

Yeats and the French symbolists: A case study

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Abstract

The symbolist movement had a monumental impact on Eurocentric art and aesthetics. W.B. Yeats, stands at the crossroads not just between two nations, not just between two centuries but also between two different traditions; the romantic poetic heritage of England and symbolist school of poetry of France. Added to it is the rich and multifaceted native Irish mytho-poetic lineage. The result is an enchanting and eclectic blend of varied impulses. The paper attempts to examine the similarities and differences between the symbolism of Yeats and that of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Keywords: Coleridge, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Symbolism, Essence

1. Introduction

Symbolism found in W.B. Yeats, its greatest exponent in England. Edmund Wilson regards Yeats as an offshoot of the French symbolist movement. It is this very idea and the nature of Yeats' symbolism. I propose to examine in this paper. I shall try to correlate his ideas with those of Coleridge, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and others.

2. Method

The primary texts concerning the study of symbolism as an artistic movement are numerous. However, the work of Arthur Symons is still the most authoritative launching pad for such an enquiry. A host of primary texts along with secondary texts have been consulted in addition to web resources. The hypothesis has been developed using the methods of observation and comparison. The translation of the French works are available both in book and e-book forms.

3. Discussion

The essential romantic attitude to imagination is reflected in the romanticism of Yeats. In *The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* Yeats argues "I... am now certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth, that the reason has not".¹ However, this imagination if placed at the vortex of his ideas concerning magic and symbol, firmly establishes a connection between Yeats himself and a great repository of images – The Great Mind & the Great memory. The dual impact that the Romantics and the Symbolists exercised upon him is evident from his comparison of the imaginative power of the poet and God's creative potency- he appropriates for himself the voices of Plato, Coleridge and Baudelaire in his assertion that the poet is "a vessel of the creative power of God"². Again his idea of "magic" as the fountain-head of all creative pursuits has predecessors in Baudelaire and Mallarme. Thus it can be contested that his distinctive dealing with the categories of magic and imagination is exceptional though his preoccupation with them is not. He formulates a linkage between the two though the connection that has been explored earlier... In his essay entitled *Magic*, Yeats writes. "I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of the spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating

magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines..., which have been... the foundation of nearly all magical practices. The borders of our mind are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single energyour memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself that this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols"³.

We notice here a movement from the particular to the general. A magical power kindles the imagination which is then conducted by symbol to the vast repertoire of the memory. One is reminded of Coleridge who illuminated the interconnection. "...a symbol...is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself a living part in that unity, of which it is a representative"⁴. Robert J. Barth goes a step further and observes "The act of perceiving symbols (The Primary Imagination) or of making symbols (The Secondary Imagination) is essentially a religious act, a finite participation in the infinite creative act of the supreme symbol – maker, the supreme symbol perceiver just as creation itself"⁵. It is crucial to be conversant with the attitude of the Romantics towards symbolism to understand the basic tenets of Yeats's approach to it... To Yeats, the entire external, material world was a symbolic extension of the subjective condition – art engages reflections of the external world as symbolic representations of the subjective disposition... Almost like all nineteenth century authors, Yeats was concerned with the mediation of symbols. Marcel Raymond in a succinct comment outlines that symbolism is a method of "transcending the self and the universe". Yeats introduced himself to quite a few mystical schools and very many authors of both the symbolic and mystic genre between 1880 to 1901. An interface with Mohini Chatterjee aroused his interest in Indian mystical philosophy which exerted a profound influence for the establishment of the Hermetic society of Dublin in 1885. Moreover, Yeats' association with Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society deserves mention. Mysticism and poetry were equally dominant in his priorities... His involvements with magic are balanced with his

poetic considerations. He never loses his poetic vision in a web of symbols.

4. Major Findings

Yeats's association with symbols was an involvement with the primacy of truth. Symbolic imagination is considered to be a reflection of what exists truly, naturally and beyond modification. Thus art was entirely symbolic in Yeats's approach. In *The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* he observes. "True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound every gesture, a signature of some unanalysable imaginative essence." [6]. This is not only an apt definition of symbolism, but it also captures what the French symbolists had tried; to make symbols the vehicle of "essences". The Yeatsian preference is not for a total dependence upon private symbolism like Remy de Gourmont & Arthur Rimbaud and unlike Baudelaire. We find an eclectic blend of traditional and personal symbolism. In his essay *Symbolism in Painting* Yeats states: "A hundred generations might write out what seemed the meaning of the one, and they could write different meanings, for no symbol let's all it's meaning to any generation"⁷. This assertion cancels out the possibility to regard Yeats as a traditional symbolist only. In the same essay he says. "There is indeed a systematic mystic in every poet or painter who, like Rossetti delights in a traditional symbolism or, like Wagner, delights in a personal symbolism; and such men often fall into trances as have waking dreams." [8]. In his essay *The Symbolism of Poetry* Yeats' prime concern is the suggestive potentials of poetry and his assumptions are akin to those of the symbolists. "The scientific movement brought with it a literature which was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds, in opinion, in declamations, in picturesque writing, in word painting, ... and now writers, have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism of great writers"⁹. He echoes Mallarmé who is averse to allow nothing but suggestion in poetry and clarifies. To define is to kill. To suggest is to create". And again "It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things." And once more "Everything that is sacred and that wishes to remain so must envelop itself in mystery". Further, Mallarmé states, "I have made a long enough descent into the void to speak with certainty. There is nothing but beauty--and beauty has only one perfect expression, Poetry. All the rest is a lie." [10].

In the same essay i.e. "The Symbolism of Poetry" there is another stance which is close to Baudelaire's theory of correspondence and synaesthesia. "All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions, and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relation.. They become, as it were, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion." [11]. It can safely be assumed that Yeats's Baudelarian overtones are unmediated. Thus Yeats starting from a different ideal (that of magic) assumes a close symbolic position.

The symbols in Yeats's early poetry are mostly derived from Celtic myths & legends. His sources may be traced and it is necessary to do so since his symbols, explore and germinate in

the unconscious memory of the Irish people and endows his poetry with a unique aesthetic appeal. Yeats unlike Mallarmé had pre-determined nationalistic motives. In his early poetry he employs, the Irish myths and legends in a narrative form, and when he uses a symbol like the image of the hound with one red ear pursuing a hornless deer, it has an early history traceable in all Oisín stories. Whenever he chooses to shun reality and seeks anchorage in the world of imagination, he communicates the sense of the incommunicable and the ineffable, he does so through the images of the Sidhe, Dannan Children, Caolite and Niamh, which are all rooted to mythology. His later symbols like the Tower the Swan, the moon, the gyre and the dome are each both personal and belonging to folk literary ancestry.

The practice adopted by the French symbolist poets, as reviewed earlier, may be labelled as a process of evocation. The focus shifts from description to suggestion. Paul Verlaine in his *Art Poétique* prescribes. "For we desire Nuance yet more /not color, nothing but Nuance! /Oh! Only nuance brings / Dream to dream and flute to horn!" [12]. and again: "Let your verse be the thing in motion /Which one feels who flees from an altering soul, /Towards other skies to other loves. # Let your verse be the happy occurrence, /Somehow within the restless morning wind, / which goes about smelling of mint and thyme.../And all the rest is literature" [13]. And Rimbaud in a letter theorizes; "The poet makes himself a visionary through a long, immense and reasoned derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he seeks himself, he exhausts all poisons in himself to keep only their quintessences" [14].

In Mallarmé the theory becomes subtler; "The mere word flower creates an ideal flower obviously absent from all rent bouquets, different from all known chalices, which rises up precisely because I forget, in its favour, every distinct outline" [15]. The flower turns to a symbol of poetry though extraordinarily mercurial transformation and exposed and denied of all its sensory qualities; it evokes a multitude of images. Mallarmé progressively diffuses the sensuous attributes from the symbol and narrows down to the idea evoked by it. The symbol itself, in its dissociative exactness becomes obscure and finally disappears bequeathing a filtered and distilled mood and atmosphere... This method involves the subtraction of certain phases and this vaulting results in stylistic elusiveness. In Mallarmé's *Tomb (Of Verlaine)*, the rock is compared to the clouds *but the word cloud is absent and the poem begins thus: "The black rock enraged that the north wind rolls it"* [16]. Thus a rift surfaces which the reader has to negotiate on his own.

Unlike Mallarmé's, Yeats' symbols are more universal and have comparatively categorical contours. His aim is not to evoke the indefinite, ephemeral impression of a moment (a Baudelarian dictum) through almost impalpable images, but to transmit a meaning through definite visible symbols. The rose, the moon, the polar dragon etc are all definite and Yeats' prefers not to suggest the importance of the symbols through airy, abstract hints, but to put them in concrete visual frameworks. "I Hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake/Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white" (*Michael Robertes Bids his Beloved Be At Peace; The Wind among the Reeds*) [17].

Such a heightening of the object as a rhetorical exercise or a direct evocation of an image is absent in the entire corpus of

Mallarmé's poetic output. Yeats lends his symbols this density by merging two aspects: first, he emphasizes the dominant physical characteristics of the symbol and secondly, most of Yeats' symbols originate in either legend or history. One does not encounter a flood of symbols: the images in Yeats's poetry hover around three or four vital and related symbols, each of which originate from a different source.

5. Conclusion

"Donne" asserts Yeats in his *Autobiographies* "could be as metaphysical as he pleased, and yet never seemed unhuman and hysterical as Shelley often does, because he could be as physical as he pleased" ^[18]. Yeats emulated this in his poetic practice, and another dimension of his symbolism is visible. The symbolist poet exercises his distinct private sensibility much further and with a greater intensity than the Romantics did. Yeats being the "last of the romantics" is usually contemplative and yet he is acutely conscious of human anguish.

"What shall I do with this absurdity –?
O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail"
(The Tower) ^[19].
This agony is recurrent; "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / a
tattered coat upon a stick
(Sailing to Byzantium)
Yet in the *Death* (The *Winding Stair*) he negates this and
attempts to overcome the angst; "Nor dead nor hope attend
A dying animal;
A mean awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times rose again.
A great man in his pride
Confronting murderous men
Casts derisions upon
Supersession of breath;
He knows death to the bone-
Man has created death.
A comparison with Rimbaud's *Poor Dreamers* exposes the
lack of similarity
The night shall come may be
When, I shall drink in place
In some old town at ease.
And, living patiently,
Meet death more tranquilly.
(From *The Drunken Boat*. Tr ... Brian Hill. Pub: Hart
London 1953) ^[22].

With an aim to be submerged into the aesthetic experiences. The French symbolists like Rimbaud displayed a calculated indifference to the social milieu. The Romantic in Yeats conceptualises life as depressing and the ideals as unachievable but an unusual, relentless appetite for life is palpable. Yeats' vigorous claim "Grant me an old man's frenzy / myself must remake" ^[23]. (*An Acre of Grass*) pulsates with passion for life. Villiers' Axel on the contrary committed suicide and his remark "Live? Our servants will do that for us" ²⁴ underlines the differences of ideology, treatment and poetic understanding of Yeats and the French symbolists. One last

instance may further illustrate the rift. Mallarmé was completely unruffled by the political turmoils that he experienced – the Second Empire, the war and the commune. Yeats' *Easter 1916* is a clear pointer to his involvement with nationalistic politics. Yeats is firmly located within the tradition and mainstream of English poetry, though in a certain juncture he admired the French symbolist movement as the "only movement that is saying new things". He describes his contention clearly in a letter written to Dorothy Wellesley on May 4 1937. He writes that he was reading a translation of Mallarmé by Roger Fry and "I find it exciting, as it shows me the road I and others of my time went for certain furlongs. It is not the way I go now, but one of the legitimate roads"²⁵

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