



How do poets in the Age of Modernism respond to the political realities of their present moment? A cognitive analysis of 'Leda and the Swan' W. B. Yeats

Ruth Tewksbury

Introduction

A growing practice in linguistics is that of cognitive poetics; observing particular linguistic features of a text to contribute further to its literary relevance. As Peter Stockwell iterates, ‘we see, hear and move in stereo three dimensions, and so the cognitive capacity for making figure and ground is clearly and literally an embodiment of this human condition’.¹ Political realities are manifested via the cognitive poetic techniques utilised by Yeats, as we know that his poetry ‘combined a revolutionary aesthetic with traditionalist politics’.² It is indeed difficult to rival Yeats’ richness in terms of locating meaning within his poetry to ratify his purposes with it. Identifying figures and grounds is a stylistic practice crucial to obtaining further meanings from literary texts; this paper will therefore utilise Stockwell’s framework of foregrounding to locate how Yeats responds to the political realities of his time both in the construction and final presentation of ‘Leda and the Swan’.

Background

Yeats’ sonnet was composed around the year 1923 and retells the Greek myth of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the guise of a swan and impregnated with Helen of Troy. She also gave birth to Clytemnestra who was directly responsible for her husband (and then ruler) Agamemnon’s death. The poem’s themes are violence, fatality and history; with Leda being overpowered by all three and the question of whether brutality is necessary for historical change being posed as the central political element. It is clear to gauge Yeats’ flirting with figures and grounds due to the different versions of ‘Leda’ he produced, with the opening quatrain being re-written at least eight times to continually redress the balance in emphasis from the almighty Zeus to the terrified mortal Leda in a way to capture the image in its purest form.

The Yeats exhibition at the National Library of Ireland tells us that the depiction of the mythological ‘Leda’ scene which most influenced Yeats was the sculpture from Elie Fauré’s *History of Art* (see Appendix One). It was specifically the Hellenistic relief of the sculpture that Yeats appears to have drawn from; the “staggering girl” and “beating wings” alluded to in the poem directly concurring with the sculpture’s portrayal.³ Deemed ‘pornographic’ by Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, the bestial female degradation certainly counters Leonardo’s serene image where Leda happily submits, surrounded by hatching

¹ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002) p.15

² Jonathan Allison, *Yeats’ Political Identities: Selected Essays* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996) p.133

³ W. B. Yeats, ‘Leda and the Swan’ in *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works* ed. by Edward Larissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.112

eggs.⁴ Alternate artistic interpretations have contributed to the debate of whether Leda's attack truly takes place against her will; and Yeats' decisions on figures and grounds within the poem also contribute to the reinterpretations made. We have to consider Yeats' choices here in relation to his political opinions that 'the reign of democracy was over for the present'.⁵

Yeats' original title 'Annunciation' reflected the poem's initial political aspirations with the opinion that nothing remains possible for Ireland 'but some movement from above, preceded by some violent Annunciation'.⁶ The poem was commissioned for a political purpose by *Irish Statesman* editor George Russell who imagined the sonnet a satire on the Irish Civil War. Despite claims the sensual aspects overwhelmed the sonnets political themes, it is contestable that Yeats' utilisation of figures and grounds in still conveys the feeling of unrest Yeats predicted would come to Ireland in the near future. His personal sufferings of warfare throughout his life also affected his drafts of 'Leda', with the continual rewrites expressing his inability to compartmentalise his political views.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Stockwell identifies *image schemas* as being the primary means of locating figures and ground in a literary text. They act as locative expressions of place and (metaphorically) time, created through verbs of motion and prepositions relating to movement in the text; namely how character's move in relation to other entities. Image schemas help identify characters who act as figures in that they move across the ground 'either spatially or temporally', as the text progresses.⁷ The figure is thus labelled the *trajector* by Stockwell, which moves above the ground on the *path*. The item the trajector has a grounded relationship with is called the *landmark*.⁸

Image schemas will be analysed in the different editions of 'Leda' to aid interpretations of Yeats' political realities. Stockwell provides a list of features that indicate what makes a figure prominent in a text; all of which help determine the different elements of image schemas.⁹ This essay will seek to identify various image schemas in accordance with this list to locate figures and grounds of the sonnet. This approach will aid inferences of Yeats' political representation in 'Leda'; however, the limitations of such an analysis must be outlined. Whilst the syntactical choices Yeats makes do influence our literary analysis, it is fair to acknowledge that we cannot rely purely on linguistic features to form a concrete argument; therefore context and critical opinions have also been taken into consideration.

Textual Analysis

The sonnet was first anthologised in May 1924 after appearing as 'Annunciation' in *The Dial* and *To-morrow*. The change to 'Leda' corroborates the opinion that the myth depicted took over the poem's political aspect. However, George Bornstein proposes that 'On the *Cat and the Moon* page, the chief context for the poem is Irish politics, followed as it is immediately by the long sequence, "Meditations in Time of Civil War"'.¹⁰ The sonnet articulates elements of Ancient Greek legend in order to serve as an analogy for the political realities of Ireland having just endured the civil war which ended in 1923. Yeats said himself

⁴ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats' Love Poetry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996) p.153

⁵ National Library of Ireland audio tutorial, 'Leda and the Swan' in *Poetry in Process: Building the Tower* <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>> [accessed 5 January 2010]

⁶ NLI tutorial, 'Leda and the Swan' in *Poetry in Process: Building the Tower*

⁷ Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* p.15

⁸ Stockwell, p.16

⁹ For list also see Stockwell, p.15

¹⁰ George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001) p.25

he wanted to depict the scene for ‘metaphor’,¹¹ and despite the later version of the poem said to contain more ‘poetic force’, it has been proposed by Bernard McKenna that the ‘early version more clearly brings out the swan’s associations with tyranny and colonialism by lending insights into the connection between the poem and Yeats’ philosophy’.¹²

The verbs and prepositions from the first quatrain articulate the swan as the figure with Leda providing the ground. The verb “descends” provides us with a movement (as it is a *material* process) in relation to the static ground (Leda).¹³ The preposition “By” in the third line creates a locative expression in which the “webbed toes” act as the agent; establishing the swan as the trajector in this image schema. The present progressive tense of “are pressed” then indicates “her frail thighs” as the path due to the verbs active function upon the imperceptible Leda, who we label the ground. This reading of figures and ground in ‘Leda’ arguably corroborates the opinion that Yeats intended to commiserate the loss of Ireland’s national identity as a result of the British takeover in 1919 (which we gather from his attempts to establish a collective literary consciousness during his life was his general feeling). Whilst ambiguities remain as to whether the English truce was beneficial to Ireland, Yeats appears in this image schema to be drawing comparisons to the Irish surrender which only served to create further social problems, as was expressed by the “terrible beauty” he predicted in his famed poem, ‘Easter, 1916’.¹⁴

The second image schema in operation is ambiguous in terms of which portrait Yeats relates to; “that all powerful bill/Has laid her helpless face upon his breast”. This indicates once again the agency of the swan (as implicated by the bill) who acts “upon” Leda as we observe from Yeats’ intelligent use of this preposition. The past perfect verbal phrase “Has laid” demonstrates passivity from Leda with the absence of an active ‘to be’. This imparts the swan once again as trajector; however, the adjective “helpless” snatches the reader’s attention, marking Leda’s inactivity out as the prominent element which draws reader’s attention. This is typical of many instances in which Yeats highlights Leda’s inactivity to mark her as a figure, making (we assume) his political argument in the sonnet, that we read, as Kiberd does, ‘the swan as the invading English occupier and the girl as a ravished Ireland’.¹⁵ This has served as the traditional contextual interpretation, but when questions of Leda’s lack of resistance are posed, the ‘ravished Ireland’ can be read alternatively as an Ireland weakened and worn down from the continuing violence engendered by the fractious end to the Anglo-Irish War in 1921.

If we look at Leda in relation to the swan we observe the nominal patterns Yeats invigorates with “her frail thighs”, “her helpless face” and “her loosening thighs”. This repeated motif of (Modifier) Head (Qualifier) has been examined by Halliday in his study of deixis in ‘Leda and the Swan’ to determine levels of distance within the nominal groups relating to both characters.¹⁶ His findings that the vast majority of these groups are ‘to be identified anaphorically’, meaning that rather than “the dark webs” being identified as “dark” (cataphorically), identity is established by relating the group back to the title, matching each group to its respective character.¹⁷ This helps foreground certain elements, as we perceive six

¹¹ NLI tutorial, ‘Leda and the Swan’

¹² Bernard McKenna, ‘Yeats, “Leda” and the Aesthetics of *To-morrow*: “The Immortality of the Soul”’ in *New Hibernia Review* 13.2 (2009) Available at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_hibernia_review/v013/13.2.mckenna.html> [Accessed 23 December 2009] p.23

¹³ M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* 3rd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004) p. 282

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, ‘Easter, 1916’ in *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works* ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.85

¹⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Random House, 2002) p.315

¹⁶ Angus McIntosh and M. A. K. Halliday, *Patterns of Language: Papers in General, Descriptive and Applied Linguistics* (London: Longmans, 1966) p.57

¹⁷ McIntosh and Halliday, p.59

nominal groups relating to the swan as opposed to Leda's three. The obvious repetition of these groupings also marks out the text's deviation from conventional norms, heightening our awareness of whom/what form the figures and ground.

The first quatrain of the final alternate version of 'Leda and the Swan' (see Appendix Two) contains more force with "a sudden blow" instantly depicting violence. The first image schema establishes similar patterns of foregrounding with the preposition "Above" throwing the swan firmly into relief. Spatial positioning in the image places the "great wings" prominently as the trajector: it is moving in relation to the "staggering girl" who we locate as the path, with the "thighs caressed" acting as the landmark. The swan occupies the foreground as we can apply all of Stockwell's features to it; the image is moving, deviates away from the ground and is self-contained. Both the path and the landmark in this instance form the ground which the figure is acting upon, and this locative expression concurs with Fauré's depiction of Leda being knocked into submission, acting as a symbolic representation of England overpowering a comparatively fragile Ireland.

The second quatrain consists of two rhetorical questions in sequence; this alerts the reader's attention and displays deviation in the sonnet form. Similarly, Zeus retains his status as the trajector in the quatrain, with "the feathered glory" and "the strange heart" both acting as detached elements separated from the ground beneath them. The preposition "from" in the sixth line of the sonnet indicates the image schema of the swan brutally forcing himself on Leda (the landmark), her fingers too "vague" to push away his "feathered glory" (trajector). Leda is frozen in this instance; marking Zeus out as moving in relation to the static ground. The "thighs" which once again form the landmark alert our attention somewhat to the absence of Leda as a person; her objectification is taken to extremes by Yeats who up until now has only referred to her body in relation to the force acting upon it. The deliberate nonappearance of Leda does in some ways hinder the ways in which the sonnet can be stylistically analysed, as ambiguities are created once the reader starts to question Yeats' intentions of marking Leda out as a figure due to her intensified absence. Her deliberate eclipsing could infer his personal resentments that, as Brown argues, 'a terrible cycle of brutality and revenge was in motion'.¹⁸

The 'Leda' text that was printed in *A Vision* (see Appendix Three) was the same as the text published in *The Tower* three years later; however, the only noticeable difference (aside from the title change) is the breaking of the sestet from the second quatrain. This marks the rape as the pinnacle of the scene; with our informed reading implying the break before the volta as the instantaneous moment of sexual union. Yeats therefore made a decision to isolate the rape, which foregrounds it and establishes it as a figure in the final version of the sonnet. The "loins" are located centrally in line 09, indicating self-containment and sharper focus that work in accordance to Stockwell's list.¹⁹ Ambiguities remain regarding the nature of the rape; is Leda still the victim of a brutal attack or has she resignedly submitted?

The last half of the sestet displays the central political message following the sheer impact of the rape previously. Leda once again lacks agency, being "mastered" and "caught up" by the "brute blood of the air". This final image schema, however, hides the swan and for the first time overtly foregrounds Leda, with the speaker asking if she "put on his knowledge with his power" hinting at the seductive nature of the encounter. The active verb phrase "put on" works locatively to create an image of Leda as the trajector, potentially undermining Zeus' brutality and inferring Leda's successful seduction through the god's omnipotence. This can be aligned with Adams' opinion that the anaphoric adjectives relating to the swan

¹⁸ Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) p.273

¹⁹ Stockwell, p.15

(such as “brute” in line 12) are all descriptive ‘from the point of view of Leda’.²⁰ Leda moves in relation to particular facets of the swan – his knowledge, power, and “indifferent beak”. This image serves as a stark realisation of Yeats’ opinions of the English in the sonnet, suggesting that their apathy potentially contributed to the demise of Ireland’s national identity due to the brutality suffered as a result of the English occupation. This later caused Yeats proclamation in 1933 to ‘hate Irish democracy’,²¹ relating to his bitterness at what Cullingford calls the ‘self-generating, self-sustaining, and self-destructive’²² violence prompted by the Anglo-Irish war.

Leda is overtly foregrounded again in the verb phrase “caught up”; indicating how she is overwhelmed by Zeus but has now emerged from the ground to become the figure. This rising is arguably Yeats’ prime intention for the sonnet, which inverts the final emphasis specifically to Ireland, shifting the entire focus onto his own political realities and making a blunt comparison between England’s consummate/corporate attractiveness compared to Ireland’s exhausted desperation.

When moving our analysis to the last printed version of ‘Leda and the Swan’ (see Appendix Four) we observe another image schema created in the last line of the first quatrain, with the preposition “upon” indicating again the heightened position of the swan as the figure which precedes the ground in visual space as well as attention. The passivity inherent within the image of Zeus acting upon “her helpless breast” would normally indicate him again as trajector. However, a case can be made here for Leda as the trajector, for “her helpless breast”, although acting passively is moving in relation to the landmark (“his breast”) through the path of Zeus’ agency (“he holds her”/“upon”). There is deviation located within the image schema also; with the creative syntactic ordering of breast upon breast leaving subtle ambiguities in regards to Leda’s reactions it is perhaps Yeats’ intention to allude to the willingness of Ireland to sign England’s treaty and effectually end their independence in 1921.

It is important to notify that Fauré was of the decadent’s opinion that Leda willingly consented to intercourse with the Zeus, receiving the ‘fatal force which reveals to her the whole of life’, despite the ‘voluptuousness and pain’ engendered.²³ Therefore the final couplet contains great significance when attributing the figures and grounds to Yeats’ political realities. Yeats poses a question here as we see Leda take agency with the verb phrase “put on”, displaying her acting upon Zeus for the first time (thus concurring with Fauré’s opinion). The preposition “Before”, however, switches agency to the “indifferent beak”, disrupting the static of the swan as the ground and therefore dislocating the image schema as it takes the form of a question.

Discussion

The argument as to Leda’s true knowledge of her attack has generated much debate and served Yeats as a significant metaphor for Ireland’s inactivity in the war of Independence, which resulted in defeated acceptance of England’s treaty despite incurring disruption that altered the state’s entire balance. Yeats’ discontent with the truce of 1921 followed by the Civil War it inspired is well articulated in *The Tower*’s ‘Leda and the Swan’ text, with the question of Leda’s awareness of the colossal change to history she made in that instance adequately translating to the political realities of Yeats’ present society.

²⁰ Joseph Adams, *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax* (London: Macmillan, 1984) p.35

²¹ W. B. Yeats in *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* ed. by Stan Smith (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1990) p.50

²² Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, ‘How Jacques Molay Got Up ‘The Tower’: Yeats and the Irish Civil War’ *ELH*, 50.4 (1983) Available at <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872926>> [accessed 6 January 2010] p.765

²³ NLI tutorial, ‘Leda and the Swan’

When entering into a full comparison of all three printed manuscripts, it should be noted that the date of composition (1923) is always placed prominently on the page at the end of the sonnet. This specifically highlights the historical context from which the sonnet has emerged, the Civil War having just ended. Readers may try to gauge what Yeats meant in terms of his political message, with the possible inference that despite the nationalists' fighting declared over, that did not necessarily mean that Ireland would be free of warfare for the future (as is the sentiment expressed in line 11, "And Agamemnon dead"). The difference in form of each printed manuscript can also be studied alongside political and historical contexts of each year, however, 1923 appears to be the most significant marker we have in determining by what means Yeats intended to write 'Leda and the Swan' as a reflection of Ireland's political realities.

Conclusion

We know that Yeats wrote 'Leda' with the intention of reflecting his belief that 'the age of democracy is over for the present, and in reaction there will be violent government from above'.²⁴ Its printing in *To-morrow* ensured that this political message was still effectively portrayed however much the aesthetic had taken over. The variation in the available online manuscripts gives us an indication of Yeats' uncertainty of how political the sub-content should be, with title and layout changes foregrounding different elements Yeats felt necessary to expose.

Although Yeats personally admitted the dominance of the image to the central political themes, a cognitive analysis of the foregrounding in his sonnet has proved that certain references can still capably allude to Yeats' political realities of his present day. Out of all the image schemas this essay scrutinises, the "indifferent beak" perhaps functions as Yeats' means of judgement on what Kiberd calls the 'irresponsible suddenness of an unplanned and ill-prepared British withdrawal'.²⁵ However, we have observed from an analysis alongside Fauré's sculpture that the consensual element of Leda's submittal is an integral factor to the poem's political message.

²⁴ Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Vol. 1, ed. Daniel J. Murphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.477.

²⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* p.315

Bibliography

Manuscripts

Yeats, William Butler, 'Leda and the Swan' Manuscript (Fair copy 1923) Available at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>> (See *The Tower* Main Exhibition) [Accessed 5 January 2010]

-----, 'Leda and the Swan' in *The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems* (1924) Available at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>> (See *Poetry and Process: Building the Tower* Exhibition) [Accessed 5 January 2010]

-----, 'Leda' in *A Vision* (1925) Available at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>> (*Poetry in Process*) [Accessed 5 January 2010]

-----, 'Leda and the Swan' in *The Tower* (1928) Available at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>> (*Poetry in Process*) [Accessed 5 January 2010]

Primary Sources

Larrissy, Edward, ed. *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works* (Oxford: University Press, 1997)

Stockwell, Peter, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Secondary Sources

Adams, Joseph, *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax* (London: Macmillan, 1984)

Allison, Jonathan, *Yeats' Political Identities: Selected Essays* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996)

Bornstein, George, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004)

Brown, Terence, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001)

Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler, *Gender and History in Yeats' Love Poetry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996)

-----, 'How Jacques Molay Got Up The Tower: Yeats and the Irish Civil War' in *ELH* (1983) 50 (4) Available at <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872926>> [Accessed 6 January 2010]

Gregory, Lady Isabella Augusta, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Vol. 1, ed. Daniel J. Murphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Halliday, M. A. K., *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* 3rd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004)

Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Random House, 2002)

McIntosh, Angus and M. A. K. Halliday, *Patterns of Language: Papers in General, Descriptive and Applied Linguistics* (London: Longmans, 1996)

McKenna, Bernard, ‘Yeats, “Leda” and the Aesthetics of *To-Morrow*: “The Immortality of the Soul”’ in *New Hibernia Review* (2009) 13 (2) Available at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_hibernia_review/v013/13.2.mckenna.html> [Accessed 23 December 2009]

O’Neill, Michael, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on W. B. Yeats* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Smith, Stan, ed. *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1990)

Appendix One

FOCUS: Elie Fauré's Sculpture in *History of Art* (1921)

Source: <http://www.saltana.org/1/docar/leda1_large.jpg>



Appendix Two

FOCUS: 'Leda and the Swan' as printed in *The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems* (1924)

p. 16

Source: *Poetry in Process: Building the Tower* at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>>

A rush, a sudden wheel and hovering still
The bird descends and her frail thighs are pressed
By the webbed toes, and that all powerful bill
Has laid her helpless face upon his breast

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
All the stretched body's laid on the white rush
And feels 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?

1923-

Appendix Three

FOCUS: 'Leda' as printed in *A Vision* (1925) p. 179

Source: *Poetry in Process: Building the Tower* at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>>

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?

Appendix Four

FOCUS: 'Leda and the Swan' as printed in *The Tower* (1928) p. 51

Source: *Poetry in Process: Building the Tower* at <<http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html>>

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
A 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?

1923