

Usurped Spaces and Poetic Identity—Anxiety of Influence in Yeats' *Sailing To Byzantium*

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A quest for permanence across the webs of the temporal is what a reader has to peregrinate through, if he seeks to traverse the scope of W.B Yeats's 'Sailing To Byzantium', and the same apply to John Keats's 'Ode To A Nightingale' as well. Despite the fact, that the two poems are separated from one another by a temporal gap of one hundred years, the string of thematic unity running between the two only confirm the fact, that poetic sensibilities of major poets seems to follow the same course. Both the poems are problematized in and around the recognition of imperfections, consequent upon dichotomous human existence, as also the search for a symbol which would help alleviate that. Structurally too the semblances between the two poems are startling: a world of sensuous details, cushioning within it the semiotics of flux and change on the one hand, and the deemed symbol of perfection on the other. The bridge between the imperfection of life, and the symbol that is perfect is provided by the imagination. Byzantium as conceived by Yeats is an act of imagination, and this is equally true of the Nightingale world of Keats (Rudra 55-56). Prof. Arup Rudra in his comparative study of the two poems, is of the opinion, that Yeats's poem is a victory of the will in that the poem ends with an image of the absorption of the self into the projected image of a golden bird, whereas Keats's poem is a recognition of defeat conditioned by the fact that he has to return to his sole self (55). And furthermore that, "Yeats forces the pace of his imagination to become victorious, yet what stands out with tragic dilemma is 'the tattered coat upon a stick'" (55).

It is precisely with an attempt to unravel the probable cause of this wrestling with the imagination to become victorious, on the part of William Butler Yeats, that I am tempted to offer a different view. I propose that in writing "Sailing To Byzantium", Yeats was under an anxiety of Influence with Keats's "Ode To A Nightingale". That this claim of mine would be open to refutation from various quarters, on the ground that the formative influences upon Yeats was exerted by Shelley, Spencer, the Pre-Raphaelites and the aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century is something that I anticipate. Also as Harold Bloom in his reading of the Yeatsian poems, had traced the literary source of "Sailing To Byzantium" in Shelley's allegorical epic "The Revolt Of Islam", I presume that I have to grapple with the larger question of authority as well (Bloom, Tower 345). However I would like to counter such objections by citing a line or two from Bloom himself. In the first chapter of "A Map Of Misreading", Bloom maintains, Poetic influence in the sense I give to it, has nothing to do with the verbal resemblances between one poet and another. Hardy on the surface scarcely resembles Shelley his prime precursor. But then Browning, who resembles Shelley even less, was yet more Shelley's ephebe than even Hardy was.... What Blake called the spiritual form, at once the aboriginal poetical self and the true subject, is what the ephebe is so dangerously obliged to the precursor for ever possessing (Lodge 248).

However since the feasibility of my claim is subject to the parameters of Bloom's "Theory Of Poetry", a synoptic overview of "The Anxiety Of Influence" therefore becomes imperative at this stage. The search for poetic space for a "strong poet" according to Bloom essentially entails finding of a voice, that is securely distinctive, and consequently, the act of writing assumes the form of a deliberate misreading, and re-writing of one's predecessors. It is designed to dethrone a strong predecessor, and is analogous to the Freudian castration complex,

which resolves the Oedipus complex of early infancy (5). In framing this theory Bloom was primarily influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche, the “prophet of the antithetical”, and Sigmund Freud’s “Investigations of the mechanisms of defense and their ambivalent functioning”. Apart from these he also acknowledges the impact of Vico, and especially the latter’s view that “Priority in divination is crucial for every strong poet, lest he dwindle merely into a latecomer”. The interesting part of Bloom’s theory is that beyond merely talking of the “distortion” technically called “misprision”, it goes on to specify the methodology by which this “misprision” (5) is effected – thus facilitating the possibility of a practical criticism. He calls them “revisionary ratios” and they are as follows:

- 1) Clinamen – A swerving away from the precursor’s poem, believing that the “precursor’s poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved in the direction, that the new poem moves” (14).
- 2) Tessera – Antithetically completing the precursor by so “reading the parent- poem as to retain it’s terms but to mean them in another sense” (14).
- 3) Kenosis – “A breaking device similar to the defense mechanisms against repetition compulsions” (14).
- 4) Daemonisation – “Movement towards a personalized counter sublime, in reaction to the precursor’s sublime” (15).
- 5) Askesis – “A movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude” (15).
- 6) Apophrades – “The return of the dead” (15).

But why “Anxiety Of Influence”? Did not T.S.Eliot in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919) declare, that a poet must “develop” a consciousness of the past, maintaining, that if as moderns we know more than the dead writers it is precisely they who constitute what we know (Eliot, Tradition para 7). Sure he did. But Harold Bloom being an interpretive scholar, has contributed in making the study of Romantic poetry far more intellectually challenging. In way of delineating a theory of poetry, alongside a theory of the dynamic of poetic history, Bloom as John Hollander believes, “has pursued a method quite similar to something like depth psychology”. If for Eliot ‘Tradition’ is a process of “handing down” (Eliot, Tradition para 3), for Bloom, it is the transactive antagonism between the ‘precursor’ and ‘ephebe’, which gives rise to poetry. It is this agonizing dynamic that constitutes the privileged locus of “The Anxiety of Influence” as a poetic theory.

However the presence of a stumbling block with relation to Bloom’s poetic theory, as expounded in “The Anxiety of Influence”, needs to be taken cognizance of. Since Bloom has predominantly been an interpreter rather than an explainer, this book does not quote texts in order to analyze or discuss them. Texts are evoked by way of allusion, but seldom to explicate the applicability of the thesis. This paper therefore is not in possession of a critical paradigm that would prove conducive in ascertaining the validity of the search.

In fact a subtle testification of the Yeatsian tryst with ‘anxiety’ over the loss of poetic space, and also in a convoluted form, with the poetic intentions of John Keats can be found in a poem entitled “Ego Dominus Tuus” (1919). Posited in the form of a dialogue between two characters “Hic” and “Ille” (this man/ that man) and literally meaning ‘I am your master’, the discourse in this poem seems to be situated within the context of privileging and subversion—the now much too quoted tension of the centre and circumference – as to whether literature should be an extension of the creative artist’s life (as Hic believes), or be an idealized vision completely antithetical to the artist’s experience. The mechanism of power, involved in the

privileging of a transcendental idealist discourse, coupled with the blatant subversion of realism with its attendant appendages, is what account for the poem's so called meaning. Hic's contention, that the pursuit of poetic truth is to "... find myself and not an image" (Yeats, Ego 11), provokes a defense of the theory of antiself by Ille who retorts by saying,

That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle sensitive mind
And lost the old non chalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled empty and abashed

Lacking the countenance of our friends (Yeats, Ego 12-18)

Interestingly however, in foregrounding the discourse of the anti-self, Yeats becomes an acquiescent of the mechanism of anxiety – the anti-self with all its fecund of untrodden spaces, or shall we say the agony of usurped spaces – operating within the poetic psyche. The projection of the self as 'timid', 'entangled', but most importantly 'empty' are overtures too obvious to be ignored.

In rebuttal to the view, which sees the artist's work as an antithesis to his life, Keats's lived life according to Hic could be taken as an exemplar: "And yet/ No one denies to Keats love of the world;/ Remember his deliberate happiness" (Yeats, Ego 56-58). To which Ille answers: His art is happy, but who knows his mind?

I see a school boy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
And made—being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The coarse-bred son of a livery- stable keeper—
Luxuriant song (Yeats, Ego 59-67).

Anxiety therefore has set in at the level of the poetic impulse—Keats' inability to reconcile the polar opposites of life—and it is my contention that a re-reading of "Sailing To Byzantium" as the output of an anxiety towards Keats' "Ode To A Nightingale" would be useful in situating its exact localization.

In "Ode To A Nightingale", Keats is fundamentally pre-occupied with the bird-song and not the song-bird. His absorption into the symbol possibly stems from the fact that the nightingale "Singing of summer in full-throated ease" (Keats, Ode 10) –that 'full-throated ease' which is so very wanting in any human endeavour, due to the limitations that flesh is heir to. However, as he moves on to embrace the nightingale world, a necessary fallacy creeps in. He equates the bird-song with the song-bird, forgetting temporarily that the bird too is an organic entity subject to the limitations of the flesh: "Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget/ What thou amongst the leaves has never known, / The weariness, the fever, and the fret..." (Keats, Ode 21-23). This fallacious identification however, is not a one way traffic. Keats' poetry is especially marked by dialectic of movement, and in the sixth stanza he reverts to his initial position: "Darkling, I listen; and for many a time/ I have been half in love with easeful death..." (Keats, Ode 51-52). He wavers again in the first line of the seventh stanza, but ultimately realizing his mistake, falls back headlong upon life: "Forlorn! The very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self! ..." (Keats, Ode 71-72).

If poetic influence as Bloom argues is necessarily “misprision” (Bloom, *Anxiety* 95), Yeats’ misprision possibly stems from the fact that he overlooks the feat of Keats’ being ‘toll’ed back “from thee to my sole self”. It appears to me that in creating his imaginative space, Yeats distorts the poem of his predecessor by situating it within the parameters of the song-bird rather than the bird-song. All that is on our part is to read in and through the lines of “Sailing To Byzantium” to find out how this imaginative space has been utilized by Yeats.

Enmeshed within the organic constructs of augmentation, change and decay; Yeats’ “Sailing To Byzantium” seeks to appropriate the symbol of perfection through the a-temporal essentialism of Byzantine civilization, and in a way becomes an exact corollary to Keats’ similar intentions, though, within the secular paradigm of the Nightingale world. The Keatsian temptation to “fade far away...” is supplanted in Yeats by an invocation to the Byzantine sages:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,

Come from the holy fire perne in a gyre,

And be the singing-masters of my soul. (Yeats, *Sailing* 17-20)

So far as the poem goes, it may be said that unlike Keats, and by dint of a predominantly potent poetic will, Yeats achieves the absorption of the self within the metallic frigidity of a golden bird. But why a golden bird? This is the question that stares us in the face.

The influence of Mohini Chatterji on Yeats has been too obvious to be negated. In fact it was he, who preached to the young Yeats the Hindu philosophy of the “Bhagwad Gita”, and the monistic Vedantism of Samkara, the eighth century south Indian thinker, as expounded in his (Samkara’s) “Viveka Chudamani”. Mr Harbansh Rai Bacchan in his book “W.B. Yeats And Occultism” has spoken at length about the impact, Samkara’s “Viveka Chudamani” exerted in way of shaping the philosophical orientation of the mature Yeats. However there is a major difference between Samkara’s basic position and that of the Bhagwad Gita, with regard to the question of emancipation of the soul, from the cyclical bondage of life and death. While the Gita seeks to realize emancipation through “Niskama Karma” (non attachment to the fruit of action), Samkara taking an absolutist stance did away with action itself (22). The reason behind this is the conditional relationship existing between desire and action, which Bacchan quoting Samkara rightly points out: “By the strength of Vasana (desire), Karya (action) is accumulated and by the accumulation of Karya, Vasana increases in the changeful life of the ego (22). The whole emphasis of Samkara’s discourse as Yeats understood it is “on the inner realization and not on any outer action, on desire that would ultimately lead to action” the former’s famous formulation being: “Brahmo satyam jagan mithya; jivo Brahmaivo na-parah”—the supreme spirit is real the world unreal; the individual self is the only supreme self and no other”(23). The factuality of life, for Yeats therefore became synonymous with what Samkara called ‘Maya’ (illusion), something that found explicit utterance in “A Meditation in Time of War”, from the anthology “Michael Robartes and the Dancer”:

For one throb of the artery,
While on that old grey stone I sat
Under the old wind-broken tree,
I knew that One is animate
Mankind inanimate fantasy.

Yeats’ misprision of the Nightingale ode I believe, stems from an understanding of these oriental philosophical discourses. As we have already seen, Yeats probably read the poem from

the song-bird perspective, so the relegation of the same symbol of perfection as an illusion becomes easier for him. Thus crop up the golden bird image and the poet asserts:

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (Yeats, sailing 25-32)

The golden bird being inanimate is not subject to the bickering of the flesh, and thus stands apart from the bondage of desire and action (vasana and karya). Again since the mineral, vegetable and mineral worlds are related to each other by continuous degrees according to Swedenborg's doctrine; it becomes possible for Yeats to make the symbol of perfection all the more credible.

Moreover, a "Clinamen" it may be claimed has been accomplished here. Unlike Milton's Satan (Bloom's archetype of the modern poet), whose inability of a slight swerve during his fall from heaven led to the creation of the mere opposite; the ephebe in Yeats successfully effects a swerve, and through his much deliberated symbol of perfection (the golden bird), achieves a "misprision proper" that is both "intentional and involuntary". (Bloom, Anxiety 14)

In conclusion a critique of Bloom's theory of poetry as explicated in the "Anxiety of Influence" becomes imperative. Poetic influence says Bloom, always starts by "misinterpretation" and "misprision" according to him is "perverse, willful revisionism". However misinterpretation only becomes meaningful within the context of interpretation. Bloom's theory therefore intends to situate interpretation at the very centre of discourse by making it somewhat normative, and empowering it with what Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence". It fails to realize, that this centre is perpetually elusive, as projection of an objective paradigm of interpretation is both impossible and absurd. Furthermore it ought to be understood that poets do not necessarily misread or misinterpret, and a subsequent poet doesn't nullify his precursors; he corrects them. Nevertheless the theory still remains as an alternate interpretive method, that by questioning the deep structure of poetry—its intentions, impulses and desires—lays bare the multiple dialectical nuances of the creative process.

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Abstract

Poetic influence as Harold Bloom theorizes in his "The Anxiety of Influence", necessarily presupposes an oedipal complex situation, whereby a strong poet has to negotiate a Freudian castration complex, involved in a predecessor poet's exhaustion of his (the strong poet's) poetic space. It is this love/hate relationship with the predecessor, which compels him to misread a predecessor poet thereby enabling him to carve out his poetic space. The present initiative was tipped off by an intention to trace the possible 'map of misreading' encountered by William Butler Yeats, which might have been instrumental in providing him with the much needed poetic space in "Sailing To Byzantium".

Key words: [Anxiety of influence, castration complex, Bloom, Sailing to Byzantium]

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