IS THERE A SWAN IN THIS POEM? YEATS AND SYMBOLIST POETICS

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At least since Arthur Symons dedicated *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) to Yeats, calling him "the chief representative" of symbolism in England, critics have been at odds over the depth and breadth of the poet's connection to the European *fin de siècle*. Edmund Wilson (1991) famously included Yeats among the writers who stand at the culmination of French symbolism and mark its transition to the modernist mainstream. Readers such as Bruce Morris (1986) and Jean-Louis Backès (1981) have pointed to Yeats's assimilation of, respectively, symbolist rhetorical and theatrical techniques. The majority of critics, however, tends to resist attributing any of Yeats's poetic innovations to the direct influence of European writers. While acknowledging the undeniable impact of *fin-de-siècle* literary ideas on Yeats's poetry, they reject suggestions that Yeats should be unproblematically grouped among the symbolists. Thus A. J. Bate, for example, refers to Yeats's "affinity" with contemporary French writers, asserting that "he was "influenced" by —though may not have known— works which defined the late nineteenth century Symbolist aesthetic" (1983: 1214–1215). Haskell Block, similarly, insists that Yeats developed his notion of the symbol primarily from his reading of Blake and Swedenborg, and "was not dependent on contemporary French doctrine for his formulations" (1990: 9). Daphne Fullwood points to his "instinctive" understanding of Symbolist practice, but also minimizes the significance of any direct or programmatic borrowing (1970: 356). Denis Donoghue suggests that while Yeats may have "started out as a Symbolist, [he] ended up as something else" (1977: 104). And Gayatri Spivak argues that Yeats may have shared with the symbolists certain thematic tendencies but "did not practice *Symbolisme*" (1972: 101).

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Yeats himself notoriously both affirms and denies the possibility of direct influence. In a letter to Ernest Boyd in February of 1915, he declares that "I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge" of the French symbolists (1955: 592). Elsewhere, he acknowledges that his French was "very bad", and that he had difficulty reading the works of current *avant-garde* writers (1959: 367). But in the important early essay "The Autumn of the Body" (1898), he acknowledges the work of writers such as Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle Adam as part of the vanguard in a "struggle" among philosophically inclined European poets against the "picturesque and declamatory way of writing" that marked the previous generation (1968: 189). And his close relationship with Arthur Symons, who translated many of Mallarmé's poems and had a detailed knowledge of other French poets, was based on a mutual admiration for developments on the continent. As Yeats writes in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), describing the sources of his early work: "I think that [Symons's translations] from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the later poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to *The Shadowy Waters*, while Villiers de l'Isle Adam had shaped whatever in my *Rosa Alchemica* Pater had not shaped" (1927: 214).

Needless to say, the question of just how much Yeats's poetry owes to the influence of symbolism cannot —perhaps should not— be definitively answered. Yeats likely drew his idea of the symbol from *both* the French symbolists (or at the very least from Symons's account of them), *and* from Blake, Swedenborg, and other figures, much as his mythological references incorporate both Greek legends and Irish folk tales. The effort definitively to label his poetry must overlook its fundamentally, and often inconsistently, syncretic character. Similarly, such an effort gives to French symbolism a conceptual unity it did not hold for the writers who have since been associated with it.[1] This is not to argue, though, that *fin-de-siècle* literary ideas were of no real significance to Yeats. Indeed, Yeats returns to these ideas throughout his career, albeit chiefly in the role of retrospective critic rather than advocate.[2] Much of his early work —most notably *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), *The Shadowy Waters* (1906), and the early short fiction— similarly shows the clear impact of symbolist ideas and imagery. Yet the most significant effect of the European *fin de siècle* on Yeats's poetry comes not in the poet's short-lived fascination with the limited set of images and themes we have come to call "symbolist" (the doctrine of correspondences, the valorization of imagination over fact, an interest in mysticism and the occult, and so forth), and with which most evaluations of Yeats's relationship to symbolism have been exclusively preoccupied. Rather, I shall argue in what follows, Yeats takes from the symbolists a poetic "strategy" and not a coherent theory or thematic constellation. This strategy is explicitly post-romantic, and seeks to challenge prevailing romantic conceptions of poetic language and subjectivity from within the romantic paradigm.[3] Despite his shifting theoretical allegiances, and his resistance to adumbrating a single poetic doctrine, Yeats continues to draw upon this poetic strategy, even as he explicitly rejects the thematic and rhetorical trappings of *fin-de-siècle* symbolism itself.

Much like the French symbolists, Yeats worked self-consciously within a romantic conception of lyric poetry. Scholars of romanticism have long noted that the specificity of this lyric derives from its claim to find the spiritual in the material, to assert a continuity between nature and imagination, the objective and the subjective realms. The chief aim of both British and continental romantic writers, M. H. Abrams notes, "was to join together the "subject" and "object" that modern intellection had put asunder, and thus to revivify a dead nature, restore its concreteness, significance, and human values, and re-domiciliate man in a world which had become alien to him" (1970: 218). In his classic article on romantic nature poetry, W. K. Wimsatt suggests, similarly, that "the common feat of the romantic nature poets was to read meanings into the landscape", to draw "the spirit or soul of things [...] out of the very surface of nature itself" (1970: 83). The poem thus stands not so much as an actual record of the poet's observation, nor as a mere solipsistic utterance of purely personal emotion, but as an embodiment of a dialectic between imagination and nature, self and non-self. Romantic poets find themselves in the landscape by investing that landscape with spiritual qualities, and asserting their own unity with the natural world. What Abrams calls the "greater romantic lyric" offers a paradigm for this kind of interaction. Such poems present a dramatized speaker in a specific and localized natural setting (often named in the title), whom the reader overhears pondering a memory or idea inspired by the setting. The poem often begins with a description of the setting, then turns inward to the speaker's meditation, and then returns to the outer scene, which is now described in terms of the insights or emotions the speaker has gained from the meditation (Abrams 1970: 201).

This poetic model was crucial to nineteenth–century poetry, and continues to underlie modern assumptions about imaginative writing. Yet it does not come without its problems. As Paul de Man argues, in his essay "The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image", the interaction between subject and object that shapes romantic nature poetry attests to an estrangement between nature and the imagination, rather than the happy union that the major Romantics seem to depict. Indeed, the dream of such an interaction arises from a feeling of lack, and not, as readers habitually assume, from a new sense of closeness to nature. De Man notes, in this regard, that "The existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence" (1984: 6). Poetry thus becomes a weak substitute for the immediate relation to nature romantic writers desire and feel they have lost, and poetic language stands as an always inadequate means of approximating this relation. For de Man, nineteenth-century poetry presents a procession of failed attempts to bring language closer to the ontological status of nature (1984: 7). The romantic writer imagines that words can rise, in Hölderlin's phrase, "wie Blumen" [like flowers]; but to the extent that words are not things —and only ambiguously "natural"— this ideal will always fall short. The confidence in the unifying power of language —in the ability of metaphor or prosopopoeia to join, if only conceptually, subject and object— thus both defines romanticism and also marks its limits and inherent contradictions.

For symbolist poets such as Yeats, I would argue, the estrangement between subject and object that de Man finds at the heart of the romantic project becomes an all-encompassing concern. The confident assertions of romantic lyric about the priority of nature and the power of language come to seem hollow. At the same time, however, these poets never reject the romantic model they question. Instead, their poetry records a sort of romantic crisis narrative concerning the presuppositions of romanticism itself. Romanticism is shown at once to be the only way and no way at all, both necessary and impossible. This wholly romantic questioning of romanticism accounts for what I would call the "romantic effect" in symbolist writing. This term points to the fact that in the poetry of Yeats and others there operates a simultaneous appearance of the romantic model and an undoing of that model by the very poetic medium that would guarantee its functioning. As a means of demonstrating the significance of this specifically symbolist problematic in Yeats's later poetry, I will compare two poems ostensibly about swans: Mallarmé's famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui" (1885), and Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1916). In each case, the swan in question seems to stand as a symbol for poetry, the poet, or the poet's relationship to his past. And in each case, the poem conforms in large part to the structure of romantic nature poetry. Yet, I will suggest, both poems work to undermine the philosophical assumptions about nature and subjectivity that seem to produce them. Both the natural image and the lyric subject begin to break down under the ambiguities of poetic language.

Mallarmé's poetry consistently makes the tension between lyric consciousness and its objects a central concern. His poems generally follow a model similar to that Abrams describes in his account of the greater romantic lyric, but with a crucial twist. The poems are often "about" an object —a sunset, a swan, the sea, a head of hair— which is described and commented upon by a coherent, if diffuse, subject. But Mallarmé's persistent foregrounding of the material aspects of language (sound, etymology, even the shape of letters) works to break down this interaction. As he writes in a crucial passage from his essay "Crise de vers" [Crisis in Poetry] (1895) —an essay that Yeats knew in Symons's translation— the reciprocal interactions of words in a text pose a challenge to the coherence of both the subject and the object:

> L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élecutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase. (1992: 276–277)

> [The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words, mobilized by the clash of their inequality; they light up with reciprocal reflections like a virtual trail of fires over precious stones, replacing the perceptible breathing in the lyric inspiration of old or the enthusiastic personal control of the sentence.] (my translation)

The "collision" of words with each other, Mallarmé suggests, suspends both the referential and the expressive powers of language. The brilliance of the object becomes obscured by the "traînée de feux sur des pierreries" [trail of fires over precious stones] generated by words; and the poet disappears in the linguistic chains his "souffle lyrique" [lyric inspiration] sets in motion. The "pure" work is thus purged no so much of extraneous images or ideas, but of those referential and expressive aspects of language that draw attention away from the play of words.

While retaining the structure of romantic lyric, Mallarmé's poems proceed by decomposing precisely that structure. Their vaunted "difficulty" arises from what I would describe as a double movement of affirmation and disavowal. The poem "suspends" reference in both senses of the word: at once holding it before us and rendering it inoperative.[4] We can take as a paradigmatic example of this suspension the sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui":

Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui
Va–t–il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre

Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.
Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l'espace infligée à l'oiseau qui le nie,

Mais non l'horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.
Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne. (1992: 68-69)

> [The virgin, the vivacious and the beautiful today/ Will it tear for us with a drunken wing–blow/ This hard forgotten lake that haunts under the frost/ The transparent glacier of flights never flown!/ A swan of another time remembers it is he/ Magnificent but who without hope frees himself/ For not having sung the region in which to live/ When the ennui of sterile winter shone./ All his neck will shake off that white agony/ Inflicted by space on the bird that denies it,/ But not the horror of the ground where the plumage is caught./ Phantom assigned to this place by his pure brilliance/ He immobilizes himself in the cold dream of contempt/ Which clothes amid the useless exile the Swan.] (my translation)

Critical opinion generally holds this text to be a statement about poetry and the place of the solitary poet in the quotidian world. In terms of its explicit imagery, the poem seems to depict an exiled swan trapped in ice. This scene symbolizes at once the poet's exile in the barren winter ("stérile hiver") of modern life and his double existence (as poet and modern man) from which he seeks liberation but to which he is bound by his own brilliance ("pur éclat") and contempt for the world ("songe froid de mépris"). The swan is quite clearly personified. It can hope for freedom (stanza 1), remember its past ("se souvient"), recognize its plight as an exile. We are led, indeed, to understand its condition morally, to see its exile as a punishment for actions untaken ("des vols qui n'ont pas fui", "pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre") or attitudes held ("mépris"). Bernard Weinberg (1966) adds to this scene a semi–dramatized narrator (the "nous" of line 2, grammatically a dative of interest rather than a subject) who observes the swan and reflects upon its plight. If we accept the notion that a dramatized narrator (and not the swan) describes the scene, we can read the poem as a greater romantic lyric, albeit an oblique example, and can treat the winter landscape as a stable natural image perceived by a coherent lyric subject. In support of this essentially romantic reading of the poem, which most commentators more or less accept, many critics point to the long tradition of romantic bird poems (Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" being an obvious example), as well as to the common romantic trope of the animal as a representation for the poet.[5]

All of this is, at least on one level, entirely correct. Mallarmé presents an image which can (and indeed must) be understood within a representational framework. One can construct the poem in terms of a subject/ object interaction, and discern a specifically romantic theme. But a number of details might leave us somewhat wary of stopping with a mimetic or schematically allegorical reading. Take, for example, the first stanza, which would seem to form the basis for the traditional reading of the poem. We can summarize as follows: a swan (depicted synecdochically here by a wing) trapped in a hard forgotten lake ("lac dur oublié"), which represents flights unflown, hopes (this hope could also be the narrator's, if we follow Weinberg) that the new day will allow it to break ("déchirer") the ice and escape its haunted and forgotten state. Although this stanza would seem to establish the scene as a winter landscape (references to a frozen lake, frost, a glacier, as well as the predominance of "icy" sounds such as "i" and "v"), the third stanza says that the swan (or, metonymically, his "plumage") is in fact trapped in soil ("sol"). Ice and soil are hardly to be equated, at least if we are concerned with a mimetic reading, but the text refuses to distinguish between them. One might respond that "sol" is a metaphor for ice, that in context it is merely a more general term for "ground". But such a metaphor would be difficult to assert, since the poem describes the swan as trapped in a frozen lake, not in frozen ground. And if, moreover, we can read "sol" as a figure, what would prevent us from reading the entire winter landscape as itself merely allegorical rather than mimetic? The landscape is by no means specifically designated, and is in great part indicated by words ("stérile", "blanche", "froid") which need not refer only to a winter scene, or indeed to any natural scene.

Another word that interferes with the construction of a stable representation is "déchirer" [to tear]. In this context, it refers to the breaking of the ice, but generally it describes the tearing of paper or fabric. This sense of tearing would seem to be supported by the predominance of sibilants in the phonetic structure of the poem —always of significance for Mallarmé— which conspicuously "sound" like tearing rather than shattering. Here again, one might respond that Mallarmé uses the word figuratively and "really means" breaking, but allusions to paper or cloth in Mallarmé's later poems are never incidental, and given the whiteness of the poem's ostensibly natural landscape, we might just as well claim that "ice" really means "paper" or "textile", or any of the other associated images (veils, lace, or images associated with whiteness, such as foam) that inhabit Mallarmé's poems and necessarily bear upon the reading of each of them.[6]

If, then, we cannot establish a stable mimetic landscape, what of the swan? Its presence in the first stanza would seem to be deducible by its body parts (its wing, its neck, its "plumage") and its association with song ("chanté") and flight ("vols"). These synecdochal and metonymic connections are confirmed by the poem's explicit naming of the "cygne" [swan] in stanzas 2 and 4, and by the word "oiseau" [bird] in stanza 3. In terms of the poem's syntax, however, even these seemingly clear references become destabilized. The grammatical subject of the first stanza, for example, is not a bird, but "aujourd'hui": "Le [...] aujourd'hui [...] Va [...] déchirer [...] Ce lac dur" [the [...] today [...] will [...] tear [...] this hard lake] (my translation). This fact could, of course, be accounted for in terms of a kind of symbolist indirection, but it nevertheless destabilizes the image of the swan as the literal "protagonist" of the poem or as the object of a viewer's perception. Indeed, the homonymy between "cygne" and "signe" (linguistic sign as well as sign of the Zodiac —compare "le Cygne" in the final line) alludes to the swan's fundamental (and final) status in the poem as a "Fantôme". There is, in this respect, nothing to prevent us from seeing the entire poem as being not about a natural swan, but about the word "aujourd'hui", which, like the swan, is notably "winged" by the apostrophe which divides it. In support of such a non–mimetic reading we could also point to the predominance of the letters "i" and "v" in the poem as material traces of a neck and wings; or to the vocabulary of the poem, in which these paired letters are "trapped" within many words (VIerge, VIvace, Va–t–Il, IVre, gIVre, souVIent, délIVre, VIvre, hIVer), much as the swan seems to be trapped in ice. On this level, the poem would be about the workings of language, about release of language from its bondage to reference, and not about a swan or the status of the modern poet.[7]

My point here is not to construct an alternative reading to that available on the thematic level of the poem, only to suggest that such a reading is conceivable. Mallarmé's poem by no means conclusively forecloses the dialectic of subject and object, and the romantic model of the natural image that underlies it. Yet by allowing both a mimetic and a non-mimetic reading, it foregrounds the conflicting claims and limitations of poetic language. The two readings, that is, are mutually exclusive. In order to sustain the thematic reading, we must foreclose the linguistic reading, which directs our attention from what language represents to its sounds and to the distribution of letters on the page: the swan in this reading is nothing but ink and paper. If we settle on the natural image of a swan trapped in ice we have to overlook several manifest inconsistencies in the language of the poem; and if we try to read the poem as non-representational, we nevertheless come up against the undeniable thematic presence of a swan and a winter landscape. The decomposition performed by the poem thus shifts attention from the lyric subject, who, as Mallarmé suggests in "Crise de vers", should "cede the initiative to words", and from the object of contemplation, which is shown to be ephemeral, to the work of language. Rather than providing a reliable medium of representation or a means of uniting subject and object, language shows itself, in the course of the poem, to be independent of such intentions, and hence to be a problematic means of ensuring the relation of subject and object, imagination and nature.

It would be misleading to suggest that Yeats's poems are comparable on this level to the poem we have just examined. Indeed, Yeats is far more invested in the romantic tradition than Mallarmé is. Like romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, Yeats often names his poems after specific places and times (e.g. "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", or "At Algeciras —A Meditation on Death"), and regularly follows the chief conventions of the greater romantic lyric.[8] Many poems seem unambiguously autobiographical, speaking of scenes and events that Yeats knew or lived through. Nevertheless, I would argue that Yeats's writing is at least as thoroughgoing in its decomposition of romantic assumptions as that of Mallarmé. For alongside their romantic structure, Yeats's poems are also inevitably invested in a complex network of what Yeats tellingly calls "symbols". According to

Yeats, these symbols come from a variety of poetic, occult, and philosophical sources, and in many cases combine associations from several sources at once.[9] They form a sort of parallel realm independent of the quotidian world, a realm open to the sensitive poet in moments of contemplation. As Yeats writes in his important essay, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900):

> It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life. (1968: 87)

This passage bears a remarkable similarity to Mallarmé's account of the interaction of words within a poem. Here, however, it is a "glimmer" passing from symbol to symbol —rather than the reciprocal reflections of words— that replaces both the "accidental circumstances of life" and the subjectivity of the poet with the "half-light" of essences and ideas. While symbols may first arise for a poet as a result of some observation, they soon crystallize into entities that bear no necessary relation to their origin in the poet's life or the natural world from which they are drawn. "It may be", Yeats writes of the cave imagery in Shelley's poetry, "that his subconscious life seized upon some passing scene, and moulded it into an ancient symbol without help from anything but that great Memory" (1968: 81). As in Mallarmé's account of pure poetry, Yeats's account of symbolism suggests that both representation and expression must be subordinated to the internal logic of poetry. What poetic language achieves for Mallarmé, the system of poetic symbolism (as opposed to the individual symbol) achieves for Yeats.

As a consequence of Yeats's evocation of symbols, images in his poetry that initially come across as mere descriptions of nature regularly reveal themselves to be allegorical figures with no necessary relation to any observed or experienced moment or to the poet's own emotions. In "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), Yeats argues that modern poetry should cast out "descriptions of nature for the sake of nature" and reject any poetics that places expression or representation over "the hidden laws" and internal logic of symbolism: "we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window" (1968: 163). In the early poem "He hears the Cry of the Sedge" (1898), for example, Yeats evokes a natural scene, described by a first-person poetic subject, that in fact gains all of its significance from conventional rather than personal or representational criteria:

I wander by the edge
Of this desolate lake
Where wind cries in the sedge:
Until the axle break
That keeps the stars in their round,
And hands hurl in the deep
The banners of East and West,
And the girdle of light is unbound,
Your breast will not lie by the breast
Of your beloved in sleep. (1987: 165)

This poem conforms in its basic structure to the romantic model of an interaction between subject and object. The speaker walks by a lake and listens to nature (the wind in the sedge). Nature is personified (it cries) and spiritualized (it utters a truth unknown by the speaker). Despite this structure, Yeats glosses the poem's imagery in terms drawn from Biblical references and Irish mythology. The "axle", Yeats tells us in a note, refers to the biblical Tree of Life; and the "I" of the poem is in fact the Celtic figure Aedh rather than Yeats himself (1987: 811–812). The poem also incorporates all of the four elements —earth (the sedge), air (the wind), fire (the stars), and water (the lake)— upon which, Richard Ellmann notes, Yeats regularly drew in his compositional practice (1954: 29–38). Given these emblematic correspondences, knowledge of any autobiographical or representational context for the poem —why Yeats was by the lake, what lake he had in mind— adds nothing to our understanding of its imagery, and the imagery does not lead back to the autobiographical context.

It is, of course, received wisdom among Yeats's readers that the poet explicitly turned from the emblematic imagery of such early works to a more realistic and conventionally romantic poetic in the twentieth century. As Ellmann writes, casting Yeats's development in terms that recall Plato's allegory of the cave: "The poet emerges from his candle-lit room into the open air, and seems almost ready to stretch and rub his eyes in the light" (1954: 103). While it is doubtless true that Yeats rejects the symbolist imagery of his early verse, he continues to share with writers such as Mallarmé a crucial skepticism regarding the underpinnings of romantic poetics. This skepticism comes across, I shall suggest, in a similar process of decomposition to that we noted in "Le vierge, le vivace". But whereas the process of decomposition in Mallarmé's poetry turns upon a suspension of reference and a disjunction between two linguistic registers (the representational and the phonetic or material), the process of decomposition in Yeats's mature poetry turns upon a subtle tension between observational fidelity to nature and the allegorical or traditional associations of a natural image.[10] In many cases, I will argue, this tension takes the form of a sharp distinction between a lyric subject that "thinks" it is romantic, and a poetic structure and imagery that seems to "think" something different. In the poem that will serve as my example here, "The Wild Swans at Coole", the lyric subject makes a claim to unity with the natural image that is belied both by the poem's diction and by associations with Yeats's emblematic system.

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans.
>
> The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
> Since I first made my count;
> I saw, before I had well finished,
> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamourous wings.
>
> I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
> And now my heart is sore.
> All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
> The first time on this shore,
> The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
> Trod with a lighter tread.
>
> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;

> Their hearts have not grown old;
> Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
> Attend upon them still.
>
> But now they drift on the still water,
> Mysterious, beautiful;
> Among what rushes will they build,
> By what lake's edge or pool
> Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
> To find that they have flown away. (1987: 322–323)

The argument of this poem, and its relation to the greater romantic lyric, is relatively easy to discern. The poet walks in an autumn landscape observing a group of swans he had counted nineteen years before. The swans, once a figure for desire, now allow the reflecting poet to understand the loss of a desire (ostensibly for Maud Gonne) that defined his youth: "*Their* hearts have not grown old;/ Passion or conquest, wander where they will,/ Attend upon *them* still" (emphasis mine). The implication of these lines is that, while the swans retain their youth and desire ("Unwearied still, lover by lover"), the poet has lost his; and whereas once the poet saw himself in the swans, now he stand apart from them but still relates them to his own condition. We could support such a reading with reference to a number of imagistic levels. For example, the entire autumnal context of the poem ("The trees are in their autumn beauty", "The nineteenth autumn has come upon me/ Since I first made my count") alludes to the common conceit comparing a life to the passage of the seasons: autumn would indicate the approach of winter and, metaphorically, of old age. The same conceit extends to the "October twilight", which compares a life to a day. In both instances, the natural imagery would metaphorically embody the poet's feeling of age and dejection.

We could also point to the many images of and figures for reflection in the poem. We find a literal reflection, for example, in the first stanza: "the water/ Mirrors a still sky". And we might read the many implicit and explicit doubles in the text (the swans paddling "lover by lover", the distinction between the poet now and the poet then, or even the past doubling of the poet and the swans implicit in the poet's comparison) as figures for reflection.[11] This notion of reflection was even more emphatic in the original publication of the poem, in which the final stanza of the definitive version was placed between stanzas 2 and 3. With this ordering, the central speculation about the future (stanza 5) was in the center of the poem, framed by the two reflections on the relation between past and present (stanzas 2 and 3), and framed again by two more or less objective descriptions of the landscape and the swans (stanzas 1 and 4), which, in their "symbolic" resonances (autumn, twilight, pairs of swans) made the distinction between past and present, poet and swans, even more explicit. This "reflective" stanza structure, along with the literal and figurative reflections within the poem would seem to support the basic claim that the poem belongs within the romantic tradition. Despite the mood of dejection which pervades the poem, its imagery and its very structure could be said to enact a joining of the natural image with lyric consciousness by means of poetic language. Subject and object, in other words, would come together according to a model of reflection, of finding analogies for one's own dilemma or state of mind within the natural world. The subtle personification in stanza 4 of the swans as "lovers" who experience "passion", and of the streams as "companionable", would complete this chiastic relationship between poet and nature.

Some aspects of the poem and of its textual history, however, should give us pause before we unequivocally accept such a reading. Let me focus on the poetic landscape itself. Although the poet presents this landscape in apparently meticulous detail (noting the season, month, time of day, precise number of swans, geographical location), it comes across as being, in de Man's words, "oddly void of substance and texture" (1984: 204). The emphasis is primarily on quantifiable elements, and most of the adjectives are flat ("dry", "cold", "still") or abstract ("beautiful", "brilliant", "mysterious"). Moreover, the drafts of the poem show Yeats actually removing pertinent descriptions, and minimizing the speaker's presence as an observer, from later versions. Early drafts describe the lake as "narrow and bright", the swans as "white", the stones as "gray", and the path as "hard" as well as "dry". Some details are altered over time. The lake, for instance, is initially described as "low" rather than "brimming"; the number of swans changes twice; and one version suggests only nine autumns have passed.[12]

It is clear, to this extent, that observational fidelity cannot entirely account for Yeats's presentation of the landscape in this poem. The landscape does, however, conform with remarkable precision to an emblematic system of correspondences that Yeats developed out of his editing of Blake in the early 1890s, and supplemented with his readings in Theosophy as well as with traditional associations. This system, to which Yeats remained faithful throughout his career, and which informs the composition of many of his poems, brings together the seasons, times of day, ages, elements, and the four compass directions in a series of equivalencies. Ellmann schematizes the system as such (1954: 26):

Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Morning	Noon	Evening	Night
Youth	Adolescence	Manhood	Decay
Fire	Air	Water	Earth
East	South	West	North

For our purposes, two series are especially pertinent: that joining Autumn to Evening to Manhood to Water to the West; and that joining Summer to Noon to Adolescence to Air to the South. In the first series, we have almost every element present in the landscape that begins the poem; every detail, in fact, corresponds in some way. It is an autumn evening (the sun going down in the west), there is a body of water, and the poet clearly represents age and manhood. The same kind of relation holds between the depiction of the swans and (at different points) both series. In the narrative present, the swans are depicted floating on the water (thus lining up with the other elements of the scene), while in the narrative past they are flying. From this we can deduce their relation to adolescence, noon and summer (pointing to the poet's youth). There are no images in the poem that evoke the first series; and the majority of the images that directly evoke the final series —the woodland path and the shore— allude to the poet's major metaphor for the passage of time: "All's changed since I [...]/ Trod with a lighter step". Every detail of the poem can be read in this way as an aspect of Yeats's emblematic system, and to this extent any actual observation of nature —either past or present— is wholly beside the point. Despite the poet's claim that "All's changed", this is mainly true, at least in the text of the poem, in terms of a shift in emblematic correspondences, and not of the reflective model the poem seems to privilege. As such, in reading the poem we might be led, like the narrator of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" (1932) to say of the flying swans: "Another emblem there!" (1987: 490).

What can we conclude from this model of emblematic correspondences, and how does it relate to the model of reflective consciousness depicted and embodied in the poem (particularly in its original order)? Clearly, we are faced with a decision between competing and perhaps irreconcilable claims: on the one hand a model of poetry as observation and reflection, and on the other hand a model which takes its starting point in a conventional system derived from Yeats's reading. Both models are legible in the poem, and both offer equally persuasive interpretations, although they can co–exist only uneasily, if at all. The two models tellingly come together in a crucial image from the first stanza: "the water/ Mirrors a still sky". As I suggested above, this image conforms to the romantic practice of reading emotions into nature. The water reflects the speaker by embodying his reflective mood. But in the context of Yeats's system of the elements, the image entirely excludes the speaker, and evokes what Yeats describe in his essay on Shelley as the "glimmer from symbol to symbol". In this reading, the water would reflect another element (the air) and not the narrator's state of consciousness. Whereas a mimetic reading of the image must insist that any symbolic resonances are secondary or supplementary to the observation, the symbolic reading treats the representation of nature as a mere pretext, and to a great extent can ignore it entirely. The same thing is true of the swans, which can be read as either actual birds or emblems for the air, or for that matter can be assimilated to the many literary (Leda, the story of Baile and Aillinn) and philosophical (Plato's image of the departing soul in the *Phaedo*) associations that swans regularly hold for Yeats.[13]

As with Mallarmé's swan, then, so here with Yeats's own: the natural image and a romantic model of the dialectic between subject and object are presented in a way that undoes their representational stability, but refuses to reject it entirely. For Yeats, as I have suggested, this undoing takes the form of a tension between the lyric subject and poetic form. In this respect, we could read Yeats's reordering of the stanzas in a manner that de-emphasizes the poem's reflectiveness as a gesture toward the emblem; but we could also see it, insofar as it gives the poem a more "realistic" time scheme (moving, roughly, from present to past to present and future), as a gesture toward the romantic model. What I would want to stress here, as with Mallarmé, is the fact that such models coexist, and that a thorough reading of the poem has to account not simply for the presence of such elements, but for their mutual undoing. In this instance, the undoing of a reflective model by an emblematic model emphasizes the lyric subject's false sense of identification with nature, and not, as in the conventional take on the poem, his mature resignation: what he takes for a swan, "we" can more plausibly read as an emblem.

I have been arguing that the poetry of Mallarmé and Yeats arises out of a conflicted relationship with the romantic tradition. Both poets produce their mature work within a specifically romantic problematic, but maintain an ambiguous stance toward that tradition. Although both poets make at least a pretense toward basing their imagery on natural objects, and toward engaging this object by means of a coherent lyric subjectivity, there coexists with this pretense a resolve to undo the poem's claim to represent nature, as well as the subject's claims of unity with the natural world. For Mallarmé, this undoing works through the irreducible semantic and material richness of his images. The object "seems" to be present, but it is always being decomposed. For Yeats, by contrast, the undoing of the natural image proceeds with reference to the emblematic systems which guide his imagery. Whereas his lyric persona claims a romantic union with the natural world, the natural images this persona describes evoke a system of elements, the significance of which he seems unaware. In both cases, then, the force of the poem arises out of a tension, an undecidable vacillation between two approaches to poetry, to neither of which Mallarmé or Yeats is willing to commit.

Symbolism offered Yeats no easy solution to this dilemma. His eventual dissatisfaction with *fin-de-siècle* literary modes and his subsequent turn away from European movements to a more thoroughgoing concern with local people and places may well arise from this fact. But this turn, as I have argued, does not mark a turn away from the problem itself, only a continued effort to work through it in a different way. No thorough account of Yeats's poetry can wholly ignore the post-romantic legacy which constitutes it. Coole Park may be many miles from the Left Bank, but it does not lie beyond the shadow cast by symbolism.

NOTES

[1] As René Wellek points out (1969-1970), the notion of a symbolist movement is largely a retrospective creation of literary historians (beginning, perhaps, with Symons). None of the major figures usually grouped among the symbolists either accepted or acknowledged the title.

[2] James Longenbach suggests that "dissatisfaction with a symbolist aesthetic runs like a refrain through Yeats's work in the first decade of the twentieth century" (1990: 95). In a famous passage from his autobiographical account of the "Tragic Generation", Yeats goes so far as to depict himself as a survivor of the late nineteenth century, and rues the influence of *fin-de-siècle* writers (here Walter Pater) on his generation: "Three or four years ago I re-read *Marius the Epicurean,* expecting to find I cared for it no longer, but it still seemed to me, as I think it seemed to all of us, the only great prose in modern English, and yet I began to wonder if it, or the attitude of mind of which it was the noblest expression, had

not caused the disaster of my friends. It taught us to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm" (1927: 372-373).

[3] Morris suggests that the similarities between Yeats and French poets such as Mallarmé are almost entirely attributable to their status as post-romantic, rather than strictly symbolyst, poets (1986: 111).

[4] According to Jackson, this resistance to the referential dimension of language in both Mallarmé and Yeats is grounded in a rejection of positivist assertions about the reality of things in the world. For both poets, Jackson notes, the "creative or liberative power of poetic language is directly grounded in a sense of non-referentiality" (1979: 520).

[5] For some versions of this basic account, see, in addition to Weinberg, the readings by Chisholm (1962), Cohn (1980: 124–132), Lawler (1958), and Richard (1961: 251–256).

[6] Jean–Pierre Richard's monumental study of Mallarmé's imagery, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (1961), remains the best compendium of these associative chains. Jacques Derrida, though, offers a persuasive critique of Richard's project by demonstrating the manner in which Mallarmé's central images and symbols represent at once all their various meanings, plus the very grounds of that representation as a praxis of spacing, blankness, material difference. The image, in other words, points not simply to an object, and to other objects associated with it, but also (and crucially) to the act of writing. A fan, for instance, is not only a fan, but also a book, a fold, a wing, etc., *and* the very model of reflexivity and differentiation by which such a series could be constituted (1981: 251–254). To assert that we see nothing but a fan is to say both too much and too little. In "Le vierge, le vivace" the word "déchirer", as we have noted, which includes an association with paper and cloth, would open the text up to the many images of veils, silks, and lace that arise in Mallarmé's poems. But in addition to both of these thematic associative chains, to the semantic sense of the images, we must add the non-sense of the "tear", the meaningless white space between letters that allows us to distinguish a theme to begin with. The same might be said about the wing (as fold, fan, hymen, book, but also the material possibility of reflection) or the plumage (pen, phallus, but also the material inscription as the condition for phenomenality) in the poem. Mallarmé's thematic chains, in other words, insofar as they thematize their own possibility, are irreducible to any one meaning, or even to any sum of meanings.

[7] Compare, in this regard, Spivak's reading of the poem (1972: 104). It is worth noting, moreover, that Mallarmé would make the placement of words and letters a crucial issue in "Un coup de d_s" (1895).

[8] On Yeats and the greater romantic lyric, see Bornstein (1986: 27–93). Bornstein nicely labels Yeats's approach to this kind of poem as "last romanticism".

[9] On the backgrounds of Yeats's symbolism, and his knowledge of occult and philosophical sources, see Seiden (1962) and Wilson (1958).

[10] I draw my basic account of this tension between natural and allegorical images from de Man's "Image and Emblem in Yeats", reprinted in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984).

[11] On the significance of reflection and doubling in the poem, see Eaves (1992).

[12] For a discussion of Yeats's variants, see Bradford (1965: 43–63).

[13] On Yeats's swans, see Billigheimer (1986), Levine (1981), Melchiori (1960: 99-132), and Stauffer (1949: 48–79). See, also, Smith's astute reading of another of Yeats's famous swan poems, "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" (1994: 228–231), which finds in this poem many of the same tensions between world and text that I note in "Wild Swans at Coole".

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