

Important Nonsense: Yeats and Symbolism

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In 1930 W. B. Yeats dictated a letter to George Moore, advising him to eat salt: salt was “the symbol of eternity” and its consumption vouchsafed one’s longevity.¹ Yeats was delirious from fever when he offered Moore his medical opinion, yet the advice reveals some of the poet’s most strongly held convictions: first, that reality—even in salt form—is intrinsically symbolic; second, that symbols participate in what they depict (salt is a morsel as much as it is a sign of eternity); third, that symbols have practical or therapeutic results (despite what the medics might say, salt is good for you). Indeed, the world-altering effects of the symbol allowed art to operate as a kind of magic. Yeats’s views on symbolism may seem idiosyncratic, but they depend on a number of philosophical and theological traditions in which he was deeply immersed. The aim of this essay is to examine these traditions in order to determine why the symbol became such a “troubled mirror” in Yeats’s work.² More broadly, I hope to recover some of the intellectual excitement of symbolism both as a practice and as a theory and to show how this excitement is lost when the study of literary form is removed from a broader philosophical history—the metaphysical character of which many scholars might feel they have outgrown.

The symbol, as we shall see, is a metaphysically overburdened concept—indeed, Heidegger maintained that it carries the whole of western metaphysics on its back.³ This partly explains why traditional lore about symbolism can be something of an embarrassment for “postmetaphysical” folk or for those who aspire to this disenchanted condition.⁴ So while René Wellek could produce a confident set of reflections on symbolism for *New Literary History* in 1970—and theories of the symbol were central to literary criticism for figures like Northrop Frye—this is no longer where the critical conversation predominantly resides.⁵ Symbolism, it might seem, is another species of white mythology: a mystified account of signs derived from a metaphysical account of being that should be left quietly to die.⁶ The option of a quiet death was never possible when Derrida was around: after all, he was fascinated by the idea of metaphor (of which symbol is a subset), but his conclusion that it was an essentially “metaphysical concept” could read like an indictment in the face of his broader, albeit ambiguous, critique of metaphysics.⁷ For born-again

positivists, all metaphysics is nonsense, but if so, it is an important kind of nonsense that has shaped intellectual life for millennia.⁸ We may no longer inhabit the problem of the symbol, because we no longer entertain the metaphysical picture from which it derives; but this is a highly questionable form of enlightenment if it neutralises our ability to grasp basic literary concepts.

We will certainly find it difficult to grasp Yeats, an ambassador of important nonsense if there ever was one. As his ruminations on salt suggest, Yeats had a metaphysically extravagant conception of symbolism. He was drawn to an occult wisdom which perceived “all things . . . to be but symbol,” tokens of something more numinous than themselves.⁹ The universe, he announced, is a symbol of “infinite thought which is in turn symbolic of the universal mood,” which is symbolic again of that traditional symbol “God.”¹⁰ At other points, his sense of symbolism was more circumscribed: it was a particular and highly charged set of terms that gave poetry its distinctive power. Yeats liked to distinguish between a symbolism of ideas and a more suggestive symbolism of emotions; yet his entire symbolic practice rested on an ornate theoretical edifice. His theories owed much to continental symbolistes—as Edmund Wilson argued back in 1931—and to Symons’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899).¹¹ But Yeats could appropriately serve as the dedicatee of Symons’s famous book, because he had already established his own credentials on the topic in essays such as “The Necessity of Symbolism” and “The Symbolism of Painting.” Later pieces such as the “The Symbolism of Poetry”—published in the The Dome in 1900—enhanced his status as the “chief representative” of an Irish symbolist school.¹²

In this particular school words repeatedly reflect on their own symbolic status. Consider poems such as “Symbols” or “Those Images”: here language queries its own role and worries about its own powers. As a speaker puts it in “Solomon and the Witch,” “Maybe an image is too strong / Or maybe it is not enough.”¹³ Moreover, as we shall see, these concerns about the fitness of images depend on a philosophically committed picture of what symbols or images should achieve (Yeats sometimes distinguished between symbols and images, suggesting the former were more definite than the latter, but this distinction was never very firm).¹⁴ The poet’s obsession with symbolism was duly noted by his friends. Woolf affectionately remembered him at dinner, expounding on the difficulties of symbolism in the modern world (“Poets can only write when they have symbols. And steam rollers are not covered in symbolism—perhaps they may be after 30 generations”).¹⁵ Pound recalled him in

The Cantos walking around Paris in a Platonic haze, pausing to “admire the symbol with Notre Dame standing within it.”¹⁶ Ideal forms were more real for Yeats than the concrete world-stuff used to betoken them (or so Pound suggested).¹⁷

So Yeats’s attraction to symbolism has hardly gone unnoticed; indeed it was an object of busy, critical discussion throughout his own lifetime. However, the contours of the Yeatsian symbol have often been traced with little reference to the poet’s broader philosophical interests—interests that were idiosyncratically pursued, but firmly held.¹⁸ All artists required a philosophy, Yeats maintained, while going on to proclaim that symbolism had made the arts philosophical.¹⁹ Contemporaries complained that in Yeats’s case the philosopher had “marred” the poet and pointed to his “arid” and “abstract symbolism” to vindicate the claim.²⁰ Others proclaimed that his addiction to symbolism rendered his work unintelligible to the masses (a criticism that Yeats in his more mandarin moments was always liable to take as a compliment).²¹ Indeed, according to critics like Michael North, bafflement was precisely the point: in North’s eyes, Yeats’s symbolism records a deliberate pursuit of obscurity.²²

Not all of this obscurity can be explained away, and few readers, I imagine, would wish to dispel all of Yeats’s magic mist, but his symbolic practice can be made to seem a little less capricious and cynical when it is placed within a broader philosophical context. In what follows I want to trace Yeats’s use of symbolism to two philosophical traditions: 1) a metaphysical idealism (or Platonism) in which true being derives from some transcendental origin exceeding time and space; and 2) a metaphysics of subjectivism in which the human subject presents herself as the source and ground of all meaning and value in the world. Both of these traditions can be aligned in a form of subjective idealism, but they can also chafe against each other. The conflict between these two outlooks gives the symbol much of its vitality in Yeats’s work.

No theorisation, perhaps, can do justice to the richness of Yeats’s symbolic practice. To attempt to abstract a philosophy from the practice is already to violate one of the fundamental properties of the symbol itself—its supposedly unparaphrasable qualities—although to advance this theory of violation is already to beg the question about symbolism. However, the self-consciousness of the symbol in Yeats suggests that it is a mistake to draw a strong distinction between symbolic theory and practice. A certain history of theorising is often internal to the meaning of

Yeats's symbols, while his highly self-reflexive word-forms **often seem to** aspire to the condition of a theory. They may never reach this position of self-transparency or disclosiveness—again it is fortunate that they don't—but Yeats's exercises in meta-symbolism make a complex contribution to long habits of thinking about the metaphysical vocation of words: their vulnerable efforts to access, as Rorty put it, "Reality with a capital R."²³

Rorty, of course, wanted us to relinquish the search for a super reality and the metaphysical theories of language it serviced. "There is nothing outside language to which language attempts to become adequate," he maintained, even if remarks of this kind led some philosophers to doubt his commitment to reality with a small "r."²⁴ But by relinquishing metaphysical ideas of correspondence and reference, Rorty hoped to lead us away from the neverland of the really Real towards the new Jerusalem of a "postmetaphysical culture."²⁵ Poetry in this cheerfully disillusioned world was to be the paradigm for the way we should relate to language and the way language should relate to the world. An obvious problem with this plan is that much of what we have taken for poetry up till now has been heavily invested in "Reality with a capital R" (this is clearly true of Yeats). Meanwhile, poets who resist this metaphysical picture often remain beholden to it (this is also true of Yeats). According to Rorty, "we must avoid Platonism and metaphysics," but this would lead us to abandon vast kingdoms of poetry and their critical hinterland.²⁶

As Angela Leighton points out, the very idea of form as a critical concept owes something to Plato, and a formalism that proceeds without any awareness of his theory of "essential Forms" will have little understanding of its own origins or its own metaphysical presuppositions.²⁷ Moreover, such criticism will always struggle to make sense of symbolism as a historical practice, not least because the practice, as I aim to show, is often a fraught enactment of various metaphysical theories, while never being simply reducible to them. The theories may be false, but they still produce some of the meaning-conditions for our poetry (at least if this "meaning" has any relation to what poems may have meant for the communities that produced them). Most formalisms, as Marjorie Levinson maintains, will usually entail a type of historicism, but this historicism should be generously cast.²⁸ As the story of the symbol shows, the history of literary form needs to be conceived against a wider history of metaphysics, a history that has all too easily reduced to caricature by positivists, deconstructionists, and badge-wearing "antimetaphysicians."²⁹

Metaphysics may be an error; however, my working assumption here is that the critic's primary concern lies not with truth, but with meaning.³⁰

I. The Ghostly Paradigm

The distinction between the sensuous and the nonsensuous, Heidegger maintained, "is the fundamental configuration of what has long since been called metaphysics."³¹ He insisted, moreover, that the distinction was always already presupposed by the use of symbolism. Conventional attitudinising about the symbol from Goethe to Coleridge to the later Romantics would seem to bear this out.³² For Carlyle, it was the "visible record of invisible things."³³ According to Arthur Symons, the symbol is the medium "through which the soul of things can be made visible."³⁴ For Yeats, in turn, it was a way of expressing "some invisible essence," a means of giving "body to something that moves beyond the senses," and so forth.³⁵ The Platonic resonance of this metaphysical project is unsurprising; indeed, in every symbol Heidegger would find Plato's thumbprint. Certainly, artists and critics had adopted a very Platonic idiom to account for the function of symbols. Their role, for instance, in Jean Moréas's famous manifesto was "to clothe the Idea in a form perceptible to the senses."³⁶

Paul de Man liked to insist that Yeats was "not a Platonist," but this was an all too categorical conclusion about a volatile thinker.³⁷ If Yeats sometimes chose to "cry in Plato's teeth," his thinking about symbolism nonetheless owed an extraordinary amount to the philosopher's influence.³⁸ The poet liked to proclaim that he was reading Plato on a daily basis in later life, but until this point his grasp of Platonism was heavily mediated through others—through a Christianised form of neo-Platonism, through writers such as Shelley (whom Yeats proclaimed a great Platonist)³⁹ and William Blake, a figure who invested heavily in ideal forms ("The Oak is cut down by the Ax, the Lamb falls by the Knife / But their Forms Eternal Exist, For-ever. Amen. Halle[l]ujah").⁴⁰ Yeats's interest in Platonism was also stoked by a passion for Plotinus, although until Stephen MacKenna's translations of the *Enneads* began to appear in the 1920s, the poet's understanding of this strand of neo-Platonism was a highly indirect one: fed by Blake, Swedenborg, Blavatsky and Maeterlinck (for whom Plotinus was the most "divine" of all philosophers).⁴¹

To understand the fate of the symbol in Yeats some basic features of his neo-Platonism need to be re-constructed here. Let us begin by emphasising the core principle of Plato's system: this is the notion of the Good—or what Plotinus usually calls the One or what Rorty calls “Reality with a capital R.”⁴² The Good is the origin and ground of all reality and it is the end-point to which all things seek to return. It gives everything its specific determination, but it is not subject to the determining influence of any other thing. If it were so influenced, it would be sadly contingent and not self-sufficient. For this reason, Plotinus deems the Good to be “formless,” for a form implies a set of borders or limits and there are no boundaries to the Good. It exists outside time and space and is both everywhere and nowhere (this is why the Good is so resistant to conceptualisation and makes its pursuit through symbols both necessary and foredoomed).⁴³ The Good resembles nothing because it lacks outer limits and a relative identity, but it is the only thing that truly is. Or as Yeats would put it in the title he used for both a tale and a play: “Where there is Nothing, there is God.”⁴⁴ This nothing is the ambiguous telos of “Meru”: here knowledge leads to “the desolation of reality,” a position that hovers between a despairing nihilism and a confident investment in absolute being. We are told too in “Meru” that civilisation is constituted by “manifold illusion”—a largely tautological construction, since in the neo-Platonic universe that Yeats often inhabits, the idea of a manifold is one of the biggest illusions of all, for it implies that the universe is plural when it is irreducibly one.⁴⁵ The Good is a perfect unity that exceeds all difference.

Yeats's art owes an extraordinary amount to this Platonic world-picture. For Yeats too the material world was a pale imitation of an ideal order; drawing on Blake, he declared it to be but “a faint shadow” of a more real and eternal world.⁴⁶ And he remained unhappy with those who assumed “that the external and material are the only fixed things, the only standards of reality.”⁴⁷ This discontent accounts for the poet's life-long opposition to empiricism, an outlook which makes experience (usually of a sensory kind) the necessary and sufficient test of knowledge. According to Yeats, humanity lost its bearings when it declared: “These things that I touch and see and hear are alone real.”⁴⁸ He tended to identify empiricism with materialism and judged both to be deeply reductionist: these sciences “took away the world and gave us its excrement instead.”⁴⁹ So scientists made shit of reality when they made matter the bedrock of being. After all, matter is a form of non-being in the Platonic tradition—an expression of our distance from the good. For Plotinus, it is an

“Essential Evil, void of all share in Good.”⁵⁰ Thus, the soul becomes ugly “by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter.”⁵¹ Yeats often conceived of “the soul betrayed into the flesh” as a type of degradation.⁵² It was partly for that reason that he celebrated “The Autumn of the Body” and treated death as a type of liberation.⁵³

Yeats’s death-fix, moreover, reflects his Platonic difficulties with time. For Plato, only the Good truly is, being utterly immutable and self-identical. Human beings, however, can never simply be, but are always bobbing about on time’s filthy tide: we move from a past that no longer exists towards a future that does not yet exist and thus live in a state of estrangement from pure being. This condition leaves Yeats yearning for a time in which “time and times are done.”⁵⁴ Hence the suicidal and homicidal tendencies of so much of Yeats’s early work. Consider, for instance, his poem: “He mourns for the Change that has come upon Him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World.”⁵⁵ Or note the equally cheery ditty: “He wishes his Beloved were Dead,” which also appears in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).⁵⁶ As Socrates maintained, those who practice philosophy correctly will cultivate death, and when it comes to death, the young Yeats is nothing if not philosophical.⁵⁷ But be consoled: the world of time and space are to a large degree forms of non-being, so the self-destruction of the poet or his murderous thoughts about his beloved can be viewed as negation of nothingness and, thus, a commitment to pure being. The person who has found his home in the absolute is, as Plotinus suggests, “no longer himself, nor does he belong to himself, but he is one with the One.”⁵⁸ So Yeats’s Fergus seems to welcome the fact that he is “grown nothing, knowing all,” while another of his speakers hopes to “wither into the truth” and thus merge with the absolute.⁵⁹

Yeats’s neo-Platonism can be easily re-constructed, but it is not immediately evident how these metaphysical hi-jinks connect with his concept of the symbol. It is to this issue that I now turn. Here we will see the problems with Rorty’s contention that the Platonist has “a reductionist view of metaphor” (“he thinks metaphors are either paraphrasable or useless for the one serious purpose which language has, namely representing reality”).⁶⁰ As I shall argue, the symbol derives its richness and complexity in Yeats, precisely because he is an agonised Platonist. He wants to represent Reality with a big R, but the difficulties of doing so will make him assess the meaning and value of representation itself. This predicament gives Yeats’s

symbolism its gloriously self-reflexive charge: as we shall see, his metaphors repeatedly wonder about what metaphors should do.

II. The Platonic Symbol

The word “symbol” derives from the Greek term *symballein* (meaning to bring together), but in order to effect such a synthesis, we must also presuppose a rupture—namely, between the ideal and the empirical. Indeed, as Gadamer pointed out, the “symbol does not simply dissolve the tension between the world of ideas and the world of the senses”; rather it is a space where this tension is often aggressively performed.⁶¹ The titular image of Yeats’s “The Rose upon the Rood of Time”—drawn from the annals of Rosicrucianism—thus becomes a symbol of symbolism itself. Every good symbol, it would seem, aspires to be a Jesus Christ: the mediator of the eternal and temporal or the supersensible and the sensible.⁶² But as the reference to the crucifixion might imply, this synthesis is not without its agonies: how does the ideal enter the temporal world without forfeiting its ideal status, and how does the body become ideal whilst retaining its beating heart? Plato used the image of image-making itself to explain how the empirical world related to the Good: the sensuous realm was a copy or image of an ideal order.⁶³ Both Plato and Plotinus used the simile of the mirror to capture the nature of the relationship between both.⁶⁴ The image connotes: a) the ontological dependency of the sensuous on the supersensuous (the reflection of a long-legged fly in a mirror is utterly dependent on there being a long-legged fly in front of it); b) the sense of likeness between both (the image of the fly resembles the fly; and c) their non-identity (a reflection of a long-legged fly is not a long-legged fly).

The image of image-making captures something of how particulars relate to their forms: they are dependent on them, they are like them, and yet they are different from them—and this difference is, for Plato, a privation: images of bears are less real or ontologically inferior to bears. Thus we might say that Plato both elevates and demotes symbols and images. He elevates them by making everything in the empirical world an image of its form. Plato often insists that empirical entities “participate” in the ideal (a position that Coleridge clearly draws upon in his own theories of the symbol: “it partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible,” while a similar theory of participation stands behind Yeats’s ruminations on salt), yet in Plato there is often a distressing gap between symbols and their referents or the

empirical and the ideal.⁶⁵ Images are inferior to what they represent, while mimesis itself is reality-depreciating. This is the metaphysical thesis (of course there are also moral ones) behind Plato's notorious objections to art: if the world is a copy of an ideal order, then art is a copy of a copy and removes us ever further from pure being.

Partly because of his Platonic leanings, Yeats has problems with mimetic art. He, too, seems to think that "things below are copies"—or so a speaker claims in one of his supernatural songs.⁶⁶ But Yeats's aim is not to produce second-order imitations or copies of copies. Indeed, he regards mimetic art as "the mother of all evil"—a medium that alienates us from the absolute.⁶⁷ Yeats's concern, after all, lies "with the essences of things, and not with things."⁶⁸ He shares this disposition with the high priests of French symbolism. Mallarmé, for instance, famously yearned for "the flower which is absent from all bouquets" and Yeats was also in search of the ideal rose: "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!"⁶⁹ This line—which opens and closes "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time"—moves from description to redescription in search of the perfect form. Significantly, the adjectives in the line change, but the "Rose" remains constant—constancy articulating itself through repetition. This is also enforced by the metre: when we read the line as iambic pentameter the stress repeatedly falls on "Rose"—just as the use of capitals provide us with a graphic stress, allowing us to feel, perhaps, that we have accessed an uppercase World. But if repetition attempts to enact the immutability and oneness of the form of roseness, it also risks destroying it, producing multiple roses (a red one, a proud one, a sad one) in a doomed search for the one rose (it's hardly a surprise that the semantic chain ends on a sad note).

Indeed, the metre of the line might seem to emphasise this corrupt plurality—"Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose"—the first three feet could be read (at a stretch) as trochees so the stress falls on the individuating features of particular roses rather than the general quality of roseness itself. Of course, all of the poem's first six words could be stressed, yielding a type of chant or mantra that lulls the reader into a position of stillness so that she becomes receptive to the noumenal. Here, as many have noted, poetry becomes a kind of spiritual exercise in which "the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols."⁷⁰ It is also worth stressing that the line we have quoted is devoid of a verb—a feature that we see again in the opening line of the Rose of Battle: "Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the World" where we find a string of nouns cleansed of the active and temporal properties of the verb.

While the mantra aspires to the stillness of being, the process of re-iteration and substitution (“Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose”) condemns the line to eternal becoming. The Good is the One, but “the mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity”—or so Yeats declares in a later poem, making the very process of mirroring a constitutive feature of evil itself.⁷¹ The proliferation of roses in “The Rose upon the Rood of Time” and indeed the entire “Rose” collection enacts a sad exile from true being.

Thus Yeats’s work performs the difficulty of accessing the ideal through the semiotic and temporal resources of language. It is easy to see, in this instance, why Carlyle fetishised silence—in theory, at any rate, if seldom in practice.⁷² “Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity,” Carlyle announced, while Maeterlinck judged words to be an increasingly unreliable resource (“Signs and words no longer count for anything”), although it is hard to see how signs could ever have been trusted.⁷³ Mimesis, after all, is privative—at least in the Platonic schema that we have been tracking. The image may derive from the Good and gesture toward it, but such gesturing already indicates that it is unlike the Good. The Good is utterly self-sufficient and relates to nothing but itself. But the sign is an intrinsically relational entity and always finds its being outside itself: its intentionality (or quality of aboutness) is expressive of its ontological lack. Thus philosophy often tries to “overcome the symbolistic character of the ‘sign,’ even to ‘eliminate’ the sign and attempt to attain to ‘adequate knowledge,’ without signs”—or so Cassirer maintained.⁷⁴ Poets, of course, have nursed the same fantasy. Pound’s call for the “direct treatment of the thing,” for instance, was a desire to escape the mediation of images as much as it was a call for a new type of image.⁷⁵ But the indirectness of the sign cannot be so easily bypassed.

The only “liberation from the compulsion of symbolism,” Cassirer maintained, is to acknowledge its necessity.⁷⁶ Yeats frequently conceded to “The Necessity of Symbolism” (to invoke the title of one of his first essays on Blake). However, he often tried to escape the purgatory of linguistic representation—or the painful privation of mimesis—by seizing on the autotelic qualities of the symbol: so if the symbol is a sign, it is a sign primarily of itself. This was an old theme of literary history: Schelling and Coleridge, for instance, distinguished allegory from symbol, by insisting that the latter was the thing it signified—or at least in part.⁷⁷ And Mallarmé wanted the self-referential qualities of the symbol to be extended across the poem itself (“Our principal aim should be to make the words of a poem self-mirroring”).⁷⁸

Poems in Yeats are often monuments of their own magnificence, but we also find more concentrated moments of self-reference within them. Consider the solipsistic sea-shell in “The Wanderings of Oisín,” “Dreaming of her own melting hues”; the dewdrops listening “for the sound of their own dropping” in “The Sad Shepherd”; the triumphantly self-sufficient fountain of “Ancestral Houses”; or “hearts [. . .] full / Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness” in a later section of “Meditations in Time of Civil War.”⁷⁹ These images might communicate a bad solipsism or a glorious self-presence—more on this point later. But they are also, one might argue, symbols of what a symbol should be: namely, the telos of itself. Only then can the symbol become a proper figure of the self-sufficient One. Thus, in a paradoxical form of mimesis, symbols become figures of the absolute by refusing to be figures of anything other than themselves.

While taking refuge in the autotelic symbol, Yeats also attempted to escape the treadmill of imitation by prioritising the musical features of language over its semiotic function. It was precisely because music was non-representational that figures like Schopenhauer—and later Wagner and Nietzsche—regarded it as the highest form of art.⁸⁰ The thinking behind this aesthetic hierarchy was once again recognisably Platonic: all other art-forms were second-order illusions (representations of a world that was at bottom mere representation), but music had no referential mission; it was, for Schopenhauer, the sound of the noumenal itself. Yeats also sought access to the spiritual realm through the musical features of verse. His aim, as he put it, was to create “those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty.”⁸¹ How the intrinsically temporal features of rhythm allow him to escape time (“the cracked tune that Chronos sings”)⁸² is not entirely clear, but by aspiring to the condition of music, Yeats’s symbolism ducks out of mimesis: it is less a representation than a performance or event in which the absolute discloses itself. Or so, at least, was Yeats’s hope.

III. Cursing Plato

From the beginning, Yeats had deep misgivings about his own Platonic predilections. He worried, for instance, that they lead to a bad form of transcendence, a sterile purity, that was as aesthetically injurious as it was metaphysically misguided.

Thus, in his lovemaking with the absolute, Yeats repeatedly proves himself to be a jittery lover. “Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still / A little space for the rose-breath to fill! / Lest I no more hear common things that crave.”⁸³ The true philosopher, in Plato’s books, “abstains from pleasures and desires and pains,” but Yeats continues to crave things that crave in ways that emphasise the intrinsic value of craving itself.⁸⁴ In theory, he hopes to roam beyond the badlands of space and time, but he also recognises that the actual costs of this transcendence are extremely high. Entry to the absolute means exile from the time-bound contexts that seem to give human life its shape and meaning; it demands a systematic retreat from the rich sensuousness of the world and commitment to a rather cold heaven; it even marks the abandonment of the empirical self and all “the body’s folly.”⁸⁵ But in situations such as these, Yeats is tempted to say goodbye to eternity—and to Plato—rather than bid adieu to the world.

Once again Yeats’s thinking about this problem is mediated through reflections on symbolism. Writing to Florence Farr in 1906, Yeats expressed dissatisfaction with the image-making of his youth: “I once cared only for images about whose necks I could cast various ‘chains of office’ as it were. They were so many aldermen of the ideal, whom I wished to master the city of the soul. Now I do not want images at all, or chains of office being contented with the unruly soul.” His new objective, he explained, was to effect “a movement downwards upon life not upwards out of life.”⁸⁶ Instead of the anaemic joys of Platonic forms, Yeats increasingly emphasised the visceral pleasures of incarnate life.

Paul de Man was rightly sceptical of Yeats’s self-described turn. The physical world continues to gesture to something larger than itself in Yeats’s work. Thus, the natural image always aspires to be an emblem, namely a sign of something numinous.⁸⁷ In Yeats’s last poems, for instance, we still find speakers insisting that “Flowers and grass and cloudless sky / Resemble forms that are, or seem.”⁸⁸ His uncertainty about the differences between what seems and what is stokes familiar doubts about our epistemic access to some ultimate reality, but once again the physical world is a mere epiphenomenon of something else (even if that something else is itself another appearance). But Yeats’s letter to Farr still captures something about his works of middle age: their enhanced commitment to the sensuous and temporal features of life. And it was partly on this basis that he would disassociate himself from French symbolism. Mallarmé, he later explained, wished to “escape

from history,” but Yeats wanted to live “in history”—although in another dizzying loop, he insisted that history is nothing more than the life of the mind.⁸⁹ Thus history becomes *Geist* and all that was solid melts into subjectivity.

It is worth pausing to consider why Yeats in his middle years felt he had undergone some significant change in perspective. Several explanations might be proffered, but one of the more obvious intellectual motivations behind this turn is his famous encounter with “that strong enchanter” Nietzsche—the great scourge of Platonism, and, as many have noted, one of the most formative influences on Yeats’s intellectual life.⁹⁰ In Nietzsche’s eyes, Plato was a great “viaduct of corruption”; even worse, Plato was “boring.”⁹¹ By championing the ideal over the empirical, Plato “reversed the concept of ‘reality,’” in Nietzsche’s estimate, and sanctioned an ascetic rejection of the world.⁹² This asceticism survived in Christianity—a “Platonism for the ‘people.’”⁹³ Yeats, too, would come to regard Plato as the world’s “first Christian”—a by no means admiring epithet.⁹⁴ He also complained that Plato “prepared the Christian desert and the Stoic Suicide” when he “separates the Eternal Ideas from Nature”—a highly contentious reading given that Plato had always insisted that empirical nature “participates” in the ideal (Yeats later acknowledged that his tendency to regard Plato and Plotinus “as all transcendence” was a mistake).⁹⁵ Be that as it may, Yeats suggested that Platonic distinctions between the ideal and the empirical produced an unhealthy division between soul and body.⁹⁶

Yeats as an alternative promoted a holistic view of the self and shrank “from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body.”⁹⁷ To accept the body, of course, is also to accept the world of change and transitoriness. Though Yeats finds it hard to escape a certain wistfulness about aging, one of his speakers is famously determined to make the soul sing and “louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress.”⁹⁸ Admittedly, this may be a very Platonic song—derived from a sense that the tatters reveal how the soul will have soon no need for dresses, for it will be, as Plato put it, “released from the body, as from fetters.”⁹⁹ But the late Yeats also affects an anti-Platonic laughter in which embodiment and becoming are a source of joy. As Zarathustra declares, “the best images and parables should speak of time and becoming: they should be a eulogy and a justification of all transitoriness.”¹⁰⁰ Yeats often produced such celebrations. The Lord of Chou duly declares in “Vacillation”:

“Let all things pass away.”¹⁰¹ Consider too the famous lines of “Lapiz Lazuli”: “All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay.”¹⁰²

Platonism would therefore come to represent a joyless form of abstraction for Yeats: from time, from matter, from embodied form. Yeats never entirely transcended metaphysical dualism, but he hoped at least that “body will not be bruised to pleasure soul.”¹⁰³ Moreover, here he could re-activate conventional theories of the symbol as a great unifier—effecting a synthesis between supersensible and sensible, meaning and expression—to heal the ruptures he associates with Platonism. The image of the dancer at the end of “Among School Children,” for instance, is a highly self-reflexive symbol. The poem’s famous question—“How can we know the dancer from the dance”—typifies Wittgenstein’s idea of metaphysical inquiry: it raises a problem where ordinarily no difficulty arises (no one struggles to tell dancers from dances).¹⁰⁴ But by stressing the ontological co-dependency of dancer and dance, Yeats is insisting upon a type of unity in which the form of something cannot be separated from its physical embodiment. And yet Yeats’s concluding question still retains the capacity to baffle. This is partly because it is a metaphysical question, and partly because it remains a symbol—immune to exhaustive paraphrase or to any meaning that is external to itself. A sign that is simply the sign of itself always risks verging on nonsense. Indeed, for MacNeice the “symbolist” meaning of Yeats’s work was virtually coterminous with its “nonsense meaning.”¹⁰⁵

IV. Absolute Symbolism

If the meaning of the Yeatsian symbol remains difficult to determine, its ontological status is equally oblique. Yeats sometimes spoke of an “imagined image,” at other moments he invoked “a real image”: the first can sound like a tautology, while the second has an oxymoronic ring.¹⁰⁶ Of course, the ontology of the symbol was already pretty uncertain in Plato: here mundane entities were images, yet these images were real, only less real than forms. Yeats’s speakers also regard empirical things as symbols. In “Among School Children,” for instance, we hear that “nuns and mothers worship images.” The differences between these respective images are acknowledged—“those the candles light are not as those / That animate a mother’s reveries”—yet the precise nature of that difference is never spelled out.¹⁰⁷ In “Byzantium,” fine distinctions between levels of reality are insisted upon and are in

the same process made beautifully indecipherable: “Before me floats an image, man or shade / Shade more than man, more image than a shade.” More image than a shade, but which is less real? Semantic differences are unfurled, but their ontological status is unclear.

In “Byzantium” symbols may gesture towards the absolute, as they so often do in Yeats, but it can also feel as if symbolism has become absolutised: it is the only reality there is. In these moments Yeats seems to say goodbye to metaphysical idealism—or to a transcendent realm beyond language—and to celebrate the pure immanence of the symbolic process. This absolute symbolism, which always risks careering into absolute nonsense, is best witnessed in the imagistic orgy that concludes “Byzantium”: “Those images that yet / Fresh images beget, / That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.” This symbolic fecundity—image begetting image—is arguably at odds with Yeats’s erstwhile search for the One. Recall how within a neo-Platonic tradition true being is gloriously singular, a total unity that supersedes all difference. Yeats may still seek this integration in “Byzantium”: his ostensible aim, after all, is to “break bitter furies of complexity” in an apparent bid to restore divine simplicity. However, the poem breaks into not out of complexity, glorifying in rupture and flux and bewilderment (no reader will ever fully fathom “that gong-tormented sea”).¹⁰⁸ In this tumult of images we have plurality and difference, image referring to image never arriving at a final resting-place in the real.

In “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time” the play of the signifier (“Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose”) seemed privative—it was an expression of lack, a record of exile from the absolute.¹⁰⁹ But in “Byzantium” it seems to represent a joyful excess—a hymn to eternal becoming. Again symbolism has arguably moved beyond all reference, having no intentional object other than itself. Now only the mirror is, or, as Yeats puts it in “The Statues”: “Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.” The feeling that appearance is the only show in town can lead to a dizzying sense of “unreality,” but it can also produce a joyous sense of riot.¹¹⁰ This emphasis on the ontological priority of the symbol is thus an inverted Platonism: all trace of a transcendental reality has been supplanted by the absolute sign. “Living in illusion,” as Nietzsche recommended, has finally become “the goal.”¹¹¹ Of course, Yeats never entirely relinquished his search for a transcendental abode beyond the deserts of time and space. In “Sailing to Byzantium,” for instance, he yearns for the “artifice of

eternity,” while conceding in the same breath that the idea of the eternal may itself be a fiction.¹¹²

Thus very different metaphysical theses lurk within Yeats’s use of the symbol. As we have seen, Yeats’s initial investment in the symbol reflects a type of metaphysical realism: there was an ultimate reality out there independent of us. The symbol was important precisely because we lacked direct epistemic access to this ultimate reality. So Yeats sends out a little probe called the symbol into the outer reaches of the noumenal; the sound it makes may be gibberish, but it is also a faint echo of the absolute. And yet the symbol always threatens to renege on its metaphysical task, abandoning the search for an ultimate good, or supplanting it, by presenting itself as the only good there is. Of course, if symbols no longer point to anything “out there,” we might be still entitled to ask what or who stands behind them as their begetter or sustaining ground. Often Yeats seems to suggest that symbols are autonomous and self-generating. In “Byzantium,” for instance, images beget images without the obvious intercession of a co-ordinating intelligence or agent—a creativity that the poem explicitly identifies as miraculous. But this free-floating symbolism also coincides with an obtrusive first-person presence: “I hail the superhuman; / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.”¹¹³ Though this voice genuflects to the superhuman, it still sounds fairly impressed with its own hailing, even intimating through its performative utterance that the superman may be hailed into life by the speaker’s own lungpower. Here the ego wants to call the shots, stipulating what things should be called and how metaphors will function.

Indeed, at times the individual ego appears to stand behind everything there is in Yeats’s universe. The poet’s commitment to a Platonic idealism in which reality has its origin in objective ideas, was always liable to be eaten up by a more subjective version. So Yeats sometimes maintains that ideas exist in the mind, while this mind becomes the ground and even the source of being. The friction between this radical subjectivism and a Platonic world-view is explicit in “The Tower”:

I mock Plotinus’ thought
And cry in Plato’s teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,

Aye, sun and moon and star, all,¹¹⁴

So life and death are the mind's creations. Admittedly, there are different ways of casting "mind"—say, as language or as some shared human resource—so it doesn't sound so metaphysically extravagant or so solipsistic. But Yeats often seems to champion a type of subjectivism in which the private ego operates as the condition of all meaning. This metaphysical egomania has profound implications for Yeats's symbolism.

V. The Subject of Symbolism

"We are such egoistic fools," D. H. Lawrence proclaimed, "We see only the symbol as a subjective expression: as an expression of ourselves. That makes us so sickly when we deal with the old symbols."¹¹⁵ The epitome of this sickliness in Lawrence's eyes was Yeats. A harsh judgement, perhaps, not least because Yeats had decried an excessively subjective art (poetry should do more than "mirror our own excited faces").¹¹⁶ Moreover, he had also enlisted the symbol as the counterforce to this kind of subjectivism: this fecund linguistic resource always exceeded the ego's attempts to control what signs might say or do. Yet he also viewed the symbol as the repository for highly subjective states—an ambivalence, I shall argue, that records broader doubts about the metaphysics of subjectivism. The contours of subjectivity are, of course, extremely mobile in Yeats. At times, he is liable to think of the whole universe as a giant ego and he is sometimes willing to relinquish his own subjectivity to achieve integration with this world-mind. Yeats's neo-Platonic commitments, in any event, make the language of objectivity and subjectivity unstable: after all, a retreat from the empirical or seemingly "objective" world towards a more inward or "subjective" state is often the best means of access to a more accurate or "objective" account of things in Yeats. Yet, as I have suggested, he is often inclined to regard this ultimate reality as a macro-subject: or "great mind."

In his famous essay on "Magic," Yeats averred that this cosmic mental space was best accessed by symbols. Yet he also entertained an expressive theory of the symbol: it was a means of giving voice to inner or private states. The artist thus uses "the outer world as a symbolism to express subjective moods." This freed art from the fetters of simple mimeticism ("The greater the subjectivity the less the imitation").¹¹⁷ The true object of symbolism was not to imitate the external world, but to articulate a radically private form of experience. "The soul moves among

symbols and unfolds in symbols,” he explained, when it has withdrawn “from every impulse but its own.”¹¹⁸ A similar commitment to perfect inwardness would be championed throughout continental symbolisme. Nietzsche, for instance, would associate symbolism with a supremely subjective outlook. He presented Jesus Christ, for instance, as the symboliste par excellence, because, in Nietzsche’s eyes, Jesus acknowledged no reality external to himself: everything external was simply a sign of an inward state. “The Kingdom of God is within you,” Jesus declares in Luke 17; this is because inwardness is the divine kingdom—a position that Nietzsche regards as heroic but also as a little insane.¹¹⁹

Yeats has also extremely ambivalent feelings about the inwardness that seemingly attends the symbol. As we have seen, he often exults in solipsistic images—figures that communicate a self-sufficiency normally reserved for the One. And yet solipsism can communicate a darker set of moods in Yeats, producing an overburdened sense of subjectivity, and an acute sense of alienation from the world. He found much of this bad subjectivism in modern art and duly chastised the poet for wanting to find his own “image in every lake and puddle.” This, he believed, was the recurrent vice of English poetry. Here the poet: “has to burthen the skylark with his cares before he can celebrate it. He is always a lens coloured by self.”¹²⁰ Yet his early works often feature this coloured lens. Both his sad and happy shepherds, for instance, want to tell their song to seashells and to hear them sung back by seashells—a fairly solipsistic enterprise one might think. But in “The Sad Shepherd,” in particular, the attempt to co-opt nature into the circle of the self simply leads to alienation. The shell transmogrifies his precious song into an “inarticulate moan,” leaving him out of sorts with nature and himself.¹²¹

The alienation between subject and object that seems to prevail in “The Sad Shepherd” is, of course, a well-mapped philosophical problem; moreover, philosophers did not hesitate from sketching out its implications for art. In Hegel’s eyes, for instance, subjectivity was the supreme principle of the modern world and this could be seen in “romantic” art (Yeats would outline a similar theory of the increasing subjectivisation of literature in “Nationality and Literature” in 1893).¹²² Famously, Hegel predicted that the romantic cult of inwardness would lead to the implosion of art, because the artist increasingly struggled to give her rarefied private vision a public or communicable form (in his “Nationality and Literature” lecture Yeats also declared much modern art to be devoid of social significance). This, of

course, has important repercussions for the symbol. For it would appear that in art's radically subjective phase, artists struggle to find a proper vehicle for their internal moods. Experience has become so private that no sign can do it justice. And so symbolism breaks down—or becomes “symbolical” in the pejorative sense that Hegel sometimes used in his aesthetics: a figure wholly inadequate to its object.¹²³

This implosion has clear ramifications for Yeats's own art. He admired Mangan's solipsistic qualities (“Outer things were only to him mere symbols to express his own inmost and desperate heart”), but Yeats was often less confident that he could make things symbolise his own desperate heart.¹²⁴ Arguably, “The Sad Shepherd” dramatises this problem: the sea-shell won't communicate what the shepherd wishes to express. The mismatch between the subject's inner vision and the images that one has at hand to express it is also evident in “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time.” Here the speaker wishes “to learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know,” nursing a fantasy of a private language that would seem to repudiate the public dimensions of signs. Here and elsewhere Yeats is happy to wander in the outer edges of intelligibility, but at other points he declares obscurity to be a weakness. It was Blake's misfortune, Yeats insisted, that he could find no models for his thought in the world around him: he was, according to Yeats, a “symbolist who had to invent his own symbols”—a process that ultimately made his symbolism both arbitrary and unfathomable.¹²⁵

Yeats initially hoped to avoid subjectivism in his own art by investing in the supra-subjective features of symbolism: “It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays an 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.”¹²⁶ Yeats's rose, therefore, is irreducibly multivalent and communicates more than the speaker can ever hope to know: sometimes it's an emblem of beauty; sometimes it stands for love; sometimes it's a Rosicrucian Jesus; sometimes it's a vagina (Paul Muldoon wasn't as outrageous as he strove to be when he claimed that Yeats's “‘far-off, most secret, / and inviolate rose’ is a cunt”).¹²⁷ But within this plurality the individual subject finds it impossible to dictate the conditions of the symbol's reception. Fortunately, there is no bridle for this Proteus. The symbol is a check to the hubristic subject who strives to see himself or herself as the sole originator and dictator of meaning in the world. The poet activates a tradition

much larger than herself through her use of a symbol; an egotistical art, on the other hand, lacks this range and depth. This is a point that Yeats came back to again and again: “all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt”—namely the ice and salt of tradition. Without these ingredients everything is “egotism and indiscretion.”¹²⁸

How well Yeats lived up to his own professions about ice and salt is a moot point. His poetry is certainly replete with ancient symbols: rose and lily, sun and moon, water and swan. A Vision, too, is an exposition of symbolism much older than himself. But it is possible to argue that A Vision was also an attempt to impose subjective control on symbols by cataloguing their meaning and co-opting them into a private cosmology. It was also a means, perhaps, of dictating the terms of perception for his own works. After all, his poems record deep misgivings about the intersubjective or public qualities of symbols. Many of Yeats’s speakers cannot stand the fact that symbols are interpretable and exceed their attempts to control them. Think of works such as “A Coat” where the apparent misuse of the speaker’s garments, leads him to assert the merits of walking naked.¹²⁹ In “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” we discover worries about the disfiguring “mirror of malicious eyes.”¹³⁰ In “High Talk” a figure complains that the verbal stilts that he has shaped for himself have been stolen and used to patch up a fence. Here the speaker seems to respond to ill-use by tossing yet another symbol out—but one so obscure that it seems immune to misappropriation, indeed appropriation of any kind: “I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on / Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn”.¹³¹ Here Yeats makes it easy to understand why Rorty regarded metaphors as radically non-cognitive: they are items that exist outside “logical space,” triggering cognitions while never being reducible to a specific cognitive content.¹³² It is not clear that all metaphors lend themselves to this description, but Yeats’s great sea-horses certainly do.

Yeats could take refuge in obscurity, but, as I have suggested, the radical open-endedness of the symbol could also present him with a problem, making it difficult for him to regulate what symbols might mean. Thus throughout Yeats’s work we often find an assertive speaker that attempts to seize control of the symbolic process. Think of the bold, declarative voice of “Blood and the Moon”—“I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare / This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair.”¹³³ Here performative statements do a lot of the running.

Yeats's declarations about his own declaring mirror the self-referential qualities of the symbol, while also professing to inaugurate one. As Austen maintained, performative sentences are essentially about themselves: they are neither true nor false, because they assert nothing about the world.¹³⁴ Nonetheless, they intervene in the world through a form of symbolic action. Yeats's symbolic action, however, is to make a claim on certain symbols. The tower may be an ancient image, but the speaker seems to suggest that he has intellectual property rights on the figure (of course, this did not stop Pound from re-describing it as Yeats's "phallic symbol on the Bogs").¹³⁵ The speaker in "Blood in the Moon" flies in the face of some of Yeats's own pronouncements about the intersubjective qualities of the symbol: its meaning, he had maintained, could not be stipulated or exhausted by the individual subject. Perhaps this still remains the case in "Blood and the Moon," but the speaker works pretty hard to present himself as the origin and arbiter of what symbols mean. Nonetheless, such a speaker still appears within language and is arguably its effect. This is playfully acknowledged in "High Talk" where the speaker admits that even he himself is a mere metaphor. And yet many of his speakers try to cast themselves as something more: as the origin or sustaining ground of the symbols they speak. Moreover, they balk at the fact that these symbols may be co-owned with others. Such worries about words reflect Yeats's commitment to a demanding—albeit unsustainable—form of self-ownership.¹³⁶

VI. Conclusion

Philosophy, for Wittgenstein, was famously a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language. "What we do," he explained, "is to bring words back from the metaphysical to their everyday use."¹³⁷ But Yeats often attempts the reverse, bewitching the intelligence through the great voodoo of symbolism. Yet this bewitchment can only be understood with the aid of some philosophy—as Yeats himself maintained. The background of his symbols, I have argued, is distinctly Platonic: they are probes in search of ideal forms. But they also attempt to mimic the unity and self-presence of the One by remaining stubbornly themselves. A sign that is radically unparaphrasable and resistant to definition is always liable to verge upon nonsense, yet Yeats was convinced that where there is nonsense there may be God. Alternatively, there may simply be Yeats. As we have seen, the poet was never entirely sure whether or not he spoke symbolism or

symbolism spoke him and the uncertainty expressed very mixed feelings about the role of subjectivity in art.

“What distinguishes the Symbolism of our day from the Symbolism of the past,” according to Symons, “is that it has now become conscious of itself.”¹³⁸ The symbol certainly reaches this state of self-consciousness in Yeats, producing a highly self-reflexive art-form that is sustained through a series of meta-symbols. In one of his last poems, for instance, Yeats takes Phidias’s sculpture as another symbol of what symbols should be. Phidias, we are told, “Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass.”¹³⁹ Yeats still abides with the metaphor of the mirror, but Phidias’s art involves something deeper or more primordial than mimesis. The statues allow mimesis to happen, permitting others to take them as their model, but these art-works—in Yeats’s poem at least—don’t seem to be derived from any antecedent thing. The statues operate as constitutive rather than representational symbols: they are not tokens of some beauty that exists prior to and independent of such images; the statues inaugurate this value, serving as the paradigm for what beauty will be considered to be.¹⁴⁰ The symbol is an event that alters the world, or so Yeats encourages us to think.

Whether or not his own symbols lived up to this billing is difficult to answer, but it is clear that they acquire a rare philosophical density through their extended self-interrogation. Of course, Yeats’s symbols never fully articulate a theory of what they ultimately perform (that is to say they remain symbols), which is why I have drawn on earlier metaphysical traditions for an account of what his words might aspire to and how they might fail. Only under the most narrow—and unverifiable—form of verificationism can these complex traditions be regarded as nonsensical; without them Yeats’s poetry loses much of its intellectual lustre. For all of his admiration of Yeats, Rorty hoped we would throw off metaphysics and stop talking “in the Platonic way.”¹⁴¹ Perhaps we have stopped, or will soon stop, but this should not make it impossible to understand those who once spoke that language. We should see more than our own bewildered faces in Yeats’s mirror.

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Notes

¹ Yeats reported this in a letter to Sturge Moore on 7 April 1930. See W. B. Yeats, The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Intellex Electronic Edition, No. 5341.

² Yeats, “Nine Hundred and Nineteen,” The Collected Poems, 208.

³ Martin Heidegger, Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,” trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996), 17-18.

⁴ For reflections on a postmetaphysical age, see Jürgen Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

⁵ René Wellek, “The Term and Concept of Symbolism,” New Literary History, 1.2 (1970): 249-70. Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Theories of the romantic symbol, however, have enjoyed a longer life-span. See Nicholas Halmi, The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 207-72. 219. A version of this essay appeared earlier in New Literary History, 6.1 (1974), 5-74.

⁷ See Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” trans. F. C. T. Moore in New Literary History, 6.1 (Autumn, 1974), 5-74.

⁸ See, in particular, Rudolph Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language,” trans. Arthur Pap in A. J. Ayer, ed., Logical Positivism (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), 60-81.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, Collected Works. Volume IX: Early Articles and Reviews, ed. John P. Frayne and Madeline Marchaterre (New York: Scribner, 2004), 183.

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- ¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, "The Necessity of Symbolism," The Works of William Blake, Poetical, Symbolic and Critical, ed. Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, 3 vols. (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 1: 243.
- ¹¹ Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York: Scribner, 1931).
- ¹² Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, ed. Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), 3.
- ¹³ W. B. Yeats, "Solomon and the Witch," The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Richard Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 177.
- ¹⁴ After all, he would declare that "many images . . . are certainly symbols." Yeats, Early Essays, 61.
- ¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 3: 1925-1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell & Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 330.
- ¹⁶ Ezra Pound, Cantos (New York: New Directions, 1996), 548.
- ¹⁷ According to Pound, "the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object," but within but the concrete object risked being swallowed up in Yeats's conception of symbolism. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," Early Writings: Poems and Prose, ed. Ira B. Nadel (London: Penguin, 2005), 259.
- ¹⁸ But for some useful accounts of Yeats's symbolic practice see: Denis Donoghue, "Yeats: the Question of Symbolism," Myth and Reality in Irish Literature, ed. Joseph Ronsley (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 99-116; Warwick Gould, "Yeats and Symbolism," The Oxford Handbook of Irish Poetry, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20-41 and Paul Muldoon, "Moving on Silence: Yeats and the Refrain as Symbol," Yeats Annual No. 20, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Open Books Publishers, 2016), 155-77.
- ¹⁹ Yeats, Early Essays, 114.

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- ²⁰ F. S. Flint, "Recent Verse," The New Age, 3.18 (August 29, 1908), 353.
- ²¹ Osbert Burdett, "The Last Ten Years of English Literature," The New Age, 3.10 (July 4, 1908), 191.
- ²² Michael North, "Symbolism and Obscurity in Meditations in Time of Civil War," Critical Quarterly, 19.1 (1977): 5-18.
- ²³ Richard Rorty, "Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction," New Literary History, 47.1 (2016), 67.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, 71. For criticisms of the extent of Rorty's anti-realism, see Hilary Putnam, The Many Faces of Realism (LaSalle Illinois: Open Court, 1987), 16.
- ²⁵ Richard Rorty, Andrzej Szahaj & Mendieta Eduardo, Take Care of Freedom and Truth will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 46.
- ²⁶ Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope (New York: Penguin, 1999), xviii.
- ²⁷ Angela Leighton, On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
- ²⁸ Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism?," PMLA, 122.2 (2007): 558-69.
- ²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Rorty identified himself as an "antimetaphysician". See Rorty, Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 282.
- ³⁰ On the need to distinguish truth from meaning in interpretation, see Quentin Skinner, "Interpretation, rationality, truth," Visions of Politics, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1: 27-57.
- ³¹ Heidegger, Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister", 17.
- ³² For a good overview of romantic theories, see Halmi, The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol.

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- ³³ Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167.
- ³⁴ Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 8.
- ³⁵ Yeats, Early Essays, 88; 121.
- ³⁶ Henri Dorra (ed.), Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology (Berkeley: University California Press, 1994), 151.
- ³⁷ Paul de Man, The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 226.
- ³⁸ Yeats, "The Tower," Collected Poems, 198. On Yeats's Platonism see, Brian Arkins, "Yeats and Platonism," Platonism and the English Imagination, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 279-89; Anthony Cuda, "Crying in Plato's Teeth: W. B. Yeats and Platonic Inspiration," Platonisms: Ancient, Modern and Postmodern, ed. Kevin Corrigan, John Douglas Turner (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 205-15. See also David Dwan, "Yeats's Thought," W. B. Yeats, ed. Edward Larrissy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 109-26, elements of which I draw upon here.
- ³⁹ Yeats, Early Essays, 63.
- ⁴⁰ William Blake, The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).
- ⁴¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, trans. by Alfred Sutro (London: George Allen, 1903), 224-25.
- ⁴² Plotinus, The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), 108.
- ⁴³ Plotinus, Enneads, 497, 502, 539.
- ⁴⁴ W. B. Yeats, The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume 2: The Plays, ed. David R. Clark and Roaslind E. Clark (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 609-672.

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- ⁴⁵ Yeats, Collected Poems, 289.
- ⁴⁶ See W. B. Yeats, The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume 4: Early Essays, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), 103.
- ⁴⁷ Yeats, Early Articles and Reviews, 340.
- ⁴⁸ Yeats, Early Essays, 141.
- ⁴⁹ Yeats, Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), 325.
- ⁵⁰ Plotinus, Enneads, 60.
- ⁵¹ Plotinus, Enneads, 51.
- ⁵² Yeats, Draft of “Among School Children,” The Tower: Manuscript Materials, ed. Richard Finneran, Jared Curtis & Ann Saddlemeyer (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 363.
- ⁵³ Yeats, Early Essays, 139-40.
- ⁵⁴ Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” Collected Poems, 60.
- ⁵⁵ Yeats, Collected Poems, 61.
- ⁵⁶ Yeats, Collected Poems, 72.
- ⁵⁷ Plato, Phaedo, trans. David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14.
- ⁵⁸ Yeats, “Fergus and the Druid,” Collected Poems, 33. Plotinus, 14-17.
- ⁵⁹ Yeats, “The Coming of Wisdom with Time,” Collected Poems, 94.
- ⁶⁰ Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 19.
- ⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 78.
- ⁶² For Coleridge, for instance, the symbol involves “the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal.” See S. T. Coleridge, “The Statesman’s Manual,” Lay

Sermons, ed. R. J. White (London and Princeton: Routledge and Princeton University Press), 3-52, 30.

⁶³ See, in particular, Plato's Timaeus and Critias, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40-43.

⁶⁴ See Plato, The Republic, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 315. Plotinus, Enneads, 205.

⁶⁵ Coleridge, "The Statesman's Manual," Lay Sermons, 30.

⁶⁶ Yeats, "Ribh Denounces Patrick," Collected Poems, 284.

⁶⁷ Yeats, Early Essays, 104.

⁶⁸ Yeats, Early Essays, 142.

⁶⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1956), 42; Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," Collected Poems, 31.

⁷⁰ Yeats, Early Essays, 112.

⁷¹ Yeats, "Ribh Denounces Patrick," Collected Poems, 285.

⁷² Darwin noted how Carlyle would silence "every one by haranguing during the whole dinner on the advantages of silence." Charles Darwin, Autobiographies, ed. Michael Neve (London: Penguin, 2002), 66.

⁷³ Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, 166. Maeterlinck, Treasure of the Humble, 40.

⁷⁴ Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, 226-27.

⁷⁵ Pound, Early Writings, 209.

⁷⁶ Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, 226-27.

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- ⁷⁷ See F. W. Schelling, The Philosophy of Art, ed. and trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 151. Coleridge, The Statesman's Manual, "Lay Sermons," 30.
- ⁷⁸ Mallarmé, Selected Prose, Poems, Essays, and Letters, 93.
- ⁷⁹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 358; 9; 200; 206.
- ⁸⁰ Music, for Schopenhauer, was still profoundly mimetic – not a copy of Platonic ideas, but "a copy of the will itself." Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, trans. E. F. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), 1: 257.
- ⁸¹ Yeats, Early Essays, 120.
- ⁸² Yeats, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," Collected Poems, 7.
- ⁸³ Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," Collected Poems, 32.
- ⁸⁴ Plato, Phaedo, 35.
- ⁸⁵ Plato, Phaedo, 13.
- ⁸⁶ Yeats to Florence Farr, 6 Feb. 1906, The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats. Volume IV: 1905-07, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 335.
- ⁸⁷ See De Man, Rhetoric of Romanticism, 165.
- ⁸⁸ Yeats, "Under Ben Bulbin," Collected Poems, 327.
- ⁸⁹ Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, 4 May 1937. See Yeats, The Collected Letters, Intellex Electronic Edition, No. 6922.
- ⁹⁰ Yeats, Collected Letters, 3: 284. On the Nietzschean influences see, in particular, Otto Bohlmann, Yeats and Nietzsche: an Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1982); Michael Valdez Moses, "Nietzsche," Yeats in Context, ed. David Holdeman & Ben Levitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266-75.

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- ⁹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 118. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 225.
- ⁹² Nietzsche, Will to Power, 308.
- ⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.
- ⁹⁴ Yeats, The Collected Work of W. B. Yeats. Volume XIII: A Vision, ed. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper (New York: Scribner, 2008), 150
- ⁹⁵ Yeats, A Vision, 253. On his acknowledged misrendering of Plato and co., see Yeats's note to "The Dying Swan," Collected Poems, 460.
- ⁹⁶ See Yeats, "Among School Children," Collected Poems, 217.
- ⁹⁷ Yeats, Early Essays, 212.
- ⁹⁸ Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," 193.
- ⁹⁹ Plato, Phaedo, 13.
- ¹⁰⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zathustra, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1961), 111.
- ¹⁰¹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 251.
- ¹⁰² Yeats, Collected Poems, 295.
- ¹⁰³ Yeats, "Among School Children," 217.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 35.
- ¹⁰⁵ Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 167.
- ¹⁰⁶ Yeats, "Solomon and the Witch," Collected Poems, 177.

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- ¹⁰⁷ Yeats, Collected Poems, 217.
- ¹⁰⁸ Yeats, Collected Poems, 249.
- ¹⁰⁹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 31.
- ¹¹⁰ Yeats, Collected Poems, 337.
- ¹¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, Writings from the Early Notebooks, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.
- ¹¹² Yeats, Collected Poems, 193.
- ¹¹³ Yeats, Collected Poems, 248.
- ¹¹⁴ Yeats, Collected Poems, 198.
- ¹¹⁵ D. H. Lawrence to Gordon Campbell, 19 December 1914, Collected Letters, ed. Harry T. Moore, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1962), 1: 302.
- ¹¹⁶ Yeats, Early Essays, 120.
- ¹¹⁷ Yeats to J.B. Yeats, 5 March 1916, Collected Letters, Intelix Electronic Edition, No. 2880.
- ¹¹⁸ Yeats, Early Essays, 119.
- ¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, 31.
- ¹²⁰ Yeats, Letters to the New Island. Volume VII: The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, ed. George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer (London: Macmillan, 1989), 89.
- ¹²¹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 9.
- ¹²² For the similarities between Yeats and Hegel, see David Dwan, The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 97-100.
- ¹²³ See G. W. F. Hegel, Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1:303-14. On the importance, nonetheless, of the symbol in Hegel, see Kathleen Dow Magnus, Hegel and the Symbolic Mediation of Spirit (New York: State University of New York, 2001).

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- ¹²⁴ Yeats, Early Articles and Reviews, 99.
- ¹²⁵ Yeats, Early Essays, 86.
- ¹²⁶ Yeats, Early Essays, 66.
- ¹²⁷ Paul Muldoon, "Yarrow," The Annals of Chile (London: Faber, 1994), 145.
- ¹²⁸ W. B. Yeats, The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume 5: Later Essays, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Scribner, 1994), 213.
- ¹²⁹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 127.
- ¹³⁰ Yeats, Collected Poems, 236.
- ¹³¹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 343.
- ¹³² Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics," Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13; Richard Rorty "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor," Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 163.
- ¹³³ Yeats, Collected Poems, 237.
- ¹³⁴ J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marins Sbisà, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5.
- ¹³⁵ The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound to John Quinn, 1915-1924, ed. Timothy Materer (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 181.
- ¹³⁶ For a fuller discussion of the problems, see David Dwan, "Yeats, Heidegger, and the Problem of Subjectivism," Paragraph 25.1 (2002): 74-91.
- ¹³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 40-41.
- ¹³⁸ Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 6.
- ¹³⁹ Yeats, Collected Poems, 337.

¹⁴⁰ Yeats's classical statues thus resemble Heidegger's Greek temple: "The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves." Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 168.

¹⁴¹ Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, xix.