



“THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE”
Poem analysis

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The **trees** are **in** their **autumn beauty**,
The **woodland paths** are **dry**,
Under the October **twilight** the **water**
Mirrors a **still sky**;
Upon the **brimming water** among the **stones** 5
Are **nine-and-fifty swans**.

The **nineteenth autumn** has **come** upon **me**
Since **I** first **made** my **count**;
I **saw**, before I had **well finished**,
All **suddenly mount** 10
And **scatter wheeling** in **great broken rings**
Upon their **clamorous wings**.

I have **looked upon** those **brilliant creatures**,
And **now** my **heart** is **sore**.
All's **changed** since **I**, hearing at **twilight**, 15
The **first time** on this **shore**,
The **bell-beat** of their **wings** above my **head**,
Trod with a **lighter tread**.

Unwearied still, **lover** by **lover**,
They **paddle** in the **cold** 20

Companionable **streams** or **climb** the **air**;
Their hearts have **not** grown **old**;
Passion or **conquest**, **wander where** they **will**,
Attend upon them **still**.

But **now** they **drift** on the **still water**, 25
Mysterious, **beautiful**;
Among what **rushes will** they **build**,
By **what lake's edge** or **pool** ->
Delight men's **eyes** when I **awake** some **day**
To **find** they have **flown away**? 30

During a talk about rhythm in his poetry, Yeats jokingly declared: "It gave me a devil of a lot of trouble to get into verse the poems that I am going to read and that is why I will not read them as if they were prose!" And although this applied to poems included in *Inisfree*, it may well be applied to "Wild Swans at Coole" whose rhythm is at the same time in and out of control, hence revealing the transitional state in which the poet and his art find themselves.

For indeed, while the poem could easily be taken for a traditionally romantic piece, its unsurprising focus on the poet and his art that turns into a disquieting self-questioning, soon leads, through a reflection upon death, to mysticism and modern writing.

I. A traditional romantic poem

Apart from the reference to the swans which harks back to Yeats's personal mythological archetypes, it is, at first, difficult to spot what is particularly Yeatsian, let alone Irish about this poem. In fact, thematically it sounds rather closer to a 19th century English piece about loneliness, nature and the self.

Among all places, it is upon the shores of a lake, just as the Lakists or Lamartine would, that the persona finds himself to meditate on his loneliness. This is made powerful with the word "companionable" applied

to the streams and swans but never to man or the persona who only appears on line seven, not as subject but as an object pronoun. Moreover, the last line and the very last word of the poem, 'away,' emphasise the poet's face-to-face encounter with nature. Transfiguration is indeed part of the poem as the enfolding of the persona's and the swans' lives are soon made one and the same. For the swans are anthropomorphised as unwearied, passionate, conquering young folks "paddl[ing] lover by lover," thus reminding the persona of his own youth, when he "[t]rod with a lighter tread." By contrast, the ageing poet may be said to identify with the fifty-ninth swan, allegedly the only one that has no lover and is dejected.

Such a situation tends to place the poet in direct line with Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." Isolated in her tower, the lady only looks at the world through a mirror in which she sees the "knights come riding two and two." Only when her eyes fall upon Lancelot, riding alone on an autumn day, does she dare to look out her window, which causes her web to fly out and the mirror to shatter. She is then confronted to her intense feeling of isolation and her own mortality. In that light, it is no coincidence that the persona should see "nine-and-fifty" – as opposed to fifty-eight – swans and that the reality he experiences after they have "scatter[red] wheeling in great broken rings" should make his heart feel "sore." It should also be noted that the tower is a haunting theme in Yeats's poetry. Finally, another feature "The Wild Swans at Coole" has in common with Tennyson's poem is the use of classical formulas bordering on archaism. In "The Lady of Shalott," they are meant to better conjure up the Arthurian world and consist in the use of numerous hyperbatons or of compound adjectives such as "many-towered Camelot." In Yeats's poem, they consist in the use of faded emphatic phrases such as "I have **looked upon** those **brilliant creatures**," or the Middle English way of counting "**nine-and-fifty swans**." These techniques tend to reinforce the persona's loneliness as they place him even further apart from men and as a consequence, probably exacerbate his communion with nature.

Despite these overused descriptions, the landscape is richly described through the lexical fields of colour and light (the October twilight, mirror), sound (**clamorous**, bell-beat of their wings) and movement (**brimming**, mount, scatter), which provide a vivid experience of the landscape throughout the stanzas. This is particularly evident as far as sounds are concerned since a flight of swans is particularly "clamorous", which is rendered through an accumulation of plosives imitating the violent flapping of wings when the swans appear. Afterwards, when they are out of sight, everything is hushed once more and only a faint fluttering movement may be heard through fricatives and sonorant glides.

As far as the rich landscape is concerned, the poem is an evocation of autumn which is irresistibly reminiscent of Keats's "Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness." All the more so as the first two lines are of an extreme regularity:

The **trees** are **in** their **autumn** **beauty**,

The **woodland** **paths** are **dry**,

Both are iambic lines, the first a tetrameter the other a trimeter. And the first line contains an instance of promotion, a classical way of creating an artificial yet perfectly acceptable iambic rhythm by placing a beat on a usually unstressed word, the preposition "in." More than half of the lines follow these iambic rules, and some, like line 18 are eventually made regular by the double offbeat which compensates for the initial inversion (i.e. beat falling upon the first word.) And on the other hand, the irregularity of the remaining lines may be interpreted as following the romantic rules of emancipation from classical iambic poetry.

Similarly, the nature theme is emancipated from the classical vision of art which relied on imitation, and Nature becomes a pretext for or at least a symbol of meditation. Like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," the poem is an ode to the swans which become this "invisible influence, like an inconstant wind" which "awakens to transitory brightness the mind in creation," this "fading coal." So that the swans become the symbols of a tyrannical muse: like her they are wild and free and "**wander where they will.**" This is emphasised by the fact that the phrase is an apposition and is part of the trochaic rhythm of the line hence attracting both the eye and the ear.

As a result of this free wandering, inspiration may either dictate her words to the poet ("The **bell-beat** of their **wings above** my **head,**") **and this is done in an imperative, "clamorous"** manner as implied by the accumulation of plosives (B and T) which may evoke the violent process the poet has to undergo in order to write under the command of the muse, along with the difficulty of writing: indeed, in plosives, air is first retained then sharply released just as a hesitating pen may splutter ink on the page. On the other hand, inspiration may be altogether absent as the swans will:

Delight [other] men's **eyes** when I **awake** some **day**

To **find** they have **flown** away

Again we come back to the notion of loneliness here, but this notion is better understood as we come to realise that to be lonely, for a poet, is to see his muse fly away and to awake to the world of men. The poet's fall to a state of imperfect humanity is revealed in the apocopated rhyme of the *aicill* "awake away."

This is reinforced by the anapaestic rhythm of "they have flown away" which creates suspense in that it delays the result of the actual finding, but more importantly reflects the poet's pondering thoughts since

an accumulation of unstressed syllables may be interpreted as a mumbling to oneself as though the poet had altogether forgotten to read aloud. All the more so as the succession of /f/ and /v/, two fricatives with a similar articulation place, trigger “have” to merge into “flown,” thus creating a whispering effect. These whispered thoughts are centred on the role of the poet and his poetry.

II. The poet and his art

There is, in the poem, a clear distinction between the poetic ‘I’, often promoted though appearing only on line eight, and “men” which appears only once to be demoted on the spot. This places the poet in a state of aloofness which is not unlike the position of the swans flying above the persona. Here, the persona takes on his position as a poet prophet who is invested with a mission to enlighten his readers.

In that light, it could be argued that the swans here in fact symbolise the poems which the persona releases and delivers to the world, to “men’s eyes.” They emanate from him and drift on the water, a symbol of time, with a forward movement impelled by the impetus of the poem which alternates regular and irregular, rhymed and unrhymed lines. Finally, the movement is integrated into space and time owing to the last rhyming pair, “day” / “away.” This means that while the poet is sorry to let his words go (“my heart is sore.”) he nevertheless notes and then hopes that his poetry lasts in time: the 19 autumns being the first 19 years since 1900. What is this message which the poet is so impatient to pass on?

The poem actually deceives expectancy as it denies the reader the Irish themes and mythological references he would automatically be looking for in a poem by Yeats. Of course, Coole refers to Lady Gregory’s house, Coole Park, and probably calls to mind her writings of folk tales. The introductory description of landscape could also conjure up a cliché Emerald Isle with untouched lakes and woods and wild life. One could also go so far as to interpret the swans as a tribute to the Irish who struggled for the independence of their country, all the more so as the poem was published only two years after the Easter Rising. Going on with the Irish theme, and knowing that swans are migrating birds, it could easily be inferred that the poem is a tribute to all the Irish emigrants who left their land during the Potato Famine in the mid-nineteenth century. The spondees in the poem would thus sound like a gloomy tolling bell in the memory of a famished population in a dying country. This interpretation would also account for the poet’s worried questions “among what rushes will they build / By what lake’s edge or pool?” Finally, the reference to the swans might also be

regarded as evoking a Gaelic song 'The White Swan', written by Domhnall Ruadh Choruna as a tribute to his lover before he went to war.

But although, or perhaps because Yeats insisted so much on his mission as a guardian of the history and traditions of his country, it may be felt that the above conjectures could be made haphazardly and without real justification. The Irishness of the poem is rather to be found in its prosody. Indeed, several features of Gaelic poetry may be found here such as the reliance on assonances (/eI/ /I/) and alliterations (/s/, /t/, /b/); on the repetition of words (upon, still); on word ladders ("ring-wing," "count-mount," "stone-swan"); or on *aicill*, a process by which a word inside a line is made to rhyme with the last line of another ("awake"/"away").

The poet, however does not seem to be entirely convinced by his own influence. This may be inferred from Yeats's biography since he was notably sceptical about his people's ability to understand intellectual matters. Still this can also be proved within the poem itself. The fact that the swans-poems are described as "drifting" is a first clue leading to the idea that the poet's words go astray. Moreover, the repetition of the term "still," though sometimes the adverb is used instead of the adjective, emphasises this paralysis which both Yeats and Joyce considered to be the scourge of Ireland. So that the poet eventually wonders whether his message will be heard:

Among what **rushes will they build,**

By **what lake's edge or pool**

The references to rushes where they are bound to get entangled and lost and the passage from lake to the stagnant waters of a pool brings a dreary prospect as to the poems' fates.

Not being heard means death for a poet all the more so as, to refer back to a romantic concept, the work of an author is a edifice that protects him from the worse death of all, oblivion. And perhaps it is this thought of death which, associated to a faltering rhythm, gives the poem its disquieting feeling.

III. A disquieting feeling

The notion of death is everywhere in the poem and is defused through the usual archetypes of water which symbolises the passing of time and of autumn, the last season before winter or death, hence old age. And this is reinforced by the persona's musing on his getting old and the years that had gone by, or flown by without his noticing it, which is perhaps not so surprising since Yeats was in his fifties when this poem was published and

could be said to have, by then, entered what psychoanalysts call mid-life crisis.

The **nineteenth autumn** has **come** upon **me**

Since **I** first **made** my **count**;

I **saw**, **before** I had **well** finished,

All suddenly **mount**

And **scatter** **wheeling** in **great** broken rings

Lack of control is evident here as the persona is first introduced as an object, me, who is acted upon rather than independent. And when he finally becomes a subject, his actions are immediately frustrated "before I had well finished." And things escape him "suddenly scatter in broken rings." The slowing down of rhythm of these lines too enhances death: the only regular iambic line ("since I first made my count") belongs to the past, while the present is described through anapaests that create suspense ("The **nineteenth autumn** has **come** upon **me**") and spondees ("**All suddenly mount**" / "great broken") that prevent a forward motion and become synonymous with death when associated to the idea of stillness. But the persona is going to react strongly against this and will finally turn his anguish into a mystical experience.

It would be unfair to say that there is a degradation of rhythm and a gradual dislocation of the lines in this poem but it must be admitted that rhythm is rather inconsistent here as it is never following any predictable pattern although admittedly never merging into, say, prose for instance. But because promotion and initial inversions are synonymous with unusual rhythm, contrasting with the expected iambic flow of the English language, the fact that the very first line contains a promotion and the subsequent trochaic rhythm are symptomatic of disturbing thoughts entering the poet's mind and destabilising the writing flow in a sort of stammering, reinforced by the constant repetition of words (still, upon, first). Stammering is also enhanced by the word ladder "ring / wing" happening at the very moment when the persona seems to lose control over the swans, and the enjambment "They **paddle in** the **cold** / Companionable **streams**" where the beat on "pa" recalling that on "paddle" and the three unstressed syllables "nionable" make the stuttering sound "cold-com" all the more resounding. Moreover, this is further reinforced by the following repetition "air / their," both accentuated since "their" is emphasised here as opposed to "my heart."

Enjambments and the succession of similar sounds reveal a wish to prevent blanks or silence from insinuating into the line, and this filling of space with sound is precisely what stammering does too. So, in a way, anguish is not allowed to settle down and death is adjourned. This is what, according to Heidegger, is happening when the *da-sein*, or being, becomes aware of its presence to the world. Death is first looked upon as

unsurprising and usual yet discarded as happening to others. It is worrying about it and trying to fend it off that makes the *da-sein* aware of his being-in-the-world when he envisages that he may no longer be. This newly achieved awareness, this presence of the self in the world is perhaps exemplified through the passage from "me" to a promoted "I" ("since I first made") transposed into "my" and then repeated eight times throughout the poem and even more if we take into account the numerous assonances in /ai/ that echo it. So that once dying has been accepted as the quintessential part of being-in-the-world and once the *da-sein* is aware of this presence, the persona may be able to turn to more metaphysical and spiritual thoughts.

According to the Celtic tradition, October is the month of ivy, an evergreen tree that represents the perennial aspect of the human psyche. Moreover, in India, a country whose culture Yeats was much interested in, /Hamsa/, swan, represents man's migrating soul. So that death no longer is a disquieting subject but becomes the end, according to the word of Tagore, of "a vast cycle moving among stars." In that sense, it is perhaps no coincidence that the persona should describe himself as being asleep, that is a transitional state in which a living man may experience after-life.

Hence the last two lines are not to be read as nostalgic regret but as an awareness that one has to renounce what "delights men's eyes" for "[w]hen we look at the world through the veil of our desires we make it small and narrow, and fail to perceive its full truth." A full truth which is to be found in the harmony which ensues from the union of opposites in the world. The union is made mostly evident in the first stanza where the three elements of earth (stone), water and air, represented by the swans, are gathered in the harmony of a perfect iambic rhythm, and where water and sky are made one and the same through a mirroring effect reinforced by an enjambment which also is a reconciliation of a sort since it unites prosody and orality, if not that of prose, at least that of songs.

For the poem too is a part of the universe and it would not be unreasonable to infer that it is the opposition between regularity and irregularity which gives it its harmony and unison. And this is directly inscribed in Tagore's philosophy:

Our life, like a river, strikes its banks not to find itself closed in by them, but to realise anew every moment that it has its unending opening towards the sea. It is a poem that strikes its metre at every step not to be silenced by its rigid regulations, but to give expression every moment to the inner freedom of its harmony.

So that it may finally be argued that just like its uneven rhythm the poem is hesitating between romanticism and modernity, a poet historian who passes on tradition and a poet prophet who realises he belongs to the world and claims harmony and oneness with it. This transitional crisis, in fact, is a strategy of self-discovery through writing. Indeed, as H. Meschonnic has it,

Si le sens est une activité du sujet, si le rythme est une organisation du sens dans le discours, le rythme est nécessairement une organisation ou configuration du sujet dans son discours.

It is also a configuration of the subject and its writing into an ever-changing world.

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