

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 17  
Issue 4 *December*

Article 3

---

December 1981

## Yeats: A Major Theme in a "Minor" Poem

Virginia Pruitt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 17, no.4, December 1981, p.197-200

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact [mfkelly@colby.edu](mailto:mfkelly@colby.edu).

## Yeats: A Major Theme in a "Minor" Poem

by VIRGINIA PRUITT

LARGELY because of the obscurity of its refrain, "Those Dancing Days Are Gone" (1929)—poem XIX in W. B. Yeats's eleventh volume of poems, *Words for Music, Perhaps* (1933)—is a baffling one. What *does* the speaker intend to communicate by his repeated declaration to the old woman he is addressing? To fathom the likely meaning of these lines—"I carry the sun in a golden cup / The moon in a silver bag"—is to understand the poem as one entry in a series of poems which share a major Yeatsian theme.

Certainly the above-quoted lines imply the speaker's sense of mastery; they also echo fairy tales, and are redolent of mystery and magic; Yeats gave as his source for the first line the last of Pound's *Cantos*.<sup>1</sup> But the values he associated with the images of sun and moon are difficult to establish. This indefiniteness may explain why so few critics have remarked on this poem, and why, in the commentary which does exist, only cursory mention is made of the symbols' derivation and meaning. For instance, John Unterecker simply records Yeats's own notation.<sup>2</sup> Richard Ellmann goes a bit further and locates the origin of the symbols in alchemical writers whom he does not specify.<sup>3</sup> A. Norman Jeffares directs us to one of Yeats's very early poems, "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" (1891)—more precisely, to Yeats's handling of the images of sun and moon in the culminating stanza of that poem. By such a referral, Jeffares reveals that he views these images as a fairy tale motif.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Parkinson, who has dealt extensively with Yeats's use of sun and moon as icons, feels that in this poem Yeats employs the early associations he had exploited in "The Song of Wandering Aengus."<sup>5</sup> If one examines Parkinson's interpretation of the latter poem, one learns that he thinks the images of sun and moon stand for "masculine and feminine," and therefore an "indolently pleasant sexual relationship" (p. 161).

1. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 456.

2. See *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (New York: Noonday, 1959), p. 233.

3. See *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 79.

4. See *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 457-458.

5. See *W. B. Yeats: Self-Critic and The Later Poetry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 165. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text.

I am convinced that Yeats's remarks in an early essay clarify the bewitching but ambiguous refrain. These statements indicate that the refrain synthesizes the attitude which the speaker dramatizes in the rest of the poem. Hence the refrain is more integral to the poem's structure than might appear. More importantly, the refrain metaphorically suggests a major Yeatsian theme, the unity of the physical and the spiritual, of the finite and the infinite. To be more exact, the symbols of moon and of sun appear to have been chosen by Yeats because inherent in them is the potency and richness of age-old tradition and impersonal memory. In the essay "Gods and Fighting Men" (1901), Yeats says that ancient Celtic writers associated the moon with communal emotions, and then continues:

Is it because all that is under the moon thirsts to escape out of bounds, to lose itself in some unbounded tidal stream, that the songs of the folk are mournful, and Fianna, whenever the queens lament for their lovers, reminds us of songs that are still sung in the country places? Their grief, even when it is to be brief, like Grania's, goes up into the waste places of the sky. But in supreme art or in supreme life there is the influence of the sun too, and the sun brings with it, as old writers tell us, not merely discipline but joy; for its discipline is not of the kind that multitudes impose upon us by their weight and pressure, but the expression of the individual soul turning itself into a pure fire and imposing its own pattern, its own music, upon the heaviness and the dumbness that is in others and in itself. When we have drunk the cold cup of the moon's intoxication, we thirst for something beyond ourselves . . . but if we have drunk from the hot cup of the sun, our own fullness awakens . . . and if any ask what music is the sweetest, we can but answer, as Finn answered, 'what happens'.<sup>6</sup>

The speaker, then, when he presents the old lady with the sun and the moon, may mean to demonstrate to her the discipline she must adopt if she is not to be lured into the melancholy dream of *personal* memories. I do not think his dismissal of her sorrows is intended to convey callousness; rather, he is admonishing her about the danger of brooding over the irretrievable losses of physical beauty and of mortal kin—about the peril, in short, of succumbing to an enervating depression. She must become, the speaker implies, more constructively introspective—i.e., seek sustenance, perhaps, in the *impersonal* memories which reside in what Yeats, both in his poetry and his prose, referred to as "the Great Memory," or Anima Mundi.<sup>7</sup> But she must not only exercise to the fullest extent her intellectual powers—in other words, drink from "the cold cup of the moon's intoxication." She must also quaff "the hot cup of the sun," must mobilize her emotional and spiritual powers, must revive her own "music"—her *affect*—be responsible for the creation of her own "joy."

This view of the speaker's purpose is supported by his allegation in the concluding stanza, at which point he intimates the wellspring of his "bizarre" gaiety, a gaiety only apparently illogical:

6. See *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 25–26.

7. This concept is congruent with the concept of the collective unconscious advanced by Carl Jung.

## VIRGINIA PRUITT

199

I thought it out this very day,  
 Noon upon the clock,<sup>8</sup>  
 A man may put pretense away  
 Who leans upon a stick

The speaker has dismissed "pretense"—by which he probably means the vanity of assuming that one has any physical desirability when one is old; the speaker insinuates by his affirmative stance that a person possesses only that intrinsic value which he creates by the exercise of imaginative activity. His final assertion that he will sing until he drops is not a show of meretricious bravado. More likely, it is meant to communicate the degree of his intensity and the constructiveness of his form of self-absorption, as does his indifference to the nature of his audience ("maid or hag"). Thus, in the course of the poem, the speaker articulates to his auditor ("Come, let me sing into your ear") not the headiness of sexual passion, which is what the reader might expect, given the manner of his address. Rather, he witnesses to the raptures of an incandescent imagination.

Reinforcement for this interpretation of "Those Dancing Days Are Gone" is provided by a consideration of the poems which flank it, poem XVIII ("Mad as the Mist and Snow") and poem XX ("I Am of Ireland").<sup>9</sup> In the former poem, the correspondence between external and internal disorder is implied by the title. The speaker, having called to his companion's attention the numerous works by classical authors which fill the bookcase, has by the third and final stanza been startled into the perception that even the supreme minds of Cicero and of "many-minded" Homer (i.e., Homer's intellect was as comprehensive as it was profound) capitulated to the vicissitudes of old age (the "foul winds" of the first stanza), in this instance to the devastating derangement conveyed by the word "mad." Moreover, the speaker's ultimate realization dissolves his own psychic equilibrium. He had, in stanza one, complacently declared to his friend that their minds were "at their best this night"; but the speaker is aged; his awareness of this uncomfortable fact is indicated in stanza two, where he asks an obviously rhetorical question: "How many years ago / Were you and I unlettered lads." Hence, in stanza three, he is driven to sighing and to shuddering, perhaps because he foresees the threat to his own faculties of that depressing fate which befell even the intellectual titans of the ancient world.

On the other hand, the speaker of poem XX, "I Am of Ireland," confronted with a similar circumstance of demoralizing external disorder—

8. The specificity of "noon" is puzzling. A comment Yeats made in *Wheels and Butterflies* offers possible enlightenment: "Perhaps now that the abstract intellect has split the mind into categories, the body into cubes, we may be about to turn back towards the unconscious, the whole, the miraculous; according to a Chinese sage darkness begins at midday" (see *Explorations*, p. 404).

9. Yeats carefully arranged the poems within each volume of poetry; surely, then, the sequence of these three poems is not haphazard but deliberate, and meant to be suggestive.

'The fiddles are all thumbs  
Or the fiddle-string accursed,  
The drums and the kettledrums  
And the trumpets all are burst,  
And the trombone,' cried he.

—seemingly does not regard this disorder as the prefiguration of impending psychological fragmentation. For despite the chaotic external conditions, she continues to issue indefatigably what appears to be, under the depressing circumstances, an absurd invitation: "Come . . . dance with me in Ireland." Her proposal makes more sense if the reader recognizes that it may reflect the breadth and depth of her imaginative vision. In other words, her obsessive contemplation may have made accessible to her imagination images deriving from "the Great Memory," heroic images from a communal past which are emotionally sustaining in the present and which also function as adumbrations of the future.

If my interpretation of these three poems is accepted, a basis exists for the conclusion that Yeats is suggesting the following proposition in "These Dancing Days Are Gone": if sanity cannot be maintained without an acknowledgement of the "objective" facts (the old man ridicules the old lady for clinging to the illusion that her "dancing days"—the days of physical vitality and attractiveness—are *not* over), a vision of "objective" reality untempered by its "subjective" complement makes the individual susceptible to madness in another form: witness the ultimate distraught emotional state of the speaker in "Mad as the Mist and Snow." Wisdom, Yeats suggests, is the capacity to counter the impact of evident facts—those which comprise either the biological reality or the external panorama—with subtler facts of potentially equivalent impact. These facts comprise the psychologic reality, the intangible resource constituted by the individual's mental and spiritual and emotional powers. If, then, the individual is forced to comprehend "objective" reality in order to retain sanity, he or she can transform the nature of his or her perceptions by the concomitant apprehension of another kind of reality. And the juxtaposition of these diverse realities permits a synthesis. This synthesis, in turn, may generate insights the individual was incapable of producing when his/her focus was exclusively upon external facts.

Thus, two partial views may blend to yield a complete and emotionally stable perspective upon experience. It is this reconciliation Yeats arrived at in other and better-known poems, in, for example, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926), "The Tower" (1925), "Lapis Lazuli" (1936) and in "An Acre of Grass" (1936). Each of these poems depicts the achievement of mastery and the concurrent banishment of despair through inspiration, the evocation, after internal struggle, of "The sun in a golden cup / The moon in a silver bag."

*Washburn University of Topeka, Kansas*