

## THE METAPHORS OF POETRY IN YEATS'S *LAST POEMS*

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One of the problems raised by Yeats's *Last Poems* is that of the poet and poetry. It seems that the solution to this problem lies in the metaphors<sup>1</sup> organizing the poems. These metaphors fall into three groups:

- (1) conveyance metaphors – metaphors found in a given poem, operating only within the text of this poem and representing individual possibility (MacCormack 1985: 32),
- (2) intermediate-complementary metaphors – created by conveyance metaphors, operating within the whole group of the poem and representing general underlying ideas,
- (3) conceptual metaphor – intuition, idea, concept undergirding the entire theory (Lakoff 1989: 5). The conceptual metaphor in *Last Poems* is represented by the *gyre/tower* metaphor.

Let us start with the conceptual *gyre/tower* metaphor and its significance to poetry.

The critics have often emphasized the presence of a *gyre/tower* motif: "His (Yeats's) cyclical philosophy also appears in a late poem 'The Gyres'. The gyres reappear in 'Under Ben Bulbin', Yeats's last will and testament" (Macneice 1967: 154). The critics have also observed the symbolic and metaphorical implications of the *gyre/tower* motif: "One of the richest but most ambiguous of his (Yeats's) symbols is the Tower itself" (Macneice 1967: 84) and "In Blood and the Moon on the other hand it becomes a symbol of the self's assertiveness, of physical egotism, of the urges of earth and blood" (Macneice 1967: 85).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper a cognitive definition of metaphor will be used. "Metaphor is not merely a linguistic expression (...) it is a process of human understanding by which we achieve meaningful experience that we can make sense of. It is a process by which we understand and structure one domain of experience in terms of another domain of different kind." (Johnson 1987: 15)

Macneice (1967) also states: "... this was, first, an actual tower near Coole in County Galway which he bought and repaired [...] the Tower therefore, represents heaven aspirations of the solitary intellect but these tend to merge with the different heaven aspirations of the soul" (Macneice 1967: 85). Yeats himself, said: "The Tower symbolises the mind looking out upon men and events" (Stallworthy 1968: 113).

Though the presence of the *gyre/tower* has been recognized and its importance in Yeats's poetry has been stated it has rarely, if ever, been connected with the notions of poetry and the poet. It turns out that the metaphorical extensions of the literary conceived *gyre/tower*<sup>2</sup>, may help us to elucidate the problems of the poet and poetry, namely, what is poetry and who is a poet?

Poetry and the poet are present in the upward movement which is very common in *Last Poems*:

I sought a theme, and sought for it in vain  
 ...  
 These masterful images because complete  
 Grew in mind, but out of what began  
     (*The Circus Animals Desertion*: 201)  
 Poet and sculptor do the work  
 Bring the soul of man to God  
     (*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)  
 John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
 All that we did, all that we said or sang  
 Must come from contact with the soil from that  
 Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong  
     (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

Phrases like: "grew in mind, but out of what began", "bring the soul of man to God", and "from that contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong" suggest an upward movement.

There is a circular movement in *Last Poem* too. It also deals with the notions of the poet and poetry and helps to elucidate them:

What can I but enumerate old themes  
     (*The Circus Animals' Desertion*: 201)  
 They are sick of palette and fiddle bow  
 Of poet that are always gay

<sup>2</sup> "... All things run  
 On that unfashionable gyre again"  
     (*The Gyres*: 172)

"... Gyres run on  
 When that greater dream had gone  
 Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude,  
 Prepared a rest for the people of God"  
     (*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)

...  
 All things fall and are built again  
 And those that build them again are gay  
     (*Lapis Lazuli*: 173)

One might conclude that poetry is just a mere repetition of some well known themes and that the poet is a craftsman skillfully taking down these old themes. However, we have to remember about the upward movement which implies that poetry is not a repetition of familiar themes:

We three alone (Synge, Yeats, Augusta Gregory)  
     in modern times had brought  
 Everything to that sole test again.  
     (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

It seems that we should rather talk about the seeming circular movement or about the movement along the spire because the poet is not just a good craftsman, he is a creator too.

Following the metaphorical extensions of the seeming circular movement one might notice that the notions of the poet and poetry are expanded by being enriched with new details.

It appears that the poet takes the part of the builder. He is the one who "brings the soul of man to God" (*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210). In *The Circus Animals' Desertion* Yeats shows the poet whose ladder is gone and he has to start his work over from the very beginning:

Now that my ladder's gone  
 I must lie down where all the ladders start

In *The Pilgrim* we see the poet who "can put down" whatever he encounters in his life:

So come in rags or come in silk, in cloak or country shawl  
 And come with learned lovers or with men you may  
 For I can put the whole lot down.

Thus, the poet is the man who is capable of "putting down" the reality that surrounds him.

Here we come to the problem of the poet's material out of which he creates his poetry. The *gyre/tower* of poetry grows in the poet's mind:

Those masterful images because complete  
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
 A mound of the refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can  
 Old iron, old bones ...  
     (*The Circus Animals' Desertion*: 201)

Though the *gyre/tower* of poetry grows "in pure mind" its roots are firmly grounded in the surrounding world. Things that are unimportant from the



point of view of an ordinary man can bring about a poem. The base of the *gyre/tower* of poetry is constituted by "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (*The Circus Animals' Desertion*: 201).

In *The Circus Animals' Desertion* Yeats laborates on the base of the *gyre/tower* of poetry:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain  
I sought it daily for six weeks or so  
...  
What can I but enumerate old themes  
...  
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,  
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows.

The old themes are the poet's material. Themes that belong to humanity, that are repeated by each generation, that are a part of ordinary life constitute the poet's material. The poet broods over the themes known to all cultures, reorganizes them, adds his own personality, and brings them "to that sole test again" (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208).

However, does the poet have any aim? Does he create art for art's sake or perhaps there is some purpose set before him? It seems that the image of poetry in *Last Poems* is far from being art for art's sake. The upward movement suggests that the poet should teach man to converse with eternity:

Poet and sculptor do the work  
Bring the soul of man to God  
(*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)

The poet should form people's life

Make him fill the cradels right  
(*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)

The themes out of which the *gyre/tower* of poetry is built should not only describe the life of man but should be close to him as well. Man is the real source of poetry: "everything comes from that contact with the soil, from that contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong" (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208), "So come in rags or come in silk, in cloak or country shawl (...) For I can put the whole lot down" (*The Pilgrim*: 194) The poet should remember tradition and its high standards:

Poet and sculptor do the work  
Nor let the modish painter shirk  
What his great forfathers did  
(*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)

Moreover, it is the poet's duty to show the harmony and discord between life and those high standards – the poet brings everything "to that sole test again" (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

Three functions of a physical *gyre/tower* are here fulfilled, namely, (1) spiritual (e.g. to teach man to converse with eternity), (2) practical (e.g. the source of poetry, its themes), and (3) ornamental (high standards of poetry).

One might notice that in all these quotations the word "poet" appears along with words like: a song, to sing, a sculptor, to sculpture, and a painter:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
(*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)  
Poet and sculptor do the work ...  
Nor let the modish painter shirk  
What his great forfathers did.  
(*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210)  
What can I but enumerate old themes ...  
Themes of embittered heart, or so it seems,  
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows,  
(*The Circus Animals' Desertion*: 201)

We have come to the point where the intermediate-complementary metaphors can be discussed. However, before we turn to the analysis of these metaphors we have to explore their name. The intermediate-complementary metaphors have two functions: internal and external. By the internal function, I mean, that they may be analysed as individual metaphors and should be treated as if they were operating within one ontological level only (therefore I have called them intermediate). By the external function, I mean that they are the integral parts of the conceptual metaphor, that they support and broaden its scope, thus, they serve as complements to the conceptual metaphor (therefore I called them complementary).

Poetry is a sculpture, the poet is a sculptor, constitute the first intermediate-complementary metaphor. J. R. Mulryne has noticed that Yeats evoked in his poetry the world of sculpture: "Many among *Last Poems* adopt the strategy of *A Bronze Head*. Behind major poems stand specific works of art: the statue of Cuchulain in the Post-Office (...), the sculpted piece of Lapis Lazuli, *The Bronze Head* itself (...) The book is peopled by a series of arrested figures, statue like, but not inert." (Mulryne 1965:75). Actually, while reading *Last Poems* we can notice the phenomenon mentioned by Mulryne. Some of the poems are given the titles of actual pieces of sculpture. For example, the poem *A Bronze Head* refers to the statue of Maud Gonne by Laurence Campbell. Another poem *Lapis Lazuli* centers around a piece of a carved stone belonging to Yeats "(...) a great piece carved by some Chinese into the semblance of a mountain with a temple" (Stallworthy 1968: 94). *The Statues* – "it is the old argument for the traditional sculpture, Greek deriving from Egyptian (...)" (Stallworthy 1968: 105).

Having acknowledged the existence of the world of sculpture in Yeats's poetry, let us see whether these two worlds, that is, the world of poetry and the



world of sculpture blend into one entity, and if so, what are its consequences? In *Under Ben Bulbin* Yeats states:

Poet and Sculptor do the work

Both the poet and the sculptor have the same work to do. They also have another thing in common:

They (hysterical women) are sick of palette and fiddle bow  
Of poets that are always gay.  
(*Lapis Lazuli*: 173)

The feature of being gay<sup>3</sup> is characteristic of poets. The verse "Of poets that are always gay" is a restrictive clause. There is a short description of Callimachus's art in this poem:

No handiwork of Callimachus  
Who handled marble as if it were bronze  
...  
His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem  
Of a slender palm stood but a day.

Callimachus is shown as a creator whose works were destroyed by the passing time: however, the next line reads as follows:

All things fall and are built again

It does not matter then that Callimachus's works have not been preserved, there have been so many Callimachuses and so many of them will come. There is one feature common to them all – they are gay:

And those that build them again are gay.

Thus, we receive the following comparison:

poets are gay  
poets and sculptors are creators ⇒ poets and sculptors are creators and are gay  
creators are gay

So far, we have found a lot of evidence for the existence of the two worlds in *Last Poems*. We can draw a parallelism between the poet and the sculptor. They have the same work to do, both are full of joy and mirth, both belong to eternity because they have the privilege of building things again and again. However, nothing entitles us to substitute a sculptor for a poet. Nothing has proved yet that in *Last Poems* the poet and sculptor blend into one entity. In *High Talk* Yeats considering his creative work, says:

That patching old heels that may shriek  
I take to chisel and plane.

<sup>3</sup> "gay" – full or disposed to joy and mirth (The Compact Edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971)

We can take note that in this poem the substitution occurs. The poet takes to chisel and plane because his heels, very old ones, may shriek. Throughout *Last Poems* the substitution is present nearly all the time. In *The Statues* the line: "They moved or seemed to move in marble or in bronze" strikingly reminds us of another line from *Lapis Lazuli*: "Who handled marble as if it were bronze". In *Lapis Lazuli* the poet and sculptor are joined by the common feature "gay". Another line from *The Statues*: "that with a mallet or a chisel modelled these" bears some resemblance to the line from *High Talk*: "I take to chisel and plane", where it is the poet who takes the sculptors tools to create his work of art. The line: "When Pearse summoned Cuchulain ..." mingles the world of sculpture with the world of poetry: Cuchulain being at the same time a character from Yeats's poetic drama *At the Hawk's Well* and a statue. The poet and the sculptor's tools are the same. We can imagine the poet equipped with a chisel and a mallet, just like a sculptor chiselling and polishing his work of art, that is, a poem. Every word, every sentence is carefully sculptured and chosen to achieve perfection.

As we see, some themes of the *gyre/tower* metaphor have been discussed by the intermediate-complementary metaphor: poetry is a sculpture, the poet is a sculptor. The theme of high standards of poetry and their strong connection with grand tradition is given a new dimension by the metaphor of poetry as a sculpture. It is not enough to take some old themes and simply put them down. This is not the way in which poetry is created. Each theme is a precious stone just like lapis lazuli but it becomes a work of art the moment it has been chiselled and polished by the man who is full of joy and mirth, capable of creating eternity and being able to teach man to converse with it.

The second intermediate-complementary metaphor of poetry is: poetry is a song, the poet is a singer. Throughout the whole content of *Last Poems* quotations like:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil  
(*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)  
You think it horrible that lust and rage  
...  
What else have I to spur me into song.  
(*The Spur*: 189)

may be found. The question may arise: What singers is Yeats talking about? Quotations already mentioned can give us some suggestion, because in both cases the source of inspiration is mentioned. In *The Spur* these are lust and rage that eventually bring about a poem. In *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* inspiration comes from contact with the soil. Lust and rage are typical themes of ballads: e.g. Mickiewicz's *Lilije*, *Świtez*, *Renegat* (a Turkish ballad), *Czaty*



(an Ukrainian ballad), Schiller's *Amalia*, Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. Yeats promoted the metaphor: the poet is a ballad singer; not only in *The Spur* but also in *The Curse of Cromwell*:

That the swordsmen and the ladies can still  
keep the company  
Can pay the poet for a verse and hear  
the fiddle sound:  
That I am still their servant though all  
are underground

and in *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*:

... that tale

As though some ballad singer had sung it all.

Yeats associates the ballad with the poem in these quotations. In this way Yeats managed to combine two meanings of the term ballad: literary and musical. We can picture the medieval court "the swordsmen and the ladies", listening to the ballads sung by a troubadour: "Can pay the poet for a verse and hear the fiddle sound" (this line may be understood in two ways: either ladies and swordsmen pay the poet for a verse and listen to him or the fiddle sound should be understood as a poem itself. Neither of the meanings rules out the other). We can also imagine that it is "lust and rage" (*The Spur*: 189) which spurs the poet troubadour into a song and François Villon "whose poetry was marked by a vast scale of emotions – from lust in *Ballade de la Grosse Margot* to fear rage in *Ballade de Perdue*" (Adamczyk 1987:450) comes to our mind. The metaphor of a poet as a ballad singer of the François Villon-type is fully expressed in the apostrophe to Irish poets in *Under Ben Bulbin* where the heroic past is joined with the present situation:

Irish poets, learn your trade  
Sing whatever is well made,  
Scorn the sort now growing up,  
All out of shape from top to toe,  
Their unremembering hearts and heads  
Base born products of base beds,  
Sing the peasantry, and then  
Hard riding country gentlemen,

The holiness of monks, and after  
Porter-drinkers randy laughter  
Sing the lords and ladies gay  
That were beaten into clay  
Through seven heroic centuries;

Yeats does not only state that poetry is a song and that the poet is a singer, he actually makes his own poetry a song. Some of his poems are ballads e. g. *The*

*Curse of Cromwell*, *Come Gather Round Me*, *Parnelites*, *The Marching Songs*. Many of his poems have refrains: *What Then*, *The Curse of Cromwell*, *The Wild Old Wicked Man*, *The Pilgrim*, and *Long Legged Fly*. Yeats's poetry is full of music, whispers, cries, and various voices:

When gong and conch declare the hour to bless  
(*The Statues*: 205)

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon shot  
(*The Great Day*: 189)

Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn  
(*High Talk*: 195)

A stricken rabbit is crying out  
(*The Man and the Echo*: 200)

One asks for mournful melodies  
Accomplished fingers begin to play  
(*Lapis Lazuli*: 173)

Once again, the *gyre/tower* metaphor of poetry is given a new perspective. The themes that come "from contact with the soil" (*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208), that deal with all people have their roots in lust, fear, and rage. The poet is no longer a bulilder but he becomes an artist: a troubadour. He is a troubadour who does not create his art just for art's sake, but who wanders from one place to another to inform people of their grand traditions and past.

The third intermediate-complementary metaphor of poetry is: poetry is a painting, the poet is a painter. In *Last Poems* we find expressions connected with great painters, or the actual pictures:

Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory:  
'Greatest since Rembrandt', according to John Synge,  
Before a woman's portrait suddenly I stand,  
... that tale

As though some ballad singer had sung it all.  
(*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

In this quotation there are the names of famous poets (Yeats, Synge) and painters (Mancini, Rembrandt) brought together. However, it does not entitle us to claim that in this way the metaphor "poetry is a painting" is expressed. It seems that we rather deal with some thoughts of poets centered around major pieces of painting. The last line of this quotation reminds us of something. We have already stated that the poet is a ballad singer and the paintings presented in *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* look like a tale which had been sung by some ballad singer – a poet? This is a clue which leads us to the poem *An Acre of Grass* where Yeats states:

Picture and book remain



The book – a set of poems, short stories, novels or plays – remains. We can say: picture and literature remain. The poet is one of those who create literature. Thus, the painter and the poet are brought together because the results of their creative work possess the same quality: they are eternal.

In *The Municipal Gallery Revisited* Yeats, describing one of the pictures says:

An Abbot or Archbishop with an uprised hand  
Blessing the Tricolour

and he continues:

This is not, I say,  
The deat Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland  
The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.

Here, the metaphor of poetry as a painting and the poet as a painter is clearly expressed. The picture in which a priest is blessing the Tricolour presents Ireland painted in the way the poets have imagined it. However, Yeats's claims that this metaphor is valid only in the case of traditional, classical painting: he does not approve of poets "modish painters":

Poet and sculptor do the work  
Nor let the modish painters shirk  
What his great forfathers did  
(*Under Ben Bulben*: 210)

The same idea is also present in the metaphor of poetry as a song:

Irish poets learn your trade  
(...)  
Scorn the sort now growing up  
All out of shape from top to toe  
Their unremembering hearts and heads  
(*Under Ben Bulben*: 210)

The methphor: poetry is a painting, emphasizes the problem of high standards. It gives concrete examples of those who are not able to keep up with tradition "the modish painters". It stresses the fact that the poet creates reality:

(...) an Ireland  
The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.  
(*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

Although the intermediate-complementary metaphors support the conceptual *gyre/tower* metaphor they also deal with the topics specific to them.

A very interesting phenomenon appearing along with the intermediate-complementary metaphors of poetry as a sculpture, a song, and a painting is a problem of the interrelation of three factors: the creator, the work of art, and

the audience. The presence of an audience is strongly felt in Yeats's *Last Poems*. One can sense the presence of someone who evaluates what the poets, painters and ballad singers have done. In *Lapis Lazuli* we deal with the attitude of common people (the use of everyday language: sick of, come out) towards poetry painting and music: "I have heard hysterical women say they are sick of palette, and fiddle bow, of poets...". This is clearly a negative attitude. In hysterical women's opinion 'art can do nothing, it has no power, it cannot change the world or people "and if nothing drastic is done aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out". Yeats undertakes a discussion with them in this poem stating that poetry has power and it creates eternity. Some overtones of this negative attitude of common people, who perhaps do not understand art at all, are visible in *The Statues*:

Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?

However, not only the negative evaluation, if this type of criticism may be called evaluation, is present in *Last Poems*. Also, a positive criticism may be found there:

Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory,  
'Greatest since Rembrandt', according to John Synge,  
A great ebullient portrait certainly;  
But where is the brush that could show anything  
Of that pride and that humility  
(*The Municipal Gallery Revisited*: 208)

This is a positive criticism in the sense that it expresses the concern whether the contemporary artists can achieve the perfection of their predecesors.

The poet is fully aware of the presence of his reader, very often he addresses him, asking for cooperation:

Under bare Ben Bulben's head  
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid  
(...)  
On limestone quarried near the spot  
By his command those words are cut:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death  
Horseman, pass by

(*Under Ben Bulben*: 210)

Having analysed the metaphors of poetry in *Last Poems* we conclude that they constitute Yeats's manifesto of poetry. The metaphors organizing *Last Poems* constitute the tool with help of which we comprehend the meaning of the notions of poet and poetry. The *gyre/tower* of poetry tells us that the poet is

a builder, the intermediate-complementary metaphors add that he is not merely a craftsman who skillfully "puts down" and "enumerates old themes" but that he is a creator full of joy and mirth, thus capable of creating eternity, an artist. The metaphor of poetry as a *gyre/tower* shows that poetry results from the clash and symbiosis of the poet's and his grand predecessors' attitudes towards life. It tells us that the theme of poetry should be close to people and belong to the great tradition. These problems are supported by the intermediate-complementary metaphors that claim that the poet should keep up with "what his great forefathers did" (*Under Ben Bulbin*: 210) and he should deal with the themes that belong to the grand tradition. The intermediate-complementary metaphors also emphasize the importance of keeping up with tradition. The winding stairs of a *gyre/tower* metaphor of poetry bring us close to eternity. This is not the gyre for the gyre's sake but there is some purpose set before it. This idea is supported by the metaphor: poetry is a song where the poet becomes the troubadour and he has to learn his trade. The poet as a sculptor should teach man to converse with eternity and should be able to form man's life.

The source of poetry mentioned by the *gyre/tower* metaphor of poetry is being elaborated by the intermediate-complementary metaphors. They tell us that it is contact with the soil, lust, fear, and rage that become the source of poetry.

Thanks to intermediate-complementary metaphors the problem of interrelation among the creator, the work of art, and the audience becomes visible.

Thus, the *gyre/tower* metaphor of poetry and the intermediate-complementary metaphors constitute a framework, on the basis of which, we come to the solution of the problem: who is a poet and what is poetry.

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