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Freeing the Sign: Symbols in Yeats's Poetry and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*

While the meaning of symbols in Yeats's poetry depends upon their relation to other objects and symbols within the poem in which they appear, they often seem to retain a fixed, stable meaning across all of his poetry. For instance, although in one poem the moon's changeability figures prominently, while in another, its eclipsing power is emphasized, the moon still retains the feminine aspect in both poems. When we turn to other poems in Yeats's oeuvre containing the symbol of the moon, we see it continues to evoke the feminine and all the traits typically identified with the feminine gender. Considering our understanding of the sign or symbol as functioning on the relational level, how is it that a specific meaning gets consistently attached to an arbitrary object like the moon? Does the fact that this happens mean that individual symbols possess their own distinct evocation, as in a stable fixed meaning? What are the implications if this is the case? I argue that much more than understanding the way that symbolism functions in Yeats' oeuvre is at stake here. If the meaning of symbols such as the moon is indeed fixed in Yeats, than we rightfully question whether this is the case beyond Yeats.

That is, if the moon is a stable, universal sign for the feminine rather than being merely arbitrarily so. If so, this would further imply that the deeply rooted dual gender ideology that in part depends upon this configuration of moon as feminine and sun as masculine is not just an artificial construct. If we move beyond Yeats's work and into the function of the moon as symbol in other cultures, we can determine whether the moon really is a fixed, stable symbol of the feminine, and if not, whether it can be re-configured to take on new meanings, freed from perpetual association with gendered ideology.

To address these issues, I will first examine the function of symbols and signs on the relational level as analyzed by Gilles Deleuze in his now classic study, *Proust and Signs*, so as to identify how arbitrary objects or symbols can be mistaken for the signified. Then, I will examine how the feminine aspect is retained throughout Yeats's poetry from his early to late period, continuing with the juxtaposition of the Deleuzian study. Finally, I will explore the function of moon as symbol in cultures outside of the Occident, in order to determine whether symbols in general remain fixed or stable, or whether or not they can be reconfigured to take on new meanings.

In Proust's masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator Marcel is sensitive to signs that function within a system of several worlds. According to Deleuze in *Proust and Signs*, these signs “constitute different worlds, worldly signs, empty signs, deceptive signs of love, sensuous material signs, and lastly, the essential signs of art” (14), and the world as a whole is an object to be deciphered. In fact – people and objects everywhere – emit signs to be interpreted (4). Marcel does what comes natural, which is to attribute to the object the sign itself, as if the “object itself has the secret of the sign it emits” (26). This is a natural tendency, as “each of our impressions has two sides: ‘Half sheathed in the object, extended in ourself by another half which we alone

can recognize” (26). It is an object that emits a sign, and so we cannot help that our attention is drawn to the object itself, but if we dwell on the object we may “miss our finest encounters,” because we identify what the sign signifies with the object it designates (26). For example, Marcel tastes the Madeleine, which instantly triggers an involuntary memory of his beloved Combray. And yet, it isn’t even the Combray of his memory. Rather, Combray “rises up absolutely, in a form which was never experienced in its ‘essence,’ or its eternity” (12). At the time, Marcel cannot explain why he experiences “so intense and so particular a joy” (12) just by tasting the Madeleine. Only later does he understand “what had escaped him in the case of the Madeleine or even of the steeples: that the material meaning is nothing without an ideal essence which it incarnates. The mistake is to suppose that the hieroglyphs represent ‘only material objects’” (13). More importantly, the Madeleine remains “insignificant taken in isolation” (23). It emits a sign that moves Marcel, not by itself, but in concert with other forms such as time and space and a landscape within which he finds himself. Through the Madeleine and the steeples and various other objects, persons and substances, Marcel discovers the world of art as “the ultimate world of signs,” (13) because it alone “can bring long-lasting joy, as it metamorphoses all other signs and leads us to the revelation of the Essence, of pure time or Time itself” (Buchanan and Marks 21).

The world of art belongs to “Time Found Again,” or “pure Time” (Buchanan and Marks 21), the Essence with an “entirely spiritual meaning” (Deleuze 40). As noted above, although the meaning is not contained in the one object or symbol in isolation, the power of objects as signifiers is that in relation to one another, they can lead one to this so-called pure ‘Essence.’ In Proust, Marcel deciphers the Madeleine in a way that leads him to the ultimate world of art. Already, we have evidence that the Madeleine as symbol or sign is arbitrary, for it could have

been a biscuit or cracker rather than a Madeleine that emitted the sign to be interpreted; the sign or Essence emitted is what matters. Further, a Madeleine may signify different things to different people within different contexts or nothing at all. In Yeats's poetry, the fact that the moon appears repeatedly is of significance. Although the moon symbol functions relationally in each poem, often (as we will see) foregrounding one particular feature of the moon, it still evokes the feminine aspect even within these poems, possibly (mis)leading one toward the worlds of signs, even pointing in the direction of so-called Essence or spiritual truth, thereby perpetuating the feminine/masculine dichotomy.

Yeats's poetic aesthetics evidently seep into his poetry. At one point in his essay on *The Symbolism of Poetry*, he refers to the moon as of the female gender: "but if I look at the moon *herself* and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality" (4; emphasis added). The moon here is feminine and apparently has been so since ancient times so that Yeats propagates this understanding without question in his aesthetic of symbols. His incorporation of moon as feminine in his early poetry is evident in poems such as "The Sorrow of Love":

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man's image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,

Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry. (Yeats 40)

Here, we see a girl arise as well as the moon, both bringing about mourning and lamentation, so that the feminine blots out "man's image" (40) – the masculine, and his cry. The "greatness of the world" (40) is associated with the masculine Odysseus and Priam, brought to tears by the feminine power of the "brilliant moon" that climbs "upon an empty sky"; it is only after the girl arises that "the greatness of the world" appears to be "in tears./Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships/And proud as Priam murdered with his peers" (40). The mournful, feminine moon blots out the masculine image, proud and great.

In his article, "The Sun and Moon in Yeats's Early Poetry," Thomas Parkinson says in reference to Yeats, that the "sun and the moon, representing basic antinomies in his experience, appear intermittently in the verse from 1890 on, and until his marriage in 1917 and the consequent work on *A Vision*, the symbols conveyed meanings rather more fixed than one would expect" (50). In analyzing first Yeats' poem, "Lines Written in Dejection," Parkinson identifies "the irrational and emotional aspects of Yeats's mind" as "gone with the moon," and the association of "the sun with the human and reasonable aspects" (50) Indeed, Yeats himself saw that "all living things have the sun for father and the moon for mother" (52). Though there is

evidence that Yeats resolved to unite the two opposing forces – sun and moon/male and female – the binary opposition or dichotomy in itself remains, assigning certain human traits as either masculine or feminine, the masculine not 'naturally' found in the female, nor the feminine found in the male. If one wants to unite the two, one must marry them to each other. Parkinson sums up sun and moon as symbols in Yeats by his periods: First as "atmospheric decor, especially before 1890," then "in their strict alchemical meaning, as symbols of the masculine and feminine principles" from 1890 to around 1901; from 1901 to 1915 his symbols were conventional "in the naturalistic tone"; in the 1915 poem, "Lines Written in Dejection," sun and moon are "used to symbolize the basic splits in his life and work"; although in *A Vision* and his later poems, he refines and elaborates "the associations to be subsumed under the symbols," we may assume he "could not obliterate the meanings discernible" in the "Dejection" poem, "so that we should expect Yeats's use of the sun and moon after 1917 to play variations upon the meanings revealed in our analysis of the earlier poetry, and *specifically on the moon-feminine and sun-masculine associations* so clearly established" (58; emphasis added).

David Holdeman, in his introduction to Yeats confirms that the sun and moon are always associated with the feminine: "Though Yeats had long deployed the sun and moon as emblems, after the decline of his commitment to the Rose they began to stand out more sharply in his work. The Cabalistic lore of the Golden Dawn had taught him to associate the sun with an elemental masculine principle connected with discipline and pattern; the moon evoked an opposing feminine force linked to passion and infinitude" (42-43). This contrary opposition is evident again and again in Yeats' poetry – femininity tied to passion and doom, often overcoming the power and virility of the masculine. It comes as no surprise then, that Maud Gonne, the primary object of Yeats's lifetime romantic obsession, appears in concert with the

moon in Yeats' poem, this time in his later period, in part II of "The Tower." Both she and the moon appear indirectly:

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
Or anything called conscience once;
And that if memory recur, the sun's
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

(Yeats 197)

If one takes the "woman lost" autobiographically as Maud Gonne, which critics often do (Holdeman 84), then the memory of losing her is as dark as the sun being eclipsed by the moon. In this stanza, the moon is not named directly just as the lost woman isn't, but it manifests its eclipsing power, its ability to blot out the light of the sun. Because emphasis is placed on woman (whether won or lost), the moon is closely connected here to the feminine aspect, and the sun to the masculine. Rather than the moon and sunlight seeming to be "[o]ne inextricable beam" (Yeats 197) as hoped for by the poet earlier in the poem, the one overtakes the other so that the poet's memories of the lost woman "ensure that the moon eclipses the sun" (Holdeman 84). How so? She was for him an 'elusive phantom' in life (84), and returns just as painfully elusive in memory, eclipsing actuality.

In Proust, to which world of signs does such elusiveness belong? It belongs to the deceptive signs of love. Marcel, much as Yeats does with Gonne, slowly individualizes Albertine among the other young girls as he falls in love with her (Deleuze 7). What makes the love signs deceptive is that while addressed to the lover, they conceal the secret world which Deleuze calls “the world of Gomorrah, which itself no longer depends on this or that woman (though one woman can incarnate it better than another), but is the feminine possibility *par excellence*, a kind of *a priori* which jealousy discovers” (9). The lover jealously discovers that he is excluded from worlds that were formed long before he arrived, worlds that include pleasures the beloved experienced that he can never access. These secret worlds belonging to love elude him. Marcel eventually loses Albertine literally, when she leaves him and then dies. But more profoundly, the painful decipherment of these love signs points to “the sign of Gomorrah as though against the deepest expression of an *original feminine reality*” (10; emphasis added). He realizes that no matter what woman he may come to love (the woman thus being arbitrary), even if she should prefer him for a time, her feminine power appears to conceal unknown worlds that will always exclude him and so will always remain elusive. In this sense, the lover can never fully possess the beloved. Though in “The Tower,” Yeats blames cowardice rather than rejection as the reason for the woman lost, love and all that one expects it to entail, remains elusive. Further, when the love lost recurs in memory, be assured the feminine moon eclipses or overshadows the actual light of day.

Let us pause at this juncture and review what the moon in relation to other objects has evoked in Yeats’s poetry: the sorrowful and painful truth of elusive love, connected to the female or feminine aspect. The feminine/female moon in the dark sky eclipses the brightness of the powerful sun in a sky of light. We can go on to analyze the moon as symbol in various other

poems throughout Yeats's works, and find time and again, that whether its changeability or eclipsing power is the focal point, the feminine connection remains. According to Hiram Haydn, Yeats is the last of the Romantics, in that “with the account of Oedipus’ divinity in *A Packet* and the exposition in *A Vision*...we find the long line of immortal opponents” which include “the Sun and the Moon,” and “with a new and final boldness, the system has been newly and finally applied: metaphysics has become declared theology” (317).

Now that we have determined that a specific meaning has fixed itself upon the moon as symbol in Yeats, the question is why and how? By juxtaposing symbols in Yeats with signs in Proust, we have part of the answer. In face of signs emitted by objects, we mistake the object or sign for the signified, our impressions resulting partly from ourselves, such as from memory and understanding of the world and its objects, and partly in the object that emits the signs, which seems to contain the meaning in itself. We mistake the moon itself as truly and forever feminine, with all the traits attributed to this quality. However, because the moon as symbol does not stand for the feminine in Yeats alone, but in poets contemporary with Yeats, such as D.H. Lawrence and others, and since the sun/moon dichotomy often stands for the masculine/feminine impression in the arts till today, we wonder, is this proof of something essential or universal in the binary? Does the fact that the moon impresses us with feminine qualities mean that there are only two genders, masculine/male and feminine/female, not only opposed but also fixed in their binary positions, with a clear border between the two? So that like the literal sun and moon, one cannot combine them into one being, but only unite them in some seemingly stable, natural balance, in a marital union of male and female?

Notice the language Parkinson uses in relation to Yeats' 1899 poem, "The Song of Wandering Aengus," where "the sun and moon exhibit clearly the formal balance of cabalistic

and alchemical lore and play upon the basic meanings, the masculine and feminine, which Hermes *assigned* them" (55; emphasis added). The verb "assigned" in this statement is very telling. It demonstrates the fact that the masculine and feminine dichotomy are not natural to the sun and moon; they are meanings "assigned," or attributed to these objects, by Hermes, himself a Greek mythological construct, Mercury for the Romans -- the Sun. Returning to Deleuze's study of signs in Proust, the danger is in automatically taking it for granted that the object really means something specific in and of itself, in isolation, when in fact it only means something in relation to other things or objects. In light of Deleuze and what we just noted in Parkinson, objects as symbols are arbitrarily so.

In order to confirm that this is the case, let us turn to the moon as symbol in cultures outside of the Occident. In Roland Barthe's imagining of Japan as "unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own" (3), he highlights the "Oriental transvestite" as not copying "Woman," but signifying her. He continues this examination: "not bogged down in the model, but detached from its signified; Femininity is presented to read, not to see: translation, not transgression; the sign shifts from the great female role to the fifty-year-old paterfamilias" (53). Notice the language he uses here: the model or object "detached from its signified," and "the sign shifts." The object or sign is not fixed, but detached, so that it can shift along with its meaning. In the West, we are bogged down with what we see – what does the moon look like? What does it – shining in the dark sky – mean? For the Japanese, "the sign shifts," from female to male, and this is not a sin or transgression, but a means to translation. When we translate, the object of translation is transformed from one form to another. No strict border here. Transvestite signifies woman, and woman man.

Barthes reminds us of the West's obsession with moistening "everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples" (70). In our drive toward meaning, "we systematically subject utterance...to one or the other of these *significations* (or active fabrications of signs): symbol and reasoning, metaphor and syllogism" (70). In his study, Barthes quotes haiku, one by Basho that reads: "*Already four o'clock.../I have got up nine times/To admire the moon*" (72). He then points to a commentator of this poem unwittingly repeating this poem when he says, "The moon is so lovely...that the poet gets up repeatedly to contemplate it at his window" (72) This is the West, intending to "*piece* meaning," but by doing so "failing the haiku," by forcing meaning upon it when "the work of reading which is attached to it is to suspend language, not to provoke it" (72). By repeatedly fixing meaning upon objects like the moon, and then trying to get into poetry "by breaking and entering" (71) we fail the poetry itself.

In turning to another culture, the Dogon indigenous tribe of Mali in Africa, we approach a system that gives us an alternative perspective of the universe. For the Dogon people, Sirius C, a star in the Sirius system translates into English as "Sun of Women" -- "the seat of the female souls of living or future beings" (Dogon). Clearly, the sun is associated with females rather than males. Further, the "Dogon believe that Sirius C sends out two pairs of beams and that the beams represent a feminine figure" (Dogon) so that not only is the feminine connected to the Sun rather than the moon, but a source of light.

In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari equate the Dogon/tantric egg with the "BwO" - the body without organs, as the "*field of immanence* of desire, the *plane of consistency* specific to desire (with desire defined as the process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows

it or a pleasure that fills it)" (154). This site of the distribution of intensities is a site of freedom from outside judgments so that the questions explored in the chapter on a body without organs is, "how can we unhook ourselves from the points of subjectification that secure us, nail us down to a dominant reality?" (160). Part of the answer is in this: "you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality" (160). In the same chapter, Deleuze and Guattari offer up points of entry where we can use our subjectivity to confront alternate perspectives, such as the "great Japanese compilation of Chinese Taoist treatises" that were "made in A.D. 982-984" (157). In these we see "the formation of a circuit of intensities between female and male energy, with the woman playing the role of the innate or instinctive force (Yin) stolen by or transmitted to the man in such a way that the transmitted force of the man (Yang) in turn becomes innate, all the more innate: an augmentation of powers" (157). It becomes a question of "constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion" (157). Though the symbols of the sun and moon are not referenced here, the point is that the interplay of female and male energies attributed to these symbols strikes us in this culture as fluid and interchangeable, not at all bound to the strict binary of feminine/masculine we are so familiar with. Further, the field opened up stands as unlinked or disconnected to any external force or criterion.

This analysis of how the symbols of sun and moon function differently in meaning in other cultures is not to say that one framework is better than other, but rather to prove that the signs/symbols and the meanings associated with them are arbitrary rather than fixed. More importantly for our discussion, since the moon is not really feminine nor the sun masculine, how do we re-configure this binary or others, or can we even do so? Let us return to Proust's

Madeleine. The sign was arbitrary. What mattered was the sign emitted by the object, which was dependent upon the reader of the sign as well as the object itself. How do we free the symbol from generalization? Deleuze, in highlighting the "force common to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, says, "Make something new of repetition itself...make it the supreme object of the will and of freedom" (Deleuze 6). He further advises, "Oppose repetition not only to the generalities of habit but also to the particularities of memory" (7). We may be in the habit of accepting generalities and rely on our memory in reading signs. Yet Deleuze says it is through repetition (vs. habit) that we can achieve difference. How so? We can repeat an object as symbol, but within an alternate arrangement so that it takes on new meanings. Compare this idea to orchestral or musical relation. Surely an instrument like the piano has its own distinct sound as does the moon its distinct physical characteristics. However, varied sounds and effects can be achieved, depending on what other instruments the piano is arranged with or in relation to. Even when played alone, the piano (like the Madeleine) does not evoke anything in isolation or by itself. What is evoked depends upon space, and time, and the context within which we find ourselves. The evocation is relational. Some musicians arrange by intent; that is, they have in mind a sound, style or emotional effect that they seek to achieve in and through the way they arrange their compositions. We, especially as artists or writers, have the power to free symbols such as the moon and sun from the dual dichotomy forced upon them by our culture by handling them in such a way as to generate alternate associations. We do not and should not accept as Universal Essence or Truth the confining and restrictive dichotomy of masculine and feminine.

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