

# Emblems of Adversity



Emblems of Adversity:  
Essays on the Aesthetics of Politics  
in W. B. Yeats and Others

By

Rached Khalifa

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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Rached Khalifa

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To Inès Khadija Khalifa



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## INTRODUCTION

No one has more succinctly summed up the Yeatsian predicament than W. H. Auden. "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," he apostrophises Yeats. There had to be another modernist with no less imaginative profundity and power to account authentically for Yeats's poetic crisis. Ireland's mad politics no doubt hurt Yeats into poetry, but what added grist to his mill was his awareness of the grievous truth that "poetry makes nothing happen," as Auden curtly puts it in his elegy on Yeats. Auden's aphorism is self-reflexive too. Here the crisis becomes universal. It goes beyond the boundaries of nationhood, selfhood and time. As such, poetry transforms itself into an outcry against confinement, be it temporal or spatial. It denounces the age into which it is born. If struck with a deep sense of paralysis, it then turns against itself; it transforms itself into an aesthetic discourse about the political, the social and the historical. Here aestheticism becomes inexorably intermeshed with politics and history.

This book not only examines Yeats's politicisation of the Irish reality in his poems, but also investigates his idea of the modern age and modernity altogether. The process is bilateral in Yeats. There is as much poeticisation of politics as politicisation of poetics in his work. The process most often articulates itself at the unconscious level of the text. Understanding Yeats's meanings requires both a diligent hermeneutic reading of the poems, as well as systematic reference to his prose. I am well aware that any critical reading can too easily slip into over-interpretation or/and oversimplification. Criticism, by definition, carries some superfluity about its enterprise, insofar as it is an addendum to the poem. Yet, at the same time, I am also well aware, if not reassured, that no interpretative project is devoid of risk taking. A text is after all woven from different yarns of agencies, be they personal, aesthetic, social or/and political. It is governed by polysemy. Therefore, risk taking is inseparable from the pleasure of critical game.

The choice of a politico-aesthetic approach comes from my conviction that this reading does not actually clash with the main argument that anti-political criticisms brandish in refutation of the political one, that is to say, their celebration of the sacrosanct autonomy of the text. That the text is autonomous does not preclude the fact that this autonomy is itself subject to a political reading, insofar as it presupposes a pre-formulated view of

what resides outside itself, that is, the world and time—to be understood as history here. Literary autonomy, Being, and the world do not cancel each other out. Textual inner world, in other words, does not entirely seal itself off the external world. There is an inherent paradox here. Any attempt to do so threatens from the outset the integrity of this so-called autonomy, insofar as it undermines the text's freedom by confining it to the limits of its own solipsistic world. If autonomy means freedom, then, in this case, it is the opposite. It is a limitation. More importantly, this so-called poetic autonomy also lends itself to a political reading. In the gesture of denying history or politics, there is an inherent acknowledgement not only of its preponderance but also of its inescapability. Shunning politics, in other words, is itself a political act, insofar as it reflects a particular reading or, better still, a certain ideological stance in relation to politics and history. It articulates the poet's worldview, in short. It is precisely in this very absence that political presence is charted and acknowledged—albeit obliquely. Textual productions are after all events, happenings, which take shape and place within historical and geographical *loci*. Texts do not take place in historical vacuum. They are *worldly* events, as Edward Said argues.

History and politics are paramount in our understanding of Yeats's poetic aesthetics. They are so not so much because they are used as critical yardsticks, but rather because they occupy a substantially important place in the poet's canon—however deftly Yeats occludes and blurs their presence in his poetic work. And here I cannot but subscribe to T. S. Eliot's conviction that no poet has more compellingly expressed this intimate relationship between history and text, poet and age than Yeats himself. He is, Eliot carries on to say, a poet "who [is] part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without [him]."<sup>1</sup> No statement can be more pertinent. Yeats's concurrent consciousness of biographical time (the anxiety of old age), chronology (*fin-de-siècle* malaise) and history (modernity and its discontents) has hardly been equalled in the history of poetry. The poet is not unaware of this combination of time-related anxieties. No doubt, there is a good measure of self-mythologisation in such awareness. This is most conspicuously seen in his synonymisation of biographical time with historical time. I shall demonstrate this later in the book in the essay "'An aged man is but a paltry thing': Willie's 'Monkey Gland' or the Bio-Aesthetics of Ageing." Yet Yeats's consciousness of temporality and historicity, I should hasten to add, is also genuine—authentic. Writing at the nexus of cataclysmic historical and political events in Ireland and the world, more precisely the Western world, the Yeatsian text cannot ignore or even shrug off such an

overwhelming historical reality. In an epigraph to one of his last poems, revealingly titled "Politics," Yeats quotes Thomas Mann: "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Although the poem reads like an antipode to the epigraph, as it calls for rejecting politics and yearns, not without a streak of self-pity, for the regeneration of both aesthetic and sexual vigour, the poem nevertheless points almost deictically to the historical and the political context in which it is generated. The talk of "war" and "war's alarms" and Europe's strandedness between internecine political ideologies, Fascism and Communism, are, to be sure, an integral part of the poem's theme:

How can I, that girl standing there,  
 My attention fix  
 On Roman or on Russian  
 Or on Spanish politics,  
 Yet here's a travelled man that knows  
 What he talks about,  
 And there's a politician  
 That has both read and thought,  
 And maybe what they say is true  
 Of war and war's alarms,  
 But O that I were young again  
 And held her in my arms.  
 (P 348)

It is hard not to refer to politics when we read a Yeatsian poem. Politics manifests itself either in manifest or latent form in his poetry. Deictic references to historical moments are most often declared right from the outset in such poem titles as "September 1913," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," "Easter, 1916," "A Meditation in Time of War." In the other poems, politics and history are rather referred to in a covert way. Poems like "Leda and the Swan," "Sailing to Byzantium" and even such an innocent pastoral poem as "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" are custodian of political discourse. This discourse, however, is relegated to the underside of the text. In the first two poems, Yeats elaborates something of an all-explicative and all-inclusive theory of history; in the latter he voices an early rejection of the Enlightenment and modernity. This rejection would prove most enduring in his poetry.

The essays collected in this volume are multifarious. Yet this is only on the surface. At a deeper level, there is something of an internal coherence that binds them together. The diversity conceals a unifying theme underneath, which is, in brief, Yeats's aestheticisation of political thoughts through different poetic phases. These thoughts can boil down to

three major orientations. Although these orientations differ from each other in terms of phase length and aesthetic importance, they nevertheless shade over into each another quite considerably. They rather consolidate each other in so far as Yeats's ideology is concerned. The first political orientation focuses on his pastoral juvenilia. Here politics and history are woven into pastoral aesthetic embroideries. They are articulated in the form of *allegoria*, as the essay "The Woods of Arcady Are Dead: Pastoral Political Allegories" seeks to show in the book. Yeats's ideology manifests itself in the semiotics of pastoral space. William Empson argues that the impulse to pastoral always translates a "process of putting the complex into the simple." No statement can better sum up Yeats's pastoral predicament. It articulates anxiety with regard to the complexity of the current historical moment. Its themes of shepherds and woods, as an escapism from, or oversimplification of, Irish political and social complexities, are soon debunked by the poet through his characters, especially Naschina in *The Island of Statues*. Yeats's poetics of pastoral hides a politics of space. This early poetry conceals politics in its subtext and thus holds in embryo much of the politics to come. In these poems, counter to their manifest pastoral quietude lies what Paul de Man calls *aporia*. This feeling of anxiety belies the apparent textual tranquillity of the poems. It mars their poetics of self-contentment. The approach is germane to Freudian hermeneutics, of course.

Yeats's denial of politics and celebration of pastoral detachment in this early poetry, however, do not take place without his latent awareness that, even in the pastoral world, death still lurks behind its blissful scene. Death here means poetic marginalisation and evanescence, should he carry on celebrating virtual Arcadia, heedless of the nation's urgent call—hence his consciousness of answering the call.

Yeats's second political orientation concerns his idea of nationalism. His politics is most explicitly articulated during the Celtic Revivalist Movement, which dominated Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here politics is blended with aesthetics, and "love of country" with its "unseen world." Yeats's view of nationalism, we shall see, is inextricable from occultism and mysticism.

Yeats's final political articulations take the form of vociferous views on what he denounces as "the filthy modern tide," that is, modernity and its philosophical and ideological foundations—i.e. the Enlightenment. His poems acerbically lampoon the founding fathers of Western modernity and deplore the current state of the Western world. Much of this vociferation culminates in excited reveries or apocalyptic images. This is no doubt Yeats at his closest point to Romanticism, as well as, interestingly, closest

to his juvenilia. His poetic trajectory somehow boomerangs. It reaches a full circle. Old Yeats's vituperations against modernity, as well as against old age, are, interestingly enough, alluded to in his juvenile poetry—indeed, in his pastoral poems. They gain in intensity all through his poetic life, rather than articulate distinct political states of consciousness. Across the essays in this book, I shall try to trace this political trajectory. Sometimes, I shall focus on Yeats alone, and sometimes see him in relation to other modernists. Such juxtapositions, I think, yield much insight into his political and aesthetic philosophy—a philosophy governed by the poet's simultaneous and tempestuous feeling of belonging and non-belonging to the current historical moment. Thus is Yeats's predicament.

In "No Great Nationality Without Literature: Aestheticising the Irish Nation," I examine Yeats's idea of the nation. I trace it genealogically, as it were. I also study it in relation to its historical, cultural and philosophical context. Yeats's definition of the nation as an essentially aesthetic and cultural body leads ineluctably to his denial of the *real* history of Ireland, especially what is most traumatic about it. His romantic nationalism rather celebrates proximate reality, that is, Irish geography, mythology and cultural tradition. Not only does romanticising Ireland confer upon Ireland something of a distinct national identity, but also distances it from a overwhelming adjacent England. The gesture is doubly rewarding. The essay investigates Yeats's notions of Unity of Being, Unity of Culture and Unity of Image with connection to theories of national identity and nationalism, say, extending from Ernest Renan to Edward Said. Yet, in spiritualising Ireland, as mentioned before, Yeats not only consolidates Ireland's national character, which is defined as diametrically antithetic to England's, but also discovers a powerful metaphor through which he gives vent to his rage against modernity and modernisation. In a colonial England that has sold its soul to the "devil" of materialism and utilitarianism, he detects and denounces this slow process of degeneration of national character and spiritual culture. The denunciation is both political and ideological. It is political because it is a "decolonising" gesture, as Said says. It is also ideological, insofar as it reflects the poet's view of the world—a view theorised as essentially anti-modern, anti-Enlightenment.

The third essay, "The Great Famine's Absence in Yeats's Poetry" weaves into the first one, in the sense that it is largely connected to the poet's early "imaginative nationalism," which is at the basis of my analysis of the Famine's impact—albeit indirect—on Yeats's poetic imagination and idea of the nation. The event is too traumatic to narrate, and too self-deprecating to bring to light in a literature which is first and

foremost concerned with the aggrandisement of national image and glamourisation of national history. The Great Hunger may blemish this glamour. Yet this view answers only partially the Great Famine's absence in Yeats's poems. The Famine, in my view, does not provide the poet with an ideal model of "tragic suffering." Hardly do gaunt faces and emaciated bodies strewn amid fields and roads embody the heroic ideal Yeats has always associated with tragic *sprezzatura*. He defines the latter as an excited and yet sober feeling of the sublime, driven by "a lonely impulse of delight" to meet one's fate. The Great Famine has rather been sentimentalised in the Irish literary tradition. If Maud Gonne, Yeats's *femme fatale*, becomes the incarnation of a sentimental, hysterical and mob-dominated post-Famine Ireland (read Catholic in Yeats), then Major Robert Gregory, the son of his lifelong friend and benefactor Lady Gregory, becomes a perfect symbolic image of tragic magnanimity, heroism and sobriety in front of subliminal death.

"All That Glory Spent: Topographies of Crisis" examines Yeats's deployment of the landscape metaphor as referent to history. Yet his landscapes, one must add, are also topographically *real*. They were aristocratic demesnes shaken by the political, economic and social crises that Ireland underwent by the turn of the twentieth century. In Yeats, the land crisis of the Irish aristocratic class becomes representative of a universal crisis. It transcends its particular reality. It becomes synonymous with a history transmogrifying "Ancestral Houses" into "ruins"—"eagle's houses" into "wren's nests." Landscape and history, space and time overlap in Yeats's symbolic and political system. Different interpretations of his landscape have indeed been proffered. Paul de Man and Edward Said's are, perhaps, most penetrating, although they differ greatly from each other. Where de Man sees an "esoteric text" in the Yeatsian landscape, Said rather sees a clear political articulation. He reads the poet's celebration of national landscapes as an imaginative repossession of the occupied lands. It is, in brief, an imaginative act of decolonisation. If de Man esotericises, Said then politicises. Both readings are nonetheless insightful. Yet my feeling is that they do not give full credit to the symbolic power and latitude of Yeats's landscape. While de Man empties it of all political teleology, Said drastically ignores Yeats's overdetermined universalisation of his landscapes, as well as the importance of periodisation in the poet's career. Yeats's symbols, to be sure, are not so much parochial modes of expression as they are articulations of universal issues, issues closely related to history, modernity and modernisation.

These issues are examined in more detail in the subsequent essay, "'Blessed still this tower': Modernity and the Poetics of Claustrophilia."



Here the correlation between symbol and politics, monument and modernity, is dealt with in light of Yeats's symbolic paradigms. His Norman tower, Thoor Ballylee, for instance, is advanced not only as a symbol of the much regretted medieval age but also as a celebration of a poetic style which is in essence masculine, subjective and symbolic. The monument, as is clear, blends politics with aesthetics. Yeats's ideological debate, indeed, hinges on the difference between *symbolon* and *allegoria*. In his view, they voice different, if antithetic, political articulations as well as historical periods. Each historical period chooses a trope that articulates best its ethos. If allegory inaugurates, in his view, modern mercantilism, that is, bourgeois society, then symbolism is acclaimed as something of a redemptive trope—as a panacea for modernity and its discontents. Yeats sees in French Symbolism the beginning of this antithetical age.

"Move Upon Newton's Town: Modernity and Thanatography" takes the issues of history and modernity at the centre of its investigation. It seeks to show their repercussions on Yeats's poetic crisis. The crisis, in brief, originates from what Frank Kermode describes as "the sense of an ending." Yeats's predicament is that he senses the beginning of the end of poetic importance in the modern age. Insisting on rational and empirical truth, modernity leaves hardly any room for Yeats's phantasmagorical and spiritual truth. If Plato started the crisis in poetry, then the *philosophes* gave it the *coup de grâce*. Yeats is well aware of this crisis in poetry and aesthetics. Yet what is interesting to observe here is that this crisis in poetry most often transmutes itself into a poetry of crisis, in which apocalypticism, war and self-destruction are exalted, idealised. Thanatography becomes the ultimate gesture of modernist writing.

Yeats's rage against the modern age is unleashed in what Beckett describes as *risus purus*, "the laugh of laughs," or "the laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy." "'We that look on but laugh in tragic joy': Irony or Tragic Laughter" discusses Yeats's philosophy of modern reality in light of Nietzscheanism. His philosophical stance is at once haughty and ecstatic, ironic and tragic. "Lapis Lazuli" is Yeats's best example of this poetics of "tragic laughter." Thus is the ironist's stance, as well as his predicament. It is doubly ironical. While it ostensibly rejects social and political commitment, it cannot avoid entanglement with the social and political on the fringes. It embodies the dandy's predicament; it operates simultaneously within and without the social space. The essay examines this stance through the lenses of Kierkegaard and Habermas's philosophies of communal commitment.

In "'An aged man is but a paltry thing': Willie's 'Monkey Gland' or the Bio-Aesthetics of Ageing," we discover other interpretations of "age"

and “ageing,” that is, both as biographical and historical configurations. The two are almost inextricable from each other in Yeats’s symbolism. Yet the poet here, as is obvious, recuperates history for self-mythmaking purposes. His senescence becomes a metaphor for an ageing or, better still, disintegrating Irish aristocracy. The biographical here interlaces with the historical; and the subjective with both the national and the universal. These are commonplace manoeuvres in poetry, but in Yeats, they acquire such dramatic intensity and theatricality that they often border on what de Man sees as “pomposity” in the poet. What looks amusing in Yeats’s sexual enhancement surgery (the then famous Steinach operation) surprisingly develops into a grave and elaborate philosophy of historical and imaginative regeneration. Sexual potency and knowledge are inseparable from his philosophy of history and poetry. His sonnet “Leda and the Swan” expresses best this correlation power and knowledge.

“‘In excited reverie’: Yeats’s Fascism Revisited” expands on the question of Yeats’s fascism. Counter to dominant interpretations of Yeats’s politics, which can broadly boil down to incriminatory or exculpatory views, I would rather prefer to contextualise it in its historical, political and cultural realities. In my view, it should be read in connection with what I call “the modernist predicament.” I think it is as much sweeping and disingenuous to dub Yeats “fascist,” as Conor Cruise O’Brien does in his essay “‘Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats,” as to call him “liberal” and “tolerant,” as Elizabeth Cullingford argues in her book *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*. Yeats’s modernist predicament, that is, his encapsulation within a complex historical, political and intellectual modern reality, in which he was almost inexorably compelled to rethink modernity’s grand narratives, to rework its values, is too complicated an issue to reduce to a mere Manichean equation of inculcation or exculpation. The question, to be sure, defeats oversimplification.

The essay “Debilitating Dublin in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Yeats’s Poetry” inaugurates not only a new discussion of the symbolic meaning of the city—Dublin here—in Yeats, but also a series of comparative studies. In this essay, the comparison is between Yeats and an Irish fellow modernist, James Joyce, in whose works Dublin has a preponderant place. Dublin represents at once a city of convergence as well as of discord between the two authors. If Yeats sees in the city a physical incarnation of modern “heterogeneity” and ugliness, then Joyce finds it both debilitated and debilitating, too backward civilisationally to measure up with such vibrant modern capitals as Paris or London. The

difference is much more than mere disagreement on describing Dublin. It is fundamentally ideological. The essay seeks to unearth this difference.

Yeats and Le Corbusier's definitions of the sublime, in like manner, intermesh in some areas and snap in others. The essay "Artifice of Eternity: The Architecture of the Sublime in Yeats and Le Corbusier" aims to examine these spots of convergence as well as divergence between the two modernists. Yeats and Le Corbusier, as is clear, are studied together, for they represent the best articulations—each in his own way though—of the modernist philosophy of architectural sublime. While Le Corbusier—the architect—wrote his architectural theory from the rhetoric of poetic apocalypticism, Yeats—the poet—celebrated his symbolic architectural monuments with all the connoisseurship of an architect. Poetry and architecture intermingle in their works. Interestingly, the architecture of the Hagia Sophia represents at once a site of agreement and disagreement between the two. If Yeats takes it as a perfect example of a premodern "artifice of eternity," then Le Corbusier discovers in its "primary forms," in its simple geometrical lines, an ideal model of what modern architecture should be, that is, an architecture essentially governed by minimalism and functionalism.

No poets have more alarmingly called for reconciling poetry with reality and, perhaps more importantly, reality with poetry, than Yeats and Stevens. If the Romantics raised the question, Yeats and Stevens gave it shrillness in the twentieth century. The project at stake is how to restore poetic nobility in an age marked by what Stevens calls "bassess"—i.e. a knack for marginalising "great things." Each poet defines nobility in his own way. But, as far as describing modern reality is concerned, they agree. Their description of it most often issues in apocalyptic violence. They, in other words, validate violence as a response to bourgeois reality. Yet, where Stevens sees apocalyptic change as a happening in the "history of the imagination," Yeats defines it as something essentially historical, as a solid fact enshrined in the laws of history—hence its resemblance to Marxist philosophy, however Yeats denies it. Perhaps the starkest difference between the two philosophies is that Yeats's historical facts are cast in occultism and cosmology; they shun pure historical materiality. "We were the last Romantics: The Problem of Affirming Poetic nobility" seeks, indeed, to expand on the questions of history and art as voiced by Stevens and Yeats, focusing on their tragic struggle for affirming poetic nobility in the modern age.

Misreading is an integral part of reading. To claim these essays are exhaustive is no less absurd than to think the oceans could be held in a swimming pool. Metaphor and symbol defeat from the outset such a

quixotic enterprise, simply because the critical form or vessel—be it an essay or even a book—is by definition far too small a space for poetic limitlessness. Yeats's poetic meaning is much more than the sum of all the critical readings and meanings hitherto grafted on it. In fact, this applies to all poets. Yet this by no means implies castigating criticism. It is rather the opposite. Critical readings are all the more important, if not vital to literature—however parasitic and opportunistic they may look. Criticism secures the survival of the literary work. It guarantees its permanence and growth, no matter how “the words of a dead [poet] are modified in the guts of the living,” as Auden succinctly describes the relationship. Criticism is about the continuous livingness of the work, now and here—hence its vital function. Poetry and criticism survive on each other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Hall and Martin Steinmann, eds., *The Permanence of Yeats* (New York, NY.: Collier Books, 1961), p. 307.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE WOODS OF ARCADY ARE DEAD: PASTORAL POLITICAL ALLEGORIES

The distant in time and place live only in  
the near and present.

—W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*.

Not until the late 1880s did Yeats start to celebrate overtly Irish geography and mythology in his poetry. His call for aestheticising Irish culture and geography became more ideologically and explicitly articulated by the mid and the late 1880s. This is due not so much to Yeats's coming of age, as he claims,<sup>1</sup> but rather to a complex interplay of agencies and factors. Irish current political reality, indeed, explains much of Yeats's aesthetic and political divorce from his pastoral muse. His subsequent depastoralisation of his poetic symbol, so to speak, should be seen as a moment of consciousness which reflects his disenchantment with an aesthetic style he came to consider tenuous, artificial and, most important, anachronistic with the nation's reality. His early poetry, as he puts it, was "a flight into the fairyland from the real world."<sup>2</sup> In sharp contrast to his later poems, in which the experiences of the real world are part of their themes, stands the innocence of the earlier poetry. Harold Bloom succinctly calls the latter Yeats's "Songs of Innocence."<sup>3</sup> His songs of experience would rather wait until the publication of *Responsibilities*.

The pastoral theme is inescapable in *Crossways* as well as in some early dramatic poems, namely *The Island of Statues*. Yeats's celebration of pastoral life suffuses this poetic phase. This poetry revolves around a commonplace opposition in pastoral tradition: an ideal natural world, placed in a golden age, and a corrupt present reality.<sup>4</sup> Here the pastoral landscape turns into a metaphor for selfhood's reconciliation with its inner world as well as with the external world (nature). In blissful nature lovers "wander ever with woven hands, murmuring how far away are the unquiet lands."

Yeats's poetics of landscape is a synthesis of diverse and yet by no means radically different versions of the same pastoral tradition. Bloom traces the influence all the way from Theocritus to Shelley.<sup>5</sup> American Transcendentalism is also a major influence on the juvenile Yeats. His father introduced him to Thoreau, which resulted in his most Thoreauistic poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."<sup>6</sup> It would be preposterous to overstate the Transcendentalist influence without acknowledging first the far more powerful impact of Romanticism on Yeats's philosophy of nature. American Transcendentalism itself is only an offshoot of European Romanticism. If Transcendentalism found resonance with Yeats, it only did so to confirm an already deep-seated Romantic influence. Harold Bloom and Paul de Man have thoroughly traced this influence.<sup>7</sup> Edmund Spenser is also another major influence in early Yeats.

Yeats's celebration of nature rehearses the Romantic view of the landscape as an alternative place to modern urban misery, that is, as a therapeutic space. The celebration is also a trope which articulates nostalgia for some essential *Ur*-selfhood, the "age-long memoried self," as Yeats calls it.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as it is retrospective the Yeatsian quest is essentially elegiac. This sense of loss of the Arcadian world is best expressed in the opening lines of "The Song of the Happy Shepherd":<sup>9</sup>

The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy.  
(P 7)

The poem is an overt celebration of Arcadian nature as *locus amoenus*. The elegiac tone of the lines anticipates the apostrophic invitation to come later in the poem. The invitation is homiletic in its sense of urgency and calamitousness. The persona invites the reader to explore the enchanting and enchanted pastoral world. The quest is to regain nature's radical innocence. The invitation also calls for exploring the geography of selfhood. Topographical exploration here reads like a metaphor for charting the world of subjectivity. This metaphorical parallel between selfhood and landscape, man and nature, is rendered in the form of the double figure of the "shell," which, interestingly, blends both metaphor and synecdoche together:

Go gather by the humming sea  
Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,  
And to its lips thy story tell,  
And they thy comforters will be,  
Rewarding in melodious guile

Thy fretful words a little while,  
 Till they shall singing fade in ruth  
 And die a pearly brotherhood.  
 (P 8)

The Arcadian world is presented as a topographical metaphor for aesthetic creation. It is both topos and trope. The interrelation between landscape and writing is as old as history. But, in Yeats, it truly attains its most forceful and authentic articulation. His Norman “tower,” Thoor Ballylee, both as a “place of writing,” to quote Seamus Heaney, as well as a “writing of place,” I would add, represents the *locus classicus* of Yeats’s refinement of the spatio-aesthetic trope. If after centuries of repetition and emulation pastoral spatial tropes have become threadbare and artificial, then Yeats’s natural and architectural places, be they Coole Park or Thoor Ballylee, are, for sure, highly authentic, credible and fresh *topoi*. They are wrought not only from Irish reality but from Yeats’s own experience of this very reality..

Yet conventional and hackneyed, as it is, pastoral tradition has nevertheless substantially shaped Yeats’s philosophy of poetry and perception of temporality and history. Interestingly, this influence proves most enduring in the poet. In the later poetry, it takes different forms. From the outset, the pastoral world is presented as a metaphor for truthful “words” and “dreams.”

To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,  
 Words alone are certain good...  
 Dream, dream, for this is also sooth [truth].  
 (P 7)

In these pastoral poems, Yeats rehearses such fundamental themes as the self’s transcendence of spatio-temporal reality and the relationship between selfhood and poetry, subjective autotelism and aesthetic mysticism. The poem “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” for instance, embodies traces of the persona’s quest for self-transubstantiation in the later poetry. Here the boundaries between poet and poetry, selfhood and artwork, are erased. This will for self-transfiguration reaches such forcefulness in “Sailing to Byzantium.” It would be ludicrous to compare the early poems with the aesthetic potency and maturity of the later poems. There is no doubt about the difference. Yet it would be equally ludicrous to overlook the fact that, in this early poetry, much of Yeats’s later thematic obsessions—such as the quest for self-obliteration into aesthetic form—are held in embryo. Yet while the quest in the early poems is most

often sought in the chthonic, subterranean world of nature, in the later poetry it is almost always transcendental and mystical. Be it earthly or mystical, horizontal or vertical, the Yeatsian quest expresses—consciously or unconsciously—the same desire for transcending the diktat of Here and Now. The predicament is in essence existential—ontological. It most often dons aesthetic and mystical forms in Yeats.

Pastoral space in Yeats magnifies poetic space. Here the “word” is invested with a formidable power. Not only does it “out-Chronos” Chronos but also unearths “absolute truths.” Poetic truth supplants theological truth: “Whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth.”<sup>10</sup> The poetic word embodies something of an alchemical power capable of transforming epiphanic moments, as Joyce would suggest, into aesthetic arrests, transience into timelessness.<sup>11</sup> It inheres something of a Eucharistic power. It transmutes spirit into flesh, and flesh into spirit; vision into text, and text into vision. As such the epiphanic moment is ecstatic, apocalyptic and unsettling. “For each ecstatic instant we must an anguish pay,” says Emily Dickinson. The epiphanic word is troubling, in the sense that it makes the mind rethink its relationship with the world, the self’s with the other. It troubles perception and comprehensibility—this “endless reverie”:

The wandering earth herself may be  
Only a sudden flaming word,  
In clanging space a moment heard,  
Troubling the endless reverie.  
(P 7)

The “word” here is metonymic or, better still, metapoetic since it refers to the poem itself. In so much that the “earth” is the creation of the “flaming word,”—i.e. *logos*—the poem also springs from an imagination that is set ablaze. It reifies itself in words. The words flesh out the idea. Yeats’s repetition of “words” has an overdetermined referential function. The repetition creates something of an echoic resonance in the poem, which makes it perfectly resonant with the poetics of echo called for by the narrator. Theme and scheme consolidate each other here:

Go gather by the humming sea  
Some twisted, echo-harboured shell.  
(P 8)



Yet, here, we are confronted with an imposing question, which, interestingly enough, the poem keeps unanswered. Does the poetics of echo called for in the poem operate to enhance the theme of the poem or to empty it of its meaning? Is the figure a figure of fullness, which comes to substantiate through repetition the poem's insistence on the importance of "words" (read poetry), or does it simply operate as an *aporia*, sabotaging its own project and subverting its own discourse? In other words, does the poetics of echo in the poem mean plenitude or emptiness, poetic affirmation or poetic undoing?

Before dealing with these questions, I would like to dwell a little further upon Yeats's juxtaposition of poetic immortality with heroic "dustiness." This opposition between diction and action is central in the poem. The confrontation between poesis and praxis results in a Manichean perception of reality: one is corrupt, changing and transient, which stands for the phenomenal world—nature; whereas the other is pure, static and eternal, which refers to the world of artifice. "Poetry is alone permanent," claims Yeats. The dictum is forcefully reiterated in "Sailing to Byzantium." In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" the ephemerality of "dusty deeds" is reinforced through the hollow resonance of the recurrent rhetorical question: "Where are now the warring kings?" The answer is curt and cutting: "The kings of the old time are dead." This motif is later dramatised in the tense phrase "Agamemnon dead" in "Leda and the Swan." What remains of kingly "glory" is an "idle word," an "entangled story" read by a "stammering schoolboy." The word here outplays the sword. And imagination outlives action. History is, in brief, condensed into a "story." Poetic stasis triumphs over worldly kinesis—poesis over praxis:

Where are now the warring kings,  
 Word be-mockers?...  
 An idle word is now their glory,  
 By a stammering schoolboy said,  
 Reading some entangled story:  
 The kings of the old time are dead...  
 Then nowise worship dusty deeds<sup>12</sup>... (P 7)

Yeats's valuation of artifice over heroic action and landscape over the urbanite "changing world" seeks to resolve a crisis which has always been at work in his text. The crisis originates from Yeats's strandedness between aesthetic autotelism and political commitment, poetic self-absorption and worldly flux. Ironically, it took Yeats almost a lifetime to apprehend the nature of the relationship between poetic genius and poetic

genesis. In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” he resolves the crisis in scatological images, accommodating the “purity” of poetic images with everyday life’s “refuse.” “Genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind.”<sup>13</sup> The poetic image, as Yeats says elsewhere, must first go through “the baptism of the gutter”:

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags...  
(P 347)

Yet much of the tension between aesthetic stasis and worldly kinesis can be traced in such early poems as the highly allegorical “Anashuya and Vijaya” or the more explicit “The Stolen Child.” Yeats claims that the chorus of the latter sums up, albeit in a simplicity that has nothing to do with the complexity of the post-*Responsibilities* poetry, what his early theme is all about—an escape into the imaginary world of the fairyland from the real world:

*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.*<sup>14</sup>  
(P 19)

Paul de Man sees the crisis as essentially aesthetic, translating Yeats’s encapsulation between the rhetoric of “natural image” and that of “emblematic image.”<sup>15</sup> The conflict ends with the triumph of the latter over the former, yet not without some trepidation and hesitancy. This reading, in my view, can gain more acuity and forcefulness should the political dimension be taken into account. The conflict between reality and artifice, politics and poetry, has always been at the heart of the Yeatsian crisis. If the “emblematic” supplanted the “natural” in Yeats, it did so only because it met a growing political consciousness. The emblematic in Yeats almost always translates political articulation—be it conscious or unconscious. Even in poems where the political is manifestly denied or occluded, these poems are nonetheless intimately intermingled with the historio-political. They are so not by virtue of what they articulate at the unconscious level of the text, but rather by virtue of what they *explicitly* say about political or historical events. “A Prayer for my Daughter” and “Sailing to Byzantium” are perfect examples, wherein the theme of

rejecting political “opinions,” ironically enough, turns into assertive and “opinionated” ideas about political reality, modernity and nationhood.

Yeats’s early poems centre on temporal and spatial antitheses. They build on an opposition between Now and Then, Here and There. They are allegorical articulations of anxiety vis-à-vis these spatio-temporal paradigms. Yeats’s poetic text is a locus in which the crisis of the present is interpreted through a prelapsarian golden past. This past is hazily placed in different histories—precolonial, premodern or pre-Christian. His juvenilia forms an aesthetic body where the pressures of political, social and cultural proximity are denied, occulted and displaced into an imagined and imaginary Arcadia. The tension arising from Irish political reality, therefore, is transposed not only into a *different* world—a purely virtual one—but also into another sphere of consciousness—that is, the oneiric realm both as a dreamworld and a dreamwork, in the Freudian sense. Describing his early poetry, Yeats, we have seen, says: “It is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and summons to that flight. [I]t is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity.”<sup>16</sup> Yet if Yeats’s statement sums up perfectly his early politics of escapism, his early poetry is far from being so explicitly articulate about this quest for detachment from Irish actuality.

Yeats’s response to the exigencies of current Irish actuality is an aesthetic flight into distant Arcadia and India. His reaction to the “necessity” of the “real world” results in an economy of overinflation—overinflating the myth of the Golden Age. Nowhere are these spatio-temporal oppositions better shown than in “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” and “The Stolen Child.” In these poems there is a juxtaposition between the “changing” world of the present, a “world full of troubles/And anxious in its sleep” and the “old” “dreaming” world of Arcadia, the Dionysian world of poetry, pleasure and pagan “mirthful songs.” The Arcadian landscape is defined as a metaphorical spatial embodiment of unity and simplicity, as pastoral tradition has it.

Yeats’s idealisation of pastoral purity and innocence amounts to a semiotics or, better still, a demonology of space. This semiotics, as said earlier, is constructed on the figuration of space as two antithetic allegories: one represents a state of natural perfection and unity, whereas the other incarnates degeneration and mutability. The first is most often detached from the second, either in terms of temporality, that is, in the form of a bygone Arcadia, or in terms of spatiality, that is, in the shape of an island detached from the “unquiet lands.” Consider, for instance, the following lines from “The Indian to his Love,” and note the highly important spatial deictic “here.” Notice, also, how it represents in the

poem an epicentrum upon which the tension between the two antithetic worlds, the “dreaming island” and the “unquiet lands,” is posited. “Here” has to be read contrapuntally in relation to “far away” at the end of the second stanza:

The island dreams under the dawn  
 And great boughs drop tranquillity;  
 The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,  
 A parrot sways upon a tree,  
 Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea.

*Here* we will moor our lonely ship  
 And wander ever with woven hands,  
 Murmuring softly lip to lip,  
 Along grass, along the sands,  
 Murmuring how *far away* are the unquiet lands.<sup>17</sup>  
 (P 14)

Yeats’s view of nature as the ideal place for aesthetic ceativity pertains to the Romantic idea that nature and art, landscape and poetic imagination, are bound together by an organic relationship. Nature is, of course, to be understood here not as a mere geographical place, but as a metaphor for selfhood in its primordial, prefallen form—the *Ur-self*. Blake maintains that the “world of imagination is the world of Eternity,” and that the “world of eternal realities” is reflected “in the vegetable glass of Nature.” The macrocosmic is mirrored in the microcosmic, the cosmos in a grain of sand.<sup>18</sup> Poetic imagination is the power to turn the experience of nature into an aesthetic object. It is that power that yokes at once the poetic mind (subjectivity) with the natural landscape (objectivity), human nature with physical nature.

The word “dream” recurs quite frequently in Yeats’s early text. And so does it in the rest of the poetry. “Dreaming” is almost always interchangeable with the imagination in his symbolic system. There is a synthesis of Blakean and Baudelairean “correspondences” between the oneiric, the imaginative and the intuitive in Yeats’s philosophy. All these are systems of synthetic apprehension and perception of reality, which stand in stark opposition to modern rational and analytic explanation of phenomena. “The imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not,” and “only ancient things and the stuff of dreams were beautiful,”<sup>19</sup> and certainly truthful, Yeats asserts in Keatsian fashion.<sup>20</sup> The exordium of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” is a lamentation over the loss of “dreaming” Arcadia and “antique joy,” and closes on an urgent call for exploring the power of “dreaming”:

...dream thou!  
 For fair are poppies on the brow:  
 Dream, dream, for this is sooth. [truth]<sup>21</sup>  
 (P 8)

The poem is not only an open invitation to oneiric phantasmagoria. It is also a call for debunking the “cold truth” of the “starry men,” that is, Galileo and company. The poem, thus, exhibits its ideological project. It unambiguously pits itself against modern epistemology. Modernity, to Yeats’s horror, has substituted astrology for astronomy, phantasmagoria for rationality. With its “optic glass” (telescope) the “starry men” defile the sanctity of the celestial dome. The image reeks of sexual assault. Yeats’s rejection of the “mechanistic logic,” advanced by Descartes, Hume and Locke—the founders of modern philosophy—is insinuated in the following lines:

There is no truth  
 Saving in thine heart. Seek, then,  
 No learning from the starry men,  
 Who follow with the optic glass  
 The whirling ways of stars that pass—  
 Seek, then, for this is also sooth,  
 No words of theirs—the cold star-bane  
 Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,  
 And dead is all their human truth.  
 (P 7-8)

The search for selfhood and authenticity—the deeply buried “ancient self”—in the poem is paramount. The passage recalls not only the Shakespearean adage that “To thine own self be true, thou canst not then be false to any man” but also the Miltonic description of Galileo’s telescope.<sup>22</sup> Yet where Milton’s “optic glass” is indispensable for the “Tuscan artist” to scour the celestial world, Yeats’s is advanced as metonymy of modernity’s panoply of technological inventions. These, in his view, defile natural and celestial holiness. His attack on the Enlightenment and modernity gains in momentum as the years go by.

Yeats’s exploration of pastoral is both psychological and aesthetic. It is psychological in the sense that it is inextricable from his philosophy of selfhood. Yeats’s landscape journeys are metaphors for exploring the geography of the “heart.” Yeats’s assertion that “There is no truth/Saving in thine own heart” is in essence Romantic. The aim is to reconcile the self with nature, that is, to restore the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity to premodern holiness and wholeness. This quest most often

translates itself into a nostalgic return to Medievalism. In the Romantic view, the relationship was disrupted by the onset of modern rationalism, utilitarianism and industrialism. The poet's enterprise, Yeats insists, is to "seek unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect, from the eleventh to the thirteenth century."<sup>23</sup> For him, there could be no "aim" for poet or artist "except expression of a 'Unity of Being' like that of a 'perfectly proportioned human body.'"<sup>24</sup> Medieval Byzantium becomes his most celebrated symbol of such a communal and aesthetic Unity of Being. The project, as is clear, places itself right from the beginning in the rhetoric of organicism, nostalgia and essentialism—a paradigm that would orchestrate Yeats's political thoughts until the end.

Yeats's exploration of pastoral space is also aesthetic. It is a metaphorical mapping of the process of aesthetic experience. It is a call for transcendence from flux and mutability, from the world of "fish, flesh, or fowl" and "dying generations" to the world of "eternal artifice." Joyce calls this aesthetic experience stasis. The poet's invitation to aesthetic experience in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" is expressed in deictic metonyms such as "words," "songs" and "dreams." The poem as such adumbrates much of the poetry to come:

Words alone are certain good...  
Sing, then, for this is sooth...  
Dream, dream, for this is sooth...  
(*P* 7-8)

That "words," "songs" and "dreams" are generic metonyms for poetry is all too obvious. More interestingly, these words work simultaneously as self-reflexive deixes. They, in other words, refer to the poem they inhabit. They echo the poem's own inner voice. Referentiality here is twofold. It is at once outward and inward, extra-textual and intra-textual—in short, generic and specific. These metonymic deixes are reminders which recur not only to reinforce the poem's presence as an aesthetic object but also to validate it as a discourse with a given ideological *telos*. The poem's assertion "words alone are certain good" is no doubt self-validating and self-justificatory. As such, the poem transforms itself into some "twisted, echo-harboured shell," resonating Yeats's assertions about selfhood, the world and poetry. The poem, thus, becomes a perfect articulation of its own figure.

In line with metaphorical echo, the poem is turned into a "hollow" concavity, a sea-shell-like microspace, which echoes back not only the persona's "heavy story" but, more significantly, its own kernel voice, its inner discourse. "The structure of the image has become that of self-