

The World Thinks with your Mind  
—Romantic Understandings of Symbols  
in W. B. Yeats and D. T. Suzuki

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**THE ROMANTIC AND THE ENLIGHTENED**

There is a Romantic style of thinking and an Enlightenment style of thinking. It was Karl Mannheim who first proposed this classification, with David Bloor explaining it further.<sup>1</sup> Enlightenment thinking sees the world as subject to the mechanical laws of nature which can be studied and understood by our rational minds. Individual human beings are a part of nature which gives us a basic equality and set of rights since inequalities and enslavement of one by the other can only ever be justified on irrational grounds that ignore natural law. Romanticism is not totally opposed to the Enlightenment project, but rejects much of its excesses. For the Romantic, the universe is not completely lifeless and mechanical. There are other things going on. Rationality is only one form of knowledge and is limited and perhaps inferior to aesthetic knowledge. Individuals do have rights but an individual has a mind that can connect with the world and other minds (through inherited national culture) in a way that argues against the excessively socially atomistic Enlightenment view of humans as stand-alone autonomous units.

**SUZUKI AND YEATS AS ROMANTICS**

It is not hard to see how D. T. Suzuki and W. B. Yeats both conform very much to the Romantic style of thinking. They both rejected dualistic visions of the world which have an excessive reverence for intellectualism

and rationalism, and both celebrated the insights of a meditative individual consciousness, as well as the specific historical continuity and special genius of national groups. Suzuki and Yeats actually knew each other and, as Shiro Naito and Gerald Doherty have pointed out, there is a good argument to be made that Suzuki's works impacted on some of Yeats's.<sup>2</sup>

## SYMBOLS

I want to look here at the idea of symbols and argue that they are seen very differently by Romantic and Enlightenment styles of thinking. We can see this by looking at the way Yeats and Suzuki expressed and employed symbols in their work.

In the Enlightenment view, symbols concretize abstract principles that do not change between events and times and social realities in the world. Symbols themselves come from language and are contingent and conventional, holding no meaning of their own. Symbols point away from language towards that which is absolute and timeless. The Romantic view, on the other hand, is that symbols are language that point to other language. Their meaning derives not from the universal abstractions governing the world out there but from their own event, the total context in which they are used. A symbol may be universal across cultures but if so this is an accident and cannot be assumed. T. R. Henn in his essay "Yeats's Symbolism" defines symbols as follows:

We are now, I think, on the edge of that indeterminate country where the metaphor become a symbol; an object, person, or event, real or imagined, that the artist perceives as offering a series of correspondences to the primary concept, or image, or experience, which he is using the symbol to express. Our criterion as to whether it is a metaphor or a symbol will probably rest on three considerations; whether its significance has meanings-in-depth of such a nature that the poet or artist can express what he wishes by its help and *in no other way*; whether those *meanings-in-depth* are of such a kind that we react emotionally to them; and

whether, for the same reason, the *full* meaning appears to be beyond any intellectual explanation. *And this fact is the justification for the poet's use of the symbol.*<sup>3</sup> [*Italics in the original*]

Looking at this explanation, on the surface it appears that the use of symbols seems like a move from the abstract to the concrete (“an object, person, or event” for a “primary concept, or image, or experience”), in which case it is in line with the Enlightenment view of symbols. However, the definition is also hinting at the fact that symbols lack contingency and convention. Symbols are not arbitrary and disposable but have a link to that which they represent that is “beyond any intellectual explanation”. The symbol provides an expression that can be attained “*in no other way*”.

I want to go further then and argue that symbols do not actually concretize the abstract. They only *appear* to. Instead, they reveal that abstract thinking itself is a concretization that masks the ontological emptiness that underlies the flow between concrete phenomena. We do not symbolize universal principles out there. (There is nothing out there.) Instead, the symbol itself creates the universal principle without which it would never happen. This view is not nominalism, for symbols themselves are infused by the material. They cannot exist in the abstract. Symbols work on the cosmology described in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the world of 事事無碍 (*jiji-muge*), where all is utterly interpenetrated and distinctions between the abstract and the concrete collapse.

## OF SWORDS, KIMONOS, AND FROGS

An example of a Yeats symbol is the Japanese sword that appears in the poem *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*:

The consecrated blade upon my knees  
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,  
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass  
Unspotted by the centuries;

That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn  
From some court-lady's dress and round  
The wooden scabbard bound and wound  
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.<sup>4</sup>

Henn comments that the “sword is of course identified with the soldier; it may, like the spear or arrow, become a phallic symbol too.”<sup>5</sup> And yet as Yeats begins to contemplate the sword, the symbols build up. His flow of consciousness is a flow of symbols. Henn remarks next, “But this sword is *consecrated*; it is like a looking glass, reflecting the image of him who contemplates it. The process of accumulation continues, adding all the while other dimensions to the sword.”<sup>6</sup> Among these accumulations “is a piece of silk embroidery, ‘torn from some court-lady’s dress.’”<sup>7</sup> A Japanese sword and a Japanese kimono. The male and the female. The martial spirit and the courtly refinement.

Similarly, Suzuki saw in Japanese culture a tension between the courtly refinements of the Heian period, the period culturally dominated by aristocratic ladies, and the Kamakura period, a period more defined by the manly rough and stoic samurai traditions.<sup>8</sup> For Suzuki, too, swords, with their close connection to samurai subculture, are a symbol. He says as much in *Zen in Japanese Culture*: “The sword ... becomes intimately connected with the life of the samurai; and it becomes the symbol of loyalty and self-sacrifice.”<sup>9</sup>

But in attaching such reverence to simple and obvious symbols are not both Yeats and Suzuki adopting a superficial attachment to that which is transient and only ever an object when seen with dualistic eyes? Indeed, Yeats hints at such anxiety in the next lines in the same poem:

Why should the imagination of a man  
Long past his prime remember things that are  
Emblematical of love and war?<sup>10</sup>

Are symbols not simply the *maya* of fixed delusions of fixity in the world? Are they not reified distractions from the real? The answer is to say that there

is no real. Or rather the real is emptiness. We have nothing but symbols, those moments of pure thought and experience that have their own self-representing singularity. Suzuki, in his explanations of Zen, talks of direct experience and shirking all words and all mediation. So how can his Zen employ symbols? How can he say, without dualistic contradiction, that the sword symbolizes loyalty? Or that the *haiku* of Basho, with their specific images and objects described, are the poetry of Zen? When words are nothing and unmediated direct experience is all, how can we have symbols and poetic images? To see his answer, let us look at how Suzuki examines and interprets one of Basho's *haiku* (in this case the famous poem about a frog jumping into a well).<sup>11</sup> Suzuki argues that to ask what the poem symbolizes, as it represents, is an intellectual activity and ignores the fact that the poem is not representing anything but merely conveying experience in its thusness. The images derive from the deepest levels of consciousness where the mind of the individual pops, like a frog (to borrow Basho's image), into the deeper well of the Cosmic Unconscious. Suzuki remarks:

Basho came across the Unconscious, and his experience was given an expressive utterance in his *haiku*. The *haiku* is not just singing of a tranquility imagined to be underneath the superficial tumult of the worldly life. His utterances points to something further below, which is at the same time something we encounter in this world of pluralities, and it is on account of this something that our world gains its value and meaning. Without reckoning on the Cosmic Unconscious, our life, lived in the realm of relativities, loses its moorings altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Suzuki explains further that "... the *haiku* attempts to offer the most appropriate images in order to make us recall the original intuition as vividly as possible. The images thus held up and arranged in a *haiku* may not be at all intelligible to those whose minds have not been fully trained to read the meaning conveyed therein." This idea of a Cosmic Unconscious is linked to the Buddhist concept of the *ālayanavijñāna*. This is the storehouse of consciousness beyond the individual but which feeds the individual's mind

with its coherent and meaningful thoughts and images. From here the creative act emerges.<sup>13</sup> Yeats's own views on symbols seem to echo this kind of cosmology. Here again, I quote Henn:

In the last resort it is clear that Yeats's use of symbols is closely connected with a particular and characteristic view of the world. Not only is the material world a continuous storehouse of symbols, things that involve, illustrate, make comprehensible the mysterious inner life of the artist, but there lie behind it the three doctrines that he puts forward in the essay called *Magic*.<sup>14</sup>

These three doctrines are:

- (1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.<sup>15</sup>

Putting Yeats and Suzuki's views of poetic concrete images together, we can argue that poetic images act as symbols when symbols are seen as being their own intuitive referent. That is to say that direct unmediated experience can never be conscious or meaningful unless the mind keeps alive the symbols it is generating for itself from its sources in a greater and more real consciousness, whether we label it the "great mind" (Yeats) or "Cosmic Unconscious" (Suzuki).

### **A ROMANTIC FAREWELL**

This core Romantic idea, that the symbols we live by are alive in our minds and connect us mutually to the life of the world has not survived too

well in subsequent decades. A resurgent Enlightenment attitude, with its sober sciencism and neurological reductionism, frowns scornfully upon any magical thinking about the magic of the human mind when it's thinking. Similarly, both Yeats and Suzuki have dated a tad with their twee and kitsch ruminations on the inner genius of chosen nations, Celtic, Japanese, or otherwise. Romantic nationalism does not offer the openness and plurality that societies seek to grow, nor the honest social realism they need to mature. Enlightenment thinking does tolerance and diversity better.

Furthermore, Romanticism itself has, in many quarters, morphed into a raging manic sword-swinging would-be Mañjuśrī turned monstrous by post-structuralist mutations, an enemy of all binaries and essentialism, ready to cut to pieces all the world's texts and poems with its sword of non-dualistic deconstruction. This Godzilla of anti-Enlightenment rage has, in turn, turned upon the Romantic tradition that helped spawn it. It is hard to see how Yeats's and Suzuki's gendered binaries of sword and kimono could survive the saurian stare of today's cultural politics. Indeed, in this fashionable reverence for fluidity, notions of core individualism too have been liquefied and bailed into the stagnant ponds of group identities into which no deeper springs of hegemonizing collective consciousness can be let contaminate.

And so, nowadays the humanities destroys itself with its self-skewering attacks on liberal individualism. The sciences reign supreme, ready to reshape the neural wiring of human brains in ways that were once only the stuff of fantasy. But before humanity slips out of the universe, to be replaced by post-humans made in the image and likeness of brute nature, and nothing more, let us remember what will be lost. It is the idea that the individual human being has a consciousness that is alive beyond nature and the material. And that this individual consciousness is the sustainer of the whole consciousness of the world as it is. The universe is alive with us and in us, and nowhere else. Again, Yeats:

We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Karl Mannheim, “Conservative Thought,” in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).  
David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).
- 2 Gerald Doherty, ‘The World That Shines and Sounds: W. B. Yeats and Daisetz Suzuki,’ *Irish Renaissance Annual* 4 (1983): 57–75.  
Naito, Shiro. ‘Yeats and Zen Buddhism,’ *Eastern Buddhist* NS 5/2 (1972): 171–78.
- 3 T. R. Henn, “Yeats’s Symbolism,” in *The Integrity of Yeats* ed. Denis Donoghue (Mercier Press: Cork, 1964), 34.
- 4 W. B. Yeats, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” in *The collected poems* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 238.
- 5 Henn, 39.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 鈴木大拙『日本の靈性』（東京：岩波文庫、1972）48.
- 9 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Tokyo; Tuttle: 1959/1988), 89.
- 10 Yeats, 1965, 238.
- 11 「古池や蛙飛びこむ水の音」 “The old pond, ah!/ A frog jumps in:/ The water’s sound!” Translation by R. H. Blyth in Suzuki 1959, 229.
- 12 Suzuki, 1959, 241.
- 13 Suzuki writes, “Psychologically speaking, the *ālayanavijñāna* or “collective unconscious” may be regarded as the basis of our mental life; but when we wish to open up the secrets of the artistic or religious life, we must have what may be designated “Cosmic Unconscious.” The Cosmic Unconscious is the principle of creativity, God’s workshop where is deposited the moving force of the universe. All creative works of art, the lives and aspirations of religious people, the spirit of inquiry moving the philosophers—all these come from the fountainhead of the Cosmic Unconscious, which is really the store-house (*ālaya*) of possibilities.” Suzuki, 1953, 242–43.
- 14 Henn, 43.
- 15 W. B. Yeats, “Magic” in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 28.
- 16 “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” 239.



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- 鈴木大拙『日本の靈性』東京：岩波文庫、1972.