THE PARADOX OF PARODY: "AMONG (SCHOOL) CHILDREN"

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Abstract: The two texts that are discussed together in this paper are "Among School Children" (1928) by William Butler Yeats and "Among Children" (1991) by Philip Levine. While the problem of whether the latter is a typical parody of the former is viewed as secondary in importance (spoof, send-up, pastiche, imitation proper, squib… are other alternative concepts), the main focus is on how the same type of quest (incidentally, any school is part of a journey toward knowledge) results in completely different views on the relationship between poet and his "object" (an experience in one case, an experience and another poem in the other); and this is given by the great differences between the two authors and their respective cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Yeats, parody, quest, modernism/postmodernism, Levine, paradox

In 1928, at the age of sixty-three, Yeats (a member of the aristocratic Anglo-Irish minority of Ireland) published his—arguably—best volume of poetry The Tower, including the often anthologized "Among School Children"; born in 1928, the American poet Philip Levine (of Russian-Jewish descent and working-class background), at sixty-three, i.e. in 1991, published his collection What Work Is, including his "American response to Yeats' poem"(Alix Wilber)—"Among Children." With his spiritualist, theosophical-mystical-occult and astrological inclinations and experiences, Yeats would have seen some mysterious workings of fate or destiny in these coincidences. Whatever the case, the two poems can be regarded in their intertextual co-existence in English, whether the second be considered a parody of the older poem or anything of the kind; by which we mean that it might be a spoof, a send-up, a lampoon, a squib, a hoax, a burlesque, a pastiche, a take-off…, and this requires some clarification, i.e. discrimination among synonyms.

Parody is the generic term (Gk. para=beside, counter, against + oide=song, i.e. a counter-song) that covers such famous examples (very often more famous than the originals they imitate) as Cervantes' Don Quixote, Samuel Butler's Hudibras, Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels and A Tale of a Tub, Henry Fielding's Shamela , Alexander Pope's The

Rape of the Lock and The Dunciad, Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey,..; in the twentieth-century, and especially in postmodernism, it came to be a central artistic device (with such an extreme example as Borges' 1939 parody of a parody in "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote"), so that Mikhail Bakhtin could regard parody as a natural development in the life cycle of any genre (one cannot help wondering about what follows next).

The basic connotations are those of imitation and oblique commentary, but also polemical allusiveness, as well as irony, ridicule, trivialization or mockery and satire (though a great parodist, Vladimir Nabokov, thought that "satire is a lesson, parody is a game"). In other words, parody is by no means necessarily satirical, and it can be done with respect and appreciation of the subject (author, work, genre, period) involved, without being a heedless sarcastic attack; while exposing the tricks of manner (mannerisms) and thought of the original, parody cannot be written without a thorough appreciation, without a complex understanding that comes from painstaking imitation. As a result, again, it may not include ridicule or comic effect (Levine's poem), and there is also something like a blank parody (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard's 1966 absurdist play), where the more recent creative effort (Joyce's Ulysses or Eliot's The Waste Land are other examples) is simple recontextualization, re-writing from a different perspective. Consequently, it is closest to pastiche (imitation or fragments from the original sources), or take-off (good-natured, mild satirical departure), leaving the coarse humour and the scurrilous attack to the lampoon and pasquinade or squib, the practical joke type of deception for the spoof, the grotesque low comedy for the burlesque, distortion and absurdity for caricature or travesty.

The next obvious question refers to the relationship between the two (or several) authors; and, not only in view of the two texts we have in mind, one could not imagine two poets—or personalities—that are more different from one another than Yeats and Levine; so, while there may be no real surprise in one of them parodying the other, the slant perspective in the second is more like an invitation for us to see what could have been parodiable (we may have just invented a word here) in the former; and this is the implicit (now explicit) purpose of this paper.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), son of painter, philosopher and orator John Butler Yeats, showed an early interest in mysticism, spiritualism, astrology and the occult on one hand, and Irish folklore on the other, both of which influenced deeply his literary activity. He was gradually going to develop out of them a personal symbology (the rose, the cross/rood, the

lily, the star, the swan, two trees, the tower, a winding stair, the interlocking gyres…) in which critics also found such diverse roots as those of French symbolism, Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, the Pre-Raphaelites and Emanuel Swedenborg (plus that of the Japanese Noh theatre in his plays). A permanent presence in his poetry was also that of Irish beauty and nationalist Maud Gonne, whom he met in 1889 (when "the troubling of my life began") and with whom he developed a life-long obsessive infatuation (he proposed to her—and was rejected each time—in 1891, 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1916, this time after the death of her husband, Major John MacBride).

Yeats' ample and diverse literary work, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, after which, untypically, he produced his major contributions, includes The Wanderings of Oisin (1889) and the essays in The Celtic Twilight (1893), followed by the poems in The Wind Among the Reeds—1899, The Green Helmet—1910, Responsibilities—1914, The Wild Swans at Coole—1917, The Tower—1928, The Winding Stair—1929, New Poems—1938, and Last Poems—1939, his symbolic cyclical theory of history in A Vision—1925, the 1938 Autobiographies of William Butler Yeats, and such plays (he was part of the Irish Renaissance connected with the revival of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, together with Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge, George Russell…) as The Countess Cathleen, Kathleen ni Houlihan, Deirdre, On Baile's Strand, The Words upon the Window Pane, At the Hawk's Well (he had met and befriended Ezra Pound, who introduced him to Far Eastern traditions in theatre and poetry)…

For the sake of a later comparison/contrast with Levine, here are some of his best (known) poems: "Wisdom," "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium," "Leda and the Swan," "No Second Troy," "Oedipus at Colonus," "The Wild Swans at Coole," "The Tower," "The Winding Stair," "Adam's Curse," "The Second Coming," and, for the theme we are interested in here, "Quarrel in Old Age," "When You Are Old," "A Man Young and Old"… and "Among School Children":

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything

In the best modern way—the children's eyes

In momentary wonder stare upon

A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent

Above a sinking fire, a tale that she

Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event

That changed some childish day to tragedy—

Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent

Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,

Or else, to alter Plato's parable,

Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage

I look upon one child or t'other there

And wonder if she stood so at that age—

For even daughters of the swan can share

Something of every paddler's heritage—

And had that colour upon cheek or hair,

And thereupon my heart is driven wild:

She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—

Did Quatrocento finger fashion it

Hollow of cheek as if it drank the wind

And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

And I though never of a Ledaean kind

Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,

Better to smile on all that smile, and show

There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap

Honey of generation had betrayed,

And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape

As recollection or the drug decide,

Would think her son, did she but see that shape

With sixty or more winters on his head,

A compensation for the pang of his birth,

Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays

Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;

Solider Aristotle played the taws

Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras

Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings

What a star sang and careless Muses heard:

Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,

But those that candles light are not as those

That animate a mother's reveries,

But keep a marble or a bronze repose.

And yet they too break hearts—O Presences

That passion, piety or affection knows,

And that all heavenly glory symbolize—

O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where

The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,

Nor beauty born out of its own despair,

Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Between 1922 and 1928 William Butler Yeats was a member of the Senate of the Irish Free State, and, as such, senator Yeats visited a convent school in Waterford in 1926; about March 14, 1926 he wrote in his notebook: "Topic for poetry—School Children and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfill our dreams or even their teacher's hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens." (see Norton…, p.140) The setting, the topic and the themes/thoughts thus established, the poem (eight stanzas of eight lines each, i.e. ottava rima, traditionally suited to and used in epic or heroic poetry) gets to be included in his 1928 volume, The Tower, where several poems are expressions of Yeats' keen awareness of old age.

In "Among School Children" this awareness is explored along a rather complicated rhetorical path; the first "I" of the poem's persona stands for a "sixty-year-old smiling public man"; next, the same "I" dreams "of a Ledaean body" (Leda, lover of Zeus, reminds him of Maud Gonne) and he remembers Plato's parable (in the Symposium: humanity was originally "doubled" in a spherical shape, but became divided into two and, thus, we are constantly seeking our lost unity); only to then—in the third stanza—"look" upon the children and think of his obsessive love again; as "her present image floats into the mind," the "I" finds himself confessing that he "had pretty plumage once" and also invoking, in stanza four, someone like the Quatrocento figure of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), as well as the Bible (Genesis 25—"took a mess of shadows for its meat," as, in old age, Maud Gonne was very thin, almost skeletal); also here is first announced the "scarecrow" theme, but, for the time being, of a "comfortable kind."

The second half of the poem begins with a shift of perspective from the personal (the "I" becomes the "son… with sixty or more winters on his head") to the universal (the "honey of generation" from Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry, 233-c.304, and his essay on "The Cave of Nymphs"—Yeats' own note), as the "I" disappears and the poet questions the real value of life in general; the scarecrow, once introduced, becomes a metaphor for the greatest thinkers of European antiquity, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle—"old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird"; thus, "golden-thighed" Pythagoras comes from Iamblichus' Life… to "fiddle" the relationship between numbers and the music of the spheres, Plato answers with the world as an

imitation of the Empiree prototype in his cave allegory, while "solider Aristotle"—Alexander's tutor—sees the world as rather more authentic in a fifth stanza in which the speaker-protagonist is completely absent. And also absent he is for the discontented poet in stanza seven where the "scarecrow" philosophers are seen as "self-born mockers of man's enterprise"; finally, as the distance grows and the previous "I" becomes "we" in the last line of the last stanza, life and death, youth and age, wisdom and despair, creator and creation are all brought together in a synthesis where antinomies are resolved; they probably include the school children and the old poet, as well as the several strands of his art: the personal, the symbolic, and the historical, as the reader comes at the end of an argument that took him from present to past, from the personal to the impersonal and universal, from the individual to the collective, from the positive to the negative and back. The poet-protagonist himself moves from self-admiration/-applause/-commendation, through self-contempt/-deceit/-deprecation/-doubt to self-justification/-projection in a poem that seems to contain his life's lesson (his own "schooling," i.e. search for knowledge).

Almost obviously (see supra), our next question refers to what one might view as fit for parody in "Among School Children." First comes to mind an A. E. Housman-like type of philosophy (of old age and fear of death, as, one remembers, Housman, a close contemporary, published his second volume as Last Poems rather early in his adult life—1922, followed, in 1936, by More Poems), brilliantly parodied by friend Ezra Pound:

Mr. Housman's Message

O woe, woe,
People are born and die,
We also shall be dead pretty soon.
Therefore let us act as if we were dead already…

Another good parody might be based upon the extravagant idea of bringing Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle to occupy (with their universally quoted ideas) a simple Irish schoolroom setting; which, in other poems, is represented by his interest in esoteric and occult knowledge. And, thirdly (but certainly not lastly), Yeats' insistent image of poet (and thinker) as an old scarecrow, of whatever kind (he also described himself once as "a wild old wicked man").

As a matter of fact, other Yeatsean poems have been parodied (some of them several times), among them "Easter 1916," "Drinking Song," "The Rose of Peace," "The Wild Swans at Coole," "The Song of Wandering Aengus," "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"… Anyone

interested in the topic might want to have a look at such books as Leonard Diepeveen's Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910-1935 (Toronto, 2013), or John Gross's The Oxford Book of Parodies (2010), or a 48-page booklet by "a Jackdaw in Dublin" titled Parodies and Imitations of W. B. Yeats, Bernard Shaw, James Stephens, James Joyce, etc. As far as our poem is concerned, of some interest is a kind of send-up by Tracy Kidder, Among School Children (2008)—an audio-book as well--, where the educationalist describes one year in the life of Mrs. Christine Zajac, who teaches fifth grade in a racially mixed school in a poor district (like Levine's) of Holyoke, Massachusetts, where Kidder, to write her book, spent nine months among twenty school children and their indomitable, compassionate teacher.

But the parody we are interested in is authored by Philip Levine, a life-long teacher, mainly in Fresno, California, but also several periods in Spain and elsewhere, and a poet mainly associated with his portraits of working class America, with images of men in overalls, women in black smocks and children with heads bowed low in a classroom in fourth grade; among the latter, except for "Among Children," one remembers "Coming of Age in Michigan," "Burning," "Gin," "M. Degas Teaches Art and Science at Durfee Intermediate School"…

Born in a blue-collar family of post-depression America, Levine is known to have spent his early years writing verse between shifts as a Detroit autoworker; such volumes as On the Edge (1963) and Not This Pig (1968) made him emblematic as a poet of the gritty despair of urban working-class life and the toughness of being a kid in an industrial city; his empathy is with "heroes" embodying the thwarted, the dispossessed, the outcast, the failed, the peripheral, the despised. Many of his free verse monologues, frequently characterized by a haunting lyricism, were often doubled by surreal elements (he translated, among other Hispanic and Latin American poets, Pablo Neruda and Cezar Valejo). His activity as a poet was rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize (The Simple Truth of 1994), and, at eighty-three, with being appointed US Poet Laureate for 2011-2012; What Work Is, amounting to "a hymn of praise for all the workers of America," had received the National Book Award and opened our list of titles for a previously announced contrast with Yeats: "What Work Is," "Night Thoughts over a Weak Child," "Detroit Grease Ship Poem," "A Sleepless Night," "An Abandoned Factory," "Bitterness," "Gangrene," "The Rat of Faith," "Wisteria," "The End of Your Life," "The Dead," "Premonition at Twilight," "The Negatives"…

Among his poems of anger and indignation, pain and inadequacy, "Among Children"(from What Work Is) is also referencing the more famous poem by Yeats (a poet and personality with whom, again, he could not have had less in common):

I walk among the rows of bowed heads—
the children are sleeping through fourth grade
so as to be ready for what is ahead,
the monumental boredom of junior high
and the rush forward tearing their wings
loose and turning their eyes forever inward.
These are the children of Flint, their fathers
work at the spark plug factory or truck
bottled water in 5-gallon sea-blue jugs
to the widows of the suburbs. You can see
already how their backs have thickened,
how their small hands, soiled with pig iron,
leap and stutter even in dreams. I would like
to sit down among them and read slowly
from the Book of Job until the windows
pale and the teacher rises out of a milky sea
of industrial scum, her gowns streaming
with light, her foolish words transformed
into song, I would like to arm each one
with a quiver of arrows so that they might
rush like wind there where no battle rages
shouting among the trumpets, Ha! Ha!
How dear the gift of laughter in the face
of the 8 hour day, the cold winter mornings
without coffee and oranges, the long lines
or mothers in old coats waiting silently
where the gates have closed. Ten years ago
I went among these same children, just born,
in the bright ward of the Sacred Heart and leaned

down to their breaths delivered that day,
burning with joy. There was such wonder
in their sleep, such purpose in their eyes
closed against autumn, in their damp heads
blurred with the hair of ponds, and not one
turned against me or the light, not one
said, I am sick, I am tired, I will go home,
not one complained or drifted alone,
unloved, on the hardest day of their lives.
Eleven years from now they will become
the men and women of Flint or Paradise,
the majors of a minor town, and I
will be gone into the smoke or memory,
so I bow to them here and whisper
all I know, all I will never know.

The ways in which "Among Children" is a parody (criticism, bitter commentary, even caricature) of "Among School Children" may best be seen by looking at the "components" of the two poems and revealing how the emphases differ and how the two visions develop into conflicting ones. As far as the major component is concerned, the children, Levine's implied criticism is that Yeats does not really care about the lives of those he is inspecting, but only the extent to which they offer him "objective correlatives" for his own thoughts about himself, his emotion and feelings about growing old, his accomplishments, his education, his life or existence in general. The egocentric modernist poet thus has just himself in his mind, and mostly his old, obsessive and tormenting love story, plus incidental thoughts about life and death, youth and age, art and life.

On the other hand, for Levine the children (who, first, are not "school children," as school is not really a significant part of their lives and their schooling is elsewhere) and their cruel destiny are of the greatest importance. While Yeats' children (only girls)—the object of his pretended imaginative investigation—learn various things "in the best modern way," Levine's children "of Flint," born at the Sacred Heart hospital ten years before (Yeats' fifth stanza is about his own birth), go unloved and resilient, to grow, in another eleven years (i.e.

at twenty-one) into the men and women (so they are both girls and boys) of a minor town and an unpromising world.

Thus, while Yeats, the individualistic, self-centered aristocratic poem sees himself as the starting and end point of his observation and meditation, Levine—the post-modernist, complex, self-subverting poet—turns his pluralistic vision more upon the object of contemplation than on the contemplating subject; he sees his children "tearing their wings" and "turning their eyes forever inward" in the worst postmodern way; he notices not only their "small hands soiled by pig iron" and their "thickened backs," but also their blue-collar fathers, their mothers waiting in lines and, consequently, their bleak prospects.

Parody implies, we remember, a thorough knowledge of both the original (with all its qualities and shortcomings) and the process in which this is being parodied. Yeats was aware that knowledge of life (his quest, in fact) does not come from philosophy or the arts, while Levine is more keenly aware that the very experience of life itself is the only source of knowledge; poetry (like Yeats' "Among School Children") could provide a starting point, but the real journey (Levine's own life, reflected in that of the children) is more important than the imaginative one. No wonder then that Yeats invokes Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and da Vinci, while all that comes to Levine's mind is The Book of Job , the main (only) theme of which is that of suffering and evil, and where the problem is why the innocent suffer is left unresolved; of course, in Yeats' religious school, the children have other things to learn. That one poem ends in some kind of rhetorical question and the other in a paradox—the paradox of parody—may be proof enough that the quest for knowledge (intellectual, philosophical, artistic, experiential) remains important in itself and not in terms of where it leads the searcher.

The second component, as in any school or classroom, is the teacher, for whom Yeats has just a few words: "a kind old nun in a white hood," whose main job is to answer the inspector's questions; for the ironic-sarcastic (see another place name, Paradise) and critically elegiac American poet, "the teacher rises out of a milky sea/of industrial scum, her gowns streaming/with light, her foolish words transformed/into song."

As far as the two traveling inspector-poets are concerned, we have seen quite enough about Yeats'; Levine's protagonist similarly travels/walks among children, but also into their past and future (not only his own), as he "bows to them" and admits his failure in his quest: "all I will never know." Writing more than half-a-century apart, the Nobel Prize winner and the Pulitzer and National Book Award winner confess to the same Romantic/Keatsean

conundrum, but differently assimilated lessons of life: how can we know truth (as the passage of time) from beauty (as frozen images, memories or words)? Both quests (ours as well) remain unfulfilled, ending in either a question mark or a paradox—or both.

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