

Limited Perspective and Gravity of Life
in Richard Yates's *The Easter Parade*

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イースターパレードにおける「生の重力」と「見通しの欠如」

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リチャード・イエイツは長らく忘れ去られた作家であるが、一方、ヘミングウェイと並んで現代のアメリカ作家に大きな影響力を及ぼしたことも知られている。本論は、ペシミスティックな作家として知られるイエイツの作品から、二人の姉妹の運命を容赦ないリアリズムの視点から描いた『イースターパレード』(1976)を取り上げる。二人の姉妹の一見対照的に見える人生を、見通しの欠如、すなわち見えない＝わからないままに生きていくという共通点に光を当てることで、どこにでもいる人間が生のかたまりに引きずり下ろされていく様子をたどり、また、共依存的な人物像を、共依存という概念が登場する前に描写していた偉大なリアリスト作家としてのイエイツの人間の生の重力と見通しの欠如のもたらす生の苦悩を明らかにする試みである。

キーワード：リチャード・イエイツ・イースターパレード・見通しの欠如

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Richard Yates has been considered as an outstanding novelist of American realistic fiction. In spite of this, or because of this, he and his works have been long forgotten. About half a century has passed since his first, and most acclaimed work, *Revolutionary Road* (1961) was published, twenty years since his last work, *Cold Spring Harbor* (1986) appeared. Most of his works had been out of print in 1990s. With his lung, which had been bad for almost 50 years, Richard Yates died of emphysema in 1992.

However, Richard Yates has not

been forgotten. Many major American writers such as Raymond Carver through Ann Beattie, Tobias Wolff, Richard Russo, Richard Ford, and Jayne Anne Phillips considered themselves “to have been fathered by Hemingway, and, as it were, brought up by Yates”(Siegel, 82) Leo Siegel indicates that these writers have long and eloquently regretted the latter’s lapsed reputation and the unavailability of his work, pointing to his plain, prose and to his bleak take on life, which can be traced to Hemingway’s Lost Generation pessimism. In 1999, in *Boston Review*, Stewart O’Nan predicted that:

Fitzgerald's did, and Yates will take his place in the American canon. O'Nan seems to be right as all of his works have been reprinted by 2006, his collection of stories was published with acclaim, and then, in 2003, the first and quite huge volume of his biography, *A Tragic Honesty* written by Blake Bailey appeared. Even there is some news that a major film company is going to make *Revolutionary Road* into film. It seems quite appropriate to re-read and see his works in a new light.

Although he had been in the category of the writer's writer, his style was not "a linguistic acrobat like Nabokov, or a highflying fabulist like Steven Millhauser"(O'Nan). Unlike his contemporary writers such as Pynchon, DeLillo and Rushdie, he wrote about the mundane sadness of domestic life in language so easy, natural and transparent that it suggests a profound humility before life's inscrutable sadness. Siegel refers Kafka's remark that writing is a form of prayer. He accurately observed his men and women, tortured, blinded and silenced by life as they are. His prose can be called "cool humble chronicling of his characters' slow doom"(Siegel) His work was simple and conventional, "free of metafictionalists' or even the modernists' tricks"(O'Nan). It would make sense to read (re-read) his "cool chronicle of his men and women" among or after the huge literary storms of post-structuralist fiction.

The inescapability of the past was a thematic obsession of Richard Yates, In

his comprehensive account of "American middle-class character and fate from the Great Depression to the early 1970s."(Castoronovo,1) he told stories about psychologically and socially stifled people living in an atmosphere of "official optimism", which was doomed to turn out to be a series of failure. Yates stands out among postwar American writers for his disappointment. Bellow, Ellison, Updike, Salinger, Cheever, Malamud, Mailer, Roth, et al., all searched everyday life for a different form of heroism, for grace under new kinds of pressure. Unlike them, Yates gave up on everyday life. He pursued "optimism" and "disappointment" as the result of the optimism.

Yates's characters typically get through most of their lives without knowing what's wrong. In other words, they have a limited perspective or no perspective to acknowledge what their lives are like. The internal process driving Yates's characters is frequently so simple that it looks like the natural fall pulled by gravity. This slow but inescapable fall can be seen in an extreme form in *The Easter Parade*.

The Easter Parade is a chronicle novel that follows the long, unhappy lives of two sisters, Emily and Sarah Grimes. Sarah Grimes is a hapless Long Island housewife, and Emily Grimes is a career woman. Sarah was a typical American girl who once bloomed as a pretty young woman appearing in the paper in the Easter Parade. Sarah could

be a symbol of an optimistic American dream in 1950s. Along with them, there is their pretentious and restless mother, Pookie. It should be noted that Yates's own mother, Ruth Maurer Yates, was nicknamed "Dookie" As in his own life, mother-daughter relationship is not a happy one.

The novel consists of three parts: Part 1 extends from the 1930s and the sisters' childhood in Tenafly, New York. Part 2 opens in the 1950s when Emily, by now the book's central character, has graduated from Barnard and taken a job with *Food Field Observer*. She goes two abortions. Part 3 is over the early 1960s. Sarah dies in a dubious situation, while Emily loses her job without any particular reason.

The *Easter Parade* carries this forced fall to an extreme. The novel's first sentence is, "Neither the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce." (Yates, 3) We see a straightforward slow fall. Two girls are born to a restless alcoholic mother who is unable to maintain relationship after the end of her marriage. Sarah Grimes marries an abusive husband and becomes an alcoholic, too. Sarah dies in a dubious situation in which family members do not declare if she died from her injury from her husband's abuse or her liver problem. The cause of Sarah's death is left unclear and Emily is not given her own clear perspective on her sister's life.

Emily Grimes moves from apartment to apartment, from one boyfriend to another, and from job to job, unable to maintain a stable emotional relationship. First sentences of *The Easter Parade* functions as a "sentence" to the lives of Sarah and Emily, which is "Neither the Grimes sisters would have a happy life."(Yates 3) .

Yates uses a very common everyday phrase effectively to suggest that Emily (and Sara) does not see what their lives are like and have a limited or no perspective to grasp the meaning of their lives. "I see,' She often said, 'I see' about things she didn't wholly understand ... and so, for that matter, did Sarah. Neither of them understood why their mother found it necessary to change homes so often, for example, -- they'd be just beginning to make friends in one place when they'd move to another -- but they never questioned it."(Yates, 12) Emily continues saying "I see," when she doesn't see the situation at all. When Sara let Emily know that their parents were not always hostile, even when they were trying to divorce, Emily says, "I see."(Yates 134).When her father died, she cried but "these tears, as always before in her life, were wholly for herself -- for poor, sensitive Emily Grimes whom nobody understood, and who understood nothing."(Yates, 42) When Emily visits her mother at the nursing home, she wanted to help her mother who has dementia, fantasizing about being President Kennedy's mother-in-law. She just says "I see," when the nurse says

nothing will help. Emily does nothing when Pookie was transferred to the state institution. This unquestioning acceptance of Emily saying “I see” when she does not see at all brings her suffering. Suffering can be a feature of a saint in a world with God, but her suffering holds no meaning in a world without God.

The Easter Parade itself is a New York phenomenon that dates back to the middle of the 1800s. The social elite would attend services at one of the fashionable 5th Avenue churches, such as St. Patrick Cathedral, and parade down the Avenue afterwards to give onlookers – and each other – a chance to view their new Easter hats and dresses. According to Irving Berlin’s lyric in the 1948 musical film, *Easter Parade* starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland, “In my Easter bonnet with all the frills upon it, I’ll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade You’ll be all in clover, and when they look me over. You’ll be the proudest fellow in the Easter Parade. On the Avenue, Fifth Avenue, The photographers will snap us. And you’ll find that you’re in the rotogravure. Oh, you may write a sonnet about my Easter bonnet. And of the girl you’re taking to the Easter Parade.”(Berlin) As the lyrics of Irvin Berlin says, the pictures of Sarah and her boyfriend, Tony, who looks like Lawrence Olivier, came out the rotogravure section of *The New York Times*, “smiling at each other like the very soul of romance in the April sunshine”(Yates 28) It is the bitter irony

in Yates’s novel that this good looking Tony turns out to be an abusive husband.

The novel takes its title from the idea of resurrection. Yates, however, seems to offer us a parody of resurrection: a beautiful, hopeful photograph of Emily’s sister, Sarah, and her future husband, Tony, taken on Easter Day at the time of their courtship, reappears toward the end of the novel, after the revelation of Tony’s wife-beating. Sarah repeatedly says, “I’m OK.” And never admits that she has been abused.

Sarah’s case is clearly that of co-dependency. According to the definition of National Mental Health Association, “co-dependency is a learned behavior that can be passed down from one generation to another. It is an emotional and behavioral condition that affects an individual’s ability to have a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship. It is also known as “relationship addiction” because people with codependency often form or maintain relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive and/or abusive”. (NMHA) Mother of Sarah and Emily is alcoholic and also co-dependency. It is notable that Yates depicts that Sara’s problem is “relationship addiction” as she always says “I’m OK.” Considering the fact that *The Easter Parade* was published in 1976, and the concept of “co-dependency” was identified in 1990s, no one can deny that Yates wonderfully functions as a witness of this sick, endless cycle. According to National

Mental Health Association, “The disorder was first identified about ten years ago as the result of years of studying interpersonal relationships in families of alcoholics. Co-dependent behavior is learned by watching and imitating other family members who display this type of behavior.”(NMHA) Yates seems to replace the idea of resurrection with the concept of the endless morbid relationship disorder.

Emily tries to change her destiny to secure the relationship only once when her long-time boyfriend, Howard, is leaving her to go back to his long separated young wife. “It took only a couple of days for Howard to move his belongings out of the apartment. He was very apologetic about everything. Only once, when he flicked the heavy silken rope of his neckties out of the closet, was there any kind of scene, and that turned into such a dreadful scene – it ended with her falling on her knees to embrace his legs and begging him, begging him to stay – that Emily did the best she could to put it out of her mind” (Yates, 210). This Emily’s desperate begging fails, her efforts to “see” her life are described with compassion, though.

The redemption of “begging him,” representing an abandonment of stylistic neutrality, revealing Yates’s compassion. In this fascinating moments, As Siegel indicates, “literary style can be emotionally consoling in the way that it calmly reflects an image of familiar pain, relieving our suffering with the sense

that we do not suffer alone, but it is not always spiritually satisfying.” Here, Yates presents us characters that we know so well. In this sense, Emily is an representative woman in our age who floats along the time with the limited perspective of her life and people, pretending that she is an independent career woman.

After a life of unrelieved disappointment, Emily Grimes arrives at the New England home of her nephew, Peter. A newly ordained minister who has recently married and fathered a daughter, Peter is the only person in the Grimes family who seemed to have come through. He has escaped his own abusive father and alcoholic mother and made a separate life for himself in a small college town. Sensing that his “Aunt Emmy” has reached the end of her rope, he invites her to stay with his family for an indefinite period of time.

From the point of view of desire, Emily is not included in the great naturalist heroines, Zora’s Therese Raquin, Stephen Crane’s Maggie, Dreiser’s Carrie, went down swinging. Desire leads Therese to murder, and the passionate decay of desire into hatred leads her to suicide; Maggie desperately turns to crime and prostitution to survive; Carrie is borne up by the destruction of the men who seduce her. Even ill-fated Emma Bovary, whom “Aunt Emmy” is meant to put us in mind, took a willful solace in her illusions – then, too, she summons her own

destruction by plunging headlong into her chosen escape. Emily Grimes, on the other hand, has to be the most passive heroine in the history of literature. She does not express a single desire of her own, except, pathetically, the desire not to be hurt or disappointed. Emily has never been really independent enough to express her own desire.

The fate of Emily seems, on the surface, more ambiguous than tragic life and fall of Sarah. On the brink of a nervous collapse, she tries to turn back from Peter's house and hospitality at the last minute. Peter comes down his driveway after her, and Emily hears "a jingle of pocketed coins or keys." (Yates 228) An instant later, when Peter suddenly realizes the extent of her distress, he asks her if she's tired and then stands "looking at her in a detached, speculative way now, more like an alert young psychiatrist than a priest." (Yates 229) "Yes, I'm tired," she said. "And do you know a funny thing? I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life." "All right," he said quietly. "All right, Aunt Emmy. Now. Would you like to come in and meet the family?" (Yates 229)

Considering that the Grimes sisters' "trouble began with their parents' divorce," (Yates 3) Peter's invitation to enter yet another family romance could be read – indeed, almost demands to be read – as the bitterest of ironies. Peter never admits that her mother was abused. His "all right" could be an escape

from harsh reality. But since he seems happily married, with his family intact, perhaps Emily does stand, if unsteadily, at the threshold of redemption. There is no knowing that the "redemption" leads to grace, understanding, passive acceptance or greed, though. Readers are left unknown with only temporary acceptance, saying "I see" for a fifty-year old woman who has never understood anything in her whole life. That is what Yates's offers. A human with limited perspective is doomed to live with the gravity of life.

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