

Yeats, Folklore, and the Aesthetic

A.E.M. Baumann

Yeats's poem "The Cap and Bells" is a curious thing. Much of the imagery is empty of immediately determinable significance: why (or how) does the jester's soul wear a blue garment and his heart a red one? Why does he die when he gives his cap and bells and not when he gives his soul or heart? What is the significance of the presence (and then absence) of the owls? Hypotheses can be made, but there is no answer readily apparent within the text of the poem. The final image of the poem is equally peculiar: the young queen sits with a red mystical object in one hand, a blue one in the other; with stars having grown "out of the air" at her singing, with her hair having assumed the likeness of a "folded flower"; and with a third ethereal element, the "quiet of love," lying at her feet. The image is very much like what one would see on a tarot card, particularly one of the major trumps: the person is a royal figure, a type character, a queen; she has a relationship to another type character, a jester; and the poem closes in an image that incorporates objects from throughout the poem (directly or indirectly) including late appearing ones (like the "quiet of love"), objects generally more mystical than mundane.

Yeats's note to the poem is also a curious thing:

I dreamed this story exactly as I have written it, and dreamed another long dream after it, trying to make out its meaning, and whether I was to write it in prose or verse. The first dream was more a vision than a dream, for it was beautiful and coherent, and gave me the sense of illumination and exaltation that one gets from visions, while the second dream was confused and meaningless. The poem has always meant a great deal to me, though, as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing. Blake would have said, "The authors are in eternity," and I am quite sure they can only be questioned in dreams. (455)

Yeats's endnotes, written for the 1933 *Collected Poems*, exist in a relationship with the poems themselves that is not unlike that of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*: the comments on the poems often complicate the poems as much as they explain them. In contrast, while Eliot's notes as a near whole are a toying, erudite addendum

to the poem, Yeats’s notes are more conversational, a setting-the-scene that echoes the nature of the folkloric and mythic resonances found throughout his works.

Yeats’s notes are far from solely companion pieces, though. They often act in concert with the poems they annotate to speak beyond the poem to the whole of the poet’s art. The note to “The Cap and Bells” is one such note. In its brief explanation of the poem, it describes the lyric as a dream, a vision, whose source was the unconscious: “The authors are in eternity.” Meaning, thus, as it exists in the poem, is entirely excised of any possible notion of conscious intent. Yeats dictated into a poem the elements of a vision-like dream he once had. While the poem did hold strong meaning for Yeats a meaning which changed over time), it had no meaning which could be called intentional – nor can it for current readers, once the note is revealed and believed. If the text of the poem is considered part of a semiotic pathway, then the message sent must be accepted as one originally conceived as a *complex* of sign-functions. The poem can not be understood as a definite, clean message encoded *into* sign-functions transmitted to the reader through the form of a hard-copy text.

I am reminded of a passage from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (a passage, admittedly, of which I am easily reminded):

[N]othing could be more certain than the fact that a poet is a poet only insofar as he sees himself surrounded by figures who live and act before him and into whose inmost nature he can see. [. . .]

For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he actually beholds in place of a concept. [. . .] At bottom, the aesthetic phenomenon is simple: let anyone have the ability to behold continually a vivid play and to live constantly surrounded by hosts of spirits, and he will be a poet; let anyone feel the urge to transform himself and to speak out of other bodies and souls, and he will be a dramatist. (63-4)

Nietzsche is stating that which Yeats’s endnote implies, and opens the door to move from “The Cap and Bells” in particular to poetry (or, at least, aesthetic poetry) in general. The aesthetic text can be

understood to exist in the mind of the author not as some definite meaning needing to be communicated sign functions but as a complex of sign-functions which the author as artist attempts to generate *in its entirety*. The “image beheld in place of a concept” is the operative phrase in that the originating thought is not a message or meaning but something non-specific, something operating in its inchoate state as a complex of ideation rather than as a signified seeking a signifier.

This idea of the inchoate is inherent to Yeats’s perception of literature, as seen through his approach to folklore and fairy tales. In his work with Irish folktales and myths, Yeats developed an aesthetic derived from the connection of the mythic to the unconscious. This aesthetic pervades his own poetry, both in his use of Irish subjects and in their formal portrayal. But it should not be seen as merely a personal aesthetic: Yeats’s approach to his own poetry offers an understanding of the aesthetic applicable to all literature and art.

That “The Cap and Bells” resembles a tarot card should not be terribly astonishing to anyone familiar with Yeats, nor should it be when the poem is coupled with its endnote and its description of visionary origins. “The true Tarot is symbolism; it speaks no other language and offers no other signs,” writes Arthur Edward Waite in his classic presentation of the cards. Here, the familiarity seen within “The Cap and Bells” is recognized for what it is: symbolism in a mystical modality; signification of meanings which are at best indefinite, at most resonant in its functionality.

In his own efforts to collect Irish folklore and understanding of the constituent aspects of folklore,¹ Yeats recognized two

¹ While for many critics of Yeats the differences between folklore, myth and legend must be clarified and maintained (e.g., see Mary Helen Thuente, “‘Traditional Innovations’: Yeats and Joyce and Irish Oral Tradition,” *Mosaic* 12.3 [1979]: 91-104), here I will use the three words often interchangeably, using them as limited synonyms of their common aspect of the mythic tradition of a people, the tradition of non-historical and often fabulous tales. Context will reveal their use otherwise. This may be an

approaches to the field. Putzel, in his analysis of Yeats’s folklore studies, quotes from Yeats’s introduction to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*:

The various collectors of Irish folk-lore have, from our point of view, one great merit, and from the point of view of others, one great fault. They have made their work literature rather than science, and told us of the Irish peasantry rather than of the primitive religion of mankind, or whatever else the folklorists are on the gad after. To be considered scientists they should have tabulated all their tales in forms like grocers’ bills – item the fairy king, item the queen. Instead of this they have caught the very voice of the people, the very pulse of life, each giving what was most noticed in his day. (112)

As Putzel describes, the “passage is key to Yeats’s [*sic*] folklore theories.” Rephrasing, the split is between those who approach folklore as a subject of scientific analysis and those who approach it for *its own* purposes. “His implied condemnation of scientific folklorists, later stated more explicitly,” Putzel continues, “suggests that Yeats saw folklore as a means to an end” (112). That end is poetry. This is not to say that the folkloric is by default poetic, or that the aesthetics Yeats was building toward is by default folkloric (in the descriptive sense). Yeats’s concern was with the manner of the telling, and with those effects which proper telling permits and creates. And while Yeats worked in written texts, and collected Irish tales into written collections, his aesthetic criteria were derived from the oral element that is the origin of all folk tales. “Yeats seemed to realize that orally transmitted tales and lore are in a sense antithetical to written language. Word for word transcriptions of tales, as those published in *The Folk-Lore Record*, fail to convey the tone and the spirit of folk recitations” (118).

The distinction is a delicate and interwoven one. By saying that the oral is antithetical to the written he is recognizing that the oral tradition carries with it nuances essential to the telling of the tale,

miscalculation on my part, but a distinction between the three is not essential to the thesis of this paper.

nuances that can not be captured through direct transcription of tales. That is not to say that those nuances can not be reduplicated – or perhaps I should say “created anew” – through a careful craftsmanship in writing the tale.

The danger in transcribing from the oral to the written is that of losing the all important element of the connection these tales of the Irish people have with the people themselves, the connection to the land from which the tales first arose, and to which the tales are deeply intertwined. Putzel:

Yeats claim[ed] that phantoms and fairies, the “spiritual beings” of the peasants, are an ever-present part of man’s world and of man himself. Myths and folk tales in effect give flesh to these spiritual beings; they enable man to see how his outer or material self expresses his inner or spiritual side. (127)

The legends of the past give voice to the “spiritual” qualities of the persons of the present. These two characteristics of (1) the literary vs. the scientific approach and (2) the connection between the imaginative world of myth and folklore and the real world are the core elements to the aesthetic of folklore that Putzel sees developed by Yeats. Yet as an aesthetic they are not limited to Yeats or the Irish tradition. Their consequences – and this, as seen between the lines of his note to “The Cap and Bells,” is his ultimate scope – can be applied to literature as a whole.

Waite also writes (in language reflective of his theme):

The Tarot embodies symbolical presentations of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind, and it is in this sense that they contain secret doctrine, which is the realization by the few truths imbedded in the consciousness of all, though they have not passed into expressed recognition by ordinary men. (59)

Here, the perceived familiarity comes to fruition, as the significations found within the tarot (and the tarot-like) are brought into connection with the human collective unconscious. This connection between the mythic and the unconscious was one very familiar to Yeats. When he argues for the power of the oral

tradition and the necessity in preserving the connection with the mythic when bringing the oral tradition to the written page, it is this quality that needs to be preserved. Putzel shows that Yeats was familiar with the work of Sir William Wilde, who in *Irish Popular Superstitions* recognized that there existed a subset of superstition that held commonalities with the superstitions of all societies (116). Yeats’s folklore theories maintain a similar universality that is obviously Jungian in nature – that is, the phrase “collective unconscious” is not, here, out of place. As Putzel describes:

Yeats reveals a sophisticated psychological understanding when he observes that the contents of the universal mind have no way of speaking directly to man’s limited consciousness; the forms which these spiritual contents assume in order to communicate with the conscious mind are limited by the individual’s knowledge and experience. Jung too insists that archetypes are forms present in every psyche [. . .]. (128)

Thus, when Yeats writes a poem that is a vision-like dream, his recognition is that structures will exist within the poem (if successfully crafted) which all persons have the ability to share, and that this poem, oriented upon these structures, has origins beyond and behind Yeats’s own conscious artifice. Authorial intention – in the hermeneutic sense – is not only discarded, it is proclaimed as unneeded. The “authors are in eternity,” and meanings are engendered through the resonance of structures that hold close relation to the collective unconscious. The aesthetic of the poem is not to be found in some meaning but in the interaction of the poem with the human mind, and the potential of the poem to tap into and give expression to the workings of unconscious of the reader.

The same effect can be seen in Yeats’s myth poems, like “Who Goes with Fergus,” “The Madness of King Goll,” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea.” Though most contemporary readers will immediately recognize the Gaelic of the names, and while many might recognize the names themselves, the events to which the poems refer are for the most part unfamiliar to English-speaking readers as a whole, and remain mostly unexplained within the poems themselves. But retelling of myth is not the point: instead,

the scenes or stories are utilized in a more lyrical fashion. “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” is possibly one of the most “myth-like” of the poems: in that it is primarily dialogue, and a very poetic dialogue, the poem is reminiscent of a scene as found in such as ancient Greek drama, giving an echo of the classically mythic through form alone. The story, that of a father unknowingly killing his son in a conflict arranged by their wife/mother and involving a strange oath common to both, would also not be unexpected in a mythic or legendary tale. Even the resolution of the tale, the hero’s fighting with the sea, though potentially read as hallucinatory, is other-worldly enough to signal a classically mythic theme. Yet for all its tags, the tale as presented is not dependent upon knowledge of who Cuchulain is within Irish folklore. The poem is entirely self contained. It is not crippled by this contextual divorce from the body of Irish folkloric tradition; it still resonates with potential meaning: in the magic terribleness of the oaths taken, in the mystical battle with the sea, through the limited description and dependency on dialogue and the resulting lyrical tone.²

Within Yeats’s folkloric aesthetic, it is unimportant that the reader know the legend upon which the poem is based. Rather, because of the folkloric nature of its source, there exists within the poem archetypal elements that would be accessible to the psyche of any reader. Though the story of the poem is of a tradition unknown to the reader, the poem can still act upon the reader as though it were a tale taken from that reader’s own tradition. The functioning of the poem within the archetypal opens the poem to all readers, and permits the poem to be used by all readers to access the archetypes as they exist within their psyches. Here again, the aesthetic does not stop at the single poem, or the poem of mythic character. Jung writes:

Since everything psychic is preformed, this must also

² An example of this break from the context of tradition, even for his countryman, is seen in Finneran’s note to “A Faery Song”: “Of the forty-one extant manuscripts of the tale, only one eighteenth century manuscript uses Yeats’s ending [. . .]” (479). Even though Yeats was writing from within Irish tradition, he still felt free to work outside the main body of the tradition.

be true of the individual functions, especially those which derive directly from the unconscious predisposition. The most important of these is creative fantasy. In the products of fantasy the primordial images are made visible, and it is here that the concept of the archetype finds its specific application. (78-9)

Yeats’s archetypal aesthetic is applicable in any poem of “creative fantasy,” in any text of “creative fantasy.” The tales of Irish folklore were for Yeats an at-hand and more importantly emotionally connected body of tales – it is impossible to speak of Yeats’s work with Irish folklore without recognizing an impassioned desire on his part to re-connect Ireland to its heritage. But the operating factor that would bring about such a connection is not historical commonality, but the archetypal functions that operate within all folktales and myth: that is, the re-connection is not factual but experiential. That the tales are Irish connects them to the Irish, yes, but without their functioning within the archetypal the tales would be but spiritually dead relics.

It should be recognized that the archetypes of Jung and (in anticipation) Yeats are not contentual in nature. As Jung points out:³

Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content, in other words that it is a kind of unconscious idea (if such an expression be admissible). It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience. (79)

While Jung can speak of the mother, or old man, or child archetypes, it is incorrect to consider them already content-filled: they are form only, structures that stand ready to accept and mold

³ Putzel also refers to this quotation.

and function through content, but are devoid thereof themselves.

When considered as an operating function within literature this quality of the archetype reveals interesting theoretical consequences concerning the text. The archetype resonates within the unconscious, yet the archetype also *originates* within the unconscious. Folkloric texts resonate with the archetypal because they were created as a voice for the unconscious. Primitive humans observed the world around them and attempted to understand and decipher the world through the guide map that they carried with them within their unconscious: the archetypal structures. Thus came the stories that developed into myth and folklore. When you carry that idea into the modern literary text, as Yeats did in his collections of Irish folklore and his Irish poems, there appears in the artist a dual action: the conscious effort of the creative act is indelibly tied with an unconscious movement of communication through and operation of archetypal structures.

The question arises, in parallel to Yeats’s development of an aesthetic of folklore, whether this operation of the archetypal must be considered in *any* consideration of an aesthetic of literary/artistic texts.⁴

Before we continue in this line, the psychological presence in literature needs to be further expanded. As the interaction of the archetype between text and reader/writer is circular in nature (inherent in the reader, instilled into the texts, read from the texts, readable because it is inherent in the reader) so are the psychic energies involved. Freud (in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*) gives account to both directions of flux: that from the object to the viewer:

Visual impressions remain the most frequent
pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused;

⁴ Of course, I am well aware of archetypal criticism, as seen primarily with Maud Bodkin and her *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, but where she is looking toward the archetypal as exists and operates within poetry, here I am looking more through a lens of questions the aesthetic. While Northrop Frye is often considered an “archetype critic,” his use of the term *archetype* is somewhat different than Jung’s, originating within the text rather than in the psyche.

indeed, natural selection counts upon the accessibility of this pathway [. . .] when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object.

and that from the creator to the object:

It is usual for most normal people to linger to some extent over the intermediate sexual aim of a looking that has a sexual tinge to it; indeed, this offers them a possibility of directing some proportion of their libido on to higher artistic aims. (22-3)

This circularity suggests capably enough the ability of the artist to work within the realm of the libido; even, with the strive for the aesthetic, the *necessity* of working within and through and towards the libido. To note, one needs here to recognize an expansion of the domain of the libido outside the merely sexual to include all psychic energies⁵ without disrupting the circle of the appeal of an object to the libido of the viewer, an object created out of the sublimated energies of the artist. That said, in a footnote to the above Freud makes the most intriguing observation:

There is to my mind no doubt that the concept of “beautiful” has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was “sexually stimulating.” [. . .] This is related to the related to the fact that we never regard the genitals themselves, which produce the strongest sexual excitation, as really “beautiful.” (22n)

The connection is made between beauty and aesthetics *after* the connection is made between beauty and erotics (care must be taken here with the definition of the latter word). It is a two step process. The first is as described by Freud: the jump from the genitals, from direct stimulation and evocation of sexual desire, to physical beauty, or, indirect stimulation. A creature is “beautiful” when a viewer

⁵ As that taken by Jung: “Instead of the descriptive definition set forth in Freud’s *Three Essays*, there gradually took shape a genetic definition of libido, which enabled me to replace the expression ‘psychic energy’ by ‘libido’ (from “The Theory of Psychoanalysis,” as quoted in *The Essential Jung*, Ed. Anthony Storr, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1983), page 57).

finds it desirous to mate with them. The second jump moves farther away from the genitals: the concept of “beauty” is desired for itself, divorced from an actual mating stance, and aesthetics arises as the erotics is transposed away from the body proper and to the image, be it visual or verbal. In a sense it is a movement from symbol to sign (and archetype), following the very precepts of language itself.

Here, one more player steps into this little fray. Nietzsche’s comment “let anyone have the ability to behold continually a vivid play [. . .] and he would be a poet,” above, echoes one aspect of the semiotic theories of Eco: the semiotic invention. Eco defines the invention as “a *content-nebula* which cannot be analyzed into recognizable and definable content units” (188; here and below italics his). Eco uses paintings as his example, wherein the vehicle of the images can be described with a series of content units, but the actual meaning of the painting as a singular sign function can not so be described. There are no verbally constructed synonyms available that succeed in describing the work, except that of the whole of very work itself: “the meaning of this work of art can only be described as being that which is the content of this work of art *A*, which is seemingly nonsensical in circularity until it is realized that one can look upon another image and remark ‘I can not describe the meaning of this work *B* except to say it has the same content as that of work *A*.’” (It is to note that “meaning” as used here is itself problematized by the content-nebula of the invention. The semiotic invention “challenges [. . .] the very notion of *coded* correlation,” simultaneously challenging the idea of the “conventional sign function” [187].) That is to say, an aesthetic object can only speak itself; to break down an aesthetic object is not to describe it, but dismantle it. As such, the only possible comments that can be made about the work *B* is to compare it to something of similar modality: the work *A*, in its entirety.

This idea of invention can also be applied to the written text as sign-function. When considering a painting, the denseness of the painting can be broken down into discrete units, be they “yellow flowers” or “brown hair” or “a pillar” or “Orpheus,” etc. The continuity that creates the invention results when the many parts are brought into interaction on the canvas, when “yellow flowers” are suddenly not only “yellow flowers” but “yellow flowers growing

in the window box beneath a window that, though empty, contains some fascination for the man in the street looking upwards,” a description *without end*, which suggests in the mind of the viewer a narrative not directly specified by the painting, and which is exploded even more in that the description of the scene is but part of a visual field, all of which can be infinitely exploded through verbal re-defining and yet re-coalesce upon viewing into a singular event, into a singular “meaning.” So also can a written text can be broken down into words, into paragraphs, into scenes and participants; yet, the whole can be greater than its parts, creating out of the interrelation of parts a singular aesthetic experience.⁶

In the literary work the multiple levels of signification are more apparent than with its visual counterpart. Thus, when Eco states,

The difficulty in isolating productive [functional, mechanical, etc.] rules is due to the fact that, while in verbal language there are recognizable and discrete *signal-units*, so that even a complex text may be duplicated by means of them, in a painting the signal looks “continuous” or “dense,” without distinguishable units. (181)

he presents, briefly, a dichotomy between the visual and the verbal which needs be removed. While words may be discrete and recognizable units, their combination into phrases steps out of pure signs and into discourse,⁷ into a communication through units not so perfectly recognizable or discrete: for while signs may carry a diversity of denotations and connotations, phrases geometrically

⁶ The recognition of a sign-function as an invention does not preclude the existence of “recognizable and definable content units” existing within the medium of the sign-function. The issue not the presence of such, but their function within the whole of the invention.

⁷ Discourse is the second of the two examples of sign-functions that “challenge [...] the very notion of coded correlation” described by Eco, and where Benveniste takes phrases and discourse out of the realm of signs, they nonetheless remain sign-functions under the expanded analysis of Eco (187).

multiply in potentiality of meaning. As Benveniste notes, “An inventory of the uses of a word might have no end; an inventory of the uses of a sentence could not even be begun” (110). As phrases are combined the development of meanings increases, both in potential utilization and in the complexity of creation. In the literary work, a unity arises out of complexity. “The sign producer has a fairly clear idea of *what* he would like to ‘say,’ but he does not know ‘how’ to say it” (188): Eco writes with the visual artist in mind, but the words are readily applicable to the verbal artist as well. Is it not common to question of a literary work “What is the author trying to say?”⁸

The verbal parallels between the phrasing of Eco concerning visual artists and that commonly applied to authors is frequent. “When the painter begins work, the content [in its nebular-like structure] is neither coded nor divided into precise units. It has to be *invented*” (188). Here we are returning to ideas already examined: Nietzsche’s artist with their play vividly, completely in mind; Yeats poem as sign-function transmitted into a sign-function. The relationship between the semiotic invention and the literary work of art is as powerful as that between invention and Eco’s given example of the visual work of art. But there has been a small leap made: from the literary, or visual *work* to the literary, or visual *work of art*. Eco makes the connection for us.

A painting does in fact possess qualisign elements; the texture of the continuum from which it is made counts for a great deal, so that a dense signal is not reducible to a distinction between pertinent recognizable elements and irrelevant variations; even minimal material variations count. It is this quality which makes a painting into an aesthetic text [. . .]. (182)

Later in the work Eco examines the aesthetic object as invention

⁸ The comparison is maintained even when media is brought to question. One may say, “Van Gogh’s stars are not just stars, for they are also the gobbled paint that makes them.” Literarily, you need only consider the two words /gloomy/ and /tenebrous/ for parallel example. Though they are synonymous, the former carries in its sound greater evocative correlations to its meaning.)

more fully, his focus being on identifying that property of art that brings it into the jurisdiction of aesthetics, that evokes in those persons engaged with the text an aesthetic experience (section 3.7, pages 261-76). Eco identifies this quality as *ambiguity*.

A first step toward an aesthetic definition of ambiguity might be represented by the postulate according to which in aesthetic texts an ambiguity on the expression plane *must* involve a corresponding ambiguity on the content plane. [. . .] A violation of norms on both the expression and the content plane obliges one to reconsider their correlation, which can no longer be the same as that foreseen by the usual code. In this way the text becomes self focusing: it directs the attention of the addressee primarily to *its own shape*. (263-4)

Here, Eco is unifying the various aspects of the aesthetic object. The “ambiguities” which create the aesthetic quality effect both the content and the expression planes, unable to discern the two.

Tying the semiotic and the psychoanalytical together, as “beauty” shifts away from the genitals the levels of signification increases to inject into the idea of the aesthetic not only content but expression planes. At the first level, symbol and content are unified. The genitals need not be considered “beautiful” in the manner Freud explicates because they operate within the confines of the content plane: exposed genitals signifies sex. As “beauty” moves away from genitals to the body and then to the image, however, the expression plane becomes more and more involved with the sign-function. At the second level, symbol is replaced with sign, and while the content plane still registers sexual potency/availability, the expression plane comes more into play as the quality of form of expression ties in to the professed potency. On the third level, the content plane falls away but for the aesthetic tie to the libido (more comprehensively, psychical energies), the energies that pulse through the aesthetic object, and the expression plane expands in importance. New content planes can be added to the expression plane, working in tandem with the expression plane, even deriving

from and becoming part of the expression plane.⁹ As Eco stated above, “The text becomes self focusing: it directs the attention of the addressee primarily to its own shape.” As such, divorcing the expression plane from the operations of the aesthetic sign-function is emasculating that very property that gives the sign-function an aesthetic value.¹⁰

Here Yeats’s folklore projects reappear. Direct transcriptions of oral texts do not carry the archetypal aspects that Yeats knew was *essential*, fundamental, inherent to the tales and their aesthetic. He recognized that the expression plane carries the content plane. The archetypal can only thrive within an artistic expression plane.¹¹

As well, as the aesthetic text coalesces into the single aesthetic invention, the text takes on the authorial notion that Yeats applies to “The Cap and Bells”: “The authors are in eternity.” The aesthetic

⁹ And here the difference between aesthetic erotics and non-aesthetic erotics: whether the process of signification has come full circle and the genitals and sex acts can be themselves sign-functions operating within aesthetics, or whether the images are direct appeals to the originating libidinous drive: evoking the desire to mate.

¹⁰ The movement away from the body to the image also permits two other expansions of the realm of the aesthetic. First is the inclusion of the non-sexual, the expansion of the libidinous to include all psychical energies as described by Jung. The second is the end of the necessity of the aesthetic being “beautiful” in the sense of the word in used above in relation to the sexual. With the viewed object being expanded to content, form and sensation, the work of art as invention can create an aesthetic pleasure even though the elements of the work may be in themselves not at all beautiful. A perfect case in point is Goya’s “Tragedies of War” series or Gericault’s “The Wreck of the Medusa.” In such, in the latter especially, the negative aspects contribute to the overall positive aesthetic experience.

¹¹ An unexamined aside is the question of the written aesthetic text orally performed.

text is removed from intention as it is imbued with the quality of the aesthetic. Meaning comes from the text itself. Emotive and psychic vibrancy comes from the interaction of the libido (psychic energies) with the aesthetic object. Unconscious interaction is propagated by the presence of the archetypal.

The only question remaining is whether what we are describing is *an aesthetic* or *aesthetics*. In his folklore studies, Yeats addressed folklore with folklore as the subject. He described folklore, and described the operatives functioning within folklore. In his poetry, the factual (contentual) element of Irish folklore were used as means to create a universal, archetypal poetry. Knowledge of the originating myths was understood as irrelevant to the functioning the poetry except where folklore *in its natural state* is itself archetypal – and here we see the immediate, social importance Yeats saw in Irish folklore.

In the notes to “The Cap and Bells,” Yeats made obvious what his poetry makes apparent (and in doing so confounds certain critical approaches to literature): the author removes himself from authorship of a poem, yet still claims a resonant meaning within the poem. As well, the author places himself as a *reader* of the poem, recognizing in the poem resonant meanings irrespective of any defined author. Yeats’s aesthetics of folklore becomes an analysis of literary aesthetics (and by extension all aesthetics), setting the psychological squarely in the issue, and establishing the aesthetic text as an *aesthetic* text.

Thus, returning to the question that opened this passage: “aesthetics” or “the aesthetic”? Understanding the distinction will clarify the use of the terms: Yeats is here describing *the aesthetic*: that nature of understanding the artwork-as-a-whole, that nature of “The Cap and Bells” that functions through the mythic, the archetypal, the unconscious; he is not speaking here of “aesthetics” in the sense of the study of techniques, or content, or historical schools or genres or conventions. That latter aspect is the factual elements of art and literature; that move to qualification and quantification that is that very scientific study of folklore antithetical to Yeats’s poetic project.

I would like to conclude with one final observation. When Yeats

removed himself as the author of “The Cap and Bells,” he created an interesting shift in the perception of the relationship of the individual to the text. Much of the difficulty with intentionality lies in the fact that certain basic aspects of our approach to the text emphasize the relationship of the author to the text and reader as primary and initiatory. The conventional way in which the text is perceived in relation to the reader and author is the three point path.

author \rightsquigarrow text \rightsquigarrow reader

That it is a three point path is expected: with every text one can and must speak critically both in terms of making and in terms of reception. As well, this path follows the semiotic pathway of

sender \rightsquigarrow transmission \rightsquigarrow receiver

a pathway which is admittedly the most natural to imagine with any system of sign-function transmission. Though, it is helpful to rewrite this in terms of the message being transmitted:

original message \rightsquigarrow coded message \rightsquigarrow understood message

As understood in this, the most general concept, the written text is a crafting out of sign-functions through which the author attempts to code a parallel or copy or equivalent to some significations within his head. The text being read, however, lacks entirely all content emanating from within the psyche of the author. It consists *solely* of the linguistic encoding of the original message on the paper and the reader’s *decoding* of that code. The author possesses a structure A (the completeness, nebulosity and extensiveness of which varies), which he tries to duplicate by creating a structure of sign-functions B^W . When the text is handed to the reader, the reader reads the structure B^R and from it develops his own “meaning,” C.

$A \rightsquigarrow B^W | B^R \rightsquigarrow C$

The intent of accurate communication is, obviously, to have $A = C$, which would mean that when the writer looks at the text they see the exact same thing and does the reader ($B^W = B^R$). Except that event is possible only within a situation that is pure reportage, pure transmission of discrete data, as with two, connected computers. In reality, the structures A and C, and B^W and B^R may have similar properties, but they can not be treated as identical objects. B^A and B^R have the same potential *physical* structure – (assuming no distortion of the text) – but they must still be distinguished in that

the moment of the reading of the text is not at all equivalent to the moment of the writing: the mind of the writer is not the mind of the reader – even when they are the same person. There is a phenomenological distinction between the two. Empirically, this distinction is seen through a common example: an author re-reading his own text does not experience the text in the same way as when he was creating it. (Make the comparison of a computer writing a text and it becomes quite understandable.) It could be that words have changed meanings connotatively (or denotatively), secondary significations may have been forgotten and are absent from latter reading; sections which may have operated in a certain way during the writing process because of the hypertextual situation of the writing process may suddenly be seen to fail entirely once that hypertextual situation is removed. And, of course, there is the inherent impossibility of exact duplication into language of a mental concept.

A potentially intriguing alternative is to rearrange the path:

text read \Rightarrow reader | author \Rightarrow text written

wherein there is only one mind, if in two different functions: the individual as reader, and the individual as writer. This turnabout eliminates the confusion between the two texts of that being created and that being read (B^W and B^R). The two relationships of text to reader and text to writer has been maintained, but the implied possibility of direct and perfect transmission of author \Rightarrow reader has been removed: the author of any given text is now visually external to the relationship between the text and its reader.

But does serve only to replace the confusion of text read and text written with a further confusion between the author and reader? Also, is it not also a rather blatant assumption to combine the reader and the author into one person? Taking the latter question first, not really. Within the set of persons who are either writers or readers, those which are writers are universally also readers: both in the sense that you can not be able to write without also being able to read (and vice versa) and in the sense that to read is always also to write (and vice versa).

Now, one might say “just because a person is able to read ‘Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea’ does not mean that person is able to write it.” That statement is *incorrect* in terms of the aims of

hermeneutics. If the writer was able to accurately encode their message onto the piece of paper, and the reader was able to accurately decode the message, then yes, any successful reader of that message would, by definition, also be able to write it. And that is the assumption of such a concept of the written as seen within the basic structure of

sender \Rightarrow transmission \Rightarrow receiver

that is, the *possibility* of perfect transmission.

Except the merest application of this thought to such as “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” – or, even, the nursery rhyme of “London Bridges” – speaks the absurdity of that assumption. (One cannot but think here of Peter Menard.) The three point passage of sender, transmission, receiver cannot and should not then be understood as the baseline, from out of which all texts (and their reception) are then understood as “imperfect” performances of the act of communication. It is absurd to think that *anyone* could write “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”; it is *equally* absurd to think any two people could *read* “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” exactly the same. To think such, is to approach the text, the poem, folklore, scientifically; to reduce the text to the definable and the discrete. As such, I posit that the diagram for the engagement with the aesthetic is rather one of one mind only: the mind of the individual in engagement with the text, be that text a written text, a natural text, or the writing of a text. As such, it is not a mere re-arrangement to consider the acts of writing and reading from this understanding:

text read \Rightarrow individual \Rightarrow text written

which is an aesthetic understanding of the engagement literature.

WORKS CITED

- Benveniste, Emil. “The Levels of Linguistic Analysis.” *Problems in General Linguistics*. Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1971 (101-11).
- Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. 2nd ed. Princeton, Princeton UP, 1969.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1967.
- Putzel, Steven D. “Towards and Aesthetic of Folklore and Mythology: W. B. Yeats, 1888-1895.” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 44 (1980), 105-30.
- Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Rev., 2nd ed. New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1989.