

# Nostalgia in Modern English Poetry

Dr. Vishnulok Bihari Srivastava\*

Associate Professor, Department of English, Rohtas Mahila College Sasaram

**Abstract – Nostalgia -wishful longing for something removed and attractive- is one of the dominant traits of modern English poetry. It would be too much to assign the reason of the longing for otherworldliness to the devastations of the second world war II, because this kind of longing is found in the romantic poets, also, particularly in Shelley and Keats. Shelley in his lyrical drama “Prometheus Unbound” borrowed the materials of his poems from the Greek legend associated with Prometheus and longed for a world which would be free from suzerainty, oppression and tyranny and where everybody would breathe a sigh of relief and the master passion would be mutual trust, sympathy and love.**

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Keats in his poem ‘Ode to a nightingale’ imagined of immortality symbolized in the nightingale. Captivated by the melodious note of the nightingale, he desired to transport himself to a world where there would be no pain, disease or death,

“Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

What thou among the leaves hast never known,

The weariness, the fever, and the fret

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs.”[1]

Mounted on the wings of poesy he longed to go to the world of perpetual happiness and beatitude.

“Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy.”[2]

All romantic poets, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth, in one way or the other, showed their longing to depart from the world of aging, death and disease and go to a world of peace and harmony where there would be no anxiety of any kind, no suffering, no threat of disease and death.

In modern poetry, particularly in the poems of W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Louise Mac Neice, Cecil Day Lewis, Hopkins and Stephen Spender, this tenet of wistful longing for something illusive, something tantalising is conspicuously found. It is this wistful longing for something attractive that distinguishes modern poetry from the poetry of the preceding generations. V.De.S. Pinto in his book ‘Crisis in Modern Poetry’ 3 and G.S. Fraser in his book

‘The Modern Writer and His World’<sup>4</sup> have rightly pointed out that the modern poets are more philosophical in this respect than the Georgians or the Edwardians.

One good example of nostalgic love for the remoteness is found in Walter de la Mare who emerged before the First World War. In his poems one gets dim suggestion, search for beauty in things which are very insignificant and negligible and glimpse of child- like vision. His poems are replete with rich imagination, suggestive of loneliness and delicacy of a dreamland, a solace from the chaos and ugliness of this world. He is a poet of quite contemplation and subtle delights and subtle fears. Although he belongs to the older generation, the Georgians, he has psychological elements in his poetry. He has an alluring gift of fantasy and an elusive charm. It is a fact that his fairies and ghosts are out of date in our age of science and technology but it cannot be forgotten that he, like Spenser, not only suggests but also describes the duality of region which apprehends both the earthly and unearthly beauty.

A kind of nostalgic return to the past is found in the poetry of W.B. Yeats. In his later poetry, he grows more philosophical and contemplative. His poem, The Second Coming, 1920 is a visionary poem. The poem was written soon after the First World War and the devastation and miseries that were brought in its train,

“Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

The blood- dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere;

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
 The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 The twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"[5]

The second stanza of this poem is highly suggestive. There is a reference to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ. There is also a reference to the sphinx like rough beast with the head of a lion and the body of a man roaming about here and there and slouching towards Bethlehem meaning that the poet longs to go back to the ancient traditional culture sponsored by Jesus Christ where peace reigned and there was no sense of fear or terror or harassment. Louis MacNeice observes,

"Yeats had a budding fascist inside himself and therefore, heralded the rise of this type".[6]

In this poem Yeats had tried to remind the readers of the day when Jesus Christ conveyed the message of humanitarianism and asked us to be on guard against bigotry, nepotism, war-mongering and mass-massacre. In his another poem the tower, 1928, Yeats expresses his vexation at the high sounding philosophy of Plotinus and Plato and declares his faith and conviction in peace,

"It seems that I must bid the Muse go back,  
 Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend  
 Until imagination, ear and eye,  
 Can be content with argument and deal  
 In abstract things, or be derived by  
 A sort of battered kettle at the heel."[7]

In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', 1927 Yeats' nostalgic tones become more explicit. He imagines of a golden bird whose body has been made by a Grecian goldsmith out of hammered gold and gold enamelline. The bird sits upon the golden bough and by its rapturing song keeps the drowsing emperor awake. The land of Byzantium is a land of beauty and art and the poet longs to go to this place in order to find everlasting peace. The poet has become very old and the dread of death hangs heavy upon him. The land of Byzantium will give him not only solace but also remove from his mind the fear of death and worldly anxiety, and trials and tribulations.

In the poem 'The lake Isle of Innisfree', the poet desires to go back to his native lake island of Innisfree. He recalls the charm of his native place and his desire to go there. He will build a small hut of clay and wattles. He will plant nine rows of leaves and rear a bee-hive and live along in the glade resounded with the murmuring of bees. The morning mist, the chirping of the linnet, the bright sunshine at noon, the flopping sounds of the wings of the linnets in the evening, the faint light of the midnight, all these will give him peace. As he stands in the street in the midst of din and bustle of the city, he fancies to hear the sweet ripples of the lake and strong desire in his mind to go back to his native place.

"I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree,

And a small cabin built there of clay and wattles made

Nine green rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee

And live alone in the glade."[8]

Hopkins was unquestionably a talented poet but unfortunately his poems could not be published during his lifetime. His intimate friend and lifelong companion Robert Bridges got published a collection of Hopkins's poems which brought him to limelight. Hopkins practiced his hand at verse libre which was later developed by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Wilfred Owen. For Hopkins, life was drab and dreary. Therefore, he became a victim to nostalgia and found solace in religious belief. By nature he was a dreamer. There are critics who hold that Hopkins expressed his spiritual complacency in his poems. But this is a superficial judgement. In fact, Hopkins was a mystique and believed in the supreme plan of God. His belief in God, religion and spirituality was a reaction against gross materialism of his time. His poems like God's Grandeur, The Starlight Night, 1877, The Deutsch land, 1875 and Pied Beauty, 1876 show how he turned to Nature and found in Nature the grace of God and peace. In fact, his belief in God, Nature, religion and spirituality was an outcome of his vexation with outward world which he found nothing but misery, suffering, disease and death.

The most famous modern poem of our time T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' symbolises the spiritual bankruptcy and moral sterility of our time. Eliot is fed up with the prevailing atmosphere of our time where there is complete lack of faith in religion and God and where everything is dry and dead. For the poet, the month of April is not a month of mirth and gaiety but the cruellest month of the year. The poet recalls not life but death raining everywhere.

"unreal city

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn

A crowd flowed over London bridge so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.”[9]

The word ‘rock’ occurring in the section ‘What the thunder said’ symbolises complete dryness. The word ‘water’ occurring in the same section symbolises faith. In modern time man has become so self-centred that he has neither time nor propensity to look outside. He has lost faith in everything including in himself. There is complete breakdown of human relationship. Man is unhappy and miserable because he is dry from within and without.

“Here is no water but only rock

Road and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water.”[10]

But the poet doesn’t feel completely depressed. He is full of faith that today or tomorrow there will be an end to this suffocation and ruination and good days will dawn upon the earth and our faith in God and religion will be restored. The word ‘cock’ occurring in the poem refers to the revival of faith in God, religion and humanity. In the folklore the cock is lorded as the bird of whose voice chases away the powers of evil. The poet find a cock standing on the roof tree in a flash of lightning. The rain which is so much wanting today will come on the earth once again. The rain will remain potential and will never fail,

“Only a cock stood on the roof tree

Co co rico co co rico.

In a flash of lighting. Then a damp guest

Bringing rain.”[11]

Eliot’s nostalgic aspiration is palpably visible in the citation from the Brahadaranyak Upanishad with which the poem ‘The Wasteland’ closes. In Brahadaranyak Upanishad, there is an anecdote that men, devils and gods went to Prajapati in order to know how they can be happy and prosperous. Prajapati gave his single teaching to all of them by uttering the alphabet ‘Da’. Men, devils and gods derive different meanings from the alphabet ‘da’. Men thought that Prajapati had asked them to believe in charity. Devils who had become very cruel and merciless thought that Prajapati had asked them to be merciful and sympathetic to others. Gods thought that Prajapati had asked them to believe in self-control. In this way they derived three different meanings from the alphabet uttered by Prajapati. The phrase datta, dayadhvam, damayat mean to give, to sympathize and to control.

The poem concludes with the words shanti, shanti, shanti:

“Datta, dayadhvam, damayata

Shanti, shanti, shanti”[12]

Apparently Eliot goes back to the teachings of Prajapati where he finds the real meaning of life and clue to peace and prosperity. In a way ‘The Waste land’ is a study in tension of polarities. On the one hand there are Devastations, sterility, moral and spiritual bankruptcy, dryness all round and on the other hand there is peace and tranquillity, emancipation from suffering and revival of happiness and poise.

In an anxiety of escape from the humdrum of life the poet projects the image of Alfred Prufrock in his poem ‘love song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Prufrock is a symbol of vacuity. He is bereft of emotion and energy y the song of J. Alfred Prufrock is not a love song in the romantic sense of the term. It provides a the picture of boredom in life. In order to find refuge in an imaginary world and with a view to get emancipation from the burden of life, the women talk of famous Italian architect Michelangelo,

“in the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo”[13]

Eliot defines life as something like a passing show. It is fleeting. The poet is assailed by the doubt of uncertainty, confusion and bewilderment. He finds no stability anywhere. He is afraid of himself. He measures his life with coffee spoons. Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play weighs life and in utter despondency says,

“tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterday’s have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle !

Life is but a walking Shadow a poor player

That shruts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more.

It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.”[14]

Eliot says,

"For I have known them all already known them all  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons".[15]

In perplexity Prufrock thinks of external footman who holds his coat and snicker. He gets unnerved,

"And I have seen the eternal footman hold my coat and sneaker.

And in short, I was afraid".[16]

The poet presents a horrifying picture of life in order to show the predicament of modern man who is just an object of pity. There is no indication in this world that Prufrock wants to get out of this miserable condition but the suggestion is there. The poet expresses his nostalgic attitude throughout the poem. He is uncomfortable at his inability to live a normal life. The poem is an exploration into the dilemma of life. Further, the poem reveals the cruelty and violence that lie beneath and outward sophistication and polite drawing-room society.

The poem 'Sweeney among the Nightingale, 1918 is a prophetic poem. Sweeney is threatened by death. He reminds us of the Agamemnon story narrated in the Greek legend. Like many other poems of Eliot, this poem also deals with the horrors of death. The poet finds no way out of this horror. The poet wants to escape from this horror and terror but he is unable to do so.

Sweeney is our modern hero putting the whole structure of values over his head and only to be converted into a human swine wallowing in the mud of lust and gross materialism. He and all his companions are equally represented as animals, fierce as well as mean. The epigraph is quoted by Eliot in original Greek meaning,

"I am smitten with moral blow".[17]

This also means that he has been killed altogether by Sweeney and his modern accomplices. Actually Sweeney is introduced here as human beast. This human beast is under the threat of murder. The word 'raven' is intended to remind us of the word raven used by Shakespeare in his drama Macbeth.

In this poem Eliot sought to create a sense of foreboding. Sweeney is threatened by death. From the beginning. Sweeney is conceived by an ape Man. As he loves he projects various suggestions to his animal relationship. In this poem an attempt is made to seduce Sweeney in a public house is put in a framework that suggests Agamemnon story. This provides the epitaph of the poem which is his mental cry.

Sweeney sprawls, gapes in silence and heavy-eyed, until the bait of the fruit makes him contract and

become alert. The mounting tension of the poem is best observed in symbolic imagery. After suggesting the animal character of Sweeney, the poem uses astronomical symbols to suggest the time, place and portent of the situation. The constellations have ominous mythological association, contrary to disaster at the hands of women. Sweeney keeps watch at the honed gate of death through lechery."[18]

Eliot's poem 'Whispers of Immortality, 1918 recalls Wordsworth's poem 'Intimation of Immortality'. But the basic approach of Eliot is different from that of Wordsworth. It derives vital sap of metaphysical thinking from Donne, the metaphysical poet and Webster, the Jacobian playwright. Both Donne and Webster show body beyond flash and life beyond physique. The concept of immortality is conceived by Eliot itself suggests that he is sick with his present state of affairs and wants to escape from the present suffocating state to a state where he is to get perpetual peace and mental equipoise. Again Eliot's poem 'Ash Wednesday', 1927 is related to the scriptural belief connected with ash Wednesday. Apart from the ritualistic description, the poet deals at length with the shadow of death. On the Wednesday the priest takes out the ash of the bones and applies it to the forehead meaning that one must always remember death and one who is oblivious of it is likely to be doomed. The poem also suggests that one must trust God and one who has a sceptical mind is bound to the destroyed. These and many other suggestions that one gets in the poem clearly indicate that the poet is a victim of death obsession. Though like Keats and Tagore, Eliot crowns death in a moralizing tone. But the irony inherent in the poem cannot be overlooked. The irony is that the poet is afraid of death and wants a permanent release from the death. This nostalgic release is impossible because it is against the principle of nature. Life and death are intertwined. Life moves in a cyclic order. The Indian swastika mark suggests that the tail is joined to the head in a frock and the frock rotates from head to tail and from tail to head. The nostalgia of Eliot to get rid of this tangle is evident everywhere.

W.H. Auden belongs to a group of poets who in the thirties of the present century achieve a very wide reputation. As F.R. Leavis says'

"The admirers of Auden spoke of him as having superseded T.S. Eliot."[19]

Auden's serious poetic output is to be found in the two volumes entitled 'Look Stranger' and 'Another Time'. In his poem one gets a sense of a doomed civilization, the reference of disease as the death wish symbolises as a mysterious enemy, the imagery of a guerrilla warfare, ruined industry, railroad and frontier. Auden chose his imagery from machinery, slums and the social conditions which surrounded him. He showed a tendency to be swamped in his sensibility by the sense of the world in which we found he harassed and perplexed. His poetry emphasizes the community, overwhelmed as

it was by the sense of a communal disease which is evident in his poem 'Look Stranger',

"Look, stranger, on this island now

The leaping light for your delight discovers,

Stand stable here

And silent be,

That through the channels of the ear

May wander like a river

The swaying sound of the ship." [20]

His poetry searched for a communal cure in psychology and leftist politics. His approach to all problems is intellectual. His work is remarkable because it expresses a discomfort which shows a moral conscience. During the Spanish War, Auden wrote poetry against fascist. He had a wonderful knowledge of human heart. In his poem one clearly perceives a tendency to find solutions to social and moral ills and in humanistic belief. This kind of nostalgic return to humanism is everywhere found in Auden's poetry. Among his poems, notable are *The Orators*, 1932, *The Dance of Death*, 1933, *Look Stranger*, 1936, *New year letter*, 1941 and *For the Time Being*, 1945.

In Auden's poetry as in Eliot's poetry, a sense of gloom, frustration and alienation pervades. Auden finds in the world nothing but oppression, inequality, tyranny and a peculiar obsession for power hunting. He is severely pained to find the entire atmosphere vitiated by evil forces. Finding no way out, he wants to take refuge in Freudian and Marxian philosophy in which Stephen Spender joins hand with him.. The poem 'The Watershed' is ample evidence of his mental conflict,

"It was Easter as I walked in the public garde the frogs exhaling from the pond,

Watching traffic of magnificent cloud

Moving without anxiety on open sky-

Season when lovers and writers find

An alternative speech for altering,

An emphasis on new names, on the arm

A fresh hand with fresh power.

But thinking so I came at once

Where solitary man sat weeping on a bench,

Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted

Helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken." [21]

The beauty of this poem lies in the contrast suggested by the poet. The poem begins with a description of the poet's mental poise. He is strolling in the public garden. The frogs are crying in the nearby pond. The poet watches the traffic coming and going. He also looks at the magnificent cloud in the open sky. This is a suitable time for the lovers and the writers to indulge in romance or to pen down something. But suddenly he is grieved and shocked to find a solitary man in a pensive mood weeping on a bench. He hangs his head down with his mouth destroyed. He is helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken. The simile 'embryo chicken' to suggest the helplessness of the man is highly sense provoking. On the one hand the poet finds gaiety everywhere and on the other hand he finds ennui and dejection.

The poem echoes the idea expressed by Eliot in his poems 'Gerontion', 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Man'. In spite of that the poem can be said to be derivatory. The poet has his own tone and his own way of treating the subject.

In the poetry of both Auden and Spender one can easily trace Freudian and Marxian influence. Spender's poem speaks in volume of his leaning towards this attitude,

"What is precious is never to forget

The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs

Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.

Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light

Nor its grave evening demand for love.

Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother

With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit." [22]

But later Auden turned to religion and Spender ceased to be the member of the Communist party. It is clear from the early poems of Louis MacNeice that he disliked communism. Cecil Day Lewis in the beginning was unquestionably lured towards communism but later he too showed his distrust in communism. Louis MacNeice' however, once again showed his faith in political and social themes. Auden and MacNeice met with each other in their cravings for colloquial language, urban imagery, though MacNeice, as opposed to Auden, takes delight in the visible world of its own sake. What is common in Auden, Spender, Cecil Day

Lewis and MacNeice is that they all are equally annoyed with the present suffocating atmosphere and want to skip from the inner failure by a nostalgic departure to a higher ideology whether it is political or religious or spiritual.

Among the poets who emerged since the war, the name of Dylan Thomas is worth mentioning. He employed dream and was greatly influenced by the French surrealists. He has his own hallucination and emotional paranoia. His poems are primarily an imitation to a mind contaminated by anxiety and wastelessness, being greatly vexed by the present state of affair, his nostalgic shelter in a world created exclusively for himself. De La Mare speculates about that other world which can be entered only through the gate of death. Fairies, phantoms and mysterious presences haunted his poem. Dylan Thomas's first volume of poem was published in 1934 when he was hardly 20 years of age.

In fact, nostalgia is permeated in the whole of modern poetry in one way or the other. Modern age is characterized by tension, anxiety, confusion, indecision, restlessness and inner and outer conflict. The modern poets, therefore, try to escape from this state of affairs by a nostalgic departure to a self-made world of ideas and ideals. Yeats found shelter in Irish mythologies, Eliot found solace in sayings of the Upanishads. Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis found a clue to modern hills in communism, religion and spirituality and Dylan Thomas created his own world of fantasy to live in. We may or may not believe in the world of make-believe created by these poets. But we cannot deny that all were vexed with this world and wanted a nostalgic return to a world created by themselves.

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## Corresponding Author

**Dr. Vishnulok Bihari Srivastava\***

Associate Professor, Department of English, Rohtas Mahila College Sasaram