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"Leda and the Swan": Where Description Ends and Interpretation Begins

**"LEDA AND THE SWAN":
WHERE DESCRIPTION ENDS AND INTERPRETATION BEGINS'**

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I

In the truly great poets, there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word.
--S.T. Coleridge

Recent criticism has tended, at least in certain quarters, to view literature as, in Valéry's phrase, "the extension and application of certain properties of language." Consequently, it has reserved a central place for linguistics, the discipline concerned most directly with delineating what the properties of language are. Although there have been numerous uses of linguistics in modern criticism, three major tendencies can be distinguished, one theoretical and the other two applied, all originating, in large measure, with the Russian formalists and the Prague school.

Within the domain of theory, European structuralists such as Greimas, Kristeva, and Todorov have attempted to develop formal models, analogous to those used in linguistics, in order to deal with questions of literary form and meaning. In particular, these theorists have been concerned with developing a generative approach to syntax within linguistics. Some of these attempts have been provocative (e.g., Greimas' theory of actants in narrative structure), but they have

generally led to more problems than they have solved (see Culler, 1975, and Hawkes, 1977, for a discussion of such problems).

In addition to this theoretical work, European structuralists have developed a body of practical criticism in which a wide range of linguistic concepts are applied heuristically. In Structuralist Poetics, Culler lists the following concepts as having been particularly useful in delineating literary structure in specific texts:

signifier and signified, langue and parole, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, the levels of a hierarchical system, distributional and integrative relations, the diacritical or differential nature of meaning, and subsidiary notions such as shifters or performative utterances (1975:255-56).

In general, the structuralists' use of these concepts in textual interpretation has been considerably more fruitful (e.g., the work of Todorov on the Decameron) than their attempt to build theoretical models.

There is another kind of practical criticism in which linguistic methods and categories are applied to the actual language of a literary text. This more direct use of linguistics, while sometimes practiced by European structuralists as a means of complementing the analogical extension of linguistic concepts, has come to distinguish a brand of stylistics associated largely with Great Britain and the United States. Within these countries, it is not uncommon that linguists are involved in the study of literary texts.

In an article that has often been anthologized, Halliday delineates a role for linguistics in stylistic inquiry that appears to have gained wide acceptance:

The linguistic study of literature is textual description, and it is no different from any other textual description;

it is not a new branch or a new level or a new kind of linguistics, but the application of existing theories and methods. What the linguist does when faced with a literary text is the same as what he does when faced with any text that he is going to describe (1970:67).

Halliday goes on to suggest that many attempts to describe the language of literary texts suffer from not having been sufficiently grounded in linguistics:

If many of the things written about the language of particular works of literature are much less useful than they might have been, this is more often than not because the writer, having neither made a description of the language himself nor used one made by someone else (other than the misty image of English that is still so often given in our schools), has invented a set of ad hoc categories for each text he has examined. What is said has therefore no relation to what was said about any other text, still less to any description of the language as a whole. If the linguistic analysis of literature is to be of any value or significance at all, it must be done against the background of a general description of the language, using the same theories, methods and categories. A literary text has meaning against the background of the language as a whole in all its uses; how can its language be understood except as the selection by the individual writer from the total resources at his disposal? (1970:68)

In the same article, Halliday illustrates the role of descriptive linguistics in literary studies by examining two language patterns found in Yeat's sonnet "Leda and the Swan": the use of the word the and the syntactic distribution of lexical verbs. He describes each pattern by applying formal categories drawn from linguistic models that he himself has developed. In describing the functions of the within the poem, he uses categories derived from a discourse model (presented most comprehensively in Cohesion in English, Halliday and Hasan, 1976). In describing the syntactic distribution of lexical verbs, he uses categories derived from a syntax model variously referred to as scale-and-category grammar, systemic grammar, and functional grammar (presented most comprehensively in Halliday, 1981).

After describing these patterns, Halliday deliberately refrains from offering any interpretation of their significance. He is not attempting, he says, to do the larger work of literary criticism but only to demonstrate the exacting standards that should govern the description of language in a literary text:

Linguistics is not and will never be the whole of literary analysis, and only the literary analyst--not the linguist--can determine the place of linguistics in literary studies. But if a text is to be described at all, then it should be described properly; and this means by the theories and methods developed in linguistics, the subject whose task is precisely to show how language works (1970:70).

The position that Halliday takes in the article is based on two assumptions, both quite common among linguists who are concerned with literary stylistics: first, that linguistic categories are the most appropriate ones for describing the language of a literary work; and second, that linguistic description can proceed apart from interpretation. I would like to take issue with both assumptions before proceeding with the major task of this article, namely, placing the two patterns that Halliday describes within an interpretive approach to "Leda and the Swan."

The first assumption, that a "proper description" of the language in a literary work should be based on linguistic methods and categories, may be questioned on a number of grounds. To begin with, there is no commonly accepted set of methods and categories that can be readily applied in literary analysis. As with any intellectual discipline in the process of development, a wide range of methods and categories compete with each other--and many of these have been used to describe the language of literary texts. Among the competing approaches to the discipline there are, of course, various points of

overlap, but it is quite misleading to suggest that literary analysts can draw upon a generally accepted set of methods and categories.

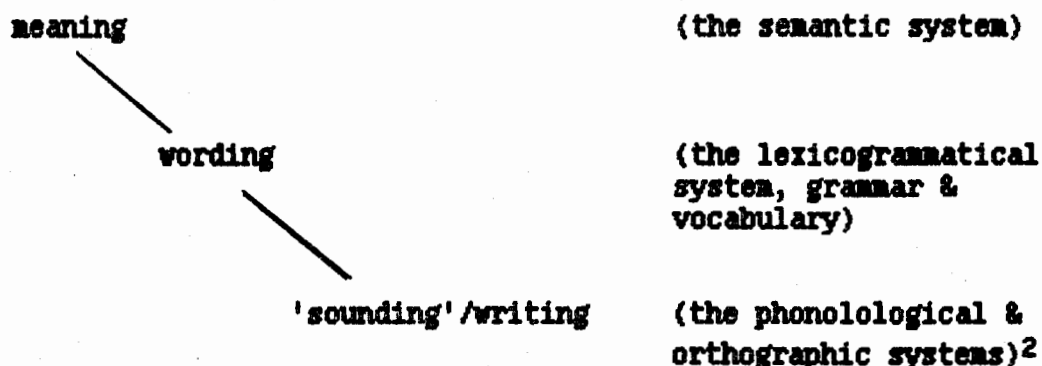
Secondly, linguistics has been largely concerned with formal properties of language at phonological and syntactic levels. As a consequence, a linguistic description of a literary text tends to ignore semantic properties, the very ones that have been of greatest concern in literary criticism. Indeed, literary critics themselves have developed a substantial repertoire of methods and categories for dealing with semantic properties, particularly those found in what is traditionally called figurative language. It is unfortunate that linguists who assume that their own approach should be used in literary analysis do not recognize the extent to which this repertoire has been developed.

One consequence of this linguistic orientation has been an almost exclusive concern with analyzing the sentence rather than discourse. More recently, linguists have become involved in discourse analysis, but, as Halliday and Hasan observe in Cohesion in English, they sometimes assume, quite erroneously, that discourse can be approached in the same way as the sentence:

A text is sometimes envisaged to be some kind of super-sentence, a grammatical unit that is larger than a sentence but related to a sentence in the same way that a sentence is related to a clause, a clause to a group and so on: by CONSTITUENCY, the composition of larger units out of smaller ones. But this is misleading. A text is not something that is like a sentence, only bigger; it is something that differs from a sentence in kind.

A text is best regarded as a SEMANTIC unit: a unit not of form but of meaning. Thus it is related to a clause or sentence not by size but by REALIZATION, the coding of one symbolic system in another (1976:1-2).

Halliday and Hasan use the following diagram (1976:5) to represent this 'coding of one symbolic system in another,' along with the further recoding into an expressive system, whether phonic or graphic:



Working with the notion of text as "some kind of super-sentence," certain linguists have attempted to discover structural relations within discourse analogous to those to be found within the sentence. In the study of discourse at large, such attempts have led to a number of misleading characterizations of larger rhetorical units such as the paragraph. In the subsidiary domain of literary stylistics, these attempts have led to a particular concern with the patterning of language features within given texts. In order to provide a rationale for this approach, linguists have often relied upon a theoretical position that has come to be associated primarily with Jakobson. There is not sufficient space to explain this position in detail, but its central concept can be found in Jakobson's well-known dictum that "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (1960:358). Or put in other terms, a poetic text embodies syntagmatic patterning, the repetition of elements that can be considered equivalent--or at least functionally similar--at some identifiable level of structure.

On the other hand, literary critics concerned with language texture have shown greater interest in multiple interpretations for a particular word, phrase, or more extended passage, relating these interpretations to various layers of context. In addition to the text of the immediate poem, there is the poet's larger body of work, its place within a poetic tradition, the poetic tradition itself, and so on. Moreover, these critics have generally been more concerned with the text as readers experience it; that is to say, as a structure that gathers a cumulative weight of meaning by virtue of the particular ordering of its elements rather than as a structure embodying some abstract principle of equivalence among various parts. In a sense, linguists and literary critics--at least those influenced by reader-response theory--have tended to approach literary texts in opposing ways: linguists are more structure-oriented, approaching text as a ding-an-sich with various patterns of language features waiting to be discovered. On the other hand, critics are more process-oriented, approaching text as they imagine it to be experienced by readers. Hence they are concerned with explicating the various kinds of responses that readers make as they move through a particular text.

Let us now turn to the second assumption that underlies Halliday's position, namely, that description of the language of a literary text can proceed apart from an interpretive frame. Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of this assumption is based on the familiar notion that the very act of applying descriptive categories is necessarily a form of interpretation. The linguistic patterns to be described in any text are so limitless that the decision to describe certain ones in itself constitutes a specific way of reading a text,

whether or not the reasons for this decision are made explicit. In this sense, description apart from interpretation may be considered merely an implicit form of interpretation.

In everyday use of the words "description" and "interpretation," we do, of course, accept the fact that they refer to distinguishable activities. Description refers to saying what things are and interpretation to saying what they mean. And, taken in this everyday sense, the two words can differentiate contrasting approaches to a literary text. As already observed, linguists have been largely concerned with describing the language of a literary text, literary critics with interpreting the complex meanings that this language conveys. Within the domain of literary stylistics, however, these concerns with description and interpretation should, in principle, mesh; for the task of stylistics is not merely to describe the language of the text, but to show how it means.

Hence, within stylistics, linguistic description and literary interpretation cannot be separated. Although Halliday might, in principle, accept this position, he still defends, as a matter of procedure, an initial stage of stylistic work in which a linguist may approach a literary text in a purely descriptive way. Certainly a linguist may do this kind of work; but in describing an actual text, he is faced with an endless maze of patterns on various levels of language structure. In the absence of an interpretive frame, the decision to describe one pattern rather than another tends to be arbitrary. As a consequence, a purely descriptive approach to a literary text may amass irrelevant detail, thereby only complicating the critical task. Culler

makes this point in disputing Jakobson's claim that linguistic methods can function as "discovery procedures" in stylistic inquiry:

A complete grammar of a language will, of course, assign structural descriptions to every sentence, and if the grammar is explicit two analysts using it will assign the same description to a given sentence; but once one goes beyond this stage and undertakes a distributional analysis of a text, one enters a realm of extraordinary freedom, where a grammar, however explicit, no longer provides a determinate method. One can produce distributional categories almost *ad libitum*. One might, for example, begin by studying the distribution of substantives and distinguish between those which were objects of verbs and those which were subjects. Going one step further, one might distinguish between those which were objects of singular verbs and those which were objects of plural verbs, and then one might subdivide each of these classes according to the tense of the verbs. This process of progressive differentiation can produce an almost unlimited number of distributional classes, and thus if one wishes to discover a pattern of symmetry in a text, one can always produce some class whose members will be appropriately arranged (1975:57).

In the concluding part of Structuralist Poetics, Culler summarizes his own position, directly opposed to Jakobson's, with the following statement: "Rather than assume that linguistic description will reveal literary effects, one must start with the effects themselves and then seek an explanation in linguistic structure" (1975:256). Reversing the priority of description over interpretation has, for the most part, been well-received, for it accords well with the common-sense principle that one needs to know what one is looking for in order to find it. It is possible, however, to view this principle, at least as stated above, as setting up its own "discovery procedures," which, in this instance, are interpretive acts. Any attempt to assert the priority of interpretation in critical method meets with objections similar to those raised against the priority of description: first, that all interpretation necessarily involves the use of descriptive categories,

no matter how implicit they remain, and secondly, that varied interpretations of a literary text can be produced almost ad libitum, all based, in some measure, on actual effects produced in those making the interpretations.

Apart from these arguments, the actual experience of responding critically to a literary text is not particularly congruent with the claim that either description or interpretation is more basic. In general, the work of criticism does not proceed in an orderly fashion. In one instance, description may provoke interpretation; in another, interpretation may guide description. Indeed, in most instances critical work is perhaps best understood, at least as it is experienced, as a constant shuttling back and forth between description and interpretation rather than as a predictable movement from one to the other. Given the little we know about how critical responses are formed and the inadequacy of single terms such as description and interpretation for characterizing such responses, it seems best to forego the question of whether description or interpretation is, as a matter of principle, more basic. Rather the question to be addressed is whether the two are, in fact, effectively linked in the actual practice of stylistics. No matter how a critical response may be formed, effective communication of that response requires a judicious balance between what we commonly call description and interpretation.

II

Style is almost unconscious. I know what I have tried to do, little of what I have done. --W. B. Yeats

Having argued that description and interpretation should be integrated within stylistics, I will now attempt to achieve such integration in analyzing Yeats' sonnet, "Leda and the Swan"³. I will use the language patterns described by Halliday, attempting to show how they contribute to crucial effects of the poem. Before proceeding with this task, however, let us first consider how these effects have been viewed, particularly within the context of Yeats' larger body of poetic theory and practice.

A good deal of commentary on "Leda and the Swan" posits the notion that the poem resembles a painting. Giorgio Melchiori, who deals extensively with the poem in The Whole Mystery of Art, points out that a strong visual element is, in fact, present throughout Yeats' poetry. He offers a number of reasons for this:

Firstly, his father was a painter; secondly, Yeats' taste was formed on the stylized Pre-Raphaelite painting so strictly associated with poetry and literature; thirdly, he studied at an art school; and fourthly, his early interest in magic, partly due to his Celtic background, and developed through his association with George Russell, Madame Blavatsky and MacGregor Mathers, stressed the relevance of stylized pattern and visual symbolism (1960:26).

Melchiori goes on to identify the influence of Blake in this regard, claiming that he was, for Yeats, "the palpable expression of the link between poetry and visual images" (1960:26).

Apart from these reasons for a highly visual element in Yeats' poetry at large, the individual poem "Leda and the Swan" drew its inspiration from Michelangelo's painting, which Yeats had first seen in 1907 when visiting Venice. He was strangely affected by the painting and, after his return to Ireland, mounted a large colored reproduction of it upon his desk. For Yeats, the static medium of painting aptly represented myth since, in arresting motion, painting, as it were, arrests time. He was concerned, from the outset, with creating a poem which could represent, in ways similar to a painting, the mythic encounter.

Yeats worked to achieve such representation over a number of years, continuously revising the poem until its publication in 1928. In its final form, he considered it one of his major achievements. In his Autobiography he described the poem as "a classic enunciation," and in A Vision he devoted forty pages to explaining its background. For the voluble Yeats, the success of the sonnet could be measured quite visibly: forty pages of talk compressed into fourteen lines of song.

The explanation provided in A Vision involves Yeats' notions about the relations between myth and history. For Yeats, myth presents certain 'actors,' as submitting to violent forms of experience--and thereby becoming 'agents' through whom new forces can be introduced into history itself. Hence human beings continuously recycle certain myths in order to make sense out of history, which they would otherwise experience as chaos, a Joycean nightmare of randomly occurring events. For example, the myth that involves a sexual encounter between a god-bird and a woman, whose offspring initiates a new civilization, was, according to Yeats, repeatedly used to organize imaginatively an entire

historical epoch. just as the union of Leda and the Swan gave birth, in the person of Helen, to classical civilization, so the union of Mary and the Dove gave birth, in the person of Jesus, to Christian civilization. And with the gradual dissolution of Christendom, Yeats prophesied in The Adoration of the Magi that "another Leda would open her knees to the Swan," thereby initiating a new civilization.

The mythic encounter of "Leda and the Swan" provided an appropriate vehicle not only for Yeats' notions about myth and history but also for his ideas about the masking of emotion in poetic expression. In The Identity of Yeats, Richard Ellmann points out that Yeats' somewhat philosophical quest for a 'mask' or 'anti-self,' "so different from his floundering quotidian personality," often led him to appropriate the subject of myth for poetic expression. The impersonal structure of myth helped Yeats achieve this anti-self, which was, in large measure, dependent upon the masking of personal emotion. Ellmann further observes that Yeats' quest for an anti-self is best evidenced in a "passion for revision of his poems." For Yeats, the language of a poem had to be continuously reworked so that personal emotion could be, in some sense, hidden and thereby heightened. In poetry, emotion wore a linguistic veil or else destroyed itself.

Having identified Yeats' passion for stylistic revision with his deliberate masking of emotion, Ellmann goes on to examine the textual history of Yeats' major poems, seeking to delineate, in the successive revisions, crucial features of Yeats' poetic achievement. "Leda and the Swan" is one of the poems whose textual history he examines. Ellmann does not, however, discuss specific changes in language from one version of the poem to the next. Rather he attends to certain

rhetorical effects of these changes, leaving the reader to inquire more precisely into how these effects are achieved. In writing The Identity of Yeats, Ellmann was, of course, not able to provide a great deal of detail on any one poem since he was working with the entire body of Yeats' poetry. Still Ellmann reflects the critical stance identified earlier: considerable attention to poetic effect but neglect of its language base. This approach contrasts sharply with Halliday's: description of the language base but neglect of poetic effect. In the analysis that follows, the textual history of "Leda and the Swan" will be examined in order to show how Yeats increasingly embodied in language the vision of Leda and the Swan that, for him, was expressed in Michelangelo's painting. Before dealing with this history, however, it is necessary to outline Halliday's descriptive approach to the poem, for it identifies the language patterns that became ever more sharply delineated as the poem evolved.

Let us begin by considering what Halliday describes as "the deverbalization of lexical verbs." This term is used to identify a salient feature of the poem, namely, that lexical verbs tend to function in nominal groups (e.g., "the loosening thighs") rather than verbal groups (e.g., "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast"). In order to illustrate this feature, Halliday displays syntactic functions for all the lexical verbs in a single table (1970:72):

Verbal Items in "Leda and the Swan"

Items in verbal group (i.e., operating as "predicator" in clause structure)					Items in nominal group (not operating as predicator)
1	2	3	4	5	6
(a) Free	Bound		Rankshifted		(irrelevant)
(b) Finite	Finite	Nonfinite	Finite	Nonfinite	
hold push feel engender	lie let	drop catch up master		beat caress catch lay	stagger loosen burn break

- (a) Clause class system: status
 (b) Group class system: finiteness

According to Halliday, the table is best read as reflecting a "cline of verbality":

On the extreme left, most "verbish" of all, is the finite verb group in free clause; the further over to the right, the more the status of "verb" is attenuated, until finally it is subordinated altogether to the nominal element without even the formality of a rankshift. In "Leda," with its preponderance of nominal groups, the verbal items are considerably deverbalized (1970:62).

Halliday also presents a smaller table, in which he compares the distribution of lexical verbs in "Leda and the Swan," Yeats' "His Phoenix," and sixteen lines from Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur" (1970:62):

	1	2	3	4	5	6
"Leda"	5	2	3		4	4
"His Phoenix"	30	12	2	6	2	2
"Morte d'Arthur" (extract from)	17		3		2	

As can be readily seen, lexical verbs in "Leda and the Swan" tend to be located further to the right on the cline of verbality; that is to say, their syntactic realization tends to be more nominal or, to use Halliday's term, more deverbalized.

Halliday makes one final observation concerning the use of lexical verbs within the three poems:

In "His Phoenix" (where...the grammatical use of verbs is, as we have seen, highly "verbal"), the lexical items operating as verbs are in general weak; that is, they are items like "be" and "have" which are collocationally neutral. In "His Phoenix," for example, out of 48 finite verbal groups, 40 are accounted for by the following items: "be" (13), "have" (12), "know" (4), "do," "go," "say," "find," "hear," "live," "walk and talk," "pick and choose," and "please." By contrast, many of those in the Tennyson passage are powerful items; that is, items with restricted ranges of collocation, like "plunge," "brandish," "wheel," and "flash." In "Leda," the few verbal items are varied in power, though medium rather than extreme. But they get lexically more powerful as they get grammatically less "verbal": in finite verbal group in free clause we have "hold," "push," "put on," "feel"; while at the other end of the scale, not operating in verbal group at all, are "stagger," "loosen," and "caress" (1970:62-63).

He provides no comment on the significance of this feature other than to note that (1) "lexical power" is a purely technical concept (i.e., it is based on statistical criteria of "range of collocability" rather than any semantic criteria) and (2) the "technically" more powerful lexical verbs in the poem tend to represent "violence and

movement" (he points out that "it is precisely these that perform nominal rather than verbal roles" (1970:63).

It seems clear that this deverbalizing of lexical verbs that represent "violence and movement" is crucial to the most salient effects of the poem. As has often been observed, the poem, much like Michelangelo's painting, simultaneously conveys stasis and motion. Moreover, each seems to be heightened, in a peculiarly disturbing way, by the presence of the other. On the merely physical plane, Leda and the Swan are represented as still, yet continuously moving. This motion and stasis is hauntingly echoed on the psychological plane. Desire inhabits the bodies of Leda and the Swan, but they appear to be detached from it. They are pictured as submitting to some violent desire that overwhelms their bodies. It is not so much that the Swan is raping Leda, but that they are conspiring to undergo the rape together. Moreover, they seem to be conspiring to remain unaware of what they undergo. In effect, the poem represents a "frozen scene of violence," one in which Leda and the Swan, nearly unconscious, are ravaged by desire.

This detachment reinforces the mythic quality of the encounter: Leda is submitting to a god-bird in a foreordained event, the event will inexorably usher in a new civilization, and, upon the decline of that civilization, a new cycle of events will be initiated by another sexual encounter between a woman and a god-bird.

In order to understand how these effects are related to the deverbalization of lexical verbs, we need to consider certain ways in which lexical verbs function differently in verbal groups and nominal groups. Let us first consider a difference that may be characterized

as presence versus absence of a temporal dimension. Whenever lexical verbs are realized in ongoing discourse within consecutive verbal groups, they represent, by virtue of certain systemic features, a temporal network of actions, events, or states that precede, overlap, and follow each other in complex ways. This complexity is increased in a language such as English where the deictic feature of tense locates each action, event, or state in relation to coding time, which, in actual discourse, is itself a continuously moving point. If, however, lexical verbs are realized within nominal groups, they do not realize any temporal network of actions, events, or states. Consider, for example, the lexical verbs stagger and loosen that are present in the modifiers staggering and loosening within the poem. Given their modificatory roles, it is not that Leda first staggers and her thighs then loosen. These two movements, by virtue of deverbalized stagger and loosen, are represented as isolated events in time. Within the poem, all the lexical verbs that express movement have been deverbalized and so, given the lack of any temporality, motion is not represented with a cumulative dynamism. Rather it is represented statically, much as in Michelangelo's painting. Though Leda and the Swan move, they are still, located in a mythic realm beyond time.

Just as deverbalizing certain lexical verbs is related to the simultaneous expression of motion and stasis within "Leda and the Swan," so it is related to the simultaneous expression of desire and detachment from that desire. In order to illustrate this further connection, let us consider, once again, the lexical verb loosen present in her loosening thighs. Whenever an action is represented as a modifier within a nominal group rather than as head of a verbal

group, the case relations in which it is embedded are ordinarily less specific. It is difficult, for example, to identify the agent for the action 'loosen.' Was it the physical force of the Swan, embodied in his initial blow? Or was it perhaps his tenderness as well, expressed by his caressing Leda's thighs? And if the latter, was the agency, in some sense, also Leda's desire, her own response to the 'feathered glory'? Such muting of agency is consistently realized in the poem by deverbalizing the lexical verbs that represent the sexual responses of Leda and the Swan.

Having claimed that the syntactic distribution of lexical verbs in "Leda and the Swan" is critical in achieving certain of its powerful effects, let us now turn to its successive revisions in order to observe how they embody ever greater deverbalization. As is often the case with Yeats' major poems, it is possible to work with a substantial textual history. A number of drafts remain from his continuous rewriting of the poem during the 1920s. The first unpublished draft is dated September 18, 1923, whereas the first published version appeared in August, 1924, in the short-lived review Tomorrow. The poem did not, however, emerge in its final form until 1928 when it was published in The Tower.

In comparing the various drafts, the increasing deverbalization of lexical verbs is particularly evident in the opening lines, which, in their final form, express a remarkable stasis. As Halliday points out, sixty-nine of the first eighty-three words in the poem function within nominal groups, the first finite verb not occurring until the fourth line, by which time the reader has already processed four deverbalized lexical verbs--beating, staggering, caressed, and caught.

In the initial draft of the poem, three finite verbs--have, hovers, and pressed--each functioning within a free clause, occur within the first two lines:

Now can the swooping godhead have his will
Yet hovers, though her helpless thighs are pressed
By the webbed toes...

From a semantic point of view, the first two, have and hover, do tend to represent stasis. Within these lines only one lexical verb, swoop functioning as a modifier for godhead, has been deverbalized.

In the next draft, however, deverbalization is manifested in two new ways: pressed now functions within a subordinated clause and a second lexical verb, tremble, has been introduced as a modifier:

The swooping godhead is half hovering still
Yet climbs upon her trembling body pressed
By webbed toes...

Two finite verbs, hover and climb, still function within free clauses. It may be observed, however, that aspectual marking on hover is now progressive rather than simple. This aspectual change may be viewed as representing a further degree of deverbalization, moving, as it were, toward the right, along the verbal-nominal continuum (the suffix -ing, given its role in forming participles and gerunds, is identified with nominal form).

The next version reflects an even greater tendency toward deverbalization: swoop now functions as a head noun rather than a modifier (The swooping godhead, A swoop) and hover as a non-finite form rather than a finite one (i.e., it now functions as a participle):

A swoop upon great wings and hovering still
The bird descends...

In the first published version of the poem in 1924, Yeats replaces the single nominal group A swoop upon great wings, with two shorter nominal groups, each with a lexical verb as head:

A rush, a sudden wheel, and hovering still
The bird descends...

The two groups are linked paratactically with the participial phrase initiated by hovering, which, in turn, is linked to the first finite clause, The bird descends...

When the poem was published in its final form four years later, it opens with a single nominal group, syntactically isolated from the remainder of the line:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl...

The head of this nominal group is blow, which, strictly speaking, is not a lexical verb, but is nevertheless dynamic in its semantic force.

In his own description of deverbalization in "Leda and the Swan," Halliday does not deal with words such as blow that function as the head of a nominal group. In addition to blow, there are two others that are more readily classifiable as lexical verbs: rush, which, though removed from the opening, is yet present in the second quatrain of the octet; and shudder in the opening nominal group of the sestet. Halliday's omission of these lexical items that function as nominal heads is noteworthy since they are, in a sense, even more deverbalized than items that occur as nominal modifiers or qualifiers. Moreover, they play a crucial role in the structural organization of the poem. This role will be dealt with in greater detail at a later point, but, for the moment, let us note that the opening A sudden blow presents, in splendid isolation, the mythic act of violence as pure stasis. As a

lexical item, blow conveys 'confined motion,' reinforced by the presence of the modifier sudden, rather than motion from one point to another, which had been conveyed by swoop, rush, and wheel. Motion is now more restricted, creating an even greater sense of stasis. Moreover, since the opening nominal group is now severed from what immediately follows (the earlier linkage of and has been removed), it is now free to echo throughout the entire poem, providing a suspended frame, static in its effect, for all subsequent representation of motion and desire. In effect, A sudden blow has been freed from its local ties and can permeate the entire poem.

There is a further sense in which greater stasis was achieved by a reshaping of the opening line in the final version of the poem. The word still, ordinarily interpreted as a time adverbial, is now in a position to be interpreted as the head verb of a finite clause. At first glance, this newly wrought ambiguity might be viewed as decreasing the effects of stasis, since it represents a movement toward greater verbalization. Given the particular semantic force of still as a lexical verb, however, the effects of stasis are increased; for if still is interpreted as a finite verb, the Swan's wings can be viewed, from the outset of the poem, as ceasing to move. This ambiguity is not readily noticeable, and most readers, no doubt, would agree with Halliday when he states that a finite verb does not occur until the fourth line (the fact that beating follows rather than precedes wings seems to decrease the possibility of parsing still as a verb; however, the immediate juxtaposition of beating and still does form an oxymoron that conveys, early on, the opposition between motion and stasis).

The fourth line itself provides a further syntactic ambiguity that contributes to thematic development within "Leda and the Swan." Given the delicate placement of the word helpless, four interpretations are possible (the first of the following four seems forced, even though certain readers, when questioned, claimed that it was the first to come to mind):

- (1) modifying he (i.e., He holds her--helpless...)
- (2) modifying her (i.e., He holds her helpless...)
- (3) modifying breast where it is not the complement of holds (i.e., He holds her helpless breast...)

The last interpretation is clearly the most plausible, given the saliency of the lexico-grammatical unit [holds X upon Y], the semantic parallel of her to him within such a unit, and the prosodic patterning (i.e., -less and breast are linked as a single iambic foot). Such an interpretation is congruent with the view that Leda is not helpless merely because of the Swan's superior power. Rather breast, symbolizing her body, is itself helpless because of desire, though she, as already suggested, remains detached from this desire. It can even be argued that the greater syntactic ambiguity in the final form of the poem contributes to a mounting sense of indeterminacy that prevents readers from answering the final question, thus allowing them to experience, in the very act of reading, a certain lack of closure, which itself mirrors the mythic quality of the poem. This lack of closure is striking, given the rather firmly developed expectation on the part of initiated readers that a sonnet, the most compact of literary forms in Western tradition, will provide resolution in its final lines.⁴

Having considered the syntactic distribution of lexical verbs in "Leda and the Swan," let us now consider the other language pattern that Halliday described. This pattern involves a striking use of the, a word Halliday identifies as belonging to "a class known as 'deictics,'" which in addition to the, contains items such as this, that, his, and her. The deictics used in "Leda and the Swan" are displayed in a table that lists all the nominal groups in the poem except for those that contain only a pronoun or a personal name (1970: 71):

Deixis in Nominal Groups in "Leda and the Swan"

	+ M/Q			- M/Q
	M	Q	MQ	
+D specific	the staggering girl the dark webs the feathered glory the broken wall the burning roof and tower the indifferent beak those terrified vague fingers that white rush her helpless breast her loosening thighs	her thighs caressed by the dark webs her nape caught in his bill	the great wings beating above the staggering girl the strange heart beating the brute blood of the air	the loins the air the bill his breast her nape his know-ledge his power
+D non-specific	a sudden blow	a shudder in the loins		
-D				body

The table has been reproduced here with slightly different labels so that it can be interpreted more easily (the difficulty of interpreting the original labels may have been due to misprints). The symbols D, M, and Q have the following values:

- D = deictic element
- M = modifying element (pre-head)
- Q = qualifying element (post-head)

For Halliday, the structure of a nominal group may be represented as [(M) N (Q)]; D always occurs as the initial element in M. With regard to the words that occur as D, Halliday observes:

The contextual function of the deictics is to identify, and among them "the" is unmarked and specific; that is, its function is to identify a specific subset but to do so by reference to something other than itself; unlike "his" or "that," "the" carries no power of identification but indicates that something else present does (1970:59).

Sometimes the "something else" that the points to lies ahead in the same nominal group, either in other elements of the modifier or in the qualifier. In such cases its function may be described as cataphoric, that is, the information in M or Q is "defining" in that it limits the reference of the head of the group. When the points to identifying information in the preceding text, its function may be described as anaphoric. In reference to these contrasting uses, Halliday points out that

samples of modern English prose writing show that the most frequent use of "the" is in fact cataphoric reference to modifier or qualifier, not anaphoric reference ("second mention") as often supposed (1970:61).

What is unusual about the use of the in "Leda and the Swan" is that out of nine nominal groups containing both the and a modifier or qualifier

only one, "the brute blood of the air," has "the" in cataphoric use. The remainder, although they have both (a) items whose place in structure (at M or Q) makes them potentially defining, and (b) the item "the" whose function is usually to show that such potentially defining items are in fact defining, yet have non-cataphoric "the." That is to say, in spite of the "the," "the dark webs" are not identified by their being dark--like "the loins," they are to be identified anaphorically, in fact by anaphoric reference to the title of the poem (1970:61).⁵

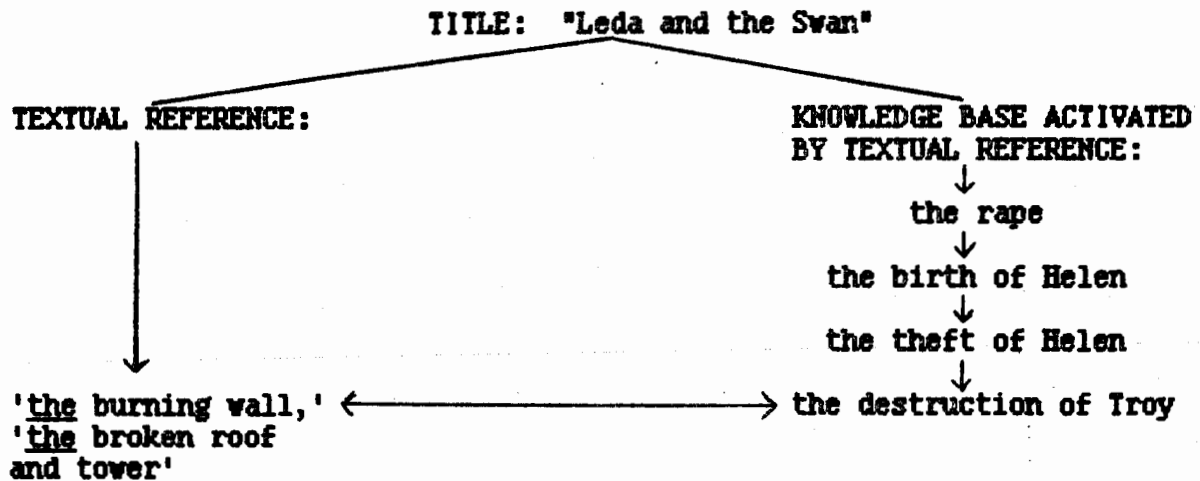
This peculiar use of the in "Leda and the Swan" is functionally related to the deverbalized use of lexical verbs in that each may be considered as subordinating the lexically powerful information realized

as M and Q within the nominal group. This information is controlled not merely by its placement at lower levels within a syntactic hierarchy, but by its location within nominal groups, where it functions non-restrictively, given the anaphoric retrieval of identifying information from the elliptical title. In effect, highly charged information within the poem, already veiled through various processes of deverbilization, is further veiled by the way in which the is used, providing the reader with the sense that motion, violence, and desire are under control.

There is a further sense in which the use of the is crucial to Yeats' poetic achievement in "Leda and the Swan." As has already been observed, Yeats viewed myth as the primary resource that human beings possess for making sense out of history. By the same token, he viewed myth as the primary resource that they possess for making poetry. It provides imaginative worlds of experience that the poet continuously draws upon. Given Yeats' views on the indissoluble links among myth, history, and poetry, the particular use of the in "Leda and the Swan" takes on even greater significance, for it forces a continuous recycling of the myth throughout the poem. The mythic personae, Leda and the Swan, are named only in the title, yet they are continuously present by means of the anaphoric functioning of the. It is as though they hover, like ghosts, throughout the body of the poem. This lack of direct naming also contributes to the sense that Leda and the Swan are merely submitting to violent desire rather than actively participating in it. In effect, the textual distance over which their names are anaphorically retrieved comes to be associated with an emotional

distance that they are viewed as maintaining between themselves and the act they participate in.

It is, however, not only the mythic encounter of Leda and the Swan that is sustained throughout the poem by the anaphoric use of the. In the sestet, the activates Leda and the Swan as progenitors of a mytho-historical cycle rather than as participants in a single event. When the introduces broken wall and burning roof and tower, the reader is called upon to imagine, using the immediately following cue "And Agamemnon dead," the larger consequences of that event. For it led to the birth of Helen, whose theft led to the destruction of Troy, symbolized by the broken wall and the burning roof and tower. The summoning of this larger narrative may be represented in the following schema:



This dependence of the reader upon extra-textual knowledge for understanding these the-initiated nominal groups reflects with Yeats' notion of the active role that myth necessarily plays in the comprehension of poetry.

Before closing this discussion of the role of the in "Leda and the Swan," it may be noted, as indicated by the chart on page 24, that

all the nominal groups in the poem are definite, except for two: the one opening the poem ("A sudden blow") and the one opening the sestet ("A shudder in the loins"). As already noted, these are nominal groups in which a lexical verb, at least as semantically defined, is realized as head. This parallelism functions powerfully in the structural development of the poem, for just as a sudden blow, violent and rupturing, initiates a nearly mechanical flow of motion and desire, so the shudder, equally violent and rupturing, initiates the nearly mechanical flow of events that leads to the destruction of Troy. In effect, the parallel placement of a preserves two tiny points of freedom and discontinuity from which brute events, introduced by definite markers such as the, flow inexorably.

Having provided an interpretive frame for the language patterns that Halliday described in "Leda and the Swan," I would like to point out certain ways in which this frame has been limited. For the most part, it has been based on the recurrence of isolated language features rather than on any organic development of the poem itself. In effect, it reflects the working assumption of linguists discussed earlier, namely, that recurrent language features are particularly significant within poetry. It would, of course, have been possible to use a more process-oriented approach to various constellations of features at particular points within the poem. It could have been shown, for example, how, in the second quatrain, a number of features work together in picturing Leda as holding back from, yet involved in, the sexual encounter. First of all, the mood is interrogative rather than indicative (the content of the how-initiated questions suggests that it was impossible for Leda to resist the Swan's energy); distal rather

than proximal determiners are used ("those...fingers," "that...rush"); "terrified" is placed before "vague" in modifying "fingers" (this ordering, unusual on prosodic as well as semantic grounds, suggests that fear motivates her distance from the act); "body" is used without any determiner at all (the complete absence of a determiner provides a peculiar focus on Leda's body, suggesting that it is, in some sense, acting autonomously); in modifier-head collocations there is a certain tension between 'concrete' and 'abstract' ("feathered glory," "white rush," "terrified, vague fingers," and "strange heart") that can be read as suggesting Leda's detachment from her own body; and finally there is the possibility that "the strange heart" in the final line of the quatrain belongs to Leda rather than the Swan (this ambiguity parallels the one found at the end of the first quatrain, and it foreshadows the uncertainty conveyed by the final question of the sonnet).

Certainly this kind of a process-oriented approach allows for sharply focused attention on various kinds of responses that the poem might engender in its readers. Yet it is only fair to observe that the more structure-oriented approach that we have followed has also allowed for considerable attention to such responses. As already pointed out, a major goal of this article has been to link the structural patterning that Halliday had noted in "Leda and the Swan" to the powerful effects that it exercises upon readers. Ideally, structure-oriented and process-oriented approaches should converge in stylistics.

It is not surprising that the patterning noted by Halliday has been useful in interpreting "Leda and the Swan." This patterning, after all, involves features fundamental to language: the syntactic

realization of lexical verbs and the role of the deictic element in establishing reference. The question naturally arises as to whether Halliday has isolated language features that might be used in exploring a wide range of poetic discourse. As an initial response to this question, it may be recalled that, at least with respect to the first feature, deverbalization of lexical verbs was less noticeable in "His Phoenix" and in the extract from Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur." In considering this comparison, however, two points need to be borne in mind. First, all the discourse involved in that modest bit of comparison was poetic: other forms of discourse were not provided as a point of reference. Moreover, the degree to which lexical verbs are deverbalized within the three bits of poetic discourse may point to distinguishable styles within poetry itself. It seems reasonable, for example, that the most powerful lexical items, whether verbs or otherwise, would tend to be realized at lower levels of syntactic structure in, say, lyric poetry as opposed to narrative poetry. Such a hypothesis is, of course, so broadly formulated that it cannot be readily tested, for there is no sufficiently explicit theory by which we can measure, first, structural levels within a syntactic hierarchy, and secondly, degrees of lexical power. The absence of such theory does not, however, prevent us from speculating on the potential significance in stylistics of a principle basic to psychoanalytic theory: the more highly charged the information, the more obscured its verbal expression. Such obscuring may involve not only syntactic subordination of crucial words (the information is, as it were, 'low' in the text), but also extended chains of the-initiated nominal groups that depend upon extratextual knowledge for their interpretation (the

information is, as it were, 'below' the text, or to shift to an horizontal image, 'beyond' it). In effect, both features described in "Leda and the Swan" accord well with a psychoanalytic principle which is itself congruent with Yeats' notions concerning the role of the 'mask,' or the 'anti-self,' in poetic expression.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to pose a question which, no doubt, has occurred to many readers: did Halliday deliberately refrain from including any interpretation of the poem so that his own discourse might, as it were, serve as an icon to Yeats' (i.e., each suggesting far more than it states)? One is tempted to answer affirmatively, given that interpretive frames emerge so naturally from the language patterns that he described. Certainly, the description of language patterns apart from interpretive frames may function as provocative commentary on a literary text, even though it does not fulfill the requirements of the kind of discourse that, from the point of view developed here, is to be uniquely characterized as stylistics. The poles of critical apprehension which, for want of better words, we label description and interpretation are, in some measure, indissolubly present in any adequate response to a literary text, and so it is our responsibility, whether working as linguist or critic, to construct discourse in which the two are judiciously balanced.

¹ I would like to thank Jonathan Culler, Franklin Horowitz, and Eric Larsen for comments on this article.

² Literary critics have, as a matter of course, worked with a semantic view of text, although they do not ordinarily limit themselves to the more formally defined relations between 'meaning' and 'wording' that linguists delineate. Rather these critics identify symbolic systems of meaning at a different level, which in the case of, say, narrative, involves elements such as plot, theme, and character, that are, in turn encoded, often in highly indirect ways, in the symbolic system of language.

3 The sonnet is provided at the end of this article.

4 There is one other feature of the first quatrain that merits consideration. At the beginning of the poem, the Swan's wings are pictured as beating "above the staggering girl." At the end of the first quatrain, however, her breast is pictured as "upon his breast." although upon does not necessarily signal a 'directly superior' position, it does, at least, signal a 'non-inferior' one. As a consequence, the contrast between the initial and final spatial images in the first quatrain forces the reader to infer some kind of movement, but not any expressed by means of sequential predication. It is interesting that the painting that inspired Yeats may be viewed as suggesting a similar reversal of positions. Although the Swan is presented in an essentially 'superior' position, Leda's upper torso is straining upward so that her breast nearly reclines upon his neck. It is as though Leda and the Swan have been caught in the very act of motion, one in which her body is languorously rising above his own.

5 In later writing, Halliday does allow for a single the functioning both anaphorically and cataphorically. He supplies the following as an example:

Last year we went to Devon for a holiday.
The holiday we had there was the best we've ever had.

Here the is both cataphoric, pointing forward to we had there, and also anaphoric, referring the second occurrence of holiday back to that in the preceding sentence (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 73).

It seems especially appropriate to allow for such dual reference in analyzing poetry.

APPENDIX

"LEDA AND THE SWAN"

William Butler Yeats (1928)

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

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