



The Use of Mythology in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Stéphane Mallarmé

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Abstract

Symbolism favored suggestion, ambiguity, and musicality over direct expression, and Modernist poetry inherited its renewed use of classical myth as a way of expressing both private and political concerns. W.B. Yeats and Stéphane Mallarmé, two poets writing in different national traditions but shaped by the same Symbolist current, both drew on Greek mythology throughout their work, yet their comparative use of myth has received little sustained side-by-side attention. This study examines three poems in which that borrowing is most pronounced: Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" and "No Second Troy," and Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un faune." The study proceeds through comparative close reading, situating the poems within Symbolist poetics and within the classical sources and secondary criticism bearing on each text. "Leda and the Swan" is read as carrying two coexisting interpretations, a colonial allegory of England and Ireland and a historical-cyclical reading drawn from Yeats' own *A Vision*, while remaining unambiguous about the sexual violence at its center. "No Second Troy" is read as recasting Maud Gonne as Helen of Troy to displace a personal rejection onto myth and, by extension, onto the politics of Irish nationhood. "L'Après-midi d'un faune" is read against the myth of Pan and Syrinx, which it adapts to dramatize a desire that dissolves the line between event and dream, with music rather than resolution at its center. The study concludes that myth gave both poets a way of saying more than their historical moment would otherwise let them say plainly, at the cost of a residual ambiguity about how literally either poet meant to be believed.

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Introduction

Symbolism developed out of Modernism's broader break with Romanticism, roughly between 1885 and 1895, under poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine. It favored vagueness, ambiguity, irony, symbol, dream, suggestion, and musicality over direct statement. Symbolist poets took the existing rules of French verse and bent them rather than followed them, building a new poetic language that was suggestive and opaque by design. Meaning was implied and never simply given. The movement's own rebellion against inherited form helped set the terms for Modernism that followed it. The French Symbolists were themselves indebted to the Romantics, and especially to Edgar Allan Poe, but their influence ran forward as well as back. Arthur Symons' 1899 ^[1] study *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* carried Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud to an English readership and left a documented mark on T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats, who for a time shared lodgings with Symons in London (p. 1).

Ezra Pound's call for poets to take classical material and "make it new" captures one important aspect of what Symbolism passed on to Modernist poetry. Symbolism also shifted attention away from the narrating self and onto the poem itself, its words, its sound, and its symbols. Among the techniques Modernist poets carried forward from this shift was a renewed and often quite deliberate use of myth. Myth condenses emotion and experience into familiar and largely pre-verbal stories of love, war, death,

and beauty. Setting a poem against such a fantastic backdrop can sharpen the human experience at its center rather than dilute it. Edmund Wilson's Axel's *Castle*, the study that first mapped the traffic between French Symbolism and Anglophone Modernism at length, treats Yeats and Mallarmé as two ends of the same current; French poets who had absorbed English Romanticism handing their innovations back to English-language poets a generation later (p. 2). Yeats and Mallarmé both drew specifically on Greek mythology, returning again and again to figures such as Zeus, Pan, and Helen. The comparative use of myth by these two poets, writing in different languages and national contexts but shaped by the same Symbolist current, has received little sustained side-by-side attention, which is the gap this study addresses.

"Leda and the Swan"

"Leda and the Swan" is a daring sonnet by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. It takes its subject from Greek mythology and the story of Zeus, who takes the form of a swan to seduce Leda, wife of the Spartan king Tyndareus. The poem is an explicit treatment of rape, rendered through violent imagery. Although the poem centers on Zeus' assault of Leda while he is disguised as a swan, neither Zeus nor the word swan appears directly in the text. The only signal of the disguise is in the descriptive language Yeats chooses.

Poetry frequently uses symbolism as a vehicle for a message beyond its literal story, and "Leda and the Swan" is no exception. In retelling the myth of Leda's rape by Zeus, Yeats supplies both an image of political violence and something close to a working model of his own theory of symbolism. The poem has attracted more than one influential reading. One long-standing interpretation states that it allegorizes English rule over Ireland, with Leda standing in for a subjugated Ireland and the swan for an all-powerful England. Kandel reads the poem as Yeats negotiating his political investments in Western civilization as an Irish colonial subject symbolically raped by England (p. 3). Yeats' own account of the poem points to a second, not necessarily competing reading. He drafted it, under the working title "Annunciation," for a political magazine, and he later folded it into the cyclical theory of history laid out in *A Vision*, where the rape of Leda inaugurates the two-thousand-year classical era just as the angel's annunciation to Mary inaugurates the Christian one (p. 4). Both readings can be held at once: a poem about the violent origin of a civilization can also be a poem about the violent origin of a nation, and Yeats' Ireland was living through both kinds of rupture as he revised the sonnet across 1923 and 1924. What the poem does not offer is ambiguity about the act itself. The original Greek story has Zeus, disguised as a swan, fall into Leda's arms and feigning refuge from a pursuing eagle before raping her. Yeats' sonnet follows that version closely. Whatever else the poem may be doing allegorically, it does not turn the trauma at its center into an act of consent.

"Leda and the Swan" is written in the form of a sonnet, though not a strictly traditional one. It keeps the fourteen-line structure and the iambic pentameter of the form, but it opens with a Shakespearean rhyme scheme in its first two quatrains (ABAB CDCD) before reverting to something closer to the Petrarchan tradition in its sestet. The formal hybridity mirrors a thematic one. Sonnets are conventionally love poems, but Yeats devotes his instead to an act of sexual violence. A juxtaposition that is part of why the poem is regularly counted

among the touchstones of Modernist verse. Yeats takes the inherited, orderly form of the sonnet and uses its tight structure to convey an act of force that the form itself seems to resist.

Yeats, like a number of his Modernist contemporaries, treated art as something close to a religious practice. A search for the kind of salvation that Britain's more conservative literary culture regarded as faintly scandalous when framed in overtly mystical terms. He does not shy from that framing. The poem opens with "a sudden blow," language that renders the rape abrupt and violent, in keeping with the nature of the act itself. In the third stanza Yeats writes: "A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead" (p. 6). Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the Greek forces at Troy, is invoked here to bring an entire chain of consequences into just three lines: the rape produces Helen, Helen produces the Trojan War, and the war produces Agamemnon's death along with the fall of Troy itself. Cullingford's study of gender and history in Yeats' love poetry reads this chain as part of a larger pattern in his work, in which women are cast as the unwitting agents of historical catastrophe (p. 5). That pattern also runs through Yeats' own life. Maud Gonne, the woman who inspired "No Second Troy," occupies a strikingly similar position in Yeats' private mythology to the one Helen occupies here.

"No Second Troy"

The second Yeats poem examined here is "No Second Troy." It grew out of Yeats' long, unrequited attachment to Maud Gonne, the Irish revolutionary he proposed to more than once and who refused him every time. "No Second Troy" reads as a rebuke of Gonne, aimed specifically at what the speaker takes to be her use of her own beauty and charisma to provoke political violence. The poem invokes Helen of Sparta, of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, who was believed in myth to be the daughter Leda conceived during her rape by Zeus, the same episode explored in "Leda and the Swan."

Yeats compares Gonne to Helen, whose beauty and, in some tellings, mischief helped set off the Trojan War and the destruction that followed it. In Homer's telling, Helen, wife of King Menelaus, leaves with Paris, prince of Troy, and bears at least partial blame for the catastrophe that follows. Gonne, like Helen, was known for her beauty and, more pointedly, for her radicalism. She was a committed activist with an unambiguous political stance. The comparison lets Yeats suggest that Gonne bears some responsibility for the violence of revolutionary Ireland in the way that Helen bears responsibility for the fall of Troy, a claim the poem makes directly. Gonne, in Yeats' words, "taught to ignorant men most violent ways" (p. 7). The poem is dated to 1916, the same year as the Easter Rising, and its language repeatedly returns to the role Yeats gives Gonne in encouraging that unrest. The comparison works on two levels at once, drawing a parallel between Helen and Gonne and, simultaneously, between the Trojan War and the Irish revolutionary period.

In 1912, Ireland remained under British rule in the same manner as Scotland and Wales, though it was, unlike them, a geographically separate island. Irish resentment of that arrangement produced a long and often bloody push for independence, one that had not yet reached its climax when Yeats wrote this poem. Gonne was among the more radical figures in that movement, convinced that the English had no claim to Ireland and willing to commit herself fully to the

cause of independence. Yeats' own politics were more ambivalent; he preferred that the status quo hold rather than see the peace disturbed. That disagreement runs under the poem's reproving tone toward the destruction the Trojan War brought about. A tone in which the speaker blames Helen not simply for what happens but for the fact that a city had to fall in order for it to happen. "No Second Troy" reads, in this light, as an argument for peace over the violent politics the speaker associates with Gonne.

It is worth noting that Yeats' anger at Gonne rests on shaky ground. Comparing her to Helen reveals less about Gonne than about how Yeats saw her, which is not quite as a woman so much as a mythic figure, held to a standard no living person could satisfy. The Helen story ends with a wife leaving her husband for another man, and Yeats may well have hoped that art could anticipate life in this particular respect, that Gonne would eventually leave her husband for him. Her refusal to do so broke the terms of the comparison he had built around her, and the poem's anger reads in part as anger at a woman for behaving like a person rather than a myth. Cullingford's broader argument, that Yeats' love poetry repeatedly channels anxiety about Irish nationhood through the bodies of the women he desired, applies with particular force here. In the poem's own logic, Gonne's refusal to submit to the men in her life doubles as a figure for Ireland's refusal to submit to England (p. 5). Yeats and Gonne were mismatched on both fronts, love and politics alike. His instincts on each were comparatively conservative, which is consistent with both his repeated marriage proposals and his preference for Home Rule over outright independence, while Gonne held radical views on both. Given that mismatch, the relationship was arguably never going to end any other way.

"L'Après-midi d'un faune"

"L'Après-midi d'un faune," or "The Afternoon of a Faun," is a poem by the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé in which a faun wakes from a nap to find two nymphs nearby (p. 8). The faun wants them, and cannot say for certain whether they are real or a fragment of his own imagination. The poem's dreamlike treatment of desire went on to inspire a considerable body of later art, most famously Claude Debussy's orchestral piece *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, and, building on Debussy's score, Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet. The poem is generally considered Mallarmé's finest achievement and one of the defining texts of French Symbolism. Its style is dense, elliptical, and deliberately indirect. Mallarmé works by suggestion and implication rather than direct statement, leaving the reader to locate meaning rather than receiving it readily made. The poem opens and closes in a haze of drowsiness, with the faun fully alert only in its middle stretch, not long after he first notices the nymphs and is instantly transfixed. He spends the rest of the poem trying, and by every indication failing, to seduce them, though the failure itself is never stated outright. Whether any of it happened at all, or only in the faun's mind, is left unresolved. A fittingly Symbolist refusal to settle the difference between event and dream.

"L'Après-midi d'un faune" leans heavily on mythological imagery, and it is loosely built on the story of Pan and Syrinx as told in Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (p. 9). In that myth, the god Pan pursues the nymph Syrinx, who flees him, much as Mallarmé's nymphs flee the faun. Ovid has fellow

nymphs rescue Syrinx at the last moment by turning her into a stand of reeds. Pan, sighing over the loss, breathes across the reeds and produces a sound he finds so beautiful that he binds them together into the instrument that still bears her name. Mallarmé's poem differs from the myth in its details, but the resemblance remains where it matters: a failed pursuit, a longing that survives the object of desire, and, above all, the importance of music as what remains after the pursuit has ended. That emphasis on music may be the single most significant point of contact between the ancient story and the Symbolist poem, since both put musicality at their center rather than resolution.

Debussy's *Prélude*, composed in 1894, is the best-known extension of that emphasis, but not the only one. Nineteen years later, in 1913, Debussy returned to the same myth directly, composing *Syrinx* for solo flute as incidental music for a stage adaptation of the Pan and Syrinx story. Other composers drew on the same material in the same period, including the Danish composer Carl Nielsen, whose *Pan og Syrinx* (1917-18) takes the myth as its explicit subject. Mallarmé's close friendship with Debussy helped ensure that the poem's own reliance on suggestion and implication found a corresponding musical language. The tempo of the *Prélude* drifts and reasserts itself in something close to the way Mallarmé's lines do, never quite settling into a fixed meter for long. The Symbolist commitments the two men shared, Mallarmé in verse and Debussy in orchestration, opened space for later composers and choreographers to keep returning to the same afternoon.

Conclusion

Mythology and poetry share more than subject matter. Myth compresses and intensifies human experience into a handful of durable stories, while poetry keeps those stories alive by finding new occasions to retell them. Read together, the three poems examined here suggest that myth gave Symbolist and Modernist poets a way of carrying more than one register of meaning at once. Yeats' *Leda* poem operates simultaneously as sexual trauma narrative, colonial allegory, and cyclical philosophy of history, and the three registers do not cancel each other out. Each reading depends on the same unambiguous account of the rape itself, which is precisely what allows the poem to carry political and metaphysical weight without softening the violence at its center. "No Second Troy" shows the same mythic technique turned inward toward a private wound. Casting Maud Gonne as Helen lets Yeats displace a personal rejection onto a figure whose culpability has long been debated by the classical tradition. Mallarmé's faun poem, drawing on a different national tradition and pursuing a different purpose, uses the myth of Pan and Syrinx to leave the boundary between waking and dreaming uncertain. Without that mythic framework, the poem would have had to resolve the experience as one or the other. Yeats' two poems and Mallarmé's single, denser one arrive at that shared technique from different national and personal pressures. Colonial anxiety in one case, unrequited love in another, erotic longing filtered through dream in the third. But in each case, the classical story does something that plain statement could not have done as simply or as effectively. Myths are renewed each time a poem takes them up, and the poems in turn are deepened by what the myths already carry.

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