

A poem without
therapy: a reading of
the wild swans at
coole



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“ The Wild Swans at Coole” is a poem of equal parts reticence and disclosure. Though the substances are the same, a logic of proportion fails; reticence is disclosure. The poem is about mortality, transience, disillusionment, and loss; more literally, it is about beautiful trees and a lake of swans. The mystery of the poem lies in the intensity and resonance of its emotional charge: one finishes it feeling that an interior has been excavated, laid bare, as in the baldest confession, but of the poem’s propositional content only one, entirely conventional statement directly addresses the poet’s feeling: “ And now my heart is sore.” This is not an unbeautiful line, and it is a significant event in the poem; but the source of emotional impact lies elsewhere – in suggestion, elided narrative, and especially displacement: the speaker reveals himself through implied contrast with the landscape around him, and particularly with the swans that are the poem’s subject and occasion. The poem’s manner is casually eloquent, poised between high and low art. The stanza invented by Yeats begins as a ballad, with alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter. He adds a final couplet, any epigrammatic force of which is muted by the lines’ differing lengths (pentameter and trimeter), and also by enjambment between quatrain and couplet in all but the first and third stanzas. The stanza rhymes x a x a b b; twice (“ stones”/” swans”; “ beautiful”/” pool”) the rhymes are slanted. The casual feel of the poem is heightened by an extraordinarily fluid prosody: by far, the majority of the lines contain metrical variations. Initial truncations, anapests, and feminine endings abound; some lines require elisions for proper scansion; at least one line (l. 21, with its extra foot) seems unresolvably irregular. All of this contributes to an air of extempore rumination, and even the poem’s grandest moments – “ And scatter wheeling in great broken rings”; “ The <https://assignbuster.com/a-poem-without-therapy-a-reading-of-the-wild-swans-at-coole/>

bell-beat of their wings above my head” – hover just this side of speech. There is nothing in the poem (like the figurative density of the penultimate paragraph of “ Adam’s Curse”) that crosses unquestionably into hieratic mode. The organizing structural principle of the poem is time. However, the poem does not move chronologically; instead, the first twenty-six lines vacillate between present and past in a restless concatenation, sometimes shifting over the course of a single line. The poem participates in that genre of nostalgic lyric for which time is the great antagonist: returning to a place first visited nineteen years earlier, the speaker finds reflected in the landscape his younger self, and senses between what he was and what he is a difference that can only be called loss. Unlike Wordsworth in the Immortality Ode, Yeats does not cast this loss outward, onto the natural world. Indeed, the first stanza presents a natural scene that is all harmony: the trees are as they should be, beautiful in their season; things are neither too wet (“ The woodland paths are dry”) nor in drought (“ the brimming water”); the sky, like the water, is untroubled, “ still”; and there is a touch even of hermetic order in the “ mirror[ing]” of high and low (“ as above, so below”) on the lake’s surface. The prepositions of lines three, four, and five – “ under,” “ upon,” “ among” – feel exhaustive, as though all possible space has been accounted for and proven sound. Nor are things in any way extraordinary: the easy propriety of “ The trees are in their autumn beauty” attests to the normalcy, the rightness, of the scene. The single note of discord is muted, and perhaps as yet unnoticeable: “ nine-and-fifty swans” gains its proper resonance only with the “ lover by lover” of stanza four. The second preposition of the series, “ upon”, returns in line seven entirely transformed. In line five it was a preposition of buoyancy, its downward

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directionality balanced by the rise of “brimming”; here, it is a preposition of oppressive weight. The speaker is passive in the face of time. The years “come upon” him – he does not “live” them or “pass” them or “spend” them. The following lines turn to the past, when nineteen years earlier Yeats made his first visit to Coole Park. Immediately, the passivity is broken. This happens, though, not in the verbs (“made my count,” “saw,” and “had well finished”), which hardly signify great activity; the difference is conveyed rather in the swans’ response to the speaker’s presence. In his youth (his relative youth: Yeats was thirty-two), the speaker disturbed the natural scene he came upon. Before he could finish counting their number, he caused them to “scatter in great broken rings”. “Scatter,” “broken,” and “clamorous” all convey disorder: the swans have been scared off. (I suspect that “great broken rings” also carries some hermetic charge, the significance of which I am not qualified to discuss.) In his first visit to the lake, the speaker was not part of the harmony and order figured in the poem’s first stanza; to the contrary, he disturbed it, he was a note of discord. After two decades, he can count the birds at his leisure. The swans, we discover, are sublimely unconcerned: either the birds have grown accustomed to the speaker’s presence in the intervening years, or part of the loss the poem laments is figured in this inability to disturb a natural order, some lapsed vigor and accompanying threat. The two explanations are not, I think, incompatible; either way, lost to the speaker are the “passion and conquest” he later envies in the swans. For the first two stanzas the description of the swans is neutral, but admiration emerges in line thirteen, accompanied by the poem’s central act of disclosure: “I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, / And now my heart is sore.” The <https://assignbuster.com/a-poem-without-therapy-a-reading-of-the-wild-swans-at-coole/>

disclosure stops the poem: this is the only sentence that ends mid-stanza. The stanza restarts with an extraordinary performance of a sentence, mirroring, in its remarkably complicated syntax, the temporal concatenation that structures the poem: All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, The first time on this shore, The bell-beat of their wings above my head, Trod with a lighter tread. The syntax in line fifteen, embodying a particularly dramatic break in that it falls between subject and verb, continues only after a three-line suspension. Moreover, the interpolation itself is broken between verb ("hearing") and object. The primary clause is "All's changed since I trod with a lighter tread"; the subordinate clause is "hearing at twilight the bell-beat of their wings"; "the first time on this shore" qualifies both. The result is a braid the dazzle of which obscures how little information is actually conveyed. "All's changed," the sentence declares, and the elaborate deferral of the verb promises some dramatic elaboration of the claim. One expects a psychological revelation commensurate with the effort of deferral. What comes, though, is – like the more direct "my heart is sore" – entirely conventional, as though a great difficulty has been approached, attempted, and retreated from. Nor does the information conveyed by the deferral seem to justify the force of its intrusion; it repeats the scene already described in stanza two, adding only that it too occurred at twilight. Importantly, though, the swans have been transformed: while before they were merely "clamorous", now the sound of their wings is a "bell-beat". This image receives the poem's greatest aesthetic investment, conjuring grandeur, solemnity, and order. Still, the poem has hit a snag. A stanza has trod water; the speaker has attempted one strategy of revelation, and has failed. Stanza four returns the poem to the present scene, and attempts revelation through <https://assignbuster.com/a-poem-without-therapy-a-reading-of-the-wild-swans-at-coole/>

displacement, describing the swans in terms that are fully meaningful only as contrastive commentary on the speaker: “ Unwearied still, lover by lover, / They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams or climb the air.”

Important here is not just the swans’ agelessness or resilient vitality (“unwearied”), but also their freedom and their suitability for contrasting elements. “ Companionable” is the most striking word in these lines, and it underscores both the ease of the swans in their environment and, especially with “ lover by lover”, the harmony and fullness of their society: each swan has its mate. The adjective is poignant, however, because we suspect that it characterizes a state different from the speaker’s; it is a quiet revelation of his own solitude. (“ Lover by lover” sparks an unexploited but, I think, undeniable reminder of the number of swans given in line six: one of these creatures is missing its mate. Perhaps to make this loss explicit would tip the poem unhappily toward sentiment, but loss is encoded nonetheless.) This contrastive mode of reading is enjoined also by the next line, which is set off by another syntactical anomaly. Each of the poem’s stanzas is divided into two syntactical parts by a semi-colon, except in stanza three, where the parts are framed as discrete sentences. In this stanza, though, there are two semi-colons; the syntax of the sentence falls into three parts. The effect is to highlight line twenty-two, a line that must receive its proper and necessary scansion, a trochee for the first foot, in order to resonate with its proper force: “ Their hearts have not grown old.” The third and final segment of the sentence imagines the fullness of the swans’ lives: “ Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still.” A curious turn has been effected by the recognition of line twenty-two: while the first three lines of the stanza celebrated the ease of the swans’ lives, their placidity and

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society, the couplet envies instead their capacity for disturbance and even violence: “ passion” is not a word of the same order as “ companionable”, or even “ lover by lover”; it denotes extremity, and a loss of self-governance and ease. Similarly, “ conquest” requires violence, or at least displacement – an initial disquiet with a new environment that is overcome by persistence or force. These lines should, I think, be shocking: these are not the placid, loving swans one expects to find in poems; instead, there is a suggestion of praiseworthy violence, of “ the brute blood of the air” Yeats will conjure so powerfully in “ Leda and the Swan.” This violence is inescapable; the swans’ true freedom comes from the inevitability of the “ passion and conquest” so necessary to their youthful hearts: they will find them “ wander where they will.” The adversative with which line twenty-five begins suggests the appeal of the swans’ lives as imagined by the poet, who must tear himself away from his own imaginings: “ But now they drift on the still water, / Mysterious, beautiful.” The repetition of “ still” so quickly after its use as an end rhyme in line twenty-four underscores its presence throughout the poem. It appears both here and in line four in its adjectival sense: “ still sky”, “ still water”. Its two occurrences in stanza four, however, are adverbial, and especially in line twenty-four it signifies something quite contrary to the current adjective: the persistence of the potential for disturbance and violence. After their imagined conquests, however, the swans receive their most pacific verb, “ drift”, and as though to undermine his own vision the poet insists upon their mystery. His conjectures as to their lives beyond Coole Park are merely that: conjectures. Surely it is strange, then, that the poem immediately returns to such imaginings, as the speaker considers what seems to be the swans’

inevitable departure from the lake: Among what rushes will they build, By
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what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away? The shift of tenses is a surprise; the poem has expanded the now/then genre to include a third term in the future tense. The effect is devastating: current loss will not be eased or assuaged, but compounded. Finally the poem speaks to a concrete, if only anticipated, privation, and we have been taught by the poem's reticence to suspect that this loss speaks for others. The sentence's correction or change of course after line twenty-seven is telling: merely imagining the swans in a continued, if now absent life (" Among what rushes will they build") is not so terrible as the thought of that life savored by others. The gender of the " men" – other than the speaker the only human beings present in the poem – is not merely generic or conventional; this loss of " delight" has an erotic edge. Even if it is impersonal, the poet has been trumped by a rival. The future tense offers no promise or possibility, but only deprivation, turning the screw of the speaker's unspeakable loss. The poem's despair is quiet; its source and the means by which it is conveyed – the poem's logic of reticent disclosure – are revealed slowly, and with much hesitation. The despair, however, is complete. This is a poem without therapy.