ASEBL JOURNAL

Good Books

Hotel du Lac, by Anita Brookner

A Vision, by W.B. Yeats

The Rhizome and the Flower, by James Olney

Good Old Quote

"Everywhere the human soul stands between a hemisphere of light and another of darkness on the confines of two everlasting hostile empires, - Necessity and Free Will."

Thomas Carlyle

Word

Ambassador

STEALING SOULS
BY KEVIN BROWN

Certain aboriginal tribes believe that taking one's picture steals a soul. This fact is not new knowledge to most people. They've heard it on Jeopardy, an introduction to a news story, perhaps, or even in a movie (it shows up in *Zoolander*, for example). Most people, almost all Westerners, certainly, believe that this belief is nothing more than superstition. However, John Rosenthal in "Stealing Souls: Thoughts on Photography" (*The Sun*, March 1983) takes this idea very seriously and considers whether or not photographers do steal something from their subjects. He tells the story of a woman who sits on a park bench feeding the pigeons; she accosts anyone who tries to take her picture. In the end, he concludes that something is being stolen from this woman: "To them she could have been a creature in a zoo. Making her self-conscious, they destroyed her peace of mind, which is, after all, what we have to work with. Lacking all imagination (having no time for it, really) they pretended she was there for them and their hungry cameras, and they stole her image."

I have a feeling that writers use people in much the same way. Like photographers, we claim that we are using people to express great truths, showing humanity in all its various forms, or trying to create art that is true to life by drawing from that life. It's true that all writing comes from life, at least to some extent, but writers today seem to be taking more from life and relying on their imagination (as Rosenthal says of photographers) less and less. The result of this lack of imagination is fiction with forgettable characters, and thus, forgettable writing altogether.

I have to confess that I have been tempted to draw characters directly from life myself. Once, while walking the streets of Athens, GA, I encountered a street violinist. Not thinking much

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about him, I stopped to deposit a dollar or two and then move on my way; however, my contribution caused him to stop playing and start talking. He told me that he would play a selection just for me written by Joe Hill. I confessed that I did not who Joe Hill was, and he proceeded to regale me with a vast quantity of information about Joe Hill, how he moved to America, changed his name, and became a great, socialist leader. I wasn't sure whether or not he knew what he was talking about, so I checked up on Joe Hill when I got home, and, apart from a few dates that were a bit off, he was dead on about Joe Hill's history. Luckily, I had jotted down the violinist's name, so I could use him (note the term we use) in a story or essay.

Similarly, I encountered a man when some students and I were volunteering at the Salvation Army. To be completely honest, we weren't really volunteering, even. Our school had a program where the students and faculty went out into the community to help out for a week. None of us had signed up for the Salvation Army, but we didn't get our choices and ended up together, not really knowing what we were going to be doing. We spent most of the week sorting donated clothes, not the most glamorous work, but important work, nonetheless. While there, we encountered a man whose job was to take the clothes the Salvation Army rejected and press them into a large cube in a machine that looked like a cardboard compressor I had used when I worked at Kroger. The clothes would then be sent overseas to even less fortunate people. The man never spoke to anyone, save for one student who was able to get him to say a few words, and we never found out why he was there, but we did know that he lived at the shelter the Salvation Army ran. He ate a can of beans every day for lunch, by himself, then went immediately back to work.

What I planned to do with these people, I'm not sure, but they were so different from most people I meet, I thought I could use them in some type of writing. I thought, as most writers think, that I could begin with these brief glimpses of humanity and fill in the rest of the story for myself. However, writers tend to be quite bad at filling in gaps in flesh and blood humans, whose story they can't control. In *Hotel du Lac*, Anita Brookner's main character, Edith Hope, is a romance writer sent away by her friends to finish her latest book (though they really sent her away because she stood up a respectable man at the altar). Edith continually tries to fill in the gaps in people's lives: "I must stop [creating lives for people], she said to herself. I do not have to make up their lives for them. They are in fact doing very nicely without them." Once she ceases to attempt to create a life for Iris and Jennifer Pusey, she is able to interact with them and find out who they really are, both positively and negatively.

Writers who see people only as material to be used miss out on the opportunities to truly interact with others. Thus, they come away with a fictionalized view of humanity; they only know the lives that they have created for people they see. This type of interaction, much like the one Rosenthal describes in photography, leads to the basest form of exploitation. In "Why Marriage" in *Harper's* (June 2000), Jane Smiley writes that "the recognition of the holy in another person is the one thing that counteracts the idea that another person is merely an object to be exploited." In order to truly understand humanity, we, as writers, must recognize the holy that is in others and draw from that holiness to create art, rather than drawing from the superficial details in an effort to mimic life. Art has no need to imitate life; it must create truth, instead.

This attempt to merely reproduce the superficial details of life leads to forgettable characters, unlike the characters of the past. I do not mean to fall into a creation of a false past, the glory days of fiction, when all writing was wonderfully imaginative, but there was a time when characters lived. Still, the mark of a great book for me is when I wonder what the characters are doing, long after I have finished the book, when I wish, knowing full well it would turn out horribly, that there were a sequel somewhere so that I didn't have to leave those characters behind. Think of characters like Ahab, Miss Havisham, Beowulf, and Huck, to name a few, characters who live on long after the reading of the book is finished, characters who are distinctly human, but who are more human in some indescribable manner. I would never expect to meet these characters on the street, not merely because I live in a different time, but because these characters are decidedly different than "real" people. They are somehow

more. More obsessed, perhaps. Stronger, maybe. More adventuresome or more clever, it may seem. Even if we can't quite label it, we know that they are more than we are.

Today, many writers lift characters straight from life, sometimes lifting scenes and whole sections of dialogue. Two examples will have to suffice here. A visiting writer came to our campus not long ago, and the English faculty was able to have dinner with him. He was discussing his next book when he mentioned a critic who had responded quite harshly (and unfairly, we all agreed) to an article he had written. He commented that he planned to use this man as a character in his next book, certainly not exactly the same person, but enough like him to make the connection clear. The joke was even made (not by the author, but by another faculty member) that we should all watch what we say at dinner, seeing that he could use it against us. Also, when I was working on my Ph.D. one of our faculty members was also a novelist. It just so happened that he released a novel while I was a student there. After talking to several other faculty members, I discovered that many of the characters in the book were based on many of the faculty members; in fact, some of the conversations in the book, they remembered clearly. The worst example of this writer's borrowing from life was when he forgot to change a few of the names once or twice throughout the book, showing that he had actually written the book with the real names in place, going back to change it later.

I'm not questioning as to whether or not works like this one are fiction or not; I think we fictionalize "non-fiction" most of the time, and the lines are more blurry than we would like. What I am arguing, though, is that there is a lack of imagination in today's writing, mainly due to writer's spending more time seeing people as material and spending less time with people as people. Of course, I may be guilty of this practice myself. After all, I did use those two people earlier in this piece, and I'm sure I fictionalized the encounters a bit. I wish I could argue that I used them only because I needed to prove a point, not create an interesting character, and I hope that's true, but something tells me it's not. I suppose I'll have to fall back on a quotation from Gerald Locklin: "For teachers and writers [of which, I'm both], ideas are in process. We don't walk around with a Decalogue written in stone. We are testing our ideas all the time."
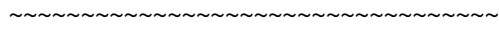
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The Imaginative Construction of the Soul
in W.B. Yeats's *A Vision*
By Alison Watkins

Though the modern revolution in ethics may have begun with challenging the divine authority of the Judaeo-Christian ethic, a task for both the Reformation and Renaissance to struggle through, it nonetheless failed to cure evil. Neither was the problem of evil adequately addressed by the rationalists of the Enlightenment who placed their naïve hope in human reason as a natural panacea for the ills of the world. Instead, Darwin's proof of humankind's kinship with the apes, the rising advent of Biblical criticism in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, and Freud's discovery of the unconscious all contributed to the destruction of old values. With the loss of any authoritative collective standard of value which accompanied the demise of the old ethic, there occurred a coincidental loss of soul, or if not of the soul itself, certainly any human sense of the soul.

W.B. Yeats reacted strongly to the scientific materialism prevalent at the beginning of the century, and though there was, it seemed, no spiritual authority to refute the scientific view of humankind as a natural object, confined by natural law, he nonetheless held to his vision of remaking himself through tracing the vagaries of his own soul. Yeats's psychic experiments performed with this wife George between 1917 and 1923, perhaps the most

remarkable sustained psychic experiments of our time, enabled Yeats to open unconscious channels between them, and to transform what had previously been for him intellectual observations into tangible experience. The Yeatses' experiments in automatic writing and sleep and dream trances resulted in a group of apocalyptic and visionary writings known as the "Script" that were eventually codified into the complex metaphysical world system recorded in *A Vision.* In this work Yeats created a mythology of the soul, and then applied that mythology to the ethical concerns of his contemporaries, and in particular to the problem of evil and the idea of valuation by images as a means for constructing the soul.

A Vision, with its wealth of geometrical gyres and symbols, gives us an insight into an endeavor of the human mind that could, in fact, be compared with the ancient process of mythologizing. The difference between them is that mythology, generated in the collective unconscious, had origins which were both a product and a projection of the psychic contents of a group mind, whereas, in spite of the similarity of their fundamental endeavors, the inception of *A Vision* came through the collaborative psychic experiments of two individuals who, along with the Instructors, trekked into the unknown terrain of their individual and combined unconscious to create a structure capable of "holding in a single thought both reality and justice" (xix). Since these experiments resulted in the construction of a unified world view (Yeats's "System") as well as in the "freeing of the imagination to create the soul's history" (xviii), and since they were as much a conscious forging as an unconscious discovering, the work extended, as it were, throughout the whole of the Yeatses' beings.

Although the Yeatses' psychic experiments reached outside ordinary experiences, they were rooted in the customs and belief patterns of traditional Western culture. As a result, Yeats's approach to the problem of evil was both inherited and radically original. He not only advanced the idealists' enduring notion of transcendence, his perspective also included ideas that emphasized the personal origin of evil. Ultimately, however, Yeats grounded his theories of ethical value neither in the spiritual nor in the subjective realms but in a third created at the juncture of the physical with the transcendent, that is, in the realm of the soul.

The metaphysical aspects of Yeats's treatment of ethics and the nature of good and evil in the System include three underlying assumptions: the soul was (1) grounded in the principle of oppositions; (2) under the governance of Karma; and (3) moved toward the aim of unity through self-knowledge. These metaphysical bases may be attributed to several familiar sources, from both Eastern and Western philosophies. It was from the psychological vantage, however, that Yeats's ideas about the problem of evil and the construction of the soul were both novel and visionary. Much as been written about the similarity of Yeats's ideas to Jung's analytical psychology, especially in James Olney's seminal work *The Rhizome and the Flower.* But even more surprising is Yeats's considerable overlap with the grandchild of Jung's analytical psychology, now known as archetypal psychology. In their seven years of psychical experiments, Yeats and George established a method of operating which closely paralleled the process currently used in archetypal psychology, that is, the "redemption" or cleansing of the psyche through the use of the active imagination.

Archetypal psychology is characterized by a combination of Jung's concepts together with ideas articulated by Henry Corbin, a French philosopher and mystic who in the 1950s became widely known for his sublime interpretations of Islamic thought, in particular those expressed in his *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi.* From Jung, of course, the idea "that the basic and universal structure of the psyche, the formal patterns of it relational modes, are archetypal patterns" (Hillman 2) was borrowed. From Corbin's interpretation of Sufism, several other archetypal psychology cornerstones were derived, including the idea the archetypal world inhabits the world of the imagination, and presents itself on the most fundamental level as image.

In archetypal psychology, the essential nature of the archetype is accessible to the imagination first and presents itself as image, so that the process of archetypal psychology as a method is imaginative. To regain a sense of soul through the active practice of the imagination and through confrontation with and arrangement of images is

one of the chief aims of archetypal therapy. Yeats himself turned to psychology for therapeutic reasons in the Script in part to develop paradigms from his own experiences. He also searched for universal patterns arising from his particular experience of life that would bridge the deeply personal with his rich symbolic inheritance.

Without question, the psychology and ethics of Yeats's System in *A Vision* were both concerned with the understanding of human behavior as an illustration of general principles of the soul. Yeats took as axiomatic the existence of the soul, and worked toward purifying and enlivening its scope. The stated aim of archetypal therapy is also to recover the loss of a sense of soul which now inflicts much of Western culture. Both Yeats's System then and the discipline of archetypal psychology now advocate that the soul's desire for knowledge of reality and for self-knowledge can be best "satisfied in terms of its own constitution: images" (Hillman 20). These three concepts then, the principle of opposites, the aim toward unity, and the metaphorical root of the soul or psyche are the foundation for Yeats's re-visioning of ethics in the Script.

The Script showed that the measurement of value for the individual was dependent on the impassioned perspective of the whole soul, not just on its day-world consciousness. It may be said that the consequences of these unconscious perspectives to the individual have thrown light on the peculiar relation between value and the soul. Psychological investigations of the mind have suggested that value is irreducibly connected with the deepest principle of all human nature, the archetypes and their images.

Modern psychological investigations as well as Yeats's psychic experiments have both pointed to the fact that the images not only provide grounding for understanding value in an individual's life, they are the stuff of the soul itself. An individual becomes responsible for crafting his or her own soul through the active use of the imagination, simply through one's response to self-generated images. The relation between value and the soul is one of the oldest topics for ethical debate. What in fact is the relation of value among the turmoil of our everyday experiences, among our emotions, intentions, volitions and decisions?

For centuries ethical theorists have acknowledged that if our knowledge, and therefore judgments, are measured by what we perceive, and if what we perceive differs from person to person, and from culture to culture, then there can be no measurement of moral judgments which is not relative. Where archetypal psychology and Yeats's System differ from this stance is in the recognition of the collective and archetypal basis of the human psyche. On the collective level, humanity knows no distinctions; even the most radical of opposing perspectives, the difference between male and female for instance, are reduced under the universal rubric of archetypes to a common source.

Such an approach to morality appears at first glance totally unreasonable and perhaps nonsensical, insofar as it contains beliefs which include such diverse ideas as multiple lives, pre-existence of the soul, and Karmic indebtedness; however, a more thorough examination proves it to be a plausible alternative to the early 20th century utilitarian's and/or positivist's approach to morality. The ethical decisions which followed the laws of the utilitarian or positivist ethics were not applicable to the criteria generated by the unconscious, even though at the beginning of the 20th century those laws were always taken as basic whenever right and wrong were discussed, or value measured, or punishment meted out.

In fact, in the latter half of the 19th century, the discipline of psychology fought for the right to claim itself an empirical or natural science as opposed to philosophical science. It was important for the positivists of the time to separate psychology from any lingering speculation about the soul. This separation justified belief in a sort of "ethical naturalism" typical at the turn of the century, a theory which derived moral norms from nature alone, such as J.S. Mill's supposition that good was what corresponded to human desires. In such cases, the discipline of ethics was reduced to a matter of moral taste, to the problem of determining what was pleasing or displeasing to an individual.

By the early years of the 20th century however the explorers of the unconscious were asking themselves

whether the old ethic was applicable any longer; possibly they thought that more investigating may bring to light deviations relevant to unconscious factors yet to be revealed. And possibly, the ethical norm to which people adhered would not necessarily prove any more valuable than what may be uncovered in the unconscious. As Yeats once remarked to T. Sturge Moore: "All that I know of any value has come from sleep" (Bridge 147).

Yeats's trust in sleep, in the 'sleeps' of George, in the dreams shared with his wife, and occasionally by others, which took objective form not only in scents, sounds, and hallucinations, but also in the actual text of the Script, all speak of the value of image to the soul or psyche. The imagination had for them, and can become a method for curing division in the psyche, and a means to "bring the soul of man to God" (Yeats, *The Poems* 326). A person's character could be crafted, as the soul was, through the act of seeing "through" the world, of raising concrete images and events from their mundane literal perspective into the imagined world, into the archetypal work, the world in which they acquire mythological significance.

Yeats recognized that the imagination alone, based as it is on images, was free of moral perspective, free of the poles of good and evil, positive and negative; to follow a "moral code" was to place belief before image and thus negate the imaginative work, the crafting of the soul. So in conclusion, we must return to Yeats's initial concern which was what Vision of Evil was adequate to "bring the soul of man to God" and to free the imagination to do its work of "soul-making."

If we survey the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century as a repository of ethical systems determined by its historical legacies, it presents to us the continuing drama of two divergent and distinct ideologies—the empiricists and the idealists. The various ethical formulae give homage to one or the other of those paths. The struggle alone for the existence of ethical systems give homage to the place of value in the human psyche, but the work of soul-making, as Yeats realized, differs in a significant respect from the simple controlling of a person's moral energies.

Yeats's vision in the Script certainly supports the notion that in our everyday experiences we not only find value but that we make it, effecting a belief towards an ideal end which lies outside the mere fact of existence. He understood also that there is, undoubtedly, in the grief-stricken psyche speculation of meaning in suffering, in the guilt-stricken psyche, recognition of an inner criteria of value, but most importantly, Yeats understood that in the imagination-stricken psyche, we come to realize that not only are we ultimately composed of images, but that the connection between image and value is so forged in the heart that transformation is possible to those willing to descend into the realm of Persephone and unearth the link between image and value. The idea of creating value by images, an idea Yeats both empirically enacted and creatively theorized in his psychic experiments with George, thus opens for the contemporary individual, perhaps as never before, the imaginative possibilities of mutually uncovering and creating one's own soul.

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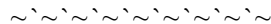-----*The Poems*. Finneran, Richard J., ed. New York and London: Macmillan, 1989

-----*Vision* Notebook 1.

-----*Vision* Notebook 2.

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ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

Kevin Brown currently resides in Cleveland, TN, where he teaches English and writes. He has published poems and articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, *REAL: Regarding Arts and Letters*, *The Clergy Journal*, *InsideHigherEd.com*, *Jeopardy*, *Pinyon*, and *The Pacific Review*, among other journals. He is the inaugural Spotlight Poet at *gtwentytwo*, a new online journal. His book of poetry, *Exit Lines*, will be published later this year, as will a book of scholarship: *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*.

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Alison Watkins, Ph.D. holds an M.F.A in Creative Writing, Bard College; Ph.D. in Literature, FSU. Liberal Arts faculty at Ringling College of Art and Design in writing and literature for 16 years.