

## **When “Many Ingenious, Lovely Things Are Gone”**

### **The Poem *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*: William Butler Yeats’ Prophetic Account of the Barbarization of Europe (and the Consequences of Decolonization)**

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*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* is undoubtedly one of William Butler Yeats’ more famous poems. It seems unlikely, though, that it will ever become the object of the kind of widespread popular attention that some of his other poems have – it is too long and ambiguous, and probably also too gloomy and disturbing, for it to have the potential of achieving a truly broad appeal.

This is especially so in our day and age, when more and more people seem to suffer from an almost unconscious unwillingness to spend time on that which is not instantly ready and immediately enjoyable, but which requires a certain measure of contemplation and prior learning if it is to supply a rewarding experience.

Add to this the ubiquitous “bread and circus” of reality television, which, like pop music, may excite the animal we all have in us, but which does nothing to develop the intellect, and it should be plain that the status quo is very close to a devoted poet’s nightmare – especially if he or she is the author of such lengthy, lofty and otherworldly poetry as Yeats was.

Yet it is partly for this very reason – the state of affairs referred to above – that *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* has aged as well as it has. For the sentiments it expresses and the situation it describes have, I would say, even more relevance for the status quo of today than for that of the era when the poem was written – even though that era is now almost a century behind us in time.

## **A Testimony to Familiarity with Ancient Greece**

In the first three stanzas of the poem, Yeats deliberately allows nostalgia to dominate the scene. He evokes images from the distant past – from ancient Greece, in fact – and then he reminisces about his own past – that of the years when he himself “was young” – creating a kind of connection between the two, and elevating the latter, which is that of his youth in provincial Ireland, by way of the former, which is the widely known and highly respected past of the Hellenes – the era of virtuous paganism that many consider to constitute the beginning of Western civilization.

Yeats writes of the “many ingenious lovely things” of that bygone era as if he actually experienced them himself – and in a sense, he did. Without any introduction or hesitation, he takes us straight into a temple from more than two and a half millennia ago, where “amid the ornamental bronze and stone, an ancient image made of olive wood” formed the focal point of people’s worship of the gods, and only a moment later, we are brought to look at some of Yeats’ personal favorites among the treasures of Phidias – as if Yeats were once a guardian of the very house of Phidias himself.

The elevated language he employs while engaged in these acts of imaginary remembrance, and the repetition of the word “gone,” tell us that he is genuinely sad for their passing away. Indeed, the word “gone” echoes through the first verse as if it were the mutterings of a person completely consumed with grief, entirely in the thrall of that which once existed and was good, but which will never be again.

Why this grief for something that most young men and women of today do not even know by name, let alone consciously yearn for or miss? Well, to Yeats, as well as to a number of his contemporaries, the wonders of antiquity were evidently not distant and irrelevant at all, but as immediate and significant as anything in the life of Man.

The reason is probably quite simple: From the earliest years of their lives, they were brought into contact with, and in some cases even encouraged to read, Greco-Roman literature. By way of the

words of Homer, Herodotus and the other great authors that we may infer that Yeats studied, the marvels of the Mediterranean world of millennia ago were resurrected in his mind – as actual sensory experiences and tangible objects, almost – and in the verse in question, Yeats indicates the degree of affection that he feels when thinking of them by choosing only a few from the great multitude and describing certain particular details of these few – details which only someone who has paid very close attention to the voices of the ancients, and who has been touched by what they relate, would remember.

In the second stanza and third stanza, Yeats recaptures the mood and the way of thinking that was dominant in his own life, as well as in society at large, up until only a few years ago. This era – his own – he also speaks rather fondly of, sprinkling the text with positively loaded terms and metaphors such as “the sun’s rays,” “ripening” and “all future days.”

### **When peace led to complacency**

Here, though, we also sense a certain irony, a touch of dark humor, perhaps. The first sign of this new device is the description “pretty toys.” “We too had many pretty toys,” he says, suddenly including in this rather curious category both the ancient marvels of the past verse and the prevalent state of affairs during his youth in Ireland – “a law indifferent to blame and praise, to bribe and threat,” “habits that made old wrong melt down,” “all teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,” et cetera.

What Yeats is hinting at here is probably that during the time of his childhood and youth – the final decades of the reign of Queen Victoria, and the first decade of the twentieth century, there was, in his view, a relative lack of barbarism and chaos. There existed, generally speaking, a sense of almost unshakable peace and security – at least in the United Kingdom. “We thought,” he concedes, that “it would outlive all future days” and that “the worst rogues and rascals had died out,” implying, of course, that he now knows that he was wrong – the “rogues and rascals” have not “died out” after all, and the notion of an everlasting, mellow Pax Britannica has nearly been turned into a joke.

The key to it all was the Rule of Law that had been achieved – the exercise of British Common Law by the symbolically blindfolded goddess of Justice, embodied by reasonably independent magistrates – this was the “law indifferent to blame and praise, to bribe or threat”, at least when compared to that which replaced it. But there was also the long “ripening,” – the centuries-long process of establishing civilization – the ending of random, unpredictable violence, the building of respect for the tenets of the legal system and the founding and nurturing of venerable traditions and institutions. Around the year 1900, this process had proceeded so far that “all teeth were drawn” and that “a great army” was “but a showy thing” – meaning that both individual people and society as a whole had become civilized to the point where they had more or less forgotten what ruthless violence actually meant, as well as how to exercise it. The nations of the United Kingdom had become pacified, accustomed to solving disputes by way of legal courts instead of with swords and arrows, and eventually, they had also become complacent.

Now a modern critic might ask sarcastically if the Rule of Law really existed in South Africa, or what the British had done to improve the civilization of Ireland, which before the ravages of foreign invasions had been known to the world as “the island of saint and scholars.” But none of this was within Yeats’ realm of experience, and with regard to the colonies, one could perhaps counter the criticism by referring the extraordinarily uncorrupt and effective Civil Service of India.

Is Yeats telling us that the process of the unlearning of “ancient tricks” had gone too far? Perhaps – people with “no teeth” – no weapons, or no mind for the use of force – are of course unable to defend themselves effectively when faced with the need to do so, or the need to assert their natural rights, and when Yeats claims that “parliament and king thought that unless a little powder burned, the trumpeters might burst with trumpeting, and yet lack all glory,” he seems to be saying that even the government had lost touch with the basic realities of human life and of war – that the whole enterprise was on the verge of turning into a ridiculous, meaningless extravaganza, and that the ruling elite actually thought a few “war-games” would be almost like a gentlemanly duel, combined with a strong shot of whiskey – a little burning of gunpowder would revive the health and manliness of the empire – give slumbering soldiers a chance to win some glory on an actual battlefield, as well as supply the musicians with a real occasion to make music,

and if the drowsy horses of the cavalry should get a chance to get some refreshing wind in their manes, even better.

If this is a sound interpretation of Yeats' words, then he must have taken the view that Great Britain did not fully realize what it was getting itself into with its entry into the First World War and its handling of the Easter Rising in Ireland – this as opposed to the view taken by more cynical and hostile souls, who claim that the British knew this very well.

### **When even the finest things are remembered as mere “pretty toys”**

But to return to Yeats' utilization of the term “pretty toys,” which is clearly ironic, but also laden with despondency. Yeats does of course employ that term quite deliberately – his intention is to show that it is in such disparaging terms that the people of the new and barbarous world that is developing around him describe the world that Yeats is attached to and has experienced as good. To him, the “toys” are objects and civilizational features of the greatest worth. To the Brave New World, however, they are as irrelevant and unimportant as the outdated dolls and games that were cherished by eighteenth-century infants.

A little below “pretty toys”, in the same stanza, we encounter the following line: “O what fine thought we had because we thought (...).” This line could conceivably stand alone – have sufficient meaning on its own – and as long as we have not read on, and do not know the poem from before, we cannot know whether the line continues on below or not. For the second or so that this situation lasts, one possible interpretation is that “we had developed fine thoughts because we often thought, and thus frequently exercised and expanded the faculty of mind pertaining to sophisticated, elevated thought.”

But, as we learn when reading on, the line quoted above is actually only the first half of a sentence, and the second half of that sentence compels us to modify our interpretation of the first. When this has been carried out, and we see the whole sentence as one, we grasp a new meaning, akin to the following: “We were able to have such lofty, pleasing thoughts because we felt safe and had faith in the future – because we believed barbarism and ruthlessness to be a thing of the

past.” This is the device of enjambment. The poet is playing with our thoughts and making a mockery of our confidence, so to speak – just as we think we have understood something, we realize that we have not quite understood it after all, or that our initial understanding only comprises the one out of several layers of meaning.

In the context of that second part of the sentence, “fine thought” also takes on much the same ironic tinge as “pretty toys.” In retrospect, when viewed from a distance, and from the vantage point of one who is observing violence and bloodshed all around him, the “fine” thought that Yeats and others entertained appears far less “fine” – and perhaps even downright foolish and reproachable – the deliberations of a proud, overconfident society, which worshipped dreams and reveries, and which was completely out of touch with the harsh realities of ordinary human existence.

### **From civilization to barbarism**

The poem also features, as I have already vaguely indicated, the literary device of contrast. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, contrast is perhaps the most striking of all the textual contrivances employed by Yeats. To mention it in plain language is to court the danger of pointing out the obvious, but in order to avoid the possible accusation of having overlooked it, I shall do so anyway.

One example of such contrast is the disparity between the terms of one line and those of the next – as when “fine thought” is set against “the worst rogues and rascals.” Another example is the difference in mood between one part of the poem and the next. We have, for instance, the first three stanzas of the poem, which have a mainly positive, and never dreadful, content, and then we have the three following stanzas, whose words paint images which are anything but positive – ranging in timbre from cruelty and tragedy to quiet desolation and loneliness.

Yeats is clearly grieved by the direction that the world has taken, but he realizes that there is something unstoppable about the changes – even the “ingenious lovely things” of ancient Greece only lasted, at the very most, for a few centuries. They were preserved for as long as they were

protected from the constant cycles of nature and of human temperament and mindsets embodied by “the circle of the moon.” Yet that protection had its limits. In time, nearly all the marvels were reduced to faded ruins and to dust.

Now, in the year that the title of the poem is referring to, it is the “ingenious lovely things” of nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish, British and European civilization that are about to be wiped away. There is really nothing new about the situation – the Fall of Civilization, the darkening of the moon, the coming of the Great Tempest, has occurred many times before – and in a way, there is something comforting about that fact. Nothing material lasts forever. No empire gets to reign indefinitely. Not even the most exquisite piece of art is allowed to challenge the perfection of Heaven. In the end, we human beings are all in the same boat, all in the same fallen world as we were at the beginning of time.

As Tennyson wrote: “Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be: They are but broken lights of thee, and Thou, O Lord, art more than they.”

Still, most human beings cannot help reacting to the coming of yet another flood and the annihilation of everything they have taken for granted with at least a measure of despair and rage. Such is human nature – ignorant of the calamities of the past, ungrateful for the present and overly optimistic about the future.

Thus, in the fourth, fifth and sixth verse, Yeats goes on to relate the dreadful state of things in Ireland during what we must assume to be the Irish War for Independence and the burgeoning Irish Civil War. Now the imagery becomes far darker and more disturbing. “Dragon-ridden,” “nightmare,” “mother, murdered,” “sweat with terror” – there is nothing “ingenious” or “lovely” about the turn of events that Yeats is conveying to here. Not only is there crime and insecurity – there is violence and barbarism, the cold-blooded murdering of innocent people, the collapse of law and order, the demise of everything stable and civilized. It seems that Armageddon is only a few breaths away. Even the moderating human impulses of empathy and conscience appear to have been banished from the land, and all the poor, disillusioned poet can do is to seek refuge

from the mayhem in the heart-wrenching solitude of his home, while the winds outside “clamour of approaching night.”

### **Romantic dreams, criminal acts**

By painting such a grim picture of the upheaval taking place in Ireland, Yeats is also, albeit in a rather obscure, indirect manner, reproaching himself and everything he is – his manner of thinking, his poetry, his hopes for the future. For as he surely is painfully aware of, he helped stir up Irish nationalism by way of his alluring, but potentially dangerous romanticism and his unbridled enthusiasm for that country’s pagan, Celtic past. He allowed himself to be seduced by the dramas and the dreamlike charm of ancient Celtic literature, but he conveniently overlooked the violence and the wars, the tribalism and the feuds, the outrageous superstitions, the bizarre sacrifices and the institutionalized “caste system” that no civilized Anglo-Irish gentleman of the nineteenth or early twentieth century would want to see revived – not then, not ever.

Hence, afflicting him in the above mentioned solitude is not only the horror of the situation itself – of the actual happenings beyond the perimeter of his house – but the realization that he himself has contributed to bringing that nightmare about – he did more than a little to goad potential Irish rebels and terrorists along with his poems and plays, and he too expressed anti-British and pro-nationalist sentiments in some of his works. Now the day of reckoning has arrived, and it is not pretty. He turned barbarian warriors into noble savages, and a moribund, constrictive Gaelic clan system into a model for future human life – now a part of his audience has turned his high-flown rhetoric into violent action, and by so doing, they have reduced the supposedly great poet to something worryingly akin to an accomplice in the crimes that are taking place – in the murders that are being committed, in the looting and burning of homes that is occurring, in the reduction of his beloved country to a state of chaos.

In other words, Yeats has good reason to be angry, and he is – both with himself and with those who have, depending on one’s point of view, abused or simply used his writings as a justification for their savagery. The Irish let him down in resorting to threats and bloodshed, but a harsh judge would say that the Irish only disappointed him in the same way that the People disappointed the

communists of Russia – anyone who attempts to make the world into a dream-based Utopia is bound to be disappointed, for the Utopia of reveries can never work in the material world – it can only, at best, work as an ideal, as a guiding star which may provide a direction to one’s efforts, but which can never be reached or taken possession of.

In part III of the poem, in verse two, Yeats seems to indicate that he truly regrets what he has done, or at least how his statements have been used, and that he is disappointed and disillusioned to such a degree that he is contemplating both his own death and the destruction of his works – “(...) and that if our works could but vanish with our breath that were a lucky death (...)” In this third verse, he admits his disenchantment in even more straight-forward language, stating that “we were crack-pated when we dreamed.”

The poem then proceeds to part IV, which consists of only a single verse, which has merely four short lines. Here Yeats makes it still clearer what his opinion is, and the concise form, along with an absence of digressions or distractions, gives his clarification a force which it would otherwise have lacked: “We, who seven years ago talked of honor and of truth, shriek with pleasure if we show the weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth.” “We,” which could mean both the Irish nationalist movement and people in general, have become mere beasts, mere blood-thirsty predators. The talk of honor and truth was empty, only a veneer – beneath which lurked the kind of mind that revels in terror and destruction.

There is little or no reprieve to be found from the gloom in the fifth part of the poem – but now he abandons his preoccupation with the fate of Ireland and returns to the kind of broad vision and sweeping perspectives with which the poem began. The content of part V could apply to any age, to any part of the turbulent history of Man.

### **The tragic fate of all human endeavors**

“The great,” he writes, again with a hint of irony and dark humor, “toiled so hard and late to leave a monument behind,” yet forgot, it would seem, that nothing made of matter lasts forever – all monuments are doomed to be leveled by the “wind.”

“The wise” do not fare any better. While living, they were so removed from ordinary life and from nature that they never even witnessed the “seasons” – a term which could be taken to mean both the four seasons of the year and the more subtle patterns and cycles of human existence. Yet in death, their skulls lie exposed to that very same nature and those very same cycles of change that they, absorbed in their arcane pursuits, were so isolated from – “gaping” at the sun as if astounded by its power. Ironic indeed.

“The good” also get a mention – but the tempest came and blew them all away. Did they accomplish anything at all by being “good”? Is all human ambition, whatever its form, doomed to come to naught?

Still, Yeats reserves the forth, most scathing verse for those who mock the great, the wise and the good – the mockers are the ones who most deserve to be mocked, he implies, for they “would not lift a hand” to help any of the above when help was sorely needed.

### **Remnants of a shattered past**

When at last, in the final verse of the poem, “the wind drops” and “dust settles,” there appears, as in the first verse, the highlighting of certain “ingenious lovely things” – although they may be more natural and strange than lovely and ingenious. These are the “bronzed peacock feathers” and the “red combs” of cocks given by the “love-lorn Lady Kyteler” to a certain Robert Artisson. After all the nightmarish scenes of the previous lines, it is a relief to hear of something as innocent and beautiful as peacock feathers, and as romantic as a love-lorn lady.

But they are only the remnants of a by-gone past, only the flickering images of an age which has been torn to pieces and chased away by the barbarous acts of human beings which turned into beasts. Only a decade or so before *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* was composed, the loftier things of human existence – like “bronzed peacock feathers” – were in the care of a category of citizens – lords and ladies and their kin – which took pride in precisely that care – in being the guardians of that which was refined and elevated, beautiful and sublime, precious and rare. By

1921, however, when the poem was completed, the loftier things are no longer in the care of anyone. The old Anglo-Irish aristocracy is in the process of being abolished, and the glorious parks and gardens where the peacocks used to roam have been vandalized or turned into plots of farmland.

### **Both fact and prophesy**

A little less than a century later, that process has enveloped the entire society – not only in Ireland, but everywhere in the increasingly empty shells of the United Kingdom and Europe. The truly elevated and sophisticated things of our existence – the ones that in a sense justify or render acceptable the less appealing parts of it – have not only lost almost all their former guardians – they are despised by many and loved by almost no one. The soul of Yeats is hopefully well on its way to a different world by now – the future year of “twenty hundred and nineteen” will likely disgust it even more than the year of nineteen hundred and nineteen did.

Yet in spite of the revulsion that he clearly felt – or rather, because of it – Yeats was able to turn his experiences into poetry. For Yeats mastered the Poetic Rage – the combination of violent emotion and complete control over it – the ability to mold the chaotic raw material of inspiration into a work with a complex and coherent design. Everyone knows what passion is, but not everyone has the ability to view it from afar, from outside of the self, so to speak, and to not only describe it eloquently, but control the usage of words – even the exact sequence in which they appear, in such a way as to make the description a piece of art – the kind of art that “aspires to be music.”

### **Sources/Bibliography**

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