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**Advaita Vedānta and the Poetic Exploration of Transcendence  
in W.B. Yeats' Poetry**

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*Abstract*

This paper delves into the intricate interplay between Vedānta philosophy and the pursuit of universality in select poems by the esteemed Irish poet, W.B. Yeats. Drawing upon the philosophical tenets of Vedānta, which emphasize the inherent unity of all existence, this study examines how Yeats, a poet deeply influenced by Eastern thought, grapples with and explores these profound ideas in his poetic oeuvre. Through an in-depth analysis of select poems, we aim to unravel the nuanced ways Yeats engages with Vedānta philosophy, seeking to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries in his quest for a universal poetic vision. Furthermore, the paper endeavors to elucidate why it is imperative to comprehend World Literature through Indic perspectives, challenging the foreign origins of the term. The argument posits the need to develop a theoretical framework rooted in the Indian viewpoint to comprehend literature from diverse global traditions.

**Keywords:** Vedānta philosophy, W.B. Yeats, mysticism, universality, non-dualism, Eastern thought, poetry, Advaita, self-realization.

### **Introduction**

The term “world literature” in its German origins didn’t initially have a direct global connection. Instead, it drew from diverse ideas across cultures, emphasizing transnational literary exchanges. David Damrosch noted that, a work becomes part of world literature when it engages with literary systems beyond its culture. World literature isn’t a collection of all literary works but a category for those transcending their original cultures. W.B. Yeats, known for his mysticism and esotericism, aligns with Vedānta philosophy in some aspects of his poetry. This paper explores the fusion of Vedānta principles with Yeats’ themes of universality, oneness, divine consciousness, and eternal recurrence.

Vedānta delves into existence's nature and universal principles, emphasizing the soul's immortality and the concept of the 'One'. This provides context for analyzing Yeats' poetry, highlighting how Vedānta's timeless themes resonate within it. Vedānta underscores the universality in nature, positing that all entities originate from a singular source preceding all else.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review situates Yeats' engagement with Vedānta philosophy within the broader context of his fascination with mysticism and Eastern thought. Scholars such as Richard Ellmann and Harold Bloom have offered insights into Yeats' mystical inclinations, paving the way for a deeper understanding of the intersections between Vedānta and his poetic oeuvre. The metaphysical underpinnings of Advaita philosophy examine concepts such as non-duality, the illusory nature of the material world (Maya), and the soul's eternal nature. It establishes connections between these Advaitic principles and the rich tapestry of imagery woven by Yeats in his poems, exploring how the poet grapples with the transient and the eternal.

### **Vedānta Philosophy: A Theoretical Framework:**

This section provides a comprehensive overview of Vedānta philosophy, elucidating its fundamental principles such as Advaita (non-dualism), Brahman (universal consciousness), and the pursuit of self-realization. By establishing this theoretical framework, the paper lays the groundwork for the subsequent exploration of Yeats' poetic resonance with Vedānta. Advaita's profound metaphysical principles, emphasizing the oneness of the individual soul (Atman) with the universal reality (Brahman), provide a nuanced lens through which to scrutinize Yeats' poetic expressions. Employing Advaita as a theoretical apparatus enriches our understanding of the intricate layers of meaning and metaphysical inquiries in Yeats' poetic oeuvre. It elucidates the core tenets of Advaita, emphasizing the transcendence of dualities and the ultimate unity of all existence, setting the stage for a comprehensive analysis of Yeats' works. The analysis shifts to Yeats' exploration of meaning and existential quest in light of Brahmanic consciousness—a central theme in Advaita. It scrutinizes selected poems to unravel how Yeats' poetic journey mirrors the Advaitic yearning for self-realization and a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all existence. How Advaita's emphasis on non-duality informs Yeats' treatment of opposing forces and dualities in his poetry needs further investigation. Central to Vedānta is the concept of the 'One' (Brahman), an ontologically basic and transcendent source from which all existence emanates. By looking at

poems by Yeats it is evident how Vedānta perceives the unity underlying the apparent diversity in the world. Drawing upon key Vedāntic texts such as the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras, Yeats' poems try to synthesize interpretations to establish the profound significance of the 'One'.

### **Illustrating Vedānta in Yeats' Poetry and Reconceptualizing World Literature: An Indic Perspective**

This section analyzes select poems by W.B. Yeats, highlighting Vedantic themes such as the immortality of the soul and the concept of the 'One' in his exploration of universal and timeless ideas. It solidifies the theoretical connection between Vedānta philosophy and Yeats' poetry, demonstrating how his works align with universal themes found in Vedānta. This analysis lays the foundation for a reconceptualization of world literature from an Indic perspective, emphasizing the need for an inclusive understanding that incorporates India's philosophical traditions in the global literary discourse

#### **“The Lake of Innisfree”: Spiritual Transcendence and Ecological Unity**

Yeats' yoga poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' explores Vedāntic themes of spiritual transcendence and self-realization. It parallels the poet's quest for solitude with Vedānta's ideals of harmony with nature. Innisfree becomes a metaphorical sanctuary reflecting Vedantic principles of simplicity and oneness, aligning individual consciousness with the universal rhythm of nature. The ecological unity emphasized in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' becomes a metaphorical extension of the Vedantic concept of 'Brahman'—the ultimate reality that pervades and unifies all existence. In the poem, the tranquil surroundings of Innisfree symbolize a sacred space where the dichotomy between the self and the external environment dissolves, embodying the Vedāntic ideal of realizing the interconnectedness of individual consciousness with the greater cosmic order.

As Yeats envisions the construction of a humble cabin and the cultivation of beans, he echoes the Vedāntic call for simplicity and detachment from material pursuits. The synthesis between the individual's yearning for a secluded haven and the Vedāntic emphasis on aligning with the rhythm of nature speaks to a universal longing for spiritual grounding, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries.

Vedāntic interpretation of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' underscores Yeats' role as a poet engaged in cross-cultural dialogue, seamlessly weaving Eastern philosophical threads into the

fabric of Western literary expression. The poem becomes a testament to the universality of human aspirations, wherein the pursuit of ecological unity becomes a shared endeavor that transcends geographical confines. Yeats, in his quest for an idyllic retreat, not only reflects his personal contemplations but also contributes to the broader discourse on the interconnectedness of humanity with the natural world.

### **“Sailing to Byzantium”: A Non-Dualistic Odyssey**

Analyzing W.B. Yeats’s poem “Sailing to Byzantium” through the lens of Advaita Vedānta, a school of Hindu philosophy, presents a unique opportunity to explore the intersection of Western literary art and Eastern metaphysical thought. Advaita Vedānta, primarily expounded by Adi Shankaracharya, emphasizes non-dualism and the idea that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is the only truth, with the world being an illusion (Maya). This philosophy also stresses the journey towards self-realization and the unity of Atman (the self) with Brahman. “Sailing to Byzantium” is often interpreted as a meditation on aging, mortality, and the quest for eternal life and spiritual transcendence. This theme resonates with the Advaita Vedānta perspective, particularly in its exploration of the transient nature of physical existence and the quest for a higher, immutable truth.

**The Transience of the Physical World:** The poem begins with a description of a country full of young people, emphasizing the physical and sensual aspects of life. From an Advait Vedāntic standpoint, this can be seen as a representation of Maya, the illusory and ephemeral nature of the material world. The speaker’s sense of alienation and his yearning for Byzantium symbolize the soul’s longing to transcend the limits of physical existence and the cycle of birth and death (Samsara).

That is no country for old men. The young /  
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees /  
—Those dying generations—at their song.

These lines depict a world engrossed in youth and physical pleasures, symbolic of Maya, the illusory and transient nature of the material world. In Advaita, this world is seen as temporary and deceptive, drawing individuals away from the pursuit of true knowledge. The speaker’s disillusionment reflects the Vedāntic realization that true fulfillment cannot be found in the physical realm. These lines poignantly encapsulate the concept of the transience of the physical world and the yearning for the eternal, themes that resonate deeply with Advaita Vedānta philosophy. The phrase ‘dying generations’ poetically underscores this impermanence,

highlighting the inevitable cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death that characterizes all physical existence. The statement ‘That is no country for old men’ can be interpreted through Advaita as the spiritual seeker’s realization of their alienation from the world of sensory experiences and material attachments. In Advaita Vedānta, true wisdom begins with the understanding that the eternal self (Atman) is distinct and detached from the transient world. The old man, symbolizing wisdom and the nearing end of the physical journey, finds himself out of place in a world focused on youthful pleasures and fleeting joys.

Yearning is a central theme in both the poem and Advaita Vedānta. In the poem, the contrast between the aging speaker and the vitality of the young symbolizes a deeper longing for something beyond the temporal – a realm of unchanging, eternal truth. Similarly, Advaita Vedānta teaches that the ultimate goal of life is to realize the true nature of the self (Atman) and its unity with the absolute reality (Brahman), which is eternal and beyond the cycles of birth and death.

**The Quest for Eternal Truth:** As the speaker sails to Byzantium, an ancient city symbolic of timeless wisdom and spiritual richness, this journey can be likened to the Advaita Vedantic pursuit of self-realization. The city represents the higher state of consciousness where one seeks union with the ultimate reality. In Advaita, this ultimate reality is Brahman, which is beyond all duality and change.

An aged man is but a paltry thing, /  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless /  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing /  
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

These lines express the insignificance of the aging body, resonating with the Vedantic concept that the physical form is not the true self. The emphasis on the soul’s ability to ‘sing’ despite the decaying body mirrors the Advaitic pursuit of recognizing the Atman (self) as distinct from the body and mind, seeking a higher, spiritual state of consciousness.

**The Artifice as a Means to Realization & Unity of Self and the Universal:** In the poem, the speaker wishes to be transformed into a golden bird, crafted by Grecian goldsmiths, to sing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium. This metaphor can be interpreted through Advaita Vedānta as the use of artifice (the golden bird) as a tool for conveying eternal truths. Just as the golden bird is an artifice devoid of aging and death, in Advaita, the realization of Atman (self) as Brahman (the ultimate reality) is seen as the true liberation from the temporal and illusory world. The transformation of the speaker into a golden bird can also be seen as a metaphor for

the realization of the non-dualistic state, where the individual self (Atman) realizes its oneness with the universal self (Brahman). This state transcends the physical and reaches eternal truth and beauty, much like the spiritual transcendence sought in Byzantium.

Once out of nature, I shall never take /  
My bodily form from any natural thing, /  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make /  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling.

The speaker's desire to leave his natural form and assume a crafted, eternal form symbolizes the Advaita goal of Moksha - liberation from the cycle of birth and death. This transformation represents the shedding of ignorance and realizing the true nature of the self (Atman) as one with the ultimate reality (Brahman).

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; /  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing /  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium /  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

The 'golden bird' symbolizes the timeless, unchanging Atman in contrast to mortal beings. Its song, encompassing the past, present, and future, represents Brahman's all-encompassing wisdom beyond time and space. Analyzing "Sailing to Byzantium" through Advaita Vedānta enriches its interpretation, revealing a shared human pursuit of truth, transcending the physical world. The poem serves as a bridge between Western literature and Eastern philosophy, embodying the universal quest for understanding existence, transcending illusions, and uniting with the eternal truth, a metaphorical journey towards spiritual enlightenment.

### **“The Second Coming”: Non-Duality and Cosmic Unity:**

Yeats' "The Second Coming" reflects Advaitic concepts like non-duality and cosmic unity. The poem's imagery mirrors the eternal cycle of creation and dissolution in Advaita Vedānta. Yeats explores the dissolution of traditional structures and beliefs in a chaotic world. His prophetic and apocalyptic tone hints at both societal and cosmic upheaval. Yeats combines historical turmoil with mysticism and philosophy, using World War I's aftermath to delve into universal themes of chaos and transformation, all depicted through vivid symbolism.

"The Second Coming" is a testament to Yeats's ability to weave focused, philosophical, and revelatory elements into his poetic vision. He captures the essence of a tumultuous era while engaging with perennial questions about the nature of reality, the cyclical patterns of history, and the eternal struggle between order and chaos. In an Advaitic interpretation, W.B. Yeats's

“The Second Coming” can be understood as transcending its immediate post-war context to explore deeper metaphysical themes about the human condition. Advaita Vedānta emphasizes non-dualism and the idea that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is the only truth, with the world being an illusion (Maya). The metaphorical richness of the opening lines of the poem reveals a deep, multifaceted interpretation being packed with imagery and symbolism:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

**The Falcon and Falconer Metaphor:** In Advaita Vedānta, the individual soul (Atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman) are essentially one, though this unity is obscured by the illusion (Maya) of separateness. The falcon, distanced from the falconer, is a potent metaphor for the individual soul’s journey in the cycle of Samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) driven by ignorance (Avidya) and desires (Kama).

As the falcon moves further away in the gyre, it symbolizes the soul’s increasing entanglement in the material world, leading to disconnection from its source, the Brahman. The falcon and falconer relationship is a vivid metaphor for control and the loss thereof. The falcon, once in a harmonious relationship with the falconer, now spirals out of control, symbolizing a disconnect from a guiding force. This imagery can be interpreted as the breakdown of societal, political, or even personal order. In a broader sense, it reflects the loss of moral and spiritual bearings in a rapidly changing world.

**The Disintegration of Order – Losing Sight of the Ultimate Truth:** ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’ is a powerful statement of disintegration. It’s as if the gravitational centre of order and stability has been lost, leading to a collapse of the structure. This line could be read as a commentary on the fracturing of the societal, political, or even cosmic order. The inability of the ‘centre’ to hold signifies a world where foundational principles and values no longer provide cohesion and stability. This line poignantly echoes the Vedantic understanding of the impermanent and illusory nature of the material world. In Advaita, the physical world and all its structures are seen as transient and ultimately unreal. The ‘centre’ here can be metaphorically linked to the ultimate reality (Brahman), the only unchanging truth. As individuals lose sight of this central truth and become absorbed in the transient, the apparent order of the world (Maya) begins to collapse, leading to chaos and disorder. This is akin to the mind losing its grounding in the self (Atman) and being swept away by the illusions of the material world. ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’ reflects the idea that when one loses

sight of the non-dualistic Brahman, the perceived world (which is essentially an illusion) starts to lose its coherence and order. This can be seen as a metaphor for the spiritual crisis where the loss of the connection to the ultimate reality leads to chaos and confusion in the individual's perception of the world.

**Anarchy as a Symbol of Spiritual Chaos:** The concept of 'anarchy' in these lines can be interpreted as the chaos that ensues when spiritual ignorance (Avidya) prevails. In the absence of the knowledge of the self's true nature (Atman) as one with the ultimate reality (Brahman), the individual experiences the turmoil of unguided desires, attachments, and the cyclical suffering of Samsara. This spiritual anarchy reflects the inner turmoil that arises from a disconnect with the true self. The phrase 'mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' encapsulates the culmination of this breakdown. Anarchy, in its purest form, is a state of complete absence of order. Yeats uses this concept to convey a sense of overwhelming disorder and chaos unleashed on a global scale. This could be a reflection of the post-war societal upheaval, where traditional norms and orders were being challenged and overturned.

**The Widening Gyre as a Symbol of Spiritual Evolution:** The widening gyre not only represents the increasing distance from the center (spiritual truth) but can also be seen as the journey of the soul through various stages of spiritual evolution. In Advaita Vedānta, the soul undergoes numerous births and experiences until it attains the knowledge of its true nature. Though seemingly chaotic and directionless, this process is ultimately guided by the underlying unity with Brahman. The falcon's inability to hear the falconer symbolizes the soul's temporary ignorance of its true nature and its journey back to the realization of non-duality. The 'widening gyre' is a symbol of increasing chaos and instability. Gyres, or spirals, are naturally widening structures, but here they suggest an expanding realm of disorder. This could represent the escalating turmoil of the post-World War I era when traditional structures and beliefs were being questioned and overturned. The 'widening gyre' represents the expansion of Maya or illusion. In Advaita Vedānta, Maya is the force that creates a sense of duality and separateness from the ultimate reality. The gyre symbolizes the increasing complexity and entrapment in the material world, taking the individual further away from spiritual truth.

**Metaphysical Exploration of the Human Condition:** From an Advaitic perspective, W.B. Yeats' verses transcend their historical backdrop, delving into the timeless human struggle with the illusions of material existence and the quest for ultimate truth. Yeats' portrayal of a world descending into chaos not only mirrors the societal upheaval of his era but also aligns with Advaita's view of the cosmic cycle of creation and dissolution, wherein the ultimate goal is realizing the self's unity with Brahman, transcending the ephemeral nature of the physical



world. In this light, Yeats' poem becomes a profound exploration of humanity's journey through the illusions of existence towards the realization of ultimate truth, echoing Advaita Vedānta's teachings.

The poem's concluding stanza reveals a profound intersection of poetic imagery and metaphysical concepts:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

In Advaita Vedānta, time is cyclical, with periods of creation, sustenance, and dissolution. The 'rough beast' whose 'hour come round' symbolizes time (Kaal) and the inevitable cycle of cosmic events. In Advaita, the material world (Maya) is a play (Lila) of Brahman, with continuous creation and dissolution. 'Bethlehem,' traditionally linked to Jesus' birth, metaphorically signifies the birth of a new era or consciousness. The 'slouching' implies an inevitable, albeit reluctant, progression toward significant spiritual transformation. Just as in Advaita Vedānta, the ultimate goal is realizing one's true nature as Brahman, the 'rough beast' represents the lower human nature that must be transcended for spiritual enlightenment. Its 'birth' suggests a new phase where the lower nature is surpassed, leading to a higher understanding of the self as non-different from Brahman.

The poem's closure reflects the Vedantic theme of continuous transformation and renewal, akin to the eternal cycle of creation and dissolution within Brahman's cosmic play.

The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

In Vedānta, darkness symbolizes Avidya, signifying ignorance of the self (Atman) and its unity with Brahman, the ultimate reality. The recurring darkness represents cyclic ignorance enveloping the world, not merely the absence of knowledge but the misidentification of self with body, mind, and ego. This cyclic darkness signifies the ongoing struggle between spiritual ignorance and enlightenment within the cosmic cycle. 'Twenty centuries of stony sleep' denotes an extended period of spiritual dormancy in Advaita Vedānta, akin to humanity's entrapment in Maya, the illusory force creating a sense of separation from truth. This prolonged slumber signifies detachment from realizing the non-dual existence. The 'nightmare' disturbing this deep sleep signifies sudden, tumultuous awakening of spiritual consciousness, often triggered by crises or significant events in Vedānta. The 'rocking cradle,' symbolizing new beginnings, suggests this awakening as disruptive, challenging entrenched perceptions and

beliefs—the ‘nightmare’ symbolizing turmoil in facing deep-rooted ignorance and material world illusions. Integrating ‘twenty centuries’ with a sudden awakening aligns with Vedantic time as a vast, cyclical process. Ignorance cycles into awakening, often radically disrupting the status quo, akin to shifting from deep sleep to awareness. This mirrors the soul’s journey in Advaita Vedānta, traversing cycles of ignorance and enlightenment until realizing its true nature as Brahman.

In summary, these lines from “The Second Coming”, viewed through Advaita Vedānta, resonate with themes of cyclical ignorance, inevitable awakening of spiritual consciousness, and the tumultuous path toward non-dual reality realization. Yeats’ imagery captures the Vedantic essence of the human condition’s cycle of spiritual slumber and awakening.

### Conclusion

Synthesizing the conclusion and the findings across the analyzed poems, we are able to underscore the pervasive influence of Vedānta philosophy in Yeats’ diverse literary corpus. It highlights how the poet navigates themes of immortality, unity, and spiritual transcendence, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Eastern philosophical intersections within Western literary traditions.

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