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Four Prayers from a Poet : The Successive Petitions of William Butler Yeats

Maureen K. GRIFFIN

*Department of Medical Social Work
Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, 701-01, Japan
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FOUR PRAYERS FROM A POET

The four prayer poems of William Butler Yeats—“A Prayer . . . On Going Into My House . . . For My Daughter . . . For My Son . . . For Old Age”—are serious petitions which provide a key to Yeats’ approach to poetry and his choice of “Perfection of the life, or of the work.” He moves through the widening symbol of place, through the hallowed and imaginative patterns of aristocracy and art, through human paradox to arrive at a blunt passion. The poet’s surprising choice is in the marrow-bone where prayer and poetry are united.

A PRAYER ON GOING INTO MY HOUSE

GOD grant a blessing on this tower and cottage
 And on my heirs, if all remain unspoiled,
 No table or chair or stool not simple enough
 For shepherd lads in Galilee ; and grant
 That I myself for portions of the year
 May handle nothing and set eyes on nothing
 But what the great and passionate have used
 Throughout so many varying centuries

We take it for the norm ; yet should I dream
 Sinbad the sailor's brought a painted chest,
 Or image, from beyond the Loadstone Mountain,
 That dream is a norm ; and should some limb of the
 Devil
 Destroy the view by cutting down an ash
 That shades the road, or setting up a cottage
 Planned in a government office, shorten his life,
 Manacle his soul upon the Red Sea bottom.

I "God grant a blessing. . ."

. . . A PRAYER

William Butler Yeats wrote four poems which begin similarly and include in their titles memorable autobiographical events : "A Prayer . . . On Going Into My House . . . For My Daughter . . . For My Son . . . For Old Age." Written in 1918, 1919, 1921, and 1934 respectively, and carefully arranged separately in the volumes "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," "The Tower," and "A Full Moon in March," the four prayer poems are richly rewarding when studied together.

Each invocation shows well the basic tone and progression of the poet's petition. "God grant a blessing . . ." Here is the classic Irish house-blessing. Then Yeats shapes for a daughter the "secular" prayer-wish : "May she be granted . . ." "Bid a strong ghost . . ." reveals a human pleading to God on behalf of a vulnerable son. And finally the in-bone prayer, "God guard me . . ." is solace in "foolish" old age. All the poems develop into serious petitions, although there is wry humor in a hyperbolic curse of the practical man and tongue-in-cheek warning about certain "fine women." A middle-aged father's joy in his children is tempered by stormy events, and a tragic joy finally permeates the later Yeats. Even an initial view of place, pattern, and paradox in these serious petitions provides a

key to Yeats' approach to poetry and the choice that he made when he thought :

"The Intellect of man is forced to choose
 Perfection of the life, or of the work,
 And if it take the second must refuse
 A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark."

II ". . . on this tower and cottage"

. . . ON GOING INTO MY HOUSE

In 1917, Yeats transformed a Norman tower into a dwelling both unique and uncluttered. The poet soon asks for it a blessing. Beside his Thoor Ballylee, his daughter will grow "like some green laurel/Rooted in one dear perpetual place." Near that watch-tower his son will "sleep sound." And the Yeats of old age will find in its winding stair the gyre of prayer that "comes round again." The tower and cottage prove a classic "composition of place" for Yeats' creative contemplation.

The symbols widen. Thoor Ballylee, already rooted in aristocratic Norman history as well as simple Irish life, also forms an oriental scene, as the three-fold sky, earth, and man of Eastern art becomes tower, cottage, and poet of Ireland. And the tower and cottage themselves aptly symbolize the dichotomy of life and work which Yeats (and everyman) presents himself.

Did Yeats ultimately choose an enlightened "heavenly mansion," or move to the lowly cottage, even if often dark?

A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER

ONCE more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack-and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed :
And for an hour I have walked and prayed
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream :
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
Being made beautiful overmuch,
Consider beauty a sufficient end,
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The heart-revealing intimacy
That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
And later had much trouble from a fool,
While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
Being fatherless could have her way
Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man.
It's certain that fine women eat
A crazy salad with their meat
Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned :
Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned
By those that are not entirely beautiful :
Yet many, that have played the fool
For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,
And many a poor man that has roved,
Loved and thought himself beloved,
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.

III "And on my heirs, if all remain unspoiled"

... FOR MY DAUGHTER

... FOR MY SON

After introducing his valued place in "A Prayer On Going Into My House," Yeats presents a pattern of aristocracy and art. Approving what "the great and passionate

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound,
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
The sort of beauty that I have approved,
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
Yet knows that to be choked with hate
May well be of all evil chances chief.
If there's no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

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

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious :
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

have used/Through so many varying centuries," the Yeats rooted in home and furniture is also attracted by the image found "beyond the Loadstone Mountain." The hallowed and the imaginative become the artist's norms, to be handled with respect.

With the second prayer poem, "A Prayer For My Daughter," the nightmarish cradle of

A PRAYER FOR MY SON

BID a strong ghost stand at the head
 That my Michael may sleep sound,
 Nor cry, nor turn in the bed
 Till his morning meal come round ;
 And may departing twilight keep
 All dread afar till morning's back,
 That his mother may not lack
 Her fill of sleep.

Bid the ghost have sword in fist :
 Some there are, for I avow
 Such devilish things exist,
 Who have planned his murder, for they know
 Of some most haughty deed or thought
 That waits upon his future days,
 And would through hatred of the bays
 Bring that to nought.

Though You can fashion everything
 From nothing every day, and teach
 The morning stars to sing,
 You have lacked articulate speech
 To tell Your simplest want, and known,
 Wailing upon a woman's knee,
 All of that worst ignominy
 Of flesh and bone :

And when through all the town there ran
 The servants of Your enemy,
 A woman and a man,
 Unless the Holy Writings lie,
 Hurried through the smooth and rough
 And through the fertile and waste,
 Protecting, till the danger past,
 With human love.

"The Second Coming" gives way to a gently cradled child. Chaos will yield to permanence, if a grown Anne Butler Yeats (and other natural and cultivated women) will dispense round a laureled custom and also lend self-delighting grace to life through an individual interpretation of ceremony. The daughter's deft manipulation of charm will be like her father's intricate manipulation of form. The slight linnet of Innisfree can count to "magnanimities of sound" where rich symbols of the hallowed lauree tree and the horn of plentiful imagination are sustained in a ceremony of innocence, stronger than any storm.

"A Prayer for My Son," the third prayer poem of Yeats and a companion piece to the longer "A Prayer For My Daughter," follows close upon the "nightmare" of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Again, Yeats would have a very young child cradled from harm. But William Michael Yeats is not idealized into adulthood as his sister is ; Yeats' artistry is taking new tone and turn.

The poet's doctrine is again presented, but here the "angry wind" which threatened his daughter, all women and civilization, becomes the "devilish things" revealed, in

automatic writing, as lying in wait against his own son. A vulnerable child might have the established power of a hearth god to stand guard, but William Michael will also be protected, and sustained, "With human love."

The poem moves from pagan ghost to the Christian tradition, still hallowed by Yeats, "Unless the Holy Writings lie." The caveat is brief, and the poet and father more strongly conditions even a fashioning Creator's artistry upon "A woman and a man" who "Hurried through the smooth and rough/And through the fertile and waste." These lines, though not technically successful, attempt to describe the uneven human journey.

By 1934, Yeats' experience of "All of that worst ignominy/of flesh and bone" has greatly deepened. Intricate presentation of the hallowed and the imaginative, of aristocracy and art, gives way to a blunt "He that sings a lasting song/Thinks in a marrow-bone." "A Prayer For Old Age," powerfully proclaiming this shift of pattern to the passionate, is Yeats' testament for every daughter and son, for all those rooted to the paradoxical human condition.

A PRAYER FOR OLD AGE

God guard me from those thoughts men think
 In the mind alone ;
 He that sings a lasting song
 Thinks in a marrow-bone ;

From all that makes a wise old man
 That can be praised of all ;
 O what am I that I should not seem
 For the song's sake a fool?

I pray—for fashion's word is out
 And Prayer comes round again—
 That I may seem, though I die old,
 A foolish, passionate man.

IV "And grant/That I myself . . .
 Yet should I dream"

. . . FOR OLD AGE

Each petition of Yeats raises the question of paradox in his life and work. Blessing his tower and cottage, Yeats sang willingly of the shepherds of Galilee and of Sinbad the sailor without establishing a "saints and sinners" distinction. With a father's concern, he wished for his daughter "radical innocence" and also a beauty that is earned ; around his son he saw both a ghostly hearth god and the protecting Holy Family. Finally, for himself, he sang of seeming foolishness and passion, and embraced a wanton wisdom.

Such dichotomies were precariously balanced, as Yeats made and re-made his celebrated choice : "Perfection of the life, or of

the work." In "A Prayer for old Age," it would seem his choice was finally made "For the song's sake." But the last stanza of the fourth prayer poem is the ultimate key to Yeats' surprise.

From the colloquial blessing for his house, Yeats moved to an intricate wish for his daughter, then a dramatic plea for his son, until he arrived at a direct, in-bone prayer as "fashion's word is out/And prayer comes round again."

Having journeyed far from his tower, Yeats finds his true place in the marrow-bone. Through the pattern of painful human experience, his radical innocence grows strong. Through the paradox of foolishness and passion, Yeats finally unites prayer and poetry in one true focus.

Quotations, referenced within the paper, are taken from William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems* (New York, Macmillan, 1967)

ある詩人の四つの祈り

ウィリアム・バトラー・イェーツの四つの祈りの詩 "A Prayer On Going Into My House" "A Prayer For My Daughter" "A Prayer For My Son" "A Prayer For Old Age" は心からの神への祈りであり、彼の詩への取り組み方と、さらに全き人生か完全なる作品かのいずれを彼が選択するかを知る鍵となるものである。彼は場所の象徴を広げ、貴族社会と芸術に関する、古式ゆかしい想像的形式、そして、人間の逆説を通して、赤裸々な情熱へと至る。祈りと詩が一体化する真髄にこそ、詩人の素晴らしい選択がある。