

The Father's Prayers: W.B. Yeats in 1919

By Ed Mulhall

On the 19th March 1919, Yeats arrived at the Abbey Theatre to see a unique performance of the play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. Playing the title role was his friend and co-author of the play, Lady Augusta Gregory. She arrived nervous and wet from the heavy rain that had poured all day. They had met earlier for lunch and Yeats had left to visit his wife George and newborn daughter in the nursing home in Fitzwilliam Street, as he had done every afternoon since her birth. The following day, Yeats, wife and baby were to move together to Dundrum, near his sisters Lolly and Lily, where they would stay before traveling west to their new home at Thoor Ballylee.

Lady Gregory had stepped into the role when the actress Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who had played in the original production, was unable to return for the first performances from England. Rather than cancel, Lady Gregory, who had been rehearsing a production of George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, said she would play Cathleen. 'After all what is wanted but a hag and a voice', she wrote in her journal.¹ She had first performed the play the previous night, hating the grease paint, 'white, black under the eyes and red inside the lips' but thankful that her own hair was grey enough not to need a wig. Despite feeling hoarse and miserable with a cold, she had got through with only one prompt from Arthur Shields who played Michael Gillane. She had two curtain calls from the packed pit and gallery. 'Of course, all the patriotic bits were applauded' she wrote, "especially 'They are gathering to see me now'".²

In the tense Ireland of March 1919, the play had a new resonance, a new urgency. Earlier that week Lady Gregory had seen the crowds welcoming home her and Yeats's friend Countess Markievicz. The Countess had been in prison for her role in the Easter Rising (for which she had originally been sentenced to death) and while there was elected as an MP for Sinn Féin in the 1918 election. Gregory was in mourning for her own son Robert, an airman for the British in the First World War, who had crashed and died a year earlier and in the memory of whom she had asked Yeats to write. In Ireland, raids and attacks on police had resumed. Agrarian aggression was also happening around Gregory's land in Coole with her own tenants threatened by local activists.

It was billed as a play by W.B. Yeats, but Lady Gregory had written large parts of it. Most of the dialogue had been hers, while Yeats (who had been inspired with the idea in a dream) wrote the speeches and the songs. Even the famous last line 'I saw a young girl,

¹ Lady Gregory's Journals, Volume one, edited by Daniel J. Murphy, Gerrards Cross, 1978 p. 56. This account is taken from those journals pp 55-66.

² Murphy, 1978 p 57.

she had the walk of a queen', was Gregory's. But while Yeats acknowledged her help, the play was for decades attributed to him. Lady Gregory did sometimes resent this but graciously (or sardonically) remarked that she didn't want to 'take from (Yeats) any part of what had proved, after all, his one real popular success.'³

The popularity of the play had been evident from the very first performance when Yeats's muse Maud Gonne played the part of Cathleen. She infused it with a nationalist fervour that was at times both thrilling and troubling for the two authors. For Lady Gregory their intention was a more subtle one. The play was not just about those who went to follow the call of their country but also about those left behind. Her performance on the 19th March was more assured. There was no need for prompts. More curtain calls were given and her friend Ruth Shine (sister of Hugh Lane) felt she had 'never known so much put into Cathleen.' Yeats's verdict was a 'cold' one: he said 'it was very nice but if I had rehearsed you, it would have been much better.'⁴ The ambiguousness in his verdict and particularly the directness to an old friend reflected perhaps his own anxiety at what he was witnessing. Here was the play which would later elicit his tortured couplet: 'Did that play of mine send out/ certain men the English shot?'⁵ The play was being performed at a time of great anxiety for him, politically and personally. He had just become a father. He was very anxious about developments nationally and internationally and how they would impact on the future of his family and his country. And as he watched his friend, now an older lady herself, playing the role which represented Ireland, in the audience watching was the actress who had first played Cathleen and turned it into such a potent vehicle - Maud Gonne. And beside her was her daughter, Iseult, who had so preoccupied Yeats's thoughts a year and a half earlier as he chose to marry George. It was a time, a year, of great significance for the poet. These four women were so much part of his conscious and unconscious life, his poetry and his politics. But he had made choices and it was these choices that would be reflected in his work and in how he was to live in the years ahead. The day after that performance of *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* he brought George and Anne from the nursing home to their rented house in Dundrum. There he would work immediately on a new poem: *A prayer* – A prayer for his daughter.

George, baby and W.B. Yeats were no sooner settled in their rented home, Dundrum Lodge, than husband and wife resumed the automatic script sessions that had been so much part of their married life.⁶ It was not surprising that there was some urgency involved as the messages mediated through George had predicted a son and an

³ See play commentary and drafts in W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, *Collaborative One-Act Plays*, edited by James Pethica, Cornell, 2006.

⁴ Lady Gregory's account in Murphy, 1978.

⁵ W.B. Yeats, *The Man and the Echo*, in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Alt and Russel K Alspach, New York, 1966,

⁶ For a full account of this see Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George, the Life of Mrs W.B. Yeats*, Oxford, 2002 and for Yeats in 1919 see Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life*, Volume 2, *The Arch Poet*, Oxford 2003.

explanation was required. The response as written out by George, who had now been upgraded to the role of 'interpreter', was that 'one spirit cannot call another - only through special permission - I knew it was not Anne's son - it could never be - I did not say so.'⁷ The wish had been for the reincarnation of the lost son of Yeats' ancestor Anne Butler, née Hyde, Duchess of Ormond. And this was to be a special birth, a fulfilment of the providence associated with their 'Vision' theories. The baby would be named Anne and George cast her horoscope concluding that she would be 'good looking and lucky but not have any great talent.'⁸

Yeats and then George had cast horoscopes exactly two years earlier to assess their possible marriage and it had been this shared interest in the spiritual that had brought them together. The automatic writing sessions had begun at a crucial time for their relationship, just after their marriage, at a time when Yeats was questioning his choice of George over Iseult in two direct and explicit poems.⁹ George later told Richard Ellmann that she had simulated automated writing in an attempt to lift her husband out of his gloom but then felt 'her hand grasped and driven insanely on.'¹⁰ Whatever the original intention, the writing sessions began a time of great intensity for the couple. Both were already susceptible to and versed in the possibilities of such activity and fed off each other's intuitions. The result was an extensive collection of Vision Papers (3,600 pages accumulated in 450 sittings over two and a half years). Much of the activity involved detailed questioning by Yeats to which George mediated a response as he sought to fashion a theory and philosophy of history and existence which became his book *A Vision*.¹¹ But as well as this a central preoccupation was the relationship of husband and wife, their sex life, the prospects for children and the attachments Yeats had with other women, in particular Iseult and Maud.

This intimate exchange contributed to a new awakening for the poet in his poetic work with some of his most renowned poems charged with the imagery inspired by this dialogue. The exchanges began to be framed in a very fundamental manner by a developing theory of cyclic history, with death and rebirth but also apocalypse and renewal. Into this inner world outside events intruded, bringing their own anxieties as Yeats, the public man (despite his own inclinations) found himself drawn into the events of the day at home and in the UK. He had directly avoided writing a war poem, when asked to contribute one on the First World War, yet found himself writing three

⁷ Full transcripts for this period are in *Yeats Vision Papers*, Volume 2, the Automatic Script, eds Steve J. Adams, Barbara J. Frieling and Sandra Srayberry, London 1992.

⁸ Saddlemyer, 2002, p 205.

⁹ W.B. Yeats, *Two Songs of a Fool* in Alspach, 1966.

¹⁰ In introduction to Richard Ellmann, *Yeats, the Man and the Masks*, New York, 1987.

¹¹ W.B. Yeats, *A Vision*, London, 1937, 1962.

poems for the dead airman Robert Gregory.¹² The 1916 Rising had shocked him, with many men he had known personally executed. He wrote '*Easter 1916*', '*Sixteen Dead Men*' and '*The Rose Tree*' in response. But he was only reluctantly drawn into public political controversy. He had joined the campaign against conscription and supported calls for the release of some political prisoners, but he had not yet published any of the 1916 poems though he had read them at select gatherings and distributed them to friends. Indeed, when he had been disappointed at the reception of his new book of poetry *The Wild Swans of Coole* earlier that year, Lady Gregory had told him it was his own fault and that the work would have had much more impact had the 1916 poems been included.

For Yeats there had always been this tension between the inner and the public man. This time of heightened intensity with major public events intruding on his most personal relationships was just a further example of this. His relationship with Maud Gonne had always had this tension, particularly as she became an important public figure herself, and works like *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* fed on this tension. When her husband Major John MacBride was executed for his part in the Rising, it led Yeats again to propose marriage to her.¹³ Rejected, he turned his focus to Iseult, to whom he had been protective as a father might but now considered marriage, an idea which was swiftly rebuffed. These events he relayed faithfully in letters to Lady Gregory to whom he turned for advice on all things including now his desire to marry.¹⁴

When Maud was imprisoned in Britain at the end of 1918, Yeats had written a poem about her fellow prisoner the Countess Markievicz as he was too angry to write one about Gonne. ('*On a Political Prisoner*', where he sees her mind 'become a bitter, an abstract thing, her thought some popular enmity'¹⁵).

But even with these close relationships Yeats had begun to make choices. When Gonne returned from prison, disguised as a beggar and hoping to stay in her St. Stephen's Green house, that he had rented, Yeats had refused her entry. He was afraid that George, who was pregnant and ill with flu and fever, would be disturbed by any effort by the police to arrest Maud. It caused a major dispute between them that had been the talk of the town. Yeats had been shocked at how 'ghastly' she looked: 'Her lung is I believe affected & there is certainly great nervous trouble, and it was this last that caused the difficulty with me. She was in an unnatural state throughout, complicated no doubt by

¹² Ed Mulhall, *The Lady and the VC*, Century Ireland, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-lady-and-the-v.c.-lady-gregory-yeats-shaw-and-the-recruitment-play-that>

¹³ See Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life*, Volume 2, *The Arch Poet*, Oxford 2003.

¹⁴ See Foster, 2003 for detail.

¹⁵ W.B. Yeats, '*On a Political Prisoner*', in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Alt and Russel K Alspach, New York, 1966,

the fact that since Easter 1916 her convictions have been fixed ideas, always making her judgement unsound.’¹⁶ In March 1919 they had only recently been reconciled, mainly through the efforts of Iseult whom George had befriended.

But the external event that most perturbed Yeats was not the trouble at home but his concerns about what would happen in the aftermath of the war and in particular the spread of Bolshevism from Russia. It was this fear that informed his most apocalyptic poem ‘*The Second Coming*’ written in January 1919. That poem is infused with the imagery from the ‘*Vision Papers*’, the ‘winding gyre’, the ‘falconer’, ‘*Spiritus Mundi*’. But it was very contemporary. The early drafts of the poem have the line ‘the Germans are now to Russia Come / Though every day some innocent has died, Recalling the mob to fawn upon the murderer. (or Recalls the mob to face with the murder)’ Some readings of the draft have this even more explicitly as ‘German’s Marx to Russia Com’¹⁷ A deleted reference to Edmund Burke and the French Revolution as a parallel supports this context¹⁸. He edited the contemporary references from the final version but not the impact:

‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.’¹⁹

At the time he was writing this poem in January 1919, Yeats had challenged Labour leader Thomas Johnson about his support for the revolution, asking whether he was seeking a ‘revolutionary alliance’ with Sinn Féin ‘if they seek these allies and endeavour to create a dictatorship of Labour, as in Russia, they will split this nation into two and destroy it.’ To emphasise his point, he said that ‘Russia in the name of progress and in the name of human freedom, revived tyranny and torture of the worst description – had in fact resorted to such a medieval crime as burning men for their opinions.’²⁰

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats to John Quinn, 21st January, 1919 in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Electronic Edition, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, 2002. All Yeats letter references from this source.

¹⁷ ‘German Marx to Russian Come’, might be the best interpretation of the draft. The manuscripts are in the Yeats Papers National Library of Ireland, MS 13,588. Reproduced in *W.B. Yeats, Michael Robartes and the Dancer, Manuscript materials*, edited by Thomas Parkinson with Anne Brannen, Cornell, 1994. For interpretation see Jon Stallworthy, *Between the Lines, W.B. Yeats Poetry in the Making*, Oxford, 1963, updated by Stallworthy in *The Second Coming*, Atlantic, 1971. See also Donald T. Torchiana, *W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland*, Washington, 1966 and Patrick J. Keane, *Yeats Interactions with Tradition*, Columbia 1987.

¹⁸ “Marie Antoinette has most brutally died, & no Burke has cried With his voice No pit (PITT?) arraigns revolution”, Parkinson, 1994, p.151

¹⁹ W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming* in *W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems*, London, 1950.

²⁰ Donald T. Torchiana, *W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland*, Washington, 1966 p. 216

So, when Yeats sat down in Dundrum to begin work on the poem for his daughter these anxieties were not far away. It seems too that his night at the theatre with Maud, Iseult and Lady Gregory was in his mind as well. Seeing Lady Gregory play the role in the more natural style may have reclaimed some of the original tension between country and family that were there before Gonne turned it into the rallying cry it had become. But the play was now intrinsically attached to the 'sacrifice' of the Rising and Yeats's concern about his own political role was a pre-occupation then as well. But the personal context was just as potent. Yeats had come to the theatre from visiting his wife and baby daughter; there were the three other most important women in his life at that time. It was a time of heightened emotions and choices.

The earliest fragment of the poem that survives has the title: 'God grant my prayer'. The fragment that follows sets the scene and the context:

'Nor am I the first father that has stood
And judged here beside this cradle hood
And thinking that a popular tempest blew
As though to make all things anew
As this opinion wound, had driven men wild
And filled their hearts with bitterness
Had dread for this child's peace unless
Heaven pour abounding sweetness on this child.'²¹

In the immediate drafts that follow, the opinion line becomes 'all must be with opinion driven wild and full of dusty bitterness' then 'and choked with dusty bitterness'. And in the last lines 'dread' for the child's peace becomes 'shuddered' then 'Trembling'.

Already the key elements of the poem are there, the father looking down on the new born, the outside foreboding storm, the woods that soon would be identified as Lady Gregory's in Coole and the linking of 'opinion' with 'bitterness', which will in turn be linked with Maud Gonne's activism in the final version.

That he was working on a poem for this daughter became big news in the family circle. Yeats's sisters wrote to their father with the news 'Willy looks at her shyly but is writing a poem for Anne'.²² Yeats himself told Lady Gregory on April 1st that he had begun his poem about Anne.²³ On the 8th April, Lily and Lolly threw a party in honour of the new arrival with over fifty guests joining the sisters and the new parents. Among the guests were AE, James Stephens, Susan Mitchell and a broad spectrum of political views from

²¹ All quotes from drafts from NLI MS 13,588, Parkinson, 1994 and as analysed by Stallworthy 1963.

²² William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father, A life of John Butler Yeats*, London, 1978, p 495. Lily Yeats to J.B. Yeats 20th April 1919, NLI MS 31/112 (10)

²³ Yeats to Lady Gregory 1 April, 1919.

Sinn Féin to 'extreme' Protestant Unionism.²⁴ Anne was christened in Donnybrook Church on April 7th with Lily and George's brother Harold as godparents and the child wearing Yeats's own christening robe that had been carefully maintained in their linen cupboard by Lily.²⁵ Yeats completed his first draft of the poem at the end of the month when the lease on the house in Dundrum was up.

The poem now starts:

'In her three hundred year old cradle hid
By its deep hood and embroidered cover lid
My month year old child is sleeping...' ²⁶

He contrasts her gentle sleeping with his own worry 'While I turned my sight to every scowling quarter' and he links the wind blast to 'some demagogue's song', and the storm beating the stones to the time 'the world fell while its masters had gone wild.'

The draft is then amended to:

'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
Where by the haystack and roof levelling wind
Bred on the Atlantic can be checked.
Not by that storm am I perplexed
But by the storm that seems to shake mankind.'

The prayer proper begins with a wish:

'I pray God grant her 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 with a sufficient end
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The hearts revealing intimacy
That chooses right and never finds a friend.'

²⁴ Saddlemyer, 2002, p211.

²⁵ Lily Yeats to JB Yeats 20th April 1919, MS 31/112 (10).

²⁶ This and drafts that follow in NLI MS NLI MS 13,588, Parkinson, 1994 and as analysed by Stallworthy 1963.

The next verse connects 'beauty' directly with Helen of Troy and therefore with Maud Gonne.²⁷ He wishes that his daughter be 'chiefly learned in courtesy' and live 'contented as a bird'. Birds had been a regular powerful image for the important women in his life throughout the sessions of automatic writing. (Maud for example was initially a Speckled then Black bird²⁸) And a further wish: 'let her live like a green laurel/Rooted in one dear perpetual place.' This contentment and rootedness are contrasted with the activist life:

'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 is no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.'

As 'intellectual hate is worst' he asks 'let her think all opinions accurst' and then leaves no doubt that it is Maud Gonne that represents the life he wishes to avoid for his daughter:

'O I have 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 of angry wind.'

If his prayer for his daughter is fulfilled and all hatred driven away, her soul

'recovers its 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. '

For the final section of the poem, Yeats, writing in Dublin, turns back to Lady Gregory's Coole and to himself:

'Daughter if you be happy and yet grown -

²⁷ For full published text of poem see Alt and Alspach, 1966 and Yeats, 1950

²⁸ Saddlemyer, 2002 p. 219

Say when you are five and twenty - walk alone
Through Coole Domain and visit for my sake
The stony edges of the lake
Where every year I have counted swans, and cry
That all is well till all that's there
Spring sounding on to the still air
And all is sound between the lake and sky

Then where what light beech foliage can let through
Falls green on ground the ivy made blue
Cry out that all is well but cry it not
Too loud for that is a still spot
And after to the gardens on that side
Where the Katalpa's grow and call growing
Until an echo in the wall
Above Maecenas' image has replied

Not think that being dead I cannot hear
For it is certain that I shall appear
If you have perfect sight
Standing to think where I have often stood
By the lake's edge, in that blue wood.
Where the path climbs between a rock and root
Or else, where twenty year or so
My friend and I paced to and fro
Hungry though driven on a vaporous foot.'

Yeats and his family were due to go to Ballylee and Coole directly after these words were written but the accommodation was not yet ready, so George and Anne went to stay with relatives while W.B. stayed in the Stephen's Green Club before heading to London on business. In Dublin he was again drawn into talk of politics and revolution. He had met Iseult Gonne and during a discussion on the atrocities of the Russian revolution Yeats had disputed some of the casualty numbers she was using which she had got from AE, George Russell. He wrote to AE to correct him: 'What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the lunatic faculty of going against everything which it believes England to affirm) to Marxian revolution or Marxian definition of values in any form. I consider the Marxian criterion of values as in this age the spear-head of materialism and leading to inevitable murder. From that criterion comes the phrase "Can the bourgeois be innocent." '29

²⁹ Yeats to AE, 5th May 1919, published in *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Allan Wade, London, 1954, p. 655.

George went alone with the baby to Ballylee and was joined there for a short time by Iseult to whom she had offered the cottage for a couple of weeks, much to Lady Gregory's surprise. George then went to Yeats in London to arrange their new home in Oxford, leaving baby Anne and a nurse with their aunts in Dublin for a month.³⁰

During their time away W.B. and George attended a performance of his play *The Player Queen* and resumed their sessions of automatic writing with an emphasis on their intimate life.³¹ That Yeats saw Anne as a link to his own future life was clear in a letter he sent to his friend and patron John Quinn in New York: 'I find that having a child seems to prolong one's own life. One thinks of oneself as perhaps living to 1970 or even with luck to the year 2000. (That would be Anne's 91st year) It makes one's family more venerable too now that one's Grandfathers are all great grandfathers. It almost ennobles one's ancestors as if it were a Chinese Emperor.'³² Anne Yeats lived until July 2001 (aged 82- Yeats' maths was not the best) having had a distinguished career as a visual artist and designer.

It was the end of June before the Yeats were back in Ballylee together for the summer stay. They went there alone at first, allowing further sessions of 'interpretation' and were joined a few weeks later by Anne and a nurse. Present now in the place where the poem is set, he returned to the text and made some dramatic changes. The opening now becomes more direct and dramatic:

'Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on.'³³

The father, the poet, disturbed by the storm and his thoughts is now pacing around their home:

'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

³⁰ Lolly Yeats to JB Yeats 18th May 1919 NLI MS 31,113 and John S Kelly, *A WB Yeats Chronology*, New York, 2003.

³¹ Saddlemyer, 2002 p. 215.

³² Yeats to John Quinn, 14th June 1919.

³³ This and drafts that follow in NLI MS NLI MS 13,588, Parkinson, 1994 and as analysed by Stallworthy 1963.

That the future years had come
Dancing to a frenzied drum
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.'

But the most significant change comes in the ending of the poem. Writing in his tower in Ballylee, close to the woods in Coole, Yeats abandons the last three stanzas that refer to his hope of meeting Anne in the future in those grounds. Taking himself out of the ending, he focuses directly on his prayer for Anne, back to politics and to another choice both philosophical and personal:

'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 ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.'

The edits and new verse sharpened the poem and brought it more firmly into the philosophical thinking that had been pre-occupying W.B. and George since their 'Vision' work began. In its choice of custom and ceremony over the 'wares peddled in the thoroughfares' the poet was making a choice for his daughter and for himself.

In the century that has passed since it was written it has become both one of the poet's most loved and most contested poems. The appeal comes from the father's 'helpless wish to protect', the criticism from what the novelist Joyce Carol Oates called the 'crushingly conventional'- Yeats wishing his daughter to be 'an object in nature for others', a 'vegetable', 'immobile, unthinking, placid', 'hidden', 'brainless and voiceless', 'rooted'.³⁴

But as Joseph Hassett has pointed out, the images Yeats wishes for his daughter are not negative ones to him at the time but ones he also wished for himself. For Yeats his move to Thoor Ballylee was an action he regarded as a 'rooting of mythology in the earth' something that was essential to 'all my art theories.'³⁵ Hassett points to Yeats description of Synge as that 'rooted man'. The choice of courtesy, custom and ceremony were choices that the poet would wish to make for himself. He was choosing the family as the unit and, as Hassett notes, seeing himself in the tradition of the courtly love poet,

³⁴ See Brenda Maddox, *George's Ghosts*, London 1999 p 140 and Joyce Carol Oates, *At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her, Images of Women in Twentieth Century Literature*, Georgia Review, V37, 1983.

³⁵ Joseph M. Hassett, *W.B. Yeats and the Muses*, Oxford, 2010. See also Edna Longley, *Helicon and ní Houlihan, Yeats's Political Identities*, edited by Jonathan Allison, Michigan 1996.

set apart with the freedom of the chosen, a discipline which in Yeats' words rids the soul of hate and replaces it with 'the freedom of the well-bred...a continual and self-delighting happiness.'³⁶ As the critic Edna Longley interpreted it 'on one level the speaker desires for his daughter, and for infant Ireland perhaps, the coherent civilisation that Coole symbolises. At another level, Coole also symbolises poetic form: the custom of literary tradition, the ceremony of technique. A highly concentrated climax adjusts the language of the opening crescendo of *'The Second Coming'*, of the 1916 poems. In an optimistic version of birth and future, beauty is separated from terror, innocence from murder' ³⁷ To this you could add that, while in his play *Cathleen* leaves to be transformed off-stage, here the last image is of a solid home beside a rooted and flourishing future.

However, at the time, for those close to him who read it, it must have been clear that in the poem too Yeats was making a personal choice. Choosing for Anne the private, spiritual and artistic life he now had with George, and represented by the example of Lady Gregory, rather than the public, activist, tumultuous life of Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult. As George's biographer Ann Saddlemyer concluded: 'He can wish for nothing better, in a world of uncertainty, than the values he has discovered for himself. In a sense then, "*A Prayer for my Daughter*" is also a hymn of thanksgiving to his wife for that greater gift.'³⁸

The poem completed, W.B. and George spent two days in Kilkenny looking for the burial place of Anne Hyde. Yeats sent a copy of the poem to Lady Gregory. He had already shown her the draft but highlighting the change he told her there was one verse 'left out' in that copy.³⁹ In Dublin, he continued researching Anne Hyde's ancestors, the Ormonds. in Trinity College Library. He had received by this time an invitation to take up a two-year lecture post in Japan and such was his disquiet with the current state of the country that he seriously considered going. 'It would be pleasant to go away until the tumult of war had died down, & perhaps Home Rule established & even the price of coal settled on'.⁴⁰ His fear was that if he stayed he would be pulled more and more by his friends into the political struggle between Sinn Féin and those who would settle for Home Rule. But he was concerned that if he left his tower would not be completed.⁴¹

³⁶ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, London 1961, p 253. Hassett, 2010 p. 144.

³⁷ Longley, in Allison, 1996 p. 219.

³⁸ Ann Saddlemyer, *Reading Yeats A Prayer for My Daughter*, *International Aspects of Irish Literature*, Gerrards Cross, 1996 p. 81.

³⁹ Yeats to Lady Gregory, 5th July 1919.

⁴⁰ Yeats to Quinn, 11th July 1919.

⁴¹ Yeats eventually agrees to go to Japan, but in November, George 'interprets' a signal that they should not, and they don't. Foster, 2002 p

In Dublin he met AE and Horace Plunkett who had just launched a new publication *The Irish Statesman*.⁴² It had its first edition on June 28th to coincide with a new initiative by Plunkett and moderate nationalists called 'The Irish Dominion League' which promoted rather than sovereign independence, home rule for all Ireland with dominion status in the Commonwealth. In a letter to Ezra Pound, Yeats confirmed that he had agreed to write a series of articles for them as a way of avoiding chairing a debate in the Abbey between Plunkett and Sinn Féin on the political situation.⁴³

Yeats wrote the articles in Ballylee later that month, bringing them over to Lady Gregory to read as he completed them. Yeats described the family scene in their new home in Ballylee in a letter to his father:

'I have been driven by rain from the river bank where I have been writing & catching a distant glimpse of a young otter fishing I suppose for trout. Probably an otter can catch them, even when there is rain overhead. One saw just his brown head & a long ripple on the water. Anne & George were there too, George sowing & Anne lying wide awake in her seventeenth century cradle. I am writing in the great ground floor room of the castle — pleasantest room I have yet seen, a great wide window opening over the river & around arched door leading to the thatched hallI am writing at a great trestle table which *George keeps covered with wild flowers*.'⁴⁴

The Irish Statesman articles were published under the title 'If I Were Four and Twenty', beginning on August 23rd and concluding the following week. They outline in prose form some of the ideas that had influenced his poetry in recent months. Yeats attempted to draw conclusions from his thirty years of intellectual cultivation to promote an alternative to the James Connolly-inspired socialism for those now growing to maturity. He wrote about a concept of social order that was 'the creation of two struggles, that of family with family, that of individual with individual, and that our politics depend upon which of the two struggles has most affected our imagination. If it has been most affected by the individual struggle we insist upon equality of opportunity, "the career open to talent", and consider rank and wealth fortuitous and unjust; and if it is most affected by the struggles of families, we insist upon all that preserves what that struggle has earned, upon social privilege, upon the rights of property.' It is clear that he is in the second group. 'Logic is loose again and because it must always draw its deductions from what every dolt can understand, the wild beast cannot but destroy mysterious life... If we could but unite our economics and our nationalism with our religion, that too would

⁴² For context on Russell and Plunkett see Ed Mulhall, A Poet among Politician, George Russell & the Irish Convention, Century Ireland. <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/a-poet-among-politicians-george-russell-the-irish-convention>.

⁴³ Yeats to Ezra Pound 16th July 1919. The first edition of *the Irish Statesman* edited by AE was on the 28th June 1919.

⁴⁴ Yeats to JB Yeats, 16th July 1919.

become philosophic, and we, our three great interests made but one, would at last be face to face with the great riddle, and might, it may be, hit the answer.'⁴⁵

But as in his poetry this logic brings him to a view of the future that foreshadows the possibilities of totalitarian rule: 'With Christianity came the realisation that a man must surrender his particular will to an implacable will, not his, though within his, and perhaps we are restless because we approach a realisation that our general will must surrender itself to another will within it, interpreted by certain men, at once economists, patriots, and inquisitors. As all realisation is through opposites, men coming to believe the subjective opposite of what they do and think, we may be about to accept the most implacable authority the world has known. Do I desire or dread it, loving as I do the gaming-table of Nature where many are ruined but none is judged, and where all is fortuitous, unforeseen?'

Yeats's biographer Roy Foster commented on this passage: 'These ambiguous questions would return to him, precipitated by Europe's lurches into historical crisis, over the next twenty years: the striking fact is how clearly he anticipated them in 1919.'⁴⁶ Yeats's friend Ezra Pound, who, like Yeats, would have his own flirtation with Fascism in the years ahead, was not impressed by this analysis in 1919 saying that the essay was a 'bundle of the worst rubbish he has written.'⁴⁷

The Irish Statesman was already becoming an important vehicle for debate and discussion. George Bernard Shaw had a letter on the Dominion League in that same August 30th edition and was to follow it with a series of important articles giving his views on Devolution and local government for Ireland. Yeats followed his own articles by giving the publication a series of extracts of letters to him from his father John Butler Yeats which featured over a number of weeks. He later published a two-part series on the topic of '*An Irish Theatre*', written in the form of an open letter to Lady Gregory.⁴⁸

But most importantly, on November 8th he published his poem '*A Prayer for my Daughter*' in the paper. It was heralded as '*A New Poem by W.B. Yeats*' on its front page and Yeats wrote to Frank Cruise O'Brien at the paper urging its immediate publication

⁴⁵ All quotes from W.B. Yeats, *If I Were Four and Twenty*, *The Irish Statesman*, August 23rd and August 30th 1919, reprinted in W.B. Yeats, *Collected Works*, Volume 5, *Later Essays*, edited by William H. O'Donnell, New York, 1994 pp 34-46. The draft typescript is NLI MS 30,277, where its opening welcomes the paper as a new vehicle for passionate criticism and MS 30,794 which has an alternative conclusion that sees Ireland opting for 'the old gambling table of nature rather than relying on a political system based on logic.'

⁴⁶ Foster, 2003, p. 148.

⁴⁷ Foster, 2003, p. 147 Pound in a letter to John Quinn 9th October, 1920.

⁴⁸ W.B. Yeats, *A Peoples Theatre*, *The Irish Statesman*, November 29th and December 6th 1919 JB Yeats letters begin on September 20th 1919 and run to October 11th, Shaw begins with a letter on August 30th on the league and follows with articles October 11th, 22th, November 15th 22nd 1919 and January 3rd 1920

to coincide with the American journal 'Poetry'.⁴⁹ It was therefore for it to be among the articles on the current political and cultural scene that Yeats chose that it be published first in Ireland and the UK. 'A Prayer for my Daughter' was the first poem of the sequence of poems later collected in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* to be published. So, his readership was reading this poem before they had read any of the 1916 poems or 'The Second Coming' or those poems like the title poem of 'Demon and the Beast' that came directly from the sessions with George.

Most of these poems were published for the first time in the *Dial* a year later by which time the external context in Ireland had become much more fraught.⁵⁰ The escalating violence of the War of Independence brought a significant new dimension both to the 1916 poems, which could now be viewed as having an increased nationalist relevance and to the foreboding tone of the 'Second Coming' and 'A Prayer' which was even more acute in the climate of fear then predominant (a new poem for 1920 was called 'In time of War'). Yeats always gave significant thought to his sequencing of the poems and chose the following order: 'Easter 1916', 'Sixteen Dead Men', 'The Rose Tree', 'On a Political Prisoner', 'The Leaders of the Crowd'. These he followed with 'Towards Break of Day', 'Demon and Beast' and 'The Second Coming', concluding the sequence with 'A Prayer for my Daughter'. The new short poem 'A Meditation in Time of War' was added as a kind of coda (to be followed in the book published by *Cuala* a few months later by his short verse dedication of the restoration of Thoor Ballylee to George written to be carved on a stone there).

But at the end of 1919 it was the 'Prayer' that was first seen by his readers and which reflected a public expression of the choices made privately by the poet during that year. W.B., George and Anne were at year end settled in Oxford for the winter and he was planning a trip to New York to see his father and give some lectures. He was developing the theories that would become 'A Vision' from their dialogue just as that dialogue waned and the couple began to plan for a second child.

A final poem of the year stated the personal choices even more clearly and can be read as the poet reassuring his wife that his preoccupations with other women in their sessions did not mean he did not appreciate what she meant to him. He had chosen to be rooted too. It was called 'Under Saturn.'

'Do not because this day I have grown saturnine
Imagine that lost love, unassailable
Being a portion of my youth, can make me pine;
For how should I forget the wisdom that you brought,

⁴⁹ Yeats to Frank Cruise O'Brien, 31st October 1919.

⁵⁰ *The Dial*, November 1920, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* was published by *Cuala* in 1921.

The comfort that you made?’⁵¹

This read originally ‘the kindness you have brought into my empty life.’ The poet’s choice was assisted by his wife, who had told him of an encounter with a local man on the roads who had welcomed the Yeats’ ‘return’ to the West to live:

‘You heard that labouring man who had served my people; he said
Upon the open road, near to the Sligo quay-
No, no, not said, but cried it out – “You have come again
And surely after twenty years it was time to come.”
I am thinking of a child’s vow sworn in vain
Never to leave that valley his fathers cried home.’
November 1919⁵²

Yeats himself was to consider this a pivotal time and later when revising another major poem which reflected on this time of turbulence at home and in the world, he changed its title from “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World” to simply “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”⁵³

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⁵¹ Draft in NLI MS NLI MS 13,588, Parkinson, 1994.

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⁵³ Curtis Bradford, *Yeats at Work*, Southern Illinois, 1965.

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