THE ROSE SYMBOL IN W.B. YEATS' POETRY

Yeats: an introduction

Art in general and poetry in particular carry within themselves those eternal symbols which contribute to define the power of archetypes. The artistic production of W.B. Yeats, Irish poet born in 1865 and dead in 1939, took place during positivism; in a period dominated by the rational approach, this author proposed an approach to literature based on symbols: from the inexhaustible richness of symbols that we can find in his poetry, I have decided to analyze the ‘rose’, since we are perfectly aware of how this symbol goes over a strictly poetic dimension to be present as universal symbol in a great number of cultures. Just a few flashes concerning the imaginary: we find the rose in tradition, initially attributed to Venus, the goddess of pagan love. This flower will later be bound to be filtered by Christianity in order to be re-directed inside the values recognized by the Catholic Church. Thanks to this operation it will become, with St Bernard of Clairvaux, the principal symbol of Virgin Mary, the Queen of Paradise. It is anyway evident that the apex of the concept of Love, both considered in its earthly and spiritual aspect, is synthetized in the rose found in Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’, where we can verify the Middle Ages in the spirit of courtly love and in the theological interpretation of divine love. The last cantos of the Paradise are dominated by the huge mystic rose, on the white petals of which sit the saints; the sun, symbol of the trinity, illuminates the scene: the sun that gives life to the rose and the rose which manifests the glory and the power of the sun are inseparable and interdependent symbols: the fact that it blossoms thanks to the divine sun is the expression of the eternal realization of all that is temporal; that is why Dante’s love for Beatrice, in the same way as man’s love for a woman, from a personal experience should assume a transcendent meaning. This assumption (also underlined by C. Baudelaire in his theory of ‘correspondences’), which states that any entity in the natural world corresponds to a supernatural counterpart, is at the basis of the symbolist movement, developed at the end of the XIXth century, to which Yeats belonged. According to Yeats art must be symbolic, since only a symbol can express an invisible essence and thus escape from the poverty of an excessively ordered conscience; this poet believes that the encounter with Wisdom (Sophia) can only take place far from conscience. Yeats took his symbolic iconography from many sources:

1. Ethnic tradition
2. The cult of Irish heroes
3. The fight for the Home Rule (Irish political freedom)
4. The disappointment which followed the poet’s unhappy love for the actress Maud Gonne
5. A new interpretation of the world, connected to Jung’s psychology and archetypes. With regard to this conception, it is interesting to notice that Yeats, as early as 1901, had already elaborated, in his essay ‘Magic’, the theory of ‘the Great Memory’ which stated the existence of a collective memory, seat of all myths and universal archetypes that can only be evoked through symbols. This means that, according to Yeats, THE SYMBOL IS THE UNIVERSAL ELEMENT COMMON TO THE HISTORICAL MIND AND TO THE UNIVERSAL MIND. On the other hand, if we believe in the eternity of the mind, the poet’s job will be close to the one of a Socratic scholar: THE LIBERATION OF ETERNAL MAN FROM HIS TEMPORAL CHAINS.
6. As far as symbols are concerned, we cannot forget that Yeats owes much of the richness of his symbols and images to his approach first to M.me Blavatski’s Theosophical Society and later (in 1890) to the Rosicrucian movement of The Golden Dawn, founded by Mac Gregor Mathers.

Yeats and the rose

Iso to Yeats, the rose is the symbol of a final accomplishment. It is the personification of eternal spirit in human flesh, of infinite love in finite man. After going through a huge number of titles, lines and sentences underlining the essential importance that this flower bears in Yeats’ poetry, I have decided to examine a poem: The Tr Octavia. The Travail of Passion and a tale ‘Rosa Alchemica’, which in my opinion evidence how the poet has found in the rose both its symbolic meaning and the highly archetypical one.

‘The Tr Octavia’

When the flaming lute-thronged angelic door is wide;
When an immortal passion breathes in mortal clay;
Our hearts endure the scourge, the plaited thorns, the way
Crowded with bitter faces, the wounds in palm and side,
The vinegar-heavy sponge, the flowers by Kedron stream;
We will bend down and loosen our hair over you,
That it may drop faint perfume, and be heavy with dew,
Lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream.

Commentary:
The poem represents the union between the highest and the lowest elements of reality; this signifies that love is nothing but a painful experience, which should prepare us for a nobler love, incompatible with our earthly existence.

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS:

It is here expressed the moment when immortal beings enter mortal life, through the process of incarnation.

1. The origin of human passion, according to this poem, is to be found in eternity and man is allowed to love profoundly only with the consent and participation of what he is not, which means only when ‘an immortal passion breathes in mortal clay’. In this construction Christ is the imagination which enters ‘mortal clay’ for the purpose of purifying it, rendering it symbolic.
2. The experience of love is an agony, like the crucifixion, the end of which is the death and consequent purification of the lover.
3. ‘Passion’: key-word denoting both Christ’s final suffering (with an allusion to the wounds and blood) and a deep sexual sentiment.
4. The element ‘dew’ is here present.
5. The last line of the poem describes the mortal lovers who have initiated their cosmic drama: ‘the lily of death pale hope’ represents the male element, while the ‘rose of passionate dream’ is referred to the feminine: here they form an image of absolute unity, the archetype of the integration of the opposites.
6. This means that the force symbolising emotions is cosmic (and not personal) and that it implies the usurpation, by the mortal lover, of the same energy by which God created the world. The sexual (infra-red) question is transformed into the (ultra-violet) longing for the progenitor figure of Wisdom, symbolised by the Virgin.

“Rosa alchemica” (published in 1896)

The anonymous Catholic narrator of the story, decides of engaging himself in an initiation practice, which will enable him to get in touch with the gods surrounding him. For this reason he decides to move to a village by the sea (at the border between conscience and unconscious), where there is a small building, seat of the Temple of the ‘Rosa Alchemica’; there he will become one of the adepts that have attained the fusion with the immortal spirits. A dance will take place, during which, in the middle of incense clouds, the union with archetypal figures will lead to the complete emptying and subsequent death of the ego, making man become an incarnation, a mask of the archetype.
invertebrates and, following evolution, even mammals’ blood, is closely connected to the infinite images present in legends, mythology and what it may symbolise in the infra-red, we must think about the hematic aspect present in man (and in women, too), that represents the human tie to the maternal being who gave him life. It must be anyway underlined that, while in man blood (the symbol of the maternal impact the opposite pole, the feminine, with the aim of completing the individuation process. It is at this point that it should be doubted whether the ‘vapores’ quoted by alchemists with regards to the rose might represent a feminine component which, once exalted, is given to the calyx, enclosing the bud before it blossoms). He wrote a riddle, which describes them as follows:

ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY
Andronic Tozonotti, Pina ‘I ROSACROCE’ 2000, ed. Xenia, Milano

Cattabiani, A. ‘FLORARIO’ 1998, Mondadori, Milano
Chevalier-Gheerbrant ‘DIZIONARIO DEI SIMBOLI’ 1999, BUR, Milano
Eco, U. ‘IL NOME DELLA ROSA’ 2000, Bompiani, Milano
Guénon, R. ‘SIMBOLI DELLA SCIENZA SACRA’ 2000, Adelphi, Milano
Guillaume de Lorris ‘IL ROMANZO DELLA ROSA’ 1983, Archè, Milano
Heinz-Mohr, Volker Sommer ‘LA ROSA’ 1989, Rusconi, Milano
Mac Liammòir M. – Boland E. ‘W.B. YEATS’ 1971, Thames & Hudson, London
Oliva, Renato ‘HODOS CHAMELIONTOS’ 1989, ed. Le Lettere, Torino
Yeats, W. B. ‘SELECTED POEMS’ 2000 Penguin Books
Yeats, W. B. ‘ROSA ALCHEMICA’ 1998, ed. Se, Milano
Zolla, Elémire ‘L’ANDROGINO’ 1989, ed RED, Milano

Written by Daniela Capsoni