

“An Old Song Resung and Revisited” by W. B. Yeats

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Abstract: *This article aims at discussing a poem by W. B. Yeats – “Down by the Salley Gardens” – by considering first the contextual surroundings of the poem, which locate it in the poetical production belonging to Yeats’s Sligo perceptions and experiences, so as to further analyse how the symmetrical formal construction of the poem camouflages conflicting ideas concerning love and life, youth and maturity, inexperience and awareness, life and art.*

The poem “Down by the Salley Gardens”, published in 1889, was originally entitled “An Old Song Resung.” The explanation for the title is provided by Yeats himself: “This is an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant [...] who often sings them to herself.” (Abrams 1986, 1935). The poem thus aligns with a common feature usually attributed to Irish Literature: that of incorporating the richness and spontaneity of oral forms and traditions to its literary productions. “Down by the Salley Gardens” inserts itself in the group of poems that deal with the poet’s experiences in the countryside around Sligo, and relates, though indirectly, to “a knowledge of the life of the peasantry and their folklore” (Abrams 1986, 1928).

The poem is symmetrically constructed: it has two stanzas of four lines each, and both stanzas rhyme in aabb.

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

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This formal symmetry is further perceived in the parallel syntactic constructions between both stanzas; the echoes are such that one can consider the second stanza as a clear formal re-iteration of the first. Let us compare their formal-structural echoes:

first stanza	second stanza
my love and I did meet	my love and I did stand
little snow-white feet	her snow-white hand
she bid me take love easy	she bid me take life easy
as the leaves grow on the tree	as the grass grows on the weirs
But I being young and foolish	But I was young and foolish

A careful comparison between both stanzas soon indicates that the formal symmetry does not find an echo in terms of the experiences depicted. However, paradoxical as it may seem, it is the poem's symmetrical construction that serves as an initial invitation for the reader to perceive contrasting ideas. Actually, the symmetry highlights the antithetical relations posed by the poem. For instance, there is a group of words in the first stanza, exactly those that will be "substituted" in the second, which are responsible for creating a *positive* atmosphere in relation to the experience lived by the participants: 'meet', 'passed', 'love', 'leaves', 'tree'. These elements are found in the first three lines. The fourth line in the first stanza, "But I being young and foolish [...]", already introduces a contrast in relation to the first three lines: this is indicated by the connective 'but' and also by the adjectives 'young' and 'foolish'. One should notice that 'young' here is contaminated by the *negative* connotation of 'foolish', thus also acquiring a negative nuance. This line is also responsible for setting a difference of viewpoint between the two participants in the poem. Considering that one is 'young' and 'foolish', one may conclude that the other (the 'she') is more mature and aware of the dangers of love.

Let us now question on the difference of effect the choice of words in the second stanza provokes: 'stand', 'leaning shoulder', 'laid her snow-white hand', 'life', 'grass', 'weirs'. First of all, the verbs 'stand' and 'lay', as well as the adjective 'leaning', convey a sense of 'stillness' and 'density' as in opposition to the 'lightness' and 'dynamic experience' expressed in the first stanza, illustrated mainly by the terms 'meet', 'passed', 'feet', 'being'. Such an opposition is further corroborated by the different ways the verb 'to be' was used in the last lines of each stanza: in the first, 'being' denotes process and continuity, whereas 'was', in the second, denotes the end of an action, in this case, a clearly demarcated finished state ("But I *was* young and foolish [...]"). Further underlying meanings arise when we consider certain specific lines in relation to each other. If we isolate the second line of each stanza, for instance, and set them in a dialogical relationship, we are able to perceive other significant details:

She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet. (first stanza)
 And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand. (second stanza)

The repetition of 'snow-white' to characterize the beloved woman is relevant to indicate that the female figure is the same in both stanzas. Though the time and spatial patterns are different (as we will discuss below), the participants remain the same. The identical repetitions 'She bid me take [...] easy' and 'But I [...] young and foolish' in both stanzas further support this argument. Not only do the participants remain the same as *participants*, but as participants *who act in a certain way*. Whereas the 'she' 'bids [him] take love/life easy', the 'young and foolish' 'he' will not agree with her. On the one hand, the participants remain the same in their attitudes in relation to love and life. On the other hand, however, the participants might be seen as changed human beings when one considers the passing of time. The comparison between 'passed'/'feet' (in the first stanza) and 'laid'/'hand', as well as 'leaning shoulder' (in the second stanza) reveals significant changes. Besides the opposition between 'dynamic/lightness' and 'stillness/density' already pointed out, the adjective 'leaning' comprises at least two different meanings: the shoulder can be 'leaning' just temporarily, that is, just for a change in physical position; or rather, the shoulder can be 'leaning' as a result of the passing of time, as a result of old age. This would thus be an indication that the participants are partially the same: they are not young anymore, but experienced old partners in love and in life.

These considerations lead us to conclude that the two stanzas in the poem stand for two specific moments in the participants' lives: the first stanza depicts a love experience lived during one's youth – a time when emotions are experienced in an intense way, without much reasoning or restraint. However, as already pointed out, there are two lines in the first stanza that already show the difference of viewpoint between the couple as it concerns their attitude to love:

She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In other words, the female voice in the poem is endowed with that wisdom which is characteristic of older people, or at least of those who have gone through a greater number of life experiences, those who have a deeper sense of consciousness in relation to life. To "take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree" means to accept and experience love as naturally and spontaneously as the growing of leaves on trees.

The second stanza clearly reveals the consequences of the 'facts' introduced in the first one. As such, the time in the second stanza is not simultaneous with that of the first. (And the same will happen with the question of space, to be discussed below). Judging from the apparent 'inaction' and 'stillness' conveyed by 'stand', 'laid', and 'was', as contrasted to their respective counterparts in the first stanza ('meet', 'passed', 'being'), one may infer that the second stanza stands for a later phase in one's life, a more mature one, characteristic mainly of elderly people, with no place for innocence or illusions. This is clear in the poem's two last lines:

She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

The changes operated in the lines above (comparing with the corresponding lines in the first stanza), though apparently irrelevant, serve significant purposes and produce relevant effects. The first change consists of the substitution of 'love' for 'life.' At first we should consider that these terms occupy the same syntagmatic position in the line, a fact that already points to a possible identification between them. Such an identification is further corroborated by the fact that 'love' and 'life' also echo one another on the basis of their alliterative sound and on the fact that both have only one syllable. But such an alteration (that is, the substitution of 'love' for 'life') also serves to extend the poem's existential significance: 'life' is a much broader subject than 'love', love being one of the elements of life. It is true that during one's youth, when one falls in love, love can be considered as the very essence of life, a fact that might suggest a possible interchange between the terms. But considering that in the second stanza the participants are more mature, because elderly, it is only natural that the term 'life' replaces 'love'. As one grows in maturity, the consciousness in relation to life becomes more acute. Life experience inevitably entails awareness and suffering, as the poem's last line illustrates:

But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

Several oppositions emerge from that: love vs. life; young/foolish vs. full of tears; youth vs. maturity/old age; love vs. age.

Another relevant difference between youth and maturity/old age is provided by the half-lines:

as the leaves grow on the tree
as the grass grows on the weirs

The first half-line – “as the leaves grow on the tree” – is attuned to the ideas expressed in the first stanza, and which are related to 'youth', 'love', 'freshness', 'freedom', 'spontaneity'. 'To take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree' refers not only to the natural process of 'growing' (both leaves and love), but already foreshadows that love – as the leaves – may also die. The second half-verse – “as the grass grows on the weirs” – also reflects the assumptions conveyed by the second stanza, which are associated with 'maturity', 'life', 'the passing of time'/'aging', 'restraint', 'control'. Besides, 'To take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs' sounds quite ironic. Considering that 'weirs' constitute barriers placed across a river to control the flow of water, one may infer that the naturalness and spontaneity that the leaves have in the first stanza are now contrasted to the limits and obstacles imposed on the growth of the grass by the weirs. The irony arises exactly when the analogy between 'life' and 'grass' reveals that in the same way that the grass is restrained

by the weirs, so is life by so many barriers. In this context, how can one 'take life easy'? Perhaps – and this constitutes another reading – “to take life easy” means exactly to accept that which we cannot change.

The way each stanza starts is also worthy of attention. “Down by the salley gardens [...]”, in the first stanza, is replaced by “In a field by the river [...]” in the second. This change in terms of space is also revealing of the change in terms of the life experiences portrayed. The symbolic meaning of ‘garden’ as “an enclosed space” (Cirlot 1971, 115) seems, at first, rather appropriate for the reservation and privacy required by the lovers. One should not forget, however, that “the garden is [also] a place where Nature is subdued, ordered and selected” (Cirlot, 115). In this sense, this symbolic meaning would align with the attitude of the female voice in the poem, present in “She bid me take love easy [...]”. Such a request certainly implies a conscious and rational decision; it certainly constitutes a sort of defensive attitude in relation to life, an attempt to tame and control emotions.

The replacement of “Down by the salley gardens [...]” by “In a field by the river [...]” must also deserve some consideration. The openness that a field suggests (as opposed to the intimacy and cosiness of the gardens) sides with the contemplative and meditative atmosphere constructed in the second stanza. The lovers, here, do not ‘meet’, but merely ‘stand’. The gap between them – a gap which has been gradually announced since the first stanza – now reaches its climax through several devices: through the time pattern of the poem (as the verb forms ‘being’, ‘was’, and ‘am’ indicate); through the physical distance between them, as the verb ‘stand’ suggests; through the expression ‘full of tears’. The lovers are now clearly separated – a separation that was gradually announced so as to culminate in a definite and irrevocable one.

General considerations result from our reading so far: Yeats’s poem, though apparently simple in terms of language and structure, contains further meanings not easily perceived at first, as always happens with high-quality poetry. For instance, the poem’s simplicity catches both the tone of folkloric traditions and the richness of natural, countryside imagery. To provide another example, the symmetry we have pointed out, though apparently formal and structural, affects the poem’s overall significance; in between the lines the stanzas convey, if not opposing ideas, at least very different or conflicting ones. The visual gap, for instance, between both stanzas, metaphorically evinces the gap that exists between the participants in terms of the experiences depicted: love and youth as opposed to life and awareness; spontaneity and freedom as opposed to constraint and suffering/tears; or, ultimately, life and art, as the epithet “an old song resung,” used by Yeats himself to entitle the first version of the poem, may also suggest.

Works Cited

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