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"I had grown wild": A Critical Reading of Yeats's Journey towards His 'Final Mood'

Amitabh Roy

Abstract: W. B. Yeats had a long poetic career which is marked by three different moods expressed through his poetry. His journey towards the 'final mood' has passed through the early years of escapism, romanticism, and a trace of pre-Raphaelite influence. Yeats began as a late romantic with his bent for Irish tradition and folklore. But he soon moved from the dreamland of fairy tales and reached a world of life and reality. With the influence of French symbolism, his conception of beauty and poetry evolved further. The nostalgic yearning for the good, old days landed the poet in a mood of despondency and pensive thoughts. Yeats's frustrating experience with Maud Gonne and his disillusionment with the prevailing Irish customs led him towards self-introspection. Naturally, his choice of themes became more realistic. The spectacle of war in both Ireland and Europe presented before Yeats a broad canvas of violence and destruction as reflected in his philosophical overtones and imagery throughout his poems, especially in his middle period. As a true tragic hero, Yeats's journey is from darkness to light and from suffering to the joy hidden in its bosom. The painting of gross destruction is left behind and the poetic theme became the gaiety of the sages. Yeats discovered significant meaning of life even through its trivial happenings. He unleashed the beautiful and lofty through individual experiences which are of real value. In his *Last Poems* the poet's deeper understanding of human nature elevates him to a person with a rare kind of vision. The poetic joy of this visionary poet is more pronounced than the tone of despondency, desolation, and loneliness expressed in his early poems.

Key words: mood, desperation, despondency, escapism, Romanticism.

Author: Amitabh Roy is Professor in the Department of English at Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya and the Principal of the institution. He has spent a considerable amount of time studying W. B. Yeats. In *The Yeats Journal of Korea*, in addition to this essay, he has already published two articles on Yeats: "The Theory of Mask and Yeats's Poetic Career" and "A Comparison of Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* and Jibananada Das's *Banalata*

Sen." His interest includes Modernism and Indian English writing.
E-mail: amitabhroy.ar@gmail.com

제목: "난 열광했네": 최후의 무드를 향한 예이츠의 여정을 비판적으로 읽기

우리말 요약: W. B. 예이츠는 긴 세월 동안의 저작 활동을 통해 세 가지 다른 무드를 보여준다. '최종 무드'를 향한 그의 여정은 도피주의, 낭만주의, 그리고 라파엘 전파를 거치면서 차츰 형성된다. 예이츠는 아일랜드 전통과 민담에 관심을 바탕으로 후기 낭만주의자로 저작 활동 시작했지만 곧 동화와 같은 꿈나라에서 벗어나 삶과 현실의 세계로 들어갔다. 프랑스 상징주의의 영향으로 그는 미와 시에 대한 개념을 더욱 발전시켰다. 초기 시는 옛 시절에 대한 향수로 인해 낙담과 사색적인 무드에 빠졌지만 모드 곤에 대한 실연과 아일랜드 관습에 대한 환멸로 예이츠는 자기 성찰을 하게 되었다. 이후 자연스럽게 시적 주제는 현실적이 되었다. 한편 아일랜드와 유럽에서 벌어지는 전쟁은 예이츠에게 폭력과 파괴에 대해 폭넓게 다루는 계기가 되었고, 특히 중세시대에 대한 관심을 통해 이를 철학적 함축과 숙달된 이미지에 승화하였다. 진정한 비극적 영웅처럼 예이츠의 여정은 어둠에서 빛으로, 고통에서 가슴에 감춰둔 기쁨으로 이어졌다. 파괴는 배경으로 사라지고 현자의 흥겨움이 전경을 차지했다. 예이츠는 진정한 가치가 있는 개인적인 경험을 통해 아름답고 고상한 것을 분출했다. 그는『최후의 시편』에서 시인의 인간 본성에 대한 깊은 이해를 바탕으로 뛰어난 비전을 제시했다. 후기 시에서 예이츠의 시적 기쁨은 초기 시에 표현된 낙담, 황량함, 외로움의 어조를 압도했다.

주제어: 좌절, 의존, 도피주의, 낭만주의

저자: 인도 알리푸두알 마힐라 마하비디알라야의 영문과부교수인 아미타 로이는 예이츠 연구에 전념하고 있다. 이 논문은 "The Theory of Mask and Yeats's Poetic Career," "A Comparison of Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* and Jibanananda Das's *Banalata Sen*"와 함께 삼부작을 이룬다. 예이츠의 시와 더불어 그는 모더니즘과 인도 영어 글쓰기가 주 연구분야이다.

I

Yeats's period of literary activity had a span of over fifty years. During this entire period Yeats's art and genius was constantly growing and developing to its final stage. The process of transition is a long drawn out, and it has been divided into three distinct phases, viz. a beginning, a middle, and an end. This journey of Yeats towards his 'final mood' is replete with his powerful

poetic narratives, which culminates in his emergence as one of the greatest poets of English literature.

Yeats's early period, designated as the poetry of the Celtic twilight period is openly escapist in character. It is Pre-Raphaelite and Romantic in nature. It imitates Shelley in fluidity and Keats in colorfulness. The poet harassed by hard and harsh reality of the world cuts himself adrift from it and seeks refuge in the dream world of Irish legend, mythology, and folklore. Wilson assigns to Yeats's early poetry, "the elements of freshness, originality and romanticism which was lost in the terseness and complexity of the later verse" (12).

Escapism and Romanticism

Yeats in his early poetry looks like a resident of a fairy world. The mundane reality is nothing but a painful reminder of things unwanted. In "The Stolen Child" we find the fairies' call to go to this dreamy abode:

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a fairy, hand in hand
> For the world is more full of weeping than you can understand. (*CPN* 18)

H.S. Krans observes:

> His poems are full of thought, spirituality and lyrical phantasy, and have a music that is subtle, sweet and beguiling. They are product of an exacting artistic conscience, and everywhere wrought with utmost care. (299)

Yeats has made his fairy world a symbol of the imaginative world of rest, peace, and recuperation. It is a delightful world of romance on Arcadia. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is one of the most enchanting poems in this period:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made. (*CPN* 39)

Yeats began as a late Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite with the additional advantage of contact with the Irish mythological tradition and folklore. But he did not remain a poet of Celtic twilight for long. He soon parted company with the fairy ridden dream world of his youthful days before his final emergence into life and reality.

During this time he came into contact with the concepts of the French symbolists and the English Aesthetes－Mallarme, Arthur Symons, Pater, etc. and accepted without reserve their conception of poetry and adoration of beauty.

His subject matter of poetry turns more and more Irish and he is able to capture the Celtic spirit. The Celtic spirit is characterized by its keen and living faith in the irrational and another worldly and Yeats brings to his ideal fairy world.

Yeats's fairy land is to make up for the grayness of harsh reality. It symbolizes a perfect imaginary world, full of delight and allurement. However, an element of social concreteness is introduced into this wonder world of imagination by the use of various Irish places and landmarks by name. Yeats's Innisfree enjoys a dual status that it is a Romantic Utopia of all human desires and dream and also a real physical mass of an island near Sligo.

This early poetry of Utopian colour and glimmer is two－sided. On the one hand it discloses the poet's keen desire, a nostalgic yearning, we may say, for a pastoral state of living, and on the other hand it betrays an equally keen sense that one cannot secure escape from reality in this way.

The little child in "The Stolen Child" leaves this world:

Away with us he's going
The solemn－eyed. (*CPN* 19)

He is pensive because he is moving to an unknown world, where

> He'll hear no more the lowing
> Of the calves on the warm hillside. (*CPN* 19)

A.G. Stock observes the prevailing mood of these escape poems is the one of irresponsible delight, but there is a faint undertone of foreboding, as if a child gives his hand to the elemental spirits, innocently in love with their wilderness and also is silently aware that this gift to their devotees is an agony of loneliness. Nonetheless the dominant note of this early poetry of Yeats is that of disillusionment. Allen Tate notes the reversal of the romantic mood of the earlier poems to the intellectual mood in the later poems. David Dyches has observed that

> [w]hile it is true that Yeats, like every poet in English since the end of the eighteenth century, began with a romantic use of language in the early poems, he ended up very differently …. If one of the historic marks of romanticism is the division between sensibility and intellect, Yeats's career may be seen as unromantic…. because he closed the gap. (98)

II

Style and Imagery

As regards language and imagery, Yeats is swept off by the lure of words. His poetry is packed with a profusion of the Pre-Raphaelite. It is in the Tennyson-Rossetti-Morris tradition. The sprinkling of phrases, such as "the pearl pale hand," "dream awakened eyes," "dew dropping sky," "cloud pale eyelids," "dew-cold lilies," along with colour words-"golden," "silver," "blue," "dim grey," and so on.

Thus we see his early poetry is dominated by the style of Pater and the pale romantics of the nineties. With the colour and dreaminess of Rossetti, which is later infused with 'The Celtic twilight' and 'Irish mythology' mixed with magic and occultism, it is a poetry of escape into the land of heart's desire, with a haunting incantation rhythm and decorative drapery of strange symbolism, calculated to produce a hypnotic effect.

The Wind Among the Reeds marks the highest point in the evolution of Yeats's early style. The collection represents the farthest limit of his withdrawal into the world of dreams. But he soon realised the futility and barrenness of such withdrawal, and this realisation prepared his mind for the new arrangement of powers that was to make possible the poetry of the whole man. Peter Ure noticed a particular pattern of thought especially in *The Wind Among The Reeds*:

> Yet in these writings can be traced many later poetic assertions and convictions. Two of the most important are the notion of a coming change in the world ··· before it is rent in the interlocking catastrophe and revelation, and of rebirth and its counterpart, the hope of escape from the round of incarnations into a changeless and immortal existence. (38)

III

The Harsh Reality

Various circumstances led to Yeats's coming out of his ivory tower. In 1903, Maud Gonne, the woman whom he had loved with all his being, married Major MacBride. This frustration was the primary reason for his revising and reforming his attitude towards poetry. He was also unhappy with the attitude of the Irish people who had booed at Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, the disillusionment generated by the sordidness of real

life which he was brought face to face with during his entanglement in public controversies like the Lane controversy, his connection with the Abbey Theatre, the hypocrisy of self-seeking politician all combined to bring Yeats down to earth. In "The Coming of Wisdom" the poet says:

> Through all the lying days of my youth
> I swayed my leaves and flowers in the seen
> Now I may wither into the truth. (*CPN* 94)

In other words, he now forsakes his earlier Pre-Raphaelitism, his early self-introspection. The change which Yeats's subject matter undergoes at this stage may be succinctly termed as 'eternality.' He is more and more drawn into the confusion of the contemporary Irish secure and feels called upon to express his own reaction to it. His themes, personal as well as contemporary, become more realistic.

With the completion of *The Responsibilities* Yeats had freed himself from his immature earlier style and manner, obtained mastery over his craft and greater confidence in his powers, and fought his way into the 20th Century.

The Irish Question

His later poetry reveals but an increased mastery over the style and techniques of the middle period. It represents a perfection of the trends. *The Wild Swans at Cook* represents Yeats's return to a period of comparative calm. He had been conscious of his responsibilities to Ireland. *Michael Roberts and the Dancer* is a short volume and not a collection of memorable quality. However, it has three poems of remarkable contents and they are "Easter 1916", "The Second Coming" and "A Prayer for my Daughter".

As described in the "Easter 1916" the soldiers have met death heroically and out of their sacrifice, "[a] terrible bauty is born,"; while we "but lived

where motley is worn":

> I have met them at the close of the day
> Coming with vivid faces
> From counter or desk among grey
> Eighteenth Century houses. (*CPN* 180)

The spectacle of war in Europe and Ireland and quarrels between well intuitioned men induced bitter reflections. Thus in "The Second Coming" the thought is still one of violence and destruction, but the setting is not Ireland but the world at large. The poet feels that the present historical cycle is approaching its end and the day of dissolution or doom in war:

> Turning and turning in the widening Gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (*CPN* 187)

IV

Theme and Pattern

In matter of themes, some groups of poems in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* include, by common consent, the finest product of Yeats's genius. There are two central themes:—

i) Preoccupation with age and the vanishing of youth and beauty and
ii) The crisis of the present civilization seen as part of the cyclic process of history.

The theme of Yeats's later poetry has been defined as a wrestling match between the soul in the eternity and soul in time, or the self or the heart as he variously calls it. This antithesis between the two aspects of human personality is resolved by taking an extra-temporal point of view, i.e., by contemplating a reality lying outside time, as in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium". Tyler Lehmann points out:

> Yeats's speaker grapples with time as he criticizes society's preoccupation with youth, discovers that age has rendered him a misfit in the natural world, besides he must find a way to escape the cruelties of time, and finally overcomes death by immortalizing himself in art.

There are two notes running side by side in the poetry of the last phase: one simple rustic and broadly humorous and the other intellectually exotic or visionary. Critics like C.M. Bowra, Stephen Spender, and D.S. Savage find in the *Last Poems* a decline in Yeats's poetic power. Bowra finds that in them there is simplicity both in tone and feature, but adds that they lack even in the stern majestic utterance in his mature work. D. S. Savage says that we have there in the glorification of violence and war the celebration of sexuality, the same inner emptiness revealed either in an expression of a sense of personal futility or in the insistence upon a hysterical and nihilistic exultation. Such exquisite poems as "Lapis Lazuli," "The Statues," "The Bronze Head" sufficiently refuse such criticism.

If the pattern of the poems in *A Full Moon in March* is chaotic and seems to accept elemental chaos as its central image, the pattern of *Last Poems* swings toward order. All things may be meaningless, Yeats seems to be asserting, but the man who comprehends the meaningless designs has achieved the most that can be accomplished in life. Having lifted himself to the vantage point of age, Yeats is able to form a final mood in *Last Poems*.

Though at the age of 70 years he claims in the little lyric "Imitated from the Japanese" that "…… never have I danced for joy," now joy is at last to be his. It is not the lover's joy, the young man's fragile delight in spiritual union. It is rather the reckless joy of "The Wild Old Wicked Man" who, looking on all things with a careless eye, is free to enjoy them for themselves. Seeing the form from the height of "The Gyres," Yeats is able to discover his hard won freedom and "laugh in tragic joy." Like the poets and tragic heroes praised in "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats is able to discover "[g]aiety transfiguring all that dread" in the "Last Poems."

Last Poems opens with "The Gyres" which presents the old poet's reaction to the murderousness of his times, which is symbolic of the impending dissolution of the current European civilization. What is new in the poem is the poet's mood which the growing tempo of disintegration has generated. Yeats would have us believe that the new mood is the result of the deeper insight into the nature of the historical rhythm which the years have engendered in him:

> When a man grows old his joy
> Grows more deep, day after day,
> His empty heart is full at length. (*CPN* 344)

The prophetic poet contemplating the violence and the confusion prevailing in the world is convinced that life - the gyre of the present civilization - has reached the highest point of its expansion and its collapse is near at hand. But instead of being stunned by the impending catastrophe, he is exhilarated by it and offers it a joyful welcome. The very rhythm of the first line, "The gyres! The gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth;" has a joyful throb about it. If there were nothing unusual about the death and disappearance of old idols or when their loss is temporary one should waste

no regret over them. The poet-spectator seeing the spectacle of a whole civilization breaking to pieces is filled with a secret delight. The joy is arising out of a deeper understanding of the tragedy. Though "numb nightmare" now determines world history, though the end of a historical cycle drawn in sight, nothing that happens is of real significance. The wiser poet will never more bother because from the 'cavern of prophecy' issues the voice audible to the ear of his heart that he should rejoice in the face of universal tragedy. Out of darkness and death will arise again the life of the antithetical gyre. Ultimately the now unfashionable gyre of "workman, noble and saint" will return; history will reverse itself. "We that look on," artists and philosophers—not participants but wise spectators—"but laugh in tragic joy." That the artist finds delight in the world spectacle is also expressed in his essay "J .M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time": "There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion" (*EI* 322). Though all themes are tragic, though the gyres whirl the world over and over again, through cycles of triumph and necessary defeat, the artist is free to respond to the voice from darkness which articulates the command no artist dare reject, "Rejoice!" This is the essence of the tragic wisdom which has come to the old man and keeps making him rejoice and feel gay in the face of dark night of chaos hovering over the present world of insane brutality.

The collection's second poem, "Lapis Lazuli," deals with three types of tragic gaiety, pertaining to the artist, the constructive worker, and the saint respectively, as contrasted with the sentimental hysteria of weak women, crying for some immediate effective remedy to avert the threatening danger of German invasion. The second stanza of the poem describes the 'tragic gaiety' of the artist, which is born out of a deeper insight into the nature of tragedy. In this context Yeats refers to Shakespearean tragic heroes who are not seen

to lament over their fate. Hamlet and Lear are gay and this gaiety of their heart has transformed all the horror of the dark event about to engulf them. Man with his indomitable will opposes the horror of tragedy and wrings delight out of it. The world is tragic drama and great actors play it through without breaking down:

> They know that Hamlet and Lear and gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread! (*CPN* 294)

V

The Transition

As Yeats says in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: "In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies" (xxxiv), the progress of a tragic hero is a march from darkness into light, from ignorance into knowledge, from the surface of suffering into the joy hidden in its bosom. In "Lapis Lazuli"'s third stanza the poet describes the joy of men of action who build a new civilization out of the debris of old one. For civilisations also are subject to the law of death and rebirth. Destruction is followed by construction and as soon as the destruction has done its work the team of builders proceeds to erect the structure of a new city. Man is not upset by the depredations of time. The last stanza expresses the gaiety of the sages, sitting on the high altitude of their philosophical wisdom and contemplating the tragedy enacting in the world below. The eyes of those withered and wrinkled sages are glittering with delight when they witness the new life emerging out of tragic scene.

"An Acre of Grass" in *Last Poems* opens with a mood of desolation. Yeats uses words and expressions such as 'acres of grass,' 'midnight,' 'old

house,' 'nothing sting but a mouse' which imply various aspects associated with an old man's life. The picture of 'midnight' (life's end) suggests all pervasive desolation and an outcast state that accompany the advancing years. Though Yeats's contemplation is quiet, that kind of quiet cannot lead to work of enduring value. Neither 'loose imagination' nor the mind's causal forms on flesh is enough to 'make the truth known.' That can be achieved only through mystical insight and mystical insight comes with 'frenzy.' Consequently, in order to add meaning to life and wring joy out of it, the aged poet must remake himself into the stereotype of mad old prophet: Timon, Lear or Blake. Inspired by frenzy, his quiet will give way to an "eagle mind" that can "shake the dead in their shrouds" and so justify itself.

If "What Then?" seems to suggest that all the "meaningful" planned events of life are inadequate, "Beautiful lofty things" reverses the proposition to conclude that events trivial in themselves prove ultimately significant. And each of those events, unplanned, Yeats asserts, is necessarily unique, 'a thing never known again.' The feeling of helpless pathos before time's fatal obliterating impact that all men share, the irrevocable blow which cancels out all persons and things—the poem "What Then?" locates the experience of individual's life's meaning. Discovering the beautiful, lofty thing—what Joyce called an 'epiphany'—is for the old poet of supreme importance. The significant act, the defiant necessary gesture which marks the individual as unique, is precisely the thing that the artist must capture if he is to create work of real value. That value can give the authentic artists like Yeats the never-failing feeling of joy.

"Imitated from the Japanese" reiterates the old Yeats's astonishing discovery of tragic joy and shows us the dance image which the poet associates with experiences of insight. Yeats's dancers move always in a self-contained coherent universe. They experience an incommunicable sense of order. "Sweet Dancer," another poem, also illustrates this sort of dance

experience. Though the dancing girl seems 'crazy,' out of touch with reality, she has in fact, Yeats argues, come at last to sweetness, to the discovery of artistic form and through that discovery to ecstasy.

VI

Concluding Remarks

Matured years in Yeats's life brings his poetry much desperation and eventually some criticism. But the transition from early escapism to later tone of complexities of life is inevitable for a poet who has created a lot with unlimited yearning to say more. The realization of growing old and losing strength was like a decaying empire in Yeats's life. He was like a monarch of his falling kingdom. Yet, he has a vision like seer now who can observe things to rediscover the meaning. Naturally, in Yeats's *Last Poems*, the sense of desolation and loneliness is replaced by a secret joy which is derived from the poet's deeper understanding of the nature of things. Because 'our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts.'

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