THE INFLUENCE OF HINDU, BUDDHIST, AND MUSLIM THOUGHT ON YEATS'S POETRY

by

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by

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Introduction

Yeats was part of a late nineteenth-century European literary movement which, dissatisfied with Western tradition, both scientific and religious, looked towards the Orient for enlightenment. Unlike Pound, who sought solace in Japanese and Chinese sources, Yeats went to Indian philosophy and literature in his quest for "metaphors for poetry," and he remained a constant student of the Indian view of life.

Though Yeats's critics and biographers have already noted the impact of Indian thought on his poetry, they generally regard this influence as spasmodic. This study, on the contrary, will endeavour to show that the influence of Indian thought on Yeats was not intermittent but pervasive.

It may be noted that Hinduism and Buddhism form the main sub-divisions of Indian philosophy, and that Islam is more or less a part of Western tradition rejected by Yeats. Yeats's thought, as it will be seen later, was chiefly moulded by Hinduism and Buddhism. Nevertheless, faint echoes of Muslim thought, especially Persian mysticism, are traceable in his poetry.

Here it will be useful to enumerate the features of Indian philosophy and literature which influenced Yeats in particular:-

1. The concept of Atman.

Atman (transcendental self or soul) is considered to be one with Brahman (the Absolute Reality), and thus the finite and the infinite form a Unity of Being.

2. Doctrine of Maya.

Although the finite and the infinite are one, yet we, in this earthly condition, cannot see through it because of maya (illusion). However, the world of duality is not the ultimate character of reality.

3. Samsara (Transmigration of souls).

Since maya (physical existence, illusion) registers the imperfections of the material world, one has to go through samsara (continual incarnation) until one gets mukti or moksha (release from the cycle of birth and death), and finds ananda (bliss) in nirvana (salvation).

4. Unity of Being.

It is a corollary of the above-mentioned doctrines of Atman and samsara.

5. Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies.

Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies conceive of a never-ending universe in a continual process of rise and fall.

6. The Tantric and Persian mystical cult of achieving spiritual union with the Absolute through the senses.

This paper seeks to examine the influence of these concepts on Yeats and his poetry.

Chapter I

The Maze of Eastern Thought -- Early Impact 1886-1889, with some remarks on Yeats's interest in the Orient 1890-1911

The visionary sensibility of Yeats made itself manifest at an early stage of his career through his interest in occultism, mysticism, symbolism, magic, folk-lore, and Oriental philosophy. This inborn tendency, which later became a life-long passion, was greatly developed through Yeats's reaction against his father. John Butler Yeats, a disciple of J.S.Mill, was a confirmed sceptic as well as a staunch believer in the supremacy of intellect over heart. William Butler Yeats, on the other hand, was an antithesis of his father[1] -- he was religious by instinct, had a monkish hatred for science, and he always yearned for a romantic dream-world. Indeed, W.B. Yeats did live in a world of fancy and imagination.[2] During his school days the entire countryside seemed to him to be full of fairies, elves, and Druids. Wandering about raths and faerie hills, he questioned old men and old women about the apparitions seen by them, and believed with his emotions.[3] His cousin Lucy Middleton once described strange

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1 For a full treatment of this father-son tension see Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948), pp.7-39. Hereafter referred to as Man and Masks.

2 The early influence of his uncle George Pollexfen, the mystic and astrologer, as well as the fairy tales told by his mother and Mary Battle, his uncle's second-sighted servant, contributed a great deal towards Yeats's preoccupation with a dream-world.

3 W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London, 1955), p.78.

happenings at Ballisodare and Rosses; and Yeats himself saw mysterious fires at nightfall, which affected him strongly.[4] He was fascinated by the world of spirit.

The first messenger that came to Yeats from the world of spirit was George Russell (AE), the poet and mystic, who gave a definite shape to Yeats's metaphysical leanings. Yeats first met Russell in 1884, at the age of nineteen, while he was at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin.[5] Russell had already begun to see visions, which he reproduced in his paintings. "He [George Russell] did not paint the model as we tried to," Yeats recalls in his autobiography, "for some other image rose always before his eyes (a Saint John in the Desert I remember)."[6] Although Russell was younger than Yeats, yet he was well-read in Oriental mystical literature. The famous fifty-volume series of The Sacred Books of the East under the editorship of Max Müller, was being published at the time. The Buddhist Sutras came out in 1881, The Bhagavad Gita in 1882, and The Upanishads were published in 1884. Russell read them all.[7] He was also in touch with the current theosophical literature, such as Mabel Collins Cook's Light on the Path, a treatise on Eastern wisdom.[8] Thus, by the

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4 Autobiographies, p.79.

5 Ellmann, Man and Masks, p.31.

6 Autobiographies, p.80.

7 See T. S. Dume's unpublished dissertation, W.B.Yeats: a study of his reading (Temple University, 1950).

time Russell met Yeats, he was familiar with Eastern philosophy and literature; and he promptly introduced the young poet to the maze of Eastern thought.

Russell and Yeats had similar interests. Both looked down upon the unimaginative science of Darwin and Huxley; both were dissatisfied with Christianity and Western tradition; and both longed for a world of poetry, love, and imagination. They became very intimate, and competed in writing long Arcadian verse plays about Asiatic magicians who expressed their scorn for the materialistic West.[9] Mosada, The Island of Statues, and The Seeker, written during this period, bring out the above-mentioned romantic tendencies of Yeats.

Mosada (1886), Yeats's first publication, deserves attention. Mosada, a beautiful Moorish damsel of the village of Azubia, is condemned to the stake by the officers of the Inquisition. Ebremar, the chief monk decrees that the Moorish girl must die. Meanwhile, Mosada, alone in her prison, sucks poison from a ring in anticipation of death and dreams of her lover, Gomez. Ebremar enters to prepare the heretic for her death and is shocked to recognize her as his old love. His passion for her is roused again, but it is too late. The deadly poison has done its work and Mosada comes to her end. There is no depth in this rather theatrical story. Its significance, however, lies in its exotic Moorish setting,

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8 Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats 1865-1939 (New York, 1943), p.44. Miss Cook was the co-editor of the theosophical journal Lucifer. Besides writing on theosophy, she produced a number of novels. Later on, she was expelled from the Theosophical Society by Madame Blavatsky.

9 Ellmann, Man and Masks, p.32.

Muslim names, and perhaps in the first reference to India in Yeats's poetry. After conjuring up the phantoms, Mosada exclaims:

> Ah! now I'm Eastern-hearted once again,
> And while they gather round my beckoning arms,
> I'll sing the songs the dusky lovers sing,
> Wandering in sultry palaces of Ind,
> A lotus in their hands. [10]

The depiction of Indian lovers with a lotus is not without significance as it shows Yeats's knowledge of Indian religious symbolism even at this early stage. The lotus is an important symbol in Hindu and Buddhist iconography. The goddess Lotus, Lakshmi, is the tutelary deity of agriculture, and she is characterized by a lotus beneath her as well as in her right hand. As Vishnu's consort, she represents fertility and earthly happiness. In Buddhism, the goddess Lotus is the female consort of the transcendent Universal Buddha and represents his nature, the nature of eternal, blissful quietude in enlightenment. Thus, under the mature Buddhist thought, the lotus, which stood for the round of rebirth, also symbolises nirvana (release from the deadly cycle of incarnations).[11]

With Russell, Yeats was soon immersed in occult, mystical, and psychical studies. Several eager young men gathered round them: one was Yeats's school-fellow Charles Johnston, who had planned to be a missionary; another was Claude Wright, who was to spend most of his life working for theosophy; another was Charles Weekes, later to write

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10 Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds., The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1957), p.689. Hereafter referred to as Variorum Poems.

11 Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civiliztion (New York, 1946), p,100. Hereafter referred to as Myths and Symbols.

mystical poems.[12] They formed the Dublin Hermetic Society. The programme of the society was three-fold:-

1. To form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, caste, sex, or colour.

2. To encourage the studies of Eastern literatures, philosophies, and religions, and to vindicate the importance of that study.

3. To investigate the psychic powers latent in man, and unexplained laws of nature.[13]

The Hermetic Society met for the first time on June 16, 1885, under the chairmanship of Yeats.[14] In his opening speech, Yeats enthusiastically invited the audience to enter the maze of Eastern philosophy in order to solve the enigma of life and death:

> . . . . Science will tell you the soul of man is a volatile gas capable of solution in glycerine. Take this for your answer if you will. Has spirtualism solved it? Where it is wise it will tell you that year by year the footfall grows softer on the haunted stairway, that year by year the mysterious breath becomes fainter and fainter, that every decade takes something from the vividness of the haunting shadow till it has grown so faint that none but the keenest eyes can see the feeble outline and then it is gone it is dead, dead forever.
>
> Take this for your answer if you will, if you will not follow us into the maze of eastern thought, but I warn you that on the road to truth lurks many a dragon and goblin of mischief in wait for the soul.[15]

Soon, Yeats came across A. P. Sinnett's then recently published

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12 Ellmann, Man and Masks, p.41.

13 Monk Gibbon, "AE and the early days of Theosophy in Dublin," The Dublin Magazine, XXXII (1957), 25-37.

14 A. Norman Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet (New Haven, 1949), p.31.

15 Quoted by Ellmann, Man and Masks, p.42.

book Esoteric Buddhism,[16] a rather confused exposition of esoteric doctrine, including a wild cosmology, which left its mark on the system expounded by Yeats in A Vision, forty years later. Yeats passed on the book to Charlie Johnston, who was immediately converted to Esoteric Buddhism. Next year, in 1886, Johnston went to see Madame Blavatsky in London, and became a chela (disciple) in the Theosophical Society.[17] On his return from London, Johnston founded the Dublin Lodge, but Yeats did not join immediately though he had been instrumental in starting the interests of others on their way to theosophy.

Yeats, however, soon submitted to the influence of a Brahmin theosophist, Babu Mohini Chatterjee, who was sent to the Dublin Lodge as an emissary of Madame Blavatsky. Mohini Chatterjee was one of the earliest members of the Theosophical Society in India, and had a wide knowledge of the various schools of Indian philosophy, as well as of Western philosophy and religion.[18] He wrote an article entitled "The Commonsense of Theosophy", which was published in the May 1886 issue of The Dublin University Review, wherein he drew an attractive picture of the theosophical movement.[19] Later, the handsome Brahmin poured out the Vedantic philosophy of non-action in riddles:

He taught us by what seemed an invincible logic that those who die, in so far as they have imagined beauty or justice, are made part of that

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16 A. P. Sinnet, Esoteric Buddhism (Boston, 1886).

17 Yeats, Autobiographies, pp.89-91.

18 Hone, p.50.

19 Gibbon, p.26.

beauty or justice and move through the minds of living man, as Shelley believed; and that mind over-shadows mind even among the living, and by pathways that lie beyond the senses; and that he measured labour by his measure and put the hermit above all other labourers, because, being the most silent and the most hidden, he lived nearer to the Eternal Powers, and showed their mastery of the world. Alcibiades fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all life long, and I am certain that we, seeking as youth will for some unknown deed or thought, all dreamed that but to listen to this man who threw the enchantment of powers about silent and gentle things, and at last to think as he did, was the one thing worth doing and thinking and that all action and all words that lead to action were a little vulgar, a little trivial. [20]

Yeats was greatly impressed by the quietest philosophy of the Brahmin. "It was my first meeting," Yeats wrote,"with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless."[21] For the rest of his life, Yeats remained a constant student of the Indian view of life.

Yeats was further encouraged in his oriental and especially Indian studies by Madame Blavatsky, an extraordinary woman with a fertile imagination, psychic intuition and compelling personality. She had been to India and claimed to have received her secret doctrine from her "Masters," who were members of "an ancient brotherhood which was keeping the secret wisdom high in the mountain fastness of Tibet." [22] This secret doctrine proposed to make one harmonious whole of all great religions, and she expounded it in her two books, Isis Unveiled(1877) and The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy (1888). Blavatsky's

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20 W. B. Yeats, Collected Works in Verse and Prose (London, 1908), VIII,279.

21 Yeats, Autobiographies, pp.91-92.

22 Ellmann, Man and Masks, p.57.

theory had a great appeal for Yeats, for as an artist by nature he had only to add art to this all-embracing synthesis. He paid a visit to Madame Blavatsky in 1887 and joined the Theosophical Society. He remained a member for three years only. Nevertheless, the period which he spent as a member of the Blavatsky Lodge had had a profound effect on the young poet, not only supporting his belief in the supernatural, but providing him with a spiritual system which he was to shape and change to fill his own needs.

Bkavatsky's doctrine had three main tenets,[23] derived from Hindu, Buddhist and Zorastrian sources, which formed a system of cosmology. The first tenet says that there is an omnipotent God beyond human speculation. Second, there is an eternal law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, or of polarity.[24] Third, there is a Universal Oversoul identical with all individual souls, which are going through the cycle of reincarnation under the law of Karma, the action determining the condition under which one is reborn.[25] All of these ideas were later incorporated in Yeats's philosophic system.

The poems written in this period (1886-89) give a conclusive evidence of Yeats's preoccupation with Eastern themes. "From the Book

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[23] Virginia Moore, The Unicorn (New York, 1954), p.57.

[24] This doctrine is an amalgam of Hindu and Zorastrian cosmologies, and it forms the basis of Yeats's theory of the gyres as well as his cyclical view of history.

[25] This tenet is obviously the Hindu doctrine of Atman, which is the prime concept of Indian philosophic systems. Yeats was greatly attracted by this concept, which will be discussed fully later on.

of Kauri the Indian -- / section v. On the Nature of God" and "An Indian Song" appeared in The Dublin University Review in 1886. After drastic revisions these poems were later published in Crossways (1889) under the titles of "The Indian Upon God" and "The Indian To His Love" respectively. His first book of poetry, The Wanderings of Oisin and other Poems (1889), contained two more poems on Eastern subjects -- "Kanva on Himself" and "Jealousy". Both were written in 1887, and the latter poem was included in Crossways under the title of "Anashuya and Vijaya." He also wrote two short sections in "Quatrains and Aphorisms," dealing with Indian themes, which were published in the January 1886 issue of The Dublin University Review.

Yeats's critics and biographers usually dismiss these poems as naive and juvenile compositions. Menon, for example, comments, "The Indian poems are very naive . . . Except for the titles and the names, the Indian poems are, again, just romantic convention."[26] G. B. Saul confirms Menon's view as a "just comment" on the Indian poems in general.[27] I, however, think that the early Indian poems, though lacking in profundity and mastery of style, do carry much more weight than they are generally given. Besides being a record of the impact of Eastern thought on Yeats, these poems also mark his first efforts, however crude, to formulate some of his own theories about man and universe through the application

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26 V. K. Narayana Menon, The Development of William Butler Yeats (London, 1942), pp.12-13.

27 G. B. Saul, Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems (Philadelphia, 1957), p.44.

of Oriental philosophic systems. An analysis of these poems appears to support this point of view.

"ANASHUYA AND VIJAYA"

This poem presents the idyllic drama of love between Anashuya and Vijaya. The scene is laid in a little Hindu temple within a forest. The action is very simple — Anashuya is greatly perturbed because of Vijaya's affair with another village damsel, Amrita, and she prays to the gods of the Himalayas for a complete sway over Vijaya's heart. Her prayer is granted; and Vijaya, after a little conflict, takes an oath of fidelity to Anashuya.

On the surface, it seems a rather superficial story; but a closer study of the poem indicates that besides using Indian setting and characters, Yeats is here applying the Hindu and Buddhist theories of the Self in order to solve the enigma of the polarity of human personality, which is the real theme of this poem. We have Yeats's own word for it. "The little Indian dramatic scene," he wrote, "was meant to be the first scene of a play about a man loved by two women, who had the one soul between them, the one woman waking when the other slept, and knowing but daylight as the other only night. . . . I am now once more in A Vision busy with that thought, the antitheses of day and night and of moon and of sun."[28]

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28 W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems (London, 1950), 2nd edition, pp.523-524. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

Hindu philosophy conceives of the cosmos as a living, organized, and conscious whole exhibiting a polarity between matter and spirit. For matter stands the Sanskrit word prakriti, and for spirit, purusha. Both prakriti and purusha are living substances — fundamentally equal, except for dormant faculties in the one, and wakened faculties in the other. Man exhibits the same polarity as does the universe. In his physical body with its atoms, cells, organs, he is prakritic; and in his innermost thinking and feeling nature, he is purushic, because here he is one with the Infinite. Every entity has two poles — prakriti and purusha — and one or the other of them is accentuated according to the position of the entity on the evolutionary ladder. The Buddhist concept of Skandhas is also similar to the Hindu view, and it sees man as well the universe as composite creations of opposing sets of living energies.[29]

In the poem under discussion, Amrita and Anashuya stand for the purushic and prakritic poles or the higher and the lower selves of Vijaya's personality respectively. Anashuya's speeches abound in vegetable and animal images — flocks of kine, growing corn, merry lambs, for example; and Amrita, on the other hand is only vaguely referred to in the poem. The very name Amrita, however, is significant for the Sanskrit word Amrita means the liquor of heaven, the drink of the gods, the elixir of life, and immortality. It is also interesting to note that Anashuya

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29 For a fuller account of these Hindu and Buddhist concepts see Oscar Ljungstrom, Karma in Ancient and Modern Thought (Lund,1938), pp.11-12 and 26-27.

is the name of a character in the famous Sanskrit play Shukuntala by Kalidasa, the classical Indian playwright of the fifth century A.D. Therefore, it is apparent that Yeats was familiar with Kalidasa at this stage. In any case, Vijaya -- the Everyman of a morality play -- vacillates between these contrary poles, but he soon submits to Anashuya for the prakritic entities are much stronger in him than are the purushic ones. One can, thus, see here the germs of the later Yeatsian preoccupation with self and anti-self, objectivity and subjectivity, and solar and lunar phases.

"KANVA ON HIMSELF"

Kanva, the sage to whom Rig Veda is ascribed, ponders here on the problems of suffering and mortality of life, and ultimately accepts these in a stoic way as the necessary conditions of existence. Kanva's reasoning is based on the Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of samsara, reincarnation and transmigration of souls. According to this doctrine one has to undergo a cycle of rebirths governed by the law of karma until one discovers atman, the higher self,and passes beyond the sphere of change, time, and place.

The poem is marked by a note of complete passivity, and it bears the stamp of Mohini Chatterjee's direct influence on Yeats. A note by the poet, which reads like the prose draft of the poem, reveals how closely the poem follows the Brahmin's line of thought:

Somebody asked him [Mohini Chatterjee] if we should pray, but even prayer was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that

acquiescence that was his beginning of wisdom, and he answered that one should say, before sleeping: 'I have lived many lives, I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again.' Beautiful words that I spoilt once by turning them into clumsy verse. [30]

The relevant verses ran as follows:

> Hast thou not ruled among the gilded walls?
> Hast thou not known a Raja's dreamless slumber?
> Hast thou not sat of yore upon the knees
> Of myriads of beloveds, and on thine
> Have not a myriad swayed below strange trees
> In other lives? Hast thou not quaffed old wine
> By tables that were fallen into dust
> Ere yonder palm commenced his thousand years? [31]

The two short sections in "The Quatrains and Aphorisms" also bear witness to Chatterjee's influence on Yeats. Here again Yeats gives expression to Chatterjee's Vedantic philosophy that everything one perceives exists in the external world; that this is a stream which flows on, out of human control; that one is nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it may reflect nothing.[32]

The quatrains, not reprinted, ran as follows:

> Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;
> Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day;
> Not even 'I long to see thy longing over,'
> To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say.
>
> The ghosts went by me with their lips apart
> From death's late langour as these lines I read
> On Brahma's gateway, 'They within have fed
> The soul upon the ashes of the heart.' [33]

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30 Quoted by Jeffares, p.33.

31 Variorum Poems, p.724.

32 W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore, Correspondence, 1901-1937, ed. Ursula Bridge (New York, 1953), pp.67-69.

33 Variorum Poems, p.61.

THE INDIAN UPON GOD

Yeats here reveals his familiarity with the Indian philosophy of Brahma, the belief in the presence of the One in many. The lotus again appears in this poem, and it is interesting to note that the lotus is also a symbol of Brahma, the four-faced demiurge-creator, who is borne on the corolla of the flower floating on the cosmic ocean.[34] Thus, the words of the lotus are charged with meaning:

> Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
> For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
> Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide.
>
> (p.15.)

THE INDIAN TO HIS LOVE

The poem depicts an idyll of love in an Arcadian Indian setting. This is an exquisitely wrought lyric having all the langour and romance of the love poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites:

> The island dreams under the dawn
> And great boughs drop tranquillity;
> The peahens dance on a smooth lawn,
> A parrot sways upon a tree,
> Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea.
>
> Here we will moor our lonely ship
> And wander ever with woven hands,
> Murmuring softly lip to lip,
> Along the grass, along the sands,
> Murmuring how far away are the unquiet lands:
>
> (p.15.)

The Indian birds -- parrots and peahens -- give a kind of authenticity to this idyllic scene. There is not much in this poem, but it is a

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34 Zimmer, Myths and Symbols, p.61.

good example of Yeats's romantic concept of India as a fairy-land of imagination, beauty, love, poetry, and spirit. It was mainly in search of this dream-land that Yeats became involved in the maze of Eastern thought; however, his interest in philosophy had an essentially aesthetic origin.

Thus, the external and internal evidence establishes the fact that Yeats was profoundly influenced by Oriental thought during 1886-1889. However, in the next two decades (1890-1910), a tremendous change came upon Yeats and his poetry. He fell passionately in love with Maud Gonne, and in order to win her, he had to come down from his Arcadian dream-land to the harsh world of action. Soon, he was feverishly involved in the Irish National Movement, and planned to bring about a new intellectual revolution by disseminating literature, folk-lore, and legends of Ireland through literary societies, theatre, and the press.[35] His poetry also underwent a corresponding change, and for about twenty years Yeats seemed to have had nothing to do with the East. "From the moment when I began The Wanderings of Oisin," Yeats wrote, "my subject-matter became Irish."[36] With his second book of verse, The Rose, the Indian almost disappears from the scene and the Irish myths of Cuchulain, Fergus, Diarmuid, and Grania appear instead.

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35 Yeats formed the Irish Literary Society of London and the National Literary Society of Dublin in 1891-92. From 1894 to 1899 he was busy with the Irish Dramatic Movement, and in 1896 he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, an underground organization formed to bring about Irish independence.

36 Yeats, Collected Poems, p.523.

Nevertheless, the mask of the man of action, which Yeats put on for the sake of Maud Gonne, could not alienate him from the poet and the visionary in him. Even during these two decades, when his subject-matter had become Irish, he never really lost interest in Eastern thought, traces of which are recognizable in the poetry of this period. "Fergus and the Druid" (1892) and "He thinks of his past greatness when a part of the constellations of heaven" (1898) serve as ready examples.

In both poems Yeats makes use of the doctrine of reincarnation, though reincarnation is not his main theme here. He makes Fergus say:

> I have been many things —
> A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
> Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
> An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
> A king sitting upon a chair of gold —
> (p.37.)

The desolate lover of the second poem also remembers two of his former incarnations when he lived in the Celtic country of the gods and the happy dead.

It is interesting to note that Yeats had by now discovered hints of the rebirth cycle in ancient Irish myths, but this discovery only confirmed his belief in a universal subjective tradition. Madame Blavatsky and McGregor Mathers played an important role in the formation of this idea.[37] As mentioned earlier, Yeats had been impressed by Blavatsky's

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37 Yeats came under the influence of McGregor Mathers, the author of The Kabbalah Unveiled, shortly before he was compelled to resign from the Theosophical Society. In March 1890, Yeats was initiated into the Inner Circle of the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn by Mathers, and he remained a member for nearly thirty years. The Hermetic Students laid great emphasis on symbolism and Kabbalistic magic, which opened a new world for Yeats.

theory that all religions had one root, namely, Brahminism and Buddhism.[38] Now the comparative study of different religious symbolic systems and of various traditions of magic, carried out under the impact of Mathers, revealed the identity of all these diverse systems, and it confirmed the postulate of ". . . a tradition of belief older than any European Church."[39] Thus, in the notes to The Wind Among The Reeds, we find him drawing parallels between Celtic, Indian, and even Assyrian symbolism,[40] while the poems themselves are an amalgam of images and ideas from the most diverse faiths. It is, therefore, obvious that even in the period when Yeats's subject-matter had become ostensibly Irish, he did not lose interest in the Orient.[41]

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38 H. P. Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled (New York, 1877), II, 639.

39 Yeats, Autobiographies, p.265.

40 W. B. Yeats, The Wind Among The Reeds (London, 1900), pp.74-75.

41 Generally, Yeats's critics and biographers think that Yeats completely forgot the Eastern themes during 1890-1911. However, I think that the influence of Eastern thought on Yeats was pervasive and not intermittent, and that faint echoes of Oriental thought can be traced, as I have shown above, in the verse of this period.

Chapter II

New Light From The East: Tagore 1912-1919, with remarks on some poems 1920-1924

In 1912, Yeats felt his blood stirred, as he said later, by Rabindranath Tagore, India's foremost modern poet, and he continued to be inspired by Tagore for a long time to come. The two poets were to have a twenty-seven-year-long association between them, which had an important impact on both, yet this aspect has not been high-lighted by the critics and biographers of these literary artists. To Yeats, Tagore represented the spirit of the East, and he confirmed the faith that the Irish poet had placed in the validity of Asian philosophy. For Tagore, Yeats was a symbol of the creativity and dynamism of the West.[1]

Tagore came to England in June, 1912 and he stayed with William Rothenstein, the artist whom he had met in Calcutta. On his way to England Tagore translated his Bengali poems into English, and presented them to his English host. Rothenstein was delighted with these translations and he sent copies of them to Yeats, A. C. Bradley, and Stopford Brooke.[2]

Yeats was equally enthusiastic about these Bengali poems and their writer. Later, he recorded his zeal for these translations in his

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1 Harold M. Hurwitz, "Yeats and Tagore," Comparative Literature, XVI(1964), 55-64.

2 William Rothenstein, Men and Memories: 1900-1912 (London,1932), p.262.

introduction to Gitanjali (1913), the book of poems selected from the translations that Rothenstein had sent him. "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days," he wrote, "reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger see how much it moved me." [3]

Yeats first met Tagore on the evening of June 27, 1912 at Rothenstein's.[4] A week later, the India Society organized a "Tagore Evening" in which Yeats gave a reading from Tagore's poetry to a select gathering that included Ezra Pound.[5] The audience was deeply impressed by Tagore's poetry, and this important event launched Tagore into the English literary world. Pound expressed his response to Tagore with great excitement:

> Hearing his first Greek professor, hearing for the first time the curious music of Theocritus, coming for the first time upon that classic composure which Dante had a little suggested in his description of limbo, Boccacio [sic] must have felt, I think, little differently from what we have felt here, we few who have been privileged to receive the work of Mr. Tagore before the public had heard it.[6]

Afterwards, Yeats and Tagore became very close friends. Yeats helped Tagore in revising and improving his translations, and Tagore

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3 W. B. Yeats, "Gitanjali," Introduction, Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p.390.

4 On this date, Yeats sent a letter to Mrs. Emery (Florence Farr, the actress), which began as follows: "Dear Mrs. Emery: I do not think I can get to you this afternoon. The usual theatre distractions draw me to Lindsay house, and at 7:30 I dine with Rothenstein to meet Tagore, the Hindu poet. . . ." Allan Wade, ed., The Letters of W. B. Yeats (London,1954), p.569.

5 Hurwitz, p.56.

6 Ezra Pound, "Rabindranath Tagore," Fortnightly Review, XCIII (March,1913), 573.

wrote to him years later of the "great mastery of the English language," which he owed to "intimate instruction in a quiet little room off Euston Road."[7] Yeats took the manuscript of these Bengali poems to Normandy in August 1912 where he stayed with the Gonnes, and he worked on the poems as well as an introduction to Gitanjali. The poems deeply moved the young Iseult Gonne, who asked Yeats to get her a Bengali grammar and a dictionary so that she might read Tagore in the original.[8] Yeats's preoccupation with Tagore and his work during this period is recorded by James H. Cousins, a minor Irish poet who was a neighbour of Yeats's in Normandy. "That summer," Cousins wrote,". . . his after-dinner chantings of the newly discovered Indian poet's prose lyrics. . . to a small company of guests, including my wife and myself, were like the ritual of a new era."[9]

In November 1912 the India Society published Gitanjali with Yeats's introduction. Yeats had selected and edited the poems, but, according to Allan Wade,"he made hardly any alterations in the English of the translations. . . ."[10] The highly lyrical and impressionistic introduction to Gitanjali was in keeping with the essence of these poems.

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7 Quoted by Hone, p.281.

8 Ibid.,p.281.

9 Quoted in the introduction to A.C. Bose's Three Mystic Poets: A Study of W. B. Yeats, AE and Rabindranath Tagore (Kolhapur, India, 1945),p.v.

10 Wade, pp. 569-570, note 3.

Writing to Yeats on April 20, 1913, Bridges expressed great admiration for the introduction to Gitanjali -- "there is no one but you who could write so."[11] Besides bringing out his great esteem for Tagore, this introduction also throws light on Yeats's own assumptions about art; and, therefore, the introduction to Gitanjali deserves a close study.

The introduction to Gitanjali reveals that two qualities of Tagore's work particularly attracted Yeats. The first characteristic that fascinated him was that Tagore's poetry reflected an unbroken civilization where art, religion, and philosophy were inseparable from one and another. "A whole people, a whole civilization," Yeats remarked, "immensely strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, . . . our voice as in a dream."[12] The idea of "Unity of Culture" had always appealed to Yeats, and he constantly endeavoured to restore the pre-Renaissance harmony between the European artist and his audience. Yeats wrote in his Autobiographies that early in life he "began to plot and scheme how one might seal with the right image the soft wax of growing Irish disunity before it began to harden . . .",[13] and at another place he wrote of his need of a poetic tradition inseparable from religion, mythology or philosophy:" . . . I wished for a world, where I could discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and in

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11 Ibid., p.580, note 1.

12 Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.392.

13 Yeats, Autobiographies, p.62.

poems only, but in tiles round the chimney piece and in the hangings that kept out the draught." [14] Thus, he responded to Gitanjali with great fervour:

> These lyrics . . . display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. If the civilisation of Bengal remains unbroken, . . . something of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads. [15]

Secondly, in Tagore's poetry, Yeats also discovered what the writings of European saints, with the exception of St. Francis, lacked, namely, a union of"the cry of the flesh and the cry of the soul." [16] The eternal conflict between body and soul, between heart and intellect was a major preoccupation of Yeats. He rejected the ascetic view on the subject and aimed at a synthesis of the two poles of human personality, which he saw as a union of opposites. Tagore seemed to confirm Yeats's point of view:

> Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.
> Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.
> . . . No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.
> Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love. [17]

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[14] Ibid., p.115.

[15] Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.390.

[16] Ibid., p.392.

[17] Rabindranath Tagore, Collected Poems and Plays (London,1952), p.34.

Tagore's poetry, though highly metaphysical, is couched in earthly images. "Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch-shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the parching heat," Yeats notes, "are images of the moods of that heart in union or in separation [from God] ; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing upon a lute . . . is God Himself." [18]

Perhaps under the impact of Tagore and other Eastern influences[19] a new note of healthy affirmation of life appears in Yeats's poetry of this period. "Solomon to Sheba", "On Woman", "Michael Robartes and the Dancer", "Solomon and the Witch", "The Tower", and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" bear witness to this new attitude. Solomon, with Sheba sitting on his knees, wisely affirms that passion is wisdom's finest fruit:

> Said Solomon to Sheba,
> And kissed her Arab eyes,
> 'There's not a man or woman
> Born under the skies
> Dare match in learning with us two,
> And all day long we have found
> There's not a thing but love can make
> The world a narrow pound.'
> (p.155.)

Michael Robartes also presents the thesis that one must learn to think with the whole body rather than with the mind, and all his illustrations support this view: Athene's beating breast and vigorous thigh reveal a "knowledge" superior to that contained in any book; paintings by Michaelangelo and Veronese make flesh eloquent:

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18 Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp.391-392.

19 The other Eastern influences responsible for this new development in Yeats's poetry are Persian mysticism and Tantraism, which will be discussed later on.

Paul Veronese
And all his sacred company
Imagined bodies all their days
By the lagoon you love so much,
For proud, soft, ceremonious proof
That all must come to sight and touch;
While Michael Angelo's Sistine roof,
His 'Morning' and his 'Night' disclose
How sinew that has been pulled tight,
Or it may be loosened in repose,
Can rule by supernatural right
Yet be but sinew.
(p.198.)

In the "Tower" Yeats tells us of his faith in the sanctity of the senses:

And I declare my faith:
I mock Plotinus' thought,
And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul.
(p.223.)

And in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" Yeats reaffirms:

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men.
(p.267.)

It was not surprising that Yeats should have been attracted by a man who resembled him in many ways. Both Yeats and Tagore were romantic by temperament and religious by instinct. Even socially and politically their positions were similar. Both belonged to distinguished families, which were associated with the national movements of independence from the British rule.[20] Besides, India had a special appeal for Yeats

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20 It is interesting to note that Yeats considered sending Tagore to Ireland in 1913. Tagore, however, refused visiting Ireland, although Maud Gonne thought he might make himself useful there. See Hone, p.282.

and , as observed earlier, he had come to see a close parallel between the cultures of India and of Ireland. This was immediately noticed by James Cousins who was with Yeats in Normandy in the summer of 1912. "We knew then," he remarked, "why Jubainville, the French scholar, found parallels between the old celtic religion and the religion of India, and why an Irish Goddess was cured of a legendary illness . . . by drinking the milk of two cows that two Irish Gods had brought from India. . . . We were one in spirit, we pioneers of the new Irish movement in poetry, and the poet from India." [21]

Besides the resemblance in their personalities, there are many points of contact between the poetry of Tagore and Yeats as both shared a common philosophic tradition. In the previous chapter, I noted Yeats's familiarity with various Hindu and Buddhist concepts, especially, the doctrines of reincarnation, Atman, Unity in Diversity, and the theory of the Self. Gitanjali is replete with these concepts, which are expressed in a deeper mystical vein:

> The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
> It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
> It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and flow. [22]

. . . Thou settest a barrier in thine own being and then callest thy

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21 Quoted in the introduction to Bose, Three Mystic Poets, p.vi.

22 Tagore, p.33.

severed self in myriad notes. This thy self-separation has taken body in me.
. . . The great pageant of thee and me has overspread the sky. With the tune of thee and me all the air is vibrant, and all ages pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me. 23

Despite these parallels, it is hard to determine whether Tagore exerted an appreciable influence on Yeats's thought and style; for Yeats was familiar with Indian philosophy long before he came into contact with Tagore, and his style was already fully developed by the time of their first meeting. Ellmann feels, however, that Yeats may have taken the theme of his poem "An Image from a Past Life" from Tagore's "In the Dusky Path of a Dream," which he included in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse;[24] it begins, "In the dusky path of a dream I went to seek the love who was mine in a former life." [25] Another poem of Yeats, "Owen Aherne and his Dancers," bears witness to the direct influence of Tagore's poem "The tame bird was in a cage, the free bird was in the forest." [26] The very words of Tagore's poem are repeated by Yeats in the line: "Let the cage bird and the cage bird mate and the wild bird mate in the wild."

However, Yeats became critical of Tagore's later poetry when he realized that Tagore did not hold similar views on art and philosophy. He disapproved of Tagore's Sadhna Lectures on the Upanishads, delivered at Harvard and London in 1913, for their vagueness.

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23 Ibid.,p. 34.

24 Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (London, 1954), p.257.

25 Tagore, p.129.

26 Ibid., p.93.

Tagore's later poetry also seemed too abstract and metaphysical. In a conversation with the Indian Professor Bose, Yeats complained that his friend Tagore wrote "too much about God. . . . My mind resents the vagueness of all such references. . . . I have fed upon the philosophy of the Upanishads all my life, but there is an aspect of Tagore's mysticism that I dislike." [27] He also deplored the absence of tragedy in Tagore's poetry while his own verse was increasingly being tinged with a tragic hue. Moreover, he was dismayed by the quality of Tagore's translations. In a letter to Rothenstein in May 1935, Yeats burst out, "Damn Tagore. We got out three good books, Sturge Moore and I, and then, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English." [28]

Although Yeats did not approve of much of Tagore's later work, the fact remains that Tagore had a great value for him. Tagore's work reflecting, Yeats felt, the spirit of India, was a stimulus to the Irish poet and he now widened the scope of his enquiry into contemporary Indian literature. Sarojini Naidu, the Indian poetess and nationalist, was always welcome at his "Monday Evenings." His attention was also drawn to the works of Toru Dutt, another Bengali poet.[29] The influence of Tagore, as a matter of fact, went much deeper than mere verbal or

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27 Quoted by Hone, p.491.

28 Wade, p.834.

29 Hone, p.282.

stylistic parallels. He symbolised to the Irish poet the power, the wisdom, and the elevation that could be attained through a study of Oriental literature; and at the same time he confirmed the trust that Yeats had put in the validity of Asian philosophy.

Chapter III The World of Philosophy -- Yeatsian Synthesis

1925-1939

From his early twenties Yeats was in search of a centre of creative meaning, a 'religion' capable of supplying 'metaphors for poetry.' He looked for it, as we have previously noted, in magic, astrology, occultism, symbolism, séances, crystal-gazing, Neo-Platonism, and Oriental philosophies -- almost anywhere except Christianity and Marxism, both of which he rejected for personal reasons. Each one of these fired his imagination in varying degrees, but his problem was to integrate these experiences into one organic whole. The System,[1] expounded in A Vision (1925), was the product of his life-long effort at such a synthesis, which provided him with a basic frame-work that made all that he imagined 'part of the one history.' In an essay of 1919 he wrote:

One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four, this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we

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The Yeatsian System is a blend of philosophy, mythology, and expository symbolism derived from diverse sources. The impact of Eastern thought on this System is immediately recognizable, and the book is full of references to Oriental religious and philosophic systems. The 1937 edition of A Vision especially bears the stamp of Indian thought.

In any case, the Wheel containing the twenty-eight lunar and solar phases of the human personality, is based on the Hindu concept of the dark and the bright fortnights of the moon. The dark fortnight is taken as the moon lost in the sun by Indian astrology. One who moves towards the full moon attains perfect enlightenment or Turiya Smadhi, whereas he who follows the dark of the moon also has a way out of the circles of the Wheel through Sushupti, complete darkness and absorption in God. Smadhi and Sushupti are the two opposing stages in Hindu mysticism, and both lead to the same objective. Yeats acknowledges his debt to this

are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity.' For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I have tested all I did by that sentence. I had three interests, interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other. . . . Now all three are, I think, one, or rather all three are a discrete expression of a single conviction.[2]

This integration brought Yeats's poetry to its full strength at last, and the System also convinced him of the use of philosophy to the artist as he now realized that great poetry does not grow out of flabby thought. Thus, with renewed interest he took to the study of philosophy from 1925 onwards in order to apprehend reality as well as find a support for his own line of thought. In the nineteen-twenties and 'thirties especially, he read fairly widely in Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, Vico, Leibnitz, Whitehead, Russell, Hegel, G.E. Moore, Berkeley, and Eastern philosophies, searching out whatever he could find on the connection between the sphere of reality and the gyres of illusory appearance, on the relation of the antinomies, on the masks of human personality, and allied subjects.[3]

These philosophic investigations made him turn more and more towards Asia. Zen Buddhism was now his passion for a while. In 1926 he wrote to Sturge Moore: "Shen Hsin said 'Scrub your mirror lest dust

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Hindu concept in his introduction to Shri Purohit Swami's translation of The Holy Mountain by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa.

Furthermore, the other fundamental concept of the System, namely, the cyclical view of history or the theory of gyres, is also based on the Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies.

2 W. B. Yeats, Explorations (London,1962), p.263.

3 Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p.216.

dim it' — I shorten the sentence — but Hui-neng replied 'Seeing that nothing exists how can the dust dim it?' Zen art was the result of a contemplation that saw all becoming through rhythm a single act of the mind." [4] His friend A.E. noted that Yeats may have owed his latter-day acceptance of all life — good and bad, to his study of Zen.[5] Further, Zen conceives of two opposite energy modes, Yin and Yang, springing from and reconciled by Tao, and this doctrine of correspondence and polarity attracted Yeats in particular.

Then in 1931 he met a Hindu swami, Shri Purohit, a Vedantist philosopher. Vedanta, the philosophy that interprets the Upanishads, is the most profound of the six systems of Hindu thought. Yeats, under the impact of Swami, was soon immersed in Vedantic philosophy. He was already familiar with this philosophy through his early contacts with Mohini Chatterjee, and in 1928, after an interval of forty-two years, he re-stated the theme of "Kanva on Himself" in his poem "Mohini Chatterjee" affirming his belief in the Brahmin's teaching:

> I asked if I should pray,
> But the Brahmin said,
> 'Pray for nothing, say
> Every night in bed,
> "I have been a king,
> I have been a slave,
> Nor is there anything,
> Fool, rascal, knave,

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4 Yeats and Moore, Correspondence, p.68.

5 A.E., The Living Torch (London,1937), p.93.

That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain."'
. . . I add in commentary
'Old lovers yet may have
All that time denied --
Grave is heaped on grave
That they be satisfied --
Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade,
Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.'
(pp.279-280.)

For four years Yeats and Swami were closely associated, until in 1936 Swami returned to India. During their friendship, Yeats wrote introductions to Swami's autobiography, to a partial autobiography by Swami's master, and to Swami's translation and annotation of Patanjali's Aphorisms of Yoga. In 1936, Swami and Yeats collaborated in the translation of the Upanishads. These essays and introductions reveal much about Yeats himself. In Swami and his teachings he met "Asia at its finest" and it seemed as if he found ". . . something I have waited for since I was seventeen years old."[6] And he spoke of how he and Lady Gregory, in questioning the cottagers about apparitions long time ago, had

. . . got down, as it were into some fibrous darkness, into some matrix out of which everything has come; . . . but there was always something lacking. . . . When Shri Purohit Swami . . . fitted everything into an ancient discipline, a philosophy that satisfied the intellect, I found

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6 W. B. Yeats, "The Holy Mountain," Essays and Introductions (London,1961), p. 428.

7 Ibid., p.429.

all I wanted.[7]

The poetry of his last years is also deeply imbued with Asian and especially Indian metaphysics. I shall now examine a few poems of this period in detail in support of this view.

"CHOSEN" (p.311.)

This poem, a celebration of the physical union of man and woman, is based on a subtle combination of three strands of Eastern thought: the belief in a pre-natal choice of lovers, the doctrine of samsara or transmigration of souls, and the Indo-Persian mystical cult of achieving union with the Absolute through the senses.

The belief in a pre-determined choice of the "lot of love" in the pre-natal state of being is a commonplace Indian idea. This idea also stipulates that usually the lovers get separated either owing to the entry of one of them into the material world all alone or because one of the two has to take a different material shape on account of karma, the action determining the condition under which one is reborn. The atmans (souls or true selves) of the lovers, however, continue to hunger for each other until they are united once again; and, therefore, true love is not affected by the turnings of the Wheel.

Yeats probably got this idea from Tagore's poetry, and he wrote a couple of poems on this theme, for example, "An Image from a Past Life," which is based on Tagore's poem "In the dusky path of a dream I went to seek the love who was mine in a former life."[8] Yeats discovered

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8 Tagore, p.129.

the same thought in the 14th-century Persian mystic poet Hafiz Shirazi, and he based his poem "His Bargain" on the one hundred and seventy-third poem of Hafiz's Divan. He quoted Hafiz's poem in a speech in Diarmuid and Grania, which he and George Moore wrote together in 1902; "Life of my life, I knew you before I was born, I made a bargain with this brown hair before the beginning of time and it shall not be broken through unending time."[9]

The lover in this poem has already entered the physical world, and the beloved can no longer bear the pangs of separation. She, therefore, takes the crucial decision of coming to the material world in search of her lover and struggles for"an image on the track / Of the whirling Zodiac." What she in fact chooses is almost the endless and agonising cycle of love in the material world, night followed by day, union by separation: the wheel of human existence ceaselessly turning, and providing no possibility of consummation. The woman, however, accepts suffering as the condition for the realization of true love and she admits:

> I struggled with the horror of daybreak,
> I chose it for my lot!

This acceptance of suffering on the part of the woman, nevertheless, is not completely stoical for she knows the compensatory advantages to be derived from "pleasure with a man", though that pleasure is far from

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9 George Moore and W. B. Yeats, Diarmuid and Grania (Dublin Magazine, XXVI, April-June 1951), 21. Quoted by Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p.279.

being sensual. The lovers meet for a fleeting moment only, yet they achieve the consummation of physical love: ". . . his heart my heart did seem. . . ." This physical perfection of love now leads them to the ultimate goal of an Indo-Persian mystic, fana-fil-haq, the mergence in the Absolute:

> And both adrift on the miraculous stream
> Where -- wrote a learned astrologer --
> The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.

The sphere or the thirteenth cone is Yeats's symbol for nirvana, the union of the Self into the Impersonal Self and release from the cycle of incarnations. The Zodiac, on the other hand, represents the circular movements of the gyres, contrasted with the stillness of the sphere which contains and transcends them. Further, the sphere is an appropriate symbol as it signifies perfection and the idea of the Unity of Being. In the moment of knowledge the atman discovers that it is one with Brahman, the Universal Spirit, and realizes that all creation forms one circular Chain of Being.

Here we may note that Yeats diverges from Vedantic Hindu thought by making the lovers attain nirvana through the senses. For Yeats total spiritual experience is not possible without the fulfilment of physical love, and this idea is the distinguishing feature of certain Indo-Persian mystic cults. I have already noted Yeats's familiarity with the Persian mystic poet Hafiz, who was an exponent of the idea that vasl-i-majazi, physical union, led to vasl-i-haqiqi, spiritual union with God; and, therefore, the physical union of man and woman was the most effective

expression of the achievement (in one moment) of complete fulfilment both on the human and cosmic plane.[10] This Persian concept particularly appealed to Yeats who was always concerned with the problem of resolving the duality of physical existence. Sexual intercourse, Yeats realized, was a momentary union of antinomies, and thus, it led one to a consciousness of the Unity in Diversity. Blake had showed him this path, and the East confirmed it. Yeats acknowledged his debt to the East by sending the hero of his unpublished novel, The Speckled Bird, to Persia in order to improve Christianity by reconciling it with natural emotions and particularly with sexual love:

> He was going to the East now to Arabia now to Persia, where he would find among the common people so soon as he had learnt their language some lost doctrine of reconciliation; the philosophic poets had made sexual love their principal symbol of a divine love and he had seen somewhere in a list of untranslated Egyptian MSS. that certain of them dealt with love as a polthugic [sic] power. In Ireland he [found] wonderful doctrines among the poor, doctrines which would have been the foundation of the old Irish poets, and surely he would find somewhere in the East, a doctrine that would reconcile religion with the natural emotions, and at the same time explain these emotions. All the arts sprang from sexual love and there they could only come again, the garb of the religion when that reconciliation had taken place. [11]

Another likely source of this cult of achieving the spiritual union with the Absolute through the senses is the Tantric Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, which shifts the accent to the positive aspects of

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10 This concept also forms the recurrent note of Sabk-i-Hindi, the Indian School of Persian poetry. I have, however, no evidence that Yeats was familiar with any other Persian poet except Hafiz. Nevertheless, Mosada and "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid" suggest that Yeats did read some more Muslim literature than mere Hafiz.

11 Quoted by Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p.52.

life.[12] The Vedantic thinker holds that nirvana can only be attained by turning away from the distracting allure of the world and worshipping with single-minded attention the formless Brahman-Atman; to the Tantric, however, this notion seems pathological. For the Tantric, matter, which is maya (illusion) in Vedanta, is sublimated into the goddess Sakti, the Eternal Female Principle of Life. Hence, sex has a high symbolic role in Tantraism. It is an essential principle of Tantric thought that man in general must rise through and by means of nature, not by rejection of nature. Thus, under the impact of Tantraism the Hindu and Buddhist iconograpies always depict Sakti-Siva, Radha-Krishna, Adi-Buddha, and Yab-Yum in close embrace.[13]

I. "RIBH AT THE TOMB OF BAILE AND AILLINN" (p.327.)

Though the "Supernatural Songs" are put in the mouth of an Irish hermit, they express a distinct Indian philosophy. By this time Yeats had come to see an affinity between Celtic lore and Indian mythology. In his preface to the translation of Upanishads, he states, "It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East, in or out of church, we are turning not less to the ancient west and north; the one fragment of pagan Irish philosophy came down, 'the Song of Amergin', seems Asiatic."[14] During the years when he composed these "Supernatural Songs", Yeats was

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12 Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India (New York,1956), pp.140-150.

13 Zimmer, Myths and Symbols, pp.99-102 and 146.

14 Shree Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats, trans., The Ten Principal Upanishads (London,1936), p.11.

studying the Bhagavad-Gita or "Lord's Song" under Swami Purohit, and he imagined some reconciliation between East and West; as he wrote to Ethel Mannin in June 1935, "I want to plunge myself into impersonal poetry, to get rid of the bitterness, irritation and hatred my work in Ireland has brought into my soul. I want to make a last song, sweet and exultant, a sort of European geeta, or rather my geeta, not doctrine but song." [15] "Supernatural Songs" are the fragments of that Yeatsian Geeta.

In the first song "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn", Yeats again affirms his faith in the necessity of the senses in attaining spiritual union with the Absolute. After the consummation of their physical love, Baile and Aillinn get mukti, release from the cycle of incarnation, and now like the lovers of "Chosen" they become one with the Brahman, the Universal Spirit, and reveal themslves in the shape of a "circle on the grass" on the anniversary of their first embrace. The yogi Ribh can see through reality denied to other mortals for he has observed the tapasia, mystic discipline, and his eyes "Made acquiline" by "water, herb and solitary prayer . . . are open to that light."

II "RIBH DENOUNCES PATRICK" (p.328.)

The vision of reality, attained by a subjection to yoga, makes Ribh reject the Christian Trinity in the second song. He denounces

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15 Letters, p.836.

the Christian Trinity for he feels that it is incomplete as it does not include the female principle of life. "Man, woman, child(a daughter or a son), / That's how all natural or supernatural stories run," he argues. It is obvious, though not specifically stated, that he rejects the Christian Trinity in favour of the Hindu Trinity, which does include the female principle. The post-Vedic Hindu Triad is composed of two male gods, Vishnu (the preserver), Shiva (the destroyer) and the female earthly goddess, Shakti (the Mother Goddess).[16]

After denouncing Saint Patrick for preaching an all-masculine Trinity, Ribh goes on to affirm the Hindu concept of Atman:

> Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.
> As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets, Godhead begets Godhead,
> For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine Tablet said.

According to this doctrine, atman (transcendental self or true self) is one with Brahman, the Universal Spirit. It is the unchanged and persistent identity which continues in the midst of all change. However, maya, illusion, mocks the perceiving, cogitating, and intuitive faculties at every turn. The Self is hidden deep. But when the Self is known there is no maya, i.e., no macrocosm or microcosm -- no world. It recognizes that it is Brahman -- Tat Tvam Asi ("That art thou"). The concept of Atman fascinated Yeats more than anything else in the whole Indian philosophy, and it is this doctrine that differentiates Hinduism sharply

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16 Arthur Llewellyn Basham, "Hinduism," Encyclopaedia Britannica, XI (1966), 510.

from other modes of thought. In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism the complete mergence of the individual in God is not possible, and even in the height of ecstasy, when God and soul seem most closely united, the soul stays soul, and God stays God. On the contrary, Hinduism sees the finite as part of the infinite.

The Mandookya-Upanishad analyses the Self into four categories or stages of development. The first condition of the Self is "the waking condition"[17] — the earthly state of being wherein "the Self enjoys coarse matter."[18] Ribh has this condition of the Self in mind when he talks of common people "damped by the body or the mind", and hence incapable of pure love that leads to the knowledge of Atman-Brahman.

In the fourth stanza, Ribh re-states the entire argument. All creation is a reflection of the infinite, but since sub-lunary lovers are incapable of self-consuming fire, they do not comprehend the reality:

> The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity,
> But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air, share God that is but three,
> And could beget or bear themselves could they but love as He.

The reference to finite creation as "mirror-scaled serpent" is worth noticing. Hindu cosmology postulates a universe immensely long in duration passing through a continuous process of development and decline.[19] The cosmic cycle begins with the "Day of Brahma", known as kalpa. At the

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17 Swami and Yeats, p.60. See also Essays and Introductions, p.474 ff.

18 Ibid., p.60.

19 Basham, p.509.

beginning of this day Vishnu lies asleep on the cobra Sheesha, symbolising endless time, who flows on the cosmic ocean. From Vishnu's navel there grows a lotus, and from its bud is born the god Brahma who creates the universe on Vishnu's behalf. At the end of one kalpa, a period of 4,320,000,000 years, the world is destroyed by Vishnu, and the god sleeps for a further kalpa or "Night of Brahma", and then the cycle starts again.[20] The point is that the gods Vishnu and Brahma are united with the serpent Sheesha (symbolising time, which is an aspect of physical universe), and therefore the image is a beautiful expression of the idea that finite nature is a reflection of the infinite.

It may also be noted that Ribh, in this song, is in the second stage of Om or Self, defined by the Mandookya-Upanishad in these words: ". . . The second is the mental condition, perception turned inward, . . . wherein the Self enjoys subtle matter. This is known as the dreaming condition." [21]

III "RIBH IN ECSTASY" (p.329.)

In the third song Ribh passes on to the third stage of the development of Self. This is the ecstatic stage, defined by the Mandookya-Upanishad as follows,". . . This undreaming sleep is the third condition, the intellectual condition. Because of his union with the Self and his

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20 It may be noted that Yeats's cyclical view of history is based on this concept.

21 Swami and Yeats, p.60.

undecided knowledge of it, he is filled with joy, he knows his joy; his mind is illuminated." [22] Ribh is now filled with joy of self-knowledge:

> . . . My soul had found
> All happiness in its own cause or ground.

However, since he is uncertain of the source of this joy (which springs from a dim consciousness of the unity of Self and Brahman), he has to resume the "common round of day."

IV "THERE"(p.329.)

The fourth song corresponds to the fourth condition of the Self, technically known as turiya, intuitional consciousness, when one has a vision of ultimate reality -- the mukti (release) from samsara (cycle of incarnations) leading to nirvana, where one becomes a part of Brahman, the Thirteenth Cone, which is a sphere:

> There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
> There all the serpent-tails are bit,
> There all the gyres converge in one,
> There all the planets drop in the Sun.

VI "HE AND SHE" (p,331.)

This song is the poetic version of samadhi, the state of the merging of consciousness with the being of the Self or the final moment of mergence of the individual self into the impersonal self. In this state the consciousness of the devotee transforms itself into Brahman,

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22 Ibid., p.60.

if to Brahman's question -- "Who are you?" the Self answers, Tat Tvam Asi ("That art thou"), and only then it passes out of the circles of incarnation, and it looks around and sees nothing but Himself, and it utters with joy,"It is I." [23] The soul cries out "I am I, am I" and finds ananda (bliss):

> She sings as the moon sings:
> 'I am I, am I;
> The greater grows my light
> The further that I fly'.
> All creation shivers
> With that sweet cry.

XII "MERU" (p.333.)

In this song Yeats, in the person of Ribh, finally declares that the vision of ultimate reality can only be attained through the bleary eyes of a yogi meditating on Mt. Everest or Meru, the vertical axis of the world. Yeats affirms his faith in Indian philosophy and he bids farewell to the West:

> Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
> Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
> Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
> Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
> Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
> That day brings round the night, that before dawn
> His glory and his monuments are gone.

Thus, we see that Yeats's later poetry is deeply tinged with Oriental metaphysics. However, it does not mean that Yeats was converted

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23 Ibid., p.119.

to Hinduism or Buddhism or any other creed. His interest in philosophy, as noted in the previous pages, was purely aesthetic. When he was twenty, Yeats proposed at the first meeting of the Hermetic Society that "whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion." [24] Here we get to the root of Yeats's interest in esoteric doctrines. Though convinced that he was looking for a new philosophy and a new religion, his search was always a search not for thought but for art. Philosophy and religion were for him the formal patterning of the visionary images expressed in poetry and in the arts. In this quest for a popular subjective tradition where religion, philosophy, and poetry were made of the self-same stuff, Yeats undertook a spiritual journey to the East and the gods of the Himalyas granted him the boon — "metaphors for poetry."

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24 Yeats, Autobiographies, p.90.

Conclusion

Yeats rebelled against Western tradition, both religious and scientific, at an early stage of his career, and went to the East in his search for "metaphors for poetry." He came across several guides on this spiritual journey to the East. Of these George Russell (AE), the poet and mystic, was the first person who gave a definite shape to Yeats's metaphysical leanings and introduced him formally to the maze of Eastern thought at the impressionable age of nineteen. Later, through his connections with the Dublin Hermetic Society, the Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats met Mohini Chatterjee, Madame Blavatsky, and McGregor Mathers. It was mainly under the influence of these theosophists that Yeats studied Eastern literature, philosophy, and symbolism in earnest, and this training shaped the entire course of his future development. From then onwards he constantly looked towards the Orient for enlightenment.

The poems written in this early period (1886-89) give a conclusive evidence of Yeats's preoccupation with Eastern themes. These early Indian poems carry much more weight than they are generally given by Yeats's critics and biographers. These poems mark Yeats's first efforts to formulate some of his own theories about man and universe through the application of Oriental philosophic systems. In the next two decades Yeats's subject-matter did become Irish, but he never really lost interest

in Eastern thought, traces of which are recognizable in the poetry of this period.

In 1912 Yeats met Tagore, India's foremost modern poet, and this meeting gave a great impetus to his Eastern and especially Indian studies. The two poets were to have a twenty-seven-year-long association which had an important impact on both. However, this aspect has not received due attention from Yeats's critics and biographers. Tagore's poetry fascinated Yeats for it seemed to embody two qualities which he admired most — "the union of the cry of the flesh and the cry of the soul" and "Unity of Culture." There are many points of contact between the works of these two writers, but the influence of Tagore goes much deeper than mere stylistic or verbal echoes. Tagore symbolised to the Irish poet the spirit of the East, and he confirmed the trust that Yeats had put in the validity of Asian philosophy.

At this stage, Yeats also discovered Hafiz Shirazi, a fourteenth century Persian mystic poet, who strengthened Yeats's belief in the sanctity of the senses. He also read The Arabian Nights with great interest, and his attention was drawn towards certain Indo-Persian mystical cults, which aim at union with the Absolute through the senses. He also learnt of the Tantric Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, which shifts the accent to the positive aspects of life. Under the impact of Tagore, Hafiz, and Tantraism a new note of healthy affirmation of life appears in Yeats's poetry of this period. Again, these Eastern influences responsible for

the development of this highly significant attitude in Yeats, have not been duly noted by Yeatsian scholars.

In 1925 Yeats expounded his System in A Vision. The impact of Eastern thought, especially Hindu and Buddhist, on this System is immediately recognizable. The System brought Yeats's poetry to its full strength, and it also convinced him of the use of philosophy to the artist. With renewed interest he took to the study of philosophy, and these philosophic investigations drew him more and more towards Asia. In 1931 Yeats met Shri Purohit Swami, who awakened Yeats's dormant passion for Vedanta, the most profound of the six systems of Hindu philosophy. The poetry of his last years bears ample testimony to the profound influence of Eastern thought, especially Hindu and Buddhist, on Yeats.

It is, therefore, apparent from this study that Yeats came under the influence of Eastern philosophy and literature at a very young age, and for the rest of his career he remained a constant student of the Asian view of life. Yeats's critics and biographers, as observed previously, generally consider the impact of Eastern thought on Yeats as spasmodic or short-lived, but the external and internal evidence establishes my contention that the influence of Eastern literature and philosophy on Yeats was pervasive. As a matter of fact, this study of Yeats reveals that the Orient takes a stronger hold on Yeats's imagination as he matures.

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