

# Yeats's and Maeterlinck's Dramatic Symbolism

Ariane Murphy

---

**Abstract:** The symbols of crumbling towers, deep wells or fountains, and impassable thresholds belong to Yeats as much as they belong to Maeterlinck, indeed as they belong to a whole generation. So, this paper focuses on similarities and disparities in the symbolism of Yeats and Maeterlinck, that is, in their conception and use of symbols. In their essays, Yeats and Maeterlinck express a similar conception. Literature is by essence symbolic. To them, symbol is not the simple image of an abstract idea; symbol has its roots beyond reason; it is of divine essence. The comparison between two plays, *On Baile's Strand* by Yeats and *The Death of Tintagiles* by Maeterlinck, will reveal a special form of "dramatic symbolism" that emerges from those ideas, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Maeterlinck goes as far as believing that the author must be a passive receptor of the divine symbols whereas Yeats believes in the writer's creative power. It explains greatly the different dramaturgical choices they made.

**Key words:** Yeats, Maeterlinck, dramatic symbolism, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Death of Tintagiles*

**Author:** Ariane Murphy is a professor agrégée of French literature, currently teaching in the Lycée International Xavier, Seoul. She is preparing a thesis of comparative literature on Yeats and Maeterlinck's mysticism, on a joint PhD program between La Sorbonne, Paris (University of Paris) and University College Dublin.

E-mail: [adrianemurphy@gmail.com](mailto:adrianemurphy@gmail.com)

---

## 제목: 예이츠와 메터링크의 극적 상징

**우리말 요약:** 무너지는 탑, 깊은 샘이나 분수, 넘을 수 없는 분지방의 상징은 메터링크에게 만큼 예이츠에 해당되며, 사실 전세대에 해당된다. 따라서 이 논문은 예이츠와 메터링크의 상징의 동일성이나 차별성에 주목하는데, 상징의 구상과 사용을 보려고 한다. 이들은 자신들의 글에서 비슷한 개념을 설명한다. 문학은 본질적으로 상징적이다. 그들은 상징과 알레고리를 구별하는데, 상징은 단순한 추상적 개념의 이미지는 아니며, 상징은 이성 너머에 뿌리가 있고, 신성한 본질이 있다. 예이츠의 『바일의 스트랜

드에서』와 메터링크의 『탱토질의 죽음』과의 비교는 19세기 말의 개념들에서 나타나는 “극적 상징주의”의 특별한 형태를 노출시킬 것이다. 메터링크는 작가란 신성한 상징을 피동적으로 받는 사람이라고까지 믿었던데 반해서 예이츠는 작가의 창조적 힘을 믿었다. 이점이 두 작가가 다른 기법을 선택하게 만들었던 것이다.

**주제어:** Y에이츠, 메터링크, 극적 상징주의, 바일의 스트랜드에서, 탕토질의 죽음

**저자:** 아드리안 머피는 서울 자비어 국제예비대학의 불문학교수이다. 그는 소르본느 대학과 UCD의 공동학위 박사과정을 밟으며, 예이츠와 메터링크의 신비주의에 관한 박사학위논문을 준비하고 있다.

To unite William Butler Yeats with Maurice Maeterlinck is to affiliate Yeats to the Francophone Symbolist movement. Yet, Irish and English critics prefer to underline Yeats's other sources for his symbols: Blake, Shelley or his mystical readings of Boehme or Swedenborg.<sup>1)</sup> It is true that although Yeats wrote much about symbolism as a key of his poetics – “The Symbolism of poetry” and “Symbolism in Art” being only the most representative articles among others—Yeats made a point to distance himself from the French Symbolist movement.

In fact, Yeats's symbols do not have one particular “source”, they emerge from all his readings, and from a common trend of the time. For example, the taste for crumbling towers belongs neither to Yeats nor Maeterlinck, but is a common symbol of the time. It should not even be dependent on a particular period or a nation; what Yeats was looking for is symbols intrinsic to human nature. Hence, I will not compare the various symbols Maeterlinck and Yeats use, but I will focus on similarities and disparities in the symbolism of Yeats and Maeterlinck, that is, in their theory of symbols and how they apply it in their dramaturgy.

I will focus on Yeats's and Maeterlinck's theoretical writings and on two plays which deal with the mythos of infanticide: *The Death of Tintagiles* (1894) and *On Baile's Strand* (1904). *On Baile's Strand* was written exactly

when Yeats saw his first performances of Maeterlinck's plays. These two plays occupy a similar role in Yeats's and Maeterlinck's dramatic work respectively as they are both at the end of a first period, a moment of transition, just before a striking turn towards a more classical dramaturgy for Maeterlinck, just before the discovery of Noh for Yeats. They condense the essential of Yeats's and Maeterlinck's dramaturgical research of their first period.

## I. Defining Symbol

### 1. The Essence of Literature

Both Yeats and Maeterlinck place symbol as the cornerstone of their poetics. Symbol is the essence of literature. Yeats quotes Arthur Symons at the beginning of his essay, "The Symbolism of Poetry": "Symbolism, as seen in the writers of our day, would have no value if it were not seen also, under one disguise or another, in every great imaginative writer" (*Early Essays* 113). Maeterlinck writes in his *Cahier Bleu*: "The use of symbol is probably the mark of all literature" ("L'emploi du symbole est sans doute la marque de toute littérature" 130).<sup>2)</sup>

Its affinity with poetical language explains that for Yeats "metaphor" is a minor form of symbol. Maeterlinck even prefers the word "image" to that of "symbol", the latter being too often used by journalists to easily classify writers in the Symbolist Movement. However, symbol is not just a generic term for tropes. Yeats and Maeterlinck's symbols do not only exist in the language, but refer beyond the language. Symbol is sufficient in itself, outside of any combination of signs. It is a natural mode of thinking of human beings, which is found as much in poetry as in dreams and myths.

## 2. A Path to Mystery

That is what differentiates Yeats and Maeterlinck's symbolism to that of the chief representative of Symbolism, Mallarmé. Cecil Maurice Bowra writes about Yeats: "it [something of Mallarmé] has been transposed to another sphere. Yeats does not regard poetry as complete in itself, with its own ritual and its own meaning" (185). Whereas Mallarmé makes poetry his new transcendence, for both Yeats and Maeterlinck, symbol is not restricted to poetry, it "a part of the Divine Essence" that transcends both literature and human intellect ("Symbolism in Painting", *Early Essays* 109). They are thus closer to the German Romantics' use of symbols. Novalis, in Maeterlinck's translation, writes: "The world is a universal trope of the spirit, a symbolical image of it" ("Le monde est un trope universel de l'esprit, une image symbolique de celui-ci"; *Fragments* 215).

To define the "symbol," Yeats and Maeterlinck use the Romantic distinction between allegory and symbol.<sup>3)</sup> For them, allegory is the old usage of a conventional literature, which does not give access to mystery anymore, when symbol is at the same time the sign of an eternal literature and of modernity. Both allegory and symbol invite to read beyond the image, but the link between the image and what it evokes is not the same. Allegory establishes a correspondence going from the abstract idea towards the image. The way of symbol is the contrary, which starts from the image.

Because allegory starts from the abstract idea of its author, it supposes too big a control by the conscious mind, which neither Yeats nor Maeterlinck trusts. Allegory is limited as is the mind of its author: "Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of memory" according to Yeats ("Symbolism in Painting", *Early Essays* 108).

As allegory is restricted in its conception, it is also restricted in its reception. The symbol cannot be rendered in a simple idea. Its meaning goes

beyond its author and is multiple: it resounds in each reader differently. Maeterlinck defines them by an image (which is itself more of an allegory than a symbol, despite its opacity):

Symbol is the organic internal Allegory; it has its roots in darkness. Allegory is the external Symbol; it has its roots in the light, but its crown is sterile and withered. Allegory is a tall dead tree; it poisons the view. Intelligence interprets Allegory; Reason interprets Symbol.

Le Symbole est l'Allégorie organique et intérieure ; il a ses racines dans les ténèbres. L'Allégorie est le Symbole extérieur ; elle a ses racines dans la lumière, mais sa cime est stérile et flétrie. L'Allégorie est un grand arbre mort ; il empoisonne le paysage. L'Allégorie est interprétée par l'Intelligence ; le Symbole est interprété par la Raison. (Cahier bleu, 185)

The intellect, which interprets the allegory is what makes it sterile. The dark roots of symbol evoke the contrary image of the unconscious, the “*mare tenebrarum*” of Maeterlinck, which gives access to true knowledge.

## II. Passive and Active Symbols

### 1. Symbol and Its Creator

If taken to its extreme, this conception of symbol leads to minimize the role of the creator, which is limited to collect Nature's symbols. The young Maeterlinck goes as far. In Jules Huret's famous interview of the leading Symbolist poets of his time, Maeterlinck answers:

Yes, said Maeterlinck, I believe that there are two kinds of symbols: the one we could call the preconceived symbol; the symbol of deliberate purpose; it emerges from abstraction and tries to cover humanity with those abstractions. [...] The other type of symbols would instead be unconscious, would take place unbeknown to the poet, often in spite of him, and it

would almost always go much further than his thought: it is the symbol that arises from any human creation of genius.

Oui, disait Maeterlinck, je crois qu'il y a deux sortes de symboles : l'un qu'on pourrait appeler le symbole a priori ; le symbole de propos délibéré ; il part d'abstraction et tâche de revêtir d'humanité ces abstractions. [...] L'autre espèce de symbole serait plutôt inconscient, aurait lieu à l'insu du poète, souvent malgré lui, et irait, presque toujours, bien au-delà de sa pensée : c'est le symbole qui naît de toute création géniale d'humanité. (Huret)

We see the big gap between Mallarmé's poetics and Maeterlinck's once again. Maeterlinck's poet is a passive one, humble in front of Nature, whose genius is purely subconscious, when Mallarmé proclaims only the effort of Conscience to create with the language.

Yeats would not condescend to reduce the role of the poet as much. He would not follow Maeterlinck when he goes further in the interview affirming that "the poet must be passive with symbol" ("Le poète doit, me semble-t-il, être passif dans le symbole"). Yeats believes in the power of the poet and does not reject his purposeful will. He goes even further than Mallarmé: the will of the poet is not restricted to language; it is powerful in life.

Like Maeterlinck, Yeats admits that "Nature itself is a symbol" and the poet feeds from Nature. But Yeats turns the famous Symbolist poetical theory of "correspondances" into a more mystical concept: because everything is connected in Nature, truly, not only poetically, the manipulation of Nature symbols is itself a new, active creation. It gives power to the poet:

Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no tow modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because theirs effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadows are continually making and un-making mankind. ("The Symbolism of Poetry," *Early Essays* 116)

The poet's power is even stronger than the clouds and shadows of Nature. In fact, Yeats's "making and unmaking mankind" rediscovers Maeterlinck's main inspiration, Novalis, who he translates. Novalis writes:

But to me it seems the poets [...] only guess darkly at the magic of that [symbolic] Speech, and only play with Phantasy as a child plays with his father's divining-rod. They do not know what Forces are subject to them, what words must obey them. (*The Disciples*)<sup>4</sup>

Maeterlinck admires in Novalis such a trust in the poet's power, but keeps a humbler position. When Yeats tries to give a united vision of the world through symbols, Maeterlinck only grants them the function to get a little closer to truth, but never believes to reach it and does not present it as a system as Yeats would in *A Vision*.

In fact, for Maeterlinck, symbol is not an end, it is even an unfortunate expedient before the "Great Silence" of the last revelation:

Ruysbroeck the Admirable, the great Flamish mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is immersed at times in a world without images where God seems to reveal himself. Indeed, images are what separates us from God. But we cannot think without images.

Ruysbroeck l'Admirable, le grand mystique flamand du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, baigne par moment dans un monde sans images où Dieu semble se manifester. En effet, ce sont les images qui nous séparent de Dieu. Mais nous ne pouvons penser sans image. (*Devant Dieu, Le Réveil*, 230)

## 2. The lone haunting image

This conception of symbol, as an unconscious revelation of something that one never fully comprehends, marks Maeterlinck's early plays: he likes to use a unique haunting symbol of the unknown, as an omnipresent leitmotiv. In *the Death of Tintagiles*, it has the face of the terrible taboo of the

infanticide. The whole castle of *The Death of Tintagiles* refers symbolically to the imminent death of the child:

YGRAINE: (...) Do you see, **behind the dead trees which poison the horizon**, do you see the castle, there, right **down** in the valley ?

TINTAGILES: I see **something very black** – is that the castle, sister Ygraine ?

YGRAINE: Yes, it is **very black**... It lies far down **amid a mass of gloomy shadows**... It is there that we have to live... [...] they preferred to build it **deep down** in the valley; **too low even for the air to come**... It is falling **in ruins**, and no one troubles... The walls are **crumbling; it might be fading away in the gloom**... There is only one tower which time does not touch... **It is enormous : and its shadow is always on the house**.

TINTAGILES: They are lighting something, sister Ygraine... See, see, the great **red windows**?...

YGRAINE: They are the windows of the tower, Tintagiles ; **they are the only ones in which you will ever see light** ; it is there that the Queen has her throne. (10,11)

YGRAINE: (...) Tu vois là, derrière les arbres morts qui empoisonnent l'horizon, tu vois le château, au fond de la vallée ?

TINTAGILES: Ce qui est si noir, sœur Ygraine ?

YGRAINE: Il est noir en effet... Il est au plus profond d'un cirque de ténèbres – Il faut bien qu'on y vive... On eût pu le construire au sommet des grands monts qui l'entourent – Les monts sont bleus durant le jour... On aurait respiré. On aurait vu la mer et les prairies de l'autre côté des rochers... Mais ils ont préféré le mettre au fond de la vallée; et l'air même ne descend pas si bas... Il tombe en ruines, et personne n'y prend garde... Les murailles se fendent et l'on dirait qu'il se dissout dans les ténèbres... Il n'y a qu'une tour que le temps n'attaque point... Elle est énorme ; et la maison ne sort pas de son ombre...

TINTAGILES: Il y a quelque chose qui s'éclaire, sœur Ygraine – Vois-tu, vois-tu, les grandes fenêtres rouges?-

YGRAINE: Ce sont celles de la tour, Tintagiles ; ce sont les seules où tu verras de la lumière, et c'est là que se trouve le trône de la reine. (549-550)

However, infanticide is not the key of Maeterlinck's play. Nor is the more generic idea of death: in its turn, death is only an image of something else that cannot be explained. In all Maeterlinck's first plays, death is just the material face of the unknown. It is striking that all the characters of Maeterlinck's first drama are made hermeneutists of those symbols. But although they spend most of their time interpreting the symbols, they never reach any interpretation. Although the spectator knows the queen has killed all her descendants, this series of infanticides is rejected as the meaning of what is happening in front of our eyes. Ygraine says she took years to investigate what is happening in the castle, only to learn that "there must be something besides", which is but a vague intuition.

There is a doubt cast on any explicative speech. Each character is an abortive hermeneutist. For example, no one dares talking about the physical appearance of the queen, which, as the symbol of death, should give a clear image of it: "those who have seen her dare not speak of her... And who knows whether they have seen her?" ("ceux qui l'ont vue n'osent plus en parler... Mais qui sait s'ils l'ont vue?"; *Tintagiles* 551; Trans. 12). Bellangère fails to explain what she has overheard: "I dare not tell what I know... and I am not sure that I know anything..." ("Je n'ose pas dire ce que je sais... et je ne suis pas sûre de savoir quelque chose" ; *Tintagiles* 553; Trans. 14). Ygraine advises against interpretative speech: "Then let us not talk any more of what we do not know".<sup>5)</sup> When Tintagiles tries to interpret the heartbeat of his sister as symbol, he is unable to do so and stopped in mid-sentence:

TINTAGILES: Yes... I do not know why I hear your heart beat, sister Ygraine...

YGRAINE: Do you hear it beat?

TINTAGILES: Oh ! Oh ! it beats as though it wanted to...

YGRAINE: What ?

TINTAGILES: I do not know, sister Ygraine.

YGRAINE: It is wrong to be frightened without reason, and to speak in riddles... (26)

TINTAGILES : (...) Je ne sais pas pourquoi j'entends battre ton cœur, sœur Ygraine...

YGRAINE : Tu l'entends battre ?

TINTAGILES : Oh ! oh ! il bat, il bat, comme s'il voulait...

YGRAINE : Quoi?

TINTAGILES : Je ne sais pas, sœur Ygraine...

YGRAINE : Il ne faut pas s'inquiéter sans raison, ni parler par énigmes (563)

Each time an explanation or the announcement of what is to come is made, a grammatical disjunct diminishes the effect: "it seems," "maybe," "there must be," "I'm not sure" punctuate the dialogue.

In all Maeterlinck's early plays, the two orders of intelligence, unconscious and conscious, are fighting. The servants, which are on the side of the mystery, acting in the name of the evil queen, comment on the ignorant victims: "People always know; but they do not understand" ("Ils le savent toujours; mais ils ne comprennent pas," *Tintagiles* 568 ; Trans. 32). Knowledge, which is unconscious, is reachable through symbols and Ygraine can guess something else exists; but understanding those symbols, which is having a conscious comprehension of their meaning, is impossible to human beings on this side of death.

### 3. A Complex Symbolic System

Yeats's trust that the poet can change the world through symbols is linked to his trust in his capacity to create symbols. Symbol in Yeats must not be a single mysterious haunting image, it must be part of a complex system, controlled by the poet. In his introduction of Blake's works, Yeats writes: "The chief difference between the metaphors of poetry and the

symbols of mysticism is that the latter are woven together into a complete system" (68). For Yeats, in this new era, poetry itself reaches mysticism through symbols. The new symbolist poet replaces the mystic.

In *On Baile's Strand*, the infanticide is not a symbol itself. It is an action around which a complex symbolic system is organised. This system is based a dual opposition. On one side, there is Cuchulain and the fool. They represent imagination, wilderness, poetry, the harmony with magical forces, and the ancient times. They are associated with an element, the air, and a symbol of that element: the hawk. On the opposite side, there are Conchubar and the blind. They represent the bond to earth, domestication, weakness and pettiness, and the modern times. They are associated with the element of the fire, linked to the hearth. To these main symbols can be added the dual image of womanhood. Conchubar is feminised. The earth symbol is associated with women and their "spinning-wheels", the queens, and their descendants. However, there is also a counter image of women: the shape-changers, the "daughters of the air", the fairies, the witches and the "fierce woman of the camp" are part of the air symbol.

There is another dual opposition between the air, and the water this time: the air and hawk are solar symbols which symbolise free life, on the contrary the water and the sea are symbols of death, "the country-under-wave" (159, 167). Cuchulain being part of the air symbol has to fight a battle on two fronts, against the hearth, and against the waters of death.

Unlike in Maeterlinck's work, the characters are not looking to interpret the symbols. It is as though they already mastered it, because they belong to the system. Cuchulain knows that he is a hawk and that Conchubar has changed sides towards femininity. In Maeterlinck, on the contrary, the characters are not part of the system: they are subdued by it and the tragedy comes from the lack of understanding. In Yeats, the tragedy does not come from the mystery around those symbols: the tragedy comes from being untrue

to symbol. The action unravels when Cuchulain gives up the hawk for the hearth by taking an oath, he is breaching the system. The infanticide happens because he is unnatural: he had naturally recognised his own son, although not consciously, but being unnatural, he is unable to see properly anymore, accepts the rational argument of the others who call him an enemy, and kills his son.

### III. Emotional Symbols, Intellectual Symbols

#### 1. Condensation of the Means

A symbol is at the same time images, ideas and emotions, but in Maeterlinck's, although death might refer to something else, evoke mystery, as it is impossible for either the characters or the viewer to interpret the symbol, to understand what this unknown is, the idea behind the symbol remains obscure. What is left and overpowering in Maeterlinck's early plays is the emotion it provokes. The haunting image of death creates a sense of terror in the viewer/reader.

As a consequence, the whole play is organised towards the effect intended. Maeterlinck's symbolism tends towards simplification of all the elements of drama. The action in *The Death of Tintagiles* is reduced to the essential. The symbol of death, that is announced in the title itself, is the only action that remains. When a story that could explain the death is initiated, it is aborted as soon as it has started: we will never know where Tintagiles was before he arrived on the island, why he was gone, who brought him back, and who the queen really is. The rational story behind the murder does not matter, only the anguish of knowing that it is coming is important.

As for the characters, almost no element of personality is given. Ygraine

and Bellangère are reduced to one function, being the sisters of Tintagiles, and one personality trait: Bellangère is the weak, who is paralyzed by anguish; Ygraine is the strong who tries to overcome anguish. Tintagiles epitomizes the unconscious terror of youth. Each of Tintagiles lines mentions Ygraine, either by her name or her function:

TINTAGILES: **Little sister**, I did not hear.

YGRAINE: When they spoke among themselves, what was it they said ?

TINTAGILES: **Little sister**, they dropped their voices when they spoke.

YGRAINE: All the time ?

TINTAGILES: All the time, **sister Ygraine** ; except when they looked at me.

YGRAINE: Did they say nothing about the Queen ?

TINTAGILES: They said, **sister Ygraine**, that no one ever saw her.

YGRAINE: And the people who were with you on the ship, did they say nothing ?

TINTAGILES: They gave all their time to the wind and the sails, **sister Ygraine**.

YGRAINE: Ah !...That does not surprise me, **my child**...

TINTAGILES: They left me all alone, **little sister**.

YGRAINE: Listen to me, **Tintagiles** ; I will tell you what I know...

TINTAGILES: What do you know, **sister Ygraine** ? (8-9)

TINTAGILES : Petite sœur, je n'ai rien entendu.

YGRAINE : Quand ils parlaient entre eux, qu'est-ce qu'ils se disaient?

TINTAGILES : Petite sœur, ils parlaient à voix basse.

YGRAINE : Tout le temps?

TINTAGILES : Tout le temps, sœur Ygraine ; excepté quand ils me regardaient.

YGRAINE : Ils n'ont point parlé de la reine !

TINTAGILES : Ils ont dit, sœur Ygraine, qu'on ne la voyait pas.

YGRAINE : Et ceux qui étaient avec toi, sur le pont du navire, n'ont rien dit?

TINTAGILES : Ils ne s'occupaient que du vent et des voiles, sœur Ygraine.

YGRAINE : Ah!... Cela ne m'étonne pas, mon enfant...

TINTAGILES : Ils m'ont laissé tout seul, petite sœur.

YGRAINE : Ecoute-moi, Tintagiles, je vais te dire ce que je sais...

TINTAGILES : Que sais-tu, sœur Ygraine? (548-549).

It continues on at almost every line. The repetition of Ygraine's name and function an indefinite number of times make them lose any informative function (the information would even be misleading as Ygraine is in fact the elder sister). "Ygraine" and "petite soeur" become part of poetical system, a scansion in the story. They have the emotional effect of a pure symbol. Here, it generally is linked to sense of alarm, a need of comfort and reassurance towards a motherly figure; whereas the word "Tintagiles" or "my child" is a comforting motherly sound. All the element of Maeterlinck's drama are condensed as in a dream, to create one single emotion of terror.

## 2. The "Innumerable meanings" of Myth<sup>6</sup>)

On the contrary, in "The Symbolism of Poetry," Yeats advocates "intellectual symbols" over pure "emotional symbols":

It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. (*Early Essays* 119)

The intellectual symbol is the one that he is looking for in symbolism: it unites us to divinity.

An emotional symbol is one "that evokes emotions alone" whereas intellectual symbols "evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions" (118). The example Yeats gives shows that this conception of the intellectual symbol is close in fact to the concept of myth: if he watches "a rushy pool in the moonlight", the emotional symbol only evokes his own memory of such pools, whereas if he looks at the moon, he associates it with "her ancient names and meanings" (118), that is, her myth.

In Yeats's drama, the action and the characters have the depth of the myth. The myth is necessary for Yeats to give a more profound and universal element to his own images. The myth carries symbols that existed prior to Yeats. The symbol of the hawk carries the reminiscence of the magical bird flock that is at the origin of Cuchulain's conception, and the description of his nails like claws of a hawk in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The doom image of the raven, that Cuchulain evokes twice reminds us of his death with the Morrighu as a raven on his shoulder. The association with the symbolic creatures of the "shape-changers" and with the songs and poetry recalls Cuchulain's foster father, the poet Amergin whose famous poem shows the poet as a shape-changer, and nature as an emanation of himself. The symbols having the depth of the myth take deeper more complex meaning.

The consequence on Yeats's early dramaturgy of using the myths is that, unlike Maeterlinck's characters, Yeats's characters, Cuchulain and Conchubar, are not deprived of individual characterization. They have the past of the myth that explains their present behaviour. Not only does Yeats count on the audience's common prior knowledge, he also recalls this legend within the play. Cuchulain's mysterious attraction to the "young warrior", the unnamed Connla, is well motivated as before the young warrior arrives, Cuchulain recalls his love for Connla's mother, Aoife.

However, in the next Cuchulain plays, Yeats will realise that in order to keep the symbolical depth of the myth, he does not need to represent the story and to give a realistic characterization of his heroes. The myth carries it by itself. In *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain even loses his name.

However, in *On Baile's Strand* already, the story of the Blind and the Fool functions as a parallel dramaturgy. Not only does it bring a comical streak to the tragic story of Cuchulain and his son, but it also brings another mode of characterization. Beside the very individualised character of Cuchulain and Conchubar, there are two clowns with no names and no story,

who happen to be there fighting for a hen. Tzvetan Todorov, analysing the decision to interpret a symbol, explains that it is triggered by textual clues which show a break in the relevance theory (28). The incongruity of the blind and the fool's presence in the "great hall" of a noble assembly's house and of their familiarity with Cuchulain is a clue for the receiver of the play to interpret them symbolically. The fool and the blind are the symbolic doubles of the more realistic heroes of the tragic story, Cuhulain and Conchubar<sup>7</sup>). The discrepancy between the two dramaturgical modes that lie together within the same play is further emphasised by the possibility that Yeats considered of using masks for the fool and the blind only.

Thus, Yeats is not thus far in this from Maeterlinck. One dreamt of using masks, the other dreamt of a theatre of puppets. Although Yeats's and Maeterlinck's conception of symbol is very different, because they were both looking for a meaningful symbolisation of the stage, they strove for a theatre of pure convention who would control and almost erase the individuality of the actor. It would also have an impact on the set.

#### IV. Visual Symbols and Language Symbols

##### 1. The Imaginary Set

In drama, unlike in poetry, the trigger for the interpretation of symbols can either come from language itself, when listening to the dialogue, or from external clues, found when looking at the set. In *On Baile's Strand*, the set remains realistic and does not have yet the symbolic value he will give it in his next Cuchulain play, *The Green Helmet*. In *On Baile's Strand*, almost all the clues for the symbolic interpretation come directly from the dialogue. On the stage set, only the light of the "sea-mist" evokes the water and the "bowl of fire" carried by the women evokes the hearthstone. Apart from those two

visible elements of the scenery, the rest of the symbols are born from the stories (the hawk is mentioned as the figure of the divine father of Cuchulain, the witches and other magical creatures as the companions of the fool and Cuchulain on their errands), or as from a concomitant off stage scenery (when the fight of Cuchulain with the sea takes place off-stage and the fools narrates it). The symbolic set is mostly an imaginary one.

One could wonder if Yeats's symbolism in his drama differs from the symbolism of his poetry. Does it become dramatic? When analysing the simple tropes, which in poetry would remain metaphors and not symbols, it is interesting to notice what becomes of them in the complex system of the whole play<sup>8</sup>). The image of the water in Cuchulain speech, "It's time the years put **water** in my blood/ And **drowned** the wildness of it", is a simple metaphor, whose only meaning is figurative. However, within the complex system of the myth, water gains a more complex meaning: the metaphorical water in Cuchulain's blood functions as a prolepsis of the real sea, which looms over the destiny of Cuchulain, until the final battle with the waves. The specificity of Yeats's symbolism in his drama is that the univocal tropes are doubled by other images which maintain the literal, concrete meaning, and actualise it. In a certain manner, the symbolic character of the fool is himself actualised in the more realistic character of Cuchulain at the end of the play, when he becomes mad in his turn.

## 2. The Dissonant Set

In Maeterlinck's play, symbolism seems to be more linked to external elements. The scenery has no element of realism, every detail of it is meaningful. However, representing exactly what is being said would be redundant, as Maeterlinck shows everything through language. For example, the minute description of the door that separates Ygraine and Tintagiles in

the last act is not given in the stage directions, but it is Ygraine who describes it aloud for the reader/spectator to picture it in imagination with all its details: “It is of **iron... solid iron** and there is **no lock...** How can they open it? I see **no hinges...**! suppose it is sunk into the wall... This is as far as one can go... There are **no more steps.**” (“Elle est en fer uni, tout uni et n’a pas de serrure... Par où donc s’ouvre-t-elle ? Je ne vois pas de gonds... Je crois qu’elle est scellée dans la muraille... On ne peut pas monter plus haut... Il n’y a plus de marches...”; *Tintagiles*, 573-574; Trans. 38) A realistic iron door, because it would be a particular door, would lose its ideal generic form, so would partially lose its symbolical value. The symbols are thus language based as well as Yeats: there are found in an imaginary scenery.

Maeterlinck was suspicious of drama on stage, and like his contemporaries, Mallarmé in particular, he was tempted by the idea of a theatre for the imagination. He published *The Death of Tintagiles*, with no intention of performing it on stage. However, unlike Mallarmé, although he was not as participating in the direction of his plays, he trusted the most avant-garde directors of the time with his works. In fact, he soon found that the theatre for the imagination, with the use of an imaginary symbolical scenery, was not incompatible with performance. However, it meant that the actors and the set would not “re-present” the text. And indeed directors of the play from the beginning have chosen not to represent on the set the scenery described in the characters’ language. The first performance of *The Death of Tintagiles* is also Vsevolod Meyerhold’s first attempt at symbolist stage direction. The set was a simple mural. The recent staging of Maeterlinck’s short plays by Claude Régy even explore the interest of a discrepancy between what the audience can see and what he hears: the set of his production of *The Death of Tintagiles* was a dark front floor and a lit wall covered with dark strips, which dull all shades: no object, no castle, no metal door, even the actors’ facial expressions were made imperceptible by the dim light. The text, which was almost chanted,

only remains, liberating the imagination. Did not Maeterlinck himself dream of a static theatre not only to hear the emotions of the text, but also to hear what lies behind the text, in the silence?



Fig. 1. Brigitte Enguerand. Photograph of *La Mort de Tintagiles*, Dir. Claude Régy. Dominique-bruguiere-lumiere.com. Web. 1 Sept. 2016

Yeats dreamt as well of a theatre that could be made to hear the text and its music: a theatre for “the ears”. For a different purpose than Maeterlinck: not to hear the interiority of beings in the silences, but to be able to grasp the complex ideas, the “intellectual emotions” of its poetry. In his recent staging of Yeats’s plays, Pierre Longuenesse worked on a similar principle of dissociation:

This dissociation between the sound and the image, and the focus on the aural medium at the cost of the visual one, is the source of a ‘theatre of voices’, where it is the voice that allows us to see what happens off stage,

or what is immersed in darkness on stage.

Cette dissociation entre le son et l'image, et la focalisation sur le médium sonore au détriment du visuel, est à la source d'un 'théâtre des voix' où la voix, précisément, donne à voir ce qui se déroule hors scène, ou ce qui, sur scène, baigne dans la pénombre. (Longuenesse, 133)

Yeats will even go further than Maeterlinck in this dissociation, when not only is the text disconnected from the set, but the voice is disconnected from the actor: dancer taking on the action and the musician the words. Cuchulain is off stage fighting the waves, soon it will be on stage that those silent movements are taking place with the commentary of musicians.

Maeterlinck and Yeats share the conception of a powerful symbolism, essential to literature, but which goes beyond it. Literature reaches mysticism thanks to symbolism. Because it is essential, symbolism is the core of their poetry as much as their drama. However, their vision of symbolism is different and it explains greatly the different dramaturgical choices they made. On the one side, Maeterlinck sees symbols as the mysterious emanations of the unknown that one can only grasp at times unconsciously. In his early plays, this conception has a consequence of concentrating all the elements of his drama, action, characters, set, on a unique haunting symbol to represent this unknown, and which all the characters try but fail to explain. All that remains is the emotion of terror that the death symbol creates. On the other side, Yeats trusts more the power of the poet; the symbols are his tool to recreate the world. His symbolic creation is thus as complex as a cosmogony. His early plays rely on myth for this depth of meaning but already it mostly relies on images, on a complex web of symbols, which, in drama, take on an active form. Where Maeterlinck and Yeats join one another is in the importance of language in this symbolism. The symbols are inseparable from the images of poetry. Thus, their theatre is not a drama to be read, but it is surely a drama to be heard.

## Notes

- 1) Cf. Cecil Maurice Bowra, Thomas Rice Henn, Denis Donoghue.  
C. M. Bowra quotes Yeats himself:  
"My interest in mystic symbolism did not come from Arthur Symons or any other contemporary writer. I have been a student of the medieval mystics since 1887... My chief mystical authorities have been Boehme, Blake, and Swedenborg.  
Of the French Symbolists I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge."
- 2) Unless otherwise stated, the translations are my own.
- 3) Tzvetan Todorov places the birth of the famous distinction between symbol and allegory at the turn of the 18th century in Germany.
- 4) In Maeterlinck's translation: "Il me semble que les poètes [...] ne soupçonnent qu'obscurément les prestiges de cette langue [symbolique] et qu'ils jouent avec la fantaisie comme un enfant avec la baguette magique de son père. Ils ne savent pas quelles forces leur sont soumises, quels univers doivent leur obéir." (*Fragments* 370)
- 5) The translation states: "Then let us not talk any more of these things" (10), but in French, it is: "Alors, ne parlons plus de ce qu'on ne sait pas" (549)
- 6) "Symbolism of Poetry," *Early Essays* 118.
- 7) See for example Jacqueline Genet's more complex interpretation of the two clowns, which one can at times interpret as the symbols of the two different characters of Conchubar and Cuchulain, and at times as the symbols of two antagonistic aspects of Cuchulain personality.
- 8) The main distinction between the symbol and the trope being that the symbol maintains the literal meaning of the sentence on which the indirect meaning is superimposed. Tzvetan Todorov calls the univocal image, "lexical symbolism", the image that maintains both literary and figurative meaning, "clausal symbolism" (37-38).

## Works cited

- Bowra, C. M. *The Heritage of Symbolism*. London: Macmillan, 1967.
- Donoghue, Denis. "Yeats: The Question of Symbolism." *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Language*. Ed. Anna Balakian. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1984.
- Genet, Jacqueline. *Le Théâtre de William Butler Yeats*. Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1995.
- Gorceix, Paul. *Maurice Maeterlinck: L'Arpenteur De L'invisible: Essai*. Bruxelles: Le Cri, 2005.

- Henn, T. R. "Yeats's Symbolism." *The Integrity of Yeats*. Ed. Denis Donoghue. Folcroft, Pa: Folcroft Library Editions, 1971.
- Huret, Jules. *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*. Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1891. gallica.bnf.fr. Web. 1 Sept. 2016.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice. *La Mort de Tintagiles, Théâtre Tome 1, Oeuvres*, Vol. II. Ed. Paul Gorceix. Bruxelles: André Versaille éditeur, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Le Cahier Bleu, édition critique avec notes, index et bibliographie de Joanne Wieland-Burston*. Ed. Joanne Wieland-Burston. Gand: Editions de la Fondation Maurice Maeterlinck, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Death of Tintagiles*, trans. Alfred Sutro. London: Gowans and Gray, 1909.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Devant Dieu, Le Réveil de l'âme, Oeuvres*, Vol. III. Ed. Paul Gorceix. Bruxelles: André Versaille éditeur, 2010.
- La Mort de Tintagiles*, by Maurice Maeterlinck, dir. Claude Régy, Set Daniel Jeanneteau, Lights Dominique Bruguière. Théâtre Gérard Philippe, Paris: 1997. Performance.
- Longuenesse, Pierre. "Singing amid uncertainty": *dramaturgie et pratique de la voix dans le théâtre de William Butler Yeats*. A doctoral thesis in English studies, dir. Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Carle Bonafous-Murat, University Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2008.
- Novalis. *Fragments précédé de Les Disciples à Saïs*. trans. Maurice Maeterlinck. Paris: Corti, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Disciples at Saïs and other fragments*. trans. Una Birch. London: Methuen, 1903. archive.org. Web. 1 Sept. 2016
- Ruysbroeck l'admirable. *L'Ornement des noces spirituelles*. trans. Maurice Maeterlinck. Bruxelles: Les Eperonniers, 1990.
- "Symbole." *Grand Dictionnaire de la philosophie*, dir. Michel Blay, Paris: Larousse, 2003, 1019-1022.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Symbolisme et interpretation*. Paris: Seuil, 1978.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, Vol. IV: *Early Essays*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Preface to The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*. Ed. Edwin J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats. 3 vols. London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893.
- Worth, Katharine Joyce. *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*. London: Athlone Press, 1978.

**Manuscript peer-review process:**

receipt acknowledged: 28 Feb. 2017

peer-reviewed: 2+1

revision received: 15 Mar. 2017

publication approved: 20 Apr. 2017.

edited by Beau La Rhee