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Mental Action of Remaking in “Among School Children”

Yuko Kitamoto

I

W. B. Yeats’s “Among School Children”¹⁾ has been tried to be explained or elucidated so many times by innumerable critics from various viewpoints that it seems to admit of nothing to be discussed any more. From its first appearance in 1927 to the early half of the 1960’s, most critics devoted themselves to analysing the images or solving the meaning of the famous last stanza, especially the last line: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (64), because they believed that the thematic purport was well represented in that stanza.²⁾ Yet in 1964 Thomas Parkinson, studying Yeats’s unpublished manuscripts and comments, revealed that Yeats did not originally plan the last stanza when he began to write the poem.³⁾ Since then what has aroused special interest among critics is the process of the poem through which the unpoetic description of stanza I turns into the spiritualised and poetic world of stanza VIII.

“Among School Children” is based upon Yeats’s experience of a semi-official visit as an Irish Senator to St. Otteran’s School, a convent in Waterford, in February 1926.⁴⁾ About a month after the visit he recorded what he had felt at the visit:

Topic for poem – School children and the thought that live [life] will waste them, perhaps no life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher’s hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.⁵⁾

And he added a mention of incomplete drafts of stanza VI to a letter to Olivia Shakespear dated 24 September 1926:

Here is a fragment of my last curse on old age. It means that even the greatest men are owls, scarecrows, by the time their fame has come.⁶⁾

Contrary to his own remarks, Yeats did not write a poem just as a disappointment in life or a "curse on old age".

In "Among School Children" it is the movement from stanza I to VIII that displays a distinctive characteristic of Yeats at his best, which is a mental action⁷⁾ of remaking himself. In this study, I consider what course Yeats pursues to transform himself, what figure Yeats tries to transform himself into and what meaning the transformation bears for the poet.

II

The opening scene in which Yeats inspects school children, though it looks like just a realistic circumstantial description, shows signs that he turns to be sensitive as early as in this stanza. When he notices that the children "[i]n momentary wonder stare upon" (7) him, he becomes wretchedly aware of his being a foreign element among them, his lacking youthfulness. With embarrassment or irritation in his mind he manages to keep up an appearance of "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" (8), and observes children around him objectively.

In stanza II it is sure that he consciously starts turning his thoughts inward.

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. (9-16)

The phrase "a harsh reproof, or trivial event / That changed some childish day to tragedy" suggests Yeats's ambiguous feelings. It is true that the poet wrote it to show adversities of life that good times in childhood always submit to conversion into hard times. But in expressing the glad season of life or days of innocence, instead of "childlike" Yeats employs the word "childish" that has rather a negative connotation, though the

fomer word has no problem to be adopted. Yeats seems to be antagonistic to the existence of children, and seems to want to say that “youthful sympathy” is fickle, unreliable and assigned to youthful folly; for “sympathy” rhymes with “tragedy”, “childish” with “harsh”. It might be acknowledged that Yeats looks upon children as the root of evil.

Thinking of “that fit of grief or rage” (17) which has been generated by reflecting on the younger days, he “look[s] upon one child or t’other there” (18). Then his mind initiates another function than recollection—it creates images. The girls before his eyes suddenly change into “paddler[s]” (21) or “daughters of the swan” (20) which has a special symbolical meaning for the poet. Now the object of his complicated feelings is not the external world but images in his own mind.

And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child. (23-24)

He thinks of his beloved so furiously that his heart is “driven wild”. It is supposed to purport that his heart is converted into like a heart of a child, for the word “wild” rhymes with “child”. He is no longer a “smiling public man”. Yeats once used a similar expression as above: “And thereupon imagination and heart were driven / So wild...” in “The Cold Heaven” included in *Responsibilities* (1914).⁸⁾ In “The Cold Heaven” the poet is so shockingly overwhelmed by “the cold and rook-delighting heaven” (1) that images in his mind make a kaleidoscopic change from the past to the world after death. A lifelong history of man is existing in his inner world with accompanying displacement in time and space. What is actually revealed in this poem is nothing but the poet’s act of mind: imagining the present, the past and the future.

The same thing should be said of “Among School Children”. At first Yeats is concerned about the present, then making pictures in his head by which his heart is “driven wild”, he thinks of his past and future. He envisages his beloved in her youth though he did not know her “as a living child”. What he sees in his mind’s eye is images with accompanying displacement in time and place, which never allow anyone to enter as is the case with “The Cold Heaven”. In stanza IV he imagines “present

image" (25) of his beloved. The first six lines of stanza IV are considered to represent what Yeats describes in "topic for poem": a disappointment in life, or as he remarks in a letter to Olivia: a "curse on old age". But the metaphors adopted here—"it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat" (27-28) — can be construed as fantastic and beautiful.⁹⁾ It is true that senility is definitely inevitable in this universe, but in the universe of the imagination the ugly face of his old aged beloved can be portrayed as what Leonardo da Vinci painted.¹⁰⁾ Yeats may be enjoying himself over figments of his imagination instead of grieving over stern reality.

Different from "The Cold Heaven", in which Yeats could do nothing but remain suffering the sharp contrast between the heaven and himself, in "Among School Children" he is no longer a youngster who is in great rage or passion, and can smile as "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow" (32); for he knows it is better and easier to pretend to be a comfortable old man. Though his smiling face appears to be the same as that of stanza I, his heart has undoubtedly learned how to cope with realities and grown more flexible.

III

Stanza V is of special significance in the poem: this is the stanza that Yeats initiated,¹¹⁾ the stanza that he worked hardest to polish out,¹²⁾ and the beginning stanza of the latter half of the poem which has complicated phrases and can be interpreted to be the primary concern of the poem. Though Yeats puts on a senile smile at the end of the previous stanza, he is a struggling poet and never allows himself to preserve such an uncertain or compromising attitude. As he says, poetry is made out of the quarrel with himself.¹³⁾ In stanza V he sets out the quarrel with himself and stands up to the root of his existence: the absolute fact of his having been born to this world.

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 its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth? (33-40)

It has been accounted for, by taking into consideration Yeats's statement concerning this stanza,¹⁴⁾ that there is a detectable influence of Platonism upon it.¹⁵⁾ The connexion between stanza V and Plato is explained as follows: when the soul enters the world of matter, it is injected with their impurity, and made to forget the memory of the former glory or transcendentality. According to the idea read in Plato's *Republic X*, being born to the actual world is defined as the cause of the ultimate disappointment. Yeats demonstrates not only an inextirpable disappointing attribute of human life but the superiority of mind over matter, and backs up the propriety of his mental representation in the preceding four stanzas.

There are some points to be remarked on stanza V. The thought that a mother would think the hard pain of her son's birth fruitless when she saw him in old age is a disillusionment of an adult to a child, and at the same time, in this stanza a betrayal of a child by an adult is revealed—it is because of a mother's seeking pleasure in having sexual intercourse, that he is forced to enter a mundane, unscared life out of the spiritual and transcendental world of prenatal freedom. And from the fact that Yeats specifies the age of the child as about sixty it is manifest that the child is Yeats himself: he was sixty-one years old when he composed "Among School Children". Now he is by the side of children; he speaks as a son of a mother.

It is allusive that a newborn baby is referred to as a "shape" which is capable of transformation or metamorphosis into any form and does not have any marked individuality. *Its* prenatal freedom seems to result from *its* lack of will or choice. The "uncertainty of his setting forth" means that he will meet with many unexpected obstacles in his life; but if it is taken into account that the very fact of his coming to this world is the biggest unhappiness in his life, the "uncertainty" does not affirm unhappiness, instead, it could indicate unexpected happiness. In

stanza V Yeats puts his viewpoint into a pure "shape" that has the possibility of becoming anything he wants. He gets back to his mother's womb to be mentally reborn, and he is now "among school children" in his deeper self.

The next stanza intelligibly and *superficially* deals with a "curse on old age": even the most famous philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras become "scarecrows". Yet it *substantially* deals with neither the misery nor the grief of old age, for the words for describing them are hardly suitable to their glorious achievements.¹⁶ Instead of general recognition of their greatness, they are so mockingly depicted that they try to associate the phenomenal world with the noumenal world in vain. In contrast to the spiritually self-begotten poet they do not comprehend the true transcendental universe. In alluding to the theory of ideas Plato regards a paradigm of his ideal world as spectral— "ghostly" (42) could stand for "insubstantial" or "shadowy" in addition to "spiritual"; Aristotle, who is known to have thought it important for man to meditate, appears to take pleasure in lashing at Alexander the Great as the word "played" (43) assumes. As for Pythagoras, the music he played is "[w]hat *a star* sang and *careless* Muses heard" (47, italics mine), not a symphony of *stars* as a legend says. The fiddle bow he takes is called a "fiddle-stick" (46) that could humourously mean something insignificant or absurd, and might be associated with "old sticks to scare a bird" (48). The newborn poet who is now living in the transcendental sphere superciliously calls them "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird" (48): the figure which he used to be.

Then what kind of world is Yeats living in now? The answer is in the next two stanzas. In the penultimate stanza it is stated as the place where "passion, piety or affection" (54) function. That is, every mind of human beings. "Both nuns and mothers" (49) are disconcerted by impure matters of the phenomenal world because they are fascinated by perceptible things and cannot understand "Presences" (53). It is nothing but a simple, innocent and essential mind that can recognise the symbol of "all heavenly glory" (55) — a real existence in every human mind. The poet, who has been mentally "self-born" (56) and is now living there

belongs to one of the "Presences", and mocks "man's enterprise" (56) of the world of matter.

And in stanza VII the apostrophe has become an issue.

O Presences

That passion, piety or affection knows,
 And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
 O self-born mockers of man's enterprise; (53-56)

Here the apostrophe will be discussed with reference to Jonathan Culler's writing about apostrophes.¹⁷⁾ Though Culler makes several remarks on its functions, those which can be supposed to have connexions with this stanza must be mentioned. A normal discourse is intended to express what is reflected in the mind of poet as it is, and given out of his eidetic images. To the contrary, the apostrophised one jumps out of the poet's stream of consciousness or the stream of time and space present in the poem, and the object of apostrophe is existing at the very moment he is writing it. Yeats apprehends the presence of "Presences".¹⁸⁾ The other operation of an apostrophe in the poem is "to make a spectacle of himself", and "to dramatise or constitute image of self".¹⁹⁾ Together with the object of the apostrophe the poet jumps out of the normal discourse: he becomes a different existence from that of the preceding stanzas. In stanza VII the rhetoric itself assures that both he and "Presences" do not belong to the phenomenal world.

Now let us see how the temporal stream flows in "Among School Children". It starts from his *present situation* of inspecting a school in eidetic images, and gradually goes back to his own past; in stanza V it goes back too far to the time before his birth. And he is mentally born again with a brand-new supernatural point of view, and the stream flows in due order from the past to the *present* of stanza VII: the "nuns" are those in the convent and the "mothers" are those of the school children before his eyes. This stream flows in the happenings in the memories and fancies of the mind of the poet. (The structure is double in respect to "I", that appears in the recollection of the poet, recollects his past.) Then the stream is suddenly dammed up by the apostrophe. The scene shifts to the *present moment* that Yeats is writing, and there he is trying

to correspond with "Presences". As if possessed by some spirit he pushes his way to the last stanza with as much liveliness as a newborn child.

IV

The poet's present state of mind and his ideal sense of life are implicit in the last stanza.

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? (57-64)

The imagery of "blossoming" and "dancing" is associated with paradise or springtime opposite to that of winter seen in stanza V. A "chestnut-tree" rooted greatly in the ground, into which the stick of scarecrow in stanza IV has metamorphosed might be the tree of life or the tree of wisdom. In any case the tree is a symbol of vigour. "Labour" denotes not only work or toil but the travail of his self-begetting. The terms "pleasure", "body swayed" and "brightening glance" evidently have a sexual connotation, which exposes his desire to be virile. The "brightening glance" of the "dancer" that enchants the poet also has some enlightening virtue.²⁰ And the "dancer" herself is what embodies the "Presence" that can be perceived only in mind: it is a medium that incarnates the essence of "dance"; for Yeats knew that dance is so effective in evoking a sense of supernatural revelation.²¹ Perceptible media for "Presences" do not have any significance in his supernatural world; they are available as long as they embody their essence. The "leaf", the "blossom" or the "bole" of the tree, though they individually play their own parts in this world, cannot have any significance of existence if they independently exist and do not embody the essence of the tree at all. It appears that Yeats, while trying to convince himself of the close rela-

tionship between media and "Presence", determines to face the task or the "labour" of the poet—to represent the essence by using his own media (words).

At the same time there are some ambiguities to be sensed in stanza VIII: of the three sentences the first one is grammatically complicated,²²⁾ and both the other two are interrogative sentences. It must be observed as uncertain or unstable of a man who has his own vision to emit such enquiries. But it is natural, because he is mentally a newborn baby and a prospect of life is always accompanied with "uncertainty of setting forth". This "uncertainty" issues from the notion of "topic for poem" that "life prepares for what never happens", which continues to follow him around for nearly twenty years.²³⁾ Yeats produces some works based on this notion earlier to represent his obsession for doing nothing remarkable before having been too old.²⁴⁾ Yet in "Among School Children" he nobly accepts the ambiguity or the absurdity of life as it is, and strikes an optimistic attitude, tries to live more intensely this time by remaking himself.

Yeats writes so many other poems that refer to a "curse on old age" in despondent tone, but in "Among School Children" the problem of death is not presented at all though it is immediately connected with that of old age. The poet at this period hates senescence not because it is a sign of death but because it causes decrepitude, makes his appearance unsightly, his physical strength declining, his imagination languishing. The poem positively displays his idealism or heroism — his yearning for a bright, vigorous and fruitful life. Yeats has been generally acknowledged as a typical pessimistic poet, and actually, afterward his philosophy of life is to move from this optimism to strong pessimism. "The Man and the Echo",²⁵⁾ a poem of his last years (written in 1938) expresses an original sin comparable to that of stanza V of "Among School Children", but in an irrecoverably annihilative tone. *The Last Poems* (1939) precisely announces that there can be no reconciliation in life: an absolute tragical conclusion into which his stream of thought pours at last. The uncertainty sensed in "Among School Children" develops to a dreadful extent. All he can do is nothing but suffer the rigid fate

of having been born to this world. Yet the pessimistic idea of his last years becomes firmly established all the more because he has once found out the blessings of life and expressed them in poetry included in *The Tower* (1928) after having experienced a depressing way of life in his early years. For the pessimistic poet Yeats, to have the optimistic notion on his way of life must be an inevitable process. When he knows an undeniable fact that what he thinks of ideal and transcendental is no other than an illusion, he begins to live an absolutely tragic life and encounters the fate of human beings.

NOTES

- 1) W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (eds. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 443-46. All subsequent quotations, titles and line numbers listed in parentheses within the text are from this edition.
- 2) Cf. Cleanth Brooks, "Yeats's Great Rooted Blossomer", *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947), pp. 178-91, John Wain, "Among School Children", *Interpretations: Essays on Twelve English Poems* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), pp. 194-210.
- 3) Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California P., 1964), p. 94.
- 4) A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 250-51.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- 6) Allan Wade, ed, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 719.
- 7) George Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1976), pp. 69-71.
- 8) *Variorum Edition*, p. 316.
- 9) Brooks, p. 83, Wain, p. 197.
- 10) Parkinson, p. 95.
- 11) Curtis B. Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (1965; rpt. New York: Ecco P., 1976), p.9.
- 12) Parkinson, pp. 96-101.
- 13) Yeats, *Mythologies* (1959; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 331.

- 14) *Variorum Edition*, p. 828.
- 15) See, for example, Brooks, p. 178, Parkinson, pp. 97-98, Robert Snukal, *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Cambridge U. P., 1973), p. 207, Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W. B. Yeats* (Mountrath: Dolmen P., 1986), p. 343.
- 16) Wain, p. 200, Raine, p. 343, Yoko Sato, “‘*Gakudotachi no Aidade*’ ni *Miru Ieitsu no Shigaku* (Yeats’s Poetics in ‘Among School Children’)”, *Sozoryoku no Heñyo: Igrisu Bungaku no Shoso (Metamorphoses of Imagination: Various Aspects of English Literature)* (ed. Yuichi Takamatsu, Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1991), pp. 410-11.
- 17) Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (1981; rpt, New York: Cornell U. P., 1983), pp. 135-54.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 147, Ronald Schleifer, “Yeats’s Postmodern Rhetoric”, *Yeats and Postmodernism* (ed. Loenard Orr, Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), pp. 19-34.
- 19) Culler, p. 142.
- 20) “Bright”, *The Oxford English Dictionary* 1989 ed.
- 21) James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1988), p. 215.
- 22) Joseph Adams, *Yeats: The Masks of Syntax* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 52-55.
- 23) In an entry of 6 September 1909 included in *Memoirs* (ed. Dennis Donoghue, London: Macmillan, 1972), Yeats asks himself why “life is a perpetual preparation for something that never happens”, and his autobiographical reminiscences written in 1914 read “All life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens”. And he writes “Accursed the life of man. Between passion and emptiness what he longs for never comes. All his days are a preparation for what never comes” in the preliminary prose draft of a play *At the Hawk’s Well* (1917). See *Memoirs*, p. 215, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 132, and Barton R. Friedman, *Adventures in the Depths of the Mind: The Cuchulain Cycle of W. B. Yeats* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1977), p. 95.
- 24) Cf. “Pardon, Old Fathers”, *Variorum Edition*, pp. 269-70, *At the Hawk’s Well*.
- 25) *Variorum Edition*, pp. 632-33.