

Symbolic Reference in the Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats

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The critical reputation of W. B. Yeats is enjoying a rather high position at present, but if the critics are not uneasy, they should be. The most important element of Yeats' poetry, seen from the standpoint of his critical future, is his radical use of metaphorical reference. There is much explanation of Yeats' use of metaphor and symbol, but the few pieces which attempt to justify this use have a tone of defensiveness and obscurity which renders it suspicious. This is not to say that there is no work which is not important and revealing. Hugh Kenner's valuable essay which shows the thematic interrelation of Yeats' poem⁽¹⁾ and W. Y. Tindall's⁽²⁾ work with Yeats and the tradition of symbolism are both interesting and valuable. There is, in fact, a wealth of such probing, but, unfortunately, very little realistic evaluation. Cleanth Brooks, for example, who can make a glittering generality sound as authoritative as a voice from the burning bush, explains soberly that a poem is an indefinable "thing" constructed by a unique "maker" which must be

(1) Hugh Kenner, "The Sacred Book of the Arts," *Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Unterecker (New Jersey, 1963), pp. 10-23.

(2) W. Y. Tindall, "The Symbolism of W. B. Yeats," *Accent*, V (Summer, 1945), pp. 203-212.

“experienced” by the reader. Brooks, in his discussion of symbolic reference in Yeats’ poetry, finally lays the blame for the whole problem of communication at the door of the modern reader who, he feels, is schooled to expect a one-to-one relationship between symbol and thing.⁽³⁾ He’s not sure just what the relationship should be, but he knows it’s not *that*.

Such vagueness and indefiniteness seems to be the tone of most criticism which attempts to deal with what I see to be the central problem in Yeats’ poetry; namely, what is the position of *A Vision* in relation to the poetry? Does the poetry succeed in spite of or because of it?

In attempting to deal directly with this question it is first necessary to define the symbolic reference. It must be decided precisely how it functions and what its end effect is.

One of the best definitions I have found, oddly enough, is contained in Yeats’ own early writing on the subject. In an essay written just after the turn of the century, twenty-odd years before *A Vision*, he explained his conviction that the essential property of the symbolic reference was its capacity to “call down among us certain disembodied powers whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions.”⁽⁴⁾ There are, he feels, two types of words capable of carrying with them evocative potential. One class is composed of those which “... evoke ideas alone, or ideas mixed with emotions.” These purely intellectual symbols, which are “associated with ideas which are more than fragments of

(3) Cleanth Brooks, “The Poet as Mythmaker,” *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Boston, 1939), pp. 173–203.

(4) W. B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London, no date), p. 243.

the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions, are the play-things of the allegorist and the pedant.⁽⁵⁾

If I say 'white' or 'purple' in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I say them in the same breath with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity or sovereignty; while innumerable other meanings, which are held to one another by the bondage of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy violence.⁽⁶⁾

The symbolic reference in Yeats' sense, then, is a complex—is truly a reference. It is composed of a union of emotion evoking words, which I will call "concept" words. The total reference awakens "meanings" which make "wisdom" of "chaos," and which finally order experience. Of course one must think here of T. S. Eliot's Objective Correlative. This is, I believe, what Yeats has in mind. We must note, however, that there is a special form of knowledge gained in the Yeatsian reference by the harnessing together of the emotional and conceptual elements. This knowledge, "wisdom," is gained by the reader's participation, through the agency of the reference, in the "pure intellect," the common world storehouse of ideas, the "Spiritus Mundi."⁽⁷⁾ Here the formerly specific part of the reference, the conceptual part, (cross, crown of thorns) becomes blurred into the unassignable.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 250.

(6) *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 251.

We have, then, the composition and the function of the reference, but Yeats goes on to specify how the component parts are attained by the poet. "One is farthest from symbols," he explains, "when he is busy doing this or that, but the soul moves among symbols when trance or madness or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own."⁽⁸⁾ The combination does not result from conscious effort. It is the soul, not the mind which is expressed. This idea of the poet as depersonalized catalyst is echoed again by Eliot, who speaks of the artist as "surrendering himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable," "... of the suspension of the poet's mind until the proper combination arrived..."⁽⁹⁾ These symbolic references, these "combinations" have no one-to-one relationship with specific ideas or assignable emotions. "The form of sincere poetry," Yeats says, "must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day."⁽¹⁰⁾ In this, Yeats' idea of his "symbolism" is very close to Ezra Pound's definition of "Imagism." "The symbolist's symbols," Pound wrote, "have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The imagist's images have a variable significance, like the signs a, b, and x in algebra."⁽¹¹⁾ The image is "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex at the same instant of time."⁽¹²⁾ This complex, if properly chosen and executed, will tap the inherited storehouse of the race's ideas and emotions.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 252.

(9) T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Modern Criticism* (New York, 1963), pp. 140-145.

(10) Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

(11) Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," *Modern Criticism* (New York, 1963), pp. 132-138.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Having come this far, the only question to ask ourselves is this: does it work? The popularity of Yeats's poetry cannot be credited to a revival of mysticism, and certainly his readers find no comfort in the view of history which *A Vision* provides. We must conclude that Yeats has succeeded in communicating something which his readers feel to be important. But before we ask if this success results from Yeats' peculiar use of the symbolic reference, it may be interesting to hear the views expressed by three important modern critics.

R. P. Blackmur is quite clear in his position. "If it happens that we discard more of Yeats than we do of Eliot, it is not because Christianity provides better machinery for the movement of poetry than ... magic, but simply because Eliot is a more cautious craftsman."⁽¹³⁾ Poetry succeeds or fails, for Blackmur, not because of the symbol system, which is merely the medium through which poetry's "grasp of reality" is expressed, but because of the "craft" which organizes this system into a poem. The system itself, whether it be (as Blackmur chooses to call Yeats' system) magic, or, as with Eliot, Christianity, provides the "fructifying function" for the poet—provides the poet with a "grasp of reality, of emotion, character and aspiration."⁽¹⁴⁾ Blackmur admits, however, that the symbol can be deceptive when it "does not fit naturally with the forms of knowledge that ordinarily occupy us, when it is "not part of our mental furniture." But he does not believe that this difficulty is insurmountable. It "may be overcome with familiarity," and eventually, when the symbol or myth system becomes

(13) R. P. Blackmur, "The Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats," *Modern Poetry* (New York, 1963), pp. 339-362.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 626.

familiar, "it will even seem rational for the purposes of poetry."⁽¹⁵⁾

With a poem such as "The Second Coming," Blackmur concedes that the reader, because he will be unequipped to deal with the mythological system which underlies the poem, cannot know precisely what the "familiar words drag after them," but "he can still tell what the weight of these words feels like."⁽¹⁶⁾ This is enough to make the poem succeed on one level of response—the emotional; but Blackmur feels that confusion is liable to occur in the search for the intellectual content of the poem. The lack of an intellectual basis of understanding between author and reader "prevents his (Yeats') poetry from reaching the first magnitude."

But Blackmur, armed with his conviction that understanding can surmount any poetic difficulty, if understanding is at all available, has a solution. He would have the reader "search out the prose parallels and reconstruct the symbols on their own terms in order to come on the emotional reality."⁽¹⁷⁾

By "emotional reality" Blackmur seems to mean the conviction which results from the reader's personal response to the total content of the symbolic reference and to the poem as a whole. He agrees, then, with Yeats that the symbol contains a conceptual element which must be understood in terms of something outside the poem itself. Both believe that the final result of the unity of the two elements is not an intellectual, but an emotional response. But Blackmur would not accept the idea of the mystical participation with the "pure

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 628.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 629.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 635.

intellect." He feels that symbols are of value if they "heighten the emotional reality and thereby extend its reference to what we call the real world."⁽¹⁸⁾ Blackmur is making here an important distinction between the "real world" and the reality shown by the emotion evoked by the poem. The poem reaches the "first magnitude" when it merges the emotional reality created by the poem or reference, with the real world. The emotional response can be attained, then, on the first level, merely by "feeling the weight" of the words. The successful poem succeeds primarily through the impact of the emotional reality (created by the poet's imagination, and dependent on the successful operation of the references) upon the material reality which all readers as well as the poet participate in. The most important element of the poem, then, is the emotional reality which it creates. For Blackmur it is, finally, "the emotion that counts."⁽¹⁹⁾

We will return to the poetic interaction of symbolic reference, emotional reality and the "real world" later, but for now let us turn from Blackmur's belief that the salvation of the total poem for the diligent reader lies in the discovery of the "Prose parallels," to John Unterecker, who maintains that.

Any analogy we can construct for the symbol, any meaning we assign to it, is legitimate so long as we recognize that that meaning is not its meaning.⁽²⁰⁾

The meaning of the symbol, Unterecker believes, "must always be more elusive than any value we can—with words—assign to it. All

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 639.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 638.

(20) Quoted by Yvor Winters in "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats," *TCL*, 5-6 (1960), p. 4.

that the meaning we might assign to a symbol can ever be is either part of its meaning or of its possible meaning. No symbol has a meaning.” The symbol gives us instead “... a feeling of rightness, of congruity at the heart of things.”⁽²¹⁾ The highest level of response, then, must be emotional or intuitive. Any response the poem might elicit from the reader is as good as any other response, so long as the reader does not attempt to understand too precisely or absolutely.

But what Unterecker is speaking of here is not the symbol itself, but the emotional reality which the symbol evokes. He is agreeing with Yeats who says that symbols must have “perfections which escape analysis,” that they must have “subtleties which have new meanings every day.”⁽²²⁾

Unterecker is avoiding consideration of the function of the symbol itself. He is speaking only of the symbol which succeeds. Neither he nor Blackmur have considered the symbol or the poem which does not yield up an emotional reality, but merely a vague emotion. We will return to this central question after reviewing the position of Yvor Winters.

Mr. Winters sees Unterecker's position as untenable. This critic sees another depth to the problem of symbolic reference. For him the problem lies not in knowing enough facts to make the conceptual element of the reference connect with its intended load of meaning, nor is it enough to achieve a mere “feeling of meaning or a defined sense of order.” Winters feels that “unless we are convinced, the passion is meaningless.”⁽²³⁾ Thus the problem involved in a reading of

(21) *Loc. cit.*

(22) Yeats, p. 250.

(23) Winters, p. 9.

“Leda and the Swan” is whether or not the reader can believe that “sex union is a form of mystical experience, that history proceeds in two thousand year cycles.”⁽²⁴⁾ Unless the mythic structure on which the references is based can make itself felt as in some way valid, the entire expression becomes merely “sonorous rhetoric.”

Obviously Winters’s approach to a poem does not involve an emotional reality at all, or if it does, this reality is totally dependent not only on its relation to the “real world,” but on the validity of a *knowledge which this relation reveals*.

Here is the key to Winters’s critical position. Knowledge. To arrive at this knowledge he attempts to measure the reality produced by the poem against a concrete and believable standard. We find him in his semi-satiric search for knowledge and value consistently applying the poetic references to the known systems of Christianity (because many people do believe in it), and classical mythology (because many people have believed in it). He feels he must do this, he tells us, because to look at the poetry as Yeats himself does, and in accord with Yeats’ own belief is to see that “what he says is foolish.” The “first four and a half lines of “The Second Coming,” Winters feels, “provides an example of Yeats’ high rhetoric,” but for their final effect they depend upon our belief in Spiritus Mundi.⁽²⁵⁾

The effect Winters speaks of here, which is impossible to achieve without belief, is never made explicit, but we can assume that the effect involves a knowledge of some kind. He would have the poem convey an intellectually verifiable concept. His objection is not to the

(24) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

clarity of the symbol; he readily admits that the "ideas are clear" in "The Second Coming." His concern, then, is not with symbols at all, but, as with the other two critics we have examined, with *what the symbols convey*.

None of our three critics adequately approach the problem posed by this paper. Using Yeats' own theory of the symbolic reference, then (with some modifications), we will approach the problem directly and form our conclusions as best we can.

Yeats tells us that *A Vision* grew out of his communication with spirits, and that the intention of the spirits was to give him "material for metaphors." Yeats used this system, however, to draw together his own fragmented world into a recognizable and understandable, but most important, communicable whole. As he later phrased it when asked about his literal belief in *A Vision*:

I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancuse. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice.⁽²⁶⁾

Held rigid within his system, the concepts of reality and imagination, being and becoming, art and artifice—dynamic abstracts all—could be captured and examined.

As a method of personal organization, Yeats' use of *A Vision* is acceptable. The critical question is this: can the obscurity of the material in *A Vision* be used to provide the conceptual element of

(26) M. L. Rosenthal, "Introduction," *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York, 1962), p. xxxiv.

Yeats' metaphors and symbolic references with success?

The author of the introduction to the *Selected Poems* complains that Yeats "sometimes made the assumption ... that because he had something intensely felt to say, it must somehow be understood."⁽²⁷⁾ I think this is, unhappily, true. Yeats felt that he would be understood because he believed that the problems with which he was dealing, which he "intensely felt," were as deeply important *in the same way* to his readers as they were to himself. Since the final effect of the poem was a participation in the "pure intellect," and since the "wisdom" gained was to be "indefinable," the problem of specific knowledge seemed secondary to the poet. But is it really?

Let us examine two of his most famous and successful poems, "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" in the light of this assumption. The first of these is a poem which does not awaken in the reader the specific knowledge of the destruction which the year two thousand will loose upon the world, which is (my apologies to Wimsatt and Beardsley) the ostensible purpose of the poem. "The Second Coming" is certainly based upon the system of *A Vision*, but it is finally a poem which conveys a *general* apprehension of the future. The reader need not share Yeats' personal response to this anxiety. What knowledge does the poem give us? Do the poem's references demand that we go outside the poem to *A Vision* or to any other "prose parallel" in order to achieve understanding? What references are there, and what is the intellectual, the conceptual components of them?

In the first stanza the "gyre" reference would escape any reader

(27) *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

who is unfamiliar with *A Vision*, but this knowledge is not essential; it would merely reinforce the obvious meaning of the stanza, but the total emotional impact would probably not be enhanced. In the second stanza "*Spiritus Mundi*" would be unfamiliar to most readers, but again, the mood produced by the other words causes the reader to guess what the meaning must be or to read on without feeling that he is missing anything central. All the other words in the poem carry their meanings and emotions with them available for instant impact. Even "Bethlehem" with use has taken on an inescapable emotional connotation along with its obvious intellectual connotation of mysterious birth. The concentration on emotion evoking words is very heavy; and the concept words, innocence, anarchy, Second Coming, cradle, and Bethlehem carry with them immediate recognition (as gyre and *Spiritus Mundi* do not). Obviously, then the poem succeeds without the help of *A Vision*. The poem produces what Blackmur would call the emotional reality, and it does this without connotative reference to unknown elements outside the poem itself. The emotional reality is related in the reader's mind to his own version of the "real world." Every man's world is different in that his experience and responses to life differ, but a large part of each individual's world is the same as any other individual's. In "The Second Coming" Yeats has his hit upon something which is common to all men's experience. This is, I think, what *Spiritus Mundi* really is.

"Leda and the Swan" is another of Yeats's poems which can be read with no reference to the theories forwarded by *A Vision*. Whether or not Yeats believed in two thousand year cycles makes no difference to the reader. All men are personally involved in conflict with a

universe which seems to impose on their will from every side. When the reader sees Leda, when he knows of the catastrophic results of the mating shown in the poem, Troy in flames and Agammemnon dead, he does not care what Leda believed or Agammemnon or Yeats. He feels the emotional reality produced by the poem to be true and important in terms of his own world.

But a very important reference in the poem makes different demands upon the reader than any encountered in "The Second Coming." The concept words in the dominant reference, "Agammemnon," "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower," demand a prior knowledge which is by no means universal. Certainly the success of the poem, the emotional reality and its reference to the "real world" depends upon a knowledge of the intelligence which these words carry. Unless these words have, with use, become inseparable from certain emotional and conceptual connotations, the reader must make a mental connection between the knowledge which he has of these events and the emotion which Yeats wishes to supply them with in the context of the poem. The mind of the reader is forced to participate in the poem as it did not in "The Second Coming." In the second poem the intellectual and emotional elements were not fused by the poet, they were merely placed side by side. The success of the poem is no less because of this allusion, but the audience who can appreciate the poem is severely limited. Of course it is the business of the poet to select his own audience, that is not the point. The point is that the problem of knowledge does exist, and, depending upon the poem, can offer various degrees of difficulty. Carried to the extreme, references can be made which exclude *all* readers from the poem.

We cannot judge *A Vision* itself—no critic should presume to judge the artist's experience, but it is fair, it seems to me, to judge the success of the communication which results from it. The poet may connect his intellectual and emotional elements, as Yeats did with "The Second Coming," or he may leave them unconnected as he did in part of "Leda And The Swan" and in most of "Sailing to Bysantium." The poet may arrange the elements which make up the poem as he will, but the elements themselves must be familiar at least to a certain audience.

But unfortunately Yeats believed the poet should present his vision with symbolic references which are "born of trance or madness." He believed that the vision must be expressed in terms of the "fructifying experience" which engendered the vision. His poetry, then, is hit or miss. If the "fructifying experience" happens to have been fairly universal, his poem will communicate, but if it was not, then the poem will be obscure.

The final conclusion is that much of Yeats, a great deal of Yeats is unavailable without the prose parallel of *A Vision*. Whether it is good or bad poetry is beside the point. It is probably good poetry. But the impact of Yeats derives from his symbolic references which fuse the emotional with the intellectual. In the poems which depend on *A Vision*, for example, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," or "The Saint and the Hunchback," the emotional element is simply unavailable. These poems may be read with a certain intellectual appreciation—and this only after a thorough knowledge of *A Vision*—but the emotional element was available only to Yeats himself. Though Yeats will doubtless remain an important figure in twentieth century

literature, he will remain so only on the basis of a very small body of poems.

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