Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935), Vol. IX, No. 3, 2017
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v9n3.13
Full Text: http://rupkatha.com/V9/n3/v9n313.pdf

"The broken wall, the burning roof and tower": W. B. Yeats's Revision of the Leda Myth in Historico-Political Contexts

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Received June 10, 2017; Revised September 15, 2017; Accepted September 18, 2017; Published September 20, 2017.

Abstract
The paper critically engages with W. B. Yeats's use of the Leda myth from ancient Greece in his works, especially focusing on his magnum opus *A Vision* and the poem "Leda and the Swan." The paper, in elucidating Yeats's employment and constant revisions of the Leda myth and its myriad symbolic meanings in his repertoire, attempts to illuminate Yeats's commentary on the historical and political reality of the then Ireland, thereby also bringing to fore his ideas about historical progressions, change and political violence. The methodology adopted for the paper entails a close reading and critical analysis of Yeats's aforementioned works, alongside his biographical details, aided by the critical responses to Yeats's mythopoetic experiments by established scholars on Yeats. The paper not only sheds light on the significance of mythical, literary and artistic cross-fertilization, but also on Yeats's ideological favouring of the necessity of violence for cultural regeneration and epistemic change.

Keywords: Yeats, Leda myth, Yeats's Vision, mythopoetic, ideological.

W. B. Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan," written in 1923, was first published in *The Dial* in 1924. It finally appeared in Yeats's poetry collection *The Tower* in 1928. In the intervening years, Yeats edited and republished the poem several times to make it more emblematic and prophetic in nature. The multiple revisions of the poem can largely be attributed to Yeats's experimentations with the myth of Leda as a metaphor for political unrest, historical change, and for his mythopoetic experiments.

Yeats highlights the motivations behind his preoccupation with the Leda myth in the politically tumultuous period of his times:

> This study of mythological brutality began with a meditation on contemporary politics: I wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor . . . of a political review asked me for a poem. . . . My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it. (*The Poem,*p. 663-64)

However, Yeats should not be taken literally here, for the poem is deeply political. As the paper will argue, especially in its use of metaphors, the poem offers a serious comment on the historical and political reality of Ireland in the context of Yeats's idea of history, violence and change.

The poem "Leda and the Swan" is arguably Yeats's poetic masterpiece, a poem in which he brings together his political, historical, mythic, literary and artistic concerns in a novel light,

transposing the myth of Leda on to the political stage of Ireland and the world at large in the early 1920s. The title of the paper encapsulates all the elementary forces that concerned Yeats during the time: "[t]he broken wall," symbolizing the breakdown of boundaries in literature, art and culture, is indicative of Yeats's employment of and revision of myth in his literary works; "the burning roof and tower," characterizing the twin domains of history and politics, signifies the inevitability of violence in times of change and the advancement of time; and the clear references to Helen and Leda, and the "engendering" associated with them in Greek mythology.

The poem emerges as one of the most significant poems in Yeats's oeuvre. An interesting case in point is Yeats's incorporation of the same poem as "Leda"—with some alterations—in the chapter "Dove and Swan" in his magnum-opus *A Vision* (1925), and the paper will comment in detail upon the same. Yeats's inclusion of the poem in *A Vision* makes it an integral part of his historical system delineated in the text, wherein Yeats deliberates upon the inextricability of violence from significant historical and political changes in the history of mankind. R. F. Foster makes a poignant observation about Yeats's continued revision of the myth and what he was possibly trying to achieve through it: "The drafts show how the focus persistently shifts from the god to Leda, a balance which he was not satisfied with until the poem's third printing in *A Vision*" (p.244). Of course Yeats reworked upon the poem even after this, as pointed earlier.

Richard Ellmann (1989), another popular critic and biographer of Yeats, clarifies wherefrom Yeats's consideration of the Leda myth began. Ellmann writes:

> This myth had held his mind since his first use of it in 'The Adoration of the Magi' in 1896, where he prolonged that 'another Leda would open her knees to the swan' and begin a new age . . . . His pursuit of wisdom went on . . . In the chapter, 'Dove and Swan,' which he was writing for A Vision, he hoped not only to interpret the past but to predict the future on the basis of the movement of the gyre. (p. 245-47)

The explanation offered by Ellmann regarding Yeats's involvement with time—both time that is past and time that is to come—opens up a range of significances and possibilities that can be read in conjunction with the myth of Leda. One of the readiest inferences is how the "engendering" associated in the rape of Leda in the past points to a cycle of birth and change in the future, how the past both anticipates and repeats itself in the future, and how violence—though undesired—is also unavoidable in an era of political upheavals and historical transformations.

The later phase of Yeats's creative writing during which the poem appeared was marked by his immaculate fusion of myth, history and politics.[i] In the opinion of Foster, "he [Yeats] returns to his old theme of the gestation of violence, the wheel of fate, and inherited guilt" in the poem (p. 244). The political conditions in Ireland inspired Yeats to write the poem, and the same is corroborated by Lady Gregory in her journal, "Yeats talked of his long belief that the reign of democracy is over for the present, and in reaction there will be violent government . . . It is the thought of this force coming into the world that he is expressing in his Leda poem. . . ." (qtd. in Foster, p.243). In fact, Yeats was deeply involved not only with the contemporary Irish political scenes, but also held strong opinions on World War I and could anticipate political violence as inevitable in the ensuing times. In one of his public speeches about the "curtailment of liberty which he foresaw," a realist and visionary Yeats observed how "a great popular leader [Mussolini]" had announced that "'[w]e will trample upon the decomposing body of the Goddess of Liberty'" (Ellmann, p. 148-49). One can also suggest, arguably though, that by employing the Greek myth of the violent sexual union between Zeus and Leda, Yeats was probably making an attempt to connect the Irish revolutionary phase and the world stage after World War I, in their shared fate of political turmoil, violence and bloodshed.[ii] Indeed, there have been scholarly studies which

suggest that Yeats was ideologically inclined towards the fascist regime and the violence practiced by Germany.[iii]

On the other hand, there exist many versions of the Leda myth as well as the myriad ways in which Yeats employed the same, refashioning them a number of times. Ian Fletcher (1982) in his essay "'Leda and the Swan' as Iconic Poem" argues that "It would be dangerous to assume that there is only one form of the Leda story, or that Yeats knew only one" (*Yeats Annual*). Fletcher explains that the many versions of the Leda myth had come to acquire a place in the European literary tradition that Yeats was acquainted with. Among some of the versions of the story that Fletcher enumerates, Zeus transforms himself into a swan and seduces Leda in one narrative, while elsewhere, he rapes her; in yet another, Leda mates with her husband the same evening (and two of the four children she later bears are sired by Zeus); and in one of the versions, the children of Zeus are not from Leda but Nemesis (p. 83-84).

Fletcher is right in concluding that owing to the different versions of the Leda myth and its multifarious depictions in literature and art, it is difficult to ascertain what really inspired Yeats to write this poem. Writing about the development of myths, Levi-Strauss (1963) opines that "myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted" (p. 29). Applying Levi-Strauss's idea to the different versions of the Leda myth and Yeats's mythopoetic experiments, one can argue that Yeats's formulation of his system in *A Vision* thematically corresponds to both the spiral growth of myth as well as to a similar structural movement of history in his magnum opus. In fact, one may also surmise that Foster's position about Yeats's desire for the achievement of balance, which can be discerned in his employment of binaries in his literary works, is also reflected in his continued syntactic and semantic alterations of the poem under discussion. Yeats strove closer to achieving the balance in his placement of the poem on the Leda myth alongside his historical cones, and thereby also, his visionary thoughts relating to time and politics.

Any discussion of the treatment of myth or poetic creativity in "Leda and the Swan" will remain incomplete without a close analysis of Yeats's concept of history, and the primacy he accorded to mythology and folklore. Yeats's fascination for ancient Greek myths and their depiction in his other poems like "A Woman Homer Sung," "Easter 1916," "The Tower," "No Second Troy," and "Two Songs of a Fool," to name a few, shed light on the modernist literary experiments that were popular in literature and art of the times, and specifically in Yeats's writing, in the early twentieth century.

Richard Chase (1969) in his book *Quest for Myth* highlights this shift in creativity during the phase of modernism in Britain. He writes:

> In fiction and poetry the prestige of naturalism, aestheticism, and symbolism has declined, for though the first and third, at least, are still usable disciplines, neither of them appears to be able to foster a first-rate literature. In the twenties and thirties our writers began to strive for a larger, a more arduous but a more promising achievement; a mythological literature. (p. v)

Writers like H. D. and Aldous Huxley also composed poems on the myth of Leda at around the same time as Yeats. Helen Sword (1992) in her article "Leda and the Modernist" critically engages with the varied interpretations of the Leda myth and its manifold employment in the corpus of modernist poetry. The modernist experiments of Yeats, coupled with his strong mythmaking tendencies (particularly in relation to a romanticized Irish past), led him to venture into the fascinating world of Irish, Greek and Indian myths. Yeats (2015) writes in *A Vision*:

> Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over in my mind, exploring all its details, defining and again defining its elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra. (p. 219)

One can also argue that the contradictory pulls between the romantic Yeats and the modernist Yeats are best exemplified in his revisions of the romantic myths of the past into contemporary political idioms.

The poem also raises some poignant questions about Yeats's aesthetic and political choices: why did Yeats choose the myth of Leda from several other mythological stories that he read, especially when he might have had numerous Irish myths at his disposal; was Yeats trying to depict—through the ordeal of Leda—the political violence unleashed on Ireland by Britain; and more importantly, what is the significance of the myth in his magnum opus *A Vision*, considering that he invested a lot of thought, time, and energy in the latter?

It is also imperative to analyze Yeats's source of knowledge of Greek mythology, and also why these myths came to occupy an indispensable position in the gamut of his creative imagination. In Yeats's *Autobiographies*, one can find significant information about the poet's early literary influences, especially his fascination for and preoccupation with classical Greek and Latin literature. Yeats's early years were spent under the strict guidance of his father, who can be credited with Yeats's first exposure to the world of ancient mythology from the Greek and Latin worlds. Though Yeats never went to a university, he was a voracious reader of P. B. Shelly, Dante Alighieri, Walter Pater and the works of a number of other writers who experimented with mythological elements in their own works.[iv] Foster also asserts that "'Leda and the Swan'. . . strikes echoes back to Blake, Spenser, Irish Legend, and many of . . . [his] earliest 'inspiration'" (p. 244). Brian Arkins (1990) attests to the same in his *Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats*. He writes:

> Mythology is all-pervasive in classical literature and from his wide reading of Greek and Latin authors Yeats naturally acquired a considerable knowledge of Greek and Roman myths. . . Armed then, with the knowledge from all these sources, Yeats set about providing us with a marvelous portrait of Greco-Roman mythology and history . . . in poems such as 'Leda and the Swan' . . . and . . . the history of Greece and Roman in *A Vision*. (p.18)

Evidently, the urge to tell Irish history in the form a mythic story and to create a national consciousness led Yeats to forge his twin concerns of mythology and politics together in his literary works and other artistic experiments. This juxtaposition is evident in the poem "Leda and the Swan," where Yeats brings together the cosmic sexual encounter between Zeus and Leda, and the history of an ancient civilization. This leads to a deep intertwining of politics with aesthetics.

The first stanza of the poem sheds light on the political unrest and exploitation of Ireland at the hands of Britain:

> A sudden blow: the great wings bating 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. (*The Poems*, p. 260)

Leda, caught in the violent blow, might be seen as representing Ireland, while the huge and imposing swan symbolizes Britain, subjecting the former to violence, thereby creating an

atmosphere of unrest and also necessitating the creation of a new identity and history (of Southern Ireland). Janet Neigh (2006) also extends a similar interpretation of the "sudden blow," in asserting that "through the character of Leda, one can interpret Yeats negotiating his political investments in Western civilization as an Irish colonial subject symbolically raped by England" (p. 147).

Yeats develops the idea of exploitation and torment in the political context again in his work, *A Vision*, and crystallizes the same in his concept of the historical cones. A literal reading of the poem tends to view the historical cones as a concept widely separated from the poem "Leda and the Swan." However, Graham Hough (1984) thematically connects them by highlighting the violence and destruction that Yeats's visualization of the cycle of history represents. He writes, "The end of every cycle is a time of exhaustion, turbulence and destruction" (p. 69). Thus, the cosmic act of sexual union takes place at every point on the historical cone (which is the point of minor historical changes), and at the same time it is also a part of the big gyre (the point at which a civilization renews itself). Another critic, Billigheimer (1986) writes, "The wild and brutal act of rape in 'Leda and the Swan' . . . [is symbolic] of the initiation of a chaotic and destructive civilization, which consumes itself with the flames of uncontrollable passions" (p. 65).

In the final stanza of the poem, Yeats ponders again upon the idea he sets forth at the beginning of the poem. He writes:

> 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? (*The Poems* 260)

As mentioned earlier, some critics interpret this as rape, for others, this turns out to be an act of cosmic (sexual) union, and some others hold the view that it is the union of the natural and the supernatural. But one can also take the position—as some critics have done in the past—that Yeats's incorporation of this poem in *A Vision* highlights his perspective that it is not possible to change the course of human civilization without the intervention of mortals. Therefore, one can suggest that for Yeats, it was the primacy of Leda—and not Zeus, the divine king of gods in the Greek pantheon—in the creation of a new world order that occupied a significant position in the cycle of historicity, change and the progress of civilization, which Yeats chose to foreground.

Yeats also changed the title of the poem from "Leda and the Swan" to "Leda" and placed it just after his geometrical diagram of "The Historical Cones." There is no doubt that he was constantly in search of a theory which could define the different layers of human imagination. The placement of the poem in *A Vision* reflects Yeats's sense of mythological logic. For Yeats, mythology was not just a repository of ancient symbols and images like Carl G. Jung, but a dense layering of historical truth. Joseph Campbell (1991) in his *The Power of Myth* writes, "Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our stories and to understand our story" (p.4). Yeats strongly believed that myths have a logical pattern in the form of symbols in ancient literature, which when decoded correctly, have the power to reveal the ultimate knowledge/truth of the world.

Yeats's act of changing the title could also be interpreted as a projection of this poem as an anti-thesis/anti-self in relation to the poems written on Leda by other contemporary poets. Unlike his contemporaries, Yeats treated this myth as symbolizing an inevitable progression towards change; the myth of Leda not only being an act of physical violence but also a representation of the psychological struggle of a writer. He was in fact captivated by the metaphysical ideas of anti-

self, daimon and evil. Remarkably, after his initiation in the esoteric circle of the Golden Dawn, he took the title of *Demon Est Deus Inversus* (D.E.D.I.), which means the devil is the god inverted. One can therefore postulate that Yeats was trying to present Leda at par with the Greek god Zeus or the evil force (the inverted Zeus) as the supreme creator. One can also find similarities between Yeats's idea of the diamon and the sexual union he accounts for in the poem. Yeats (2008) elaborates:

> Main's *Daimon* has therefore her energy and bias, in man's *Mask*, and her constructive power in man's fate, and man and *Daimon* face each other in a perpetual conflict or embrace. This relation . . . may create a passion like that of sexual love. (*A Vision*, p. 25)

For Yeats, a writer's mythopoetic experiments and their articulation in the form of literature and art are also outcomes of the struggle between the self and the anti-self, or between the Man and his daimon/*Mask*, and, to stretch the argument further, between the common man and his artistic soul. From the time of his association with the Society of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was intrigued by the idea of Good and Evil. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats (1999) writes, "One of my fellow-students quoted a Greek saying, 'Myths are the activities of the Daimons' or had we but seen in the memory of the race something believed thousands of Years ago . . . I was sure there was some symbolic meaning could I but find it" (p. 281).

In the beginning, Yeats started working on the myth of Leda with Ireland in his mind, but later on, in *A Vision*, the myth acquired greater spiritual, philosophical, temporal and political dimensions. The paper also elucidated how Yeats's treatment of an already popular and ancient myth (which is significantly European, but not Irish) is integral to our understanding of Yeats's take on the ideas of time, history and violence. Additionally, Yeats also established connections between the Leda myth and other concepts which acquire great significance in his magnum opus, i.e., *A Vision*, and his later works, namely, his ideas of the anti-self, daimon, the different phases of the moon, the gyres, the theory of historical change, creation and destruction, genesis and doomsday, Christ and anti-Christ. A careful study of Yeats's usage of the Leda myth can thus open up newer possibilities of interpretation and cross-cultural exchange on a symbolic level, pointing to how an Irish myth-maker establishes aesthetic and cultural connections between Ireland, Greece, Britain, and Europe at large, through the medium of his poetry and poetic revisions.

Notes

[i] It has been pointed out earlier that the poem underwent numerous revisions from his first draft to its final publication, through the years between 1923 to 1928.

[ii] It is a subject of intense debate whether Yeats saw the encounter between Leda and Zeus as an act of rape/violence, or as a sexual union—not without its violent overtones—as resulting in a "white rush," a culmination of sexual energies, and hence indicating some form of "engender[ing]"/birth/regeneration.

[iii] Elizabeth Cullingford, in her work *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, discusses this extensively.

[iv] I also came across some Greek texts in Yeats's personal library collection, preserved in the library, during my archival research at National Library of Ireland in the year 2016. Yeats's collection includes John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*, Franz Cumont's *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, Lucy M. J. Garnett's *Greek Folk Poesy*, to name a few. For further details, one can access the link: <http://www.nli.ie/pdfs/mss%20lists/Yeats%20Librarylistforpublic.pdf>

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