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Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A New Critical Approach

Abstract

New Criticism is primarily concerned with the text in itself, its language and organization. A close reading of the text articulates the paradox, ambivalence, order and harmony within the text. An emphasis on objectivity, impersonality and humanist principles marks the basic trend of Anglo-American New Criticism. This paper aims to provide a close reading of W. B. Yeats's Byzantium poems—"Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium". The paper gradually unravels the insolvable enigma of human life—the transience of life and the permanence of art. The poems achieve a resolution through the working out of contradictions, a unification of different dispositions towards experience.

Keywords: Close reading, aesthetic, criticism, literary

New Criticism is a reaction against the decadence and anarchy of the twentieth century. It has its roots in the criticism of those literary texts that represent the aesthetic-humanist idealization of literature. Matthew Arnold's concept of 'culture' and T.S. Eliot's anti-romantic tendencies provide an impetus for New Criticism. An emphasis on objectivity, impersonality and humanist principles marks the basic trend of Anglo-American New Criticism. John Crowe Ransom, in his book *The New Criticism* (1941), analyzed the critical

methods of literary study of T.S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Yvor Winters and so on. Thus the movement derives its name from Ransom's work. The New Critics are engaged in 'intrinsic' criticism as opposed to 'extrinsic' approaches that incorporate historical, biographical and other fallacies. It advocates practical judicial criticism of individual texts. The aesthetic relevance of a work of art lies in studying the text, 'the thing-in-itself' and not venturing beyond it. A close reading of the text through critical analysis is the primary concern of the New Critics.

The New Critics in America in the 1920s were the members of a political and literary group—'the Fugitives'. Ransom and Tate were members of this group. By the 1930s it merged into 'the Agrarians'. Being a politically defined group of intellectuals, the Agrarians defended the South against the materialistic and industrial North. The members wanted to establish organic unity of south through the medium of literature. Such a socio-political situation provided an impetus to the development of New Criticism. The New Critics wanted to make literature humanistic in its appeal by the retention of genuine aesthetic qualities.

I.A. Richards, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, Penn Warren, and F.R. Leavis are the major exponents of this school of study. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) elaborate the basic tenets of literary study by close reading. Practical criticism is an endeavour to discriminate between complex experiences and aesthetics of evaluating a literary text.

Richards states his aims at the outset of *Practical Criticism*: to offer a new kind of documentation about the contemporary state of culture, in order to develop a new technique for those interested in cultivating their responses to poetry, and more efficient educational methods for developing the discrimination needed to understand what we hear and read. (Waugh 104)

Richards focus is primarily on classroom teaching, the way to make people familiar with the principles of literary criticism. *Understanding Poetry* (1938), another foundational text for New Criticism by Brooks and Penn Warren, indicates that the principles of reading poetry must be learned in order to understand the significance of literary artifact. Though the New Critics are sceptical about subjective romantic poetry, they lay special emphasis on Coleridge's concept of 'organic unity' in a literary text. Again, Keats's 'negative capability' and Eliot's 'objective correlative' are the concepts that inspired the New Critics to focus on the capacity of poetic language to encompass the 'whole knowledge' of human experience. Brooks in his *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) asserts that a literary text is an independent, autonomous entity that contains meanings specific to the context provided by the text. It regards that 'paradox' and 'irony' are typical virtues of poetry. To Empson the process of examining 'ambiguities' (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* 1930) in a poem dissociates the text from the context and facilitates a close reading of poetry. Influenced by Arnold and T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, the 'practical critic', states that the function of a critic is to achieve a peculiar completeness of response in order to enter into the possession of the given poem in its concreteness. The "close address to the text is only ever to establish the vitality of its 'felt life', its closeness to 'experience', to prove its moral force, and to demonstrate (by close scrutiny) its excellence" (Selden 34-35). The critic must be engaged in 'the common pursuit of true judgement'. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) attacks the 'fallacies', both 'intentional' and 'affective' in order to establish the autonomy of the text. For the New Critics the words on the page should be the concerned area of critical judgement. New Criticism concentrates on semantics, meter, symbols, metaphors and imagery by foregrounding the isolated text dissociated from historical background and biographical references. It has been alleged that New Criticism imprisons the

text within the boundaries of artistic strategies and close reading only. In this context Heilman's words must be considered:

[...] to declare the literary work self-contained or autonomous was less to deny its connections with the non literary human world, past and present, than to assert metaphorically the presence in the poem of suprahistorical uniqueness along with the generic or the hereditary or the culturally influenced. (138)

The New Critics including Brooks did not castigate history, biography or other issues. Such studies are undoubtedly valuable, but it should never be confused with the criticism of the text itself.

Cleanth Brooks asserts that close reading through the analysis of poems marks the essence of New Criticism. Following Brooks's propositions of organic unity, and close reading of a text, this paper offers a close reading of W.B. Yeats's mature poems—"Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium". Brooks relates Yeats to the tradition of modern poetry marked by paradox, symbolism and metaphysical traits. He reckons Yeats in his *Well Wrought Urn*. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" begins as a symbolic, visionary voyage from Ireland to Byzantium, from life to art, from flux to fixity, from temporal to eternal. The word 'sailing' infers his last voyage to the unknown—his veritable death. Yeats creates a tension and balance between the desires of the ageing body and the soul's yearning for liberation. Like Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" is locked in the insolvable enigma of human life—the transience of life and the permanence of art.

The poet-speaker desires to retire from the sensual passionate world of Ireland to Byzantium, the realm of 'unageing intellect'. Known as Constantinople, Byzantium in the eighth century was the centre of European civilization, the paradise of art and spiritual

fulfilment. The land of Yeats's heart's desire, Byzantium "is a symbol of the 'heaven of man's imagination as suggested in Yeats's *A Vision* (1925): "[In Byzantium of this period] . . . all about . . . is an incredible splendor like that which we see pass under our closed eyelids as we lie between sleeping and waking, no representation of a living world but the dream of a somnambulist" (qtd. in Brooks, *Permanence* 73). Byzantium, the 'artifice of eternity' is more a country of the mind, a symbol of creative perfection. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker rejects the youthful dalliance of his motherland, Ireland. The vegeto-animal life of Ireland retains its continuity through the cycle of life and death. They are the 'dying generations' engaged in transient carnality. As a contrast to such pleasures Byzantine art stands as the indestructible epitome of perfection, spirituality and permanence. In the second stanza the poet expresses his own sense of decay and loss through the undignified image of a scarecrow—"A tattered coat upon a stick". An old man to Yeats is unheroic, a hollowman eligible for pity only. Though the poet discards youthful sensuality, he doesn't glorify old age. Such an ambiguity reveals the conflict, the dilemma in the poet's mind. The luxuriant, voluptuous and gorgeous imagery of the first stanza is a contrast to the barren, undignified and unheroic imagery of the second stanza. The poet's dismissal of a procreating life unmasks his innate desire for youth and passion. The repetition of the word 'sing' juxtaposes mortal beings with the magnificence of Byzantine art. Human soul has to study the splendor of art to supersede the mundane and the gross. Ambiguity and paradox pervade the third stanza as the poet realizes that he cannot overcome the desires of worldly life. His soul comes in conflict with the ageing body. The latent desire for youth and a self mockery has been fused with the yearning for spiritual salvation. Deliverence from sensuality can only lead him to the path of spirituality. Being tormented by desires he seeks purification by the purgatorial fire so that he can reach the paradise of eternity. The word 'holy fire' signifies purification through suffering'; 'gold enamelling' and 'hammered gold' stand for hardness and effort.

Byzantium, metaphorically, becomes a state of mind, a realm of spirituality purged of all desires. The poet earnestly prays to the saints to extinguish all desires buried within him. He longs for the purification of his soul so that he can fuse into the world of sages. The image of ‘gyre’ represents Yeats’s concept of the cyclic progression of history. The expression ‘artifice of eternity’ symbolizes Yeats’s journey from nature to culture—a quest for the kingdom of artistic imagination, a utopia beyond the limits of time and nature. The final stanza of the poem culminates in the poet’s desire to escape from the flux of life to the artificial world of Byzantine art. He seeks to become a golden bird on a golden bough singing of the cyclic process of life—the past, present and future. This bird in the realm of art is a contrast to the procreating birds of the first stanza. The image of golden bough connects the poem to Virgil’s *Aeneid* where Aeneas unlocked the gate of the underworld with a golden bough in his hand. In this context it is relevant to consider Bhabatosh Chatterjee’s assertion:

The gleaming bough that unlocks for Aeneas the gates of Hades also illumines the dark process of life and death; he learns, with agony and despair, that each departed spirit has to prepare himself for another pilgrimage among the children of men; there is ordained for each a ghostly penance, which endures for a thousand years, until the heavenly essence has been cleansed of every stain and memory of unhallowed fellowship. (121)

The poem is an expression of the poet’s journey from innocence to experience, a journey that demands effort, endurance and suffering.

The poem achieves a resolution through the working out of contradictions, a unification of different dispositions towards experience. He observes that human mind has been obsessed by some images which have no origin in our daily experiences. For Yeats “that images so derived have both an absolute meaning of their own and an operative force in determining meaning and predicting events in this world” (Blackmur, *Permanence* 43). The

collective soul of the universe contains the memories of all times. Both the Byzantium poems gain their significance in relation to Yeats's theory of 'Anima Mundi' and Great Memory. It is that vital force or system of thoughts that establishes a connection between all living things of the world. He believes that a great memory passes on from generation to generation. From this memory emanates two influences: the natural and the intellectual. "It is this inflow which the poet wishes to come to him and to transform him, shaping him to a 'bodily form'" (Brooks, Permanence 75). Thus, Yeats appeals to the 'sages' to come from the 'holy fire' and free him from the cycle of life and death by transforming him to the golden bird, an object of eternity. This establishes a connection between the dead living in the passionate memories and the theory of 'Anima Mundi'.

The resolution of the poem is open dialectic. The golden bird, an object of art, will sing of life. Yeats's bird, timeless, beautiful, and wise, paradoxically sang of the temporal. Art cannot escape from life. The craving for eternal artifice does not necessitate the renunciation of life; rather it implies an enrichment of life through art. Written almost at the same time, "Sailing to Byzantium" seems to balance "Among School Children". While one glorifies natural beauty, the world of becoming, the other glorifies intellectual beauty, the world of being. The paradox remains about Yeats's resolution. Such a paradox has been resolved by Cleanth Brooks in his *The Well Wrought Urn*. "He chooses both and neither. One cannot know the world of being save through the world of becoming" (171). Such conflicts represent the artist's philosophy of life. There is no simple resolution, but an intricate elaboration of the mysteries of human existence and an acquaintance with the myths beyond life and death. The poem has a circular journey beginning from life and ending in the triumph of art through life.

If Byzantium in "Sailing to Byzantium" stands for a land of heart's desire—a dream world of art and permanence, in the poem "Byzantium" this historical place symbolizes the

paradise of man's mind. Byzantium is a miraculous state of mind where the eternal soul reigns. The poet has matured enough to return from the utopian Byzantium and step into the real world of an artist. As Blackmur declares: "Byzantium represents both a dated epoch and a recurrent state of insight, when nature is magical, that is, at the beck of mind, and magic is natural—a practical rather than a theoretic art" (54). "Byzantium", a sequel to "Sailing to Byzantium" travels beyond 'nature' to evoke a picture of life after death. This poem is a reply to Sturge Moore's comment: "Your 'Sailing to Byzantium', magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's body is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies" (Bridge 162). Like the earlier poem the poet here rejects the 'unpurged images' of the physical world. He is burning in the purgatorial fire in order to purify himself and reach the paradise of eternal bliss. The poem begins with the image of Byzantium after a day of carnality and revelry. The drunken soldiers deep in their slumber ushers us to a world of serenity and peace. The 'cathedral gong' symbolizing the death bell marks the end of worldly affairs and gradually initiates the poet to the world of the dead. 'A starlit or moonlit dome' is the image of death that links the earth with heaven. The pain of purgatorial fire is relevant in the expression that man is nothing other than 'mere complexities, / The fury and mire of human veins'. The painful process of life and death is suggested by the word 'mire'. Heaven has only contempt for the human world engrossed in sensuousness. In the second stanza the poet invokes the superhuman, the immortal images of imagination which are far above the complexities of men. The words 'image' and 'shade' superimpose the superhuman with the poet's imagination. Moreover, the image of 'man and shade' evokes a relationship among the dead, the living and the Great Memory. The expression 'Hades bobbin bound in mummy-cloth' is the image of a bobbin round which the cloth of a mummy is wound. The 'winding path' as mentioned in 'Anima Mundi' refers to

the 'winding movement of nature' as contrasted with the straight path of the saints. It symbolizes the torturous path from life to death, expiation through pain and suffering. The entire action takes on the whirling motion of gyre. The reference to Coleridge and Tennyson in the line: 'I call it death-in-life and life-in-death' implies a state of spiritual stagnation. The third stanza takes us back to the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium". 'Miracle, bird or golden handiwork' glorifies the superiority of deathless Byzantine art over the changeable mortal 'bird or petal'. It can crow or sing in 'the artifice of eternity'. Such a work of art condemns the struggles and pleasure seeking affairs of men. Art supersedes the complexities of life by its everlasting beauty that is changeless. In the fourth stanza the advent of the spirits takes place in dark, midnight world of Byzantium. This is not a nightmarish experience, rather an image of purgation. The predominant image in this stanza is 'flame', the fire that does not destroy but purifies. The spirits are brightened and lighted by the flames. The phrase 'blood-begotten spirits' gains its significance in the context of Yeats's theory of 'Anima Mundi'. He quotes from Hippocrates: "The mind of man ... is not nourished from meats and drink from the belly, but by a clear luminous substance that redounds by separation from the blood"(qtd. in Brooks, *Permanence* 79). Imagination shapes and reshapes these elements. He says further that "our animal spirits or vehicles are but as it were a condensation of the vehicles of *Anima Mundi*, and give substance to its images in the faint materialization of our common thought, or more grossly when a ghost is our visitor" (qtd. in Brooks, *Permanence* 80).

The final culminating stanza is a continuation of the previous. It introduces the image of the Great Memory as the vast expanse of the sea. The image of 'spirit after spirit' connotes that perfect harmonization which provides a proper shape to our thoughts releases the spirit from fear and man from worldly desire. The image of 'dolphin' connects it to the myth of Arion. The dolphin, though living, is the protector of mankind. "The tone of the last stanza is

prophetic and the hope of redemption breaks forth in the movement of the rhythm” (Chatterjee 124). The spirits hammered into the shapes of ‘smithies’—the artists and the poets, transmute the real sea of flux into an artistic sea of images. The superiority of art is asserted by the image of artists creating order and harmony out of chaos and complexities. The word ‘break’ has the suggestion of taming or subduing the changeable ‘bitter furies’. The ‘fresh images’ are those that are purged and purified from the gross. The image that has transcended the framework of time and space, becomes a symbol, surpasses death and remains as a ‘living soul’. The final image of ‘That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea’ ushers in a world of real experiences thoroughly shattered by sensualities and spiritual aspirations.

A close reading of the poem introduces us to a variety of image-patterns marked by complexities and ambiguities. The vibrant images and rhythmic cadence reveal the conflict within the artist. The poem remains a ‘miracle of rare device’, a metaphysical ‘sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice’. It is a perfect blend of contrary elements—emotion, philosophy, the natural and the supernatural pulsating with a true realization of life. It makes us conscious of the present world tormented by the fever and fret of physical existence and death. In order to transcend the sensual world of pleasures the poet realizes the necessity of purgation through suffering so that he can take eternal shelter in the blissful domain of art.

Influenced by the French symbolists like Mallarmé, Yeats’s network of symbols range from Celtic legends to Greco-Roman mythology, and his own philosophy of life and art. He recreates a complex network of image-patterns that resonate with plural significances. His poetry unifies the disparate poetic elements into an organic whole. His poetical strategies foreground his emotions and philosophies in words that are to be felt and understood, not argued.

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