Global or Provincial: A Reading of Modern English Poets

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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes the presence of Christian kerygma in modern English poetry. It also challenges the claims of some Western critics who maintain that this poetry is above factious or parochial interests and is, as they allege, universal in outlook. Their claim is shown untenable by documenting the strong affiliation that poets such as Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Frost and some others have with Christianity. To prove the Christian elements in these poets, specific poems are examined and their religious aspects are elaborated. It is found that the life of Christ—his incarnation, immaculate birth, and sacrifice for human redemption—adumbrates the poetic consciousness of these poets. It is further alleged that this poetry promotes a worldview which, in a global society, if it ever comes into existence, will sound like Christian jingoism.

Keywords: Modern English Poetry; Yeats; Eliot; Auden; Frost; Larkin; Levertov; Global; Provincial; Parochial Interest; Christology; Christian Sensibility; the Other; The Islamic Other; Civilizations; Byzantium; Incarnation; Redemption; Worldview.

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, the words "global" and "provincial" need explanation so that their role in the argument of this paper stays in proper focus. Traditionally, persons coming from the country to London and exhibiting the manners, dress, and speech of their part of the countryside were labeled as provincial; the word implied a lack of civilization and a sort of inability to adjust into the new environment. If we replace "London" with "Globe" or the world and "persons" coming to it with Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and so on, the meanings in which global and provincial occur in this study should become unambiguously available to the readers. On this globe, religious identities constitute provinces. Hence, global or provincial.

There are two assumptions behind the argument this paper develops. The first is that most of, if not all, the great accomplishments of poets referred to here have already been pointed out and discussed even to a point of exhaustion; all the accolades have been sung and no addition is needed or attempted here. The second assumption, the truth of which this study tries to establish, is that the parochial and/or the racio-ethnic content present in modern English poetry is usually either suppressed or made to look aesthetic achievement. If ever a negative or compromising remark is included in scholarly discussions, it is dismissed as an inessential part of the whole work of a poet, and thus the overall rating and status of the poet are tidied up, and the poet stands as a symbol of pure aesthetic accomplishment. With this sort of intellectual filtering of ideas often practiced by anthologists and critics, the reader may come to the conclusion that the poet—to borrow Wordsworth’s phraseology—has felt “the still, sad music of humanity,” while in reality the music could be that of a particular community or of a group; a specific angle of vision or a provincial ideology may be masquerading as a universal truth. Wordsworth himself exists in the minds of most readers as a great nature poet; but when his religious sonnets, that are seldom included in popular anthologies, are seen, his universal image suffers a parochial narrowing down and his sympathies become limited to one group of humanity. Such selective approach to poetic works keeps the image of poets in line with the accepted cultural or aesthetic principles even today.

An explanation of this second assumption—i.e., existence of religious group loyalty—is the main burden of this study. By looking at the poetry of some of the most notable modern English poets, it is posited in this paper that in a global world order English poetry will appear as a form of Christian jingoism rather than a universally enlightening and meaningfully acceptable experience for, if not all, the

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majority of mankind. In fact, E. M. Tillyard's statement, "English literature as a whole has spoken an idiom permeated by Christian dogma" (19) and Northrop Frye's judgment that "Western literature has been more influenced by the Bible than by any other book" (14), may sound euphemistic.

There is no need to stress the idea that the religious and cultural values practiced in the society in which a poet is born play a fundamental role in the formation of that poet's worldview. And, therefore, all the resulting worldviews clearly or implicitly can be at odds with one another. Since the human society as we know it has not so far not tried to arrive at a uniform and universally accepted worldview, the literature produced in such a society inevitably is partial to and in favor of one or the other cultural/religious group. Literature of various groups, thus, silently but surely generates an environment of conflicting perceptions, which now in the contemporary moments can also be seen affecting the political and economic endeavors of people. In fact, mankind is divided into multifarious groups at odds with one another. The aim of this paper is to show that, in English, modern poets such as Yeats, Eliot, Frost, and some others have not risen above this kind of cultural divide. The bond with or loyalty to a group is very much alive in every ivory tower.

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)

To begin with, it is instructive to see how the religious content of Yeats's poems has generally been presented. For Leavis, Yeats "differs from the Victorian romantics in the intensity with which he seeks his 'higher reality'" (40). Nowhere in his discussion of Yeats (New Bearings in English Poetry, 27-50) does Leavis indicate what that higher reality is; abstract phrases such as 'eternal beauty,' 'unity of being,' and 'unity of culture' are thrown at readers some of whom may not guess any parochial elements in Yeats's poetry while it cannot be ruled out that some others will connect such phrases with Christian ideas that MacNiece in his Poetry of W. B. Yeats has touched upon. MacNiece suggests that Yeats may have believed in 'transubstantiation' (26), that he may have been 'a Roman Catholic manqué' (67), that he and Joyce were 'spoilt priests' and that there is a 'blend of mysticism and dogma' in his poetry (176). But, then, MacNiece, unaware of the implicit contradiction of his judgment, goes on to say that Yeats was 'unable to accept the established religion' and, therefore, he developed his system (112-13). MacNiece's study presents Yeats to be a devoted priest of poetic aesthetics, as if all his output were non-parochial and universalistic. For MacNiece, there is only a drama of Being and Becoming in "The Second Coming" (126-30) and "Easter 1916" is 'a patriotic memorial poem' (118). The specifically Christian content of the two poems, as will be clear in my discussion below, is simply ignored.

Then there are critics who think that Yeats was not really serious about any religion. Alvarez, for example, says: "Yeats's dogmas and orthodoxies encouraged in him a sort of triviality." "In his maturity," Alvarez continues, "his spiritualism was a game he played" (37). Wilson warns us that "we have to remember that [Yeats] was in the best possible sense a religious rebel: he saw much virtue in what have conveniently been regarded as the heresies of the past" (19). A. Norman Jeffares, who has extensively commented on and vigorously promoted Yeats, says: "Yeats did not find satisfactory answers in the religion of his forefathers...and though on the one hand he wanted to believe, to have faith, on the other he had a strongly sceptical streak in his mental make up" (viii). This is more or less a suggestion to the readers to see Yeats as only a temporizing Christian faithful and to take his religious symbols with a pinch of salt. Richard Ellmann, another tireless and respected Yeatsean, tries to clear up the air a little bit; but the very title he gives to his endeavor- "Assertion Without Doctrine" (in Keane, 81-99)- is tantalizingly suggestive of Yeats's non-committal attitude toward religion. Ellmann believes that "God appears in Yeats's verse... [as] an ultimate counter with which imagination can round out its world" (in Keane, 92). The whole tenor of Ellman's discussion suggests that for Yeats God, Christ, and the rest of Christian iconology are no more than aesthetic conveniences and that Yeats was pretty proud to be "un-Christian, unscientific, and unconventional" (in Keene 85). Ellman even dismisses Mrs Yeats's remark that her husband prayed all his life by saying "but if so not to orthodox Christ" (in Keane 91). One wonders what to make of Yeats's poems he wrote to pray for his son, his daughter, and his house?

In short, in critical scholarship, Yeats is often seen as playing several roles. Sometimes he appears to the reader as an Irish nationalist: someone upholding the Irish cause against the Brits, glorifying Ireland's mythical past, perhaps to counterbalance the British Arthurian legends, and seeing its peasantry as a source of Irish idiom and literary purity. At other times, he delves into occultism, trying to be in and in control of the world of spirits. Occasionally, he looks like a recluse, angry at his nation, at science, and at all sorts of material progress. In this last attitude, he begins to sound like the Luddites of the early 19th century. His reasons may...
be indefinable but it seems pretty certain that what ordinary people call life and living is for him just a sensual irresponsibility that’s at war with the life of the intellect. He even can be seen hobnobbing with the fascist ideology, though he does so to let the oppressed Irish know that their as that of all men’s deliverance from confusion and directionlessness is made possible only by strong and committed souls. Yet, the final impression he leaves on me is that of a traveler in search of power and permanence. And in that outwardly universal aim, he appears to resemble the most with all Christian seekers like Pier Ploughman, Bunyan, Everyman, and Hopkings. Of course, he is not a pulpit pounding priest or even a Christian as ordinary followers of Christianity understand this word. But, is he without a Christian sensibility? Has he brought in his overall view a vision that all human beings - irrespective of race, creed, and political sympathy - can call their own? A short answer like “yes” or “no” wouldn’t do. A comprehensive overview of his poetry will be in order to arrive at a clear understanding.

At the start, one would have to admit though that Yeats often seems to encompass all humanity. After all, he utilizes myth; he brings paganism into different Christian themes, especially in the birth of a dying God; he presents the march of history as influenced by antinomies or the so called grinding gyres; and he looks at political issues most bothersome to human beings. But what is often ignored is the fact that he does so through a particular religious orientation. He actually squints through the keyhole of Christianity, as do Eliot, Frost, Auden, Larkin and many other less known modern English poets. This peculiarly Christian tone and accent, often very narrow, would make a non-Christian reader have a sense of “otherness” as if the poetic endeavor of these minds were leaving out, even feeling hostile towards others who are not the followers of Christ. It is this narrowness that has not been seen by the Western critical establishment and that must be pointed out to correct the focus of literary comprehension.

Take for example Yeats’s celebrated view of history as presented in his poem "The Second Coming." The very title points to a specific religious interpretation of history which, incidentally, is shared both by Christianity and Islam, but is acceptable to no one else. Both Christians and Muslims predict that the Messiah will reappear in Jerusalem at a time in history when violence and chaos will be at their zenith, and his reappearance will start the final millennium of peace before the Day of Judgment. This religious notion provides a defining framework to the whole poem. Of course there are some ideas in the poem to which every one, Christian or non-Christian, can easily relate to. For instance, the picture of human condition painted in the opening of the poem is lyrical and touches the chords in every thinking human being. For, it is a lament on the loss of control of authority and on the resulting chaos and cheapening of human life. The lament is capped off with an observation that can be made in any society or civilization:

… everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity (CP 185).

Despite this general opening, despite the intrusions of Yeats’s ideas regarding "Spiritus Mundi," and despite his idea that every 2000 years a new dispensation takes hold in human history, the entire ambience of this poem is couched in very familiar Christian symbolism. The idea that “some kind of Messiah” is about to reappear in Bethlehem—the birthplace of Jesus Christ—is the message of this poem.

The nature of this Messiah, however, is a bit paradoxical. Yeats calls him a “rough beast” having a “lion body” and a blank pitiless gaze. Outwardly, this description, instead of suggesting a prince of peace, portrays a harbinger of violence. Yet, this imagery is often found in descriptions associated with Jesus Christ. One often hears “Christ the devourer” and “Christ the tiger.” In Christian sermons, he is often compared to some one who takes all unto himself for their own salvation. Besides, the idea of violence suggested in the imagery of the poem is consistent with the conventional notion that a millennium of violence will precede the millennium of final peace. The only idea that does not fit into this Christian pattern is that of the inevitable change occurring every 2000 years. The readers of Yeats know that this notion has come into the poem from A Vision, a rather arcane interpretation of history and human characteristics that both Yeats and his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees developed a few years before "The Second Coming” was written. I believe, though, that even this idea may not be a total anachronism. Although Yeats had a faith in Christ’s divine sacrifice, he had come to believe that in human experience such a sacrifice exists as a recurring necessity.

This is only one aspect of the parochial nature of this poem. Another limitation comes to light when we understand the time and circumstances in which Yeats wrote it. Soon after their marriage, Mrs. Yeats started what now is known as the automatic writing. The so called “mediums,”
invisible spirits seen and heard in séances, would dictate ideas that Mrs. Yeats wrote on papers. Soon Yeats himself began to receive these ideas as well, and all such received messages were gathered in his book, *A Vision*. One of the ideas, which Yeats thought to be new, was the ever present conflict between antinomies that resulted in one or the other civilization. Yeats laboriously develops a system that helps interpret human character and civilization. In my discussion of the parochial elements in English poetry, the mention of this system is relevant only to the extent that its main outlines come out of séances. Although the Christian theology disapproves of this practice, there is quite an established tradition of talking to the spirits of the dead. The whole gamut of Catholic sainthood and seeking of intercession from the saints (of which more will be said by and by) is a respectable Christian tradition. In the background of "The Second Coming," therefore, this tradition of becoming privy to the unknown and, consequently, assuming a prophetic role is very much alive. Still another circumstance behind "The Second Coming" is the Irish political conflict, particularly the one during and after the First World War. The division between the Republicans and the established Irish aristocratic families became worse during the civil war, and almost all the houses which had carried on Yeats’s “ceremony of innocence” and high culture were either burned down or abandoned by their owners. This and the horrendous violence of the World War were actually the immediate inspirations for this poem. A G Stock succinctly remarks that in "The Second Coming," Yeats “sets his own age in the perspective of eternity” (186). What is important for a non-Christian reader is to know that it is a Christian perspective and the idea of this eternity is to be grasped through the Biblical prediction of apocalypse. Practically every commentator refers the reader to consult the Gospels of Matthew (xxiv) and St. John. For example, see Untrecher (165) and Jeffares (246).

Such narrowing down of a reader’s attention to a specific worldview occurs in Yeats almost invariably. I came across 16 titles of his poems that would be incomprehensible to all those who have no knowledge of Christian history and its dogma. How, for instance, would one know the significance of titles like “The God’s Mother,” “The Magi,” or “The Old Stone Cross” without some knowledge of the Christian belief in Annunciation, Immaculate birth, Incarnation and Resurrection? Or take for illustration the title “Veronica’s Napkin”. A reader has to know where and when a woman named Veronica used her napkin to remove blood from the face of Christ. Not only that, the reader has to know what happened to the piece of cloth as well. This title, in short, contains in it the story of the Stages of the Cross and of miracles attributed to Christ. Even as easy titles as “Solomon to Sheba”, “Solomon to the Witch”, and “Crazy Jane and the Bishop” remain out of the reach of people who have no background information of Christianity and its history even if the actual contents come from ordinary human experience. The irony is that when such people read these poems they can relate to their contents. After all, who would be unaware of lust or love and of the debate over pretentious piety and lovable sincerity? However, when common human experience is given a specific cloak or, say, a Biblical twist, the lesson intended becomes parochial. Yeats was so fond of the idea behind the Christian Annunciation that he elaborated it in a poem entitled "Wisdom," a poem not often anthologized but which must be read in its entirety to realize the extent to which he exploited Christian ideas.

The true faith discovered was
When painted panel, statuary
Glass-mosaic, window glass,
Amended what was told awry
By some peasant gospeller;
Swept the sawdust from the floor
Of that working-carpenter.
Miracle had its playtime where
In damask clothed and on a seat
Chryselephantine, cedar-boarded
His Majestic Mother sat
Stitching at a purple hoarded
That He might be nobly breached
That He might be nobly breached
In starry towers of Babylon
Noh's freshet never reached.
King Abundance got Him on
Innocence; and Wisdom He.
That cognomen sounded best
Considering what wild infancy
Drove horror from His Mother's breast. (CP 216)

According to Jeffares, Yeats must have been inspired by "pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as 'Christ in the house of his parents'” (369) when he wrote this poem. The domestic scene as sketched in the poem certainly suggests a link with those paintings; but toward the end, the poem focuses on the Christian ideas of Annunciation and the divine immaculate birth of Christ. In particular, the fear of Virgin Mary at the time when she learnt of the divine scheme for the divine birth is obviously magnified in the poem. The light
heartedness of the line "King Abundance [God] got Him [Christ] on Innocence" [Virgin Mary] suggests that Yeats looks upon this event more or less in physical terms just as he portrays the physical union of Zeus and a mortal in "Leda and the Swan." The point, none the less, remains that in Yeats the concepts of annunciation and of immaculate birth become a part of poetic aesthetics.

This kind of religious parochialism is more effective in those poems of Yeats in which the Christian idiom is apparently muted in order to highlight universal relevance. Yet, paradoxically, the Christian notions in such poems get increased emphasis. Take for instance his poem "Easter 1916." Only the title, alluding to Christ’s resurrection, is charged with religious meaning, while the actual text of the poem is based on a particular historical event in the Irish struggle for freedom, i.e., the uprising of April 24, 1916. On this day, 700 members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army occupied the Dublin Post Office and its surrounding area in the hope of gaining freedom from the British, who were involved at that time in the First World War. The British characterized the occupation as a treasonous act, captured and killed many people, and from May 3 to 12 hanged more than a dozen leading men. Yeats wrote this poem in reaction to this event (Jeffares 384). The poem consists of reflection by Yeats on his own relationship with some of the men he mentions in it, on what he considered the comical nature of the Irish struggle, and on the fact that those whom he had not given any importance rose to sacrifice their life. During the uprising, general Irish public was quite unsympathetic but the British court-martials rose to sacrifice their life. During the uprising, general Irish public was quite unsympathetic but the British court-martials changed its opinion and all dying men, including MacBride whom Yeats describes as “a drunken, vainglorious lout,” became heroic martyrs. Yeats himself immortalized these men and their action in his poem. He went, in fact, a step further. He connected the Irish uprising with, on the one hand, the rising of Christ, commonly known among Christians as the Resurrection, and on the other with the archetypal deliverer or scapegoat. Only in this sense the words "All changed… A terrible beauty is born" can be understood. Besides, when this poem is read in the context of other poems he wrote on the Irish martyrs of freedom—for example, “Sixteen Dead Men,” “The Rose Tree,” and “On a Political Prisoner” and in that of his play "The Resurrection," it becomes absolutely clear that he regards the death of these men as akin to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Their action brings freedom for the Irish the same way as Christ’s death, as is believed by Christians, not only frees all from sin but also starts a new dispensation. A song in "The Resurrection" has these lines:

Ondour of blood when Christ was slain
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline.  (Collected Poems 211).

The Easter martyrs sowed the seeds of a similar change in Ireland. Yeats’s poem very clearly supports my idea that in English poetry an item of local importance or a belief held by a specific group usually passes for or assumes universality. For the concept of fruitful sacrifice is quite common; but to present it through Christ’s blood makes this idea an instrument of parochial propaganda, for it limits the idea to a religious group.

There are many poems of Yeats in which, intentionally or unintentionally, this kind of stance is introduced. In fact, several of his poems read even into pagan experience the same or parallel Christian notions of death-rebirth of god and divine entry into temporal reality. I, as a reader of Yeats, often feel that he is trying to see Christian patterns of divine and worldly realities in all human experience. This is as if one province on our globe subsumes all the others.

Before I discuss the Christian aesthetics of Yeats any further or take up discussion of the same in other poets, it’s important to clarify the sense in which I am using words like "Christian" and "Christianity." My thesis has nothing to do with the Christian sectarian differences. I am using these terms in the sense implied in these words of a Christian scholar: "Christianity begins with a high Christology, with what we think of Christ. It is his life, death and resurrection which is the cornerstone of our faith and the clue to the meaning of history" (Fern 228). I am aware, though, how the sectarian divide has influenced social, political, and literary life in the West. In fact, many in Ireland may not have considered Yeats as their kind of Christian. One example from his political life may be relevant in this connection here. Yeats belonged to what is known as Irish Protestant Ascendancy, protestant well-to-do classes whose influence was on the rise. As a senator of the Irish Free State, he often expressed his ideas openly. When marriage bill was under discussion and he was trying to speak for the protestant minority in the Senate, some Catholic Senators walked out to protest against “his true Cromwellian colours” (Hone 373—74). For the purpose of my argument, it is necessary to point out that no matter how the Irish public or the Christian faithful characterize Yeats's personal faith, his poetry is full of images and symbols that a non-Christian reader can make sense of only with reference to Christian ideology. It is this
inevitability of a faith that, in my judgment, makes Yeats's poetry thoroughly parochial which, from the universal perspective, would also be seen as provincial.

Even the two Byzantium poems that have often been read as great monuments to human creative imagination (Ellmann 257, 274-275) contain a notable share of the Christian residue. To begin with, "Sailing to Byzantium" presents a soul withdrawing from a sinful world where "Caught in ... sensual music all neglect/ Monuments of unageing intellect" (CP 191) and going toward a place where some sort of fulfillment, different from the one possible in the world of sense, is expected. In "Byzantium," we are shown what happens to the soul before that fulfillment may be realized. Without getting into the nitty-gritty of all the symbolic details of these poems, couldn't a non-Christian reader see parallels between Yeats and other writers such as Langland, Chaucer, and Bunyan? After all, there is an account of a spiritual journey, though different in details, that Yeats himself "was incapable of accepting Christianity" (xiv). Again, he regards "the dome" in "Byzantium" as "the image of heaven, the only canopy for God" (230), and while discussing the nature of "flames that cannot singe a sleeve", he points out "the Biblical reference to the fiery furnace" (234), yet he wiggles Christianity out of the Byzantium poems and makes them relevant to all human, and not just Christian, experience. His final position is quite significant to the main point I am trying to make in this paper. The "two Byzantium poems," he regrets, "have been buried under a great mass of exegetical rubble, and that way we may lose sight of what they are." For him, "they are great rhetorical poems of a traditional kind, which lament the passing of youth, virility, strength, and which seek to establish, by symbols which are part traditional, part personal, an imagined defence against Time's decay. They are linked by the theme of Byzantium and the golden cock" (236). Yet, it is the theme of Byzantium which brings these poems closer to a Christian ambience than to a carpe diem tradition. The images of the poems, when read in the light of Yeats's own

Most Western critics shy away from the idea that in these poems the individual Christian soul experiences a mystic union with God. Instead, they read in them an artistic stasis. Ellmann, for example, though conscious of the possibility of a religious interpretation, regards the poems "primarily a description of the act of making a poem" (274). Untrecker, likewise, suggests that the Yeatsean "scarecrow"—the "aged man," or "a tattered coat upon a stick"—becomes a singing bird, "the very work of art" (173). Bowra finds Yeats caught between "an unrealizable ideal and a real world" (211) while Rosenthal sees in these poems "a world of pure creativity in which the fleshly is transformed into the eternal" (in Keane 43) but he does not identify whether this eternal is the everlasting art or God. Wilson, on the other hand, sees in the city of Byzantium "a symbol for the world of intellect and the spirit as opposed to the world of senses" and then equates it with "Elysium" (231-32), the mythical paradise where mortals and gods are supposed to roam together. Denis Donoghue, however, warns us that "the body was the only universal Church to which Yeats would belong" (in Keane 106) and, therefore, when the soul gets out of the body "in Yeats it has no where to go" (in Keane 108-09).

Among all the commentators that I have been able to consult, T. R Henn presents a thoroughly ambiguous stance. On the one hand he acknowledges that the poetry of Yeats "demands continuously some knowledge of, and sympathy with, the Christian tradition" and, on the other, he asserts that Yeats himself "was incapable of accepting Christianity" (xv). Again, he regards "the dome" in "Byzantium" as "the image of heaven, the only canopy for God" (230), and while discussing the nature of "flames that cannot singe a sleeve", he points out "the Biblical reference to the fiery furnace" (234), yet he wiggles Christianity out of the Byzantium poems and makes them relevant to all human, and not just Christian, experience. His final position is quite significant to the main point I am trying to make in this paper. The "two Byzantium poems," he regrets, "have been buried under a great mass of exegetical rubble, and that way we may lose sight of what they are." For him, "they are great rhetorical poems of a traditional kind, which lament the passing of youth, virility, strength, and which seek to establish, by symbols which are part traditional, part personal, an imagined defence against Time's decay. They are linked by the theme of Byzantium and the golden cock" (236). Yet, it is the theme of Byzantium which brings these poems closer to a Christian ambience than to a carpe diem tradition. The images of the poems, when read in the light of Yeats's own
often quoted remarks from *A Vision*, unambiguously point to a religious struggle of soul’s salvation. After all, Byzantium was the center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity where Yeats would himself have liked to live because there, as he put it, "religious aesthetics and practical life were one" (quoted in Untrecker 172) and which, according to Hone, “represented Rome approached from the East” (371). Regardless of what the poems may really mean, Henn is typical of those scholars who tend to read universality in narrow parochial symbols. He even urges a non-Christian reader to ignore clear Christian references and to look upon the Byzantium poems as a sort of metaphysical conceit representing the theme of *carpe diem* to which all human beings, regardless of their religion, can respond. And my point is that not only English poetry but also its Western explicators try, albeit indirectly, to represent worldwide, a view entertained by only a part of humanity, as a universally shared or sharable idea. This tendency shows that Jingoism is not limited to politics alone; it also sustains aesthetic endeavors of the Christian West. A non-Western reader is made to hear not just the slogan "my country, right or wrong" but also its companion "my religion/culture, right or wrong".

There are moments in Yeats, however, when he appears to be moving away from Christianity. In his poem, "Vacillation" for example, he rejects the mysticism of Von Hugel in favor of the poetics of Homer: "Homer is my example and his unchristened heart." But in the same poem he literally overwhelms the reader with Biblical allusions and also suggests that Homer’s theme was nothing "but original sin" (CP 247). Thus Henn’s idea that some understanding and sympathy with Christian mores are necessary for understanding Yeats’s poetry is quite valid whereas his opinion about Yeats being unable to believe in Christianity has no bearing on the fact that the poetry he left behind is fully saturated with Christian ambience. Actually when Yeats looks askance at Christianity, he does so to elevate the role of the poet to that of the poet-priest. For him the poetic apprehension of truth, if not the same as that of the priest, is the only practical spiritual anchor that humans can have. "Whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments," he declared in his *Autobiography*, "was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion" (Macmillan 90). For him the true function of art apparently is to strengthen and preserve spiritual angst of humanity. "The supreme art," he says, "is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius but never abandoned.

...A great work of art [like] the "Ode to a Nightingale"...is rooted in the early ages as Mass which goes back to savage folk lore. In what temple garden did the nightingale first sing?" (Macmillan 490) The outward link to the whole humanity can easily mislead a reader to think that Yeats is embracing a nonparochial, religiously neutral, stance. But in reality he is reinstating the priestly role for the poet. "The arts," he says in his essay entitled "The Autumn of the Body" "are about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests" (*Selected Criticism* 41). His poetry like the poetry of many other poets is certainly embedded in the lore of Christianity, the religion known to him. A parochial ring is loud and clear in it.

Other Poets

To begin with, it may be noted that, due to limitation of space, giving equal or even a balanced attention to every poet is impossible; yet, the main thesis of this study is satisfactorily kept in view throughout, and the extent to which the Christian *Kerygma* is overwhelmingly present in modern English poetry is clearly explained. Besides, it is necessary to restate that this study has nothing to do with the personal faiths of poets themselves; for the real focus of this effort is on the faith that emerges from or is embedded in their poetry. My contention is that the faith that emerges from their poetry is the Christian dogma or something like it and that the Western critical establishment has by and large presented this poetry as a ‘still and sad music’ of all humanity. This establishment contends that this poetry bears, if at all, little resemblance to Christianity and that this poetry promotes man’s aesthetic apprehension of his condition in this life. Here is, for example, how G. Wilson Knight concludes his impressions about Eliot’s poetry: "I write of Eliot as a poet, of his poetic self; and this self, I have argued, cannot be regarded as wholly, or even mainly, Christian. … As a man he was, we know, a Christian; his conversion existed in the order of decision and life action, not in art. The two orders are distinct" (SR 255). This type of apology for the Christian elements in Eliot’s poetry can be seen in practically every notable critic (Dobree 86; Spender 60, 68; Read 54; Ransom 15; Brooks 86; Traversi 7). The Western critical establishment, in short, often beats the aesthetic drums and envisions all humanity dancing around them; and, in the name of Art, it douses all human experience with the holy water from the Christian fount.

Before I focus on the parochial elements in the poetry of Eliot, Frost, Auden, and some others, it is helpful to sample,
at some length, one more critic to show that the critical response to modern poets has generally excluded or ignored their Christian leanings. According to Matthiessen, for example, "both Yeats and Eliot recognize that there can be no significance to life, and hence to tragedy in the account of man's conflicts and his inevitable final defeat by death, unless it is fully realized that there is no such thing as good unless there is also evil, or evil unless there is good; that until this double nature of life is understood by a man he is doomed to waver between a groundless, optimistic helpfulness and an equally chaotic, pointless despair. Eliot has learned from his own experience that the distinguishing feature of a human life consists in the occasions on which the individual most fully reveals his character, and that those are the moments of intense 'moral and spiritual struggle'" (20). Clearly, two poetic selves which are essentially-and in case of Eliot, as will be shown below, dogmatically-Christian are being looked upon as reliably objective interpreters of man's predicament in this life. In the light of the parochial partisanship of Yeats presented in the first section of this paper, Matthiessen's judgment is clearly off the mark, for it characterizes a Christian outlook as universal. And when we enlist the Christian elements in Eliot's poetry, this critic's effort to universalize a narrow world view becomes just too obvious to ignore.

By common consensus, Eliot's poetry is seen to have two phases. The first phase ends with the publication of "The Hollow Men" in 1925; the second begins with the publication of "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and, developing fully in Ariel Poems and Four Quartets, concludes in his plays. According to Herbert Read, the poetry of the first phase is what may be called "pure poetry" (54, emphasis original). To what extent it is pure, i. e., descriptive of the universal aesthetic experience of man, will soon be clarified below; but first a working summary of the second phase will help us understand the extent of Eliot's parochialism.

The tone of Eliot's second phase is that of a penitent Christian. And the tenor of this poetry would be incomprehensible to a non-Christian reader without a thorough knowledge of Christian dogma and its concomitant iconology. Information regarding the journey of the Magi, especially the meaning of a Christian martyrdom. And African heathens stokes the traditional Christian prejudice against the non-Christians, especially the Islamic Other. In his second phase Eliot actually exceeded his own limits he had set in his essay "Religion and Literature." "What I want," he had asserted, "is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian" (Essays 346; italics original). The two adverbs he...
wants to exclude, in fact, applicable to his attitude that describes his Christian outlook in the second phase of his work.

This attitude has a veneer of universalism in the poetry of his first phase in which Eliot presents dissatisfied, almost totally unfulfilled, life of supposedly the modern (European or every?) man whose aesthetic sensibility has suffered a shock and who appears to have lost not only personal confidence but also socio-cultural moorings. A certain tiredness and meaninglessness pervade the human experience as sketched in this phase. Images of seedy city life and portraits of cultural deterioration are presented in so powerful and sonorous language that they leave significant impact on the readers, who may or may not be able to fully understand the poetry itself. I can still recall my own first puzzled response to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": 'a vacuum of life, indeed' was my attempt at stating its meaning. This vacuum, which in Prufrock is in the life of an individual, becomes the blight of an entire civilization. Yet when we try to understand the significance of multiple Biblical allusions in this phase of Eliot, the veneer of universalism begins to assume parochial colors, for the cause of the vacuum (disappearance of faith in traditional Christianity) is obvious in these allusions. There are six in "Prufrock" (Southam 50-53 passim), six in "Gerontion" (Southam 70-76 passim), and twenty-seven of these allusions in "The Waste Land" (Southam 126-199 passim). Some other poems such as "The Hippopotamus" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" are actually beyond the comprehension of a non-Christian reader without extensive information about Christian exegeses of Godhead and the Church.

To give an ironic twist to meanings is a typical way in which Eliot uses allusions; nonetheless an expansion of meaning also occurs invariably. Take for example Prufrock's effort to compare himself to John the Baptist and Lazarus. In each case, the suggestion that he is living a lack luster and unfulfilling life is intensified. Besides, the idea that he himself and his society are living a death in life, certainly a life that had required correction in the Biblical times through some kind of divine intervention, is clearly implied in these comparisons. Or study all the images of dryness, of lack of water, and of comfort-giving shadow of the rock along with the various Biblical allusions contained in "The Waste Land" especially those to Ezekiel II, i, to Ecclesiastes XII, v, to the Garden of Gethsemane, and to the journey to Emmaus, and Eliot's poem begins to look like a Christian sermon despite its indirect stance and use of vegetation and Hindu myths. In the presence of all these allusions it would certainly be inconceivable not to connect "rock" to Christian Church and "water" to not just any spiritual washing but to baptismal ceremonies. Of course, the poem contains allusions to much of human history, making some readers believe in Eliot's universal and "international" relevance. "The true protagonist of Eliot's poems is the heir of all ages," says one enthusiastic admirer (Schwartz in Martin, 98). Mr. Eliot has done a great service to "this generation," says another, "by effecting a complete severance between his poetry and all beliefs" (Richards 759, n.8; emphasis original). A non-Christian, non-Westerner, might actually see in Eliot's poetry a clear attempt to universalize a parochial Christian outlook. It is noteworthy in this context that Eliot shows some sympathy only with Hindu and Buddhist traditions in which divine Incarnation is looked upon as a process and he shows no interest in cultures in which Incarnation and Trinity are regarded as a violation of the sanctity and absolute Oneness of the deity. If Eliot's poetry and by extension English poetry are presented by its Western readers as "universal," the stand I am trying to take in this study is fully justified: A narrow group consciousness is touted as not only universal but also presented as an underpinning of entire human history. Does anything of Christian humility survive in this effort?

Two additional pieces of textual evidence will further strengthen this reading of Eliot's poetry. The first comes from "Gerontion," a poem Eliot had wanted to use as a prelude to "The Waste Land" but was dissuaded by Ezra Pound from doing so (Smith 65). This poem, on the whole, reasserts the necessity of a Christian Sacramental life through the use of symbols of dryness and seasonal renewal of nature:

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'  
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger  
In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,  
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk  
Among whispers…  

Clearly, the whole history from the start of the ministry of Jesus to the establishment of Christian ritual of Eucharist is mixed here with nature's cycle of renewal every spring. And though "flowering judas" is intended here to refer to a plant, yet the association with the historical Judas who had
betrayed Jesus is overwhelming in the present context. Moreover, the history that Eliot presents in this poem as having "cunning passages and contrived corridors" issues forth from "the wrath-bearing tree," engendering a knowledge for which there is no "forgiveness" (ll. 33-47). Unmistakably, this is the Biblical Book of Genesis or Miltonic Paradise Lost masquerading as the difficulties of the little old man Gerontion. Furthermore, the comparison of Jesus to a "devouring tiger" made twice in the poem (ll.18-19, and 48-49) reinforces without any doubt the Christian idea of redemption possible allegedly only through Jesus.

The second textual evidence can be seen in Poems Written in Early Youth. This little booklet, published in 1967 by Valerie Eliot two years after her husband’s death, shows almost all the seedlings of Eliot’s later achievements. The mocking stance, the uneasiness at pleasures of life, and of course the churchly as opposed to the worldly bearing are all present in their full incipience in this collection. While a poem called "A Fable for Feasters" makes fun of the Catholic bishops and the process of canonization, another titled "Spleen" sees life “a little bald and gray” waiting “hat in hand,/ Punctilious of tie and suit/…On the doorstep of the Absolute” (ll. 11-16). One can see here a Prufrock-like figure starting on his journey that brings him later unto the fold of the Church. But the real clue of Eliot’s bearing comes in a poem entitled "The Death of Saint Narcissus" in which the saint passing through a world resembling that of Gerontion feels he cannot “live the ways of men,” becomes “a dancer before God,” and rests “under the rock” (ll. 17—21) where he finally finds peace. These stages of the saint’s journey represent the exact replica of those the poetic persona of Eliot takes in both phases of his career, up to "The Hollow Men" (1925) and afterward. What is important in this resemblance is its Christian religious content, which has invariably characterized this persona and the zenith of which occurs in Four Quartets:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled.
(“The Dry Salvages,” ll.215-219)

And, because of Eliot’s recourse to the Christian dogma again and again in his work the contention of Herbert Read that Eliot's early poetry is "pure poetry" or the thesis of G. Wilson Knight that Eliot's poetic self is above and beyond parochial discourse or the usual effort of the Western critical establishment to present Eliot as an acme of human aesthetic achievement is in contradiction with the textual evidence that has been presented in the previous few pages. Of course, it would be rash on my part to suggest that great English critics do not know how to read what is written in their own language. Yet, in face of this evidence, it would be a miserable kowtowing to them to accept their comments on this poetry and not consider them guilty of either committing logical fallacies or indulging in communal solipsism. After all, what their views suggest is a clear denial of parochial content in Eliot's poetry, of a content that only a certain part of humanity believes in or even aesthetically relates to. But they present this content as the sum and substance of all human and historical experience. As such, both the poets themselves and the critical custodians of their poetic output see the rest of humanity in their own image. Both see the Christian sensibility as equal to the human sensibility. Since the latter is a much larger entity, inclusive of all humanity Christian and non-Christian, equating both of them is a basic logical flaw in their thinking.

This solipsistic pattern is amazingly uniform in critical approaches to modern poetry. Here is how Frost is looked at. In the words of Literary History of The United States: "He is not a religious poet, not even a nature mystic, in spite of all that nature meant to him" though most of his poems achieve a "metaphysical significance" (1191-1192). No reader could dare disagree with this judgment until he is hit by these words from "Kitty Hawk":

But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.  (ll. 219-224)

Whether Frost, the person, observed Christian dogma in his life is none of my concern; nor should it be that of his readers. But as one reads these lines along with Frost's poem "Directive" and "The Masque of Reason" and "The Masque of Mercy" one would not, could not, deny Frost a prominent place in the Christology pantheon. Aside from the humor and light heartedness explicit in the two masques, every point they make can be understood only through knowing the biblical stories of Job and Jonah. And the essential thematic concern of both, inscrutable mystery of God's ways
of showing mercy and justice, awfully resembles the Churchly exegeses of Christ's crucifixion. A character named Keeper concludes "The Masque of Mercy" by uttering these words: "Nothing can make injustice just but mercy" (l. 738). The apparent cruelty perpetrated on the body of Jesus, as the Christians allege, was a divine plan to redeem the fallen humanity. The "Directive" shows, among other things, a Frost who seems to know, like his Christian brothers, the part of humanity that can benefit from this plan, for he concludes the poem like this:

I have kept in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,
So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't.
(I stole the goblet from the children's playhouse.)
Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion. ll. 55-62

The "Directive," which, in the words of a critic, "is both an elegy for a world lost in time and a program for the future" (Parini 282), actually appears to reduce American Experience (settling in the eastern part of the land that had been formed by a great glacier, building houses and farms then abandoning them to move westward, leaving the settled place for nature or other humans to start their life, etc. etc.) to an allegory of new pristine beginning. In this New Republic of Frost, only those who drink from the Grail goblet are "the right ones" as opposed to "the wrong ones" who will not be able to find the goblet anyway. The allusion to St. Mark, 16: 16 actually says it all: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." As such, Frost may be counted among those conservative Christians who gloat over their own bright hereafter and sneer at those who are "left behind." Undoubtedly, this image of Frost stands in a clear contrast to his usually accepted image of a poet who, in spite of being a regionalist, was universal. "No poetry so regional," says Untermeyer, "has ever been so universal" (3). But as noted here, some parts of his poetry reduce Frost to a parochial figure.

In the beginning of this paper, it was pointed out that whenever a clearly narrow parochialism-an idea or a statement that somehow would compromise the neat universally accepted image of a poet-occurs, the Western critical establishment either overlooks it or tries to come up with novel interpretations to save the image. The commentaries on Frost's "Directive" that I have seen indulge in such an exercise. None points out the significance of the allusion to Saint Mark and none really explains the idea behind the grail-like goblet. All, one way or the other, try to bypass the clear parochial stance and connect this section of the poem to poetic inspiration or imagination (Deutch 82; Jarrell 48; Pritchard 140; Parini 282). In his discussion, Parini even omits the lines that allude to Saint Mark. In his study, Pritchard only makes a passing reference to "a falling-off" in the "amount" and, what he calls, "earlier intensities" in Frost's poetry. The only negative comment by Pritchard may be this: "Flattered by the attention paid to him by both Eisenhower's and Kennedy's administrations, he [Frost] was willing to sound off on subjects not even his devoted admirers cared to hear him linger on" (112). Non-Christian and, to a certain degree, non-American readers would certainly know the areas alluded to but not dwelled on by Pritchard. And one of those areas is the Christian notion of divine Incarnation, the defining principle of the identity of a large and politically very powerful group in the world.

Before concluding my discussion, brief references to some other modern poets have to be made to show the persistence with which Christian consciousness continues to make a part of the poetic aesthetics of the West. W. H. Auden (1907-1973), Philip Larkin (1922-1985), and Denise Levertov (1923-1997) are, in my judgment, a fairly representative list, though several other 20th century poets are also good candidates. Auden started as a secular intellectual and ended up as a committed Christologist. He spent much of his later life revising his earlier verse to bring it in line with his Christian ideology. Whenever a variorum edition of his poems is made available to the readers, it will become clear how change of ideological commitment affects the very nature of a poet's work. But even a hasty perusal of his poems such as "The Dark Years," "Kairos and Logos," "For the Time Being," and "Horae Canonicae" would establish his similarity to Yeats, Eliot, and Frost in regarding human history as an explanation of Incarnation. Salvation through Christ is a recurrent idea in his later poems. Toward the end of his life, he even took issues with Plato's concept of ideal celestial forms. In a poem entitled "'No, Plat, No,'" written a few months before his death, he expressed his wish not to have "a discarnate Spirit," instead his flesh would pray 'for "Him" to die, so setting Her free to become irresponsible Matter' (CP 888). Denise Levertov may actually have outdone Auden in making her readers realize her commitment to Christology. Her entire canon revolves round the idea of immanence and transcendence. She is so
persistent in her Christology lore that she even looks upon poetry as "a chalice," and "Time, a communion wine" (Relearning, p. 101); and reduces natural objects to religious texts: "each leaf of/ the new grass near us/ a new testament" (Relearning, p. 106).

Outwardly, Larkin is not as enthusiastic about Christianity as Auden and Levertov. His poetry appears more attuned to secular issues. Unlike Yeats, he thinks that poetry should be free from mystical reaches. He often mocks at and dismisses the Christian ideology. For him each poem is "its own freshly-created universe" (qtd. in Press 258) having no connection to tradition. To him "the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little" (qtd. in Press 259). And yet his poetry preserves while it dismisses the Christian afflatus. No non-Christian reader would grasp fully the meaning of poems like, for example, "Church Going", and "Water" without knowing the significance of baptism, Eucharist and the sacraments of marriage, birth, and death. Just to comprehend "the font" (l. 10), "here endeth" (l.15), "the pyx" (l. 25), and "rood loft" (l. 41) -common enough words used in "Church Going"-would entail a considerable information about the Christian religious practices. Actually, "Church Going" is a great paradox of modern sensibility. It expresses a consciousness of the futility of the Church and at the same time affirms the validity of its function. The concluding stanza of the poem has these lines in it.

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete (ll. 55-58).

Despite his mocking tone, the narrator often stops in this run down church (ll. 18-19) and experiences soulful satisfaction. "It pleases me to stand in silence here" (l. 54), he says. Only on surface Larkin's verse is secular; its depth is densely Christian. In fact, according to one critic, most of Larkin's poetry contains "sacramental settings, motifs, images, and symbols" (King 2). This poetry confirms my thesis that poets can never be fully free from the underpinning ideology of the culture in which they grow up. [The truth of this assertion becomes evident when we try to separate qiblat from Islam and Tagore from Hinduism]. Even if they disagree with the ideology and its defining rituals, the language they would have to use and the actions or events their language would describe will preserve the very fiber of their cultural cocoon. When one scratches the surface of a poem like "The Whitsun Weddings," one realizes that it contains more than a mere description of a wedding season or of a train journey that the narrator shares with the wedded couples going on their honey moon. To begin with, the word Whitsun in the title, like the word Easter in Yeats's "Easter 1916," alerts the reader of a religious connection. As The American Heritage Dictionary points out, it refers to the seventh Sunday after Easter, a Pentecost holiday in honor of the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the disciples and also to a "tradition of clothing the newly baptized in white baptismal robes on Whitsunday". Seen in the light of such religious allusions, the farcical marital ceremonies of "The Whitsun Weddings" assume a sanctified status, for in them part of the baptismal living is enacted. The women of the poem who share "The Secret like a happy funeral" along with the girls who are conscious of "a religious wounding"(ll.52-55) and the swelling "sense of falling" (l. 79) all the passengers experience as the train comes to a halt begin to reverberate the baptismal significance of marriage, a mixed harvest of dying into sin and multiplying the human progeny that the fall of Adam and Eve, according to the Christian myth, imposed on humans. And yet, the poem consists of the observation of social and industrial scenes that the narrator makes on his journey from a provincial town to the metropolitan London: A perfect cover for authentic Christian outlook.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the major Western monuments of aesthetics in modern poetry are built upon the Christian Rock, the Church, specifically on the loving sacrifice of Christ. The poets referred to in this paper are strong pillars of what may be called Christology Incorporated. And poetry being the ultimate voice of a community, a society, or a civilization, it represents the conscious and unconscious thinking of its people. The acclaimed universality of this aesthetics in reality, therefore, is the Christian worldview, which the Western critical establishment takes pains to present as human experience or human condition. In poetry and, as Tillyard has admitted, in the English literature, the Christian West does not just present but promotes the Christian dogma. The poets examined in this paper, in particular, privilege Christianity as one over-arching episteme under whose umbrella all humanity is imagined to exist. Neither the poets nor the critics referred to in this study are bothered by the fact that it might be like a grand exercise in solipsism. If subconsciously the West looks upon human experience
through Christianity and consciously guides its political acts in the interest of this religion, what possible reaction can it expect from others whose poets or religious leaders might have given a different profile of human experience? In the presence of this intellectual makeup of the West and of the several other competing worldviews around, a state of conflict among societies is inevitably a foregone conclusion on this globe. "Differences in culture and religion," says Huntington, "create differences over policy issues" (29). If the "Clash of Civilizations" as seen by Huntington becomes a reality, the role played by the poets of each civilization will be no less than that of hot-headed politicians.

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