

Self-Delighting Soul: A Reading of Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter" in the Light of Indian Philosophy*

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In this essay, I read "A Prayer for My Daughter" (written in 1919, published 1921) as a reverie on the nature of the self—the individual self, but also, more importantly, the Self in the sense of universal spirit, as Yeats used the term in his translation of the ancient Indian philosophical texts, the *Upanishads*.¹ In "A Prayer" Yeats invokes cross-cultural tropes, such as the tree and the bird, to bring the Upanishadic understanding of the self into relation with everyday life. I argue that reading "self" in the poem to refer only to the individual ego, and ignoring other philosophical resonances of the term, has resulted in misreading the poem as narrowly personal and politically conservative.

Throughout his adult life Yeats remained deeply engaged with Indian philosophy. When he was 22, he heard about the idea of consciousness as universal Self from Mohini Chatterjee ("Reveries" 61); in 1885, he participated in the Dublin Hermetical Society's discussions about the *Upanishads*; and, in 1935-36, he and Purohit Swami executed a beautiful translation of ten *Upanishads* (Yeats and Swami).²

The *Upanishads* are a set of philosophical dialogues between teachers and students, composed circa 1200-800 BC. They explore such questions as the nature of knowledge, of action, and of the self. All the *Upanishads* posit, first, that spirit exists; second, that spirit participates in all that exists; and, third, that the individual self (the changing, acting ego with name, form, gender and physical characteristics) is a

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temporary manifestation of an unchanging Self without name and form that witnesses action but itself does not act.

Yeats's familiarity with these philosophical concepts is evident from early in his poetic career. Many of his poems, both early and late, are shaped by these ideas as well as by ideas drawn from Western philosophy. However, the formative influence of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* as well as Yeats's translation of the *Upanishads* have been largely ignored by critics. Bloom's 500-page book nowhere mentions Yeats's translation of the *Upanishads* or his essays on Hindu philosophy. Even Snukal, who sets out to examine philosophical issues in Yeats's poems, does not mention Hindu philosophy. Shalini Sikka is the first critic to undertake a sustained examination of Yeats's engagement with Hindu philosophy, but close readings of his major poems taking this perspective into account have not yet been undertaken. My reading of "A Prayer for My Daughter" is an endeavor in this direction.

The Good Life and the Singing Bird

The word "prayer" calls up in English the idea of a Christian God but Yeats, unlike earlier poets, such as Donne and Hopkins, who wrote prayer-poems, does not explicitly address God. Nor, however, is the poem "an agnostic's prayer" (Toker 108) or a "secular prayer" (Adams 143). Rather, it is in the nature of a spell, a mantra, an incantation, such as are found in ancient Greek texts and also in the *Upanishads*. "Poetry," writes Vereen Bell, "was a mantra for Yeats, an instrument of thought" (39).

In "A Prayer" Yeats adumbrates his idea of the good life. To do so, he draws on Aristotelian as well as Hindu traditions. In the third, fourth and fifth stanzas, he includes physical beauty, good breeding and material prosperity in his idea of the good life along with love and friendship. The inclusion of material prosperity has been read as politically conservative (see Maddox 143) and is also contrary to some traditional Christian understandings of the virtuous life. However,

several ancient philosophers, Greek and Indian, considered material well-being essential to the good life. For Aristotle in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, *eudaimonia* (well-being) and *arete* (virtue in the sense of excellence) are composed of more than just right action. Aristotle considers virtue or excellence necessary but not sufficient for the life of *eudaimonia*. Good birth and breeding, beauty, love, friendship, and prosperity are also required. Likewise, the classical Hindu idea of the complete life includes four goals—*kama* (desire) and *artha* (material prosperity), based on *dharma* (the law of one's being), lead to *moksha* (spiritual liberation). This trajectory can be traced in "A Prayer." Modern forces that erase difference ("the haystack- and roof-levelling wind" 188.5) threaten the good life which the poet struggles to envision for his daughter and, implicitly, for himself.

The poem moves from the threatening external world to the stillness of the inner world. Stanzas three to five imagine the good life in terms of love and friendship, both of which require relating to the external world. But in the fifth stanza the virtue of courtesy, which has both external and internal dimensions, becomes a bridge to contemplating the essence of happiness, which requires turning inward. The sixth stanza registers this shift through the interdependent tropes of the bird and the tree.

As Sikka points out, while Yeats was aware that "symbols drawn from nature, sun, moon, and sea, for example, were universal, shared by West and East alike" (154), he "insisted on drawing his symbols from his race and nationality" (151). "The distant in time and space," he wrote, "live only in the near and present" (*Autobiographies* 490). In his representation of the bird and the tree, the linnet and the laurel, Yeats blends Upanishadic meanings with those derived from English literature. I examine both in tandem here.

Having wished for his daughter beauty, kindness, the intimacy of friendship, and courtesy, Yeats hopes that her thoughts will be like the linnet's song, a "glad kindness" (40) dispensed freely and magnanimously. The female linnet in English poetry generally appears as a mother while the male linnet is free and self-delighting.³ Thus,

Robert Burns's female linnet in "The Linnet" does not sing; she is a mother-bird raising her young in a nest. Tennyson's female linnet's song is determined by her offspring's fate:

And one is glad; her note is gay
 For now her little ones have ranged;
 And one is sad: her note is changed,
 Because her brood is stolen away. (884)

In Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned," the linnet, a spontaneous songster, represents the superiority of nature to art; he stands for the ideal poet and is male:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
 Come, hear the woodland linnet,
 How sweet his music! on my life,
 There's more of wisdom in it. (85)

In Wordsworth's "The Green Linnet" the bird is an analogue of Yeats's linnet in its self-sufficient gladness:

While birds, and butterflies, and flowers,
 Make all one band of paramours,
 Thou, ranging up and down the bowers,
 Art sole in thy employment:
 A Life, a Presence like the Air,
 Scattering thy gladness without care,
 Too blest with any one to pair;
 Thyself thy own enjoyment. (186)

However, Wordsworth's green linnet is emphatically male; the male pronoun is repeated eight times in the last two stanzas of "The Green Linnet" to refer to the bird which is also termed a "Brother of the dancing leaves."

Robert Bridges's linnet, a symbol of the devoted lover, is also definitely male:

I heard a linnet courting
 His lady in the spring;
 His mates were idly sporting,
 Nor stayed to hear him sing
 His song of love. (231)

In Wilde's short story, "The Devoted Friend," the narrator is a male linnet who tells a story contrasting a selfless friend with a selfish one; both friends are male.

Yeats is perhaps the first major English poet to connect a linnet's song to a woman's rather than a man's thoughts. He makes a new move in feminizing this symbol of freedom and joyful creativity. This feminizing connects with the feminine gendering of the spirit or soul, which I will discuss later.

The Self-Healing Tree

That the self in "A Prayer" is not just the individual ego but rather, as in Yeats's translation of the *Isha Upanishad*, universal Self or spirit, is indicated also by the trope of the tree. In Yeats's and Purohit Swami's translation of the *Prashna Upanishad*: "All things fly to the Self, as birds fly to the tree for rest" (45). Likewise, in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, the bird is the mind, which retains its connection with the inner life of spirit: "A tethered bird, after flying in every direction, settles down on its perch; the mind, after wandering in every direction, settles down on its life; for, my son! mind is tethered to life" (90-91). In "A Prayer" the bird is not tethered but free. It spontaneously flies to the tree that constitutes its life.

In the *Upanishads*, the tree is a recurrent symbol of Self or spirit, for example, in Yeats's and Purohit Swami's translation of the *Katha Upanishad*:

Eternal creation is a tree, with roots above, branches on the ground; pure eternal Spirit, living in all things and beyond whom none can go; that is Self. (36)

This eternal tree is not to be confused with its illusory reflection. In his poem "The Two Trees," Yeats contrasts the "holy tree" growing in the heart with the "fatal image" of a tree as seen in a mirror held up by demons. This image is similar to that of the inverted tree in the *Gita*, with its roots above and branches below, which suggests a tree reflected in water; the *Gita* advises the seeker to cut this tree down:

With its roots upward
 and its branches downward,
 they speak of the everlasting
 Ashwattha tree [...]
 Cutting this Ashwattha tree,
 whose roots
 are fully grown,
 With the strong
 ax of detachment; (193-94)

As in the *Gita*, so also in "The Two Trees," the tree reflected in the mirror is the delusional tree of "outer weariness" which is barren, while the eternal tree in the heart bears flowers and fruit:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
 The holy tree is growing there; [...]
 Gaze no more in the bitter glass
 The demons, with their subtle guile,
 Lift up before us when they pass,
 Or only gaze a little while;
 For there a fatal image grows [...],
 Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
 For all things turn to barrenness
 In the dim glass the demons hold,
 The glass of outer weariness, [...]
 There, through the broken branches, go
 The ravens of unresting thought;
 Flying, crying, to and fro,
 Cruel claw and hungry throat [...].
 (Collected Poems 48-49.1-2, 21-25, 28-31, 33-36)

Just as "A Prayer" moves from the howling storm, screaming wind and frenzied drum of external forces to the inner stillness of bird and

tree, so also in "The Two Trees," the speaker modifies the injunction not to gaze in the bitter glass with "only gaze a little while"; the modification suggests that wrestling with political change should be temporary and should not take over one's consciousness. This is because the external world is like a reflection in a mirror, mesmerizing but delusory and ever changing. Gazing too long at this delusory world, becoming enraptured with its political power struggles, damages the spirit. The "ravens of unresting thought," which are the equivalent of the hate-filled intellectual opinions of "A Prayer," produce bitterness and greed: "cruel claw and hungry throat."

In the seventh stanza of "A Prayer," Yeats considers the damage that the mind suffers from forces of hate that rampage through the world. If the mind retains its connection with spirit it survives these assaults; the linnet is not torn from the leaf. Here it is not the imagined daughter's mind but the poet-speaker's that, like a tree in a drought, has "dried up" (51). The damaged mind can revive like a tree that revives from its roots even after its branches have dried up.

Likewise, in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, the Spirit is a tree that has the ability to revive after being damaged: "Strike at the bole of a tree, sap oozes but the tree lives; strike at the middle of the tree, sap oozes but the tree lives; strike at the top of the tree, sap oozes but the tree lives. The Self as life, fills the tree; it flourishes in happiness, gathering its food through its roots" (93). This self-healing quality of the tree in the *Upanishads* is paralleled by the revivifying quality of the laurel in particular (see below).

Several feminist critiques of "A Prayer" are premised on unidimensional readings of Yeats's symbols. Such readings are problematic because symbols are inherently multidimensional. For example, Joyce Carol Oates reads the tree as an object that exists only for human consumption: "This celebrated poet would have his daughter an object of nature for others'—which is to say male—delectation. She is not even an animal or bird in his imagination, but a vegetable: immobile, unthinking [...] brainless and voiceless, *rooted*" (17). Oates's reading is untempered by any awareness of the fault lines of its own

Cartesian humanism. Just because trees do not have human brains, it does not follow that they exist simply as objects.

Nor is Oates's construction of a hierarchy (derived from notions of a Great Chain of Being) wherein trees are inferior to animals and birds, which in turn are inferior to humans, self-evidently accurate. Her italicization of "rooted" suggests that rootedness is oppressive, which is highly debatable.

The tree of life is a symbol of the universe, of growth and continuity, and other critics have noted it as the obvious referent here (cf. Adams 144; Stallworthy 35). Also, both in Western and in Indian texts, humans are often figured as trees. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* constructs the self-healing tree as a model for humanity:

Man is like a big tree; his hairs are leaves, his skin bark [...] his muscles are like its fibres, his bones like hard wood, his marrow like its pith.

The tree when felled grows up again from its root, from what root does man grow when cut down by death? [...]

Spirit is the root, the seed; for him who stands still and knows, the invulnerable rock. Spirit is knowledge; Spirit is joy. (146)

Here humans in general are envisioned as trees, and the stillness of knowledge ("him who stands still and knows") is valued over the busy-ness of thought.

The symbol of the laurel is also more complex than such readings recognize. Although it has multiple meanings in Western tradition, some of which are explored below, and although the poem nowhere alludes to the Greek myth wherein Daphne's father turned her into a laurel to save her from rape by Apollo, some critics read the laurel in "A Prayer" as directly and only referring to the Daphne story. Cullingford reads the laurel as a symbol of imprisonment, "preserving [the woman's] chastity at the expense of her humanity" (137). Maddox justifies this reading of the laurel not on the basis of any internal evidence in the poem but on the grounds that "The cause of 'the great gloom' in the poet's mind could be the incestuous thoughts that a daughter can stir in a father" (144). Maddox (see 144-45) also accepts

Cullingford's interpretation of the poem's last stanza as incestuous (see 138-39).

If we refrain from importing into the poem themes that are nowhere evident in it, such as incest, some other meanings of the laurel emerge. These meanings are directly relevant to the poem's exploration of spiritual damage and recovery. Through its association with Apollo, the laurel is a symbol of creativity and knowledge, hence the crowning of poets with laurel wreaths. Also through association with Apollo, the laurel stands for healing, rejuvenation and immortality. This meaning is reinforced by its being an evergreen that can revive from its roots after it turns brown and seems to have dried up. In the Bible and in Roman culture, the laurel is a symbol of prosperity, victory and fame, hence the laurel wreath worn by victors. All of these combined meanings later resulted in its becoming a symbol of Christ's resurrection.

Furthermore, Daphne's laurel too may be read as signifying autonomy rather than chastity, and thus in consonance with the linnet, which Cullingford sees as a symbol of "the single life" (137) and as an allusion to Wordsworth's "The Green Linnet." Yeats's contemporary, E. M. Forster, in his 1909 short story, "Other Kingdom," which explicitly refers to the Apollo and Daphne narrative, reads the myth as being about autonomy, not chastity. In Forster's story, a young Irish-woman turns into a tree to retain her freedom and spontaneity in the face of her overbearing English fiancé's conformity to convention. Frederick Williams has pointed out the significance of the heroine's Irishness in the context of Forster's support for both Irish Home Rule and women's suffrage. Both in Forster's story and in Yeats's poem, green, the color of modern Irish nationalism, is associated with the heroine's freedom and joy: Forster's heroine wears a flowing green dress when she is happy, and Yeats's imagined daughter is compared to "some green laurel" (47). Thus, the tree symbol is not simply and self-evidently indicative of mindlessness and imprisonment; it is much more strongly associated with vitality, joy and autonomy.

Yeats's imagined daughter is both laurel and linnet ("May she become a flourishing hidden tree / That all her thoughts may like the linnet be," 41-42), both rooted and free. This figuration as both tree and bird indicates the oneness of the individual self (the bird) with the universal Self (the "holy tree" growing in the heart of all beings).

Ideas and Innocence

The eighth stanza of Yeats's "A Prayer" has been a prime target of feminist critique; many critics, discussed later in this essay, read it as specifically about women and claim that Yeats wants his daughter not to have any ideas. This reading stems from an incorrect conflation of ideas with opinions. Oscar Wilde, who (as many biographers, starting with Ellmann, have noted) exerted a major influence on Yeats, made a crucial distinction between the play of ideas and the violence of opinion. In the letter he wrote from prison to Alfred Douglas, he pointed out Douglas's fatal flaw: "you had not yet been able to acquire the 'Oxford temper' in intellectual matters, never, I mean, been one who could play gracefully with ideas but had arrived at violence of opinion merely—" (155).

Wilde posits this flaw as "fatal" because it renders hatred stronger than love in Douglas's nature. Hate triumphing over love or the rigidity of self-righteous opinion triumphing over the play of ideas is not at all specific to women; Maud Gonne is merely one example for Yeats (as Douglas was for Wilde) of a tendency that is not unique to her but is a widespread malaise. Yeats's ungendered phrase "quiet natures" indicates that opinions that generate "intellectual hatred" are damaging for everyone, not just for women.

Reading the eighth stanza's critique of intellectual hatred as relevant to women alone would necessitate ignoring the way this stanza flows from the preceding one. The seventh stanza, with its repetition of the ungendered word "mind" ("the minds that I have loved," 49; "no hatred in a mind," 54) and its shift from daughter to father ("her

thoughts," 42, to "My mind," 49), indicates that a general malaise is under examination. In the last line of the seventh stanza, the linnet comes to represent not just the daughter's or a woman's mind but the speaker's own mind that has dried up yet is capable of revival, and indeed any individual's mind: "If there's no hatred in a mind / Assault and battery of the wind / Can never tear the linnet from the leaf" (54-56).

Yeats's contemporary Sri Aurobindo suggested that many Romantic poems work as mantra, which he defined as "rhythmic revelation" (31). The marvelous ninth stanza of "A Prayer" is a good example of poetry working as mantra; it presents a logical culmination of the poem's argument but also stands alone, constituting as it does a self-contained sentence with a meaning that does not depend on what went before:

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still. (65-72)

Here, "she" becomes almost interchangeable with "it" that refers to the ungendered soul. In the third line, the soul is "it" but when "She" returns in the sentence's main clause: "She can [...] be happy still," the pronoun refers to the daughter as it has throughout the poem, and now also refers to the soul—any soul. The self or soul, the *anima*, is feminine in Latin, masculine in Sanskrit (*atman*) but feminine in modern Sanskrit-based languages, such as Hindi (*atma*).

Let us examine the main clause in the first part of this stanza—"the soul recovers radical innocence." The word "recovers" (rather than, say, "retains") indicates that the soul loses innocence but then regains it. Yeats's metaphor here is the tree that heals itself, the laurel that dies down to its roots and grows again. The tree metaphor is implicit in the

word “radical”—innocence is said to live in the soul’s roots. The reference to the root (in the word “radical”) also recalls the root meaning of the word “innocence.” From Latin *nocere* (to injure), the word “innocence” literally means not harmful, not injurious. The poem reaches its climax in this focus on the soul recovering its innate non-harmful nature. Innocence as non-injuriousness is contrasted with the hatred and anger fostered by political radicalism, the “murderous innocence” or ignorant violence of the mob, whether imaged as a sea or as “thoroughfares.” Physical chastity or virginity is not the point here; innocence refers to freedom from hatred, not to the imagined daughter’s virginity.

In the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, a wounded tree continues to live, drawing food through its roots. The “dear perpetual place” in which the individual self is rooted could be read as a geographical location but, more importantly, it is Spirit or universal Self in which the individual self is rooted, as in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: “The tree when felled grows up again from its root, from what root does man grow when cut down by death? [...] Spirit is the root, the seed” (146). The poet prays, then, not just for a happy life for his child but for spiritual rootedness and the ability to recover from spiritual death (“My mind [...] has dried up of late”), both symbolized by the laurel.

The words “at last” suggest that this healing and learning are a process. Like the poet-speaker-father whose mind has dried up but who yet knows that spiritual integrity is made possible by shedding hatred, the daughter (and any soul) can experience loss and recovery, yet finally learn, in the *Gita*’s words, that “the self alone / is the self’s friend; / the self alone / is the self’s enemy” (6: 5; Schweig 92), or in the words of the *Isha Upanishad*: “He who sees all beings in the Self itself, and the Self in all beings, feels no hatred by virtue of that (realization)” (Gambhirananda I: 13).

The “self-delighting, / Self-appeasing, self-affrighting” (“A Prayer” 67-68) spirit, which Harold Bloom reads as solipsistic and autistic rather than autonomous (326), a judgment Oates echoes in her phrase, “an autism of the spirit” (17-18), resonates very differently in the light

of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*. The *Isha Upanishad* characterizes the Self as "self-depending, all-transcending" (16), and in the *Gita*, one whose "self becomes / connected to / the self in all beings" (5: 7; Schweig 83) is satisfied within the Self alone (6: 20; Schweig 97) and thus is both happy and peaceful. This innocence is not what Bloom terms a "perpetual virginity of the soul" (327); rather, if one were to continue Bloom's metaphor, it would be like Aphrodite and Hera recovering their virginity by bathing in a sacred spring.

Wholeness and Joy

The main clause in the ninth stanza as a whole shifts from the wishful "may" to "can," asserting ability: "She can [...] be happy still," with a play on the word "still," meaning both "continuously" and "calm." The word "still" on which the final emphasis falls, brings to a provisional conclusion the series of contrasts throughout the poem between agitated activity (howling storm, pacing speaker, screaming wind, roving man) and calm action (sleeping child, choosing right, dispensing sound, living rooted). The concept of stillness as joy appears frequently in the *Upanishads* with relation to the Self or spirit, for example, in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "Spirit is the root, the seed; for him who stands still and knows, the invulnerable rock. Spirit is knowledge; Spirit is joy" (146).

In contrast to Christian doctrine, wherein the individual is best off freely subordinating his or her will to the will of an omnipotent God, here the soul becomes happy (or fortunate, in the original meaning of the word "happy") once it realizes that its own will and divine will are inseparable because it is itself divine.

As in the closing lines of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," the self, having cast out regret and guilt, sees everything, even the apparently painful, as divine:

So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,

We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. (69-72)

This sentiment is very close to that in the famous opening verse of the *Isha Upanishad*: “That is perfect. This is perfect. Perfect comes from perfect. Take perfect from perfect, the remainder is perfect. May peace and peace and peace be everywhere” (15). Translation cannot entirely convey the meaning of the original because the word (*purnam*), translated by Yeats as “perfect,” means “whole” and “full” and “complete.” It could be understood to indicate perfection but there is no exact equivalent of the word “perfect” in Sanskrit. Rather, wholeness, fullness and completeness are indicated.

An insistence on confining the poem in the framework of a father’s protective feelings for an infant daughter, and, more importantly, in the framework of Western philosophical categories alone, results in missing some of the joy that builds as “A Prayer” moves to its conclusion. For instance, Leona Toker states that “the emotional stance that transpires from underneath the intellectual position of the poem is somewhat alienating: something in it dampens the sympathy evoked by an elderly father’s anxiety for his infant” (107). When one reads the poem with an awareness of the Indian philosophical framework towards which its language and its tropes point, it evokes not the alienating patriarchal stance Toker discovers, but a joyful centering in the Self, the same emotion found in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*’s statement: “joy is Spirit. From joy all things are born, by joy they live, toward joy they move, into joy they return” (76).

The poem’s concluding stanza has also been criticized for its patriarchal imagining of the daughter being handed over to a protective husband in a conservative or elite context (see Maddox 143). Protection, though, is nowhere mentioned in this stanza. Instead, ceremony and custom are emphasized. Ceremony refers to ritual observance or worship, and is here identified with abundance and prosperity, one of the desired outcomes of worship rituals such as the Vedic *yajna*. The non-injurious (innocent) and beautiful self flourishes in the context of a ceremonious tradition. Tradition and custom arise from rootedness

in the universal Self and in a community. As Snukal points out, the phrase "ceremony of innocence" also suggests the seriousness with which a child invests its play (171).

Just as the self in the poem is not merely an individual ego, so too, marriage here is not merely the daughter's conjugal union. Marriage is also a trope for union with the universal Self. In many religious traditions, marriage is a symbol of union between the divine and the individual spirit (the Jewish people and Yahweh; Christ and the Church; Sufi mystic and God). In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the Self is compared to a solitary bird who dreams that it is suffering and is killed or that it is a king or a god; this Self recovers from the dream's effects, and the recovery is symbolized by the delights of marriage:

But his true nature is free from desire, free from evil, free from fear. As a man in the embrace of his beloved wife forgets everything that is without, everything that is within; so man, in the embrace of the knowing Self, forgets everything that is without, everything that is within; for there all desires are satisfied, Self his sole desire, that is no desire; man goes beyond sorrow. (151)

The *Upanishads* frequently depict the pleasures and pains of individual existence as a dream. Descartes famously pointed out that it is impossible to prove beyond doubt that life is not a dream from which we will awaken; the *Upanishads* assert that life is in fact a dream (which has, nevertheless, its own reality as a reflection of ultimate reality). At the beginning of "A Prayer," the poet-speaker suffers this dream, an "excited reverie," but the ninth stanza establishes that the self's realization of its own nature is the basis for happiness. The tenth stanza then envisions this happiness through the trope of marriage with the divine.

In the *Upanishads* the trope of marriage evokes integration and joy—the thinking individual self unites with the divine Self within, which is of the nature of joy: "The knowing Self is the soul of the thinking Self, but within it lives its complement and completion, the joyous Self. The joyous Self grows up side by side with the knowing Self.

Satisfied desire is its head, pleasure its right arm, contentment its left arm, joy its heart, Spirit its foundation" (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 71).

In "A Prayer," marriage refers to the imagined daughter's wedding but it also, because of the weight of the preceding stanza, carries an undertone of completion through self-integration. Bride and groom, nature and spirit, are in the *Upanishads* two dimensions of the same Self, as imaged in the icon of Shiva, half of whose body is female (*ardhanarishwara*, the God who is half woman).

Misreading Symbols

Almost all critics, across four decades, from Harold Bloom in 1970 to Glaser in 2009, read "A Prayer for My Daughter" as primarily about fatherhood. Many critics tend to argue that it represents "woman as the reproducer of the ideals and values of a patriarchal society" (Cullingford 138), and that it reveals Yeats's reactionary political views. Lock cites in Yeats's defense Empson's self-consciously hyperbolic declaration that all the great writers in English in the first half of the twentieth century, except Joyce, were fascists (see Lock 211). Were Forster and Woolf not great writers, one wonders.

Because these critics ignore Yeats's engagement with Hindu thought, they miss some of the philosophical issues at the heart of the poem. Most importantly, they read the self in the poem as simply the individual ego, entirely missing its other connotation, as soul or spirit. In their translation of the *Upanishads*, Yeats and Purohit Swami use "Self" and "soul" interchangeably, as Yeats does throughout "A Prayer."

Joseph Hassett is almost alone in pointing out that courtesy, ceremony and rootedness were positive and gender-neutral attributes for Yeats who "thought opinions were accursed for himself as well as his daughter" (143). The few European and American critics who do mention Hindu philosophy dismiss it as part of a "silly" and "off the wall" (Eagleton 52) mix of mythology, spiritualism and magic with

which they see Yeats as involved. Today, when philosophers like Jonardon Ganeri are demonstrating that Indian philosophy has historically been just as serious an enterprise as Western philosophy, asking many of the same questions and suggesting answers, some of which are similar to and others of which are divergent from those posited by Western philosophers, it is time to take seriously Yeats's engagement with Indian philosophy.

The form of "A Prayer" with its repeated use of "May" is an invocation, like that of the opening verse in an *Upanishad*, and the poem concludes with an idea of union that mirrors the form of the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* are largely cast as dialogues between teacher and student (who are, in Indian thought, like parent and child); thus, the *Katha Upanishad* opens with a famous invocation, referring to teacher and student: "May He protect us both. May He take pleasure in us both. May we show courage together. May spiritual knowledge shine before us. May we never hate one another. May peace and peace and peace be everywhere" (25). So also, "A Prayer" is about an "us both"—parent and child, both of whom must traverse the same human journey.

Unlike English, Sanskrit has not just the grammatical singular and plural, but also the dual number, which is used to refer to two persons together. The term Yeats and Purohit Swami translate above as "us both" is in the first person dual, referring to two persons, teacher and student. "A Prayer," I suggest, likewise casts speaker and child as a dual unit, an "us both." Praying as much for himself as for the child, the speaker wishes, as in the *Katha Upanishad*, for peace, spiritual knowledge and the absence of hatred for both of them.

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NOTES

¹Indian philosophical texts use the word *atman* (self) to refer both to the individual and the universal self as both are in the ultimate analysis identical. In English, commentators often use “self” to refer to the individual *atman*, and “Self” to refer to the universal *Atman*.

²All quotations from the *Upanishads* in this essay are from the Yeats and Purohit Swami translation, unless otherwise indicated. Page numbers appear in parentheses after quotations, and refer to this edition.

³Lady Lynette in the Arthurian cycles seems to have no associations with the bird.

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