

“Meditations in Time of Civil War ”: W. B. Yeats’s Emblems and Illusions of Adversity

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The title of this paper refers to the words “Befitting emblems of adversity”, the final line of “My House”, the second poem in the seven- poem sequence which comprises “Meditations in Time of Civil War ”. The aim of the paper is to examine the emblems or symbols Yeats employs in the poem and to make bold to suggest that these speculative poems so closely connected to Yeats’s personal circumstances at a particularly fraught time in his life when he was holed up in his tower during the civil war of 1922, furnish revealing insights into the poet’s creative imagination and the issues that were preoccupying him.

Furthermore, the word “illusion” in the title refers to the element of self-deception in Yeats’s life-long search for “befitting emblems of adversity”. This paper will therefore examine the evidence of a change in the consciousness of the poet evinced by this poem sequence; it seems to indicate that, in response to the violence of the Civil War, Yeats felt compelled to admit to and confront former illusions which had served him well as “befitting emblems of adversity”.

Yeats was surely too astute and skeptical to be unaware of, and too honest to discount self-deception and illusion as unavoidable impurities adulterating the emblem-making process, and in this sequence of poems we can observe Yeats endeavoring to look beyond symbols which have outlived their usefulness, overtaken by the passage of time and exposed to the harsh realities of the twentieth century. As Michael Schmidt has noted, “Late in life he recognizes the evasiveness of his symbols, the tendency of his verse to turn away or inward, and in the concentrated intensity of the late poems he tries to remedy this.” We can observe this struggle between evasion and confrontation in “Meditations in Time of Civil War ” (Schmidt: 629)

“Self-deception” is not necessarily blameworthy behavior, much less a venal sin; on the contrary it is always a part of any individual’s world view and value system, and it is an essential mechanism of self-defense when the world’s contingencies threaten the status quo of an individual’s self-identity, thus impinging on the integrity of a vulnerable psyche. Cervantes produced the definitive fictional treatment of this all too human condition in *Don Quixote*, written in part when he was the same age as Yeats writing at Thoor Ballylee. This is perhaps not coincidental since both men had reached the age when people often resort to a measure of self-deception in order to preserve their dignity in the face of an increasing awareness of their mortality and the ultimate vanity of the world, and yet ironically, have acquired the wisdom born of experience to see through the flimsy fig leaf of human denial. Until the end of his life Yeats would struggle with his times and inner doubts, transmuting the dross of experience into the gold of poetry by means of his “emblems of adversity”.

“Meditations in Time of Civil War” literally describes the theme of the poems written in part after the sudden outbreak of civil war in Ireland when Yeats was living isolated in his tower without newspapers and post; no railways were running, roads were blocked and travel had become hazardous. Violence came briefly to his doorstep when the bridge at Ballylee was blown up and the debris blocking the river caused water to flood the ground floor. The intrusion of the outer world now gave the poet an opportunity to take stock of his situation, resulting in a poem that fused ideas composed before the troubles with speculations inspired by the sudden changes around him.

As one would expect from a poet with Yeats’s temperament the poem sequence has more to do with his “meditations” rather than with the events of the civil war themselves, and eschews the more direct and shocking lines of the following poem sequence “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, written earlier in 1921:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

This mixture of Shakespearian rhetoric and realistic detail of the earlier sequence, originally entitled “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World” is toned down in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, limited to the spare, laconic references in the sixth poem, “The Stare’s Nest by my Window”: “A man is killed or a house burned” and “That dead young soldier in his blood”. But both sequences use the outbreaks of violence in Ireland as a starting point for an extended meditation: in the first sequence, speculations on the perennial scourge of violence in history, and in the second, more heterogeneous sequence, an opportunity to meditate on the symbol-making which enabled him to better cope with his anxieties and preoccupations and to make sense of the violence that threatened to bring chaos to his life. As the title of the sequence implies these are meditations influenced by the times, by the violence, but also by the private matters that weighed on Yeats’s mind as he looked back to past traditions that had gone or were dying, and forward to a future filled with uncertainties. Helen Vendler (62-89) in her chapter “The Puzzle of Sequence” points out that the order of the poems in Yeats’s poem sequences is not haphazard but deliberate, and, when studied, carefully reveal interesting insights. In the following analysis of the sequence the way Yeats segues from one poem to the next will be considered as an important means of speculating on Yeats’s train of thought and feeling.

“Ancestral Houses”, the first poem in the sequence, was written in 1921 before the

start of the Civil War and was partly inspired by the house of Lady Ottoline Morrell at Garsington, near Oxford. Yeats was especially attached to Lady Gregory's Coole Park so he was clearly exercised by the problem of the decline of grand country houses: some falling into ruin through a lack of money for maintenance, others through a lack of issue for inheritance, or homes falling victim to arson in the political violence.

Yeats had often found occasion to identify himself with the aristocratic tradition of the Protestant Ascendancy, even imagining fanciful connections with the heroes and overlords of old Ireland. The "befitting emblem" of common ancestry or self-identification with an enduring tradition of Protestant aristocracy, even if only with an aristocracy of the spirit, is posited in the first stanza as a comforting meme: the life of luxury and ease which continues smoothly from generation to generation, borrowing the metaphor of flowing water fed by the ever abundant rain of Ireland whose uncontainable, shapeless volume in turn serves to symbolize the resistance of the spirit to the decadent mechanization of society populated by the blindly toiling servile masses which Yeats feared and loathed.

During the nineteen twenties Yeats became increasingly concerned about the threats to the freedom of speech of individuals like himself. In 1927 in a letter to Olivia Shakespear (Brown: 131) Yeats voiced his fears that the free expression of a minority was being threatened by an ignorant majority: "The old regime left Ireland perhaps the worst educated country in Northern Europe... We were helots, and where you have the helot there the zealot reigns unchallenged. And our zealots' idea of establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth is to make Ireland an island of moral cowards."

From this quote it is clear that Yeats had no illusions about the legacy of the Protestant Ascendancy; indeed, as a young man he had been severely critical of the mediocre intellectual achievements of Irish Protestantism, but now, faced with the new, dominant Catholic majority, he felt compelled to emblemize Protestant Anglo-Ireland's "attachment to freedom of conscience and individual liberty", in the words of Terence Brown who continues:

"So, in the face of the manifest evidence that Anglo-Ireland with a few remarkable individual exceptions had in the twentieth century scarcely been in the vanguard of those who served human liberty, he developed a *private vision* (my italics), an historical myth, of a great tradition of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish mind, Protestant and freedom-serving, skeptical, anti-empirical, anti-modern, hostile to the vulgar leveling of formless revolutionary agitation and mass democracy. In the name of an ascendancy pantheon of philosophers and writers he denounced both the excesses of the Gaelic enthusiasm and the Catholic democracy he saw about him that was prepared, at the behest of a majority feeling in the country to pass laws forbidding divorce and restricting freedom of expression."

(Brown: 130)

Thus in the second stanza of "Ancestral Houses" Yeats, realizing the illusory nature of his vision of an eternal, self-renewing aristocracy, calls out: "Mere dreams, mere dreams", but he recovers his confidence momentarily, alluding to Homer, the archetypal symbol of the

creative artist, in order to affirm the vitality of the individual creative spirit who is grounded in real life, and whose emblem, symbolizing the inexhaustible source of creative energy, is the eternal fountain of life-giving water; but again Yeat's confidence falters as he gropes for another "befitting emblem" and comes up with the emblem of a "marvelous empty sea-shell", which again betrays his skepticism toward the idea of an aristocracy that can defy the ravages of time. Yeats sees the empty shell "flung / Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams, / And not a fountain, were the symbol which / Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

This darker yet more "befitting emblem" of the aristocrats of the spirit and the murky origins of their illustrious pedigree leads directly to the meditation of the third stanza on the "violent bitter man, some powerful man" and his legacy which must succumb eventually to the degeneration of his issue. The "bitter and violent men" used their power to erect grand residences in vain attempts to build "emblems of adversity" from stone and brick, but Yeats envisions a whimsical fate for their descendants, as mice living amidst bronze and marble, and darkly concludes in the last two stanzas that greatness comes alloyed with violence and bitterness, sentiments which no doubt accurately reflect the influence of the civil war on Yeats's thinking.

The meditation on ancestral houses in the first poem leads Yeats to his tower in the second poem entitled "My Home" where, as in the first, he indulges in reveries of the past and speculates on the fate of his heirs. The first stanza describes the physical setting of the tower and cottage set to the sound of wind and rain. He observes: "The stilted water-hen / Crossing stream again / Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;" This observation gives an immediacy to the poem which with its abstract speculation the first poem lacks. One also wonders if the lanky Yeats identifies himself with the scared stilted bird, in his case alarmed by explosions and the firing of guns and fearful of the wave of violence that was washing over the country.

Further concrete details such as, "A winding staircase, a chamber arched with stone, / A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth, / A candle and written page.", set the stage for the image of Milton isolated in his tower, another literary giant and symbol of the heroic, creative spirit, whose loneliness is highlighted by the sudden change in point of view: "Benighted travelers / From markets and from fairs / Have seen his midnight candle glimmering." The word "benighted" is clearly a poetic epithet describing the darkness surrounding the travelers by night, but equally, there is the nuance of an unfavorable comparison of the ignorant majority in the dark with the artist in his lofty tower; the candle-lit window, the light in the dark symbolizes the lonely glimmer of enlightenment in a benighted country which reflects Yeats's self-defensive position as a poet among philistines. Yeats's mood of anger and even desperation, and an attempt to find some common ground with his warlike predecessor, may be detected in the phrase "...the daemonic rage/Imagined everything."

Finally, Yeats's thoughts go back to the past, to the founding "man-at-arms" who waged war from the tower but whose memory had been swallowed up by time, and then move on to the future of his children for whom he hopes, "that after me / My bodily heirs may find, / To exalt a lonely mind, / Befitting emblems of adversity." Here the poet clearly reveals his attachment to symbolization, as a vital resource of the psyche to deal with the threats and assaults of the world, and as a device to transmute experience and feeling into art.

"My Table" is the title of the third poem, which immediately following the hope for "befitting emblems of adversity" announces its theme: "Two heavy trestles, and a board / Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword, / By pen and paper lies, / That it may moralise / My days out of their aimlessness." Here the Japanese sword embodies the ideal of the work of art. The iron sword is an antique object of great beauty whose weight and worth are reflected in the heavy wooden trestles supporting it. This venerable weapon must have exuded a mysterious, numinous power and become an object of fascination for Yeats who as a poet was able to turn the thoughts and impressions produced by this ancient *Ding an Sich* into a poem. Thus the sword offers itself to the poetic sensibility as the perfect emblem of adversity.

The adversity in question might be the passing of time and human mortality, more specifically Yeats's approaching old age and thoughts of death. The steadfast, unchanging iron weapon symbolizes the certainty and completeness of an artwork, the solace to the soul given by the beauty of perfection. On the other hand, such a sword crafted five hundred years before is a double-edged symbol whose unchanging appearance also mocks the brevity of human life. Thus the sword as symbol is ultimately unsatisfying because it is disturbing in its longevity and threatening by its imperviousness to time whose destructive power makes short shrift of the human body. However, Yeats later said that the sword was "my symbol of life" (Wade: 729) but it is unclear in what way the sword worked for him as a symbol of life. This might well be an example of self-deception: idealizing and elevating an inanimate object to the level of life. In this poem Yeats appears to have some awareness of the inadequacy of the emblem as his meditation develops and penetrates beyond the world of objects to that of living things and Man's spiritual universe..

The juxtaposition of sword and pen and paper reminds us of the power of the humble pen, mightier even than the sword when directed by the heart and hand to paper. Works of art passed down from generation to generation may be objects of veneration but Yeats's realization that "only an aching heart, / Conceives a changeless work of art." is an admission of the illusion of eternity created by objects which are also subject to the pitiless march of time, for they only "seemed unchanging like the sword." Even "soul's beauty" seems jeopardized as "Men and their business took / The soul's unchanging look." Thus Yeats seems to concede that nothing is unchanging, a reality recognized by the "most rich inheritor" who, with "an aching heart" but with "waking wits", stands confronted by the changing times, symbolized by the sudden scream of Juno's peacock which, like a wake-up call, startles with its power to elicit a satori-like moment. The living energy of the peacock's unbridled scream at the close of the poem forms a striking contrast to the controlled menace of the inert, static sword, a silent witness to a vanished past of strife and turmoil.

This poem, book-ended by two starkly contrasting images, leaves us with a feeling of dissatisfaction, which perhaps Yeats might have felt himself. This may reflect the inadequacy of the emblematic power of the Japanese sword, an object of exotic beauty with its seductive invitation to escape back to times of yore, an inappropriate symbol of war in the face of the ugly menace of violence that was growing in intensity. Thus Yeats's search for an "emblem of adversity" was being frustrated by the deafening reality of the peacock's scream, and once again the illusory nature of his quest exposed.

Unable to find solace in houses of the landed gentry, the Norman tower, the Japanese sword, all objects associated with violence and war, in "My Descendants" the 57-year-old poet turns his thoughts to his progeny in his search for his "emblem of adversity". Children have always been the major source of comfort for mortals buffeted by life's vicissitudes and anguished over their brief sojourn on earth.

The first stanza begins typically on an optimistic note, "Having inherited a vigorous mind / From my old fathers". As an old father himself he can not afford to be pessimistic about the future and announces: "...I must nourish dreams / And leave a woman and a man behind / As vigorous of mind..." , but then the confidence of the ageing poet falters as his wishful thinking (illusions) is shaken by the realization that life is so fragile, "Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind / Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams, / But the torn petals strew the garden plot; "

From melancholy thoughts on the fragility and transiency of life Yeats envisions various scenarios of failure that could blight the future of his children and heirs:

And what if my descendants lose the flower
Through natural declension of the soul,
Through too much business with the passing hour,
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?

These thoughts arouse the poet's ire and in his despair he rains down curses on his roof. But then he recovers his composure as he remembers that he must count himself "...prosperous / Seeing that love and friendship are enough," Thus Yeats in the final line of the poem is forced to return to the comfort of the old emblem of his tower where he ends on a somewhat strained optimistic note: "These stones remain their monument and mine." In "My Descendants" Yeats seems to have become lost in his search for a salutary symbol and fallen into a pessimistic frame of mind, and despite his sporadic attempts to find comfort in fame, family and friends, the elegiac mood is scarcely dispelled by the Ozymandias-like hubris of the final line. In fact the tower fell into disrepair after Yeats moved out and most likely would have become a ruin had not the Irish government realized the tower's importance for the tourist industry, thanks to Yeats's formidable international reputation, and rescued it from demolition.

Stymied in his quest for "emblems of adversity" Yeats wakes momentarily from his reveries and speculations on past and future when the outside world suddenly intrudes on his world and "In the Road at my Door" he turns his attention to the present. Albright (647) quotes Lady Gregory's comment on this poem: Yeats came over; still making his poem on Ballylee, he likes connecting it with the Rising, says "Lyric poetry is such a fragile thing it ought to have its roots in history, or some personal thing." In the quote we can glimpse Yeats's thinking on the relationship of poetry to its subject

This is one of only two poems in the sequence where the civil war makes a direct appearance. The war comes to his door and as is usual for civil conflict Yeats finds himself between the two warring factions. First came the jolly IRA man whose insouciance in the face of death seems to make an impression on "old man" Yeats who feels the distance between

himself and the war experienced by the fighting men. Next follow soldiers from the national army and again Yeats feels alienated from the reality of the violence: "... and I complain / Of the foul weather, hail and rain, / A pear-tree broken by the storm." Such inconsequential remarks betray both Yeats's lack of involvement in the war and the generation gap that separates him from the young fighters. The latter fact more than anything seems to pain the ageing poet:

I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
To silence the envy in my thought;
And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream.

These lines are remarkable for their frankness since the torment of envy is not easy to admit to, and the mechanism Yeats describes to suppress the emotion of envy is masterful in its psychological realism and admirable in its artistry; the melancholy last lines capture the sad figure of Yeats ascending the winding staircase to his cold chamber; one can imagine his heavy tread on the stairs, the old heart pounding, the blood racing to his head from the effort to suppress his humiliation, while murmuring to himself: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" The last line of the poem betrays a sense of self-disgust at his alienation from the cause and action and his impotence to influence events, imprisoned, as an old poet, in a lonely dream world of his own creation. In this poem Yeats appears bereft of illusions, tired and frustrated in his quest for an emblem to contain the chaos of events.

The sixth poem, "The stare's Nest by my Window" is the other poem directly inspired by events of the civil war. Albright (648) writes: "Yeats explained that he wrote these lines after hearing explosions and seeing coffins driven past his house, at a time when no news of the war's progress could be got: "One felt an overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature."

This poem appears to repeat Yeats's attempt in the previous poem to suppress unpleasant thoughts and emotions. Nature has always offered solace to humans seeking to flee the ugliness of human society and times of violent upheaval.

In the humble honey-bee Yeats finds a comforting "emblem of adversity" as the tiny busy creatures go about their tasks oblivious to human cares. Thus as a poet isolated from events, Yeats finds a measure of identification with the insect performing useful tasks in harmony with the natural order. Bloody scenes are painted in this poem but the poet has taken refuge in his tower: "We are closed in, and the key is turned on our uncertainty;" just like the bees in "the crevices of loosening masonry".

This little poem contains some memorable lapidary lines that are typical of the Yeatsian oeuvre in their rich opaqueness and open exegesis:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;

More substance in our enmities
 Than in our love; O honey-bees,
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

These lines can bear the weight of numerous interpretations. With the word “we” he implicates himself as well as his countrymen in his accusation. Blinded by nationalism, sectarianism and ignorance the Irish people were skirting the abyss. The perennial accusation of many a poet: the lack of love towards one’s fellows and oneself and the substitution of love with hate and blame. The poem ending with an appeal to the bees to come to the empty nest offers no solution except escape.

The title of the last poem of the sequence, “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness”, echoes the emptiness of the stare’s nest, of the human heart, a descent into despair, suggesting the portrait of a man who has retreated inside himself out of a world-weariness like that of a disappointed lover.

The poem represents the climax of the poet’s quest for an emblem as a refuge for his harried mind. Confronting the reality of war at his doorstep, witnessing the carnage from his tower and unable to create any “befitting emblem” to take refuge in, Yeats finds himself driven to the top of his tower and leaning on the broken stone of the battlements he surveys the moonlit countryside swept by wild swirling mist. Now even the moon looks strange like an unchangeable, glittering, crescent sword. The phantasmagoric scene viewed from on high mirrors Yeats’s introspective state of mind and inner turmoil and provides a perfect setting for the poet to give free rein to his excited imagination: “Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind; / Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind’s eye.”

Staring out into the swirling mist he conjures up images of murder and mayhem, inflamed mobs roaming the land and baying for revenge to the extent that even Yeats gets carried away by his over-excited imagination: “and I, my wits astray / Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried for vengeance…” Clearly these apparitions are the creatures of a fevered imagination, fearful of the ignorant sectarian masses and especially the specter of Bolshevism that was anathema to his patrician sensibility. Yeats, attempting to augment apocalyptic scenes with magical unicorns bearing ladies on their backs, fails to convince as his images become unfocused or lose their force through preciousness; he flounders in insubstantialities until he recovers in the last stanza when he regains control of his thoughts and makes peace with himself.

Shutting the door on the chaos of the night, Yeats stands pensively on the winding staircase, still smarting over his impotence as an “unacknowledged legislator of the world”, and his inability to prevent Ireland’s slide into civil war, whether as a poet or as a man. Ultimately Yeats accepts his fate as a poet rather than as a soldier or statesman and concludes that contentment eludes us all. However, the last poem and thus the sequence end with the consoling sentiments:

…The abstract joy,
 The half-read wisdom of daemonic images

Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.

Thus Yeats seems to concede that the emblem-making can never bring complete satisfaction, while at the same time blithely admitting to the charge leveled by Michael Schmidt (629):

he is willing to plump out a truism as truth. As his mastery increases, his art becomes less truthful. But his main concern is not – until the later poems, and even there in an attenuated spirit – truth, but the house of myth and legend where he can become a principal tenant, where it is his voice we hear casting the spell, and where real men are reduced – or in his mind, enlarged – to masks, figures and types useful to myth, regardless of the human reality they had. If he assumes a mask so must they... Yet the poems speak with the authority of a truth-teller. The disparity between the quality of witness weakens our trust in the poet, a fact which for some readers devalues the poems.

This charge, though harsh, can be substantiated in some of the poems in the sequence. Yeats claimed, for example, that Sato's sword was forged before Chaucer was born but such historical inaccuracy does not attenuate the reader's appreciation of the poet's point that the sword was ancient, and yet the taking of Chaucer's name in vain is more than stretching the proverbial poetic license. Schmidt's criticism reminds us that the cost of myth-making and the constructing subjective symbol systems may be a loss of veracity. However, the poems of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" also show how Yeats himself finds his symbols lacking in persuasive power, but continues to strive to find a symbolic means of describing his reality.

The final line brings closure to the sequence as Yeats, after fantasizing a kaleidoscope of fearful images high on his tower, at last regains his self-composure and comes to terms with his old age, and his calling to a life of creativity and imagination. Ian Jack, writing on Yeats and his audience concludes that:

No poet better illustrates Wordsworth's remark that 'every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed'. Yeats created the taste by which his poetry is to be enjoyed, and as he did so he did a great deal to bring Ireland and its tragic history into the consciousness of Europe and of the world. He had educated his audience, and the text-book is the volume of his poems.

(Jack: 168)

While bearing in mind Schmidt's caveat, with every rereading of "Meditations in Time of Civil War", the truth of Jack's (and Wordsworth's) remarks is reconfirmed: the First World War, the Uprising of 1916, and now the Civil War had compelled Yeats to forsake his former romance with Celtic mythology and create greater, more original poems of sterner stuff for an international, intellectual readership. The poems with all their imperfections work well

together in sequence, acquiring a resonance they would not possess if taken alone and the variety of the poems in the sequence, reflect the fascinating range of Yeats's concerns as he transformed himself from a provincial Irish poet to a public poet with international appeal.

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