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PROFANE PERFECTION: "THE STATUES"

by Jon Griffin

Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?
His numbers though they moved or seemed to move
In marble or in bronze, lacked character.
But boys and girls pale from the imagined love
Of solitary beds knew what they were,
That passion could bring character enough;
And pressed at midnight in some public place
Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.¹

Thousands of years later, thousands of miles away, Yeats enjoins the Irish to a similar act of passion and discovery, and there is the first difference, for the boys and girls do not have to be told, and the Irish are not imagined slipping helplessly through the streets in their nightclothes. Instead, a larger passion subsumes the Eros of the first stanza, driven by a vastly more complicated sort of awareness than the intuitive attraction of youths. Still, Yeats implies, it is the same act, and its Irish actors possess by heredity and tradition the same impulse toward realized perfections of form. He sets out, in the middle stanzas of "The Statues," to show the career and effects of these forms through the intervening centuries, and to show why the Irish must climb, of their own will, where the boys and girls were effortlessly drawn.

The attraction described in the first stanza is erotic, but vague and undirected, in the manner of adolescence, until it finds expression through an object of desire. The statues give shape to desire, and act as an apprehensible medium between ideal form and the unordered world of things. Their beauty, in turn, derives from number:

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Greek thinkers generally, and Pythagoreans specifically, maintained that the limitless is evil and that only when quantitative limitation and measure are imposed on the unlimited to give it form is there anything good, ethical or beautiful there.²

Of course, boys and girls do not leave bed to see a theorem demonstrated.³ For them, the statues' attraction is the human form, perfected and freed from character. This absence of character is no privation, but merely the lack of the accidental attributes of existence—accidental as opposed to essential, as opposed to planned: "Pythagoras planned it."

Yeats long recognized the strange attraction between the inhuman and the human, cold form and passionate experience. In "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," he recalls watching a Japanese dancer in a drawing room, and comments paradoxically on the dancer's ability, through his formal gestures, "to recede from us into some more powerful life . . . One realized anew, as if every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts' greatness can be but in their intimacy."⁴ The statues intimately attract the boys and girls precisely because of their "separating strangeness." Sexual passion—amorphous, mired in blood—brings character enough, and in Olney's words, "discovers its necessary form in the archetypal image" (64–65).

The opening stanza describes the "Profane perfection of mankind" at work. The same attraction heats the bowels of the undoubtedly mortified "globe-trotting Madam" in "Under Ben Bulben," and in "Long-legged Fly" inspires "girls at puberty to find/ The first Adam in their thought." Art shaped by ideal form, realized number, exerts a shaping influence beyond the bedroom, informing the structures of social life. So the King in "In Tara's Halls," absolutely self-defined, defines the realm. At his death, the form of kingship (a sort of artifact) remains behind. In *On the Boiler* Yeats asserts that Europe owes its very birth to the formal strength derived from Pythagorean numbers realized in stone:

There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers, those faces which are divine because all there is empty and measured. Europe was not born when Greek galleys defeated the Persian hordes at Salamis, but when the Doric studios sent out those broad-backed marble statues against the multiform, vague, expressive Asiatic sea, they gave to the sexual instinct of Europe its goal, its fixed type.⁵

This passage, justifiably inevitable in any discussion of "The Statues," explicitly links sexual passion's discovery of its form with social and cul-

tural manifestations of order. It also, of course, very nicely glosses the poem's second stanza:

No; greater than Pythagoras, for the men
That with a mallet or a chisel modelled these
Calculations that look but casual flesh, put down
All Asiatic vague immensities,
And not the banks of oars that swam upon
The many-headed foam at Salamis.
Europe put off that foam when Phidias
Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass.
(lines 9-16)

Pythagoras is great because his numbers gave the mind a means of apprehending and ordering phenomena. But the artists are greater, for they have taken his numbers and arrested stone, made a seamless and commanding transition from mind into the world. They create a visible ideal by which Europe becomes defined. These Phidian statues give women dreams, a form for their passion, and are themselves the mirrors to which dreams refer for their shape. To remember that the statues were made of marble or bronze, had weight, could be kissed is helpful for understanding the third stanza.

"In reading the third stanza," Yeats wrote, "remember the influence on modern sculpture and on the great seated Buddha of the sculptors who followed Alexander":⁶

One image crossed the many-headed, sat
Under the tropic shade, grew round and slow,
No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat
Dreamer of the Middle-Ages. Empty eyeballs knew
That knowledge increases unreality, that
Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.
When gong and conch declare the hour to bless
Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.
(lines 17-24)

Here it is usual to cite a passage from Yeats' *Autobiography*, in which he considers Watts' portrait of William Morris:

Its grave wide-open eyes, like the eyes of some dreaming beast, remind me of the open eyes of Titian's "Ariosto," while the broad vigorous body suggests a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane, though it give itself to every fantasy: the dreamer of the middle ages. It is "the fool of fairy . . . wide and wild as a hill," the resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation, and has no trait in common with

the wavering, lean image of hungry speculation, that cannot but because of certain famous Hamlets of our stage fill the mind's eye. Shakespeare himself foreshadowed a symbolic change, that is a change in the whole temperament of the world, for though he called his Hamlet "fat" and even "scant of breath," he thrust between his fingers agile rapier and dagger.⁷

At first glance, the passage seems wonderfully bound up with the third stanza of "The Statues." There are "the wide open eyes," "the dreamer of the middle ages," "the resolute European image," Buddha, a thin Hamlet, and a fat one. The temptation is instantly to apply the passage, and Yeats' evident affection for Morris, to the poem. A second or third glance suggests that this application is not easy. Many of the critical difficulties with "The Statues" may have arisen from attempts to turn the Morris passage into a coherent gloss of stanza three.⁷ The confusion begins when we associate Morris with Buddha, and Yeats after all liked Morris, and sometimes liked the East. But what Yeats says in the misleading passage is that Morris reminds him of "the resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation." What the stanza describes is rather the swelling, absorbing figure of the Buddha, whose formal strength derives from a half-remembered (and by the last line, barely remembered) European image, that of the Phidian statues. The difference is significant—a close opposite.

The Hamlet Yeats describes in the passage, the "wavering, lean image of hungry speculation," does answer to the Hamlet in stanza three, and is not, Yeats felt, the Hamlet Shakespeare created, but rather a modern diminishment of him. In *On the Boiler* Yeats suggests the crucial distinction between Shakespeare's Hamlet and ours:

But thought is not more important than action; masterpieces, whether of the stage or study, excel in their action, their visibility; who can forget Odysseus, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Lear, Faust, all figures in a peepshow, and we are not coherent to ourselves through thought but because our visible image changes slowly. English producers slur over that scene where Hamlet changes letters and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death, because they define him through his thought and think that scene but old folk material incompatible with Shakespeare's "Hamlet." . . . Hamlet's hesitations are hesitations of thought . . . outside that he is a mediaeval man of action. (33-34)

Shakespeare indeed "foreshadowed a change, that is a change in the whole temperament of the world," and Yeats, in "The Statues," reflects it. No longer "a mediaeval man of action," the Hamlet of modern producers cannot translate thought into action. He has thinned over the centuries, and

seems to us what Shakespeare wrote, because “we are not coherent to ourselves through thought but because our visible image changes slowly.” Hamlet, the most “modern” of Shakespeare’s heroes, is modern because a producer (in this analogy, our much-dwindled Phidias) shows us an image of ourselves, choosing to emphasize a disintegrated “man of action” who cannot act.

Our thought, lacking the Pythagorean numbers, no longer has confidence that it can impose an order on phenomena, much less the ideal forms that Phidias realized in stone. Innumerable structures make do for various circumstances, and their coexistence leads us to conclude that no one of them is real, that they are merely products of this special knowledge or that. This is the wisdom of the Buddha, “That knowledge increases unreality, that/Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.” But the Phidian statues were real, had weight, could be touched. They were not merely an insubstantial net of thought, but number, mind’s means, translated into stone. When Phidias “Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass,” he disproved “that/ Mirror on mirror mirrored is” necessarily “all the show.”

The third stanza, then, traces the movement of the Greek statues east, behind Alexander, where, in Ellmann’s words, “they paradoxically gave a form to eastern passivity, which otherwise would have been formless.”⁹ As the Western embodied ideal died into the life of its Eastern opposite, here figured by the Buddha, a disintegration occurred in the West. The mind’s confidence in its ability to inform phenomena, to translate thought into action, diminished, its self-image a “Hamlet thin from eating flies,” and a scrawny cat. Thought’s tenuous hold on the world must then succumb, in its crisis, to Buddha’s emptiness.

This entire complicated and compressed movement, of course, is an expression of Yeats’ historical gyres. But in “The Statues” the inevitability of historical cycles is not his point. He wants rather to stress the possibility that human freedom and will can, in isolated instances (Ireland, namely), hold back the historical tide. In *On the Boiler* he describes the dilemma in terms similar to those of the poem:

Of late I have tried to understand the falsehood that is in all knowledge, science more false than philosophy, but that too false. Yet, unless we cling to knowledge, until we have examined its main joints, it comes at us with staring eyes. Should we drive it away at last, we must enter the Buddhist monastery in Auden’s play and for the reason there given. (36)

The play is *The Ascent of F6*; the reason there given is “to make the complete abnegation of the will.”¹⁰ In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats com-

plains that "Auden, Spender, all that seem the new movement," seek strength outside themselves, "in Marxian Socialism, or in Major Douglas." But "The lasting expression of our time is not this obvious choice but in a sense of something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and cold."¹¹

If Ireland is to save itself from faction, and create a nation that does not depend for its identity on any of the myriad confusions of Europe, it must do so consciously. It must create out of its own will "something passionate and cold," something human and inhuman, the familiar constituents of the Phidian statues which brought Europe to life. Thus the fourth stanza of the poem must evoke a unity of thought and action, and indeed it fairly roars upon us, its strong verbs and rhythms triggering a release from the dilemma drawn in the third:

When Pearse summond Cuchulain to his side,
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?
(lines 25-27)

It was convenient for Yeats that "Pearse and some of his followers had a cult" of Cuchulain, and that the government had set a statue of the legendary hero in the post office, the center of the Easter Rising.¹¹ Cuchulain works here as an ideal form for the Irish, and as a link not only to the Irish past but, through him, "to those legendary first settlers of Ireland who were Greeks, and to Pythagoras himself who was held to be a teacher of the Druids."¹³ Pearse's summoning of Cuchulain is an act of will, and the form he calls forth is strikingly realized in the poem: Cuchulain as "violent and famous" man, and as bearer of the Greek tradition of "calculation, number, measurement."

Yeats had recognized years earlier that passionate dreams and love of country lay behind the Rising: "And what if excess of love/ Bewildered them till they died?" (182). Those dreams were of an ideal Ireland, free and rooted in its own past. Similar passion and love, including but going beyond the intuitive knowledge and Eros of the first stanza, must now be called forth in the Irish by an act of will, for modern history runs with the tide of materialism, mind's helplessness among things:

We Irish, born into that ancient sect
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked,
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.
(lines 28-32)

Yeats reminds his readers that their heredity and tradition lie with the "ancient sect" of Cuchulain, Phidias, Pythagoras. The imagery alters the movement in stanza two, where the Greek forms mastered the many-headed foam, which is now ascendant. It may be too hopeful to remember that, as the Greek victory at Salamis contained the seeds of its eventual defeat, so the seeds of a new formal mastery are surely somewhere in that churning chaos. But the Irish may climb above it, into another midnight, now not the diurnal midnight which welcomed the boys and girls, but a "proper dark" through which the mind can reach back and rediscover those numbers and proportions that were its first strength. Yeats stresses the difficulty and tenuousness of the effort: unable to press live lips upon stone, we must trace the forms, as with fingertips, blind. The effort, though, can result in a miraculous recovery of that intellect which once before informed and defined a culture through "The lineaments of a plummet-measured face."

Throughout *Last Poems* Yeats insists that the Irish should define themselves, not by mere circumstance, but by referring centerward to recoverable ideals of the nation. Those ideals exist in the tradition, of Tara, of Cuchulain, of the spirit that dignified the Easter Rising, and behind these, of "calculation, number, measurement," the mind's means of imposing an ideal form on reality. Man made the forms, and they are thus knowable; remembering Vico, Yeats thought man can only know what he has made. The artist's task in all this is to realize, in words or paint or stone, those forms, and set them before the people. With "The Statues," honestly complicated as it is, Yeats tries to give Irish dreams at least part of a looking-glass.

NOTES

- 1 W. B. Yeats. *The Poems: A New Edition*. Richard Finneran. New York: Macmillan, 1983: 336.
- 2 James Olney. *The Rhizome and the Flower: The Parenial Philosophy—Yeats and Jung*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1980: 63.
- 3 "You would not write your name in pencil across the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle," said Dedalus. "—No, said Lynch, give me the hypotenuse of the Venus of Praxiteles."
- 4 W. B. Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. New York: Collier, 1968: 224.
- 5 W. B. Yeats. *On the Boiler*. Shannon: Irish UP, 1971: 37.
- 6 W. B. Yeats. *Letters*. Ed. Alan Wade. New York: Macmillan, 1955: 911.
- 7 W. B. Yeats. *Autobiography*. New York: Macmillan, 1965: 95.
- 8 Thomas Whitaker also mentions the misleading effect of these lines. *Swan and Shadow*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1964: 324n.

- 9 Richard Ellmann. *The Identity of Yeats*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964: 189.
- 10 W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. *The Ascent of F6*. London: Faber and Faber, 1953: 74.
- 11 Wade, 837.
- 12 Wade, 911.
- 13 Whitaker, 243.