

Chapter 6

A Terrible Beauty is Born! Cultivating Critical Consciousness Using Trauma as Visual Metadata in Yeats's Poetry of Resistance, "Easter, 1916"

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to examine William Butler Yeats's use of trauma as visual metadata during the Easter Rebellion in 1916 to raise critical consciousness for future rebellions in Ireland. Previous examinations of Yeats's "Easter, 1916" focus almost exclusively on the call for rebellion. This appeal however overlooks Yeats's challenge to preserve the spirit of resistance by focalizing on the unseen liberation within him and Ireland that remained despite the failed rebellion. With 2016 marking 100 years of "Easter, 1916," as the most popular of Yeats's political poems, the rhetorical appeal in this chapter will take a cognitive rather than aesthetic approach to illuminate Yeats's epistemic ambition in "Easter, 1916." This chapter represents an attempt to evaluate "Easter, 1916" also as poetry of resistance, but to analyze the extent to which Yeats employs visualizing as metadata to constitute and govern his audience's visualizing practices to inspire civic and political action.

INTRODUCTION

Exile is more than a geographical concept.

You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room.

-Mahmoud Darwish (as cited in Shatz, 2001).

William Butler Yeats visually contextualizes his nationalist pathos in the political poem, "Easter, 1916," over the Easter Rebellion in Ireland on April 24, 1916. By cultivating his audience's critical consciousness through poetic imagery, Yeats guides his audience through devastation and death in "Easter, 1916" by visually coaching them from political surveillance and voyeurism to civic and political action. Although

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the Easter Rebellion was a revolutionary failure against British Imperialist rule and Yeats was torn between his modern and idyllic visions of Ireland, “Easter, 1916” remains a compulsively political visual lyric. For example, Yeats rhetorically coaches his audience on how to visualize the political ideology of “Easter, 1916” using visual trauma as metadata to mediate the citizen agitators who were arrested by the British, charged with treason, and executed by firing squad. By using the refrain “a terrible beauty is born,” Yeats is referring to the expansion of the nationalist group Sinn Féin and the rise of civic and political activism by ordinary citizens in the aftermath of the Easter Rebellion. Yeats is also making a tacit argument on the way visual public trauma can be used to trigger civic and political action.

For instance, months after the failed Easter Rebellion Yeats writes, “I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent about the future” (Malins, 1962, p.13). Yeats uses his lingering embodied experience of “Easter, 1916” to examine the images that haunted him, but also to resist being instrumentalized by the political imaginary of British Imperialism. Yeats demonstrates that traumatic visual imagery can embolden Socratic reflection and cultivate a critical consciousness relaxed by conventional institutional practices. For Yeats, witnessing the failed 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland was an enabling trauma because it helped him to expose British Imperialist rule and shape the critical consciousness of his audience in “Easter, 1916.” Yeats is keenly aware of the visual as ideological metadata and he re-mediate the representation of the Easter Rebellion trauma as a product of British Imperialism rather than as objective truth. For instance, in the first and third stanza there are sixteen lines, perhaps referring to the sixteen in 1916, the year of the rebellion, and the second and fourth stanza have twenty-four lines, which one can infer references the first day of the Easter rebellion—April 24. With such poetic annotations to the revolutionary act embedded in “Easter, 1916,” Yeats’s use of key numbers from the Easter Rebellion as visual metadata of the failed insurrection secures the Easter rebellion as history to remember.

In “Easter, 1916,” then, Yeats reminds us that seeing is not believing—but interpretation—which plays a great role in cultivating critical consciousness into transformative civic and political action. Without question, “People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains” (Gee, 2003, P. 19) and this chapter argues that using trauma as visual metadata is one of those domains that is not only semiotic, but also epistemic. By examining trauma as visual metadata in this chapter I will demonstrate Yeats’s illumination in the power of the unseen in “Easter, 1916” as a call for civic and political action for social justice in Ireland.

This chapter will provide a close reading of Yeats’s use of trauma as visual metadata in “Easter, 1916,” his canonized poetry of resistance. The first section will define poetry of resistance and analyze the first stanza. The second section reviews the second and third stanzas and will juxtapose trauma and Yeats’s use of visual metadata as an appeal to explain the resistance of the ingrained social ideals that the agitators in Easter 1916 reacted to. The third section analyzes the last stanza and Yeats’s visual appeal to his fellow Dubliners to awaken from their anesthetic comfort to rebellious agitation for the sake of liberty. The chapter concludes with how modern day authors from any genre can both artfully and lyrically use poetry of resistance to inspire the citizenry to see the unseen for civic and political transformation.

YEATS: POET OF RESISTANCE

William Butler Yeats was haunted by the failed Easter Rebellion in Dublin, Ireland on April 24, 1916, which he canonized in his political poem, “Easter, 1916.” The poem, noted as one of the most popular

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