



'The Soul Recovers Radical Innocence'- W.B.Yeats' "A Prayer for My Daughter"- An Assertion of Even-Tempered Graciousness.

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ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats's love for Maud Gonne was unsuccessful. His constant effort to win her heart went in vain. Yeats realized that his love could never be reciprocated by Gonne because she is guided by 'intellectual hatred'. Now as his daughter is sleeping under 'cradle-hood and coverlid', he wants her to become a lady with moderate beauty, kind and artistic. From his own experience he realized that a beautiful heart is more important than a beautiful face to become happy in life. In this paper my inclination is to show how Yeats shaped his philosophy of life and accepted his lot with sheer resignation.

KEYWORDS

Prayer, Innocence, Hatred, Anxiety, Frustration

Anne Yeats- the daughter of W.B. Yeats was born on February 26, 1919 and by April Yeats had begun the poem "A Prayer for My Daughter". Though apparently the poem celebrates the birth of the daughter and expresses her father's wishes for her, it is more concerned with Yeats' attitude towards femininity and the regret that ranges from his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. To quote Harold Bloom's words:

Its actual subject is not the new born Anne Butler Yeats but Maud Gonne, and the bridegroom who ends the poem in so movingly archaic a fashion is Yeats himself, making in a phantasmagoria the marriage he was denied in life, yet ironically marrying only his own soul. (326)

Yeats bred a sense of hatred for the contemporary world as it is well expressed in his earlier poem "The Second Coming". Realizing the evils of the contemporary society Yeats envisions that the world of love and innocence would no longer be enjoyable and would be fragmented into numerous pieces- 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. These two poems are 'matched' because in both the poet speaks of 'the soul's solipsistic knowledge of its own autonomy, and is born only out of ritual, 'where all's accustomed, ceremonious' (Bloom-322). But if in "The Second Coming" the poet envisions the approaching of a new era which is marked by horror and frustration, in this poem the poet registers a deep nostalgia for the past. Again when "The Second Coming" ends with the birth of a monstrous beast, "Prayer for My Daughter" begins with the birth of an innocent baby.

The opening stanza depicts the picture of a tempestuous condition. The strong wind is 'howling' outside and also creating a sense of panic in the poet's mind. Though the poet realizes the fierceness of the storm which can bring haystacks and roofs down to the ground, yet consoling his mind to an extent he says that his baby will not be affected by the storm since she 'sleeps under 'cradle-hood and coverlid'. The violence of Nature which produced 'murderous innocence of the sea' is also a symbol of a larger violence which is expressed in "The Second Coming" as 'blood-dimmed tide'. However this real storm outside is the objective correlative of the poet's gloomy mind. To reduce his anxiety and restlessness the poet walks for an hour and prays for her daughter so that the social turmoil outside does not affect her simplicity and innocence.

The second stanza shows that though the poet is in a state of excited reverie, his thoughts keep on tormenting him. The ferocity and all-pervading destructiveness of the storm make him ponder on the shape of things in the proximate future. As biting of the drum is a way of summoning a tribe, the phrase 'dancing to a frenzied drum' works as a suitable metaphor to convey the wildness and fierceness of the storm. The sea is simultaneously 'murderous' and 'innocent' because in one hand

it is fraught with destructive power and on the other hand it has no grudge against anyone. Daniel Albright rightly comments on the phrase 'the murderous innocence of the sea':

Perhaps the sea- the force of historical process - is innocent because it is impersonal, not petty, spiteful, or divided against itself. (623)

In the third and fourth stanzas the poet warns against the beauty which breeds obsession and engulfs human aspects- 'natural kindness' and 'heart-revealing intimacy'. Citing examples from myths he shows that like Helen or 'the queen' Aphrodite, Maud too choose either foolish or deformed man as her life partner. But Yeats did not indulged hatred in his mind; rather his involvement with Maud had taught him that such beauty tends to undo the 'Horn of plenty'.

In the fifth stanza the poet emphasizes the necessity of being courteous and generous. He wants his daughter to become kind and artistic; but not exquisitely beautiful. He who once advocated woman's beauty, quite interestingly now would have his daughter schooled in heart winning courtesy. Pointing to his condition the poet expresses his sheer grief and says that those men who do not turn their eyes away from the beautiful faces ultimately prove themselves fools. Yeats thus feels that the beauty of the heart has more power and lasting quality than the beautiful faces. A. Norman Jeffers pertinently opines:

Yeats regarded courtesy and self- possession and style in the arts as the result of 'a deliberate shaping of all things'. (206)

In the sixth stanza the poet expresses his desire that his daughter should grow like a 'flourishing hidden tree'. The tree here is symbolic of tradition, consistency, commitment and generosity. He feels that when his baby would grow up, her mind will possess idealism and her thought would ever remain cheerful like a linnet's song marked by 'magnanimities of sound'. He further continues to compare his daughter with 'green laurel' which is rooted permanently in one dear spot and thereby symbolizes consistency. But what surprises the conscious reader is that the poet who once advocated kinetic energy and even in his old age sailed to Byzantium ("Sailing to Byzantium"), uses such a symbol of static energy. Such treatment even prompts Joyce Carol Oates to opine:

'This celebrated poet would have his daughter an object in nature for others'- which is to say male- delectation. She is not even an animal or a bird in his imagination, but a vegetable: immobile, unthinking, placid, 'hidden'. (Norton- 445).

But Yeats' emphasis on the rootedness of the tree vivifies his own state of dislocation. He himself told John Masfield in a

May 1930 letter:

I have always wanted to live in one place and have never managed yet. (Ross.204)

In the seventh stanza the poet says that the tragic fate of the person whom he loved and her irresponsible attitude towards Yeats have plunged him into the sea of depression and made his mind 'dried up'. But for that he does not want to indulge in hatred in his mind as he knows that a heart without hatred can persist eternally. He feels that a mind without hatred is like a fresh linnet and no 'assault and battery of the wind' can dislodge it from its position.

The eighth stanza is the continuation of the same thought. The poet says that the most heinous hatred is the intellectual hatred. He does not want her child to be actuated by intellectual opinions, because it leads only to suffering and despondency. Though the poem, as the title shows, is apparently about the daughter, in actuality it is more synchronized with Yeats's unresolved courtship and the fastidiousness of Maud Gonne. Realizing the malevolence associated with a woman's intellectual hatred Yeats wrote in his diary in 1910:

Women because the main event of their lives has been a giving of themselves give themselves to an opinion as if it were a stone doll.... Woman should have their play with dolls finished in childhood for, if they play with ideas again it is amid hatred and malice. (Jeffers.207)

In the penultimate stanza the poet is of the opinion that if the soul can shake off hatred, it can attain 'radical innocence' and such innocence will outlast time and would make others learn that it is the soul which possesses the God's will.

The poem ends on its most beautiful note. The poet wishes for his daughter, who will marry some day, a home 'where all's accustomed, ceremonious'. He believes that hatred and atrocities only enlarge the distance between the individuals. He opines that only in an affluent and aristocratic house beauty and innocence could be found:

Ceremony's a name for the rich horn, And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

'Yeats, of course', said David.A. Ross about the above lines, 'had recently been a bridegroom, but these lines can only be read as a final statement of the marriage portion he had promised Gonne, a final assay in the argument he had already lost'. (205)

Yeats was an aristocrat and did not believe in the attitudes propagated by the socialists. His magical philosophy, struggle, intellectual achievements are put out of mind by Yeats to understand the basic creed of human beings. He precisely puts emphasis on simplicity and opines that innocence has more lasting quality than beauty. The poem begins with the 'murderous innocence' of the sea and ends with the 'radical innocence' that the soul recovers ultimately. If the first five stanzas carry the gloom of poet's mind, the last five stanzas invests to it some positivity. The poet asserts that love can compensate everything and it is 'self-delighting, self-appealing, self-afrighting'. The frustrated lover in Yeats learned that an innocent heart is more appealing than an 'opinionated mind' and accepts his tragic lot graciously taking himself away from his 'sweetheart from another life'. He precisely asserts that any single-minded commitment may become obsessive and can ignore other true human feelings. The poem thus is an attempt to impart true lesson that the mind and soul should be disentangled from the peril of common human miseries.

In the poem Yeats wanted his daughter not to be affected by the evils of this mundane world. His frustration which emerged from the imbalance between his aspiration and achievement would never disturb the stasis of her daughter's equilibrium, for she would be guided by love, simplicity and civic virtues. Yeats could only 'howl' like a cloud but never found the rain of love to tranquilize his heart. The philosophic Yeats knows that Maud being obsessed with 'one purpose alone' neglected and rejected other human qualities. His personal experience, disillusionment and realization prompt him to pray for his daughter. Daniel Albright rightly says:

The wish for a well mannered, human daughter instead of a harrowingly attractive one suggests that Yeats was himself somewhat disillusioned by the over-intense, the too-shivery. Such visions as that recorded in "The Second Coming" would give good reason for a desire to find a lower tension-level of existence; and the behavior of amazing woman, such as Maud Gonne- estranged from mankind and liable to craziness- did not provide a model for a girl to follow.(622)

The portrayals of Yeats' own disillusionment along with even-tempered graciousness only express his poetic brilliance and power of imagination. Critic no lesser than the stature of T.S.Eliot comments:

Mr. Yeats' mind is a mind in some way independent of experience; and anything that occurs in that mind is of equal importance. It is a mind in which perception of fact, and feeling and thinking are all a little different from ours.(Cowell.11)

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