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A NEW LOOK AT WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS'S "BYZANTIUM"

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Abstract

W.B. Yeats's poem "Byzantium" is one of the most complex poems of English literature that is highly expressive, yet mystically revealing in its usage of symbols. Despite multiple observations made by the great critics, many metaphors and symbols stand tough to be illuminated coherently. The research paper titled *A New Look at William Butler Yeats's "Byzantium"* henceforth aims at reading the poem "Byzantium" in the light of varied influences that he had put on record including his knowledge of Indian thought and myth with a view to deriving the meaning of the text in its most pertinent context.

Key words: Symbol, occultist, Indian thought, Great Fire.

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*"Seek those images
That constitute the wild,
The lion and the virgin,
The harlot and the child."* --- W. B Yeats,
Those Images, Last Poems (C.P. 316)

The most noteworthy poem of W. B. Yeats titled "Byzantium" (1930) (The Winding Stair and other poems, 1933) is an extensively discussed, yet extremely ambiguous among his poetical corpus; the sources and analogues of which have been diligently pursued and painstakingly researched upon. It would not be out of place to mention that the poem received critical attention from the doyens of English letters owing to the scope of the assorted interpretations due to its allusive connotations. In regard to the origin of this poem an excerpt from Yeats's letter to Sturge Moore dated October 4, 1930 can be put forth, "The poem originates from a

criticism of yours. You objected to the last verse of 'Sailing to Byzantium' because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition" (Quoted in V Rai 138). An eminent authority on Yeats, B. Rajan holds the opinion, "Interpretations of 'Byzantium' are varied enough to suggest that every reader makes his own poem from the same words" (Rajan 142). Regarding the ambiguity that lies in the very text of the poem, the opinion of A.G. Stock is worthy of note. He asserted without any reservations whatsoever, "Byzantium, written three years later, is powerful before it is intelligible. It has an authentic but fragmentary quality like Cassandra's second sight in Agamemnon, as if he has been to an unimaginable place and is speaking of it, but in words to which some of the clues are missing.

The intensity with which it is seen and felt almost overwhelms the translatable meaning" (Stock 202).

Despite the erudite annotations made by the seasoned critics of the likes of A. Norman Jeffares, Richard Ellmann, A.G. Stock, et cetera, many metaphors and symbols stand unexplained; it seems literally tougher to derive a coherent and compact meaning out of the very content of "Byzantium". Even a most sincere reader of Yeats's poem under consideration can have multiple doubts:

- 1) What meaning does essentially, come out of "All that man is, /All mere complexities, /The fury and mire of human veins in stanza 1?
- 2) What does the expression "death- in- life and life - in- death mean in line 16 (stanza 2)?
- 3) Who does the Emperor symbolize in stanza 5?
- 4) What does the metaphor of Dolphin suggest in stanza 6?
- 5) Who are the golden smithies of the Emperor referred to in stanza 6?
- 6) What do "dolphin –torn" and "gong – tormented sea" stand for in stanza 6?
- 7) What is the central thesis of the poem concerned?

The author of this research article holds the conviction that reading the poem "Byzantium" with an eye too on Yeats's knowledge of Indian thought and myth by way of various direct and indirect connections will be avidly helpful in explaining the text and obvious contexts. W.B. Yeats had received a great tradition before him that was, no doubt, impregnated with Oriental wisdom. It would not be out of place to mention that the great pioneers of world literature like Blake, Shelley, Emerson, Goethe, etc. drew their philosophical ideas from a pagan way of life metaphorically represented by India. Yeats was well familiar with the fact that "all material things correspond to the concepts in the world of spirit, and that through the use of material objects as magical symbols the adept may call down disembodied powers. The essay "Magic" (1901)

expresses Yeats's conviction that the great memory of nature "can be evoked by symbols" (Tindall 46). Yeats's linkage with the great occultist William Blake is a significant facet in Yeats scholarship. That Blake was well versed in Indian philosophy becomes quite clear from the trustworthy assurance of Northrop Frye who asserts profoundly in his "Fearful Symmetry", "Blake was among the first of European idealists able to link his own tradition of thought with the Bhagvad- Gita" (Frye 73). It is equally true that Blake was aware of the *Triguna* theory of the *Bhagvad Gita*. Yeats's reading of Blake combined with other impulses to encourage his mystical interests, and soon he was seeking wisdom in all kinds of unorthodox broodings. Yeats's very compilation of Qualitch edition of Blake in collaboration with Edwin J. Hillis in three volumes can be considered as a great achievement. Blake's "Wheel" corresponds to Yeats's "Gyre" that in other sense can be compared with the Hindu idea of *Samay Chakra* (the discus of time). Further the impact of the great Romantic poet Shelley on Yeats can be brilliantly justified on the testimony of Tindall, "The example of Blake, also an occultist, taught Yeats the use in poetry of magical symbols; the poems of Shelley, which he carefully analyzed, confirmed his symbolic system" (Tindall 46).

It is a curious fact that Celtic civilization of which Yeats was a bright product, had its roots in the Aryan culture of India. However Yeats directly came into contact with three Indian geniuses, namely, Mohini Mohun Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, and Shree Purohit Swami. In all probability, Chatterji visited Dublin in the final months of the year 1855. Yeats writes, "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless. Consciousness, he (Mohini) taught, does not merely spread out its surface but has in vision and contemplation, another motion and can change in height and depth"(Yeats, Autobiographies 91-92). Through Chatterji, Yeats's knowledge of the *Bhagvad Gita* got enriched and he also came to know of the monistic *Vedanta* philosophy of Shankaracharya, the 8th century Indian thinker and visionary, as articulated well in his *Viveka-Chudamani*.

Yeats in the later span of time met the great Indian scholar and poet Rabindranath Tagore in the year 1912. Both had excelled in their quest for knowledge and mystical ways of the universe and of course, the "Unity of Being". The friendship between them proved to be very considerable in the evolution of their ideas and opinions. Yeats wrote an Introduction to the *Gitanjali* (1912) of Tagore for which the latter received the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

In 1931, Yeats met Shree Purohit Swami. Yeats wrote an Introduction to Purohit Swami's *An Indian Monk*. This book developed Yeats's reliability in the actual feelings and experiences. He also wrote an introduction to Swami's *The Holy Mountain*. Both of them undertook a joint project of translating the Upanishads that came into a book form as *The Ten Principal Upanishads* (1937) to which Yeats wrote a brilliant preface. Yeats further assisted Swami in the rendering of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* that later on came to be known as *Aphorisms of Yoga*. Purohit Swami dedicated his translation of the *Bhagvad Gita* into English as *The Geeta: The Gospel of Lord Shri Krishna* to "my friend William Butler Yeats" on 13 June 1935. Yeats doubtlessly got an insight into the philosophical casements of India through Swami. Yeats himself acknowledged his debt to the Indian scholar in the following words, "... I have, of late, I think come to some coherent grasp of reality and whether that will make me write or cease to write I do not know. I have learned a good deal from the Swami who suddenly becomes all wisdom if you ask him the right question." (Yeats's letter quoted in Jeffares, *Yeats: Man and Poet* 280-1).

That Yeats was deeply interested and enamored of India and her culture becomes evident from the close readings of his poems like "Anashuya and Vijaya", "Meru", "The Indian Upon God," etc.

In view of Yeats's multiple interactions and interests in India and things Indian and his visionary outlook towards various facets of knowledge and mysticism, the poem titled "Byzantium" seems essentially open for a wide range of interpretations and explications. Nothing can be considered as the last word as far as the interpretation of a literary text is considered. Tindall observes, "'Byzantium"

remains an enigma even with the help of *A Vision* and of several explications; for although it has every appearance of unity, and although such images as the dome are readily intelligible, other images and their connections and references are as obscure as those of Mallarme. In Yeats such privacy is uncommon." (Tindall 52). Another critic of repute, Graham Hough writes, "Although the image comes from the historical part of the Yeatsian system, the connection with the historical Byzantium is of the slightest and when we turn to the second poem, Byzantium has taken leave of the earth altogether and become an *unchristian* (italics mine) New Jerusalem, an intricate symbol of the initial purgatorial stages of the life beyond the grave" (Hough 72).

A Norman Jeffares in his brilliant article refers to Yeats's 1930 diary entry dated 30 April that runs as under, "Subject for a poem... Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking mummy, flames at the street corners where the soul is purified, birds of hammered gold singing in the golden trees, in the harbour offering their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to Paradise. These subjects have been in my head for some time, especially the last" (Jeffares, *The Byzantine Poems*, RES 49). Jeffares further goes on to refer to Yeats's system and the very reason of referring to Byzantium as the central place of his creative imagination, in his *A Vision*, "I think that if I could be given a month of antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I would find in some little wine shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer him than Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make what was an instrument of power to Princes and Clerics and a murderous madness in the mob, show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body.

I think that in early Byzantium, and maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that the architect and artificers -- though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of

controversy and must have grown abstract -- spoke to the multitude and the few alike" (Yeats's *A Vision*, p.190, Quoted in Jeffares, *The Byzantine Poems*, RES 50).

The poem "Byzantium" therefore is a highly philosophical poem demonstrating the grand narrative of a divine world where human salvation takes place. A serious reading of the poem makes it clear that its subject is "the nature of the final escape from the round of re- incarnation" (John Unterecker 217). Commonly understood as a sequel to "Sailing to Byzantium" this poem encapsulates the description of the Utopian kingdom of Byzantium itself in night view that is nothing but a metaphor for what happens after the mortal life ends.

The very opening stanza talks of the very moment of devout meditation. The time is that of night and the predominance of *Tamo- Guna* is perceived because the impure images of day are diminished and the drunken soldiers have gone to take rest. There can be viewed only the presence of the night walkers after the cathedral gong,

"The unpurged images of day recede;
The emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night walker's song
After great cathedral gong;" (C.P. 243)

A sense of chaos, confusion and restlessness seems the future of mankind itself. The dome of St. Sophia signifies the Divine Force --- *Brahma* --- that governs the cosmos and its ways. It is the life giving elixir that has the potential to mend the perverted vehemence of human existence. The poet's belief that the grand vision of the Divine purifies a man with his in born frailties,

"A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and mire of human veins." (C.P. 243)

While composing the above lines it seems that Yeats had in his mind the dictum of Jagatguru Shankaracharya --- *Brahma Satyam Jaganmithya*; *Jeevo Brahmaiva Naparah* that means only the *Brahma* is true, the rest is merely an illusion and that only He can free a burdened conscience from the anxieties of bodily forms.

Vision of a *Mayavi* world is well reflected in the second stanza through the grand image,

"Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a
shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy- cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life - in - death." (C.P. 243)

The poet - persona is not confirmed of the image that he sees. Sometimes he visualizes it as a man and sometimes a shade. The persona sees an image of a superhuman force that is lacking in human attributes. The great image is trying to unwind the cycle of death and life. The narrative of soul is perceived as death-in-life and vice versa. This image is a powerful phenomenon and the very *aavahan* (*invocation*) of it as death- in- life and life- in- death is symptomatic of the persisting disillusionment of the worldly affairs. Even this life is a form of death owing to the imprisonment of *Atma* by Body. Lord Krishna has enunciated the idea that we are soul and not body and that body is only the covering of the soul in the 22nd verse of the chapter 2 entitled *Samkhya Yoga (The Philosophy of Discrimination)* of the *Bhagvad Gita*:

Vaasansi jeernani yatha vihaya
Navani gruhnati naroparani/
Tatha shareerani vihaya jeernanya—
Nyani sanyati navani dehi// (BG II 22)

(As a man discards his threadbare robes and puts on new, so the Spirit throws of its worn-out bodies and takes fresh ones. -*The Geeta* 14)

Further the image alludes to the *Virat Purush* (*Vishwa Roop Darshan* --- *The Cosmic Vision*) of Chapter 11 of the *Bhagvad Gita* that the overwhelmingly befuddled Arjuna perceives with a sense of wonder,

"Anadimadhyantamaanantveerya---
Manantbahum shashisuryanetram/
Pashyami tvaam deepthutashvaktram

Svatejasa vishvamidam tapantam// (BG XI
19)

(Without beginning, without middle and without end, infinite in power, Thine arms all embracing, the sun and the moon Thine eyes, Thy face beaming with the fire of sacrifice, flooding the whole universe with light. -*The Geeta* 51)

In the third stanza the poet finds a sort of miracle in the form of a golden bird on the starlit dome. Regarding the very bird image, a remark by Yeats in July 1937 seems worth mentioning, "There is a record of a tree of gold with artificial bird, which sang. The tree was somewhere in the Royal Palace of Byzantium. I use it as symbol of the intellectual Joy of eternity, as contrasted with the instinctive joy of human life" (The Letters of W. B. Yeats, Ed. Allan Wade). Yeats writes,

"Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood." (C.P. 243)

This golden handiwork, for the poet, is the symbol of permanence of art and intellectual aesthetics. The body made of flesh and blood is subject to decay. However, the creative and artistic genius becomes a permanent source of rejuvenation and ultimate inspiration. The poet persona visualizes in it a metaphor of permanence of art in contrast to the temporal nuances of human life.

The fourth stanza of the poem reflects upon the time of midnight that is considered as very significant in ritualistic practices. The Great Fire of Judgment that purifies the blood- smitten spirits is not man-made. It is the form of the Great Soul of the Emperor (God) with His ever- diminishing aura. Under the spell of this highly mystical power the blood begotten spirits undertake a hypnotically cathartic dance and free themselves of the complexities and qualms that had perverted their conscience for long,

"At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a
sleeve."(C.P. 244)

In the succeeding stanza Yeats suggests the way to attain salvation,

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithes break the
flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin- torn, that gong-tormented sea.
(C.P. 244)

That means by seeking the knowledge from *Guru* (Dolphin --- In Hindu mythology the dolphin is said to be one among the creatures that facilitated Ganga's descent from the heavens and her mount, *Makara*, is shown sometimes as a dolphin. Vide <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dolphin>) a general mortal can attain the state of *Moksha* (Divine Abode). The persons --- The golden smithies of the Emperor--- who cultivate the elevated state of *Sthitaprajnta*, after having initiated as the true *Shishyas* of an eminent *Guru* are only capable of breaking the shackles of the cycle of birth and death --- *Mayavi Tantra* (i.e. the bitter furies of complexity). Further "those images that yet / fresh images beget" corresponds with the *Mrig -Trishna* (lust for materialistic gratification) of those ignorant people who in spite of the quest for spiritual salvation, seek the fulfillment of one's desires. The visionary poet is convinced of the fact that those who have transcended these *Mayavi* boundaries only can sail across the "gong -tormented sea", i.e. the *Bhavasagar* and can attain the lofty height of *Moksha*.

In fine, we can safely conclude that the central thesis of the poem "Byzantium" is the

depiction of a vision of a mystical land where the human soul gets fully purified and liberated from the complexities of the materialistic world. Byzantium is a sublime symbol of that cathartic platform where the soul becomes free of its *Karma* of the previous birth by seeking wisdom from an encouraging *Guru* (Moral Guide) that can be only possible with the blessings of the Great Emperor (God). John Joubert truly writes, "Yeats was not the first artist to invent for himself his own personal mythology. For him the city from which the poem takes its title represents a staging –post in the continuing process of transmigration where the spirits of those who have died are purged in preparation for rebirth. But it can also be looked upon as a monument to the durability of great art and therefore a symbol of immortality" (Joubert 249).

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