



# Poetry and the Rhetoric of Management: *Easter 1916*

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*An exploration of William Butler Yeats's poem Easter 1916 as an illustration of the proposition that poetry is a natural medium for expressing and contemplating doubt, paradox, and contradiction—features of life, well-known to experienced managers, but normally banished, perhaps with reason, from the public language of management.*

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Poetry exposes momentary glitters of transcendent humanness in the beauty of a mind. Anything else is extra. In a utilitarian culture, however, poems are sometimes validated by claiming practical uses for them. This article is in such a spirit, exploring a possible utilitarian justification for poetry in the life of organizational managers. It uses one of the better known poems by William Butler Yeats, *Easter 1916* (Yeats, 1996), as an illustration of the proposition that poetry is a natural medium for expressing and contemplating doubt, paradox, and contradiction—features of life, well known to experienced managers, but normally banished, perhaps with reason, from the public language of management.

*Easter 1916* is a short poem of some 430 words arrayed in 80 lines. It is a song of exquisite lyricism with sounds and rhythms and rhymes that would deserve recitation and incite admiration even if the

lines were devoid of meaning. There is music in the words.

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.

There is music in the words, and that is reason enough to enjoy the poem; however, *Easter 1916* also evokes a cascade of meanings. In particular, it illustrates the epigram (attributed to W. H. Auden) that poetry is “the clear expression of mixed feelings.” The poem is an exploration of ambivalence and paradox, of the possibility of feeling simultaneous sentiments that seem contradictory, of living in multiple worlds and experiencing multiple feelings, and of recognizing the role of ugliness in the creation of beauty.

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*Easter 1916* celebrates the Dublin insurrection of 1916, a failed-but-inspirational cameo in the history of Irish independence. The poem honors the visionary leaders of an ultimately successful revolution, paying tribute to the martyrs of the Easter insurrection and their "terrible beauty."

MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

The readers of the poem are enjoined to remember the heroes as much-loved members of the family,

To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child.

However, the admirable qualities found in the martyrs of 1916 are not derived as much from their characters as from the dramaturgical requirements of the Irish revolutionary story. Their beauty is, in modern terms, a socially constructed beauty. Their actions and their natures were purified and sanctified by the executions of 1916 and the subsequent independence of Ireland; however, the poem is unabashedly ambivalent about the individuals. One is viewed as distracted by the insurrection from his true literary potential; another as a strident rabble-rouser; and another as an egocentric bastard.

A drunken, vain-glorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart.

*Easter 1916* is a eulogy in which the heroes of 1916 are extolled and reproached; and the admiration and condemnation are too closely connected to be considered separate sentiments. The poem invites an awareness that the leaders involved in radical change are saints only by subsequent reconstruction; that battles lost and won in life are often fought in a muck of human lunacy; that although lives are lived in a public world of decisions, revolutions, collective goals, speeches, and history, they are also and simultaneously lived in the daily episodes of private lives and private thoughts that are filled with ambitions, envies, sentiments, fears, and sorrows; and that the demands

of history may conflict with the demands of decency. The implicit claim of the poem is that ambiguities, contradictions, and ambivalences are not errors to be purged from consciousness. They are components of any intelligent comprehension of reality. Confidence has its doubts; love has its hates. Every virtue has its vice, and every vice its virtue.

Such a sense of life as filled with unavoidably mixed feelings matches the experience and understanding of many experienced managers; however, it conflicts with standard rhetorical imperatives for managerial talk. The rhetoric of management is a rhetoric of decisiveness, certainty, and clarity. Managers are usually expected to represent confusions as clarified, contradictions as resolved, estimates as certain, and doubts as driven out. Although the confusions and contradictions of life are often obvious to them, managers generally avoid the public expression of perplexed perceptions, mixed feelings, private images, and the torments of ambivalence. They often articulate a fantasy world that is simpler than the world in which they live and that they know from experience.

This rhetorical fantasy serves a purpose. There is ample evidence that confidence and certainty, even when unfounded, create conditions for decisive action; and decisiveness is often a prerequisite for effectiveness. Effective managers frequently seek to absorb ambiguities and doubts so that they do not spread to others in the organization or reduce commitment to action. Leaders often make things simple and unambiguous to mobilize followers (and themselves) for coordinated actions involving substantial personal commitment.

The paradox that it is often the simplicity, stubbornness, single mindedness, and blindness of leaders, not their subtle perceptiveness and flexibility, that foster organizational change is well known. Simple mindedness is an instrument of change; and, in moments of change, adaptive organizations often exhibit rigid leaders. As *Easter 1916* observes,

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter, seem  
Enchanted to a stone.

Rather than flexible instruments adapting to life's natural course, committed leaders are obstructions to it—stones in a river, stubbornly inert "to trouble the living stream."

*Easter 1916* is a tribute to fanatical visionaries for their contribution to Irish independence; however, it is also a reminder of the social and human costs involved. In particular, the poem observes that leaders are quite likely to be (or become through the process) something less than unconditionally attractive as human beings.

Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.

The heroes portrayed by the poem have been led by the sacrifices they have made to substitute an ugly confidence in their own simple faith for an intelligent comprehension of the complexity of real human experience. They contribute to beauty and flexibility without being beautiful or flexible themselves.

Is there an alternative? Can managers sustain an awareness of the contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities, and ambivalences of life (as intelligence, human beauty, and learning require) while espousing a rhetoric of simplicity, clarity, consistency, and certainty (as managerial norms and practice require)? A passion for poems such as *Easter 1916* is not essential to maintaining such a duality, but it helps. Poems claim exemption from the rules of coherence and resolution of dilemmas that managerial discourse imposes. They exhibit "the clear expression of mixed feelings." At the same time, not only by virtue of their tolerance of contradiction but also because they are rhetorically private, poems help to sustain a consciousness of com-

plexity. By reinforcing an awareness of life's confusions without requiring that that awareness be reflected in managerial talk, poems protect intelligent comprehension from the simplifying necessities of managerial life.

Poetry is a voice of an incoherent truth. It reminds managers and their advisors that life is gloriously chaotic and endlessly confusing, that contradictions of feelings and comprehensions bring a bittersweet, but essential, enrichment to life, and that although the rhetoric of management is exquisitely disconnected from managerial reality, that disconnection itself is part of the panoply of paradoxes that protects the beauty of human existence.

## REFERENCE

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