ACTA UNIVERSITATIS LODZIENSIS
FOLIA LITTERARIA ANGLICA 8, 2009

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"I SUMMON TO THE WINDING ANCIENT STAIR": ON THE SYMBOLIC SEARCH FOR WISDOM IN W. B. YEATS'S "BLOOD AND THE MOON"

William Butler Yeats devoted a great part of his life to the study of occultism, Kabala and magical rituals. Despite the fact that his enchantment with the occult lasted all his life, Yeats was never fully satisfied with the supernatural motivation of his poetry and soon began to mould the acquired philosophy so that it might be applicable to his own purposes. His efforts resulted in the creation of a system based on two intersecting and interchangeable gyres which was laid out in *A Vision*. The book is heavily influenced by such pontiffs of occultism as Blake, MacGregor Mathers and Madame Blavatsky, but the ideas remain distinctly Yeats's. As of the 1928 volume, *The Tower*, Yeats made constant use of his newly designed philosophy although typically kabalistic rituals and symbols were never discarded.

Thus in order to thoroughly comprehend his poetry, it is essential to investigate how Yeats's knowledge and thought were assimilated into his works. In his later career, Yeats conceived of the occult as a source of symbols describing the human condition; whilst his own philosophy was aimed at procuring ones that would reveal a true mystical sagacity. The two sets of symbols are thus built on a binary structure which is explored in one of Yeats's final poems "Blood and the Moon" (coming from *The Winding Stair and other Poems*, 1933). The lyric will serve as a seminal example of Yeats's typical practice of harnessing both the occult and self-created symbols with the object of revealing the truth of the human condition. In order to explicate Yeats's philosophy, Jungian notion of the "collective unconscious" and his theory of symbolic reverie will prove necessary.

In his last letter, Yeats wrote to his friend Lady Elizabeth Pelham that "a man can embody the truth but cannot know it" (qtd. in Raine 214). He wanted to see this statement as a summary of his philosophy, and indeed it

was a deft explanation of the idea. The truth Yeats desired entailed acquiring the mystical knowledge; however, Yeats

> Differed from ordinary students of philosophy or religion through [his] belief that truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed, and that if a man do not lose faith, and if he go through certain preparations, revelation will find him at the fitting moment. (qtd. in Raine 182)

No amount of learning could compel the truth, perceived as tantamount to mystical wisdom, to be discovered; it might only be embodied. Therefore Yeats hints at his conviction that the truth or sagacity are pre-existent notions, their source being what he termed the Great Memory.

> Before the mind's eye ... came images that one was to discover presently in some book one had never read, and after looking in vain for explanation to the current theory of forgotten personal memory, I came to believe in a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation. (*Mythologies* 345)

Yeats would say that the symbols reveal the wisdom of the Great Memory and allow them to embody the truth in a short moment of epiphany (Tindall 47). The Great Memory was also called the Anima Mundi – the Soul of the World by one of Yeats's occultist teachers Henry Moore (*Mythologies* 346), and the poet eventually adopted that name. The nature of the truth consisted not only in comprehending the existence of the Anima Mundi but also in "using symbols as agent[s] for expressing" the wisdom inherent in the Great Memory (Blackmur 52).

The term Great Memory evokes C. G. Jung's notion of the "collective unconscious." Jung surmised that

> [Collective unconscious] is no ... potential handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain. There are no inborn ideas, but there are inborn possibilities of ideas. (1000)

Jung's definition fits very closely that of Yeats's Anima Mundi; and similarly to Yeats, Jung would ascribe the power to access the "collective unconscious" to tangible representations of the images, i.e. symbols, whose origin can be traced back to the primordial time (Rosińska 80). According to Jung the true symbol „should be understood as an expression of an intuitive idea that cannot yet be formulated in any other or better way" (993); the poet himself could not phrase his notion of a symbol more accurately. They both held that symbols came subconsciously to individuals, and it was only through the interpretation on the ground of poetry that a given symbol could evoke the primordial world.

Where Yeats appears a little vague coming to the description of the purpose of symbols, Jung expounds on them rather clearly. Their object is to solve ostensibly unsolvable problems by relegating them to "a higher level of consciousness" (Storr 96) at which a way out from the seeming viscious circle may be implicated, and the conflict that admits of no solution can be disposed of by the symbolic ascension to the "collective unconscious." Therefore Jung endows symbols with a purifying capacity. That idea recalls the occult practices of communicating with the outer reality through, for instance, the Tarot in order to purge an individual of fleshly confinements and gain preternatural wisdom.

To comprehend Yeats's symbolic poetry, the occult thought needs to be applied. "Blood and the Moon," if viewed with reference to the mystical knowledge, stands as an example of the importance of the Tarot, occultism and Yeats's own philosophy in his work. The poem begins with an incantation that blesses the tower, and identifies it with an instrument of omnipotence.

> Blessed be this place
> More blessed still this tower;
> A bloody arrogant power. (1–3)

The tower is singled out not merely as a building, but as a symbolically dominant power. The persona then reveals that "In mockery I have set / A powerful emblem up, / and sing it rhyme upon rhyme" (8–10); thus the tower is explicitly described as a symbol of omnipotence and mockery, and is given the role of the centre of the symbolic sphere.

Seamus Heaney observes that the symbolic Tower derives its meaning from the actual tower in Thoor Ballylee, where Yeats took up residence in 1917. Thoor Ballylee shortly became for Yeats a symbol of his poetic goal, and he based his imaginary tower on the real building from county Kiltartan. In Heaney's words Thoor Ballylee was "the place of writing ... which constituted one of his singing schools, one of the monuments which the immortal soul built to rejoice in its own magnitude" (198 transl. mine). That opinion amplifies the pride the first stanza of the poem expresses.

Yet, the tower stands "In mockery of a time / Half dead at the top" (11–12). The two lines provide a key to the understanding of the reasons why the time is mocked. The last line brings forth the association with Tarot Key XVI – The Tower:

> The tower ... is what man himself builds, and the prototype of all towers is Babel, the tower that falls into ruin before it can be completed. [...] The tower [...] struck by lightning of divine power, and signifies catastrophe and downfall. (Raine 242)

Therefore the significance of the symbolic tower is dichotomised and made ambiguous. On the one hand, the Tarot tower disdains the people of the "storm-beaten cottages" (7) and taunts them as fallen, but on the other the Yeatsian symbol is an arrogant power, standing for the force of imagination. The symbolism is twofold, but the Tarot is used to express the human degradation, whilst the Yeatsian tower stands vivified as the speaker continues to "sing it rhyme upon rhyme" (11).

Unlike the Tarot tower, the Yeatsian one must have its origin in the Anima Mundi as all perfect symbols do. In the second part of the poem, the speaker juxtaposes his symbolic tower with three others.

> Alexandria was a beacon tower, and Babylon's
> An image of the moving heavens, a log-book of the sun's journey and the moon's;
> And Shelley had his towers, thought's crowned powers he called them once. (13–15)

Yeats's symbol thus acquires the meaning of a guiding light that leads to the understanding of the universe, and enables the speaker to be "joined to what is above and beyond thought" (Raine 242); therefore the tower's direct link to the Anima Mundi is implied. The task vested in the poem is higlighted by declaring the tower a prime symbol in line sixteen; additionally if the stress is put on "this" in the same line, the primacy of the symbol is acknowledged even more straightforwardly. The revelation of the truth through the Yeatsian tower is emphasised by using the performative verb "declare" two times within the same line (16), accentuating the ritualistic importance of the act (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 18).

At this point of the poem, the Tarot tower is discarded; the focus falls on the means of transcending reality in order to reveal the truth. The tower half dead at the top refers to a downfall, hence it would deny the possibility of ascending to the Anima Mundi. The ascension is brought to the fore when the speaker employs another symbol which Yeats frequently associated with that of the tower: "I declare / This winding, gyring, spiring, treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair" (14–15). The performative function of the tower is now additionally expressed by the symbol of the winding stair. The two are mutually dependant, in Richard Ellman's words "the winding stair has a tower around it to suggest fixity" (165) which may effectuate the ascent to a higher plain of existence.

Kathleen Raine points that "Yeats, through the winding stair, also invokes the divine anger against succeeding generations if they should fall away from 'thought's crowning powers'" (251). Thus the subsequent examples of Swift, Burke, Goldsmith and Grattan whom the speaker calls his ancestors present another twofold commentary. Firstly, they assure that continuous labour can reveal the truth; and secondly, those who venture away from the path of the stair will arouse "saeva indignatio" – divine

anger. The effort to glimpse the Anima Mundi and reveal the truth becomes a venture that might take generations. Time span is irrelevant as the truth can be approached only through symbols and those come from the Great Memory common to all who have devoted their lives to the study of those symbols. Yeats implies that delving deeper into the occult is the only way to reveal the truth. The Tarot must be studied, but eventually it will prove too narrow to lift the veil of the Anima Mundi. Hence pondering over the kabbalistic symbolism constitutes a beginning that bodes well for the future.

Parts I and II of the poem introduce the symbols that Yeats mulled over in his other writings. The tower and the winding stair both demonstrate that it is the search for the truth hidden in the Anima Mundi that matters most. The search is primarily symbolised by the winding stair. Yeats thus constructs his own symbol of the typically occult idea of the meandering path of the Serpent. The image comes from Blake and refers to a steady upward movement towards the sphere of perfection, which is Heaven in Blake, and the Anima Mundi in Yeats. The advance always involves arduous labour such as the speaker's singing the tower "rhyme upon rhyme" (Raine 245). The tower is arrogantly erected in mockery of a time since the Path of the Serpent is no more followed.

The description of the ascent to the Anima Mundi in order to reveal the truth is reminiscent of the Jungian notion of symbolic reverie; the idea consisted in the belief that all anxieties can be resolved at an imaginary level. Thus the persona builds up the symbolic structure of the poem with a view to approaching the revelation. It appears that what Yeats meant by revelation was the purification of thoughts possible to be effectuated only by a diligent study of the occult symbolism.[1] At this point Jung's theory may account for the poet's trust in symbols; the psychologist argues that interpreting symbols enables an identity to regain its unity (Storr 96). He adds that having a direct experience of the "collective unconscious" could result in schizophrenia. Symbols mediate the process of linking the material world and the Great Memory (Storr 33–36).

Yeats needed that mediation in order to convey his ideas and, even more importantly, to gather them into a consistent philosophy. Furthermore, he knew that it was only the arduous process of "stitching and unstitching" that could ensure the final purification of the thought, and subsequently allow an individual to embody truth. An instantaneous ascent was impossible. The poem corroborates that theory at the opening of Part III: "The purity of the unclouded moon / Has flung its arrowy shaft upon the floor" (31–32). The image comes from the Tarot and refers to " 'the path of the arrow' by which hero, martyr, and saint ascend direct from earth to heaven"

[1] That is during an individual's life span, before the soul has passed to the phase of the Unity of Being, when the Principles enter the 13th cone, and purification is by all means certain.

(Raine 245). Himself being no hero, martyr or saint, Yeats discards that means of revealing the truth as impossible, saying that the moon has flung the arrow back to earth. The winding stair and the "path of the arrow" form a binary opposition similarly to the Yeatsian tower and the one derived from occultism. Whereas in both cases the former is emblematical of labour towards the wisdom, the latter pertains to the fleshly desires and the lack of understanding of the mystical practice.

In part III the speaker introduces the moon symbol, which, in Yeats's theory, "stands for self-fulfilment" (Ellman 157). It transpires that the pure moon, which after "Seven centuries ... is still pure" (33), symbolises the actual Great Memory. Its purity stems from the fact that in cannot be accessed by any physical power, and therefore it remains an immaculate haven for those who have accomplished their ritual of purification. However, the binary frame requires an antithetical idea to be provided.

In the penultimate stanza the symbols of the moon and blood establish the needed dichotomy. Contrary to the pure moon, which the speaker strives to symbolically approach, climbing the winding stair of the tower, blood represents the fleshly world of "soldier, assassin, executioner" (36). All three are associated with death and violence, but despite their fierceness, those men cannot embody the truth. Since the poem is constructed on the basis of dichotomies, blood together with the Tarot tower symbolise the fall to physicality and the loss of the spiritual drive for the truth. Even if the violent men attempt to gain the wisdom of the Anima Mundi, they stand no chance as they wish to pursue the "path of the arrow." Their impetuousness signifies the downfall and causes the speaker's derision.

The dichotomies of the Yeatsian and Tarot towers, the winding stair and the "path of the arrow" find their complementation in the symbols of the moon and blood. The binary frame of the poem is thus completed. To put it in Jungian terms, the Yeatsian symbolism is issuing an explanation of how to attain the primordial wisdom. The speaker concludes Part IV of the poem with a decisive juxtaposition.

> Is every modern nation like the tower,
> Half dead at the top? No matter what I said,
> For wisdom is the property of the dead,
> A something incompatible with life; and power,
> Like everything that has the satin of blood,
> A property of the living ... (47–52)

The tower evoked in line 47 is the Tarot symbol of the fleshly downfall; a direct link is established between the tower and the "time / Half dead at the top" (11–12). The persona gathers all the previous images into one statement that the living cannot see the wisdom; all they can achieve is power. However, it is not the arrogant power of the Yeatsian symbol from

the first stanza, but a blood-stained tyranny. The Tarot provides the commentary on the condition of the world and is used to mock the lack of understanding of the mystical philosophy.

Yeats's symbols are employed to reveal the wisdom, the twofold purpose of the poem being the derision of the earthly-oriented people and the revelation of the mystical sagacity. The binary opposition is resolved at the symbolic level. The mental anxiety, as Jung puts it, is assuaged by the procession to "a higher level of consciousness," for the truth is finally revealed. The winding stair fixed in the centre of the tower bring the laborious speaker to realise that "The wisdom is the property of the dead" (49). Frank Tuohy observes that "the occultists held the conviction that knowledge is power" (78). In light of that notion the occult symbolism condemns the men even more noticeably as it denotes that they are earth-bound, at the same time affirming that the power they hanker after is illusory. The real omnipotence lies in the knowledge of the truth.

Only the dead are entirely purged of the stain of blood having passed onto the sphere of the Anima Mundi. Yeats considered death to be a process of ascent to this higher plain of existence where "all memory has vanished, the Spirit no longer knows what its name has been, it is at last free ... it becomes self-shaping, self-moving, plastic to itself" (*Vision* 233). The dead of the poem are what Yeats refers to in his *Vision* as Spirits that have shed the fleshly form and can partake of the symbolic wisdom. The Tarot is incapable of revealing the truth since it is a system created by human thought; it is only Yeats's philosophy, bestowed on him by a supernatural force, that can locate the source of the sagacity and embody it in the proper symbols. The final lines of the poem are in line with that idea.

> ... but no stain
> Can come upon the visage of the moon
> When it has looked in glory from a cloud. (52–54)

The moon cannot be smeared with blood as it represents the unphysical reality. Thus the procession of symbols in the poem leads to the conclusion that the truth will never be revealed to the human race. The only way to glimpse the wisdom is the study of mystical symbols based on the occult. However, despite his endeavours, the speaker remains pessimistic about the notion of seeing the truth. He concedes "No matter what I said" (48) which implies that irrespective of how much he managed to comprehend, his imagination is still limited by the fleshly form and the truth lies beyond his reach. Nonetheless, in the manner of the medieval alchemists and the nineteenth century occultists, neither the speaker nor, indeed, Yeats would ever cease to seek that truth.

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Symboliczne poszukiwanie wiedzy w wierszu „Krew i księżyc" Williama Butlera Yeatsa

W niniejszym artykule wiersz W. B. Yeatsa „Krew i księżyc" zostanie poddany analizie w celu ukazania, w jaki sposób Yeats poszukiwał wiedzy (w sensie metafizycznym i okultystycznym) w obszarze swoich wierszy symbolicznych, do których z pewnością należy „Krew i księżyc". W odczytaniu wiersza odniesienia do psychoanalizy Junga posłużą do zdefiniowania kluczowego terminu „Anima Mundi", którym Yeats posługiwał się zarówno w swej poezji, jak i w filozoficznej książce prozą, zatytułowanej „Wizja". Same tezy, które poeta stawia w swej teorii stożków i faz księżyca, zostaną odczytane jako filary nie tylko samego wiersza, ale też całej późniejszej poezji Yeatsa; aby wyjaśnić ich rolę w poezji Irlandczyka, postulaty z „Wizji" analizowane będą w odniesieniu do pojęcia „kolektywnej podświadomości", które zostało ukute przez Junga. Ostatecznym celem analizy będzie zademonstrowanie modelu analizy wiersza „Krew i księżyc", która pozwoli odczytać go jako przykład jednej z najdłużej trwających fascynacji Yeatsa.