A STYLISTIC-COGNITIVE APPROACH TO WILFRED OWEN'S POEMS ABOUT THE WAR

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Abstract: The paper entitled "A Stylistic-Cognitive Approach to Wilfred Owen's Poems about the War" tackles the issue of WWI from a twofold cognitive and stylistic perspective. It was Owen's preoccupation with rendering his war experience both in a realistic and artistic manner that has conviced us of the opportunity to approach his poetry from a stylistic perspective. On the other hand, Owen's experience of the Front will be also cognitively approached by us, via Soja's Thirdspace, precisely because the poet seems to be mostly concerned with a "strategic awareness of this colectivelly created spatiality" – the Front and its socio and psycho-cognitive consequences.

Keywords: war, Thirdspace, Soja, Owen, Bachelard

Wilfred Owen, born at Oswestry, a Welsh town in Shropshire, on the 18th of March 1893, has still been associated with the Liverpool Poets and the Beatles – "the two great anti-war icons of modern times" (Cuthbertson, 17). His association with Liverpool rests on his father's career when the family moved, for a short time, to Shrewsbury, and then settled in Birkenhead, regarded by many people as part of Liverpool.

Cuthberston's biography of Owen expands upon his birthplace, his childhood, his education received at Shrewsbury Borough Technical School, his lower middleclass extraction which, due to financial issues, did not allow him to be educated at Oxford. Instead of Oxford, he was educated at Reading University College in Dunsden, where he first worked as lay assistant to the Rev. Herbert Wigan. During his training period in Dunsden, he bought books and considerably improved his knowledge of Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, being mostly attracted by the dead writers than by the modern ones.

Beginning with September 1913, he came to France intending to teach English at the Berlitz School. It was here that Owen became committed to escape and poetry. Owen was in France when the First World War began, and Germany declared war on France. It was then that Britain "entered into war with Germany" (Cuthbertson, 91). In October 1915, back in England, he decided to join the 2nd Manchesters and make for the front.

Besides the Romantic poets Keats and Shelley who have greatly influenced his writings, it is Housman's poetry that seems to have influenced some of Owen's poems about the war, such as "Disabled", "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "The Send-Off" (Cuthbertson, 155). Many poems belonging to Housman's "A Shropshire Lad" are focused on the idea that "death was imminent".

In spite of the feeling of the immanence of death, associated with the war experience, in 1916, Owen was much concerned with leaving for Egypt with the Flying Corps. The Shropshire soldiers doing their duty and dying in Egypt are poetically described by Owen in two strongly

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articulated lines. “And the Nibe spills his overflow/Beside the Severn’s dead” (in Cuthbertson, 157). He left the Flying School in Cairo and went further up the Egyptian coast, up to Fleedwood, where we was in charge of a firing party (Cuthbertson, 157). There, his basic concern was for the less educated and less prepared soldiers from the lower ranks, who were facing the cruel realities from the battlefields.

However, Owen did not spent too much time in Egypt and decided to make for the Western Front in France. It was the 2nd Manchesters that he joined at Hallow, in the vicinity of the river Somme. He described this experience as being “let down, gently, into the real thing, Mud” (Cuthbertson, 159). Surrounded by mud, he kept complaining that in spite of the fact that he was “perfectly well and strong”, he realized how “unthinkably dirty and squalid” he was (in Cuthbertson, 159).

Such considerations on his mental and physical condition reveal Owen’s self released into the awareness of what front life is like, namely not having any possibility of washing and being obliged “to keep out the water” (Cuthbertson, 159). The overwhelming mud and filth made the soldiers look “bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / knock-kneed, coughing like hags” (in Cuthbertson, 159).

Actually, the small attacks undertaken by the British in the Somme area, meant to suggest a major attack in the region in the spring (Cuthbertson, 159), were Owen’s “first experiences of fighting” (160).

Owen increasingly felt the need to reveal the truth regarding the atrocities of war from the perspective of someone who survived and who sorrowfully recollected what happened. One of the most dramatic experiences has been rendered in the poem “The Sentry” which depicts how “one lad was blown down” and “blinded”.

Thud! Flump! Thud! Down the steep steps came thumping
And sploshing in the flood, deluging muck,
The sentry’s body; then his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bomb, and mud in ruck on ruck.
We dredged it up, for dead, until he whined,
‘O sir – my eyes, - I’m blind, - I’m blind, - I’m blind’.

What we notice here is Owen’s natural rhetoric filled up not with invented things or emotions, but with real, experiential aspects of life. In order to create “a climate of opinion” (Howard, 335) regarding such issues, Owen uses onomatopoeic words such as “thud”, “flump”, to suggest the outer and audible effects of the “steep steps”, “sploshing in the flood”, “deluging muck”.

The audible effects are further increased by the visible agony of the sentry’s body and mind. Susan Sontag claims that “the discovery of the self” equates with “the discovery of the suffering self” (Howard, 350), in the modern consciousness and, as such, Owen’s concern with modern consciousness resounds in the stylistic patterns, for instance the rhyming pair “muck/ruck”. The latter is comprised in the syntagm “mud in ruck on ruck” suggesting the ethical dimension of his poetry.

The second rhyming pattern “whined/blind” suggests the confrontation between the chaos alluded to and the need for imposed order, in the sense of depicting the true condition of those apparently dead in order to comfort and sympathize with them. It is Owen’s concern with rendering his thoughts both in a realistic and artistic manner that has convinced us of the opportunity to approach his poetry from a stylistic perspective.

The verbal structure “I’m blind”, repeated thrice, crystallizes Owen’s polar involvement with the size of such psychological catastrophies. By quoting Alex Katz who said that “the size is intimate, but the scale is vast” we assume that Owen experienced, on the one hand, the accommodation of the feeling of catastrophe and, on the other, the indulgence of self-pity for having to attend to such experiences (Howard, 351).

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Since the poem is focused on drowning, Owen informed his mother that he nearly broke down and let himself drown in the water after having taken part in the dramatic experience of the sentry's going blind. And yet, he surpassed self-pity and the tendency to self-destruction and survived precisely to "speak for the dead" (Cuthbertson, 161).

The exploration of the Front can be cognitively approached, as well, via Soja's Thirdspace. It comprises the Firstspace of objects, the Secondspace of thought and the Thirdspace of experience, the last being constructed around the First and the Second spaces perceived as simultaneously "real-and-imaged" places of individual and collective experience (Soja, 3). In our opinion, Owen's preoccupation with social and political spatiality is largely embodied in various concrete representations of the Front itself, namely the mud, the trenches, the rifles, the bombs.

Even more than that, Owen seems to be mostly concerned with "a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality" – the Front – and its "social" and psychological consequences (Soja, 1). This brings us closer to Soja's Secondspace of thought. Owen, exactly as Soja, is constantly contemplating "the spatiality of human life" revealing life's "intrinsic historical and social qualities" (Soja, 2). Moreover, Owen never thought "that war is not horrific" (Cuthbertson, 161).

Sociality, which is strongly related to the Thirdspace of experience, can be commented upon through his military involvement prior to the Western Front. He was familiar with the sick and dying soldiers in Dunsden, had been trained as concerns military issues for over a year, had noticed and pitied many wounded soldiers that returned from the Boer War to the Mersey ports (Cuthbertson, 161).

Owen had actually joined the Front after "two and a half years of trench warfare" (161). And yet, as his poetry clearly reveals, the experience of war was completely different from his previous training and social and military involvement. Paradoxically speaking, Owen's previous attitude to war involved an intense awareness of "the visual beauty" (Cuthbertson, 162) of it. For instance, he had once intended to be part of the Italian cavalry thinking that he would look handsome on horseback in a genuine Italian landscape. According to Cuthbertson's biography of Owen, he had imaginatively contemplated death, never dreaming "of dying in a landscape like the Western Front" (162).

The poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est" reveals the opposite of his previous attitude to war, namely the ugliness and dramatism of the trenches.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
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.

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 him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at 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, -

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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.

All the metaphorically charged nouns are instances of historical and social spatial characteristics: gas, helmets, fire, panes, sea, wagon. This Firstspace of objects is further enlarged upon and deepened through its association with various experiential instances related to profound psychological states. All are carried out from ordinary tenors into strong emotional vehicles revealing the essence of Owen's philosophy of the world.

Present and past participles best render "the imaginative aspects of reason" (Lakoff, 9), because they are part of extended mental images. For instance "ecstasy of fumbling", "yelling", "stumbling", "floundering like a man in fire", "drowning", "guttering", "choking", "eyes writhing in his face", "hanging face", "blood come garling from the froth-corrupted lungs", are means of individualizing suffering and of establishing some sort of "unity" among "place, time and action" (Bachelard, 174).

Bachelard quotes Michel Leiris and claims that you can identify within some words, "some intimate movement" (174). It is here that cognition and perception go hand in hand. The present and past participles suggest an inner drama and help us enter a highly qualitative space, animated by the need to survive.

The ethical dimension resounds through the previously mentioned metaphorically charged linguistic patterns meant to help us contemplate some intimate experience which turns into one with vaster and more profound psychological and national connotations.

A phenomenological reading of the poem reveals the ephemeral being, fighting for the country, dying for her. And yet, the metaphysical aspect arises precisely from this level of the image (Bachelard, 246), because the spiritual dimension is closely related to the space of the front and its overwhelming dramatic experiences. Bachelard claims that to "genuinely live a poetic image means to acknowledge the becoming of a particular human being, the awareness of the disturbance of the being" (248, our transl.).

Stylistically speaking, the rhyming couplets well render the psychological dimension of the poem: "fumbling/stumbling", "time/lime", "light/night", "pace/face", "in"/sin", "blood/cud", "lungs/tongues". The pure dramatic tonality of the poem arises from the last four lines directly related to the conditional structure inserted in the ninth line and extended upon in the rest of the stanza which represent an accumulation of auditory and visual images, sequentially preparing the reader for the ontology of death.

"If in some smothering dreams you too could … watch the white eyes writhing in his face / his hanging face …"
"If you could hear the blood / come garling …"

As concerns the conclusive last four lines, we notice "an evasion of imagination" (Bachelard, 243). "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". Such lines record the dialects "glory – death" which reveals a confused world unable to "reach its centre again" (Bachelard, 242), due to the fact that everything changed during and after the war.

Owen himself went through the "near – death" (Cuthbertson, 165) experience depicted in the poem entitled "Exposure". It depicts life in the trenches where the soldiers were permanently facing frostbite and death. Owen deals with "human realities" (Bachelard, 238) and, as such, he does not refer to "impressions" in order to render them concrete.

He lived those realities in "their poetic and psychological vastness" (Bachelard, 238). It is the first line that articulates the poet's sensitivity to suffering and the perilous frost: "Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us". Following Paul Eluard's terminology, we opine that this line in the expression of "spatialized thinking", or, as Lakoff

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would put it, "thinking embodied" in psychologically charged images of the aching brains and of the knifing east winds. The vowel "i" echoes the poet's disturbed and dislocated self.

The next two lines are characterized by the dialectics of "silent" and "salient", of death and life through a series of images which establish a certain order regarding the positive and negative poles.

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent …
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient.

The poet's nightmare is "simple" and "radical" (Bachelard, 245) and it resounds in the following line: "Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous".

The repetition of the word "silence" in the two constructions: "the night is silent", where it is predicatively used, and in "worried by silence", fully charged with nominal psychological connotations, brings us closer to another dialectics, that of "outside-inside" (Bachelard, 239).

"The night is silent" partially sums up the "ontological" (Bachelard, 241) aspect of the problem, placing the human being in an externalized background. Owen expands upon the dialectics of "outside-inside" in "worried by silence". Paradoxically, the disturbing trench noise turned into silence is tormenting the soldiers' minds. "Outside and inside" have become "intimate" issues, being equally painful.

The second part of the fourth line "sentries whisper, curious, nervous" suggests an intimate space characterized by tension. The last line "But nothing happens" suggests that the outer space is chaotic as if the soldiers were deprived of any certitude regarding possible frightening events that might occur and take them by surprise.

Fear and "pity of war" (Cuthbertson, 166) are further depicted in another stanza from the poem entitled "Exposure", connecting them to the cause proper, the war.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and as,
Shriveling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are
ice / But nothing happens. (Cuthbertson, 166)

The outer space is cognitively well rendered via what Soja's called the Firstspace of objects - "mud", "frost" - associated with parts of the human body: hands, foreheads, faces, eyes, offering a real lesson of "ontological extension" (Bachelard, 244).

The dialects of "outside-side", approached by us via Bachelard's aesthetics and Soja's Thirdspace, can be further commented upon via Spinoza's concept of "mode", defined by him by the state of the matter, conditioned not by its inner essence, but by exterior influences" (217, our trans.).

The ontological dimension of Owen's poetry can be further extended upon via Soja's Secondspace of thought and his Thirdspace of experience, the latter encapsulating the previously mentioned First and Second spaces. Thinking is best rendered by verbs, precisely because Owen contemplates the war events and describes them in terms of real actions.

The participial constructions "shriveling", "puckering" associated with "hands" and "foreheads" reveal the ontological nightmare of the poet. The present tense simple of the verbs "pick" and "shovel" associated with the "burying party" depicts the nightmare through aggressive verbs meant to suggest the lowest degree of unity between the living and the dead. The line "Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice" suggests the ephemeral character of the world.

The stylistic connotations of "eyes are ice" arise from the repetition of the diphthong /ai/ creating an intensively negative sonority. Since /ai/ represents the phonetical representation of the "self", through repetition, it suggests the poet's lamentation that grants to the spiritual the status of an intensively involved entity regarding a space where dramatic events take place.

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Apparently, spirituality and "musicality" are "openly resisted" (Schneider, 97) in Owen's poetry. Schneider, in her approach to the "Music" of Banville's novels, quotes Rudiger Imhof and his syntagm taken from Beckett's Mollow where he states that he appreciates the magic and the music of the words" which, he claims he "would be a fool to try and explicate" (106). We have constantly focused on the music of Owen's words, and, contrary to Beckett, we have tried to explicate it because sound has been regarded by Perrine as a means of increasing and emphasizing meaning.

The complete phonetical transcription of "eyes" and "ice", namely /aiz/ and /ais/ which creates a surprisingly intense inner rhyming couplet, can be further commented upon resorting to Owen's "religious upbringing". Mud "as a form of baptism", the Front like Dante's Purgatorio, "the Bible's Sodom and Gomorrah", "Babylon" and even Hell (Cuthbertson, 166) sends us to another rhyming couplet "Hell/shell" from the poem "Cramped in that Funneled Hole" (317).

Owen's childhood interest in astronomy and cricket can be also encountered in the poem "The Show" where he depicts "a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth, / Grey, cratered like the moon with hollow woe" (Cuthbertson, 167) or in the poem "No Man's Land" where the German trenches look "like a crowd moving off a cricket field" (Cuthbertson, 167). Moreover, his archeological concerns can be found in "Dulce et Decorum East" where "a bandaged soldier" looks like a "mummy" or in an unfinished, untitled poem focused on digging, soil and eternal soul:

As bronze may be much beautified
By lying in the dark damp soil,
So men who fade in dust of warefare fade
Fairer, and sorrow blooms their soul.

The rhyming couplets "beautified/fade" and "soil/soul" depict, through the created oppositions, a particular sonority which is charged up with rigidity within the former rhyming pair and with warmth, in the latter, both offering an embryo of recollection and daydreaming.

Owen's war experience came to an end in March 1917 when he fell down a well at Bouchoir, was hit on the back of his head, and spent a lot of time in hospitals to recover himself. The time spent in hospital has been pragmatically depicted in the poem "Conscious":

His fingers wake, and flutter; up the bed.
His eyes come open with a pull of will,
Helped by the yellow mayflowers by his head.
The blind-cord drawls across the window-sill …
What a smooth floor the ward has! What a rug!
Who is that talking somewhere out of sight?
Three flies are creeping round the shiny jug …
'Nurse! Doctor!' – 'Yes, all right, all right.'
But sudden evening blurs and fogs the air.
There seems no time to want a drink of water.
Nurse looks so far away. And here and there
Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.
He can't remember where he saw blue sky …
The trench is narrower. Cold, he's cold; yet hot –
And there's no light to see the voices by …
There is no time to ask … he knows not what (Cuthbertson, 172).

Besides the oppositions "outside-inside" and life-death, in Owen's poetry, there arises the difference between the Old Testament and the New, revealing his intense preoccupations with the spiritual. The poem "Soldier's Dream" depicts Jesus the pacifist who brings the war to an end:

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I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears,
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts,
And rusted every bayonet with His tears" (Cuthbertson, 174).

Such an image is an embryo of virtual awakening without which we are not allowed to enter the realm of positive thinking and recollect the past.

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