"A terrible beauty" – "Easter 1916" (still) reading the Easter Rising

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In the course of the autumn of 2015 the state funeral of Thomas Kent was carried out in his native place in County Cork. The funeral was actually a belated ceremony as Kent was court-martialled and executed shortly after the Easter Rising as a result of an associated event. The commemoration of the martyr, however, received mixed reactions: the praise for the agents for bringing about independence in Ireland was complemented by the somewhat sobering thought that Kent was eventually executed because he had killed a policeman whose sacrifice should also be duly noted and thus remembered. (cf. http://ehr.oxfordjournals.org/content/131/548/122.full)

The Royal Irish Academy biographical compilation entitled *1916 Portraits and Lives* (by James Quinn, Lawrence William White and David Rooney), published in October 2015, provides a similarly unorthodox approach as it singles out a number of characters associated with the Easter Rising. The participants are all referred to as "insurgents", hinting at a broad range of possible rhetorical implications of such a term, and the selected figures include representatives of the regime against which the rising took place as well as nationalist leaders who opposed the event. Such a decision reflects a renewed interest in formulating a more balanced critical approach towards both the event and the participants than has been characteristic since the advent of revisionist tendencies in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, and it is also indicative of the dilemmas concerning the Rising that would inevitably resurface on the occasion of the centenary of the event in 2016.

The participants of the Rising, especially its leaders, have long been considered heroes and martyrs devoting their lives to and eventually sacrificing those lives for the cause of Irish independence. The initial designation of them as "rebels," perhaps even "revolutionaries," was transformed into and broadly replaced by a highly dignified status during the first decades of the new Irish state, and the Easter Rising came to be widely regarded as a major event in the course of the struggles towards the desired ideal of sovereignty. The approach, however, concentrated principally on the leaders and neglected the numerous other casualties of the Rising, and the decision of the essentially self-appointed leadership to resort to violence to achieve their visionary aim of an independent Irish Republic would come under more critical scrutiny as Ireland progressed from the position of an isolated and backward

protectionist country towards a modernising and increasingly open European state. Reflections on and interpretations of the event and its protagonists have thus shown a rather wide range of possible assessments yet some of the basic questions remain unresolved – the very questions that would emerge as early as in the poem "Easter 1916". When William Butler Yeats wrote "Easter 1916" shortly after the Rising, he was still in doubt as to the proper historical significance of the event and the status of its protagonists, as it is reflected most explicitly in the ambivalent refrain of the poem. Though no historian himself, Yeats was deeply troubled by the possible implications of the event as his allegiances to morality and the nation were prompted to clash. The event, an insurrection prepared and carried out by a rather small and isolated group against the backdrop of a passed Home Rule bill suspended in its implementation because of the war, left Yeats pondering questions that would regularly reappear in connection with the Rising. These questions involve the use and justification of violence for achieving political aims, the status of participants in events of this kind and the ultimate issue of consensus regarding the interpretation of the events, none of which receive an unequivocal answer in the poem. It is because of this uncertainty that "Easter 1916" becomes a blueprint of later discussions concerning the Rising, and owing to the issues raised the poem points well beyond its immediate reference.

The Easter Rising of 1916 is beyond doubt a major event of 20th century Irish history. It is often considered as a catalyst or even a cardinal moment in paving the way towards independence as the British reaction to the Rising eventually drove the country into the arms of Sinn Féin, which in turn led to the War of Independence and the Treaty that would establish the Irish Free State. The broader context is that of a revolution that took place between 1912 and 1923, and the traditional narrative of the period is that of "a linear progression towards independence" (Cronin and Regan 4) from the Ulster crisis to the Civil War, and ultimately to the rise of Fianna Fáil to government in 1932. The Proclamation of the Republic in 1916 with its rhetoric associating earlier risings with the republican cause comfortably supports this type of historiography which centres on the "idea of republican predestination" (ibid). Nevertheless, the isolated nature of the event, both in terms of time and space, would lead to changes in the perception and interpretation of the Rising, suggesting and pointing at certain dimensions of the events and their participants which challenge the general consensus on the significance of the uprising. Official commemorations provide an ample illustration of this: although the 50th anniversary included a parade, there were already dilemmas present concerning the relevance of the Rising for a modernising Ireland eager to become part of the EEC, and in 1976 a commemoration ceremony was even prohibited by the government, influenced partly by the resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland. A more pos-

itive turn came in the 1990s; as a result, the 80th anniversary was attended by the Prime Minister of the country, and ten years later a military parade was held once again as part of the official commemoration. The 100th anniversary would naturally raise questions, old as well as newly formed ones, concerning aspects of the Rising, not surprisingly focusing on the ethics of the event.

The changes in the approach to the interpretation of the Rising epitomise the general postmodern understanding of history as discourse. The republican monopolisation of the Rising created the impression of consensus on the significance of the event yet the process of modernisation in the Republic and the Northern eruption of violence would propose contrasting and even combating interpretations. As Irishness as a category opens towards pluralism, the validity of a singular approach to history is contested by rival narratives. The once minority view of the Rising as sacrifice and martyrdom in the name of the Irish Republic becomes the dominant discourse following independence but with this shift the context changes: the now dominant view turns into the new field of play for potentially diverging interpretations, depending on the question of who writes history and thus discourse on the Rising can once again become plural and divergent.

Reactions to the Rising while it lasted fall remarkably short of enthusiastic and unanimous support: the bourgeois repudiation, the anger of the wives of soldiers serving in the British army and the notorious lootings of the bombed shops cast a rather disillusioning picture of the Easter week events (cf. Bew 380 – on the reaction of the public to the insurgents during and after the event). The severe British measures taken to put down the Rising and the brutal retaliations afterward did considerably more for the glorification of the event and its participants than the actions of those involved in it, yet the acknowledgement of this remains a curiously muted element of the Republican approach. On closer scrutiny the Rising was an ill-prepared action of a "minority of a minority" (Foster 477), hastily executed and lacking in a proper ideology, which gives it the image of an essentially doomed project. Yet the aftermath would eventually provide a fitting place for the Rising as a cardinal event in the nationalist historiography of the Republic until the 1960s when the resurgence of the conflict in Northern Ireland began to raise uncomfortable concerns in the relationship between the nationalist ethos and violence. When the possible association between the violence in the North and the earlier violence of the Rising was pointed at, revisionism gained significant ground in the approach to history, leading to a significant reconsideration of what was so far unchallenged and unchallengeable merit.

The Easter events are commonly referred to as "rising" or "insurrection" whereas the term "revolution" has been applied to a broader period which includes the Rising. The Irish revolution, however, is itself a subject of substantial debates as to

its focus and achievements, and delineations of its time frame also show differing convictions (cf. Fanning 201-210 or the use of the term in carefully placed quotation marks in Boyce 295). Nevertheless, the Rising is one event in the course of the revolutionary period, an isolated one as it was not preceded directly by any event and it did not directly cause another. The aftermath of the Rising, however, led to the conditions engendering the War of Independence with its guerrilla tactics, justified retrospectively in the light of the treaty establishing the Free State yet dubious both in terms of its practice of violence and in the subsequent chaos eventually culminating (or rather, as it is, reaching its nadir) in the Civil War. What appears as the most salient common element in the events regarded as the revolution is the increasing presence and importance of violence and intimidation in the struggles for independence as it gradually replaced the earlier direction of the diplomatic relations of the Home Rule compromise.

Violence, however, is an intriguing issue in both the course of the Irish revolution and in general if its relation to peace is considered. Pearse's conviction that "bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing" (quoted in Foster 477) would eventually become the guiding force of the events and even the reluctant James Connolly would be recruited to the campaign in spite of his earlier reservations springing from his stance of internationalist socialism (cf. Foster 478-9). The military action of the rebels, however, was complemented by a bitterly anti-climactic parallel in the subsequent lootings in the bombed shops, which suggests the subversive dangers of violence in the public sphere, indicating the thin and rather fragile boundary which ideology may embody. The British answer was rather disproportionate even in terms of the harsh imperial logic, which had a considerable role in the tactics the Irish would embrace in the course of the War of Independence. The wide-scale employment of guerrilla warfare and the British measures taken to respond to it properly exemplify the significance of the idea of "point of view" in history: for the Irish the British answer was widely unacceptable yet no objection was raised to the native enterprise.

Violence is a major element of Irish politics in the revolutionary period but its assessment is not without debates. Declan Kiberd refers to the participants of the Rising as "the gentlest revolutionaries in modern history" (Kiberd 199) adding that the leaders of the Rising had the idea on their mind of getting Ireland out of the war by the Rising itself as it could save more lives than what would be lost during the insurrection (ibid). Although Mike Cronin and John M. Regan mark the growing significance of militarisation and violence in the period, they euphemistically refer to the guerrilla tactics of the War of Independence as "sustained revolutionary violence" (Cronin and Regan 1) and assert that "[S]uch violence as there was turned out to be short-lived, sporadic, and of low-intensity" (Cronin and

Regan 3). They conclude that the violence of the revolution did not reach its full potential as the compromise of the Treaty was a triumph of the moderates, with the resulting new state seen as basically "an institutional bulwark against revolution and revolutionaries" (ibid), thus minimising the possibility of resorting to violent measures for any later attempt of social change. These interpretations appear to lessen the old dilemma of violence used to achieve peace as they attempt to provide the possibility of legitimation of force and violence in creating and maintaining peace. The chaos of the subsequent Civil War, however, would provide a rather sobering example of the subversive element inherent in political violence: the measures remain the same yet the context has already changed, the practice of the same violent tactics becomes repulsive after independence. The view of the moral rightness of the actions apparently depends on the presence of a substantially widely shared ideology and this once again points towards the postmodern idea of truth as a matter of consensus with the rather uneasy consequence that given the nature of history as discourse, in addition to "truth", "good" and "right" may also be understood as a matter of consensus. The same dilemma is inherent in the so-called just war theory as well, with its employment of elusive terms such as "right intention" and "just cause". In 2014 James G. Murphy applied the just war test to the Rising and concluded that the criteria were not met (Humphries), and in 2016 he claimed that even the commemorations are problematic for the same reasons. (Ryan)

Violence, however, has a long history in the context of Irish culture due to the concept of the sacral kingship. The symbolic marriage of the king and the land involves the latter as a female entity, transmuted later into the figure of Cathleen Ní Houlihan, who can only be redeemed by the sacrifice of blood. Yeats's eponymous play turned this figure into a highly potent symbol and its influence on nationalist thinking was tangible in the period, even leading Yeats himself to formulate the question in connection with the Rising in a later poem: "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" (Yeats 358).

In relation to the Easter Rising the element that disturbed Yeats the most was violence. The single-minded nationalist determination of some of the leaders was a more problematic aspect to criticise especially with the poet's earlier work in mind. Yeats's conviction that actions motivated by hatred are wrong (cf. "A Prayer for My Daughter") would naturally discredit violence as a legitimate means of politics, yet the possible contest between hatred towards England and love towards Ireland was a real dilemma: the sacrifice of the rebels may have been motivated by love for their country rather than sheer hatred for the oppressor. Yeats eventually chose not to decide on this issue feeling that a moral trap was involved. This is illustrated by his prose commentaries in the wake of the Rising: whereas in a letter written to Lady

Gregory in May 1916 he referred to the events as "The Dublin tragedy" (quoted in Jeffares 190), in a July note his attitude is more balanced: "The late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one can say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism." (quoted in Ellmann 217).

The poem "Easter 1916" provides a haunting trajectory in connection with the general pattern of assessing the events and their participants. From the inherent absurdity of the initial situation through the rather disillusioning description of some of the participants it progresses to a tentative explanation, perhaps even an excuse for the action of the leaders. The fact of the martyrdom of the leaders is acknowledged but whether it brings about the desired result remains unclear as a result of the dilemma of the motivation and the related dilemma of the justification of the action. The action, however, has been done and the consequences beyond the immediate British retaliation are unclear and this is what confines the poet to a deadlock in terms of his assessment of the Rising. The historic nature of the moment is grasped but what exactly that means is impossible to describe from the perspective of the time of the writing of the poem.

The third section of the poem is seemingly out of place with its imagery focusing on the natural world and its existence as a function of time. The atmosphere created by the listing of rural details is nearly idyllic, the temporal is made to look more attractive than the timeless, but the image of the stone insists on the ambivalence that runs through the whole poem as permanence and steadfastness as well as stubborn insistence and lack of concord are equally possible to associate with it. The opening assertion of the fourth section does not ultimately decide between the potential positive or negative quality of the image. This is the point when the emotional response takes over: the answering of the question "when may it suffice?" (Yeats 180) is rhetorically left to a more potent agency, "our part" is "to murmur name upon name" (ibid), which suggests a cultic dimension, an uncritical act of reverence as part of an emotional reaction. Yet the poem on the whole proposes a set of other dimensions to consider, those of the rational and the moral as well, and this is where Yeats remains perplexed. The romantic association of death and sleep is denied, and the rationality of the sacrifice of the leaders is dubious in the light of the promise of the Home Rule Bill; the only certainty the Rising can boast of as an achievement is the death of prominent people whose assessment will be "utterly" different after this as a result. The inherent dilemma of what exactly that assessment may be is outlined in the refrain of the poem, "A terrible beauty is born." (Yeats 179) The ambivalence of Yeats's response illustrates his doubts about the wisdom and necessity of the sacrifice as he builds tension within the phrase. In spite of the potent rhetorical force of the phrase there is still an order of preference implied: although the adjective qualifies the noun, it is still the noun that governs

the phrase. This could suggest the yearning of the poet for a moral ground, the idea of there being a right side to history but the phrase in its entirety implies the impossibility of this enterprise. Faced with the problem of the unpresentable the poet escapes into rhetoric, which renders the Yeatsian reaction both modern and postmodern in the Lyotardian sense: modern in its nostalgia for the solace of good forms and neat categories and postmodern in the attempt of presenting the unpresentable. This manoeuvre elevates the poem above its immediate political context and turns it into a blueprint for later assessments not only of the Rising but of any other event that relies on violence and militarism for its political goals.

Yeats was not present in Dublin at the time of the Rising, he learnt about it in England. Declan Kiberd sees the poem as the attempt of Yeats to write himself back into the history of the nation in the wake of the insurrection after he had renounced his nationalist endeavours, "to regain control and to earn the right to perform that final bardic naming" (Kiberd 217). This indeed creates the sense of irony as the occasion of the Rising arrived too late for the poet to become absorbed in it with his earlier youthful enthusiasm, tentatively opening the possibility of yet another, though indeed a highly subverted, reading for the lines "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (Yeats 180).

Only a few months after the Rising Yeats was already aware of the dilemmas of the events and his reaction seems to identify those points which still haunt assessments of the Rising and its participants a hundred years after the events themselves. Beyond the immediate concerns of the wisdom and practical usefulness of the sacrifice the poem insists on the keen awareness of the fact of change. The events happened in one particular way, and what is perhaps even more important is the fact that they happened. The irreversible nature of causality inevitably raises the concept of the road not taken and the impossibility of knowing what the situation would be had the Rising not happened. Yet the Rising occurred and its consequences were underway as it is indicated by the present tense used in the refrain, which in turn implies that the dilemmas troubling the poet would continue to haunt later generations as well. Although Yeats would probably never use phrases such as "democratic deficit" in connection with the lack of broad support for the leaders he did not fail to see the problem of self-appointed authority. Likewise, he had no illusions about the colonial position of Ireland, yet he would no longer believe in the legitimacy of an insurrection in the course of accepted political practice. Justification for the Rising, both for its fact in general and for its execution in particular, thus remained questionable for him, and his spirit of doubt still haunts the assessment of the event – the context may have shifted, but the dilemmas remain the same.

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