Chapter 8

In the Shadow of Ben Bulben

8.1. Introduction

The symbols and themes of the last phase of Yeats’s career bear testimony to the poet’s Christian mystical identity. The visionary and Christian in Yeats, reiterates his undaunted faith in soul, eternity and resurrection.

The Last Poems, published posthumously, record the poet’s intense zest for life and a return to spirituality. They are saturated with personal memories, feelings, traumas and conflicts of his past life. They are the outcome of mature wisdom and the final understanding of the vision of life. They manifest his blazing faith in the spiritual world. The poet's mind becomes elevated and unaffected by the racks and ruins of time and he looks at life with tragic gaiety and intensity as the artists in “Lapis Lazuli”:

Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
Delight to imagine them seated there;
There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
The glittering eyes and gay disposition of the Chinamen provide a projection of the poet's mind that highlights the co-ordination of body and soul, life and art. "The Wild Old Wicked Man" provides a projection of the poet that highlights the co-ordination of body and soul, the material world and the spiritual world of reality.

"The Three Bushes" narrates the story of a highborn lady who wants to keep her chastity and satisfy her lover simultaneously. Here the poet establishes the mysterious collaboration of body and soul in the act of lovemaking. Yeats sets apart a series of poems to celebrate the pleasures of sensual love. The poem "The Lady's Second Song" also gives a brilliant projection of the poet's mystical frame of mind that never shuts the doors of the senses. The Lady accepts divine love that embraces her body and soul.

8.2. Christian Overtones in the Symbols and Themes

Yeats uses complex, intractable semiotic symbols to convey his shifting moods in the closing years of his life. The whirling metaphor of the gyre in "Old Rocky Face", builds up an atmosphere of hideous violence, decay and death and the emergence of a vibrant era. The spiral movements of the gyre represent the countervailing motions of creation and destruction. The powerful repetition of the word 'gyre' and the power-packed words - 'bloated out', 'stream of blood', 'staining earth', 'tomb' 'sepulchre' and 'owl'- bring in sombre associations of destruction. The
movement and counter movement of the rotating gyre is a representation of
the warring factors in human mind and the universal conflict. The
movement of the gyre pointing upwards represents the timeless world of
spirituality and the other the world of material pleasures. It also suggests
violent movements that herald loss of direction, chaos and terror. It is
another representation of the spool on which thread is wound in mills. And
hence, it evokes associations of the departed souls who wind and unwind
their way to the celestial kingdom. It represents the Supreme Designer, who
winds and unwinds the thread to form a pattern of each individual’s life.
The symbol also indicates the introspection of the past and foreshadow a
deliverance from sombre tragic intensity.

The “Old Stone Cross”, a powerful political reflection, conveys
powerful girders of thought through word symbols. The buried captain
foretells the resurrection of a heroic age and his own resurrection from the
grade. The recurring word images, ‘golden breastplate’ and ‘stone cross’
bring in mystical overtones that point to the eternal human soul. The
vertical bar of the cross pointing upward indicates life, eternity and
resurrection. It is an explicit symbol that establishes the influence of
Ireland, the country famous for its innumerable stone crosses.

In the closing years, Yeats becomes a critic of modern civilization.
He takes up the role of a saint and surveyor who seeks joy and goodness in
the broken heaps of destruction. In the “Last Poems” too, he takes up the theme of total annihilation and resurrection envisaged in the Scriptures. “The Gyres” and “Lapis Lazuli” focus on the end of civilization and the sad plight of humanity. The gyre is also an emblem of synthesis and remaking: “The workmen, noble and saint, and all things run / On that unfashionable gyre again.”\(^2\) The fast rotating gyres that consume nobility, beauty and tradition, declare the destruction and the end of civilization. “All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay.”\(^3\) The ideas of remaking suggest the concept of the new creation prophesied in the visions of St. John and Ezekiel.\(^4\)

“Lapis Lazuli” and “The Gyres” reveal the new insight of the poet in facing tragedies with gaiety and full recognition and boldness. The shock of disaster and the tragic experience enable the ‘chinamen’ to confront life boldly with exultation. The two poems bring to light Yeats’s concept of confronting crisis with a balanced mind that comes closer to the Christian perspective. In “Tara’s Halls”, the portrayal of the old man who confronts death in full possession of his faculties implies the Christian view of death as a temporary farewell.

“The Black Tower” again is an illustration of Yeats’s faith in resurrection and Last Judgment along the Christian tradition. In “Man and
the Echo" also, we find the reassertion of his conviction in Last Judgment, soul and life beyond:

Then stands in judgement on his soul,
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.\(^5\)

Most of the poems in the last phase portray the spiritual dimension of love. They establish the inextricable bond between flesh and spirit. The Crazy Jane series of poems and "The Three Bushes" are examples. The Lady in "Three Bushes" devotes her entire life for the act of love. When she comes in the conflicting grip of physical love and spiritual love, she lets her chambermaid take her place. The strong influence of Irish monasticism could be seen in the determination of the lady to safeguard her chastity:

I know that I must drop down dead
If he stop loving me,
Yet what could I but drop down dead
If I lost my chastity.\(^6\)

The rose tree planted by the chambermaid on their graves takes a mystic halo and becomes the emblem of the inextricability of love, body and soul. Yeats illustrates the spiritual dimension of love in "The Lady Second Song". Soul as well as body is of great significance in one’s life. Physical
love is important in making the soul a wholesome entity. The spiritual and physical aspects of love and their interdependence find parallels in the Songs of Solomon

We see Yeats, the Christian mystic at close quarters in “News for the Delphic Oracle” which probes deep into the mysteries of death and life beyond. After the death of Plotinus, his friends go in search of him. The reply of the deity shows the unshakable faith in the blessed Heaven and the Resurrection of the dead souls. The land of the blessed portrayed in the poem is in greater conformity to the Christian Paradise that reverberates with the songs of angels. In “Black Tower”, the dead soldiers who anxiously await their king’s resurrection reaffirms Yeats’s faith in the promise of Resurrection: he celebrates the theme of resurrection along the Christian tradition:

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore,
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.7

The picture of the rising of the dead has close similarity to Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dead spirits in the Scriptures. Thus we see that the poems of the last phase are remarkable for their controlled gaiety, enhanced zest.
“Under Ben Bulben” begins with Yeats setting out his faith in the first section. The second section explicates the gist of his faith, which is that every man lives and dies several times. Yeats expounds his cyclical theory of burial and re-birth, and death is only a brief parting from those dears. This idea of death as a temporary parting is part of the Christian faith. He dovetails the conflicting views of religion and nonetheless keeps his Christian religiosity intact till the end of his life. The tragic exhilaration in the face of destruction is, to a certain extent, the reflection of his Christian temperament:

Whether man dies in his bed
Or the rifle knocks him dead
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.  

“Under Ben Bulben” is really a grand testament of Yeats’s silent adoration for Christianity. He winds his way back to the graves near his Irish ancestors and Christian tradition. He longs to lie buried in Drumcliff churchyard in the shadow of Ben Bulben:

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid,
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient Cross.
8.3. Conclusion

An imaginative preoccupation with mysticism, and the enigma of life, and life beyond, mark the poetry of W.B. Yeats. These concerns spring from a rich complex of generative impulses. The unique religiosity of Catholic Ireland, the features of the land itself; familial and peer influences; the faith, folklore and myth of Ireland; the spiritualistic traditions of the East and the West; and a host of other factors strike unexpected permutations in Yeats’s poetry. The diversity of the confluent elements generates a complex and irreducible mystical dimension, that can be represented only in terms of a highly sophisticated symbolic system.

A critical factor of the combination is the religious identity of Yeats. The standard critical posture has been to describe the religiosity of Yeats as ambivalent, obscure and controversial. Such a scheme emphasizes the hostility of the poet to institutionalised church, his contempt for the clergy, his disdain for hypocritical faith and his ambivalent attitude to Christian mysteries. But it must also be accepted that Yeats did subscribe to the vital tenets of deep Christian faith. The concept of sanitized faith, free of doubts and ambiguity, is too simplistic a grid to measure the religiosity of Yeats.

The scepticism of Yeats has been often exaggerated to classify him as an agnostic, pagan or heretic. Such a view can even be justified with recourse to selective illustrations from the work of the poet. At times,
Yeatsian ambiguity takes on a pitch that can be mistaken for disbelief. A closer examination, however, is bound to reveal the underpinnings of deep Christian faith. Yeats, certainly, is not a Christian of conventional configuration. His ever-questioning faith is racked by doubt and critical apprehension.

* A Vision* offers the most convincing proclamation of his Christian identity. The twin plays, “The Calvary” and “The Resurrection”, through an extremely complex system of symbols and characters, substantiate Yeats’s faith in some of the central tenets such as soul, immortality, sin and redemption. The ideas represented by Countess Cathleen and Father Hart are distinctly Christian. Though some his characters apparently speak against the Christian faith, they only serve as devices to emphasise the faith.

The works of Yeats record faith and doubt. They fuse respect and indictment of Christianity. There is no insularity in his faith. Yeats was open to the influence of Indian philosophy. But he was never dominated by it. His desire to lie buried with his ancestors in Drumcliff Churchyard in the shadow of Ben Bulben, bespeaks the strength of his Irish Christian identity.
Yeats's conceptual acceptance of the soul and resurrection is a mask of his Christian faith. This comes through in "Anima Mundi" where he speaks of the God-man relationship and the human soul. His sensitivity to the violence of the times does not amount to the denial of Christian ideals; but rather, it approximates him to the Christian prophetic tradition. His mysticism is not the extension of timid faith. It comprehends the complexity of the times as well as the essence of religious faith. Ribh, the Irish hermit who surrenders totally before the Almighty represents this aspect. His attachment to Christianity never hinders him from entering the broad spectrum of religion and ecumenical vision. Yeats regards Christianity and other eastern religions as part of a higher synthesis. Though he expresses the concepts of reincarnation and rebirth, they do not belong exclusively to the frame of Indian philosophy. In Yeats, we see a sustained synthesis of criticism and adoration and faith and disbelief. Though Yeatsian mysticism shares some features of Blake, Wordsworth and Tagore, it is unique in its paradoxical intimacy and aloofness to spirituality.

Yeats thought naturally in symbols, and learnt to manipulate them to convey swift transitions and intricate connections of thought. Yeatsian symbology is unique and charged with mystical overtones and the intellectual or thematic content of each poem balances multiple meanings contingent upon each other. The liberal and eclectic range of Yeats gains well-defined Christian contours that find expression in the multi-faceted
symbols. The progression of his thoughts and philosophy is also a progression through the tenets of Christianity. This partly erases the image of Yeats as an agnostic and non-believer. The awakening of God consciousness and the endearing fellowship in God manifested in “The Ballad of Father Gilligan” and “To Some I Have Talked to by the Fire” are instances. The idea of mystic marriage and the total surrender to the Divine in “Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient” is in close conformity to the concept of spiritual marriage in the Song of Songs.

The Christian concept of sin, redemption and resurrection expressed in “The Black Tower” and “The Old Stone Cross” illustrate his sanguine conviction in the Christian tenets. Yeats’s discourse with the spirits of the dead (“Byzantium”, “Municipal Gallery Revisited”, “All Souls’ Night”) and his luminous vision of the world beyond substantiate his Christian identity.

The symbols of Yeats are diagrams of his mystical frame of mind and spirituality. The images of beast in “The Second Coming”, and the gyre are examples in this regard. The symbols of the Rose, the Tree, Water, and the Flame too have their origin in Christian religion. The images of burning - Fire, Flame - are frequent in Yeatsian poetry and their multiple implications reveal Christian affinity. In many of the poems, Yeats assigns spiritual significance to fire as in the Holy Scriptures. In “To Some I Have Talked by the Fire”, it becomes the manifestation of Jehovah and His glory
and the fiery doors suggest the entry into the timeless world of spirituality. ("The Valley of the Black Pig"). The saints standing in the holy fire and fire lit pavements in Byzantium remind us of the blazing city of Jerusalem in the Bible. The idea of death, decay and imminent destruction is also represented by the image of fire ("The Moods", "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth", "No Second Troy")

Water is another important sign revealing innumerable spiritual facets. The gurgling waters that build up the oasis islands in the early poems generate such associations. The 'brimming lake' in "Broken Dreams" and the 'gong tormented sea' become purgative. They signify timelessness and spirituality. They also become the medium through which souls are carried to Eternity, and spiritual transformation. Similarly the 'blood-dimmed tide' in the "The Second Coming" that anticipates the end of the world in deluge, finds a close parallel in Genesis.

The poetry of Yeats need not be reduced to easy formulae. His work is a complex synthesis of an intricate symbolic system that represents a dense mystical dimension poised delicately across the essential tenets of a deep, unconventional Christian religiosity. The poetry itself is the tortured effort of a sensitive mind to imaginatively explicate the density that lies beneath.
Works Cited


4 *Revelation*, 21: 4-5, Good News Bible.


