

W. B. Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter": The Ironies of the Patriarchal Stance

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Modifying Shelley's view of poetry as prophesy, which so sharply contrasts with Marianne Moore's ostensibly skeptical attitude to poetry ("I too dislike it"),¹ William Butler Yeats has written that "Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in color or in form or in sound . . . and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians . . . are continually making and un-making mankind."² But mankind is also continually making and unmaking the poet. The history of a poem's reception, like the fate of a beloved child, is unpredictable. At one stage of reception the intellectual and emotional repertoire of a poem may appear hopelessly dated; at another it may emerge as well ahead of its time. I shall sketch these two eventualities in respect of Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter."

A prayer is an attempt to exert an influence on the world which, to paraphrase Housman, one "has never made." As a poetic move it is partly akin to what in *Les Figures du discours*, the eighteenth-century rhetorician Pierre Fontanier describes as "metalepsis," that is claiming to produce, one may even say generate, that which one is merely describing. Fontanier's example is the opening of the fourth canto of Delille's *Trois Règnes de la nature*:

Enfin, j'arrive à toi, terre à jamais féconde,
Jadis de tes rochers j'aurais fait jaillir l'onde;
J'aurais semé de fleurs le bord de tes ruisseaux,
Déployé tes gazons, tressé tes arbrisseaux,
De l'or de tes moissons revêtu les campagnes,
Suspendu les chevreaux aux buissons des montagnes,
De leurs fruits savoureux enrichi les vergers³

Modern literary theory tends to reverse Fontanier's distinction and say that by using images of fertility Delille may be redeeming the dream wasteland since in doing so he is "instructing"⁴ the reader to conjure it up in a certain way. In terms of J. L. Austin's performative speech-act theory, in an everyday speech situation, such a case of ekphrasis would constitute not a constative speech act but a performative one, an "exercitive," that is an act of "giving a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action, or advocacy of it," a decision "that something is to be so, as distinct from a judgment that it is so."⁵ Austin denies the possibility of applying speech act theory to the same utterance if introduced in a poem or a novel since the use of language in such frames is, as he says, "parasitic."⁶ The word "introduced" is, however, a spring of ambiguities: does Austen refer to any sentence in a novel or a poem or a direct speech act "introduced" in this derivative discourse? What if the poem as a whole is viewed as a complex speech act, variously deploying and reining in different illocutionary forces?

The oral speech act is made in an actual deictic situation which determines the extent of its "felicity." A literary work, as an act of communication, belongs to a virtual rather than an actual deictic situation; the author cannot foresee what cultural audiences he might eventually be addressing. Hence, the range of the *perlocutionary* effects of a codified literary text⁷ is much greater than that of a direct oral speech act; and the control that the speaker can exercise over its consequences diminishes as the time goes by. In that sense "procreation" is a better metaphor for the origin of a literary speech act than "performance."

Indeed, the result of a felicitous performative speech act, one performed by a person in authority and in appropriate circumstances, is definite, limited, and final. When the person authorised to do so proclaims "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth," reality is modified in the precisely intended way. In giving birth, by contrast, contingencies are paramount. To a baby one transmits one's codes but in unpredictable combinations, and the world into which a baby is inserted is one that even the most influential of parents has never made. The future life of a poem and its future intellectual environment are likewise notoriously beyond the author's ken. *Panta rei*:

everything flows, and in every which direction; there is no telling when and how and in what currents of perpetual heterogeneity the poem will be reinserted. The instructions encoded in the text come down to us trailing halos of blanks, and these blanks tend to grow with the passage of time. The resulting semiotic entropy can be partly contained by the study of relevant biographical and intertextual materials that set limits to the liberties we take with texts. Yet these materials are, in their turn, reinserted into the perpetual flow and do not re-emerge from it unchanged.

The contingencies of the ideological reception of "A Prayer for My Daughter" are partly due to the significance of the issues raised in different parts of this rather long poem. Yeats's treatment of one issue may appear archaically culture-bound, his treatment of another may emerge as prophetic. It seems important, therefore, to refrain from extrapolating our response to separate parts of the poem and from turning this partial response into a perlocutionary *dominant* of the poem as a whole.

The negative eventuality in the reception-history of "A Prayer for My Daughter" may be illustrated by the harshly critical reaction of a feminist reader like Joyce Carol Oates to Yeats's metaphors for the future that he would wish for his daughter:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
 That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
 And have no business but dispensing round
 Their magnanimities of sound,
 Not but in merriment begin a chase,
 Not but in merriment a quarrel.
 O may she live like some green laurel
 Rooted in one dear perpetual place.⁸

Oates is disgusted with this prospect: "This celebrated poet would have his daughter an object of nature for others'—which is to say male—delectation. She is not even an animal or a bird in his imagination, but a vegetable: immobile, unthinking, placid, 'hidden.' . . . The poet's life-work is the creation of a distinct voice in which sound and sense are harmoniously wedded: the poet's daughter is to be brainless and voiceless, *rooted*."⁹

It would seem, however, that Oates is merely using Yeats as a sample spokesman of a run-of-the-mill patriarchal position, practically identical in purport with that of American popular fiction for lady readers. This is basically the position that George Eliot attributed to her Victorian Middlemarchers and defined in the following way: "Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on."¹⁰ Oates's agenda is to show that despite the immense aesthetic distance between modernist literature and the middle-to-low-brow ladies' reading-matter that she criticises in her article, the persistence of the paleological patriarchal mind-set forms a partial ideological overlap between them.

The only place in the poem that is, indeed, a clear expression of an obsolete patriarchal attitude is the culture-bound belatedly Victorian reference to the bridegroom who is expected to prepare a ready-made form of well-being for the bride: "And may her bridegroom bring her to a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious." Already more than half a century before novelists like Dickens and George Eliot created striking portraits of women who offered helping hands to unanchored young men instead of waiting for them to qualify (mainly financially and prior to marriage) for the roles of respectable heads of the family. The two lines just quoted may support Oates's critique of Yeats, but she discredits her case when she attempts to supporting it by her interpretation of lines 65-72:

. . . all hatred driven hence,
 The soul recovers radical innocence
 And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
 Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
 And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
 She can, though every face should scowl
 And every windy quarter howl
 Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

What for most readers is a poet's dream of his daughter's intellectual and emotional independence is, for Oates, a recommendation of "a kind of autism of the spirit."¹¹ Here Oates overshoots her goal by betraying her own near-totalitarian tendency to condemn non-joiners. Her metaphor

of "autism of the spirit" conflicts with Yeats's simile which presents his daughter's thoughts not as a natural outgrowth of her being (not, for instance, as the foliage of the tree to which he likens her in his vision) but as singing birds (linnets), gently hosted by the boughs that do not bear the autistic fruit of hatred ("If there's no hatred in the mind / Assault and battery of the wind / Can never tear the linnet from the leaf") and shared by the tree with the outside world. Ideas are thus presented as partners in the relationship, and the worst that can be said of Yeats's imagery is that he does not seem to expect his daughter to *generate* original thoughts. The poem deals not with the desirability or danger of new philosophical insight; the target of its critique is "opinions," that is, the socially formalized and shared attitudes that suppress and damage individuality instead of promoting its growth.

There is, moreover, a difference between the Middlemarchers' dismissively paternalistic attitude to women and an actual father's desire to have his child protected from that "murderous innocence of the sea"—from that "blood-dimmed tide" which, in Yeats's "The Second Coming" drowns, and "In a Prayer for My Daughter" threatens to drown, "the ceremony of innocence."¹² The impulse of paternal protection works irrespective of the baby's gender; indeed it characterizes both "A Prayer for my Daughter" and "A Prayer for My Son" (1921), written after the birth of Yeats's son. Both the poems contrast sharply with the Romantic wish to have the object of one's care exposed to the seasons; Yeats's agenda is that of the exertion of his psychic energies in a (doomed) attempt to shield. "A Prayer for My Son" lacks the touches of specific tenderness elicited by a girl-baby (they are partly compensated for by the care for the baby's mother); and though it is also free from the imaginary Victorian-style match-making, it is the weaker poem of the two. M. L. Rosenthal has noted that its feelings "seem strained, especially in the comparison of the dangers the poet says the child will confront (such as enemies jealous of his achievements) with those faced by the Holy Family."¹³

A woman and a man
 Unless the Holy Writings lie
 Hurried through the smooth and rough

And through the fertile and waste,
 Protecting, till the danger past,
 With human love.

However, this allusion to Mary's and Joseph's plight can be read as emphasizing not the grandeur of the baby's future "deed or thought" but as an ultimate expression of the parents' helplessness to forestall their child's martyrdom: the present danger will pass, but not the one thirty-three years later. The epithet that qualifies the future "deed or thought" of the child is not, as one might expect, "mighty" (or some such bisyllabic word that would fit into the prosodic slot in the line) but "haughty" ("some most haughty deed or thought")—a word with not only positive but also strongly negative connotations.¹⁴ It is almost as if the exercitive speech-act of "prayer" in both the poems seeks to protect the child in each poem not only from the enemies of their ideas but also from the sway of the ideas themselves.

This is precisely the attitude which, if not original, is, nevertheless, ahead of its contemporary philosophical contexts. "Intellectual hatred is the worst," "opinions are accursed," "not but in merriment begin a quarrel"—all these might just as well be among the rhetorical vignettes of the type of late-twentieth-century intellectual whom Richard Rorty calls "a liberal ironist." The ideological portrait of "a liberal ironist" is painted in Rorty's book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: as a liberal, such an intellectual has one strong opinion—that "cruelty is the worst thing we do";¹⁵ as an ironist, he (or she), recognizes the cultural, political, and biographical contingencies of his /her opinions.¹⁶ "Nor but in merriment begin a chase, / Nor but in merriment a quarrel" might in fact sound as a stylistic improvement on the grain of ironic salt with which a liberal ironist treats all of his /her opinions—except the one on cruelty as the worst thing we do and the self-reflective one on the need for the ironic stance.

Yet, as Rorty himself indicates, the stance of the liberal ironist is "not empowering."¹⁷ Yeats knows that well: in "The Second Coming" the dangerous forces, "the worst," are characterized by "passionate intensity," whereas "the best lack all conviction" and therefore cannot, or will not try to, dam the tides of violence. The prophetic accuracy of these intuitions

requires no comment. In "A Prayer for My Daughter," often regarded as a companion piece to "The Second Coming,"¹⁸ the speaker casts for a prescriptive conclusion, and finds it in the place where another twenty-first century philosopher, Bernard Williams will introduce a correction on the ironic stance. For Yeats the instabilities that result from an ironist's pluralism are to be compensated for by "rooted"-ness in "custom" and "ceremony"; for Williams, they are to be contained by the "ethical confidence" that results from a conscious affiliation with a sustaining cultural or ideological circle.¹⁹ A recognition of the validity of other perspectives need not undermine or even relativize one's own position—one's philosophical foothold has a good chance of stability if it has been planted by a conscious and reciprocated commitment to the people around one. What makes Yeats vulnerable to criticism like that of Joyce Carol Oates is that his motifs of custom and ceremony are intellectually less tenable than Williams's broader concept of ethical confidence. They do not specify, for instance, that the planting of the self in a tradition is to be done by the self, rather than by others.

The "flourishing hidden tree," that is Oates's "vegetable," is a transformation of the tree-of-life topos that grows in many a poetic melodious plot. As noted above, the liberal ironist's commitment to her ideas (the linnets in the tree) is presented not as a matter of organic outgrowth but as companionship. Yeats himself is believed not to have wholeheartedly endorsed his own eclectic "salad" of mystical ideas but rather to have needed these ideas as a counterweight to rationalism,²⁰ to have liked living in their vicinity, evoking and hosting them, and turning to them for poetic language.²¹

The relationship between the tree and the tenacious singing birds contrasts with the famous bird images of "The Second Coming," where the falconer loses control of the falcon which has been gyrating above him in ever-widening circles and which, in the second verse paragraph, generates the desert birds that angrily *reel* over a slouching monster. The motif of hunting, associated with the falcon, is in "A Prayer for My Daughter" replaced by the playful "chase" ("Nor but in merriment begin a chase"); the "indignant" cries of the desert scavengers cheated of their

prey are replaced by the linnet's "magnanimities of sound." The linnet's generous, magnanimous song is pitted against the howling of the storm, the prophetic "frenzied drum" of the future cataclysms, and the "angry bellows" for which Maud Gonne is accused of having bartered her birthright. Maud Gonne, Yeats's Helen of Troy, is invoked as a negative example, almost a control group: her passionate commitments left no place for liberalist irony.

I do, however, concur with Joyce Carol Oates in one point: the emotional stance that transpires from underneath the intellectual position of the poem is somewhat alienating: something in it dampens the sympathy evoked by an elderly father's anxiety for his infant. A dark vision of the world's future may not be the sole cause of the "great gloom" that has made the speaker walk and pray. In a paper entitled "Between Hatred and Desire," Marjorie Perloff has suggested that the speaker's mask of husband and father conceals troubled memories of a shaking recent debacle with Maud Gonne. Maud Gonne had escaped detention in London and, fully expecting to be welcomed and sheltered, knocked on the door of her Dublin house, 73 Stephen's Green, which Yeats and his pregnant wife were renting for a nominal fee. Concerned about his wife's condition after a bad bout of the flue and intent on protecting her from police harassment, Yeats did not let Maud in. A reconciliation was soon achieved, yet Yeats's conduct in this test of loyalties might have been easier forgiven than forgotten.²²

If this painful memory haunts the mood that the poem attempts to capture, it is blocked by the massive yet somewhat contradictory motif of protection. The speaker takes on the role of the father who must exert his spirit, in prayer and best-laid plans, to protect his baby from the elements. Not only the fragile "cradle-hood and coverlid" but even the wood and the hill do not seem to him sufficient obstacles to the "roof and hay-stack levelling wind." When he imagines his daughter as a "*hidden* flourishing tree," the word "hidden" is associated with the "half-hid" of the poem's second line; hence with sheltering and protection rather than, as in the case of Wordsworth's Lucy, obscurity. The content of the prayer sharply contrasts with that of Wordsworth's prayer for his sister Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey"—"may the lofty mountain winds be free to blow

against thee," and even with Coleridge's day dreams about the future of his own sleeping baby in "Frost at Midnight"—"but thou, my babe, shalt wonder like a breeze. . . ." While ostensibly dealing with the future of his daughter, the poem also processes Yeats's own predicament: underneath the natural wish for his child to be protected there may be the subconscious need to believe that his erstwhile wish to protect this child's pregnant mother was a sufficient motive for his conduct at a crisis point.

Indeed, the vocabulary of a criminal charge in "Assault and battery of the wind" may be read as striking back at Maud Gonne for Yeats's own deficiency, as balancing the "murderous innocence" of the storm with his own aggressive innocence. The wind instrument ("old bellows") by which the cornucopia, the Horn of Plenty, is replaced in the poem, transforms the god-given, a Dorothea, into a Pandora with the boxful of winds. The heroic Maud Gonne is here associated not merely with hatred but also, through the word "barter," with the "wares peddled in the thoroughfares." The motif of nobleness, which accompanies her image in Yeats's other poems (e.g., "because of that great nobleness of hers" in "The Vanity of Being Comforted") is here transposed onto Yeats's dream child's thoughts spreading "the magnanimities of sound." It is as if the hidden agenda of the poem were one of the transfer of allegiance facilitated by the liberal ironist's stance. The irony of this agenda lies in that it is of women that the patriarchal mind-set usually expects the deliberate prioritizing of family loyalties. This may be the reason for the would-be "atmospheric" gloom of this poem:²³ Yeats is not sure of the legitimacy of his own practicing the principles of family life and courtesy that he recommends for his daughter. In another respect, however, the content of the poem is congruent with its stance: an agnostic's prayer is a speech act whose effectiveness cannot be known—a speech act quite appropriate for a liberal ironist who realizes the contingency of his ideas and of his right to expect their realization.

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NOTES

¹For noting this contrast I am indebted to a lecture by Shimon Sandbank at the Faculty celebration of his winning the Israel Prize for translation. The lecture was eventually published, in Hebrew, as "Two Defenders of Poetry," *Iton* 77, 197 (June 1996): 18-19.

²W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 157.

³Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du discours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977) 128.

⁴Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 64.

⁵See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 154.

⁶Austin 22.

⁷The *perlocutionary* aspect of a speech act is its effect on the recipient, which may be totally different from the intended effect or from the *illocutionary* force of the utterance (see Austin 94-107). The perlocutionary aspect of a literary text consists in the responses of a reader as an individual (entitled to individual idiosyncrasies) and as a member of an "interpretive community" (see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980] 13-15).

⁸All the quotations given are according to the Macmillan (London) 1950 edition of Yeats's *Collected Poems*.

⁹Joyce Carol Oates, "'At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her': Images of Women in Twentieth Century Literature," *Georgia Review* 37 (Spring 1983): 7-30, here 17.

¹⁰George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1977) 3.

¹¹Oates 18.

¹²The motif of attempts to protect the child in the poem is rather neglected in Marjorie Perloff's fascinating paper "Between Hatred and Desire: Sexuality and Subterfuge in 'A Prayer for My Daughter,'" *Yeats Annual* 7 (1990): 29-50. One may, of course, foresee the nowadays rather common suspicion of such a motif as disguising the wish to use one's baby to protect oneself from the world, but the genuine tenderness the poem breathes would tip the scales the other way.

¹³M. L. Rosenthal, *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 245.

¹⁴This stanza prefigures Nabokov's 1925 poem "The Mother" in which, on hearing Mary's sobs after Golgotha, the apostle John wonders "What if those tears / cost more than our redemption" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981] 33).

¹⁵Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989) xv. As Judith Shklar notes, a liberal abhors cruelty because cruelty breeds fear and fear destroys freedom; see Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1984) 2, 7-15.

¹⁶A demand for this recognition is also made by Alasdair MacIntyre, who notes that in choosing one set of conflicting moral premises one does not have to "diminish or derogate" the claims of the other; see *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1981) 208.

¹⁷Rorty, *Contingency* 91.

¹⁸See, for instance, C. G. Martin, "A Coleridge Reminiscence in Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter,'" *Notes and Queries* 12 (1965): 258-60, here 259-60, and Beryl Rowland, "The Other Father in Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter,'" *Orbis Litterarum* 26 (1971): 284-90, here 284.

¹⁹Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985) 170-71.

²⁰Cf. Richard Ellman: "Yeats found in occultism, and in mysticism generally, a point of view which had the virtue of warring with accepted beliefs, . . . he wanted to show that the current faith in reason and in logic ignored a far more important human faculty, the imagination. And, in his endeavour to construct a symbolism, he went where symbols had always been the usual mode of expression. . . . Predilections of this sort made him not a mystic or an occultist but one of what he called 'the last romantics.'" *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) 3.

²¹See, for instance, A. G. Stock: "Though [Yeats] listened hopefully to messages from his evocations he was never their humble slave. They only got into his poetry when they made good poetic sense. . . . He tested philosophy by poetry, not vice versa." *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1961) 83. In an article reprinted in *The Permanence of Yeats: Selected Criticism*, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York: Macmillan, 1950), Allan Tate likewise notes that Yeats's mystical ideas form "not a mythology at all, but rather an extended metaphor" (115).

²²Perloff (above n12).

²³The effect of hate, political and intellectual, occupied his thoughts even in 'A Prayer for My Daughter,' for Anne Butler Yeats, born in Dublin on 24 February 1919. The poem begun two days later was finished at Thoor Ballylee in June—an atmospheric poem, full of foreboding for all its appreciation of courtesy, radical innocence, custom and ceremony." Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1988) 247.