

Chapter II

Defining 'vision' and indicating its importance in Yeats's poetry

I was interested in little but the vision itself.

(W. B. Yeats: *Essays and Introductions*: 1961:33)

The readers of W. B. Yeats's poetry often confuse his *A Vision* with his "vision" which is a part and parcel of poetic perception. Literally, "vision" denotes a number of meanings. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as

The ability to see: the idea or a picture in one's imagination: a dream or similar experience especially of a religious kind: the ability to think about or plan the future with great imagination and intelligence. (2005: 1705)

The word "vision" can be associated with a mystic, with a saint or with a literary artist. William Blake's vision is the vision of a religious mystic who believes in the union with the divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation, and in the power of spiritual access to domains of knowledge, closed off to ordinary thought. In Bernard Shaw, Saint Joan's vision comes from her, to paraphrase Schopenhauer, extraordinary intellect which works quite independently of "the will", and therefore freely. For a literary artist, his work embodies a life vision reflective of an intensity of imaginative conviction. Rabindranath Tagore admired that in Yeats:

That Yeats had an intensity of imaginative conviction is an utter truth. He never played with imagination but

whatever he saw in the light of imagination, he perceived the truth of it in his own life. Thus imagination was not only a vehicle of his vocation as a poet for Yeats, but a part and parcel of his life. He used to feed his soul from the resources of the world by means of imagination. Whenever I met and talked with him in solitude, I felt his intensity of imaginative conviction. I was yet to go through his poems to judge his poetic talent, but that he touched upon all gamut of human experience with the help of imaginative conviction of heart, was what I felt when I came in touch with him. (Translation mine)

(Ei imaginative conviction kathata Yeats sambandhe attyanta satya. Kalpona tahar pakhhe kebol lilar samogri nahe, kalponar aloke tini ja jaha dekhiachen tahar satyatake tini jibane grahan karite pariachhen. Arthat tahar hate kalpana-jinisti kebolmatra kabitya babosajer ekta hatiar nohe, taha tahar jibaner samogri; ehar dwarai biswajagat haite tini tahar atmar khadya paneo ahoran karitechhen. Tahar sange niwrite jatobar amar alap haiache tatobar ei kathai ami anubhab kariachi. Tini je kabi taha tahar kabita padia janibar sujog akhono amar sampurnorupe ghate nai, kintu tini je kalponalokito hridayer dwara tahar choturdike pranobanrupe sparsha karitechhen taha tahar kache asiai ami anobhab karite pariachhi.) (2003:666-670)

“Literature is always personal,” says W.B. Yeats, “always one man’s vision of the world, one man’s experience, and it can be popular when men are ready to welcome the visions of others” (1962: 115). Hence, we propose to study the ‘vision’ of W. B. Yeats through his poetical works. From the very inception of his poetic career, W. B. Yeats had “grown

happier with every year of life as though gradually conquering something in" himself, certainly his miseries were not made by others but were a part of his "own mind" (1966: 11). He lived in a dream, and the reality meant nothing to him. He worked on a large canvas with all the force of his violent personality, oblivious of everything in his effort to get what he saw with the mind's eye. He was never satisfied with what he had done; it seemed to him of no consequence compared with the vision that obsessed his mind. As a result, all his poems are endeavours to capture some high, impalpable vision in a net of obscure life-experiences. Hence W. B. Yeats sorted out the avocation of a poet:

He (a poet) must make his work a part of his journey towards beauty and truth. He must picture saint or hero, or hillside, as he sees them, nor as he expected to see them, and he must comfort himself, when others cry out against what he has seen, by remembering that no two men are alike, and that there is no excellent beauty without strangeness. In this matter he must be without humility. He may, indeed, doubt the reality of his vision if men do not quarrel with him as they did with Apostles, for there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection, and it sometimes has the form of the religious life and sometimes of the artistic life; and I do not think these lives differ in their wages, for the end of art is peace... (1961: 207)

The most obvious difficulty in responding to Yeats's work is the sheer complexity of his vision. To a considerable degree, this complexity arose from a life-long conflict that raged within him—a conflict compounded of contrary impulses pulling him at once towards a life of introspection and towards a life of action and engagement. This self-

division had its origin in Yeats's childhood revolt against his father's world. Hating his father's skepticism, the young Yeats would dream the days away, but he wanted the leisure of ease as well as the pleasure of success. So, he grew up with this divided personality. Hence, he painfully turned inwards, being self-conscious of the vast gulf between his self-reality and his self-image. His poetic nature made him dream and ruminate whereas the historical period in Ireland in which he belonged, demanded concrete action. Torn between these two extremes, Yeats craved for mental stability and inner poise. Yeats's Irishness is more than a matter of using Irish themes and an Irish atmosphere. It means that his vision is something more than private, personal and literary; that it has its own rationale. It gives him the kind of advantage that he had in his mind:

I filled my mind with the popular beliefs of Ireland... I sought some symbolic language reaching far into the past and associated with familiar names and conspicuous hills that I might not be alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses... or mourned the richness or reality lost to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* because he had not discovered in England or in Ireland his Caucasus. (Yeats: 1961:150)

T. S. Eliot extols Yeats for the maturity of vision the later Yeats shows in his whole gamut of experience: "When I was a young man at the university of America, just beginning to write verse, Yeats was already a considerable figure in the world of poetry... I cannot remember that poetry at that stage made any impression upon me... For this reason the poetry of young Yeats hardly existed for me until after my enthusiasm had been won by the poetry of the older

Yeats"(1961:296-297). Eliot makes an attempt to trace the developing phenomena of Yeats's vision.

J.B.Priestley called W.B. Yeats "a poet first, last, and all of the time; not only a great but probably the greatest poet of the century"(1961:197). As a poet Yeats marked the movement away from the energy and exuberance of romanticism in Blake and Shelley, and the poetry of "current opinion" in Tennyson. It was a transition from the roles of a prophet and teacher holding up a fragile vision of beauty to a concern for what Yeats termed the "Unity of Being" and to bring the whole soul of man into activity. In June 1890, he had written:

The mind of man has two kinds of shepherds, the poets
who rouse and trouble and the poets who hush and
console. (Yeats: 1986: 222)

It was only too evident that he was not content with either and considered the need for bringing together the two impulses of romanticism in seemingly binary opposition—the pure aesthetic mode and the pure rhetorical mode. The aesthete distanced himself from the readers; the rhetorician aimed at crowds that found no authenticity and ratification in experience. Yeats summed up the issue in three lines in his poems:

Rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
(Yeats: 1955: 182)

In the words of Yeats, "One of the means of loftiness... has been the choice of strange and far away places for the scenery of

art..."(1961: 207). Hence, he created a never-never land of love and idleness in the early phase of his poetic career. He very easily acquired the habit of shielding himself from the world by looking within and creating a personal vision of reality based upon his own dreams and fantasies. In the world created out of vision he could preserve the higher reality that his imaginations and emotions craved, and without which life seemed worthless. In his early collection of poems, Yeats brings the cult of "eternal beauty wandering on her way" with its Red Rose of "an unimagined revelation" into the world of Irish lore. In a letter to Katherine Tynan, Yeats speaks of his future aspirations in poetic creativity:

...it is almost all a flight into fairy-land from the real world and summons to that flight. The Chorus to the 'Stolen Child' sums it up—that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge. (1986: 63)

Yeats's creative aspirations began to be fulfilled when he turned from fairy tale to myth, from the dream-world beyond the borders of history and reality towards a deeper "insight and knowledge". But with *The Wind Among the Reeds* the vision takes on a new character, and the poet inhabits in the dream-reality. For a new force has entered into his poetry – love. It is mainly despairing love, and the poetry is extremely poignant. The essential thing to note is that Yeats turns both exaltation and despair to the heightening of his dream-vision, his substitute for the drab quotidian actuality. In this early phase, Yeats not only searched Irish and mystical traditions for symbols but also strained to elevate all the images of his poetry to a

symbolic vision. It is a vision that "has transcended particular time and place...and becomes a living soul" (Yeats: 1961: 80).

In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats makes it clear that his vision embraces a poet's plunge into the world beyond himself. To him, "...art/ Is but a vision of reality" (1955:182). And how Yeats has perceived that "reality" through myriad stages of his life, is the central focus of this thesis. Yeats has seen "reality" with the eyes of a poet having "imaginative perception". His vision is in fact his vehicle which has radiated his poetic sensibility and the outcome is his attainment of that "truth and beauty" which Yeats felt, should be the only, the only way out of attaining the "Unity of Being":

All my life I have been haunted with the idea that the poet should know all classes of people as one of themselves, that he should combine the greatest possible personal realization with greatest possible knowledge of the speech and circumstances of the world". (1966:470)

Added to this attitude, Yeats's frustration in love, his bitter experiences in politics and in the Abbey Theatre shattered his illusions and produced the harsh and ironic tone of the Middle poems. The poet hurtles down to the hard realities of life—the grime and the dust, the sham and the swank. In "A Coat", Yeats puts into record the change from a dreamy glorification of Ireland's past to a cynical awareness of its present:

For, there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

(Yeats: 1955: 142)

And it was the poetry, which came out of this enterprise:

I have several ballads, poignant things I believe, more poignant than anything I have written. They have now come to an end I think, and I must go back to the poems of civilization (Yeats: 1961: 112)

The poet understood that "the romantic movement with its turbulent heroism, its self-assertion, is over." (Yeats: 1961:405) He wanted to make his "readers understand that explanations of the world lie one inside another"(Yeats: 1962: 434). For, "a poet is justified not by the expression of himself, but by the public he finds or creates". (Yeats: 1961: X). As such, he came to the conclusion:" Individuals and classes complete their personality and then sink back to enrich the mass". (Yeats: 1962:81). It is this creative mode of his major poetic works that enables Yeats "to wither into the truth" of life, to visualize any form of contemporary reality. This is also perhaps one of the secrets of "his ability, after becoming unquestionably the master, to remain always a cotemporary" (Eliot: 1961: 298) The poems like "The Second Coming" and "Easter 1916" offer an ideal case-study in Yeats's creative responses to the historical crises confronting Christian Europe through the first World War, the Irish rising of 1916 and its ruthless suppression by the British and such other national and international upheavals.

The struggle between humanist and would-be saint formed the essence of Yeats's vision of life. In *The Tower* phase onwards, the fundamental theme of his work was the war of the spiritual with the natural. Hence Yeats had begun "to see things double—doubled in history, personal history.... In my own life I have never felt so acutely the presence of spiritual virtue and that is accompanied by intensified

desire. You must feel plunged as I do into the madness of vision, into a sense of relation of separated things that you cannot explain, and that deeply disturbs emotion." (Yeats: 1961: 113) Now the poet came to the vantage point of age and experience. At this hour, he "had nothing to distract" his "thoughts that run through" his "past loves, neither numerous nor happy, back to the Platonic love of boyhood, the most impassioned of all, and was plunged into hopeless misery." (Yeats: 1962: 40) Thus, Yeats had made a distinction between the perfection that is from a man's combat with himself and that which is from a combat with circumstance. With this simple distinction he built up a vision of eternal world, quite faint in the initial phase of his poetic career. In his reply to Lady Gregory's letter, Yeats wrote:

And I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this change to an incredible experience. (1962:8)

In *The Tower*, the poet achieves a kind of ripeness. Each moment gives value to the poet's life. He is capable of excitement, for he can now "make his soul". He turns with a pang from the varied "sensual music" of the world, but he is drawn towards the 'monuments of unaging intellect'. He does not deceive himself about what he has lost in old age, but the regret itself becomes a positive assertion of life:

We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

(Yeats: 1955: 269)

Hence, the poet justified his quest for eternal glory in BBC, Belfast, 8 Sept. 1931:

Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul. And some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'.... Byzantium was the center of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city. (Yeats: 1984: 213)

In 1938, Yeats admonished his fellow poets: "Irish poets, learn your trade". At its core was this realization: "Only that which does not teach, which does not persuade, which does not cry out, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible". The poet hoped "to have attained the distance from life which can make credible strange events..." (Yeats: 1961: 221) It is for this mature vision that T.S. Eliot called Yeats "the greatest poet of our time – certainly the greatest in this language, and so far as I am able to judge, in any language". (T. S. Eliot: 1961: 296) In his vast life-span, Yeats's vision adumbrates these:

- i) The poet as an individual whose life gives weight to his words.
- ii) The poet as the social character, the site of tension between a social and personal identity.
- iii) The poet as prophet revealing truth.