Classical motives in 20\textsuperscript{th}-century war poetry

The use of the sonnet form and/or the myth theme in “Dulce et Decorum Est” (Owen), “Leda and the Swan” (Yeats), and “The Shield of Achilles” (Auden)

Frances Van de Vel

Presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics and Literature

Supervisor: prof. dr. Theo D’haen

Academic year 2012-2013

116,478 characters (bibliography excluded)
Table of contents

1. Introduction 3

2. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) 4
   2.1. Case study: “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1917) 4
      2.1.0. The poem 4
      2.1.1. Introduction 5
      2.1.2. The sonnet form 8
         2.1.2.1. The first section: the terrors of warfare 8
         2.1.2.2. The second section: the gas attack 9
         2.1.2.3. The third section: the nightmares 10
         2.1.2.4. The fourth section: the soldier-poet’s rage 11

3. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) 12
   3.1. Case study: “Leda and the Swan” (1923) 12
      3.1.0. The poem 12
      3.1.1. Introduction 12
      3.1.2. The myth theme 15
         3.1.2.1. The first reading: the swan as the rapist 16
         3.1.2.2. The second reading: Leda as the rapist 17
         3.1.2.3. The third reading: History as the rapist 18
         3.1.2.4. The fourth reading: the reader as the rapist 19
      3.1.3. The sonnet form 20
3.1.3.1. The octave: the eruption of Violence and the questioning consciousness

3.1.3.2. The sestet: the consequences of Violence and the epistemological riddle

4. Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973)

4.1. Case study: “The Shield of Achilles” (1952)

4.1.0. The poem

4.1.1. Introduction

4.1.2. The myth theme

4.1.2.1. Stanza 1 – 3: the organisation of the post-war State

4.1.2.2. Stanza 4 – 6: the Idea behind the post-war State

4.1.2.3. Stanza 7 – 9: the consequences of war in the post-war State

5. Conclusion

6. Bibliography

6.1. General reference

6.2. Wilfred Owen

6.3. William Butler Yeats

6.4. Wystan Hugh Auden
1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to investigate the use of classical formal and thematic motives in twentieth-century war poetry. More specifically, we will have a look at the use of the sonnet form and the myth theme in three poems from different authors that employ either the sonnet form, or the myth theme, or both. We have chosen these motives because we thought it would be worthwhile to study how they are used to depict horrible aspects of modernity (i.e. twentieth-century warfare and post-war society), even though they predate modernity themselves; both the sonnet form and the myth theme have been present in literary history for many centuries.

The first two poems deal with the First World War, the last poem with the Second World War. The poets’ purpose is the same: to come to terms with the experience of war in poetry and criticise the poetic tradition for its insufficiency in this enterprise.

The first poem that we will study is “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), which is composed of a double sonnet. We will first give some background information about the poem, focussing on the soldier-poet’s stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. We will highlight the shell shock that Owen suffered from, since the horrible dreams that were its main result constitute a major influence on the poem of our case study. Then, we will take a look at the ways in which Owen manipulates the formal, thematic and metrical conventions of the sonnet form in order to come to terms with his traumatic experiences in the trenches and with the dreams that still haunted him at night, and to criticise war propaganda.1

Our second case study is “Leda and the Swan” by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). This poem makes use of both the sonnet form and the myth theme, in particular the classical tale of Leda being raped by a swan, the animal disguise of the passion-driven god Zeus. We will start once again by discussing the background of the poem, including its place in Yeats’s self-made mythology A Vision and the underlying new concept of History, born from socio-political and religious exhaustion after World War I. In this perspective, we will scrutinise Yeats’s manner of using the myth of Leda as well as the sonnet form so as to give an abstract-symbolical place and origin to the Great War. For the myth theme, we will focus on the epistemological (im)possibility of superhuman knowledge (did Man gain intellectual profit from the supernatural contact with the godhead?), the role of Man in History (is Man to blame for the war?), and also on the different possible identities of the rapist in the poem. Concerning this last aspect, we will explore four readings by Barnwell (1977), each of which considers another participant responsible for the outburst of violence. For the sonnet form, we will explore the ways in which Yeats deals with the existing literary conventions and gives them a twist to deliver his own representation of the conflict.

The third poem is “The Shield of Achilles” by Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1979). The poet uses the mythological participants of Homer’s Iliad Book XVIII, where Thetis watches how Hephaestos crafts armour for her son Achilles. Before discussing the poem, we will say a few words about the poem’s background, in particular the use of rhyme royal and Auden’s view on the function of art after the Second World War. Then we will investigate how Auden uses Achilles’ shield to give three images of post-war society: its organisation, the founding Principle and the consequences of war for everyday life.

Finally, a conclusion will summarise the most important findings of our three separate analyses.

1 Of course, one can claim that Owen uses the myth theme as well in “Dulce et Decorum Est”, since the title is derived from Horace’s Odes, a well-known work of classical poetry. However, we have chosen to focus only on the sonnet form in our analysis. We will include some information about the origin of the title in the poem’s introduction (2.1.1.).
2. WILFRED OWEN (1893-1918)

2.1. Case study: “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1917)

2.1.0. The poem

1 Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime…
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
20 His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, a every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
25 -

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.

(Owen, ed. Day Lewis 1964: 55)
2.1.1. Introduction

The very first drafts of “Dulce et Decorum Est” were written in 1917, while Owen was staying at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. In March of that year, he had fallen into a well near Fresnoy, where he fought with the 2nd Manchesters regiment to fend off the Germans, and was subsequently diagnosed with concussion. Although he initially stated that he “[did] not feel at all fuddled” (Stallworthy 1974: 171), a later letter of 18 March (his twenty-fourth birthday, which he forgot, cf. ibid.) tells of a headache, high fever, vomiting and pains. He was subsequently moved to the Casualty Clearing Station at Gailly on the Somme Canal, from which he sent cheerful letters home, happy to rest and to hear that the British Army was making progress at the front lines.

Even though his fall caused only physical damage, Owen had been bearing a far heavier mental burden for some time that was going to exercise a major influence on his poems. In January 1917, he had participated in the last stadia of the battle of the Somme, and shortly afterwards told his mother in a letter that he “[had] suffered seventh hell” (Roberts 2007: 256). The fierce battles introduced Owen to shelling and gas attacks, which he equally reported to his parents in heroic letters, yet other fragments disclose another view, tainted with fear and despair: “I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it” [...] “I nearly broke down”, “I am never going back to this awful post” (Purkis 1999: 21).

I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt. (Johnston 1964: 159)

It was especially during this Somme period that Owen found out the banality of heroism, which would greatly influence the making of “Dulce et Decorum Est”: war propaganda increasingly seemed to be composed of hollow words now that he realised that those whom poetry called “glorious” – soldiers who died in battle for their country – turned out to be foul creatures, blending perfectly with the disgusting repulsiveness of the battlefield they populated:

I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the face-to-face death, as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language and nothing but foul, even from one’s own mouth (for all are devil ridden), everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day and all night, the most execrable sighs on earth. In poetry we call them most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night… and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there, in motionless groups, THAT is what saps the “soldierly spirit”. (Stallworthy 1974: 159; Roberts 2007: 177)

After his stay at the Casualty Clearing Station, Owen returned to his advancing battalion in Selency near St. Quentin on 4 April, where he was once more confronted with heavy shelling attacks, which kept on haunting his mind: “I kept alive on brandy, the fear of death and the glorious prospect of the cathedral Town just below us, glittering with the morning.” (Collected Letters, ed. Owen and Bell, quoted by Purkis 1999: 22). Halfway through April, one of those attacks occurred particularly close to him:
I think the worst incident was one wet night when we lay up against a railway embankment. A big shell lit on the top of the bank, just 2 yards from my head. Before I awoke, I was blown in the air right away from the bank! I passed most of the following days in a railway Cutting, in a hole just big enough to lie in, and covered with corrugated iron. My brother officer of B Coy, 2/Lt Gaukroger lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his rest be a 9 days-rest. (Stallworthy 1974: 182)

These attacks could not remain without severe consequences on Owen’s mental system. On 1 May, Owen’s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Luxmoore “noticed that Owen’s speech was confused and that he trembled uncontrollably” (Roberts 2007: 307). Moreover, the Battalion Medical Officer “found him to be shaky and tremulous and his memory confused” (Stallworthy 1974: 183). Once more, he was sent to the Casualty Clearing Station at Gailly. He was diagnosed with neurasthenia, which Owen mentioned in one of his letters, followed by some reassurance: “I still of course suffer from the headaches traceable to my concussion… Do not for a moment suppose I have had a ‘breakdown’” (Collected Letters, ed. Owen and Bell, quoted by Purkis 1999: 23). It is quite ironic to remark here that, although Owen had realised by now that heroism was a very relative concept in this war, he still did not want his parents to think that he could not deal with the horrors of warfare.

Yet the most obvious diagnosis was soon made: at the Casualty Clearing Station, “evidence of trench fever” was found (Purkis 1999: 23) and on 11 June 1917, Owen was removed to the No. 1 General Hospital at Etretat (Stallworthy 1974: 187) and consequently to the Royal Victoria Hospital (at that time known as the Welsh Hospital, Netley) on 16 June (Roberts 2007: 307). The Medical Board observed the following on 25 June: “There is little abnormality to be observed but he seems to be of a highly-strung temperament. He has slept well while here” (23). Yet Owen increasingly suffered from bad dreams, which were considered to be the direct result of shell shock. He was declared “unfit for General Service for six months” (Stallworthy 1974: 188) and transferred to Craiglockhart.

This period at the war hospital turned out to be of vital importance for Owen’s poetry. In August 1917, Owen met Siegfried Sassoon in Craiglockhart, an event which Stallworthy (1974) and many other critics consider to be “the most important meeting of his life” (204) and “a tremendous stimulus” (Roberts 2007: 300). Roberts (2007) states, more specifically, that “[t]he meeting with Sassoon, the exchange of views about the war, the discussion of poetry, the older poet’s advice and encouragement – all contributed to a strengthening of the poetic impulse along the lines previously indicated in his letters from France” (160). Indeed, after having read Owen’s manuscript poems, Sassoon saw traces of talent and encouraged the aspiring poet to further develop his abilities, thereby particularly stressing the exploration of new poetic techniques and literary devices, “[prompting] Owen to apply his technical innovations to something more ambitious” (Stallworthy 1974: 211). From that moment onwards, Owen and Sassoon saw each other almost every day, playing golf, picnicking and discussing poetry (210).

Critics clearly perceive Sassoon’s influence in the word choice and language register of “Dulce et Decorum Est”. Johnston (1964) accurately voices the opinion of many critics in saying that

the negative, cynical attitude of “Dulce et Decorum Est”, however, together with its emphasis on shockingly realistic details, represents an element in Owen’s verse that is not really natural to it. He is sincere, of course, but neither cynicism nor purposive realism is a major factor in his true poetic vision. (174)
Purkis (1999) believes that Captain Brock, Owen’s supervisor at Craiglockhart, may have had some role in the origins of “Dulce et Decorum Est” as well: “He also believed in facing the obsessive nightmares in the minds of his patients, and Owen was encouraged to write about his dreams in order to take control of them” (130). This may have played a part in the composition of “Dulce et Decorum Est”, which narrates a scene involving the poetic voice and a soldier who is too late to put on his protective mask in a sudden gas attack and subsequently suffocates. Owen had witnessed similar events countless times, so the poem probably functioned as a personal therapy so as to try to come to terms with these traumatic experiences, as far as this was possible (cf. case study).

“Dulce et Decorum Est” is an anti-propagandistic war poem, directed at “overzealous patriots” (Johnston 1964: 174). Originally, the poem was addressed to Jessie Pope, who had contributed in the trend of publishing motivational war poems in newspapers: “Who’s for the trench – Are you, my laddie?” (Purkis 1999: 34). While Dulce et Decorum Est was first dedicated to this woman (“To Jessie Pope etc”) (Owen, ed. Day Lewis 1964: 55), Owen later changed it to “To a certain Poetess”, “in an effort to outface all such authors” (McIlroy 1974: 54).

The title is derived from an original fragment of Horace’s *Odes* (III, 2.13), which runs as follows:

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:
Mors et fugacem persequitur virum
Nec parcit inbellis iuventae
Poptlitibus timidove tergo.

It is sweet and an honour to die for your country
Death persecutes the fleeing deserter
And does spare neither the hamstrings nor the cowardly backs
Of the young who retire from battle.

(our translation)

The phrase “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” was very popular among Roman conquerors, and its use was revived at the beginning of the Great War in 1914 by war propagandists (Roberts 2007: 261). Owen’s adoption of this particular title is therefore very bitter and ironic: while the heading “Dulce et Decorum Est” seems at first sight to introduce a propagandistic poem, reading the first lines immediately rejects this illusion.

Owen’s poem is inscribed in the problem of communication: how does one put into words experiences that world nor man have ever seen before? “[H]ow are we going to tell the children and what are we going to tell them?” (Purkis 1999: 55). Owen saw no other solution than to twist the existing formal and thematic conventions, heirs of nineteenth century romantic poetry, in order to adapt them to the new, hallucinatory reality of warfare. The Great War created a new world as well as a new world vision: the optimism of the Victorian Age had crumbled to reveal a dark and gruesome macrocosm, where the sky could only be described in terms of the bullet rains falling from the firmament. Moreover, Man was not to be depicted in its Beauty, but in its maimed, cripple and distorted form, as the physical consequences of War required. Owen had “a belief that his individual poetic destiny was to be achieved on terms far different from the communal Georgian response” (Johnston 1964: 162) and “sensed a radical shifting of
the historical and social values which determine the artist’s response to his milieu” (164). He knew what was needed as an antidote to the existing Georgian poetic traditions, who failed to describe war: “a more effective poetic arrangement to depict evil” (165).

“He was the only war poet who seemed to be conscious of the implications of “war poetry” for poetry in general. The change in his own conceptions anticipates a radically altered conception of poetic purpose and method, itself a product of inadequacies which the war – and the poetry of the war – clearly revealed. The summary of nineteenth-century traditions which the Georgians represented could not cope with the moral and physical complexities of the twentieth century; poetry, if it would live, must change.” (199)

He is a “revolutionary” poet not in the sense that he deliberately undertook any radical reformation of his art but in the sense that his work embodies, more dramatically than that of any other poet, the changing values of the time. (209)

Owen puts literary and religious language into jarring new relationships with the absurdities of modern war experience. He recuperates but distorts the conventions of pastoral elegy, relocating them to scenes of terror, extreme pain, and irredeemable mass death. (Greenblatt et al. 2006: 1971)

In the following section, we are going to investigate the classical motive of the sonnet structure in “Dulce et Decorum Est”. The poem is composed of two sonnets, each of them having a theme of their own. In the following paragraphs, we will study the ways in which Owen distorts the canonical overall perfection inherent in the sonnet to suit his own horrible war experiences.

2.1.2. The sonnet form
McIlroy (1974) distinguishes four sections in the poem (54), which we are going to use as the framework of our analysis.

2.1.2.1. The first section: the terrors of warfare
The first section runs from the first till the eighth line and thus comprises the octave of the first sonnet. Owen follows the thematic rules of the sonnet in that he uses the octave to develop one coherent theme, which is about to be countered by the sestet. Yet the nature of the theme violently clashes with the conventions: whereas the sonnet used to be the ideal formal structure to write heroic, patriotic verse or romantic poetry, Owen fills the first octave with a description of the horrors of warfare.

In the first two lines, Owen describes the soldiers who walk back to their camp after a battle. The use of the plural personal pronoun “we” confirms Owen’s growing self-imposed statute of “spokesman for the inarticulate” (Johnston 1964: 199): he reports the experiences of the others. After all, his fellow military men do not talk: they merely “[cough] like hags” and Owen indicates a few lines later that they are “asleep” whilst marching. The general picture that he paints of them is one that contradicts the propagandistic image of energetic soldiers, proudly defending the honour of their country: the soldiers resemble “old beggars”, crooked under their heavy baggage. Moreover, Owen’s choice of the word “hags” makes them all (including himself) look like the elderly, thereby possibly referring to the war which chases every trace of innocent and cheerful boyhood out of its participants on the battlefield. Additionally, one should notice that the soldiers are not just walking, but they “[curs[e] through sludge” (our emphasis), as if the act of cursing is the primordial aspect of their pace. On the fourth line, Owen
once again indicates their style of moving by means of the word “trudge”; on the sixth line, “limped” once more accentuates the slowness, this time with an extra connotation that suggests wounds as the cause. In that way, the soldiers form a painful contrast with the usual soldiers’ marches in proud military parades.

From lines five to eight, the poet seems to completely twist the requirements of metre: the second quatrain becomes an enumeration of physical disturbances, chopped in relatively short phrases, separated by punctuation marks triggering pauses and thus disconcerting the metre. The repercussions of battle on the human body seem to be too horrible a picture to represent in fluent pentameters. Also, the stuttering rhythm may be a metrical reflection of the staggering soldiers’ walking.

Additionally, the war has apparently made the soldiers lose their senses: they are “all blind” and “deaf”; even the “tired” artillery shells seem to be fatigued of the endless battles.

The first section of the poem thus displays already some twists in the classical sonnet structure: the rhyme scheme is consistent, yet the theme it describes is so horrifying that the metre struggles as much as the soldiers do.

2.1.2.2. The second section: the gas attack

The sestet of the first sonnet constitutes the second section of the poem. Line nine contains the volta and is in that way loyal to the formal sonnet conventions. Yet the metre is once again irregular and expresses thereby the sudden chaos of the gas attack: three short exclamations are followed by a dash, after which the unit of soldiers (reinforced by the use of “we” in the octave”) is broken. McIlroy (1974) emphasises in this paragraph the word “ecstasy”, which we should interpret here in its older meaning bordering on madness, such as we encounter in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Hamlet (55). The madness seems not only to scatter the group of soldiers and thus break the collective character, but also to penetrate the standard rigour of the sonnet metre.

While the first two quatrains reported the state of an assembly, Owen now zooms in upon one individual: the soldier who is too late with his gas mask and struggles against the overwhelming effect of the poisonous gas. McIlroy (1974) suggests that the sestet talks about mustard gas or phosgene, but if one takes into account the effects as described by Owen, we think that it may have been chlorine gas. Roberts (2007) gives a testimony of Lance Sergeant Elmer Cotton about this last type:

It produces a flooding in the lungs... a splitting headache, terrific thirst (to drink water is instant death), a knife edge pain in the lungs and the coughing up of a greenish froth off the stomach and lungs, ending finally in insensibility and death. The colour of the skin turns a greenish black and yellow, the tongue protrudes and the eyes assume a glassy stare. (Tommy Goes to War, Brown, quoted by Roberts 2007: 259)

The description fits in “Dulce et Decorum Est”: the “thick green light” and the “green sea” as well as the “froth-corrupted lungs” of line twenty-two may refer to “the coughing up of a greenish froth”. Also, “the white eyes writhing” can represent the “glassy stare”.

Additionally, McIlroy (1974) indicates the use of a specific semantic field in this passage: Owen associates the death with drowning. The word itself is mentioned twice (cf. infra), and Owen sees the soldier “[a]s under a green sea”, “guttering”, and a few lines later, he “plunges” (55). His analysis also fits the theory about chlorine gas, since the soldier is actually drowning twice: not only in the green froth that
he coughs up, but also inside his body, where his lungs are flooded and the lung tissue burns; the lungs thus drown in the soldier’s own blood.

The individual character of the sestet is once more emphasised by means of the personal pronoun “I”: suddenly, Owen does not talk about the group of soldiers as a whole, but switches the scene to his personal point of view: “I saw him drowning”. The feeling of direct involvement is immediately reinforced.

2.1.2.3. The third section: the nightmares

From that moment onwards, the sonnet structure is completely broken: the third section comprises the first two lines of the second sonnet (lines fifteen and sixteen), yet they seem to float helplessly between the first one and the second, which is in that way incomplete. As aforesaid: during the period when this poem was written, Owen was recovering from shell shock and this state of mind is visible in this couplet: the poet is still haunted by dreams and nightmarish scenes of his experiences in the trenches. This becomes very clear when one notices the shift in tense: in the first sonnet, Owen uses past tenses so as to report past experiences, but in the couplet he suddenly employs the present tense, which is a significant choice. The vision of the man struggling while his lungs are being infected did not only play before his retina on the moment itself, but also afterwards, every night on the ward of Craiglockhart War Hospital. In addition, the use of the present continuous stresses the effect of continuity: the soldier keeps on “guttering, choking, drowning” in “all [his] dreams”.

This section is also pervaded by a sense of guilt: Owen is “helpless”, and this may refer to both the past and the present: he could do nothing while the gas was already exercising its fatal powers on the soldier, and he can still do nothing to help the soldier when he comes to him at night.

Although the couplet should, according to the sonnet structure, belong to the second sonnet, Owen deliberately chooses to ignore this. The theme of guilt and traumatic experience haunts the couplet, and influences the rhyme scheme. While lines fifteen and sixteen should actually start with a new scheme, they continue the rhymes of the last lines of the sestet. Yet Owen’s rhymes lose every aspiration of formal perfection, which is clear in the repeated word “drowning”. The strict rules of the sonnet forbid the occurrence of the same word in rhymes in order to stimulate creativity, but Owen refuses this, since his terrifying visions paralyse him and deprive him – as a manner of speaking – of any originality: the apparent endlessness of the dreams almost compels him to repeat the “drowning”, just like the drowning scene in his head keeps on repeating itself. In this perspective, Owen’s rhyming scheme seems to lose every meaning: it is not a rhyme scheme anymore when words are simply used twice. Yet this is Owen’s deliberate choice: the terror of his nightly visions is almost indescribable, nearly impossible to put into words. There is no other option than twisting the existing poetic traditions: his horrific nightmares are boldly summarised in two lines, which form technically the first two lines of the second sonnet, but the rhyme scheme suggests a closer bond with the first. Yet the distorted rhyme and meaningless repetition make the couplet also stand on its own, a statement which may be explained further by the observation that the couplet is isolated between two voltas. It constitutes a volta because it changes the image of the soldier in the sestet into the dream scene of the gas-attacked man and forms a contrast with the dreams of line seventeen. Owen’s helplessness in his dreams is reflected in the sonnet form: while the first sonnet was, albeit disrupted in metre and theme, fairly regular in terms of rhyme scheme and unity, the second begins with a complete disturbance: the rhyme scheme fails and the first two lines belong to neither part
of the poem. Just like the couplet is hard to connect with one of the two parts, Owen finds it hard to give his nightmares and his traumatic experiences a place to come to terms with them.

2.1.2.4. The fourth section: the soldier-poet’s rage

The poetic voice becomes angry in the fourth section, and this is where the invective starts. This stream of criticism is, because of the “loose” first two lines, a “broken” sonnet. Owen starts with a sharp contrast: while the couplet dealt with his own horrible dreams, he now invokes the “smothering dreams” of the war propagandists at home, who undoubtedly do not wake up every hour to relive the horrors of the battlefield once more. This part of the poem shows clearly the influence of Sassoon: Owen’s accusations contain a particularly blunt vocabulary for a poet who has become known for his musicality in language. The soldier’s body is depicted by means of harsh comparisons: his face is “like a devil’s sick of sin”; the image of the gargling blood is “Obscene as cancer” and “bitter as the cud/Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues”. If one sees the last twelve lines indeed as a “broken” sonnet, one could make the following division: firstly, Owen fills an octave with two long if-clauses. The first long clause “If in some smothering dreams... a devil’s sick of sin” seems to demand a then-clause, yet it is not resolved and continues once again in a rattle painting gore. In that way, the rhyme scene and metre are almost prevented from providing any form of musical character: the ranting if-clauses turn the octave into a seemingly endless tirade. Secondly, after the second quatrain ends with a dash – again disturbing the metre –, there is a last quatrain which forms the then-clause (with elided then) that resolves the previous if-clauses and thus constitutes the fourth volta. Yet the final four lines fall together with the culmination of the poet’s anger and this is visible in the clause length: the clauses of the last quatrain become visibly shorter compared with the if-clauses which they are supposed to answer. Moreover: the poet’s fury seems to prevent any further speech, since his lines become shorter and shorter. The rhyme scheme is respected, yet the metre does not seem to matter anymore: the phrase “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” is divided in two to suit the rhyme scheme, yet this decision results in a last line that is only half filled. This triggers some sort of anti-climax: in this last section, Owen clearly assumes the position of “spokesman for the inarticulate” (Johnston 1964: 199), but apparently he becomes inarticulate as well. The last line expects another half, a solution maybe, but Owen may want to indicate that there is no solution possible. He is overcome by his trauma, the mental wounds that the war has pierced in his mind; he cannot continue his rage. The First World War was unseen on the global scene, and maybe the world (and literature in particular) is therefore unable to produce a response to the traumas that have evolved from it.
3. WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865-1939)

3.1. Case study: “Leda and the Swan” (1923)

3.1.0. The poem

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?

(Greenblatt et al. 2006: 2039)

3.1.1. Introduction

In the summer of 1923, Yeats started writing “a short and forceful poem, which would achieve a unique notoriety among his work” (W.B. Yeats: A Life, R.F. Foster, quoted by McKenna 2011: 426). The first complete draft was finished on 15 September 1923 and bore the name “Annunciation” (McKenna 2011: 426). This title refers to the Annunciation made to Mary by God, which resulted in the birth of Christ and the Christian Era. “Leda and the Swan” contains as it were an earlier Annunciation, equally based on contact between godhead and mortal, albeit this time more violent and introducing the period from 2,000 BC to AD 1 (Malins & Purkis 1994: 69), so two thousand years prior to the Biblical Annunciation.

Two Annunciations form a pattern in history: Leda and the Virgin. [...] Both events concern the union of godhead and woman. Both produce momentous births. The eggs of Leda give rise to the fall of Troy; from them emerge the legend of two destined women Helen and Clytemnestra. [...] The swan stands for power, phallic strength, purity, spirit and spirits (as all white birds), fidelity; fire and air (as the dove); the ineffable Godhead. [...] Into the softness and whiteness is concentrated all the sensuality of touch. The outcome of the union is further history or myth, pagan or Christian, Love and War. (The Lonely Tower, Henn, quoted by Jeffares 1974: 248)
Greenblatt et al. (2006) refer to the occurrence of birds in both events: “Yeats saw Leda’s rape [by the swan] as the beginning of a new age, analogous with the dove’s annunciation to Mary of Jesus’ conception” (2039).

A third Annunciation, set in the twentieth century AD, was prophesied by Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming” (1919).


I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War. (Mills Harper & Hood 1978: 181)

“Leda and the Swan” occupies a prominent place in *A Vision* since it fits quite well in the main concept of the book. Yeats needed a new metaphysical doctrine in a society where intellectuals found it hard to cope with the spiritual emptiness left by World War I.

Yeats was at this time moving towards a new synthesis of the historical and religious doctrines which were unacknowledged or ‘hidden’ behind conventional beliefs [...] there was nothing really left in conventional Christianity for an intellectual like Yeats to believe in [...] (Malins & Purkis 1994: 90)

Yeats embarked on studies in esotery, astrology and alchemy (ibid.), which were canalised in the conceptual fundaments of *A Vision*. The book describes history as a cyclical development, where each cycle (or “gyre”) eventually breaks down in chaos and violence, before resuming its course in a new cycle, that will likewise lead to destruction: “Again will come the ‘brood of Leda, War and Love; history grown symbolic, the biography changed into a myth’” (Whitaker 1964: 93).

One should not fail to mention that Yeats stressed the mythical identity of *A Vision*: he forbade any historical analysis of the work, wishing only to deliver “a document speaking the language of myth and imagery through which he [gave] us a message which he [could] endorse” (Malins & Purkis 1994: 65). Additionally, he “hoped that conflict, the dominant subject of his prophetic book, would be the catalyst of spiritually invigorating change” (*Life of W. B. Yeats*, Brown, quoted by McKenna 2011: 440), *A Vision* being in that perspective, so to speak, some kind of written Annunciation in its own kind, heralding spiritual change in the post-war state of Mind.

The composition of *A Vision* exercised a great influence on Yeats’s poetic work, which started to comprise more and more “visionary poems of great scope, linguistic force, and incantatory power” (Greenblatt et al. 2006: 2021). Holdeman & Levitas (2010) add that “[p]assion took bodily form in Yeats’s poetry of the 1920s as never before, the misty yearnings of the early phase replaced by a raging physicality” (231).
“Leda and the Swan” also bears testimony to a country trying to heal its war wounds. The First World War had left deep traces all over Europe, and the British Isles in particular were also recovering from the Irish revolutionary period, which had led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Greenblatt et al (2006) point out that Yeats’s poetic enterprise was heavily influenced by the recent national and international conflicts:

[H]is late poetry became more dynamic, its propulsive syntax and muscular rhythms more suited to his themes of lust, rage, and the body. He had once screened these out of his verse as unpoetic, along with war, violence, “the mire of human veins”. Now he embraced the mortal world intensely.

(2021-22)

Furthermore, Yeats thought that democracy had failed: the political system had lost its credibility after the Great War and the Irish revolutions. A new authority was needed to Announce a new “gyre”, a responsibility Yeats would eventually place in Zeus’ hands, or rather, webbed toes, in “Leda and the Swan”:

Above all [...] ‘Leda and the Swan’ drew its inspiration from Yeats’s sense in 1923 that ‘the reign of democracy is over for the present’ and a violent form of authority from above would be the next turn of the wheel. (Lady Gregory’s Journals, 1852-1932, Vol. I, Daniel J. Murphy ed. (Colin Smythe, 1978), quoted by Holdeman & Levitas 2010: 215)

Moreover, Yeats’s awareness of the exhausted Earth stimulated in him a new concept of History: destruction had reached a sad and tragic climax, and seemed to call out for a new beginning, stimulated by nothing more than a new violent sort of movement, a brutal Annunciation. This newborn idea found a poetic counterpart in “Leda and the Swan”:

I thought ‘After the individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularised by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries.’ Then I thought ‘Nothing is now possible but some movement, or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation.’ 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, and my friend tells me that ‘his conservative readers would misunderstand the poem.’ (The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems, quoted by Jeffares 1984: 247)

Yeats links his inspiration for “Leda and the Swan” to his understanding of “a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries”. The poem is, for that matter, a transposition of the recently experienced conflicts to 2,000 BC. In that way, the poet uses the classical motive of the myth in order to come to terms with the bruised and beaten post-war society: seen from the context of A Vision, Yeats provides a symbolic place for the war in his personal concept of History, independent from the recently failed systems of Christianity and democracy. The assignment of a fixed place to the Great War, albeit merely symbolically and on a more abstract level, can possibly ease the mind of the traumatised poet, as well as those of the rest of society. Yet our analysis of the myth-component will show that the interpretation of the relationship between Man and War/Conflict is also highly problematic (cf. infra).
Yeats combines the myth with another classical motive, the sonnet. It is these two that we will investigate further. The following sections will contain separate analyses for the classical motive of the myth theme (3.1.2.) and the sonnet form (3.1.3.), respectively. The poem’s content will primordially be discussed when we talk about the myth, while the section about the sonnet will mostly (though not exclusively) deal with formal aspects.

3.1.2. The myth theme
The myth narrates how Zeus, driven by erotic desires, rapes the mortal woman Leda. He acts after having assumed the physical form of a swan, in order to avoid his wife Hera’s suspicions. This violent crime gives rise to the birth of Helen, Clytemnestra and the twins Pollux and Castor (Greenblatt et al. 2006: 2039). Yeats’s poem implicitly mentions the first two in referring to the destruction of Troy, caused by Paris abducting Helen, and Agamemnon murdered by his wife Clytemnestra. Pollux and Castor do not play a part in the poem.

Scott (1979) states that the myth of Leda, and myth in general, is an everlasting subject for literature:

> Myths acquire a peculiar autonomy in literature simply because they become self-sustaining fictions; all formal and generical pressure is towards plot-making and semantic self-sufficiency. Leda and the Swan, while remaining a crucial episode in a much longer history, achieves its own special resonance by a momentary oblivious to context, and all that is problematic in that context […] is sheered away, so that we are left with Zeus, Leda, and, if a third, Helen. (1)

Myths as “self-sustaining fictions” need neither co-text nor context to assume referential identity: their poetic function finds its source in their own semantics; it is, so to speak, endogenous. The removal of periphery consequently creates a sense of universality, allowing the myth to remain an important source of inspiration through the ages, independent from spatiotemporal and contextual constraints.

As stated earlier in our text, Yeats adopts Leda’s myth in order to give a personal, symbolic, and abstract background to the eruption of violence in the world, specifically to the Great War and the Irish revolutions. Leda’s story becomes an Annunciation with dramatic historical and physical consequences. Additionally, he twists the myth by adding a new, abstract layer: he discusses the possible transfer of superhuman knowledge and, implicitly, the role of Man in the gyres of Time and his relationship with Conflict.

Yeats has retold the story of war as a sexual assault in which the poetic voice imagines what this woman/city felt and thought when overpowered and colonized by the combined forces of time, nature, and divinity[.] (The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume I, The Poems. Richard J. Finneran ed., quoted by Holdeman & Levitas 2010: 198).

[Yeats] opts for a representation of the swan’s moment of violation, both its immediate and historic consequences, and the possibilities of revelation, asking if Leda “put on his knowledge with his power.” (McKenna 2011: 426-7)
Our analysis of the myth-component in “Leda and the Swan” will duly focus on these particular aspects, and its transposition to Yeats’s time: did Man in the post-war society gain any knowledge or insights from the past conflicts? Moreover, does he play an active part in the unfolding conflicts? At the same time, we will discuss the possible identities of the rapist in the poem. In the original myth, Leda is depicted as the victim of Zeus’ restless passions. Yet, in adding the question of supernatural knowing, Yeats has engendered different possible reinterpretations of this pattern in the poem. This interpretational polysemy may illustrate the problems that arise when finding a symbolic place for war experience: there are so many perspectives that processing a trauma becomes a very challenging task.

Barnwell (1977) has previously studied the position of the rapist in “Leda and the Swan” and he distinguishes four different readings, which we will discuss below, complete with some our own findings and the link with the epistemological question.

3.1.2.1. The first reading: the swan as the rapist
The first reading, which we will also follow in our analysis of the sonnet form, sees Leda as the victim of the rape, and the swan as the aggressor. This interpretation is thus not aberrant compared with the original version of the myth.

More in general, this perspective recognises two extremes: the supreme domination of the divine power and the total ignorant submission of Man. Leda is numbed after the “sudden blow” and the “beating” of the swan’s wings. The only action she performs is denoted by “staggering”, but afterwards she becomes utterly helpless and passive: Zeus is the agent of all the verbs that modify her in the first quatrain: “caressed” and “caught”.

Zeus-as-actor makes Leda pregnant by rape and heralds in this feat a new cycle in history. As A Vision proclaims, this new gyre brings violence once more: Leda will give birth to Destruction in the shape of Helen (the fall of Troy, “[t]he broken wall, the burning roof and tower”) and Clytemnestra, who will murder her husband (“Agamemnon dead”). Yeats’s personal, historical law finds an expression in the mythical reality of the poem: violence will engender violence, in endless repetitive cycles.

The question “Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” thus triggers a negative answer. All the time, the supernatural knowledge of “cause-and-effect nature of history and time” (Barnwell 1977: 63) remains with Zeus: Leda-as-victim is passive both in mind and body. She cannot resist Zeus: her “terrified vague fingers” are too frightened to push “[t]he feathered glory” away from her. This physical numbness expands and reaches Leda’s mental state as well: her body cannot feel anything anymore (both physically and mentally), save the “strange heart [of the swan] beating where it lies”, the violent movement predominates the scene and annulls Leda’s senses. This total submission limits her intellectual power and makes her unable to acquire the precious divine knowledge from this contact with the godhead. As a mortal victim, she gains nothing: she undergoes the power of God and History and becomes a gear in the mighty machine of Time. Without being aware of it herself, Leda’s pregnancy and offspring will envelop the world in destruction: Agamemnon will perish, and Troy will fall. Leda becomes a symbol for the gods’ vision of mankind as ignorant entities, to be used for their pleasure and abused in order to create a violent era for Man on earth. The “shudder in the loins” should be interpreted here as Leda’s movement of fear: she shudders at the climactic violence of the action. Additionally, one can see the “shudder in the loins” as Zeus’ triumphant orgasm: the will of the gods has prevailed once more. His beak is “indifferent”, since he knows that Man remains ignorant, and the transfer of superhuman knowledge has not taken place; the gods’ secrets are safe.
In transposing this question to Yeats’s time, we can use this reading to claim that Man has learnt nothing from the wars that have turned his world upside down. Conflicts happen as a result of supernatural plotting and Man remains utterly ignorant of its workings and consequences. Man is depicted as a helpless entity: clashes between nations cannot be avoided and Man figures in them as puppets mastered by the Above.

3.1.2.2. The second reading: Leda as the rapist

The second reading is the complete opposite of the role pattern in the original myth and recognises Leda as the aggressor and Zeus as the victim. One should consider Zeus in this case as “the notorious womanizer” (Barnwell 1977: 63), the godhead who is continually submitted to his erotic lusts and desires. Leda, who is cunning and aware of his vulnerable state brutally abuses the situation and forces him into sexual contact with her. It is impossible for Zeus not to rape her, because her beauty triggers his yearnings even more and consequently makes him surrender helplessly to his fiercest desires.

This interpretation forces the reader to reconsider some denotations in the poem; it might be Leda who, strengthened by her lust for superhuman understanding, strikes the “sudden blow”. In that case, the swan’s wings are “beating still” in resistance. Moreover, “staggering” can be seen then as an indication of Leda moving difficulty, since she tries to oppress the struggling swan beneath her. Barnwell (1977) adds that “caught” must be seen as a past tense in this perspective: Leda traps Zeus’ bill in her nape (63). The author admits that there is a problem with the line “He holds her helpless breast upon his breast” and states that the absence of punctuation presupposes a certain ambiguity in the role pattern, both participants can be either victim or aggressor (64). In the second quatrain, “those terrified vague fingers” then become those of Zeus, whose fingers are “vague” because of the webs that connect them and consequently make it difficult to distinguish separate fingers (ibid.). Zeus is unable to push “the feathered glory” (of his divinity) from Leda, who is “loosening [her] thighs” to facilitate the physical contact that she craves for. Lines seven and eight further reinforce the ambiguity that line four already hinted at: to whom does the “body” belong, and what does “white rush” refer to? (65). Barnwell (1977) suggests “the whiteness of the swan's plumage, the seminal flow of generative juices, or Leda's encompassing thighs” (ibid.). He also sees a link with Helen: “body” then becomes the unborn foetus, who feels the beating of the mother’s heart (gods usually do not possess a heart at all). In that way, lines seven and eight form a metaphorical bridge between past (the rape) and future (the historical consequences)(ibid.).

The epistemological question has no clear answer in this case and causes doubt: did Leda – and Man in particular – gain anything of a divine order? We can state, however, that Leda uses (and abuses) Zeus precisely for this purpose: to obtain divine knowledge, desired by Man. She sacrifices her body for knowledge, “as a human hero willing to tempt and plumb supernatural heights for human benefit” (Barnwell 1977: 64-5). In this case, the “shudder in the loins” becomes Leda’s moment of triumph: she hopes that Zeus’ seamen will create knowledge in her, new life in her intellect, rather than new life in her womb. The roles are reversed: it is Zeus who shudders of fear when realising that he has, once again, failed to resist his desires. This interpretation considers Zeus’ beak as “indifferent”, “because the supernatural, knowledge given or not, always has been and always will be above the human reality of the flesh into which Leda is dropped by Zeus after the momentary union of the two has passed” (65). So even in the case of a positive transfer, Leda’s intellect will nevertheless be insufficient to grasp the grander scheme of things, a fault for which only her human nature is to blame.
This view, when read in Yeats’s post-war society, depicts Man as a thirsty creature that deliberately creates violent contexts in order to derive profit from it (e.g. independency, territorial expansion, etc.). Yet the world has been left behind in chaos after the wars, so the question arises whether Man has learnt anything at all. Man does afterwards see the inaccuracy of certain socio-political and religious systems, but fails to achieve any Higher Knowledge, which remains exclusive property of the gods: peace and armistice after conflicts are relative and fragile concepts that do never completely exclude the rise of a new war. We should, however, stress the increased independence of Man in this vision: in the first reading, Man was no more than helpless, while the second reading hints at the presence of the will in Man to actively discover metaphysical knowledge.

3.1.2.3. The third reading: History as the rapist

In the third reading, both Leda and the swan are victims of the rape. This scenario takes as a starting point the observation that there are too many ambiguities in the text of the poem to be sure about the identity of the rapist. Consequently, both participants are seen as victims. In order to identify the rapist, one should reconsider Yeats’s concept of History that he expanded on in A Vision: History moves according to a clear pattern, in cycles that take 2,000 years, after which a new cycle begins. The pattern in History requires, however, an Annunciation to herald each new cycle of destruction: there has to be “a coupling of the natural with the supernatural” (Barnwell 1977: 65). This means that the Historical Pattern forces both mortal and godhead to have intimate contact: the rapist is none other than History itself, and the pattern that controls it. Leda and Zeus are thus both victims of the will of the abstract notion of Time and “are forced into sexual union for the sake of a history that must move in certain prescribed grooves for certain destined ends” (ibid.). The human and the divine are both helpless and are passive participants in a violent event that is completely orchestrated by the Higher Force of Time: “a sudden blow” may affect both Leda and Zeus, who are respectively “staggering” and “beating [his wings]” in helpless resistance. The “terrified vague fingers” should then be interpreted as modifying both godhead and woman as well: both of them want to push each other away, but are unable to defy History and its chosen course. The “shudder in the loins” becomes a frightful climax, where ejaculation – unwanted by the pair of victims, required by Time – clears the path for the violent events to come.

Concerning the epistemological aspect of this interpretation, we can say that both Leda and Zeus are excluded from the higher knowledge that accompanies the ways of Time and History. Since both are victims of the Historical Pattern, none of them have access to any insight in the workings of Time. In their shared ignorance, Leda is probably more unaware of things than Zeus, given the fact that she is a mortal woman and he belongs to the realm of gods. Leda participates in the violence, unwillingly yet unable to resist, because she cannot, as a human being and a toy in the hands of Time, “control her own or mankind's destiny” (66). Zeus, as a god, “may have knowledge of its inner workings, but an inability to act on it” (ibid.).

Yeats’s post-war society is in this perspective nothing more than a microcosm that turns like a gear in the schedule of Time and History, and the gods are participants in another one. Violence is needed in order to keep the course of History steadily flowing, notwithstanding the will of God and Man. The latter is, not unlike the first reading, helpless in this scheme, but so is the former; all are submitted to Time.
3.1.2.4. The fourth reading: the reader as the rapist

The fourth reading – the most abstract one – considers the reader as the rapist. Barnwell (1977) paraphrases Cassirer (1962) in order to clarify this thesis:

For Cassirer, symbolic reality is the only reality man can know; he cannot know something if he cannot symbolize it in some way. The act of reading a poem, then, recreates a specific reality in symbolic space and time in which, for example, the “great wings are beating still/ Above the staggering girl,” and human history is repeated over and over again, rehearsed as it is in the symbolic arenas of the mind. *(An Essay on Man, Ernst Cassirer, quoted by Barnwell 1977: 66)*

Man differs profoundly from other animals in “his ability to create a symbolic reality” (Barnwell 1977: 66). This means that Man derives all of his experiences from these symbolic realities than he has created himself. One specific symbolic reality can be found in and constructed by means of reading a poem. Each lecture of that particular poem revives once more the participants and the events discussed by the poetic voice. In that way, each reading of “Leda and the Swan” becomes a rape:

[The reader] manipulates the bird and woman through their paces again and again, through countless shudders and blows, through countless burnings and deaths, through countless conjectures and questions about life and time and their ultimate meaning. (ibid.)

Man abuses both Leda and the swan to fulfil his needs of experience. He makes use of their symbolic reality over and over again, because it is his ability as an *animal symbolicum* (ibid.) that compels him to do so with the aim of gaining as many experiences as possible.

In this perspective, it is Man as a reader who tries to achieve supernatural knowledge: in browsing through symbolic realities, he hopes to acquire insight in the workings of Reality itself and the future, and thus “parallel godhood” (ibid.). This is a process which does not always turn out to be fruitful:

Certain things have happened in time that man understands; other things have happened that he does not understand, and his knowledge of future events can only be based on what he already knows or can fathom in his momentary sensings of the infinite. The symbology of the poem powerfully concretizes these sensings and in a sense creates them. (ibid.)

Reading poetry is thus a path leading to knowledge, and in that case, one can see Leda and Zeus as victims in a symbolic reality created countless times by Man, to discover more and previously unnoticed experiences that may be the guide to an understanding of the future.

Applying this vision to Yeats’s time, we can observe that Man occupies his most active position so far. Barnwell (1977) states it as follows: “if the rapist is that human cognition that intermittently imposes itself on chaos, there is the suggestion that ability to create such a drama entails potential divinity as well as profound humanity” (67). Man creates violence himself and is in that way similar to Man in the second reading, yet he approaches the roles of the gods in the first reading, and of History/Time in the third reading. He does not have to take into account the existence of God(s) or any higher presence of History and Time, but creates his own realities and learns from them. War is thus a necessary path to follow, an essential reality to experience in pursuit of Knowledge of Everything and the Future.
3.1.3. The sonnet form

This paragraph will explore the ways in which Yeats treats the sonnet form to poetically voice the recent conflicts. Our analysis is based on previous studies by Whitaker (1964), Scott (1979), and McKenna (2011) and complemented by our own findings. Furthermore, we will opt for the perspective of Zeus as the rapist and Leda as the victim, and illustrate this statement by means of textual examples.

Scott (1979) thinks the subject matter of “Leda and the Swan” is particularly suited for the sonnet form:

[T]he Leda episode is a reverberant event, with sufficient intimacy, sufficient multi-directional pulls, to make it peculiarly appropriate to the sonnet, which is a strangely private sphere where the great can be spoken of without awe and in all their naked humanity, and where impulses in a raw state can enjoy a greater freedom of movement, can adopt more stanzaic guises, than is possible in any other prestigious form. (11)

“Leda and the Swan” is a Petrarchan sonnet, following the rhyme scheme abab/cdcd/efg/efg. Scott (1979) describes the formal and thematic conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet as follows:

[...] a fixed form; the Petrarchan (or Continental) sonnet’s tercets throw into question the solidity of the quatrains, with their usually enclosed rhyme-schemes, penetrate their complacency by disrupting it, and yet, in the end, reinforce a convention and bring into existence something reassuringly recognizable. (2)

As our analysis will show, Yeats disrupts these conventions and twists them so as to adequately represent the conflict.

3.1.3.1. The octave: the eruption of Violence and the questioning consciousness

The first quatrain immediately makes the reader engage in an “overwhelming participation” (Whitaker 1964). The first two feet of the opening line are almost as confronting as the words they contain: “a sudden blow”. In the first four lines, Yeats vividly describes the ongoing violence between Leda and Zeus-as-swan. Concerning word choice, it is striking that Leda hardly performs any action: the “staggering” in the second line is the only verb of which she is the agent. The other verbs that modify her body are past participles, which express actions executed by the swan: her thighs are “caressed” and her nape is “caught” by the divine animal. The only adjective (apart from the verbal one “staggering”) that describes Leda is, significantly, the word “helpless”.

While the rhyme scheme is respected (abab), special attention must be paid to the metre in this initial part of the poem. Lines one, two and four are written in a regular iambic pentameter, thus marked by a steady rhythm. In the first line, this may serve to metrically complement the “great wings beating still” and to stress the “sudden blow” that brutally introduces the poem. The second line combines in the pentameter two actions that seem to be rhythmically discordant: on the one hand Leda’s staggering, on the other hand the swan’s (probably slower) caressing of her thighs. In the fourth line of the quatrain, one could see the regularity of the iambic pentameter as accompanying the pushing movements of Zeus, pressing her breast to his. The third line, however, has a very irregular metre compared to the others in the first quatrain: Scott (1979) remarks that the iambic pentameter is replaced in that line by pyrrhic and
spondaic metres in the first two feet, whereas the fourth foot contains a trochee (9). He visualises this statement as follows:

```
/ / / / /  /
```

By the dark webs, // her nape caught in his bill (ibid.)

Scott (1979) sees in the first two feet “the insistent treading of the swan’s feet” (ibid.), yet we are more inclined to interpret the spondees on “dark webs” as an emphasis on the big webbed toes that pin Leda to the ground. It is as if the greatness of the god’s power in this action almost requires the caesura, so that it echoes on in the reader’s mind before he continues the line. We do support Scott’s opinion about the fourth foot, in which he sees “the jarring, jerking movement of neck and bill” (ibid.).

The second quatrain poses some rhetorical questions with reference to the rape: the mind confronts itself with what it has perceived. The questions seem to hint at pity for Leda, who is surely too helpless to be able to push Zeus away, and cannot avoid the oppressing contact that makes her feel continually the beating of Zeus’ “strange heart”. This time, her actions are instances of her succumbing to Zeus’ will: the “push” of line five is merely hypothetical, her thighs are “loosening”, she is “laid” in his overwhelming “white rush” and only actively feels the swan’s heartbeat. Moreover, both participants are never named throughout the poem.

The regularity of rhyme and metre follow more or less the same pattern as in the first quatrain: the rhyme scheme (cdcd) is fairly regular, but the metre is very hesitant in the fifth line, before becoming the usual iambic pentameter in the sixth, seventh and eighth line:

```
/ / / / /  /
```

How can those terrified vague fingers push

In that way, “terrified” acquires the stress of the second foot followed by two unstressed syllables, clearing the path for the doubly stressed word pair “vague fingers”. Scott (1979) sees the resemblance between this line and the “dark webs” from the third line, “the concertedness of the webs against the uncoordinated activity of the fingers” (10).

Yet there are also other possibilities for the metrical arrangement of this line, each of which yields a different reading. For example, one could equally scan the fifth line by starting with a trochee, followed by two iambs, a spondee and a iamb in the end:

```
/ / / / /  /
```

How can those terrified vague fingers push

This pattern emphasises the question word “How”, the importance of which is even more stressed by its isolation from the rest of the line by the two unstressed syllables of “can” and “those”. The weight of the line lies on the very first word: how, in what possible way can Leda fend off the swan? The metrical separation of “How” enhances the despair of the utterance: the poetic voice seems to be unsure about there being a way of escape at all for the poor woman.

Another possibility is similar, but with a spondee at the beginning of the line:
How can those terrified vague fingers push

This metre adds stress to the word “can”: the poetic voice wonders how Leda can find a little strength to push, even though her “vague fingers” fingers are “terrified” and her gradual submission is already visible in “her loosening thighs”. In this point of view, one may state that despite her helplessness, Leda still has some free will left before she is completely smothered by the divine oppression.

One last possibility consists of the same pattern, except for the word “those”, where one should place an emphasis this time:

How can those terrified vague fingers push

The added stress on “those” may refer to Leda’s identity as a mortal woman compared with Zeus’ superiority. In this perspective, the poetic voice utters the question whether the fingers of that mortal human being are capable of defying the “feathered glory” of a creature that is not only physically, but mentally superior.

Whereas the metrical irregularity in the first quatrain emphasised Zeus’ power in his feet, the rhythmical oddity in the second quatrain thus accents Leda’s helplessness.

The octave thus has provided a depiction of the violent scene, as well as the pitying questions that follow the perception of the event. Additionally, we should remark that Yeats uses the word “beating” in both the first and the last line of the octave: the description of the violence thus starts and ends with a present continuous tense of the word with the most violent denotation, emphasising the ongoing aggression throughout the octave.

3.1.3.2. The sestet: the consequences of Violence and the epistemological riddle

The sestet discusses the repercussions of the rape in history to come. The classical place of the volta on the ninth line is respected. The first tercet moves to the historical consequences of the deed, “the expansion into heroic dimensions” (Scott 1979: 10): the Annunciation has been completed in the “shudder in the loins” and destruction follows. Leda’s first child, Helen, leads to the destruction of Troy – “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower” – and the second, Clytemnestra, will eventually murder her husband Agamemnon. The violence of the Annunciation thus creates other forms of violence; the “shudder in the loins” is both engendering and destructive (Whitaker 1964: 247).

Like the second quatrain, the second tercet poses a question that arises from this newly engendered violence: did Leda acquire the supernatural knowledge in this contact with the divine swan? Was she aware of the violent consequences that would ensue from the rape? The focus thus shifts from the future to the past, which we also see in Yeats’s use of tenses. The physical events to come are complements of the present tense “engenders”, while the question afterwards is formulated by means of the simple past tense: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power”? We can interpret this sentence as containing an undertone of doubt: given her physical helplessness, was she mentally strong enough to be susceptible to the transfer of divine knowledge?
Concerning the questioned acquisition of this supernatural information, McKenna (2011) has stated that Yeats mostly “stresses the brutality of the violation and the futility of transcendence” (436), as well as the consequences on a historical scale.

Indeed, Yeats does continually stress the brutality of the swan and the tragic consequences of its violence. There is, moreover, no mystical union as a consequence of rape. There is only a forced association with the grotesque manifestation of the swan and the brutality it engenders in human history. [...] As a consequence, violence and brutality inject themselves into human history, and conflict does not produce an “immaterial ecstasy”. (439-40)

In this perspective, the consequences of the rape are thus utter violence without intellectual benefit: Leda is physically unable to stop Zeus’ force and the coming of a destructive era and mentally unable to extract divine knowledge from the rape.

The rhyme scheme is once again regular (efg/efg), and also the metre does not display any significant changes in the sestet. We should mention, however, the typographical feature of splitting the third line of the first tercet. This decision turns “Being so caught up” almost into a prelude of the question of the second tercet, creating a caesura after the word “dead” and a second volta in the sonnet, highly unconventionally in the last line of the first tercet. In that way, the lay-out of the poem seems to literally suggest a blank space, an emptiness between the words (more precisely, oxymora) “dead” and “Being”. A silence follows so as to let the destructiveness of the violent future sink in, before turning to the questioning of the transcendental knowledge behind all the events.

Greenblatt et al. (2006) have called Yeats earlier “a restless innovator who disrupts generic conventions, breaking up the coherence of the sonnet” (2022) and “Leda and the Swan” pays tribute to this statement. To summarise, we can say that Yeats portrays the conflict of the rape by means of a twist in the metrical scheme of the sonnet. In the octave, the occasional use of spondees reinforces both the Zeus’ power (first quatrain) and Leda’s helplessness (second quatrain). The sestet is characterised by the typographical blank, completely disrupting the end of the first tercet and inserting a long caesura to digest the violence that has been suffered.

Moreover, when we return to Scott’s (1979) statement about the Petrarchan sonnet conventions (cf. supra), we see more clearly that Yeats does not entirely follow them:

[...] a fixed form; the Petrarchan (or Continental) sonnet’s tercets throw into question the solidity of the quatrains, with their usually enclosed rhyme-schemes, penetrate their complacency by disrupting it, and yet, in the end, reinforce a convention and bring into existence something reassuringly recognizable. (2)

The tercets of “Leda and the Swan” do not really question the octave; instead, the pattern is a bit more complicated. The first quatrains depicts the “sexual force of the event” (Scott 1979: 9), whereas the second quatrains confronts the poetic voice’s consciousness with the scene and questions the tragedy in the event. Subsequently, the first tercet discusses the historical consequences and afterwards the second tercet returns to the actual event and questions the underlying transfer of supernatural knowledge.
Although the rhyme schemes of the quatrains are indeed “enclosed”, the octave in itself is not entirely solid or complacent, since the first quatrains is immediately questioned by the second. We can agree that the first tercet constitutes a rupture, since it contains a thematic shift, yet the end of the poem is definitely not “something reassuringly recognizable”: the poem ends in uncertainty, an epistemological riddle.

The octave thus comprises two different themes, after which the sestet reprises more or less those same themes in the same order; it is a thematic crossover.

Yeats’s play with metrical irregularities and theme shifts may indicate that merely following the rules of the sonnet does not suffice to grasp the complexity of Violence or of the First World War in particular. Experimenting with the formal, metrical and thematic conventions may provide a possible solution when one tries to speak of the recently-suffered violence, yet maybe the best solution will never be found.
4. WYSTAN HUGH AUDEN (1907-1973)
4.1. Case study: “The Shield of Achilles” (1952)
4.1.0. The poem

1
She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities,
And ships upon untamed seas,

5
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
10
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
15
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
20
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
25
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated, for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same,
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
Of any world where promises were kept
Or one could weep because another wept.

The thin-lipped armorer,
Hephaestos, hobbled away;
Thetis of the shining breasts
Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought
To please her son, the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.

(Greenblatt et al. 2006: 2437-8)
4.1.1. Introduction

In February 1955, Auden published a new volume of poems, called *The Shield of Achilles*, of which the eponymous poem, written three years earlier, is still deemed to be one of the poet’s “most magnificent shorter poems” (Davenport-Hines in Smith 2004: 22). Ever since, critics have stated that the ekphrastic poem “The Shield of Achilles” constitutes “a remarkably successful juxtaposition of classical mythology and the desolation that Auden saw in post-war society” (Carpenter 1992: 378). Indeed, Auden uses a Homeric mythological setting, inspired by Book XVIII of Homer’s *Iliad*. This specific passage depicts the god Hephaestos creating a shield for the mythic warrior Achilles while being observed by Achilles’ mother Thetis. Auden adopts this scene, but changes the images on the shield: whereas Homer mostly depicts bucolic aspects of the Grecian world, Auden confronts Thetis’ hopes to see an idyllic and well-governed society with Hephaestos’ portrait of reality as World War II has made it.

‘The Shield of Achilles’ [...] puts the post-war scene into just the kind of oblique and dramatically archetypal context that brings out both its full horror and its religious meaning. [...] She looks for order and good government but finds only its negative image, a spiritless totalitarianism; she looks for religion, but finds only a military execution parodying the crucifixion; she looks for art, and finds only an aimless violence[.]’ (Fuller 1970: 228)

The imagery on the shield provokes a totalitarian macrocosm, where people “become unrecognisable from their earlier versions as a result of social adaptation” (Boly in Smith 2004: 146). Individualism is seemingly nonexistent and the inhabitants of the post-war era display a conformist attitude whilst moving in blank uniform masses and multitudes. They obey to the same logic as during the war, indoctrinated by a higher power which they cannot face or resist.

The contrast between Thetis’ wishes and Hephaestos’ actual rendering is also found in the typographical representation of the poem. Thetis’ hopes and a first glint of (another) disappointment are given in centred eight-line stanzas, while the post-war reality is written in rhyme royal. This stanza form consists of seven lines, each metrically arranged by means of the iambic pentameter, and its rhyme scheme is ababbcc. Rhyme royal was introduced in English literature by Geoffrey Chaucer and probably acquired the adjective “royal” because James I of Scotland used the form for his poem *The Kingis Quair* (Greenblatt et al. 2006: A81).

In this perspective, one should remark that Auden plays upon the original use of this form: whereas it has been employed as a royal form and for longer narrative poetry, Auden applies it in the sections dealing with post-bellum observations. This creates another contrast next to that between Thetis’ desires and Hephaestos’ craft: one would expect the rhyme royal form more likely to occur in Thetis’ stanzas, yet they are used to depict scenes of post-war blankness and bleakness, causing a schism between form and content. Auden consciously makes use of this form in order to criticise it: rhyme royal, and especially poetic forms and poetry in general, is not fit anymore to represent and voice the horrible events that took place during the war, as well as their consequences.

Therefore, the poem also deals, albeit on a more implicit level, with the function of art in recently changed society. Auden himself gradually started doubting the power, or even the mere possibility of “poetry in the grand manner, of poetry as revelation or as a tool for political change” (Greenblatt et al.
2006: 2421). He increasingly began to see the inefficiency of the poetic enterprise for healing mental war wounds; especially his later work “strongly discouraged looking to art for salvation” (Callan 1983: 16).

The greatness of this poem undoubtedly has much to do with its deromanticising of art. [...] it is also about the need for art to confront the worst rather than seek refuge in dream. Its plangent dystopianism extends to all those who continue to find allure in the wished-for grandeur of conquest and subjugation.]

(Lucas in Smith 2004: 162-3)

From this point of view, “The Shield of Achilles” reports “the despair of the aesthetic mode in the face of the realities of history” (Callan 1983: 225): the changes that Society has had to face and undergo during and after World War II have been too drastic to express. Inasmuch as poetry has been used throughout history as a means of narrating historical changes and events, the Second World War proves to be too much to digest poetically.

Mendelson states in Smith (2004) that the poem became very popular, even though “The Shield of Achilles” contains “a deeply unflattering portrait of the reader”:

[T]he poem is a deeply unflattering portrait of the reader as the passive, observing Thetis, and of the poet as the indifferent craftsman Hephaestos, each allowing the worst to happen by their failure to protest against it in first-person speech.

The overt themes of The Shield of Achilles are large matters of war and injustice, but the covert themes are Auden’s arguments with himself about his art and his relation to it. (60)

Neither Thetis nor Hephaestos seem to be guilty in the poem and can only look helplessly at the depicted events. Thetis, the onlooker, can only “[cry] out in dismay”. While Hephaestos may seem more active – he utters some kind of protest in visualising post-war society –, the creator cannot act either: he merely “[hobbles] away” from the horrors. Yet it is exactly this inability, which readers saw as an assurance of their innocence, that Auden severely renounces: the passive spectator attitude is maybe precisely the cause of war; those millions of casualties may have been orchestrated in the war plans of one Evil Mind, but they owe their death equally to the “failure [of the Masses] to protest against it [i.e. the war] in first-person speech”. On the other hand, we can also assume that Auden realised that this criticism was made in vain and that society would never know any better, as he stated in his essay collection The Dyer’s Hand:

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror. (Auden, The Dyer’s Hand, quoted by Callan 1983: 16)
4.1.2. The myth theme

As stated above, Auden uses the classical motive of the myth in order to poetically vocalise the post-war situation. However, he does not simply adopt the mythical characters, but utilises them as part of a broader reasoning:

[...] myth in Auden turns out to be a special form of imagery, rationally chosen, to enable writer and reader to respond sensuously and emotionally to the facts of life, inner or outer. It is symbolic metaphor writ large, since it makes the abstract concrete, and the concrete general. [...] The use of myth, then, allows the abstract and general to be dramatised and particularised, and if necessary touched with comic exaggeration to make its point the more graphically. (Rodway 1984: 87)

Moreover, Rodway (1984) suggests that Auden makes use of the myth component so as to invent an image of society that paradoxically explains the current state of said society:

We might add that it is unlike history because it is not factual, but like history in that it is explanatory; and it is unlike the novel because it is not mimetic, but like the novel in that it is invented. (Rodway 1984: 149)

This section will deal with the ways in which Auden explores classical mythology to render an image of post-bellum mal de siècle and subsequently criticise heroic poetry. We will divide the poem into three sections, based on the views of Rodway (1984). He sees the first three stanzas in the light of the organisation of the State, the next three as the Idea behind the State (its mental machinery, the underlying strategies, the One Principle that founds and funds the State), and the last three as a discussion of the consequences of this policy.

Before we start our analysis, we should highlight that “The Shield of Achilles” opposes the arcadian and the utopian (Rodway 1984: 149):

The arcadian represents the principle of harmony, the utopian that of order; the one community is largely rural and even the people in its small cities have some rapport with nature; the other community is urban-based, complex, overpopulated, and subject to a necessarily highly-organised imposed order. (ibid.)

In the three shorter stanzas – each marking a new disappointment on Thetis’ behalf –, Auden describes how Achilles’ mother hopes to see some arcadian tableau of the “recorded Greek past” (ibid.) on the shield. The longer stanzas, however, show how these hopes are instantly dashed when the goddess is confronted with the imagery on the shield, representing the actual happenings in the dystopian present. This approach creates a juxtaposition of beauty and truth in a double stanza pattern (cf. also Smith 1985); “a temporary equation of the historical and natural worlds, imaged by a bleak landscape, identified with, in particular, the modern world, and opposed to sentimental Arcadian wistfulness” (Johnson 1973: 157); a “contrast between ideals of harmony and humane community, and practices of mass-manipulation, moral blindness, and militarism” (Rodway 1984: 149).

In addition, one should note that there is already a contrast between Thetis’ wishes and the medium which she expects to render those wishes: she wants to “see idyllic images on an instrument of war” (Smith 1985: 192). This piece of armour, designed for her “Iron-hearted man-slaying” son, contradictorily constitutes for the mother a possible mirror of a peaceful society. In this perspective,
Smith (1985) states that Thetis may consider the shield as “an instrument of propaganda, offering she hopes images of that patria for which it is sweet to die, as her son will” (193). Yet the shield disillusions Achilles’ mother in its truthful rendering of the post-war present: not only is it hardly dulce et decorum to die for such a country, there is also a hint at the end of the poem that Achilles himself will not fare well with the shield and meet an untimely end, yet increasing the overall sense of irony. The mother can only cry after the completion of the shield, and the divine artist Hephaestos does not speak, but merely “[hobbles] away”, hiding from his terrible creation. This could not be in greater contrast with Hephaestos’ lines in Homer’s Iliad:

To her the artist-god: “Thy griefs resign,  
Secure, what Vulcan can, is ever thine.  
O could I hide him from the Fates, as well,  
Or with these hands the cruel stroke repel,  
As I shall forge most envied arms, the gaze  
Of wondering ages, and the world’s amaze!”

Unlike the speechless Hephaestos in “The Shield of Achilles” who turns his gaze away from the piece of armour, Homer’s Hephaestos (Vulcan) is filled with pride when he promises Thetis to forge the “most envied arms”, suggesting not only godly strength, but also divine beauty. However, the question of Fate remains the same: the gods are inferior to Destiny; thus Hephaestos does not craft Achilles’ armour to prevent the latter’s predicted early death (“O could I hide him from the Fates, as well,/Or with these hands the cruel stroke repel”), but to provide armour so splendid that it can only be worn by the ultimate warrior of classical mythology.

4.1.2.1. Stanza 1 – 3: the organisation of the post-war State

As mentioned before, the scene of the poem is set in the forgery of Hephaestos, who crafts armour for Achilles in the presence of the latter’s mother Thetis. When she – who remains unidentified until the very last stanza, just like the smith – casts a first glance at the shield, expecting instances of nature (“vines and olive trees”, “untamed seas”) and (commercial) culture (“marble well-governed cities”, “ships”), she only finds chaos disrupting cosmos, instead of the Homeric tableaus she hoped for. Her first impression of the shield is one of sheer disappointment. Hephaestos, whose divinity allows him visionary power, cannot deny the reality of the present and is forced to show the truth, by means of the oxymoron “an artificial wilderness”. The word “artificial” denotes in this perspective both the divine craftsman’s art and the destruction of “nature and pastoral work” by men (Rodway 1984: 150; cf. also Smith 1985: 193). Brilliantly though the shield seems to be “shining”, this brightness cannot conceal the horror it represents. We can read this in the immediately following lines: despite the gleaming armour, the “sky” on the shield still sombrely looks “like lead”.

The second stanza gives a more detailed picture of Hephaestos’ view on the present. Lines nine to eleven focus on lack and absence: “A plain without a feature”, “No blade of grass”, “no sign of neighborhood”, “Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down” (our emphases). Whereas Homer’s plains on

---

Achilles’ shield were ploughed and scenes of human labour, Auden’s plain is first and foremost characterised by its defects and its “blankness”. This is the backdrop for “An unintelligible multitude”, the inhabitants of modern post-war society, who are described in lines twelve to fifteen. They have become big Masses where individuality does not exist and has even become impossible: the Bunch is as blank and colourless as the “plain without a feature”. The epithet “unintelligible” seems to suggest that the people in the multitude are so indoctrinated that their voices of protest are subdued and therefore unclear. Another possible interpretation is that the Masses cannot talk at all; they can only watch things happen in utter passivity, merely watching with their “million eyes”, standing on their “million boots” without moving, waiting “in line”\(^3\), which immediately provokes the image of a battalion of soldiers, neatly standing in formation. Rodway (1984) adds that “unintelligible” refers “not only [to] the mind-boggling vastness of the army, but [also to] its meaninglessness (what sense can be made of getting half a million men together and turning them into robots?)” (Rodway 1984: 150).

Indeed, these “soldiers” have become completely meaningless: individual differences have been effaced so as to create faceless robots with only eyes to watch and feet to stand on. Mouths are not necessary anymore and therefore protest is impossible. The absence of a proper face (and, consequently, a proper identity and individuality) reduces the population to a big crowd of eyes: without a face, one remains “Without expression”. Post-bellum residents are seen as a phenomenon that is purely plural in its essence; the anaphor on “million” is only one of the many contributing words. The three verbs that modify the Masses are perfect indicators of their inherent facets as well: “congregated” emphasises the unified assembly character\(^4\); “stood” indicates the passive attitude of the throng (they do nothing but standing still) and the present continuous form “waiting” stresses the endlessly ongoing passivity even more.

...the artificial wilderness is a plain indifferent to the multitudes of men who wait there for some sign – the voices of the gods in the Homeric world, the voices of political leaders and dictators in the world. (Bahlke 1970: 170)

This sign comes in the third stanza, when the Authorities introduce themselves. The ruling powers of post-war society are as faceless as the Masses they command; like a revised version of Orwell’s Big Brother, the government consists of a mere “voice without a face” floating like an invisible bubble over the Masses and proclaiming its doctrine. This speech is represented as entirely devoid of content and meaning (thus not very unlike the Masses): the voice tries to justify war by means of statistics, as if warfare is a part of exact science which can be explained and proved just in tables, graphs and charts full of numbers, ending once and for all in a conclusive Quod erat demonstrandum. The actual subject remains vague: there was “some cause” justifying the war, but the concrete identity or significance of this cause is never specified. Auden’s choice of the determiner “some” reflects the hazy speech: maybe the voice’s propaganda only contains words as indefinite and unspecific as “some”; consequently, even the voice knows that there is no real just cause, but finds enough hollow words to make the Masses – already dumb and ignorant by indoctrination – “understand”. The emptiness of the speech is further reinforced in the phrase “nothing was discussed”.

\(^3\) Note the repeated labial sounds (Rodway 1984: 152).

\(^4\) Rodway (1984) also emphasises “its association with religious gatherings” (150).
Concerning the voice’s articulation, one should notice the machine-like quality of its “tones as fry and level as the place”. This makes the voice completely impersonal, just like the Masses: it is only a spokesperson, an instrument of the “real” Authorities, who may have dictated the speech to a computer and spread it over the crowd through speech technology.

The people, on the other hand, apparently do not understand the voice’s scientific justification of war and can only obey and listen passively: given the fact that they are meaningless themselves, it has become impossible for them to distinguish the true underlying meaning of the voice’s plain rhetoric. In a typical soldier’s formation (“Column by column”) they march on, while a “cloud of dust” shrouds the Masses and makes them even more colourless, disguising even more features. The only mental concept that they bear in mind whilst marching is “a belief/Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief”. Moreover, the Masses are “enduring [this] belief”; Auden uses here a verb which Rodway (1984) sees as an implication of “a belief foisted on to people from without, and in context it also hints that it will bring suffering rather than happiness” (150). This is certainly plausible: the logic that orchestrates their attitude – the will of the Invisible Nameless Authorities – is the same logic that was the driving force behind the war, the same logic that caused countless victims, who died (“brought […] to grief”), “somewhere else”, i.e. far away from their families and homes.

Another reading becomes possible when one sees “them” as referring to the moving Masses, whose mournful sadness for their perished relatives seems to be only possible “somewhere else”. This noun phrase is separated from the other content in the stanza by two commas, and maybe sorrow is detached from post-war society as well: sadness is possible, but true grief may be only happening “somewhere else”, in a world where they do respect the sacrifices of their relatives in renouncing the logic that brought them war.

4.1.2.2. Stanza 4 – 6: the Idea behind the post-war State

In the fourth stanza, Thetis looks for the second time at her son’s shield. Expecting scenes depicting religious ceremonies as of old (including animal sacrifice and libation), she is once again severely disappointed. Auden subtly refers to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in line twenty-five (Greenblatt et al. 2006: 2437), yet we are all aware by now that the peaceful and pastoral images painted by the latter would look empty and out of place in a picture of post-war desolation. This time, a new scene of horror appears, which feeds the suggestion that the shield is not really (physically) showing all of the given events, but functions rather as a kind of mirror or even a television screen. Rodway (1984) phrases this as follows:

In this mythicised documentary, as we may style it, the legendary shield is not presented mimetically. Not even a shield fashioned by a god could picture so much – and in any case the scene seems to change every time Thetis looks at it. A magic mirror, revealing the future as well as the present and showing what is true rather than what is desired, is what it really acts as. A device that permits the poet to concentrate great scope in a small compass. (150)

5 “White flower-garlanded heifers”: compare with “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, lines thirty-one to thirty-four: “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?/To what green altar, O mysterious priest,/Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,/And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?” (Greenblatt et al. 2006: 906).
From this point of view, we can state that Thetis, who wishes to see “some cause” worthwhile enough to send her son to war to defend it, is confronted with the reality, pictured by Hephaestos. He is, so to speak, a seer who uses the shield as a crystal ball to show post-war actuality, a mirror in which Thetis sees a true reflection of post-war life: a disillusionment of all possible ideas about heroism and propagandistic war spirit.

The fifth and sixth stanzas contain Hephaestos’ visual answer to Thetis’ cravings for religious scenes: he shows her an execution of “three pale figures” in a location that reminds one strongly of a concentration camp with “Barbed wire” encircling the place. Before discussing the process, Auden focuses at first upon the environment: despite the serious events going on, some officials seem to be so used to them that they can “[lounge]” at ease and their subsequent boredom allows them to make fun (“one cracked a joke”). The poet even briefly sketches the weather (“the day was hot”) before the description of the process. This foregrounding of background information seems to suggest that these items are more important than the actual events taking place, and this is probably precisely the attitude of the officials and sentries that Auden speaks of and hereby formally reflects.

“A crowd of ordinary folk” is the audience present, even though they seem to be detached from the process itself, given the fact that they are looking on “from without”. In that way, they resemble Thetis, who also looks at the horrible events Hephaestos shows from outside. The Masses are as anonymous as in the second and the third stanza: “neither moved nor spoke” fits perfectly in their earlier mentioned characteristics. They see how three citizens, the accused, are led forward to be executed. This is apparently the outcome of the trial, but as is it the only aspect of the process that is explicitly mentioned, one should wonder whether there has been any process at all. Maybe it is not unlikely that these three victims were randomly chosen to pay the price for the deeds of the untouchable higher Authorities.

In the sixth stanza, Auden clarifies the general Principle that lies behind war and the consequent post-war society. The first three lines contain, so to speak, the foundations of the post-war Constitution: “The mass and majesty of this world, all/That carries weight and always weighs the same,/Lay in the hands of others”. Everything in the post-war State is decided by the “others”, the central Authorities, and the ordinary people, the members of the Masses, cannot do anything about it but accept and follow meekly. Auden discussed this subject earlier in his introduction to the philosopher and theologian’s Kierkegaard’s work:

The basis for the creation of an aesthetic religion, [...] lies in “the experience of the physical weakness of the self in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful not-self.” (Bahlke 1970: 169)

The execution scene is a prime example: the “crowd of ordinary decent folk” can only “[watch] from without” and do nothing, as if they are (like Thetis) watching a film on a television screen. By simply stating that the Masses “could not hope for help and no help came”, the poet criticises epic war poetry: unlike this genre, Auden does not seek refuge in “conventional heroics or lucky escape”: the people cannot escape from their helpless situation; no deus ex machina, literal or figurative, will come and save them (Rodway 1984: 152). The Authorities have succeeded in convicting others for their own crimes and

---

6 Note on the adjective “pale”: Rodway (1984) associates this modifier with “overtones of long incarcerations [and] fear” (150-1).
do not feel any regret about this: “What their foes [i.e. the Authorities, the enemies of the Masses] liked to do was done, their shame/Was all the worst could wish”. The three innocent people are sentenced and humiliated in front of the passively watching Masses and this results in a loss of self-esteem and dignity; the prisoners actually die twice, both mentally (“they lost their pride/And died as men”) and physically (“before their bodies died”).

This is also exactly what happened during the Second World War: the Authorities tried to defeat their enemies by relying on Machiavelli’s old lore: in order to achieve victory, millions of ordinary people were sacrificed, either by dropping (nuclear) bombs or by genocide through gas poisoning in the concentration camps.

4.1.2.3. Stanza 7 – 9: the consequences of war in the post-war State

The seventh stanza relates how Thetis glances for the third time at the shield, hoping that she will see some sports event (“athletes at their games”) and dancing couples (“Men and women in a dance/Moving their sweet limbs/Quick, quick, to music”). Yet the mirror-shield of Hephaestos’ craft shows a cruel scenery once again: this time, Thetis is presented “a weed-choked field”, where all flowers and plants are suffocated in their growth. This may be a metaphor for the Authorities and the Masses, involving the former strangling the individual blossoming of the latter, preventing each society member from developing a proper voice.

It is in this eighth stanza that we encounter, for the very first time in post-war society, a defined individual: “A ragged urchin, aimless and alone;/Loitered about that vacancy”. However, his individuality connotes in this poem loneliness and a sense of uselessness; he “lives in a solitude where individuality is meaningless because it can imagine no relations to other individuals” (Mendelson in Smith 2004: 60). The boy is “aimless” because of a lack of friends and family, and has nothing better to do than bullying a bird (“a bird/Flew up from safety from his well-aimed stone” – note how his only “well-aimed” action is one of violence). Rodway (1984) sees this urchin as the burlesque version of the “legendary hero” type that we find in heroic poetry (150). Furthermore, the “vacancy” in which he hangs around, “clearly refers to a moral void as well as a physical wasteland (151).

This is a sad image of post-war reality, where the horrors of warfare are simply replaced by others: “girls are raped” and stabbing seems to be an everyday occupation (“two boys knife a third”). We should remark that the boy is as ignorant as the Masses: the ubiquitous manifestations of violence “[are] axioms to him”. It is a principle that he takes for granted, that he accepts as the truth, even though it may very well not be the case. Yet it is impossible to question this social code for someone “who’d never heard/Of any world where promises were kept/or one could weep because another wept”. Pity is a word deleted from the Masses’ dictionary: the indoctrinated obeisance of the people forbids any compassionate feelings. Moreover, corruption seems to have choked society as much as the weed did with the field. Promises made to the people are not kept and society keeps moving in a rhythm dictated by the Authorities, irrespective of the Masses, the members of which are unable to protest anyway.

In such a world, the events are without meaning because they are merely the fulfilment of the arbitrary will of either divine or human rulers. (Bahlke 1970: 170)

The ninth and last stanza no longer explores the repercussions of warfare in everyday life and modern thinking, but returns to Thetis and Hephaestos, who are now for the first time identified. Hephaestos has
shown many terrible social tragedies, but in the end he remains as passive as the Masses: he is a mere spectator who seems to realise that this situation cannot be rectified, that this war wound is too deep to heal. All he can do is gaze away from the horror and “[hobble] away”. The nymph can only react with her voice, and although she is thus far more articulate than the silent Masses, she does not use it to protest. She can only “[cry] out in dismay/At what the god had wrought/To please her son”. Her sadness gives us “a reminder of the special griefs of war among the general ones” (Rodway 1984: 150). Probably, Thetis realises by now that the days of heroic poetry narrating epic wars are forever lost; the second World War has destroyed many values, social but also literary. Whereas she initially hoped to see an idyllic image of the patria, she sees that heroism and propaganda have become empty concepts, insufficient to grasp and justify the bitter essence of war. Now she becomes aware that her son will soon die in all his bloodlust (he wants to revenge the death of his friend Patroclus). Armour, which should protect Achilles from harm, only ensures her of his near death (ibid.). “Iron-hearted” and “man-slaying” are in this perspective rather ironic and hollow modifiers for Achilles, a traditional Homeric hero. They completely nullify the “favourable adjective ‘strong’” (ibid.), and become quite meaningless when one takes into account that he will perish soon.

Both in the Iliad and in “The Shield of Achilles”, Achilles “would not live long”: while Auden does not mention the cause, Homer narrates how the famous fighter dies an almost banal death after being shot in the heel by Paris, probably the best known coward of mythology, who abducted Helen of Sparta (married to King Menelaus) and sacrificed Troy for this impossible romance.

Yet, whereas Homer’s Thetis, Hephaestos and Achilles are actors in the Iliad as the prime example of heroic poetry, their place is significantly different in Auden’s version: they become involved in a picture of human atrocity, in a century where the values of heroism have been nullified by the Second World War. In contrast with the Trojan War, World War II was not centred on bravery in battle nor man-to-man fighting, but introduced nuclear weapons and chemical gases in concentration camps, which could eliminate various people at once and killed not only soldiers, but also millions of ordinary people. In such a war, heroism has become an empty value. Therefore, the heroic poetic tradition fails to portray modern warfare.
5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have studied the ways in which Owen, Yeats and Auden use the sonnet form and/or the myth theme in order to come to terms with their war experiences (which have been, of course, more direct in Owen’s case), and subsequently find out that the existing rules of the sonnet or the mere adaptation of myths do not suffice anymore to render an image of war or post-war society.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” consists of two sonnets, whose structure, formal and thematic conventions are twisted to lend a voice to Owen’s unspeakable traumas and experiences caused by battlefield horror. The first section is a twist in theme: the usual heroic and patriotic subject of the sonnet is replaced by the terrors of warfare. The dreadfulness of this theme evokes a struggling rhythm, representing the staggering soldiers it describes. The second section displays the chaos of the gas attack by upsetting the metre once more, but follows the canonical thematic change of the sonnet required of the sestet in switching from the general to the individual perspective. The third section about Owen’s haunting dreams is hard to place in the sonnet structure, just like the nightmares themselves are difficult to give a place in the poet’s mind. The couplet is isolated by two voltas, but continues the rhyme scheme of the first sonnet, albeit completely challenged: the repeated words render the couplet as meaningless and impossible (according to sonnet conventions) as the experiences it depicts. The isolation of the couplet causes a second “broken” sonnet, consisting of a ranting octave and a formally insufficient quatrain. The rhyme scheme is respected, but the endless raging of the if-clauses requires a solution, which seems impossible to give: the last quatrain has four increasingly shortening lines, ending in a half-line, asking for a solution that probably will never come. The spokesman has become inarticulate.

In his modern Annunciation “Leda and the Swan”, Yeats makes use of both the myth theme and the sonnet form, both of which are adapted to the poet’s post-war beliefs. Concerning the myth theme, the poet adopts the tale of Leda and Zeus but adds an abstract layer; he tries to come to terms with the post-war society in trying to solve some existential questions that have arisen in his mind and which he applies to the mythological scene. When one studies his description of Leda’s rape, the position of the rapist can be occupied by Leda, Zeus, History and the reader. All of these readings have a different implication regarding the question whether or not Man has acquired superhuman knowledge. Additionally, each reading gives a proper interpretation of the responsibility of Man: depending on the perspective, Man is either ignorant, greedy for higher knowledge no matter what it takes, as much of a helpless toy of Time as the gods, or an independent pseudo-divine creator of symbolic realities. The existence of those many possible interpretations illustrates the difficulty of processing the war trauma, which becomes a very challenging enterprise that maybe will never reach a definite outcome. In that point of view, Yeats seems to indicate that war experiences may be something that is to be carried on forever, that cannot be given a place, and is therefore a wound that can never completely be cured. This is also true for the responsibility question: maybe Man will eternally remain a pawn on the chessboard of God or History; maybe Man will continue to create violence to satisfy the endless hunger for knowledge; maybe Man can learn from the past by recreating symbolic realities and study them countless times so as to prevent future fighting. In short, finding the specific cause of the war may turn out to be an impossible quest that will never end, at least not in a satisfactory way.

With regard to the sonnet form, Yeats does not follow the rules of the Petrarchan sonnet, of which “Leda and the Swan” is an example. While the rhyme scheme is very regular, the metrical composition of the poem reflects specific aspects of the violent rape. More specifically, the octave is characterised by
more spondees than a usual regular iambic pentameter requires. In the first quatrain, they accentuate the divine power of the swan, in the second quatrains, the large amount of spondees draw attention to Leda’s helplessness (dependent on the reading). The most important formal aspect of the sestet, on the other hand, is the typographical space that cuts short the first tercet and adds an extra complement to the second tercet, as some sort of introduction to the final epistemological riddle. The sestet is broken: the first tercet is too short, the second is too long; Yeats deliberately includes a long pause for the reader so as to let all the violence sink in, before moving on to more abstract matters. Thematically, we have noticed that, unlike regular sonnets, the tercets do not question the quatrains: there is a thematic shift within the octave, as well as within the sestet. There is a regular shift in theme between the octave and the sestet, but then the first tercet deals with violence and thus reprises the same theme as the first quatrains (albeit in a future perspective). After the unusual typographical caesura, the second tercet subsequently further develops the same thematic pattern of the second quatrains, i.e. the poetic voice’s questioning of the events. In “Leda and the Swan”, Yeats thus plays thematic leapfrog. The violence of World War I, transposed to a mythological Annunciation, has turned out to be too terrible: the existing sonnet conventions, and probably poetry in general, cannot adequately represent the horrors of war; breaking the literary conventions seems the only way to achieve an acceptable result, but maybe poetry will never be the true mouth-piece of the voices of war.

Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” is based on Book XVIII of Homer’s Iliad, which narrates how Thetis watches Hephaestos creating a shield for her son Achilles. Yet her hopes of seeing depictions of an idyllic society worth fighting for are dashed three times when the divine artist shows her the harsh reality of post-war society.

Auden ironically uses rhyme royal for the unjustifiable post-war scenes, so as to sharpen the contrast between form and content, and between the stanzas themselves. Post-war society has, in his eyes, a social stratification of Authorities commanding a Mass. The Principle lying underneath dictates that everything lies in the hands of the Authorities: the Masses cannot possibly interfere and sometimes random people are sacrificed and punished for the horrible acts committed by the Authorities during the war. Such a society can only be one in which violence keeps on thriving even after the war. In that way, Auden notices how post-war society has actually little changed compared with the actual war: “some cause” is given to justify the necessity of the post-war situation; all power is in the hands of the Authorities; and violence is still omnipresent. We have not learned anything from the war; post-war society may be even worse than the battle that came before.

Whereas Homer used verse to tell a tale about heroes in the Trojan wars, Auden feels that heroism has become an empty concept after the Second World War, which substituted totalitarianism, nuclear weapons, genocide and concentration camps for bravery in battle. Heroic poetry has become an insufficient means of representing war tales; maybe there will never be any means at all.

The projection of the Homeric world upon the shield thus proves to be a failure, an empty enterprise, because the reality of the modern world that Hephaestos shows is too different. Heroism does not exist anymore, only meek acceptance and violence. Even the two mythical personae can only watch: they hardly differ from the Masses when they react by either walking away from the harsh facts (Hephaestos) or crying out and realising that nothing can be done to set things right (Thetis).

Owen, Yeats and Auden all feel the need to transform the classical motives they use. They can only be truthful by distortion. Firstly, Owen’s memories of the trenches are too horrible to suit loyalty to the
sonnet rules. Of all the three case studies, his “Dulce et Decorum Est” is maybe the one with the most violent distortions, which is very plausible since he saw the horrors of war with his own eyes on the battlefield. Secondly, Yeats demonstrates the difficulty of processing war experiences by means of adding an abstract layer to the mythological scene and giving a twist to the metrical and thematic conventions of the sonnet. Yeats distorts both the original myth of Leda and the sonnet principles in order to give a place to the Great War that has turned society upside down. Thirdly, Auden takes a mythological scene from Homer’s *Iliad* and uses it to contrast the heroism of ancient times with the dystopian post-war reality, where heroism has become impossible due to the mass-character and nuclear inventions of mid-twentieth-century warfare.

Finally, it is interesting to remark that there is one big point of divergence regarding the ones responsible for the War: Owen’s poem is a sneer at war propagandists and Auden blames both the Authorities and the Masses, while Yeats leaves the question open for several possible interpretations. Yet they all agree on the insufficiency of the poetic tradition: the experience or aftermath of the World Wars are too horrible to be entirely processed or grasped in the formal and thematic rigour of the sonnet or in the mere adoption or metaphorical use of mythological characters. The sonnet’s intern structure is challenged on almost every level (Owen, Yeats), while the myth theme is complemented with existential/epistemological questions concerning violence (Yeats) or projected onto the bitter post-war reality (Auden). Whereas the sonnet form and the myth theme were previously used in literary history to describe heroic events or patriotic feelings, they prove to be incapable of representing the twentieth-century wars, which offer no place for heroism at all (cf. Owen, Auden). From the twentieth century onwards, war wounds (both mental and physical) need a stronger medicine, even though it is likely that true oblivion will never reach their core.
6.  BIBLIOGRAPHY
6.1.  General reference


6.2.  Wilfred Owen


6.3.  William Butler Yeats


6.4. **Wystan Hugh Auden**


