

The Phases of the Moon Part II, or Aherne and Robartes get Attacked by Zombies

*The tower window came ablaze again.
The circling bat flew on with lighted wings.
Around the old men moonlit life emerged
Out of the shadow of the high black tower.*

Aherne. What are these creatures?

Robartes. Mere products of his
Idle pen. These wandering creatures have nought
But soulless eyes. The truth he finds is
Limited to hindsight. A decaying past
Is home for worms.

Aherne. Worms still eat. I fear the
Strangeness of these beings.

Zombies. Eat brains! Eat brains!

Robartes. The moldy bodies will not find us here.
They tread only where they have tread before.

Aherne. I sense a malicious purpose in them,
But their moonlit eyes are blank.

Robartes. They are but
Vessels, bodies without souls. He cannot
Direct them; their steps are as uncertain
As Custance's rudderless ship.

Zombies. Eat Brains!

Aherne. Let us seek our beds tonight, away from
This foul place.

Robartes. We'll go. You are right to spurn
This fruitless plain. His quick'ning pen spurs them on.
I know not whether they be alive or dead.
They reek of death, but move on with life-like
Vigor.

Aherne. It's his, not theirs, that drives them on.
They are not freed through death as we once were

Robartes. Each face reflects the moonlight's snowy rays,
But they know not of beauty. They are but

*That there was perhaps something productive
In destruction, for new life emerged from
The old. The window light went out again.*

Zombie Aherne. The moonlight strikes me strange. What are we?

Zombie Robartes. He made me undead, and undead I choose to be.

Commentary

You're probably wondering what in the world that was about. Here's the deal. Zombies are in right now and I wasn't going to let that gravy train pass me by. I felt that it was time to write a zombie attack into a work of classic literature. So I chose to start my poem at the end of the poem "The Phases of the Moon."

That's right, that means you Yeats.

Oddly enough, however, there were some pretty serious challenges to writing this poem.

1. Writing poetry is surprisingly tough.
2. Writing in iambic pentameter is even more difficult, and just when I thought I had it down I made the zombies speak in 9 syllable lines in iambic whatever-four-and-a-half is.
3. Trying to write like Yeats is enough to cause a more than minor short circuit in my brain.

So go get the jumper cables and we'll get started.

I liked the idea of Yeats sitting up in his tower scheming to get back at his asshole characters and I decided to handle his revenge in the most mature way possible. Then I realized that was lame. You know those old Looney Tunes cartoons where one of the characters starts insulting the cartoonist and then you see this giant pencil erasing everything on screen? That's how I envisioned Yeats in his tower. He has the power to create and destroy everything that lies below, and hell, he might as well take advantage of it.

It seems that Yeats tries to bring back the symbols of the past and put them into his poems. The zombies symbolize that in the extreme. Maybe there are some things that should be left dead and buried. I also think that by making Aherne and Robartes opposed to the zombies I inadvertently made them modernists. Robartes does have a couple lines where he makes a subtle jibe at the expense of the traditionalist point of view. He says, "The moldy bodies will not find us here/They tread only where they have tread before." Part of me thinks that's really funny and the other part of me thinks it's mildly embarrassing that I actually think that's funny.

Speaking of humor, there is definitely some self-effacing humor in the original poem but I wanted to make that more explicit in mine. Perhaps the situation I've created is funnier than the actual lines I've written, but if that's the case, keep it to yourself. The first explicit attempt at humor is Robartes's quote from the previous paragraph. The second is when zombies finish a line with "Brains! Eat Brains." It's a nice juxtaposition with Aherne and Robartes's more formal language. It's also a great way to squeeze in those last few iambs when you can't think of anything else. I wonder why nobody's tried that before...The final attempt at humor is the last line of my poem. It's a play on something Robartes says in the

original poem, "...his tale/Said I was dead; and dead I choose to be" (27-28). Making him a zombie so that I could rewrite this line was just too good of an opportunity to pass up.

When writing this poem I tried to use similar literary techniques as Yeats. In the original poem he focused the conversation on the moon. I built on this by referencing moonlight and its relation to truth and alchemy. Also, in addition to using the zombies as a metaphor for Yeats's long dead symbols I used them as a metaphor for art. Robartes accuses them of having no souls, which makes them artless. There is also the question of why Yeats created them. He created them in vengeance, so is vengeful art still art? Does such art still have a soul? I did allude to Edmond Dantes from *The Count of Monte Cristo* in effort to make this clearer, but I think that text is ambivalent about the beauty and aesthetics of revenge. (I also made an allusion to the Man of Law's tale from the Canterbury Tales. Whenever you have a chance to allude to Chaucer, you take it.)

From a tonal perspective I wanted to be ambivalent throughout my poem. I liked the idea of using the zombies to personify the vulgarity of bringing back traditional symbols. So to some degree I'm criticizing the traditionalist perspective, but the "modernists," Aherne and Robartes, get their brains eaten. Maybe I'm saying that the modern perspective eventually becomes old and traditional. I just chose to illustrate this in the most gruesome way possible.

As far as structure is concerned I wrote nearly the entire poem in iambic pentameter. However, the zombies generally speak (when they're not saying "Brains!") in 9 syllable lines. I made them speak this way because to speak in 10 would imply perfection, and the zombies aren't quite perfect. Although if I were into pseudo-philosophy I might say that they are perfect in their imperfections, but come on. Zombie Robartes gets to steal the show though when he finishes the poem in iambic hexameter. Maybe he thinks he's Greek...

Note: the original poem by W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) was published in the collection entitled *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919).¹

35. The Phases of the Moon

AN old man cocked his ear upon a bridge;
He and his friend, their faces to the South,
Had trod the uneven road. Their boots were soiled,
Their Connemara cloth worn out of shape;
They had kept a steady pace as though their beds,
Despite a dwindling and late risen moon,
Were distant. An old man cocked his ear.

Aherne: What made that sound?

Robartes A rat or water-hen
Splashed, or an otter slid into the stream.
We are on the bridge; that shadow is the tower,
And the light proves that he is reading still.

¹ <http://www.bartleby.com/148/35.html> (Friday, January 22, 2010)

He has found, after the manner of his kind,
Mere images; chosen this place to live in
Because, it may be, of the candle light
From the far tower where Milton's platonist
Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince:
The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
And now he seeks in book or manuscript
What he shall never find.

Aherne: Why should not you
Who know it all ring at his door, and speak
Just truth enough to show that his whole life
Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
Of all those truths that are your daily bread;
And when you have spoken take the roads again?

Robartes: He wrote of me in that extravagant style
He had learnt from Pater, and to round his tale
Said I was dead; and dead I chose to be.

Aherne: Sing me the changes of the moon once more;
True song, though speech: 'mine author sung it me.'

Robartes: Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.
From the first crescent to the half, the dream
But summons to adventure and the man
Is always happy like a bird or a beast;
But while the moon is rounding towards the full
He follows whatever whim's most difficult
Among whims not impossible, and though scarred
As with the cat-o'-nine-tails of the mind,
His body moulded from within his body
Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then
Athenae takes Achilles by the hair,
Hector is in the dust, Nietzsche is born,
Because the heroes' crescent is the twelfth.
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.
The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
In its own being, and when that war's begun
There is no muscle in the arm; and after
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,

To die into the labyrinth of itself.

Aherne: Sing out the song; sing to the end, and sing
The strange reward of all that discipline.

Robartes: All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world.

Aherne: All dreams of the soul
End in a beautiful man's or woman's body.

Robartes: Have you not always known it?

Aherne: The song will have it
That those that we have loved got their long fingers
From death, and wounds, or on Sinai's top,
Or from some bloody whip in their own hands.
They ran from cradle to cradle till at last
Their beauty dropped out of the loneliness
Of body and soul.

Robartes: The lovers' heart knows that.

Aherne: It must be that the terror in their eyes
Is memory or foreknowledge of the hour
When all is fed with light and heaven is bare.

Robartes: When the moon's full those creatures of the full
Are met on the waste hills by country men
Who shudder and hurry by: body and soul
Estranged amid the strangeness of themselves,
Caught up in contemplation, the mind's eye
Fixed upon images that once were thought,
For separate, perfect, and immovable
Images can break the solitude
Of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.

And thereupon with aged, high-pitched voice
Aherne: laughed, thinking of the man within,
His sleepless candle and laborious pen.

Robartes: And after that the crumbling of the moon.
The soul remembering its loneliness
Shudders in many cradles; all is changed,

It would be the World's servant, and as it serves,
Choosing whatever task's most difficult
Among tasks not impossible, it takes
Upon the body and upon the soul
The coarseness of the drudge.

Aherne: Before the full
It sought itself and afterwards the world.

Robartes: Because you are forgotten, half out of life,
And never wrote a book your thought is clear.
Reformer, merchant, statesman, learned man,
Dutiful husband, honest wife by turn,
Cradle upon cradle, and all in flight and all
Deformed because there is no deformity
But saves us from a dream.

Aherne: And what of those
That the last servile crescent has set free?

Robartes: Because all dark, like those that are all light,
They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,
Crying to one another like the bats;
And having no desire they cannot tell
What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph
At the perfection of one's own obedience;
And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,
Insipid as the dough before it is baked,
They change their bodies at a word.

Aherne: And then?

Robartes: When all the dough has been so kneaded up
That it can take what form cook Nature fancy
The first thin crescent is wheeled round once more.

Aherne: But the escape; the song's not finished yet.

Robartes: Hunchback and saint and fool are the last crescents.
The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow
Out of the up and down, the wagon wheel
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter,
Out of that raving tide is drawn betwixt
Deformity of body and of mind.

Aherne: Were not our beds far off I'd ring the bell,
Stand under the rough roof-timbers of the hall

Beside the castle door, where all is stark
Austerity, a place set out for wisdom
That he will never find; I'd play a part;
He would never know me after all these years
But take me for some drunken country man;
I'd stand and mutter there until he caught
'Hunchback and saint and fool,' and that they came
Under the three last crescents of the moon,
And then I'd stagger out. He'd crack his wits
Day after day, yet never find the meaning.

And then he laughed to think that what seemed hard
Should be so simple—a bat rose from the hazels
And circled round him with its squeaky cry,
The light in the tower window was put out.