

*Emblems of Adversity: Essays on the
Aesthetics of Politics in W. B. Yeats and
Others*
by Rached Khalifa

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In his first collection of essays, Rached Khalifa examines Yeats's development of an 'aesthetics of politics' more or less chronologically; from his early pastoral works, through the starker political commentary of his middle period, to the latter works, which return to his ideas of occultism and apocalypticism. Most of these essays focus solely on Yeats, but he is also compared to Joyce, Wallace Stevens, and somewhat tangentially, Le Corbusier. In all the essays, Khalifa endeavours to contextualise Yeats's philosophy – political and aesthetic – within the intellectual milieu of the time. This is perhaps the strongest aspect of the collection, making it relevant to students of ideology and literature in general.

Starting with the unfulfilled aesthetic ambitions of the early pastoral works, Khalifa moves through Yeats's 'reclamation' of Irish geography in imagined landscapes, his stance on modernity and the modern city, on to his concerns about ageing and the future. For those unfamiliar with Yeats's biography, there is much here to sympathise with or be repelled by. Presented with the evidence of Yeats's sexism, or his sympathy for fascism and eugenics, Khalifa does not shy away from the discussion. In everything he seeks to contextualise, so that more often than not, one feels sympathy, if not empathy, for the man. In particular, Khalifa's study of the absence of

the Great Famine in Yeats's work is illuminating, taking the reader through Yeats's personal concerns about the Irish literary movement, through to the reaction of Irish society as a whole. What drove Yeats to seek out an aesthetic of politics, and what motivates this study, is what Khalifa describes as '[a] displacement of the political dimension from consciousness to textual unconsciousness' (p.30), because, as Yeats put it, 'all literature created out of conscious political aim in the long [run] creates weakness' (p.34). In short, he wanted to avoid propaganda, or soap box rhetoric, as either would make not only for weak art, but a weak argument. This, as Khalifa establishes in his introductory essay, presented Yeats with a paradox: how to aestheticise politics, and how to politicise aesthetics. Returning to Yeats's statement, how can politics 'say' something, unless it has a conscious aim? Yeats himself certainly had an agenda, and we must question whether he was being disingenuous here. Khalifa takes as read that Yeats succeeds in his goal of creating an unconscious or subconscious political statement, but it would have been beneficial to hear an argument to the contrary. The analysis is particularly useful in showing how the dilemma between politics and poetry was conjoined, for Yeats, with a number of other crises in his early work. He felt constrained by the pastoral idyll in which he wrote ('The Woods of Arcady are Dead'), feeling unable to express directly any truth pertaining to Ireland's (and his own) present reality.

Yeats's early ideas on how political art could be achieved centred on the resolution of opposites. Indeed, Khalifa lists a number of oppositions which Yeats was concerned with: politics versus aesthetics, politics versus poetry, consciousness versus unconsciousness, history versus pastoral myth, worldly kinesis versus aesthetic stasis, and subjectivity versus objectivity. As Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies*, 'Genius is a crisis that joins the buried self for

certain moments to our trivial daily mind' (O'Donnell 1999, p.217). Or, as Khalifa puts it, 'The poetic word embodies something of an alchemical power capable of transforming epiphanic moments' (p.14). Yeats's position was essentially a version of romantic integrity, in that he believed poetry arose from an argument with the self, or between our conscious and unconscious selves. As such, it cannot connect with a public world, and by extension cannot be political. Khalifa gives an analysis of several early works, particularly 'The Sad Shepherd' and 'The Island of Statues,' showing Yeats's awareness of this dislocation from political reality. His Arcadian quests are ultimately solipsistic. As with the 'echo-harboured' shell in 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd,' the concerns of the protagonist are repeated 'in melodious guile [...] Till they shall singing fade in ruth', ultimately changing nothing (p.13). As Khalifa states, politics are displaced from the early poetry, despite Yeats being all too conscious of it: 'the pastoral quests are based on political negation or repression, in the Freudian sense' (p.30).

This anxiety with poetry's self-referentiality is gradually replaced in Yeats, Khalifa shows, by a sense of aestheticising the nation through his poetry, approaching the political aspect of his ideology from a new angle. Whereas Alminator's quest for the flower in 'The Island of Statues' represents Yeats's quest for themes 'to sweeten Ireland's wrong', poems like 'The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland' and 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' seek to reclaim national landscapes, and are, as Khalifa puts it 'imaginative acts of decolonisation' (p.6). They present an Ireland which is distinct from England and its ideologies. Here, Khalifa demonstrates, is the turning point. Yeats had always appreciated the need for Ireland to have a unifying culture if it were to survive the colonial forces of England. As he asked rhetorically in his *Autobiographies*, 'Was it a nation [...] which I sought

in national literature, being but an originating symbol?' (p.41). His early poetry imports its references from classical literature, from Spencer and Shelley. While these influences were never negated, Yeats found in the mythical past of Ireland a source of native themes.

As well as Yeats's overarching philosophy, Khalifa is excellent at mapping out the actual techniques Yeats used. He shows how Yeats gradually found a method which would allow him to express his politics implicitly. A system of correspondences between polysemous symbolism, and deictic titles which contextualise otherwise apolitical works, are among these. Because of this attention to the nuts and bolts of the texts, Khalifa's study is as good an introduction to poetic ideology in general as it is to Yeats's ideology in particular.

One of the most interesting essays in this collection comes towards the end, in 'The Architecture of the Sublime in Yeats and Le Corbusier'. Unusual as it is to compare the poet to the architect, the comparison yields an interesting discussion of the 'sublime' in both men's work. The essay examines the architecture in Yeats's work (particularly his polysemous image of the tower, with its winding, gyring staircase) and the poetry of Le Corbusier's ideology of architecture. To paraphrase Le Corbusier, great architecture is that which makes for great ruins. Although Khalifa does not draw a comparison here directly, his essays understand the parallel between this stance and Yeats's. For Yeats, a political poem may serve an immediate purpose. But if, after that purpose has passed, the poem is not a lasting thing, it is not a poem at all.

Bibliography

O'Donnell, William H. and Douglas N. Archibald (ed.). 1999. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Autobiographies*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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