

‘Easing the World: A Search for Unity Through Memory’

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Abstract:

This paper will strive to examine impact of mysticism and cosmology in terms of Yeats’s life experiences which shaped the poetry of one of the most celebrated poets of all time. The antinomies and universal contradictions that he wished to impart came out as a result of his own moments of spiritual doubt and intervening darkness when his own faith was shaken up. His family upbringing, the political state of Ireland and London, and his personal life struggles forced him to turn inwards, into his soul, in search of unity, which was non-existent in the chaos outside his mortal body. The vision to open oneself imaginatively and fearlessly in times of crisis and that too, to maintain unity of spirit and form, while one’s surroundings seem on the verge of utter destruction requires courage and mental strength. While his familial relations and country seemed to disintegrate into parts, he desired to attain some form of spiritual wholeness, in the hopes of easing the world. Moving away from orthodox Christianity, he turned to theosophy and sought Madame Blavatsky, and continued study of sacred religious traditions. His prophetic ideas of ‘Anima Mundi’ and ‘Spiritus Mundi’ reiterates his goal of transcending the mortal life and his quest to understand the achieve the unity of life. The role of memory cannot be missed, since it gives rise to symbols such as the phases of the moon and the gyres Yeats speak about. Through his writings, he looks for true reality of nature, and seek creative independence while maintaining unity of being.

Keywords: Memory, oneness, unity, nature

“Verses should hold, as in a mirror, the colors of one’s own climate and scenery in their right proportion...”,¹ said Yeats about Nature while elaborating on features of ‘Popular Poetry’, which was interestingly inspired by Young Ireland Society. His

familial discord between his mother Susan and father John Butler Yeats compelled him to spend numerous summers with his mother's parents in Sligo, Ireland. He never quite felt at home in London and longed for his visits to his maternal grandparents' place where he, much to his own surprise found the oneness and comfort in the quaint company of Nature. The indelible impact of nature on his renowned poetry is remarkable, and one of its own kind, stirring in readers magic and familiar memories of a common and shared past, thus uniting generations of people and creating a single mind, a single energy, ultimately leading to culmination of a Great Mind and Great Memory which echo in the following linesⁱⁱ:

'And certain men-at-arms there were

Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,

(The Tower, p87)ⁱⁱⁱ

Yeats often talked about Imagination dwelling in the most unknown of places, invoking impulses to reinvigorate and remake the world according to the impulses and patterns in the Great Mind and the Great Memory, that which contains all wisdom and knowledge known to mankind, passed down through generations, through the passage of dreams and visions.^{iv} He was a follower of William Blake, the great mystic, who was also inspired by dream images and mystical visions of his brother. Like Blake, he views the universe upon the point of a grass blade before him. His principle is to encompass an area of thoroughly known objects, always with a view to decipher their ulterior symbolic significance. On working with mythic tales, his method was to assume its shape wasn't accidental but reflected even if imperfectly, a hidden yet significant scheme. Every detail was like a blade of grass, which meant that it was the poet's task to determine its concentric circles of varying significance. By uncovering these, he could either apply that myth to past or present.^v

Yeats spent some of the best years of his life in Ireland, where Nature coaxed him into her arms, never letting him slip away for too long a moment. He mentioned that she had filled his head with "thoughts of making a whole literature",^{vi} and plucked him out of Dublin art schools, and deposited him into a library instead "to read bad translations from the Irish."^{vii} From there perhaps, stemmed the ideas of the Vision and Unity of Life that Yeats spent his life writing and discussing with similar humanists. He felt almost as if Nature had entrusted him with this earthly project of uniting lives, while politely asking him to string a few verses along the way. Moved by Blake's writings, he also believed when the former said that "Mental Things are Alone Real."^{viii} Yeats too insisted on his right to imagine the truth for himself, unfettered and uninterrupted by other's imaginations and perceptions, thus finding a quiet place for his thoughts to exist, in a free passage, only interrupted by inflections of life and its seemingly unusual motions.

To Yeats, Ireland seemed an unspoiled and beautiful space where people still held on to magical and time-honored beliefs. As a sincere scholar of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, essentially known for leading the Theosophical Movement, he developed his understanding of mysticism and the Sacred Tradition through her teachings and further sought inspiration for his own ideas on mysticism and magic. Unlike many mystics, she does not outrightly reject sciences and its role in the workings of the universe. Instead, she insists on this world being a miracle, and seemingly magical, but only to those who wish to think of it that way. Symbol of Time is all pervasive-being silent, never-resting, always rushing and rolling on swift and all-embracing ocean tide, on which the universe swims in the form of soft and sturdy exhalations, which at times seem apparitions or reflections. In a materialist world, she saw tender souls seeking refuge in philosophy, dogmatic religions, liberal Christianity, or mysticism while Yeats did not restrict his refuge to these four narrow paths.^{ix} His Vision surpassed cosmos and life itself, imagining an infinite umbrella larger than life or any natural creation of God, which could fit the contradictions and the antinomies; the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the strong and the weak, the virtuous and the vile, the noble and the wicked. His goal was not to eliminate the antinomies of life, but to firstly accommodate all the universal contradictions, and then unify those quaintly, without involving force and violence. The Antinomies of life make life what it is, even though it might seem bleak and hopeless at times. If there was only light left, what would be the point of reaching across and leaping across to the other side? As Yeats said, we would not even trouble to get out of beds and move about, if it wasn't for Nature, for whose sake we must stir ourselves.^x And therefore, if we lay bathed in sunlight all days of the year, we would not bother to move from the comfort of that familiar light which brings us ease and respite. It is the presence and reminder of darkness which forces us get out of our beds, and move about. The dark is a flinchingly harsh reminder that fortunately and unfortunately, permanence is non-existent in this life. Like the Sun and the Moon, light and dark are inherently tied together, the broad universal contradictions which we need to come to terms with.

Through his poetry and prophetic vision, Yeats focuses on the inevitability of the antinomies of life to remind his readership and earthly beings that in matters of the cosmos, their troubles and struggles must not be wept over, and that life holds far greater meaning than trivial and petty matters of war and violence. Human life should be constantly celebrated and not perished. Sometimes, we keep waiting for that one 'perfect moment' but doesn't realize that life in passing is indeed a fleetingly perfection of imperfect moments.

Critics of Yeats's writings tend to agree on the point that he produced one of the modern era's definitive books of poetry in *The Tower* (1928), which is a repository of his responses to Ireland's War of Independence and Civil War. It reflects a new profoundness of tone and attitude unknown to erstwhile poetry. He devoted this work to protest the cosmos revealed in *A Vision* and rages against the way the lunar cycle tosses lives of human beings. His genius lay in his remarkable ability to transform himself whenever the changes in his life required him to do so. For him, verses should hold in a mirror, the colors of one's own climate and scenery in the correct proportion. Interestingly, the mirror and dream imagery echo repeatedly in his later poems.^{xi}

*'Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.'*

(The Wild Swans at Coole, p56-57)^{xii}

Although the poem ends with reference to eventual awakening of the spirit suggesting that the end of ordinary life might bring the start of something else, many of the later poems instead suggest that the advent of *A Vision* failed to make life much easier. Regardless, Yeats's new convictions comforted him knowing that the cosmic cycles would bring some sort of redemption but failed to provide clear cut or appealing answers to questions pertaining to how he should live his remaining life. Even though he succeeded in constructing his own self, art, house, family and religion, which perhaps only a limited number of people do in a lifetime, his only regret or the cause behind his melancholia was his failure at having revived unified Irish tradition.

*'That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.'*

(The Tower, p.85-90)^{xiii}

He strived to make vivid connections between his three worlds- personal, national and natural. He thought it was possible for symbolism to pull the external back into the mind by establishing correspondences between nature and mental states, quite similar to the school of theosophy which strived to draw correspondences between the natural and spiritual world, which were conceived to be parallel and interlocked.

Constant allusions to symbols of luna or the moon were aimed at collating all elements of mankind and weaving it into a complete system of human cycle. The profound twenty-eight phases of the moon or the soul's incarnation was the primary

focus of study in his book *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in addition to the soul's experiences after death.

'The Phases of the Moon' essentially delves into the cosmic realities which Yeats struggled to understand and comprehend in a poetic fashion which his audience might be able to grasp. Out of the four main phases of the moon (1, 8, 15 and 22) also known as The Four Ages of Man, phase 15 or the full moon phase is the gyre of subjectivity where the soul has reached the tipping point to arrive at 'the Perfect Moment' where the dancer becomes the dance and the artist becomes the art itself.^{xiv} Few souls achieve this 'unity' or oneness with their realities when they wholeheartedly come to terms with the opposites or antinomies of life- harshness and softness, despair and delight. The beauty of this phase arises from many lifetimes of painful agony, perhaps the very reason it is almost impossible to achieve. To achieve aesthetic congruity after cycles of soul disintegrations is a delightful sight only a handful of artists experience, which is a rarity for the souls stuck in their mundane realities, struggling to fulfil their basic needs of love and care.

*'We are on the bridge; that shadow is the Tower,
Moreover, the light proves that he is reading still.'*

(The Phases of the Moon, lines 11-12)^{xv}

The bridge is another symbol which refers to the symbolic bridging of life and death. Yeats's tower equals a place which is conducive for meditation and the quest for ultimate reality. Like other poems, this poem is also set at late evening or early morning just before dawn which symbolizes the meeting point of time and eternity. These phases are also cycles of the human personality and history which transcends time and space, across which Man struggles to balance his internal and external forces, to find his uniqueness in this fragmented world of Imagination and psyche. And while the artist might reach the point of perfection in phase 15, the cycle doesn't end there, in an idyllic static state of bliss.

Yeats through the creation of Robartes explains that on reaching that phase, the wheel of rebirth pulls the string of rebirth and the cycle of life commences again, from the first lunar phase, i.e., new moon, thus the process of unity and oneness is never- ending, pulling souls in a labyrinth full of dreams and visions, waking them up from their perfect moments by whispering in their ears, continuously flashing signs of caution and wisdom, hoping one might listen and travel the path of integration, as opposed to the disintegrated world of chaos and mishaps. In *A Vision*, his analogy between the cyclical fluctuations of these two interpreting gyres of subjectivity (phase 15 onwards) and objectivity (phase 1 onwards) configured so that the narrowest point of one could coincide with the widest point of the other. The initial phases of objectivity and latter half of subjectivity exist in polarities, or

antinomies, in Yeats's vocabulary, and both kept expanding and contracting until the extreme was reached post which the process was reversed, from subjective to objective now. ^{xvi}

The perfect moment might come unexpectedly, when we aren't expecting it at all, when the dancer becomes the dance and two souls sitting next to each other unite and become a single entity for half a second. But it is pertinent to note that the dancer cannot be separated from the dance, just like the moon cannot exist without its sun. The antinomies of life are essential for existence of life itself. If chaos and tumult weren't a part of this world, would the quiet and beauty of this magnificent universe be ever realized and experienced? The presence of the dark is what makes living in the light worthwhile. Without the dark, no shadows would accompany our pain and grief that is carried in our fractured hearts, hoping to find a fleeting moment of respite and unity, which would remind us again, to hold onto the hand of hope, in this dull yet fascinating world full of mist and magic. And as Yeats remarked about the world being full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper, in the hope of achieving oneness if not at once with the external world around us, we can hope to try to unite the broken pieces of our souls and become a collective whole, because if we aren't at peace with our own tragic selves, how can we even begin to dream of altering the tragedy that the world has become today?

Thus, Yeats's poetry not only brings respite to the mind but also seeks to educate humanity. War and violence have drastic consequences and Yeats longed for restoration of humanity in the faith of unity and oneness. Through his writings, he endeavours to ease the world's suffering and imagines a collective memory or the Great Memory wherein every living soul shares a collective past and future. The shared experiences of life might bring lost souls together and build unity in the face of impending crisis.

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