

VERBAL ELEMENTS IN THE STRUCTURE OF YEATS'S "LEDA AND THE SWAN"

A.M. Sallam (Minia Univ.)

This paper is a tentative attempt to analyse Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" explicitly from a formal standpoint following the methods established by Ellis (1970), Keyser (1981) and Ceci (1983). Focusing narrowly on verbal elements, the analysis shows why Yeats made particular syntactico-semantic choices and how those choices affect the impact and meaning of the poem. Verbal elements and sequencing of elements (finite and non-finite) are manipulated to reinforce two basic issues in the structure of the poem: fragility of the human recipient vis-a-vis the supernatural agent, and action unrestricted by time.

Introduction

"Leda and the Swan", a sonnet written in 1923, dramatically depicts a vision of the mythological story of Leda (mother of mankind) from the sudden attack of the Swan (the bird-godhead) to the girl's helpless yielding (Stanzas 1,2). ~~The consequences of the sexual act are presented (the momentous birth of the Athenian civilization and its violent fall)~~ together with speculative thoughts about the relationship between the omnipotent power and the helpless recipient which is also the relationship between fate and man (Stanzas

2,3). The text of "Leda and the Swan" follows with its individual verbal elements italicized.

The Poem

(Reprinted from *The collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1958, p. 241).

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*?

The verbal elements in "Leda and the Swan" can be divided, by and large, into two distinct (though converging) types: finite verbs and participles (active -ing and passive -ed forms) which function like verbs as well as adjectives. For our purpose, a finite verb is a form that can occur on its own with a subject in a main clause (or independent sentence). It permits linguistic contrasts in tense (which limits the time reference of the verb) and mood (using modal

auxiliaries to express possibility, certainty, etc.), e.g. 'went' and 'must stay' in : 'Yesterday he went fishing, but today he must stay at home'. On the contrary, participles are non-finite forms derived from verbs and used inter alia as adjectives. They lack tense and mood contrast and can occur on their own only in subordinate clauses (see Crystal, 1985, 121). Participial adjectives are used before and after nouns subject to collocational restrictions. Examples are:

Preposed

The *rolling* hills were beautiful.
The *broken* window was repaired.

Postposed

The boy *swimming* is Ali
We left the skirmish
exhausted.

It is worthy of notice, however, that when a participle is preposed (i.e. used attributively) it usually indicates some more permanent or characteristic feature; it is more like an adjective than a verb. On the other hand, if the participle is postposed its verbal force is explicit (i.e. it denotes more of the actions) : the participle is like a verb as well as an adjective. More often than not, the preposed participle has the same 'identifying' function as a relative clause, cf.

the only place left - the only place that was left
a child screaming - a child who was screaming

(For details, see e.g., Quirk, *et al.*, 1985, Toolan, 1990, 99, Swan, 1985, 453).

Armed with these observations about finite verbs and participial elements we return to the poem. It is observable that Yeats in "Leda and Swan" makes little use of finite verbs (1 verb in the first stanza, 2 verbs in the second, 3 verbs in the third). In contrast, he makes extensive use of preposed and postposed participial elements in their -ed and -ing forms (4 participles in the first stanza, 5 in the second, 4 in the third). Following are lists of these verbs and participles in their respective contexts:

Finite verbs

S(entence) 1 (stanza 1): He holds her ... 1 4
 S 2 (stanza 2): How can ... fingers push ... 1 5
 S 3 : How can body ... But feel ll ... 7-8
 S 4 (stanza 3): A shudder ... engenders ... The broken wall
 ... ll 9-10
 S 5 : Did she put on his knowledge
 Before the ... beak could let her drop?
 ... ll 13-14

Participles

Preposed

S 1 (stanza 1)
 staggering girl 1 2
 Ss 2,3 (stanza 2)
 terrified ... fingers 1 5
 feathered glory 1 6
 loosening thighs 1 6

Postposed

wings beating 1 1
 thighs caressed 1 2
 her nape caught 1 3
 body laid 1 7
 heart beating 1 8

Ss 4,5 (stanza 3)

The broken wall 1 10
the burning roof 1 10

Being so caught up
1 11
So mastered 1 12

As can be seen, in the five multi-clause sentences of the poem Yeats uses 6 finite verbs and 13 participial forms. Note that all subordinate clauses are participial and that in the first and last sentences the multi-clause series are foregrounded as they precede the main clauses. In fact, there is congruence here between information prominence and syntactic prominence. It will be seen subsequently that the poet's intense vision of power appears located in the subordinate, participial clauses. This very fact gives grounds for suspicion that this circumstance is not haphazard but strategic: it reinforces (or mirrors) the thought processes in the poem affecting its meaning and impact.

Vision - Contemplation

It is interesting that the distinction between finite and participial is concomitant in the poem with a thought division between vision and contemplation. The vision (of power vs fragility) is mainly in participial syntagms, the contemplation (commentary on the actions involved in the

vision) is couched in finite elements, modal and rhetorical. Before going on to the details of participial forms, let us look at the function of the finite elements.

Finite elements / contemplation

The use of finite elements serves the insights the poem provokes and the poet's reactions to those insights. It is noteworthy, for instance, that tense (present and past) in the poem is not supplemented by time adverbials. This has resulted in a vague, notionally flexible time reference. The mythical world of the poem requires this type of temporal characterization for it is a world outside time specification. The time at which it is asserted the reported event of supernatural onslaught took place is not specified in the poem. This is congruent with the use of participial forms to serve a similar function (see p. 10).

The simple present

The choice of the simple present in stanzas 1 and 3 to designate a presumably past action is evidently for greater vividness: the use of the present 'holds' in

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast (l 4)
and 'engenders' in

A shudder in the lions engenders there
 The broken wall, ... (ll 9, 10)

emphasises the present significance of the mythical act. Moreover, the simple present enhances the transitory nature of the sexual act between the godly (the Swan) and the human (Leda) - a transitoriness which is further emphasized by the brief 'time span' implicit in the phrases 'A sudden blow' (l 1) and 'A shudder in the lions (l 9).

Furthermore, the simple present functions in stanzas 1 and 3 to express general truths (e.g. about the interdependence and final reconciliation between spirit (Zeus) and flesh (Leda), knowledge and power, myth and history, etc.) which are outside of time. Because they are always accepted as truths (at least in the world of the poem), they are timeless.

The movement from the use of the simple present (sentences 1 and 4) to the 'How can' frame (sentences 2 and 3) and the 'Did' frame (sentence 5) provides syntactic mimesis for the move from an intense vision of power (sentences 1 and 4) to the rather speculative (more relaxed) moments of contemplation (sentences 2,3,5).

The 'How can' frame

It may be worth recalling that in English there are two

kinds of questions: 'yes/no' questions (characterized by word order inverted from that of the indicative sentence, and answerable by a simple assent or negation) and wh-questions (beginning with a question word, and answerable by a phrase). Yeats has made use of the first type of questions in the final sentence of the poem (see p. 9); the questions in sentences 2 and 3 belong to the second type:

S 2

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

S 3

And *how can* body, laid in that white rush
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

'Can' is most commonly used to express root possibility. Coupled with 'how' in the two questions, it expresses a point of view or 'an emotional inclination' that is not sure of realization. There is, in fact, a clear contrast with the final 'Did' question here since the questioner's attitude to the truth of the proposition is not involved in the meaning of the modal auxiliary which can be paraphrased as: 'it is impossible' (for the terrified fingers to push the feathered glory ...).

The emotional effect of the two speculative 'How can' questions is then a reinforcement of Leda's helplessness expressed with participles throughout (staggering girl,

terrified vague fingers, etc.). The 'ignorance-factor' (which is a condition of an utterance with the force of a question) is here reduced by these participles plus the use of following 'but' which excludes any possibility of resistance on the part of Leda. The situation has been made clear enough in stanza 1 to allow the questioner to elicit information. However, the questions function to focus attention on the entities expressed by the nominals following 'How can', sc. 'fingers' (those terrified vague fingers, l 5) and 'body' (laid in that white rush, l 7). They also function as disguised exclamations for the poet's information is much more complete than his questioning pose would suggest.

In summary, the 'How can' questions do not really ask for information, they express confirmation of the inevitability of the sexual act.

The simple past

The perception of the situation is far less clear in the questioner's mind in the concluding 'yes/no' question of the poem. Here the 'ignorance-factor' is made stronger by the move from the 'How can' frame to the 'Did' frame accompanied by modal 'could let' expressing a past permission:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

The question points to a focal issue in the events reported. It is therefore presented not just as another question for contemplation, but separately; and the past simple is used to distinguish it from the rest of the poem.

Moreover, the shift from the present simple (denoting timelessness/general truth) to the past simple appears to represent a shift from the visionary world of the omnipotent to the temporal world of contemplation. The past simple is more dramatic than the present simple: it forces the reader back to the world of mundane actualities (to consider, e.g., Leda's fate) and help him perceive the series of visionary events as Yeats must have perceived them, that is, as completed. Note that tense variation in the poem is also for variety, vividness and contrast.

The participles

The participles (so called because of their 'participation in both nominal and verbal characteristics (Lyons, 1968, 12), help Yeats convey somewhat obliquely the details of a mythical, unusual experience that would be lost if described directly. In fact, they are calculated to achieve certain effects and help the reader enter the poet's experience

which is at once sensory and intellectual. As will be seen subsequently, a similar iconism to that of the finite elements can be appreciated in the syntax and distribution of these participial forms.

A comparison between the -ing and -ed forms of participles used in the poem (see p. 4) can be instructive. In the following Table (based on the frequencies of the forms) the percentages are given for each form before and after nouns:

	Preposed		Postposed	
		%		%
-ing forms	3	50	2	29
-ed forms	3	50	5	71

One immediately notices that while the distribution of both forms is balanced preominally, the -ed forms are predominant after nouns. Note that it is after nouns that the participle has the function of a clause (see p. 4), cf.:

{ the great wings beating still (1 1) -
 { the great wings (that) were beating still

{ ... body, laid in that white rush (1 7) -
 { ... body, which was laid in ...

Thus, e.g., the first sentence of the poem can be seen as a multi-clause sentence consisting of one main (or superordinate) clause (He holds her helpless breast upon his

breast, l 4). and three participial clauses:

... 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 ...

These opening participial clauses, though subordinate, they apparently report major events prior to the event reported in the main clause. The poem as a whole contains seven participial clauses where the participle has verbal as well as adjectival functions. It would be instructive to see if there is some deeper reason for Yeats's choice of such participles.

It is also worthy of notice that the -ed clause indicates -like the passive - that the subject of the verbal element is the recipient of the action. In contrast, the -ing clause indicates -like the active -that the subject of the verbal element is the agent of the action, cf., e.g.:

subject	verbal element	function of subject
her nape	caught (in his bill) l 3	recipient
the great wings	beating (still) l 1	agent

Yeats has manipulated the syntax of participial forms to suppress most vestiges of Zeus (the supernatural) as an agent from the surface of the poem and make prominent the role of Leda (the human) as the helpless recipient of the supernatural onslaught. At this junction we need to deal

with the notion of agency at some more detail.

In English, the typical function of 'agent' in a clause is to specify the instigator or means whereby a particular action came about (cf. Crystal, 1985, 11). The agent of a verbal form is normally animate in subject position as in (1 a). However, it could be replaced by the recipient of the action as in a passive construction. In this case, the agent is either unexpressed as in (1 b) or expressed as object of 'by' in a by agentive phrase as in (1 c):

- (1) a. Ali opened the door.
 b. The door opened.
 c. The door was opened by Ali.

In the light of these observations we recategorize the -ed forms in the poem in terms of whether or not an agent is present:

recipient	participle	agent
her thighs	caressed	By the dark webs 11 2,3
her nape	caught	---- 1 3
body,	laid	---- 1 7
(Being so) = as	caught up	} by the brute blood of air 11 11,12
the girl (was)	mastered	

As can be seen, the recipient is always in subject position. The agent is either unexpressed or expressed in a by agentive phrase which heightens the verbal force of the participle and indicates explicitly the correspondence to

the active form of the clause. Thus Leda, the human recipient, is in focus while Zeus, the supernatural Agent, is out of focus (i.e. suppressed). When expressed (as object), his existence is implicit: 'dark webs' l 3, 'brute blood' l 12. In subject position preceding an -ing form Zeus is equally oblique, part of him represents the whole:

A SUDDEN blow: *the great wings* beating still l 1

And how can body ... But feel *the strange heart* beating
where it lies? ll 7,8

This corresponds to the unique world of the poem in which the supernatural initiator overwhelms the helpless natural.

Another function of the participial forms is evident if we recall that agents presuppose actions and that actions develop through time. As the participles are used to suppress Agents in the poem, they are also used to evade temporal orientation. It is observable that no finite subordinate clauses are employed in "Leda and the Swan". The seven subordinate clauses are all participial. They serve the world of the poem by expressing verbal action with no time reference. This function correlates with the use of the present tense to imply timelessness. Both participles and the present tense signal action developing through timelessness.

Once this is established, however, we have to tackle yet another aspect of the use of the participles with regard to the -ing forms. As has been shown, one basic feature of the poem is the use of finite and non-finite elements to express timelessness. Nevertheless, one would have expected the use of the progressive aspect present tense to report the sexual act (core of the poem) as long as it is in progress. However, the progressive is not used for it expresses action developing through time and the strategy throughout is action unrestricted by time. Alternatively, the poet employs the -ing participles whose forms resemble the transitory present progressive to express the ongoingness of the sexual act as a wave of activity without defined points of termination: The opening scene

A SUDDEN blow: the great wings *beating* still 1 1
Above the *staggering* girl ... 1 2

The sexual passion:

loosening thighs 1 6
the strange heart *beating* where it lies ... 1 8

The dynamic text proceeds to a climax:

A shudder in the lions engenders there
The broken wall, the *burning* roof and tower ... 11 9,10

The use of -ing forms, therefore, is not only consistent with the absence of the progressive but are perfectly coincident with the general purport of the poem.

References

[The place of publication of books is London unless otherwise stated]

Carter, Ronald, (ed.) 1982, *Language and Literature, An Introductory Reader in Stylistics*, George Allen & Unwin, London.

Ceci, Louis G., 1983, "Iconic features in the noun phrases of Yeats's 'The Cold Heaven'," *Language and Style*, 16, (138-150).

Chomsky N. 1961, "Some Methodological Remarks on Generative Grammar" *Word*, 17 (219-39).

_____ 1965, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, Cambridge.

Coates, Jennifer, 1980, "On the non-equivalence of 'may' and 'can'" in *Lingua*, 50, 209-220.

Crystal, David, 1985, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* Blackwell, Oxford.

Cummings, M. and Robert Simmons, 1983, *The Language of Literature, A stylistics introduction to the study of literature*, Pergamon, Press, Oxford.

Ellis, J.M., 1970, "Linguistics, literature, and the concept of style", *Word*, 26 (75-77).

Freeman, D.C. (ed.), 1981, *Essays in Modern Stylistics*, Methuen, London and New York.

Keyser, Samuel Jay, 1981, "Wallace Stevens : form and meaning in four poems " in D.C. Freeman (ed.), *Essays in Modern Stylistics*, Methuen, London & N.Y.

Leech, G., Margaret Deuchar, Robert Hoogenraad, (reprinted) 1985, *English Grammar for Today: A new introduction*, Macmillan in conjunction with the English Association.

Lakoff, G., 1968, *Irregularity in Syntax*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y.

Lyons, John, 1968, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Milic, Louis, 1966, "Unconscious ordering in the prose of Swift", in *The Computer and Literary Style*, ed. Jacob Leed, Kent, Ohio, (79-106).

Ohman, Richard, 1969, "Generative grammars and cocept of literary style", in *Contemporary Essays on Style*, ed. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne, Glenview, I ll, pp. 133-48.

- Ross, D., JR, 1975, "Stylistic contrasts in Yeats's Byzantium poems", *Language and Style*, 8, 293-305.
- Sallam, A.M., 1973, "The bird and the tree in the poetry of W.B. Yeats", Unpublished M.A. thesis, Assiut Univ. Faculty of Arts (Now Minia Univ.).
- Short, Mick (ed.) 1989, *Reading, Analysing and Teaching Literature*, Longman, London and N.Y.
- Swan, M., 1983, *Practical English Usage*, The English Language Book Society and Oxford Univ. Press.
- Thorne, J.P., 1981, "Generative grammar and stylistic analysis" in *Essays in Modern Stylistics*, D.C. Freeman (ed.), Methuen London and N.Y.
- Toolan, M.J., 1990, *The stylistics of Fiction*, A literary-linguistic approach, Routledge, London and N.Y.