

The View from 'The Tower': The *Axis Mundi* of W. B. Yeats's Poetical Oeuvre.

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This paper considers the eponymous poem of W. B. Yeats's first best-selling and perhaps most famous book of verse *The Tower* as a personal confession of the poet's credo and suggests why this particular poem provides a summary of his life and work.

As a symbolist poet, Yeats was peculiarly sensitive to the power of symbols, aware of their central organizing power for the human psyche, and their immensely important role in culture and the conduct of human affairs. The title of the collection was therefore significant, being intimately connected to the poet's personal circumstances while also reflecting mythopoetical elements which he deemed essential to upholding the dignity of the human condition in a world threatened by new barbarians.

The special design of the book cover also suggested symbolic meanings, as Maddox (231) points out: the mirrored image of the tower in the stream, creating an above and below like the mirrored universe of the mystical order of the Golden Dawn.

The tower has played an important role in the history of mankind as a pre-eminent means of both defense and domination as walled towns and castles in the material domain, and also stood as a potent symbol of Man's spiritual yearning and higher aspirations as spires and minarets in the religious sphere. Hence the tower's role as one of the human artifacts that have been considered by mystics an *axis mundi*, a most famous example being the biblical Tower of Babel, a symbol of Man's vain attempt to bridge heaven and earth and transcend his earthly lot.

It might be argued that all creative work has an element of hubris, and like Babel, may be ultimately frustrated by the limitations of language and the limits of communicability. In a metaphorical sense *The Tower* with its references to Yeats's System may be seen as an *axis mundi* of his oeuvre, looking back wistfully to his past and his mystical musings, and at the same time with a death-defying determination striding forward in a new direction with verses on political and historic subjects, love poems and poetry more grounded in reality. Like a muezzin from his minaret Yeats in his "Tower" summons the faithful to proclaim the wisdom of the imagination.

From the very start when Yeats bought the tower in 1917 and renamed it Thoor Ballylee, exchanging the original 'castle' for the Irish Gaelic word for tower which he felt gave the 'softness' of his retreat a harsher character, he was very conscious of the symbolic value of his new purchase. Even the small detail of the renaming illustrates Yeats's sensitivity to the symbolic power of words extending to the reverberations of the sound of the word itself. At the same time Yeats's attraction to the harsher sound of 'Thoor' (cognate with the Gaelic tor(r) = rocky hill / outcrop, another symbol of the *axis mundi*) may betray his perennial psychological

need to reassure himself and others of his masculinity, then being put to the test by a late marriage. Freudians will also point out the phallic aspect of the tower with its passive / aggressive nuances.

In any event, Yeats exploited the symbolic power of the tower which infused a number of poems and supplied the title for the collection of poems completed in 1925 which followed Yeats's first modern collection *Wild Swans at Coole* (1919): " I am making this gaunt tower the centre of many poems. It is a deliberately chosen symbol of some difficult truths." , he told Lady Londonderry (Foster: 2003, 314).

One difficult truth for Yeats was the passing of time, the growing awareness of his senescence and his ailing physical condition. His future was palpably receding and the shadow of his past lengthening. Under such circumstances Yeats must have felt pressured to take stock of his life and so *The Tower* collection consequently reflects the more personal reflections of the public man Yeats the poet had become after being awarded the Nobel Prize and serving as senator of the Irish Free State.

Having experienced the civil strife of 'The Troubles' which brought violence to his doorstep (though he was absent) when the Irish Republican Army exploded the bridge leading to Ballylee, and having suffered disillusionment in the turbulence of Irish politics when he retreated chastened to his tower after his unsuccessful plea for the right to divorce, a tiring Yeats felt impelled to confront 'the dying animal' and the vanity of our mortal coil. From the vantage of his tower and his sixty years he expressed some of his more private thoughts about his life in an attempt to make sense of his experiences and ruminate on how to live out the time that remained.

The physical reality of Yeats's tower gave him inspiration for further self-mythologizing, an apparent life-long need for a poet who once said that he wrote out of uncertainty. The question of identity was of central importance to Yeats, born in Ireland on the periphery of English culture to which he fully belonged linguistically and partly by blood ties. As a Protestant he felt a sense of marginalization among the Catholic majority, and his peculiar family situation made it difficult for him to identify with working-class Catholics. Thus the changing social realities of Yeats's times spanning both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were an especially troublesome and intractable problem for a man of his sensitive character and circumstances trying to find his place in society. Consequently, his chameleon-like character with his assortment of masks and poses, lends credence to Michael Schmidt's observation:

Yeats was haunted by the idea of a great *poet* more than the great *poem*. Poetry was a mode of identity; the poems often divert attention back to the poet as a kind of *vates* or priest. He works towards an irrefutable art, evanescent, mysterious, hermetic, which only yields up its content fully to the initiate. Art defends and defines the self. He takes a cue from the Irish bards, but at the same time aligns himself finally with the dwindling Anglo-Irish aristocracy. (Schmidt, 626)

All the elements in Schmidt's brief characterization of the man and his poetry are present in *The Tower*, and the physical environment of the tower with its four rooms linked by

a spiral staircase that reminded him of his gyres and the ascent of the soul as he climbed up and down, must have encouraged Yeats's penchant for mythmaking and reinforced his identification with the aristocracy that ruled the lands about. Now Yeats could take his seat in his own demesne, stand on the battlements and survey his kingdom and beyond as far as his imagination could take him. The objects he surrounded himself with all carried a symbolic significance, most famously Sato's sword whose venerable age charged with its unchanging aristocratic aura inspired verses. To Yeats the Japanese sword symbolized life, perhaps suggested by the mysterious aura of a 500-year-old, unchanged *Ding an sich*, while the silk-embroidered sheath symbolized beauty. Even the roses in his garden were no ordinary ones but 'symbolic', for as Ellmann writes: "The Yeats touch turned all to symbol." (Ellmann, 242)

Yeats consciously appropriated every symbolic opportunity afforded by his new country seat. Writing to John Quinn on July 23, 1918: " I am making a setting for my old age, a place to influence lawless youth, with its severity and antiquity " (*ibid*), Yeats must have come to realize that his needs were changing: symbols might be bread and butter for young poets but at his age, soon to be ' hostage to fortune ' with wife and child, a touch of reality with concomitant material comforts was a change he could not have been averse to. As Ellmann (243) astutely observes :

Those other vague, unpossessed emblems of his youth, such as ' the wind among the reeds ' , which represented the spirit breathing upon mankind, had entirely given way before the solidity and private ownership of tower and stair. This is not the symbolism of an exile or pariah, but of a man of means and position

In contrast to the humble pose of the peripatetic German poet Rilke whose ' pilgrimage poem ' in *The Book of Hours* collection pleaded God's indulgence for the blindness of humans who in their self-delusion call things ' mine ' , Yeats seems to take special pride in his ' possessions ' , as again noted by Ellmann (*ibid*) :

Yeats heads the sections of his ' Meditations in Time of Civil War ' as ' *My House* ' , ' *My Table* ' , ' *My Descendants* ' , ' *The Road at My Door* ' . That old Castle of the Heroes of which he had once dreamed as a kind of ethereal temple of the spirit is now, in 1922, a microcosm, where he and his family live, and where life is condensed and controlled by the machinery of symbolism. Who can say now where the work begins and the life ends? The world, once so hostile, lies docile at his feet.

The acquisition of the tower then clearly marks a new beginning, a change in Yeats's life and thus a turning point in his poetical oeuvre in the sense that he was now becoming a member of the ' establishment ' whose bone fides were finally confirmed by his Nobel Prize in 1923. Foster surmises that Yeats's wife George may have had some influence on the direction of her husband's versifying and the changing character of his poems, away from hermeticism and symbolic abstraction towards love poetry and more personal lyrics; he quotes the unvarnished comment she made to Tom MacGreevy :

there's nothing in his verse worth preserving but the personal. All the pseudo-mystico-intelecto-nationalistico stuff of the last fifteen years isn't worth a trouser-button. (Foster: 2003, 313)

Perhaps the disappointing reception of *Vision* in 1926 also led him to the realization that he needed to plough a different furrow, but other more powerful forces were undoubtedly at work on Yeats's psyche pushing him towards the more direct, simpler style of his later, great poems which captured the more intense and urgent reality of his struggle with his declining powers in the autumn of his life. What these forces might have been, and what concerns most weighed on Yeats's heart and mind, may be discerned from *The Tower* which, it can be justly claimed, was the progenitor of the astonishing later output of poetic writing. The title poem, amenable to comprehension on account of its direct manner, may be considered a kind of tentative last will and testament of both poet and man. Moreover, since it shares motifs and themes with other poems in the collection, the content stands out as emblematic of the whole cycle, making it perhaps the most representative poem of Yeats's new late style.

The brilliance of *The Tower* collection's first poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' has put the following title poem somewhat in the shade; G. Wilson Knight, speaking for the majority consensus, even declared the two Byzantium poems would be recognized as Yeats's greatest work (Knight, 255-59). But the relative neglect of 'The Tower' is unjustified, and one of Yeats's most astute exegetes, Harold Bloom, has even claimed it is more impressive than its illustrious predecessor (Bloom, 344-49), an evaluation that may be finding more support today when the highly compacted symbolism of 'Sailing to Byzantium' might seem somewhat alien to modern taste.

'The Tower' is a long multi-poem sequence divided into three parts, that is to say, three poems of different shapes and meter linked under one title. The short first section, written in undivided quatrains states the initial predicament: old age and the creative powers of the poet. The long second part, written in a stanza form, seeks to dispel any doubts that the poet's creative powers will fail him. The 'old man' gives a vigorous display of memory and imagination. The third part, written in energetic trimeter quatrains, self-confidently proclaims the supremacy of Man's creative powers, then shifts to a gentle valedictory mood, sure of the poetic legacy he leaves behind. At the age of sixty Yeats was clearly ruminating on his bequest to posterity and for the rest of his life he would wrestle in verse with his waning powers and his mortality.

Before examining the poem in detail, the question of Yeats's use of symbols in "The Tower" needs to be mentioned. As Daniel Albright explains in his commentary on the poem, Yeats's use of symbols in this poem and subsequent poems differs from previous practice. Whereas in his early work he had relied on closed symbols such as the Rose with predetermined or metaphysical meanings which lent an opaque, unreal quality to the verse, now a new direction was taken with open symbols such as the tower which offered a variety of meanings, depending on the experience, intellect and imagination of the reader or listener. This new way of using words with a symbolic charge enabled Yeats to deal with more substantial issues such

as poetry and creativity in response to politics and history, the human condition in the twentieth century, ageing, love and desire, death and the meaning of life, especially his own.

Helen Vendler (63) points out it was “ Yeats’s inveterate belief that it was the symbol, abstracted from the quotidian, that could hold the quintessence of reality “. She adds, “ his confidence in those managed abstractions, needed the implementation of form “ (*ibid*). However, for symbolic abstractions to work, the poet would require a commensurately cogent example of the quotidian, i.e., the smooth, intimate integration of symbol and reality, which, according to Schmidt, Yeats did not always achieve. Schmidt’s dissenting opinion (629) is that even the symbols drawn from life in *The Tower* “ have meanings ascribed to them. The meanings do not inhere in the objects in a particular context.” Both opinions can find a sympathetic ear among readers.

The following brief analysis of “The Tower” will highlight some of the significant features that shed light on Yeats’s frame of mind and the self-mythologizing project he worked on throughout his life.

The first section of “ The Tower “ opens with a question to his heart (himself) wondering how to deal with ‘this absurdity’, an abstract term which placed at the end of the line is emphasized, and once again when followed by a pause. Placed in apposition similarly for emphasis at the end of the second line and following a pause is ‘this caricature ’ linked by a comma to the target phrase ‘ Decrepit age that has been tied to me / As to a dog’s tail?’ Thus Yeats broaches the subject of old age which he will pursue like a dog chasing his own tail until the very end. This description of old age exudes bitterness and suggests that Yeats had not yet come to terms with his physical decline. Auden famously said that mad Ireland hurt him into poetry but so did dying. The interesting question is why Yeats found it difficult to deal with physical decline. Maddox (211) may well be right to suggest that the wasted, i.e., celibate years of his youth were a source of unending regret, while fear of impotency blighted his peace of mind

As if in compensation, the next lines assert the potency of his ear and eye and the strength of his imagination but then Yeats is assailed by self-doubt or lack of confidence in his Muse’s attention and hints he may have to comfort himself with the company of Plato and Plotinus, philosophers more of the spirit than of the flesh. To expect more from life Yeats risks being “ derided by a sort of battered kettle at the heel.” Here the poet, self-conscious about his physical condition, shows a capacity for self-irony, the form of humor that best spares the pride of old men.

The second sections open with Yeats as “lord of the manor” surveying the scene from his lofty perch, superbly positioned to receive inspiration: “ I pace upon the battlements and stare “. He surveys the scene reminiscing about his past and conjures up images and memories of local characters both real and fictitious, and redolent of Hamlet confronting the ghost, writes: “For I would ask a question of them all.” Throughout the poem Yeats constantly refers to the act of remembering, as if straining his memory to gain access to his past self.

Yeats narrates four anecdotes, first about one Mrs. French, a grandee of the Ascendancy who was presented with the ears of an insolent farmer on a plate, illustrating the brutal power of the Anglo-Irish authorities. Following in the next stanzas by way of contrast is

the story of a famous local beauty whose fame, borne on song written by the blind Gaelic poet, Anthony Raftery, illustrates another kind of power, that of beauty, poetry and music whose influences may be no less sinister: “maddened by those rhymes”, “Music had driven their wits astray - / And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.” Shifting from the local to the classical, expatiating on how blind Homer cast a similar spell with Helen of Troy, whose legendary beauty brought death and destruction, Yeats yearns to possess the power of a primitive poet: “For if I triumph I must make men mad.” This thought leads Yeats to an earlier creation, the imaginary poet Hanrahan who, as a kind of alter ego, represents the artist fleeing from reality to the ideal, only to become ensnared by witchcraft and lose himself in the labyrinth of self-delusion, a fate the poet turned public man rejects.

Finally, there is the wretched figure of a former bankrupt owner of the tower for whom art, dreams or music could bring no comfort. His memory is joined by that of “The Great Memory” or the *Anima Mundi* out of which appear more distant image of rough soldiers who once trod up and down the winding stairs of the tower. All these images imagined from the battlements represent the Irish past, especially the “usable” past for Yeats where the line between the real and the imagined dissolves in the mind of the poet who has conjured them up; since they cannot answer the question that exercises him most, “Did all old men and women...rage / As I do now against old age?”, Yeats quickly dismisses them all except for his own creation, Hanrahan, who remains his faithful link to his own past and self-mythologizing.

Albright (638) refers us to the mystical doctrine of the soul’s journey: “Dreaming Back” where the dead arrange their mortal memories before proceeding to their next destination. Yeats seems especially interested in prurient recollections, as if envious of a lecher’s life: “lured” resulting in a “Plunge.../ Into the labyrinth of another’s being.” But Hanrahan as an alter ego reminds him of his own troubled heart when young, and the probing, questioning, ruminating mind of the poet leads him in the final stanza back to his own personal fate and to ask: “Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or woman lost?”

This question had perhaps tormented Yeats for many years in the shape of Maud Gonne and the road not taken. He persuades himself that he “turned aside / From a great labyrinth out of pride,” which together with the hyperbole of “And that if memory recur, the sun’s / Under eclipse and the day blotted out” suggest that he could not rid himself of regret.

Thus the second section of the poem which starts from the battlements of his tower as an extended meditation on the *genius loci* and the poet’s part concludes on a deeply personal note with the bewilderment of an embattled mind struggling to make sense of a past that will not leave him in peace.

The anxious anticipation of the future glimpsed in the first part leaves the poet with a restless present, once famously formulated by Yeats when he wrote that all life seemed a preparation for something that never happens. In the second section the poet seeks to explicate the present by plumbing the past. However, in the third and last section Yeats is able to mask and master his anxieties by attempting to summarize the flow of his thoughts and framing it all in the shape of a last will and testament.

The trimeter quatrains that Yeats made into a signature poetic form carry his ideas forward at a brisker pace as if he is afraid of allowing doubts and darker things to obtrude. He

declares his heirs to be proud, hardy men of the land sprung from Ireland's loins: "Bound neither to Cause nor to State, / Neither to slaves that were spat on, / Nor to the tyrants that spat, / The people of Burke and of Grattan." Yeats was ever keen to establish his pedigree by identification with the bards of the Gaelic past and then latterly with the luminaries of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy of birth and spirit. The historical accuracy of Yeats's Ireland was never an issue for a poet who willfully evaded the historical record to accommodate the higher claims of his imagination and aesthetic sensibilities: the colonizing project of the men who built Thoor Ballylee, the exploitation and intolerance of Georgian society, the poverty and injustice of the nineteenth century are glossed over to create a usable, romanticized past, thus compromising the veracity of his verse as Ellmann notes:

in Yeats's verse man is never a political animal, and almost never under economic pressure. The poet rarely indicates any pity for the poor or oppressed and despises passive suffering because it is incompatible with his vision of almighty man.

"Pride" is the quality that for Yeats symbolizes the Nietzschean concept of the aristocracy of the spirit that infuses all life; the dying swan nearing the moment of its swansong excites the imagination of the poet as he contemplates the poignancy of that moment. In comparison with that exquisite emotion of aliveness even in its imagination, the dry, abstract philosophizing of Plato and Plotinus seem lifeless. Pride, however, can seem like hubris as Yeats indulges in his favorite metaphysical ideas to proclaim the human soul, or otherwise defined, the imagination, as the creator of reality, even of death itself. Culture, too, is imagined into life by a process of accretion, like daws building their nests: "Man makes a superhuman / Mirror-resembling dream.", wherein mankind can see its image reflected, just as "The Tower" reflects the dreams of the man and his quarrel with life and of the poet and his struggle with truth.

Surrounded by much that was alien to his sensibilities, Yeats must have felt the same strong need as William Blake (564) who wrote: "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's. / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create." References to mystical concepts and metaphysical systems in Yeats's poems are the least digestible parts for non-believers, but such is the power of Yeats's rhetoric that the mystical allusions do not prevent the reader from grasping the general thrust of his argument and experiencing the enchantment of the language and images.

Thus in the final fifteen lines added on later to the poem, the first line "Now I shall make my soul" can move the reader with its simplicity, and the general sense of preparing oneself for death is felt even if the mystical elements of the soul's journey elude the majority of readers. Moreover, in these final lines we see Yeats moving away from the ideal and towards reality: "Till the wreck of body", / slow decay of blood, / testy delirium / Or dull decrepitude". The monosyllabic and quadrisyllabic words suggest a slowing down of the biological functions. But beyond the physical decay a "worse evil" may come: the mental distress at "the death of friends", and then before segueing into the cool, elegiac tone of the final lines, Yeats imagines the annihilation of the "labyrinthine" beings who had enthralled him body and soul: "... or the death / Of every brilliant eye / That made a catch in the breath ? " The poem then comes to a gentle

close, like existence itself after a lifetime of *Sturm und Drang* during the ultimate moments when life and dream become indistinguishable: "Seem but the clouds of the sky / When the horizon fades; / Or a bird's sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades."

These last lines, so seductively beautiful, illustrate the power of Yeatsian suggestiveness; the meaning of the words may elude us, but the images shimmer in the reader's mind and gestate in the imagination. One is transported back to some quiet, intimate place where the human is at home with the natural, an ur-world that we have become separated from and which now only exists in our dreams and memory.

Perhaps Yeats has woven his words to create a mere chimera, and like a shaman just excited our susceptibility to dream and to imagine for as Schmidt (629) writes: "The poetry is always heard, not overheard. It is a poetry of all but social evasion. There is little intimacy about Yeats." This characterization may also describe "The Tower" where even the poet's personal meditation booms down from the battlements, notwithstanding the elegiac conclusion tacked on to the finished lines of verse. However, Ellman's *aperçu* (298) that, " If he cries out his cry of the infinite power of man it is in the teeth of the facts, not because of them. As a result, Yeats's work is full of overtones even when he appears to be shouting.", applies equally to "The Tower" which stands and can be read as a microcosm of his whole oeuvre.

Thus aside from the poetry, the importance of this title poem lies in its emblematic status, linking the poet's past with its bitter-sweet memories to his present position of prominence but now facing a future of renewed struggle with the forces of mortal decay. "The Tower" stands as an x-ray of the poet's inner world, his imagination; indeed it is a celebration of the imagination as the supreme reality-creating force. The life lived and the work wrought seem to possess an impressive consistency: the past is alive in the present through the presentation of memories which Yeats bequeaths to future generations entrusted with the legacy of his literary creations. As Ellmann (298) concludes his study of Yeats he points out his tremendous effort in the organization of the poems resulting from years of preparation. Ellmann writes:

He looked the poet, and he lived the poet...He keeps asking the same same questions over and over until they have become profound: what is truth? what is reality? what is man? His answers are symbolic, but fully in harmony with one another, for they spring from a rich, unified consciousness. During a lifetime of bitter toil Yeats constantly advanced and penetrated until he had evolved a world that has more solidity than that of any poet since Wordsworth.

As if mocking the mortality of Yeats's decaying human frame, the Anglo-Norman stone tower which had withstood the ravages of centuries also suggested itself as a lasting physical memorial to his name. In 1927 he wrote, "I like to think of that building as a permanent symbol of my work plainly visible to the passer-by " (Bridge, 1953, 114). However, the tower soon fell into disuse again but such was the importance of Yeats's reputation to Ireland that it was restored in 1965 and became, as he wished, a museum and symbol of his life and work. But it is amusing to think that even in his wildest dreams he could never have imagined that multitudes from around the world would one day be able to enter his tower like faerie spirits via the internet.

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