

Mastering the Imaginary: A Lacanian Reading of W. B. Yeats's *The Rose* (1893)

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Резюме: Настоящият прочит на две стихотворения от ранната поезия на големия ирландски модернист У. Б. Йейтс („Фергус и друида“ и „Битката на Кухулиън с морето“) през призмата на психоанализата, по-специално теорията за личността на френския мислител Жак Лакан, разкрива представа за стихосбирката *Rosamund* (1893), която се различава от доминиращото в литературната критика схващане за нея като езотерика. Статията заключава, че Йейтс не търси пресъздаването на някаква мистична реалност, а по-скоро използва ирландските митове като метафори за човешките преживявания. В процеса на тълкуване, авторите изтъкват не само значимостта на психоанализата като направление в литературната теория, способно да осветли силнокриптирани художествени текстове, но също така и потенциала на художествената литература да предоставя ярки, достъпни илюстрации на сложни понятия от областта на психологията.

In "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*" (1906), Sigmund Freud famously states that "the description of the human mind [provided by the creative writer] ... has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology". Hence, "the creative writer," he concludes, "cannot evade the psychiatrist nor the psychiatrist the creative writer" (168). While Freud's reflections on Wilhelm Jensen's short novel highlight the two-way exchange between the science of psychology, especially psychoanalysis, and imaginative literature, they also point at oftentimes overlooked aspects of this exchange. Since Freud's essay on *Gradiva* psychoanalytic literary criticism (at its very simplest, producing textual

meanings based on yields from psychoanalyzing the author or particularly interesting characters) has risen to a major approach to literature. The following interpretation of two poems – “Fergus and the Druid” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” from the collection *The Rose* (1893) by another major figure of European modernism, William Butler Yeats, will attempt to demonstrate not only to psychoanalysis power to illuminate texts deemed “mystical,” but also the potential of imaginative literature to provide unique illustrations to complex concepts in psychology such as those introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Lacan, to offer compelling psychological case studies through fictional characters, and to bring a breath of fresh air into psychoanalytic theory by poetic treatment of grave psychiatric themes.

In *The Turbulent Dream*, a periodization of the of Yeats’s oeuvre, Geoffrey Thurley asserts that the assumption of “a world lying beyond the veil of things, and that this world was the world of Truth with which the poet must be concerned” stands at the heart of *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist poetry (5). Thurley consigns Yeats’s early work such as *The Rose* to this symbolist longing to uncover what lies beyond the veil of common human experience. He suggests that Yeats’s commitment to this project of poetic exploration predetermines the pervasive presence of the theme of the *dream* as a vehicle to imaginative transcendence of the phenomenal world. However, Yeats’s texts from *The Rose* seem to gainsay the claim that Yeats shares a symbolist and mystic understanding of the *dream* as transcendence. And if mysticism is the belief that another, more genuine world exists beyond the veil of the common human experience, the current reading of “Fergus and the Druid” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis concludes that Yeats would

use Irish myth, especially the druidical art of dreaming, as a metaphoric milieu for subtle and systematic reflection on the human condition, rather than assert mysticism. Lacan's personality model stands out as a particularly beneficial approach to Yeats given the ethical messages that, we believe, are central to the oeuvre of both the modernist Yeats and the postmodernist Lacan: salubrious relations with one's own self and with the others; balanced types and degrees of social involvement; caution toward the inherent desire for transcendence – desire that has to be tamed simply because the reality of our lives is, in its essence, dream-like. The story in "Fergus and the Druid" illustrates in a striking fashion that any liberation, awakening from this dream-reality is equivalent to non-being, for only the noumenal void lies beyond the dream. In turn, "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" warns against the lack of awareness of the dream-like, imaginary quality of one's reality; ignorance that leads the characters to narcissistic preoccupation with their status and to fanatic resolve for refashioning the dream according to their desires.

Since Lacanian personality theory has herein been posited as primary theoretical lens, a basic outline of this model may be appropriate as a stepping ground for the subsequent analysis of "Fergus and the Druid" and "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea."¹ A key concept in Lacan is *desire* – the unconscious force that carries the human experience across its three dimensions (orders): the *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic*, and the *Real*. Desire's final goal is the Real – the realm of pure experience and no signification; the noumenal that lies beyond the phenomenal surface; the Divine. In

¹ The following sources were used in outlining Lacan's model: Jacques Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," as well as Dylan Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

“Fergus and the Druid,” Yeats elaborates on the idea that the Druids, the priestly class in the ancient Celtic societies, were considered mediators between the between the world of appearances and the Real. And since the Real stands as the utmost object of religious, magic, or meditative practices and, on the other hand, the literary imagination – for these all probe the limit of representation – it is the world behind the phenomenal veil that the king-poet Fergus – like his creator the poet-mystic Yeats – longs to explore. The Real, however, does not exist as a space outside the psyche; for Lacan, it is a phantasm, and psyche’s structuralfeature, necessary to enable the operation of human emotions and cognition. Drawn by the Real, desire harnesses the psychic energies (drives) and projects them onto the *Symbolic order* – the screen the signifiers that separates (protects) the mind from the void of the Real. Since for Lacan human experience is mediated by the sign, more specifically, by its linguistic dimension – the *signifier* –the Symbolic, being the layer of signifiers, stands as the core of what is ordinarily referred to as “reality.” However, pure symbolic knowledge is impossible. To attain focus on particular images or to form attitudes, the ego concentrates psychic energy (*libido* or, essentially, psychosexual drives) on an object or idea. This process involves a certain level of distortion of the Symbolic – an effect, which Lacan calls the *Imaginary*.² Among the manifestations of the Imaginary in Yeats would be Fergus experiencing the images from the Druid’s bag of dreams as “wonderful and great” (“Fergus and the Druid”), or the discontent of Cuchulain’s son with his status. All in all, the Imaginary stands as the psychic gloss, which the ego attaches to the signifying system. While the Imaginary is necessary in

² The libidinal (energetic) concentration on an object or idea is referred to as *cathexis*.

a functional subjectivity, the hypertrophy of the imaginary layer may cause dangerous distortions in the personality's perception and cognition. The most extreme version of such distortion are cases of total cathexis: so intense an investment of psychic energy on an object that it cracks the surface of signifiers. In these cases, which Lacan terms *jouissance*, the mind, inebriated by excessive emotions, so blurs the images from the surrounding reality that the personality is engulfed by the Real, which lies below the cracked screen of signifiers.

Considering the preceding review of Lacan's personality model, in which of the dimensions of human experience shall the state of *dream*, represented in "Fergus and the Druid," be situated? As the Druid honors King Fergus's request for initiation in the druidical "dreaming wisdom," the dream-images from the Druid's "little bag of dreams" are jarred loose:

{Fergus} I See my life go drifting like a river
From change to change; I have been many things –
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold.

The content of the druid's bag, the poem unambiguously tells, by no means pertains to some mystic world; the images are nothing but a record of King Fergus's life. But Yeats's view of the dream as the individual's reality in "Fergus and the Druid" parallels Lacan's notion of the Symbolic order on more than one level. The Symbolic is not merely a set of visual images, which have been stamped onto the

individual mind; its system of signifiers “comprises the order of culture and society, from the grammar of language and meaning to the laws of the State and rituals of everyday life” (Evans, “Symbolic order”). The poems “Fergus and the Druid” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” offer examples of how certain signifiers can take on a domineering cultural position. In his artistic rendering of Irish myth, Yeats’s emphasizes the symbolic elements that structure the socio-political status and interactions between the characters. Thus, “Fergus and the Druid” highlights the pivotal role the king plays in the political ontology of the warrior culture, in which Yeats’s story is set. In the Lacanian register, Fergus’s words “A king is but a foolish labourer / Who wastes his blood to be another’s dream” imply that the figure of the monarchical ruler functions as a master-signifier – a signifier that structures the arrangement of vast plates of meaning in the dream-reality of the others. But while in Yeats’s mythological universe kings, their druid priests, and champion-warriors occupy privileged positions, the degrading symbolic value attached to the status of Cuchulain’s son – “a common herd” – turns the character’s reality into an oppressive nightmare (“Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”). When the young man sets forth to challenge Cuchulain on a duel, he does not disclose his “name and lineage” upon arrival at Conchubar’s camp – an act that vividly expresses the son’s refusal to define himself according to the extant symbolic arrangements, which frame his selfhood as derivative from the figure of his father.

The correspondences between Yeats’s idea of dream-reality in “Fergus and the Druid” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” and the Lacanian Symbolic opens up an alley for exploring certain modalities that dominate Yeats’s fictional subjects. No other phrase expresses the psychic state of the protagonists in both stories than

unwavering desire. In the case of Fergus, this is the desire for transcending the limits of one's dream-reality; for renunciation of all *partial* desires that tie him to objects and activities, and for realization of the noumenal. For this character Yeats conceived an entry into the Real that reflects his own interest in magic ritual and mysticism (Jaffares 24-25). Indeed, the King of all Ireland in the time of the Red Branch kings³ experiences his position in the social reality as a "burden without end." He perceives his kingship as meaningless energetic investment in a master-signifier – that of the figure of the King in the construct of national politics – that informs the dream-reality of the others: "A king is but a foolish laborer/ Who wastes his blood to be another's dream." And since the blood is universally perceived in mythopoeic thought as fluid where most of the body's bioenergies are contained, the very reference to "wasting blood" should be understood in a broader, figurative sense of libidinal dissipation. Fergus's conviction in the vain nature of his activities prompts him to seek a state of complete renunciation of earthly desires with the help of the druid's magic. However, such a wish would, from the standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis, mark a dangerous alienation from the Symbolic – the realm of the image, which is the only medium where normal subjective experience exists. Provided that the drives – the constituents of desire – serve as the mind's "grip" over the signifier, Fergus's liberation from all earthly desires entails the loss of control over the symbolic dream-reality:

{Fergus} I See my life go drifting like a river
From change to change; I have been many things –
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light

³ On Yeats's sources for the legend, retold in "Fergus and the Druid," refer to Jaffares's *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 23-24.

Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold --
And all these things were wonderful and great;
But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.
Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing!

Fergus has plunged beyond the phenomenal surface into the Real. Once the subject has broken through the screen of signifiers, the only thing he can do while watching the kaleidoscopic flashing of the images from his life is to retroactively assess his past psycho-emotional experience from the contact with these images as one of wonder and greatness. Fergus has neglected the Druid's warning that the glimpse into the Real, the attainment of vision uncontaminated by attachment comes at the loss of an essential layer of the human experience:

{Druid} Look on my thin grey hair and hollow cheeks
And on these hands that may not lift the sword,
This body trembling like a wind-blown reed.
No woman's loved me, no man sought my help.

In the psychoanalytic register, the implications of Yeats's poem are that the withdrawal of desire (essentially aggressive and sexual) from its usual objects of attachment is equivalent to the individual's incapacitation to perform the common social roles in the warrior culture, mirrored in the Gaelic myth, such as participating

in battles, procreation, or productive communal involvement. Fergus realizes that after his initiation into purely Symbolic knowledge, he, like the Druid, has “grown nothing, knowing all.”

“Cuchulian’s Fight with the Sea” offers an inverse scenario of the tale of desire in “Fergus and the Druid.” While Fergus is engulfed by the noumenal void in the wake of his refusal to attach his desire to the dream-reality that shields him from this void, Cuchulian and his nameless son clash with the Real in the course of the fanatical pursuit of their dreams. The poem opens with the portrayal of Cuchulian’s son as a narcissistic and aggressive figure. Enraged with his lowly status, he invests his entire energy to inscribe himself as a master-signifier in the warrior culture. The unrestrained desire of both Cuchulian and his son to retain or, respectively, attain the symbolic role of the champion warrior stands as the root-cause for the blind battle between son and father; a battle that brings both characters to the state of excessive cathexis and, consequently, to dysfunctional subjectivity. The heroes’ hubris that entails the catastrophe in “Cuchulian’s Fight with the Sea” is in the narcissistic bent of their egos – a propensity to steep the subjects too deeply into the Imaginary and distort their reality. Lacan calls the instances of such distortion *méconnaissance* or “imaginary misrecognition of symbolic knowledge” (Evans, “*méconnaissance*”). For Cuchulian’s son, this process seems to manifest itself in the character’s unrealistic idea of his own might. Emer, instead of discouraging her son’s plans to challenge the champion-warrior of king Conchubar on a duel further inflates his self-image by making him fancy himself as taller and stronger than Cuchulian:

“You have the heaviest arm under the sky.”

“Whether under its daylight or its stars

My father stands amid his battle-cars.”

“But you have grown to be the taller man.”

The son’s faith in his own extraordinary strength is moreover joined with his misrecognition of Cuchulian as “aged, worn out with wars.” Cuchulian himself falls prey to misrecognition as he would not listen to the voice of the image telling him that his adversary is his kin (“Your head a while seemed like a woman's head/ That I loved once.”), thus disregarding the cues of symbolic knowledge in favor of the captivation with the role of a champion warrior – a status that obliges him to crush, without much consideration, any pretender.⁴ Yeats’s artistic treatment of the ensuing battle evokes the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. The intensification of the fight (“fighting sped”), the cease of conversations, and the “awakening” of “war-rage” appear as a reliable indicator that the characters have plunged into *jouissance* – a state of pure, excessive emotion, during which the mind cannot represent its experiences through language. And as long as the “war-rage” is an instance of *jouissance*, it is literally an awakening from one’s dream-reality. Indeed, the dangers of *jouissance* stand at the heart of Yeats’s message in “Cuchulian’s Fight with the Sea.” In the first place, being “outside language and inassimilable to symbolization” (EP 171), *jouissance* goes beyond the normal human experience – the one mediated by the

⁴Conversely, because of his failure to set himself as the champion, and make his own name a point of origin, a master-signifier, from which the others will derive their identity, the son remains nameless in the poem, and defined through his relation to Cuchulian.

signifier – and is therefore of essentially traumatic character. However, the major reason the state, which Lacan terms *jouissance*, has preoccupied not only psychoanalytic theory, but many other fields of knowledge, as well as the literary imagination, is not so much in the shattering experience it produces for the individual, but in the ways it affects the surrounding world. Because *jouissance* unleashes the entire destructive potential of human energy, it is the specific psychic condition, in which the individuals affect their social and natural environment to the greatest degree and with often-irreparable consequences, as in the case of Cuchulian slaying his own son.

“Fergus and the Druid” and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” present two cases of dissociation between the Symbolic and Imaginary, which dissociation, though owing to the diametrically opposed causes of utter renunciation and blind pursuit of one’s desires, produces the comparable consequences of dysfunctional subjectivity and social plight. Cuchulian’s realization of the terrible consequences of his having given vent to the ecstasy of war-rage entails a *jouissance* of suffering no less intense than the frenzy of the battle. Unable to bear the traumatic image of the filicide, the hero’s mind again derails from the Symbolic and sinks into the void of the Real. In the concluding section of “Cuchulian’s Fight with the Sea” the reader sees Cuchulian incapacitated in a catatonic stupor. And only the druids – the masters of the dreaming wisdom – can, by “chaunting in his ear delusions magical,” extinguish the consequences of the series of “awakenings” and lull him back into his habitual dream-reality. And while the poem’s final images of Cuchulian fighting “with the invulnerable tide” in a way corroborate, with sad irony, Fergus’s view that the human condition is futile, dream-like, “delusional,” Yeats’s poems teach that the acceptance

of the imaginary side of this dream-reality is preferable to Fergus's dissociation from earthly attachments. But even more interesting is Yeats warning against the dangers from the ignorance of this imaginary aspect – ignorance that makes the individuals regard certain dream-image as the ultimate truth and essence, and defend, like Cuchulian and his son, their personal illusions “at the sword-point.” In this sense, “Cuchulian's Fight with the Sea” conveys an essentially Lacanian moral imperative in artistic images that are intuitive, hence, comprehensible and, at the same time, vivid, hence, memorable; images that can find valuable pedagogical applications in areas such as psychology, political science, and civil education. Resonating with Yeats's poetic incantation, Lacan's appeal to contemporary humans “*Ne pas céder sur son désir!*” (“Do not yield to your desires!”) in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* warns against the dangers of *jouissance* – the state where reason is blurred and the human destructive potential unleashed; a state, which, Lacan asserts, speaking in “The Mirror Stage” in retrospect about the World War II, can manifest itself as “the madness that deafens the world with its sound and fury” (142).

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