

Speaking for the Infant: On Yeats's "A Prayer for my Daughter"

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Leona Toker's defence of Yeats's "A Prayer for my Daughter" is advantageously placed in the context of a debate over "Poetry as Procreation." For it is in that context that such pejorative readings as Joyce Carol Oates's can be seen in the full measure of their triviality, and caught out in their very indignation. Trivial, that is, in the determination to read the poem as an autobiographical statement, as an ideological text, as anything but a poem. For how much longer are we expected to be shocked at the revelation that a modernist aesthetic conceals patriarchal and quasi-fascist ideological positions? As William Empson observed as long ago as 1965: "the weight of the charge is that Yeats was a fascist. Surely the first point to get clear is: 'So were all the great writers in English in the first half of this century, except Joyce.'"¹

Toker's defence has much to do with prophecy, and it is worth contemplating the relationship between prophecy and fascism, between a language that lays claims on the future and a politics that would engineer the present. We could give a continuing validity to the sense of poetry as prophecy by thinking of prophecy as a critique directed against the epoch of its utterance, a critique, therefore, that anticipates the new era of its fulfilment, its realization, and its cancellation. To say that poetry contains, or even inheres in, ambiguity and contradiction, is to recognize the temporality of any poem, its lifespan, even its shelf-life. Every poem will be found to contain something offensive to some reader, even if only by that exclusion that operates as non-inclusion: a gendered or even a racial

¹Reference: Leona Toker, "W. B. Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter': The Ironies of the Patriarchal Stance," *Connotations* 9.1 (1999/2000): 100-110.

exclusiveness can be deduced from a pronoun. This is liable to occur when the first-person pronoun is treated as a referent to the poet whom we know to be male, or white, or Irish, or old. And it is the prophetic element of a poem whose overlooking in any critical account usually brings down the charge of 'formalism'; for it is this, and only this, the prophetic, the scandalous, which gives any poem a purchase on future readings. It may, of course, be preferable to talk about prophecy rather than fascism, though the latter term will always tempt: we might say that a fascist is a prophet with political power; and that it is precisely in his own country that a prophet ought, for the good of all, to be without honour or power.

What routinely gets labelled and discounted as "the formalist approach" is often simply the reader's sense that a poem has a life and a meaning beyond all that ideological fiddle. To say that "My child" does not "refer" outside the poem to a biological daughter of William Butler Yeats, but functions within a system of tropes, may be taken as a copout, as an evasion of one's moral and political responsibilities as a reader. To such an anti-formalist challenge I would prefer not to respond. Rather than perpetuating that debate, by arguing on one side or the other, we would do better to acknowledge the constitutive necessity of such an irreconcilable division. Constitutive, that is, of any poem to be read more than once. The discrepancy between the formalist and the ideological reading is a measure of the poem's life, insofar as it foretells and enables another reading.

Whatever Leona Toker may mean by saying that "A Prayer for my Son" is the "weaker poem" of Yeats's two prayers for his offspring—let alone what we might agree about in that judgement—we can agree that "A Prayer for my Daughter" holds our attention; and that, by contrast, "A Prayer for my Son" seems contrived, little more than a companion-piece. Yet it is "A Prayer for my Son" that lacks ideological offensiveness. In being able to detect no fracture, no element whose exclusion from our reading might lead to a charge of "formalism," we are likely to consign "A Prayer for my Son" to its own time, without residue, without the prophetic note, the irritant of otherness. Yet this is not to imply that this or any disregarded poem will not have another moment, that in another age it might be upheld as a "strong poem": whatever that age will see, find, or take offence in,

we might not see now, or yet. Such mutability is, in Yeats's phrase—cited and qualified by Toker—the continual "making and un-making" in which the poet engages, and in which, willy-nilly, the poem is engaged.

Prophecy and procreation are linked by their common prefix, that *pro*- which may indicate a motion forward or outward, a time before or ahead, or "on behalf of" (*pro* rather than *contra*), or, most significantly in the present context, in place of, instead of. A prophet is not, etymologically at least, one who speaks beforehand, one who sees into the future, but rather one who speaks on behalf of another—in standard usage one who speaks in place of the Lord. Yeats was much concerned with prophecy, with voices detached, displaced, disembodied; and in "A Prayer for my Son" we find the Christ-child as an infant, without speech, the Word without a word, in T. S. Eliot's formulation ("Ash Wednesday V") drawn from Lancelot Andrewes's twelfth Christmas sermon: "Verbum infans, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word":

Though You can fashion everything
From nothing every day, and teach
The morning stars to sing,
You have lacked articulate speech
To tell Your simplest want

The prophet speaks on behalf of another. Here, in the Nativity, that other, God, is Himself deprived of speech: the Verbum is infans, unworded.

One kind of prophet is an angel, the messenger who brings the word from the Word, who brings warning to Joseph in a dream (Matt. 2:13). One of the archangels is of course named Michael. "A Prayer for my Son" is a poem about protecting, a request for divine protection; it takes the angel as protector and figures this Michael as lying helpless, in need of human protection, just as the Divine Word is figured as a mute infant, in need of human love, to be spoken for by a human voice. As the Incarnation involves a parodic inversion of the divine order, so "my Michael" makes a parody of the angelic order: this is an angel for whom, on whose behalf, the poet must speak.

Procreation seems etymologically to waver between creation in advance and creation in place of. Is the act of procreation an act that both *is*, and yet only anticipates creation itself? Or is it, setting aside the temporalities of *pro-*, an act by which one creates one's own replacement? (The same ambiguity is present in the word *generation*, signalling both increase and substitution.)

Procreation as a metaphor for poetry involves that metonymic displacement by which the poet lives on, lives again, in his or her creations. This figure is turned and returned in Ben Jonson's great and diminutive elegy, "On my first Sonne":

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lye
Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetrie.

By contrast, Yeats does not address his living child in the form of an apostrophe, as Jonson his dead son, but addresses Him to Whom prayers are customarily addressed—though it is only in the "Prayer for My Son" that "You" is invoked, the defining initial upper-case asserted. It is surely a remarkable feature of "A Prayer for my Daughter" that in a "prayer" of eighty lines the second-person pronoun is entirely absent. The prayer is framed within the narrative of an act of praying, most explicitly in the lines from the first two stanzas: "And for an hour I have walked and prayed," "I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour." The "Prayer for my Daughter" is, we might venture, a prayer precisely in order that it should not be an apostrophe. For everything that Oates objects to in this poem might well have been put directly, and no less offensively, as a father's advice, in the manner of Polonius.

Leona Toker argues interestingly that prayer is a form of metalepsis; that is, a figure that takes possession of what it describes, that puts one's own signature to what one has only described. Prayer does so by taking as its very premise the possibility of altering the world as given. Metalepsis works with the same temporal ambivalence as *pro-*, looking ahead, yet already there, as prolepsis works from here forwards. What is curious in Toker's terminology is that she should invoke metalepsis without a mention of prolepsis, though the two must be defined in each other's terms. A poem

always looks ahead to its future readers, so every act of writing involves prolepsis; reading is itself a kind, or even the very type of metalepsis, for metalepsis is present whenever a poem is surprised in the act of being read. Metalepsis is the fulfilment of prolepsis, its recognition, the completion of its circuit, its discharge. And it is the metaleptic appropriation of the poet's own voice, through the reader's voicing of the poem, that is liable to find, or take, offence in what that voice says.

The link between metalepsis and prayer is as clear as that which would almost equate prayer with prolepsis: a desire to change the world as given, and a desire to change the poem as found. Prayer is directed towards the future, as prolepsis; metalepsis lays claim to a text already there, while withholding assent from every detail of that text. Hence, in Harold Bloom's scheme of tropes, the need for a *clinamen*, a swerve or "strong misprision" or "deliberate misinterpretation," in every instance of metalepsis.² That with which we are in entire agreement is not worthy of our appropriation; the offence, the divergence, is alone and precisely what precludes redundancy, the mere iteration of vocal repetition. The reading of poetry necessarily and invariably presents us with the dilemma articulated by Socrates in the third book of Plato's *Republic*:

But when the poet speaks in the person of another, may we not say that he assimilates his style to that of the person who, as he informs you, is going to speak? . . . And this assimilation of himself to another, either by the use of voice or gesture, is the imitation of the person whose character he assumes? (III, 393)

The poet's dilemma is (in the *Ion*) transferred to the rhapsode; should we imitate, give our voice to that which is beneath us, whether to the words of cowards or slaves, or to the irrational sounds made by animals or the wind (III, 396)? Socrates concludes that mimesis—the voicing of another's words—is appropriate when the one imitated is good and noble, but is not otherwise to be encouraged:

the decent man . . . will not want seriously to liken himself to his own inferior, except momentarily, when he is acting well. He will be ashamed . . . he will feel disgust at modelling himself on, and inserting himself into, the patterns of the inferior. (III, 396)

And so it is with readers of poetry, who have no choice but to hear the poet's words in their own voices, who (to speak only for one self) enjoys his own voice in the rhythm supplied by Yeats, but who may hesitate to articulate within the patterns of the inferior. In voicing again, in speaking on behalf of another, we make ourselves present at the meeting of the prophetic and the mimetic, the confluence of Greek and Hebrew anxieties. That is why poetry must be read aloud, and why even its most fervent readers habitually play false to that injunction.

Those anxieties live on in the most familiar of all forms of metalepsis, interpretation, the figure by which the reader makes his or her own the meaning of a text, by claiming access to the original meaning or intention. And that "original meaning" must differ from the apparent, obvious meaning—or else there would be no need for an act of interpretation. "Original meaning" implies the temporality within which the differential of meaning can occur. Intention implies a spatial otherness in which, synchronically, difference has its being. Whether or not we admit to being practitioners of hermeneutics, we cannot elide the differential that makes a text worth reading: what makes a text worth reading is not only its pattern of superior sound, but also whatever "shames" or disturbs us in the reading aloud. The link to procreation hardly needs spelling: the Poem that the poet creates is recreated by the reader's voice.

Such observations as these pertain to poetry in general, to poetry as the conveyor not of voice itself, nor of a particular voice, but of that which can be vocalized. Yet it is hardly an accident that these thoughts are prompted by Yeats's "Prayer for my Daughter," which is also a plea for the good behaviour of future readers. The opening phrase—"Once more the storm is howling"—invokes the Socratic anxiety: "Rivers babbling? The roar of the sea? Thunder? Are [poets] to imitate this sort of thing?" (*Republic* III, 396). In the next stanza the poet has "heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, / . . . and scream / In the elms above the flooded stream." The voice of the poet is silenced, subdued by the irrational noises produced by the wind. The half-rhyme of "wind" and "mind" stresses the loudness of the former, the mute inwardness of the latter. (The two words will rhyme again, in adjacent lines, in the seventh stanza, and once

more as the envelope of a quatrain in the eighth stanza.) And although the storm is not mentioned again after the first two stanzas, it remains as the surrounding sound of the prayer that commences in the third stanza with the implied second-person address: "May she be granted beauty . . ."

To suggest that the storm has something to do with poetic inspiration is obvious enough: "Once more" echoes the opening of "Lycidas," and makes the storm no exceptional event, but a recurrence: less a summoning of inspiration than submission to the afflatus. The sleeping child is that which is to be protected from the storm, yet is also awakened, even brought to birth, by the breath, spirit, *pneuma*, *ruach*, a lexical cluster whose symbolic and theological imbrications are familiar (in a number of senses). We note that the child sleeps, or sleeps on, under two levels and kinds of covering, while it is the storm that is "bred" and that cannot be "stayed."

In the second half of the second stanza, the poet seems to be of a similar disposition as the storm:

Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

The frenzied drum mediates between the storm and the poet, the frenzy being transferred from a natural howling to a drum and dancing, subject to human agency. That transference is endorsed by the present participle "Dancing" which seems to modify either the "I"—congruent with "Imagining"—or the future years. Rhetorically, the equivalent positions of "Imagining" and "Dancing" may lead one to suppose that "Dancing" also modifies "I." Grammatically, however, we must attend to the way in which "Dancing to a frenzied drum" does not follow a clause but interrupts it, and interrupts it in the middle of a phrasal verb: "come . . . out of." Such a clausal interruption requires that "Dancing" modify the future years and the way in which they come, and come out of.

"The murderous innocence of the sea" thus links the future years to the present storm "Bred on the Atlantic," and as the future years are those in which the daughter grows to womanhood, so daughter and storm are

“assimilated”: the storm “Bred on”—where we might expect “bred in”—while “My child sleeps on.” The abruptly registered temporality of “on”—“sleeps on” while or despite—mocks our expectation that a child sleeping under so much that is specified—“cradle-hood and coverlid”—might also have something—a cot, a mattress—to sleep on.

The prayer itself, filling the remaining eight stanzas, is concerned with the stilling of the storm, the calming of the wind, the rooting and growth of a tree where there is, now, only “Gregory’s wood and one bare hill.” It contests the storm, and though it displaces it, the storm has not been banished. The storm that is no longer described returns in the prophetic vision of all the storms ahead, as if that storm were an omen of a turbulent life. And it is the prophetic vision that makes this poem so extraordinary, so salient that no amount of reading can level it. For the poem’s vision of its own future renders thematic future readings, and thus pre-empts the metalepsis of interpretation. To be engaged in an argument over this poem is only to form part of what the poet has prophetically seen, and, as a prophet, voiced: by an uncanny rhetorical twist, ours are the voices that have already been anticipated and appropriated. We do not interpret the words of this prophet: he has already appropriated our words, words that we had thought were yet unspoken.

The pre-empting of the reader’s act of metalepsis entails the appropriation of the future by and at the present moment of writing. Among the most brazen of all such instances is in Matthew’s Gospel, when we are told that Pilate was addressed by the chief priests and Pharisees in these words: “Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first” (Matt. 27:34; see also 28:13-15). Such a narrative device forestalls the very act of interpretation. One can only assent to such a narrative, in a repetition without misprision, for it allows no space, no future, in which it can be “read”: any possible “misreading” of those events is already made present, given voice.

Yeats’s poem makes no such claim as the Gospel passage, lays its readers under no such overwhelming obligation. But it does make its own voice

present at our re-voicing. My child sleeps on; and who are you to wake it? It is the father's (or parent's) absolute possession of, control over, responsibility for a sleeping infant that is being challenged by a reader's voicing. The moment that an infant ceases to be such, begins to articulate, is the moment of parental dispossession. As the child speaks, so the child ceases to be spoken for by the parent: the parent ceases to be the prophet for the child, as the last of the Old Testament prophets must be Simeon, holding in his arms the child over whom (or to whom) he pronounces "Nunc dimittis" (Luke 2:29-32). In the coincidence of Word and infant, there is no place for prophecy. The poet, his child sleeping still, speaks for her future which is necessarily, insofar as the father is speaking, and using prolepsis, a future in which the child remains silent. Joyce Carol Oates protests that "the poet's daughter is to be brainless and voiceless, *rooted*." Yet one cannot prophesy what another person will say, for that would be to contradict the very premise of prophecy as speech on another's behalf: the prophetic voice depends upon an other's voicelessness.

And how better to figure the voiceless than as the vegetal? Specifically as the laurel (in Greek, *daphne*) sacred to Apollo. Daphne escaped pursuit by Apollo only, in answer to her prayer, by being transformed into a tree. According to Ovid:

Her prayer was scarcely ended when her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts were covered in delicate bark, her hair became leaves, her arms branches, and her swift feet were rooted into the ground, while her head became a treetop. Nothing of her was left, except her grace, her shining.

Apollo loved her, even as a tree Then the god said, "Since you can never be my bride, my tree at least you shall be. The laurel will henceforth adorn my hair, my lyre, my quiver" (*Metamorphoses* I, 548-62)

Daphne prayed only to evade capture by Apollo, but not for a specific form of escape; this poet prays specifically that his daughter may be turned into a tree:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree . . .
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

One could argue that such rootedness is desired by the father for the daughter, not as a tyrannical form of aesthetic objectification, but as a means for her to avoid predatory men. This would bring out the wordplay in “radical innocence.” A rooted fate is preferred over those fates, loose and willful, of Helen and Venus. The curse from which the father would spare his daughter is that of which the storm would be the auspice: Vulcan (or Hephaestus) is figured by metonymy as his own instrument or attribute—“an old bellows full of angry wind”—the vessel of a howling storm. The storm is still raging there, in the daughter’s future, and the father prays that she shall remain protected, no longer by “cradle-hood and coverlid” but by her qualities. Given the absence of hatred and opinions, and in the presence of “radical innocence”:

She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

When the mind/wind rhyme recurs, the mind is no longer the father’s but the daughter’s:

If there’s no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

The same rhyme-pair in the following stanza is given to Venus/Aphrodite (herself named as storm-bred, or “bred on” the foam: an echo heard as “born out of” harks back to “come . . . out of”):

Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty’s horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

“Quiet natures” are not mute, not infant, but those which keep the mind protected from the wind. This tree is not mute, even under the figure of

a tree, for the tree is both flourishing and hidden, though the latter epithet is transferred from the linnets within it, which

have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound

This laurel tree is to the poet as the bellows to Hephaestus, an attribute and a figure, metonymy and metaphor. For that which the poet wants to procreate is both another and more of the same: the poem as adjunct to the poet, and the poem as the poet himself, the poet in immortal guise, the poet as the one who makes space for no other.

Yeats wrote "A Prayer for my Daughter" in early 1919, in the wake of the set of Edward Thomas's "gift poems" that were published posthumously in *Poems* (1917), listed here by their first lines: "If I should ever by chance grow rich," "If I were to own this countryside," "What shall I give my daughter the younger," "And you, Helen, what should I give you?" It was their posthumous appearance that must then have been most moving, for each of these poems promises very little, and that, in two poems, is conditional on the clause of the opening lines. The third poem states baldly: "I shall not give her anything." The fourth poem plays with the modalities of should and could and would. What these poems so saliently give is nothing but themselves, all that remains of the poet, the father and the husband killed on Easter Monday 1917.

Also published posthumously, in 1918, is what might be called the mother of all poems-as-procreation, Gerard Manley Hopkins's "To R.B.," an agonized last poem in which the poet attempts to explain all the other poems, none of them published, which he has sent to his friend Robert Bridges. Here poetry is figured precisely as procreation, the mind as mother, and the inspiration, spur and fire, "the sire of muse," as the generative paternal principle:

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.

This poem strains the bearable, and it does so with a metalepsis that defies and precludes the misreading not only of this poem but of all those that have preceded it. The sonnet limps to a close with the concession of its own weakness, relative to the earlier poems, but a concession explained in terms of its obligation to function as a key to those poems, as itself an explanation:

O then if in my lagging lines you miss
 The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,
 My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss
 Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

Has another poet, ever, deliberately concluded his entire corpus with so lame a word as “explanation”? After the harvest comes the winter yield, “yield” teetering on that semantic fence that holds “produce” apart from “surrender.” We have not merely received the explanation: it has been yielded to us. Nothing more can, nor should, be demanded of the poet. Yet we can hardly find the explanation useful, if we can find it at all. The “explanation” is no explanation, but only the word: this is metalepsis of a high degree of coerciveness, whereby the reader is virtually inhibited even from declaring a lack of understanding. The mildest query will only elicit yet more sighs, in the endless enjambed “now”—the word bronchially expended not only after the line, but beyond the clause that would be complete without it—that must and will forever announce the time of each of our voicings, a time which no reading can move beyond.

Hopkins’s “To R.B.” is as extreme a case of metalepsis as any since Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, and quite without the latter’s levity. Yeats’s “Prayer” is not extreme, but is moderate even in the moderation that it celebrates. What most offends Joyce Carol Oates, and many others, is the final stanza with its consigning of the daughter into the care of a husband:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
 Where’s all accustomed, ceremonious

This may well be patriarchal, but it is also the moment at which the father, and the poet, relinquishes control, yields his voice to another, ceases to

pray and to prophesy, closes the poem, and silences our reading voices also. Given the ritual, the custom, that this poem celebrates and upholds, it would be strange for the father to do otherwise than to bestow his daughter on a husband. A father may prophesy for a daughter, and will always have a memory of her as infant; a husband may sometimes speak on behalf of his wife, but their two voices are distinct, and coordinated synchronically, not—as with father and daughter—diachronically. Our disapproval of certain customs and ceremonies should not obscure this fundamental distinction, at the discursive level, between a daughter and a wife.

This poem plays with the time-span of generation, with the discursive possibilities of the temporalities of procreation; it ends before, that is to say it stops short of, the discursive synchronicity of marriage. The synchronic displaces the diachronic, the time of procreation and prophecy which may be the time of poetry itself. And yet the poem, like the spreading laurel tree, stands free of the poet, created yet autonomous, metonymic yet not only an attribute, as an infant who has found speech, who has (she might say, for nobody else can) her own words now. And even the reader most solicitous, or most indignant, whether on behalf of the daughter or of the poem, finds herself with no role to play, no speech to voice, but that which has already been assigned—to the bridegroom.

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NOTES

¹"A Time of Troubles," *New Statesman*, 23 July 1965, repr. in William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987) 344.

²See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1973) 43.