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Thomas Dilworth
University of Windsor

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The Hidden Date in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'

by Thomas Dilworth

[This essay is a revised version of one with the same title published in *Explicator* 67:4 (Summer 2000), 236-7, copyright T.D]

'Easter 1916' is written in four stanzas alternating between sixteen and twenty-four line each. For most poets these numbers would be irrelevant but not, probably, for William Butler Yeats, who was an aficionado of the esoteric, including numerology. The four stanzas may correspond to the four named patriots in lines 75-6 and the fourfold alliterative chiasmus in 'terrible beauty'. Any meaning arising from such correspondence seems negligible. There is, however, a series of related numerical correspondences that is indisputably significant. The 4 stanzas and the 16 or 24 lines in each stanza in turn mark the opening date of the event celebrated by the poem. The number 16 corresponds to and is colloquially short for the year 1916. Too high to indicate a month, the number 24 indicates the day of the month, leaving the number 4 to designate the fourth month of the year, April. This date, 24 April 1916 was Easter Monday, when Padraic Pearce as commandant-general and president of the provisional Irish Republican Government read aloud the proclamation that government on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin. His act initiated the five day-long 'rising', which received its enduring literary memorial in Yeats's poem the following September (Jeffares 224) and was a major step toward independence for most of Ireland. The formal-numerical emphasis on this date in Yeats's poem implies the importance of the date in the mind of Irish people at the time the poem was written. The numbers in the extrinsic form comprise an all-encompassing image that corresponds with the limited image of the 'stone... in the midst of all' (lines 43, 55), which serves 'to trouble the living stream' (44).

Works Cited

Jeffares, A. Norman. *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1968.

Yeats, W.B. "Easter 1916," *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*. Ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Mcmillan, 1957, 341-4.