



The Phoenix' Nest upon the Tree of Life

W. B. Yeats's Aesthetics of
Symbols in Poetry

生命树上凤凰巢

——叶芝诗歌象征美学研究

蒲度戎 著

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内容简介

本书以爱尔兰诗人叶芝的核心理念“象征”为视角，在整体把握的基础上集中评述了其诗歌象征主义的独特理论，详尽剖析了该理论的五大源泉，并澄清了一些长期存在的、有关其源泉的理解误区。然后，本书以叶芝自身的诗歌理论为依据，着重研究了其象征主义的魔幻诗学和智性诗学，深度探索了其诗歌创作中呈现出的魔幻美和智性美，提出了叶芝乃“魔幻象征主义诗人”和“智性诗人”的概念。结论是：叶芝之所以成为独具风格的象征主义理论家和大诗人，是因为其魔幻美和智性美的理论和实践；其象征主义诗学堪称在生命树上修筑凤凰巢。

Approached from the perspective of Yeats's core concept "symbol" and based upon a thorough grasp of it, the book comments on this Irish poet's peculiar theoretical statements of symbolism in poetry, elaborates the five major sources of his theory, and clarifies some longtime misunderstandings about the sources. Then following Yeats's own poetry theory, the book focuses upon the magical poetics and the intellectual poetics of his symbolism, explores in depth the magical beauty and the intellectual beauty in his poetry, and suggests that Yeats was a "magical symbolist" and an "intellectual poet". The conclusion is that the theory and practice of the magical beauty and the intellectual beauty distinguished Yeats as a symbolist theorist and a great poet and his symbolist poetics can be considered as building the phoenix' nest upon the Tree of Life.

Key Words: Yeats; poetry; symbol; symbolism; magic; intellect; magical beauty; intellectual beauty

Abstract

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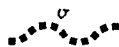
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Introduction

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

—Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances"¹

As the greatest poet of Ireland and the acknowledged leader of Irish Renaissance, William Butler Yeats holds a high position in world literature. On 13 June 1865 he was born in a painter's family at Sandymount, Dublin. His poetic career began when he was a teenager; and he continued writing fine poems till his death. He rose from late Romanticism and Pre-Raphaelitism, through Symbolism to Modernism; in every stage of his literary life he created great poems and remained an admired celebrity. His everlasting inspiration and gigantic achievements have made him a literary wonder because poets hardly keep creative power in their whole lifetime; the great William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was even found "withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted".² In 1923 Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first of the four Irish writers ever so honored; the other three being



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George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), and Seamus Heaney (b. 1939). On 28 January 1939, Yeats died of illness at Roquebrune, France. The English poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973) immediately wrote an unforgettable elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939), praising thus:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections.³

The American poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) went to Dublin one year after Yeats's death and delivered a historic Yeats lecture at the Abbey Theater; he declared Yeats to be "one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them".⁴ Today, Yeats, together with Eliot and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), has been elevated to "the modernist trinity"⁵ and M. H. Abrams (b. 1912) calls him "beyond question the greatest twentieth-century poet of the English language".⁶ He is read in a hundred countries.

The artistic power of Yeats's poetry lies largely in his symbolism. Although he called himself a last romantic,⁷ critics generally name him a great modernist. In this book he will be rightly studied as a distinguished symbolist. His poems, especially his early poems, are really full of symbolic images and qualities. His 1899 collection of poems *The Wind among the Reeds* is considered by Edward Larrissy as "Yeats's most truly symbolist volume" and "perhaps the one symbolist masterpiece in the English language".⁸ A reading of this volume and other poetry volumes by Yeats will



make us feel that we are walking in a forest of symbols; birds, trees, roses, fairies, towers, etc. "Tree and bird, particularly, are with Yeats from the beginning of his career to the end."⁹ So it is natural and essential to understand Yeats by studying his poetic symbols and symbolism.

Symbols are connected with human cultural activities. To use symbols is a part of human life. For example, a dove symbolizes peace; the lion, strength and courage; the Cross, Christianity; the Stars and Stripes, America and its States. We can find symbols even in the earliest human civilization, in the primitive dance, painting, ritual, witchcraft, etc. As a conscious way of expression, the symbolic method in Western literature and art first appeared in the religious subject matter in the Middle Ages. Popes encouraged artists to employ symbolic forms. Popes Gregory I and II emphasized that art must make the invisible embodied in the visible and that the soul must be inspired through meditating upon artistic symbols.¹⁰ During the time of W. B. Yeats symbolism had become so mature and popular that it formed a movement in Europe and Yeats became its representative writer in the English world.

Now Yeats has been studied for over a hundred years. The first recorded example of Yeats criticism is Katharine Tynan's enthusiastic review of his dramatic poem *Mosada* (1886) in the *Irish Monthly* of March 1887. In the exhaustive *W. B. Yeats: A Classified Bibliography of Criticism* (1990) there are 10152 entries. This book, produced by K. P. S. Jochum, is a book of great labors of love, indispensable for all the serious Yeats scholars. In its "Preface and Acknowledgements" Mr. Jochum states that "My



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bibliography aims at completeness, not at critical selection" and that "its scope is international".¹¹ He also admits some possible omissions, because "this bibliography is essentially the product of one man's labors".¹² In this handsome and handy reference book 213 entries are directly classified under the subject of symbol and symbolism. In addition, there are 18 entries concerning specific symbols such as bird, tree, gyre, tower, etc. Because the number of actual publications is considerably higher than the number included in this bibliography it is fair to say that hundreds of studies in Yeats's symbols and symbolism have been published in the world ever since the rise of Yeats as a poet and a critic, chiefly in Great Britain, Ireland, the United States, Canada, and Australia. With the help of Mr. Jochum's bibliography, and after my own research, especially my research in Yeats studies in China, I find that about one fifth of the studies in Yeats are Ph. D. theses or books that are based on Ph. D. theses. I also notice that very few entries may concern the aesthetic qualities in Yeats's symbolic poetry. Even in Mr. Jochum's all-inclusive book only 12 entries of aesthetics are found, and none of them may discuss the beauty of Yeats's symbols or symbolism. So Yeats is a favorite topic among the students, but Yeats's symbolic poetry needs more and deeper studies from the aesthetic perspective.

This book will study first of all Yeats's theory of symbolism in poetry, its major statements and sources, and then the focus will be Yeats's poetic symbols and their aesthetic qualities and values. Yeats's own symbolist critical principles will be used as the theoretical foundation of the book and some of his poems will be inves-



tigated to explain why his symbolic poetry has been enchanting to so many readers all over the world for so long.

Notes

1. Charles Baudelaire. "Correspondences". in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces: Volume 2* (Sixth Edition). (eds.) Maynard Mack, et al. New York; W. W. Norton & Company, 1992. 1361.

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11. K. P. S. Jochum. "Preface and Acknowledgements". in W. B. Yeats; *A Classified Bibliography of Criticism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990. xi & xii.
12. Ibid., xvi.

Chapter One

Yeats's Symbolist Statements

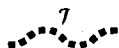
A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame....

—W. B. Yeats, "William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*"¹

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*,

The word symbol derives from the Greek verb *symballein*, 'to throw together', and its noun *symbolon*, 'mark', 'emblem', 'token' or 'sign'. It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or 'stands for' something else.²

In this sense a symbol involves two objects: One is the representing, the other is the represented. To symbolize is to throw these two objects together. Because words themselves are signs, language is a





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system of symbols. To use words is to use symbols. In the broadest sense, literature as an art of language expression is thus an art of how to symbolize. Indeed, literature began with symbols. The symbolic element can be traced to the very beginning of human literary creation. "Song of Clog-Throwing" is said to be the first Chinese poem:

Song of Clog-Throwing

Work at sunrise,
Rest at sunfall;
Sink a well for drink,
Plough the fields for food.
What's the emperor's power to me?³

Here the poem's title itself may well deserve a symbol of carefreedom. In "The Turtledove", the first piece of the first collection of Chinese poems, the singing turtledove is none other than a symbol of cooing or a symbol of the lover. The English national epic *Beowulf* also has symbolic references; for example, the hero Beowulf stands for courage and heroism. Now he is rightly considered a symbol of the English national hero. Before the nineteenth century the symbolic method had been used for thousands of years unconsciously or subconsciously and at most half-consciously as a specific skill of creative writing, and there had been quite few notable theoretical explorations of it. Even if it had been used consciously, it had not produced much influence. Then in the second half of the