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Yeats's *Daimonic* Birds and Beasts of Apocalypse

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Abstract:

Much from George and W.B. Yeats's channelling sessions left little or no trace in *A Vision* yet provided important material for the poet. The *Daimon*, an antagonist spiritual counterpart, though unclear in *A Vision*, was a vital concept to Yeats, and could be symbolised in bird or animal form; similarly, the dove and swan that appear in the annunciations to Mary and Leda embody the *daimonic* on a macrocosmic scale. Another *daimonic* beast at both individual and world level is the unicorn; one related to the new religious age is the sphinx, which embodies a complex conjunction of ideas, including the reawakening of ancient ways of thought. The *Daimon* brings crisis to human life, and the *daimonic* beasts are associated with crisis in world history, the irruption of the irrational divine.

Keywords: Avatar, Daimon, Millennium, Sphinx, Unicorn

Writing about the first attempts that he and his wife made with automatic writing, W.B. Yeats remembered offering "to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. 'No', was the answer, 'we have come to give you metaphors for poetry' " (*AVB*, 8; *CW14*, 8). Given this statement, Northrop Frye thought that "it seems obvious that *A Vision* should be approached as a key to the structure of symbolism and imagery in Yeats's own poetry, as what Yeats calls in another connection 'the emergence of the philosophy of my own poetry, the unconscious becoming conscious' ", yet Frye found it "a fragmentary and often misleading guide to the structure of imagery in Yeats" (1976, 251). Frye is far from being alone in wanting *A Vision* to be what it is not, but he also rightly comments that, in mining the automatic script, Yeats seems to have concentrated on "schematic elaboration" in *A Vision* rather than creating an exploration of symbol and image in the vein of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917) that it could almost equally well have yielded. Alongside the rules for placing the *Faculties* or the revolutions of the gyres, the automatic script is full of metaphors and symbols that were never used in *A Vision* – and no doubt many more were written or spoken that do not survive.

If *A Vision* is fragmentary, the automatic script and the "sleeps"[1] from which it arose were even more so, very the much "scattered sentences"' that Yeats offered to piece together, and recalling the "mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street" that Yeats saw as the origin of "masterful images" in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (*VP*, 630; *CW1*, 355). Out of the mass of material assembled, some ideas and images never left the script itself, some were rejected as misleading "frustration"[2], but most were organised into notebooks and a card file from which Yeats then synthesised his drafts, many of which went through multiple recastings and revisions[3]. Part of this was the search for language to express his ideas better, but Yeats's understanding of the system's elements and meaning also evolved significantly over the years from the first scripts, through the early dialogues he created for exposition, to *A Vision A*, and then through his later reassessment and reformulation leading up to *A Vision B*. The constant work with this material, sifting it and wrestling with ways of creating a coherent version for presentation left marks on Yeats's thinking and creative expression that are the hidden bulk of an iceberg of which *A Vision* is the visible part. In the introduction to *A Vision* written in 1928, "I will never think any thoughts but these, or some modification or extension of these; when I write prose or verse they must be somewhere present though not it may be in the words" (*PEP*, 32). Yet Yeats's immersion in these "thoughts" goes far beyond what is contained in the book, and if *A Vision* is to be "a key to the structure of symbolism and imagery" (Frye 1976, 251), then the term needs to embrace the system as Yeats knew it, not just the published versions – though they must have priority – and the art of any given period must be looked at along with his understanding in that period[4].

An example of the development of Yeats's ideas is the *Daimon*. The concept emerged from earlier ideas of the anti-self and mask, and came to the fore in the meditations on "Anima Hominis", the soul of man, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*[5]. The fragmented picture of the *Daimon* that emerged in the question and answer of George Yeats's automatic script and sleeps was recognisably related to this earlier formulation but significantly different in role and attributes, and the script introduced different types of *Daimon*, as well as collective *Daimons* in connection with schools of thought and art, as well as countries[6]. The *Daimon* that is presented in *A Vision*

[1] The communications started as automatic writing in 1917 and shifted to "Sleeps" in the spring of 1920 (Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M., 1992, vol. 3, 9; see also Mann 2019, ch. 2 and <www.yeatsvision.com/AS.html> (05/2024). The sleeps involved W.B. Yeats waiting for his wife to enter a form of trance in sleep, during which he would question her and she would answer, the voice being that of the Communicator or Instructor. He would make notes, which GY or he would then write up the following day. These sleeps continued sporadically into the late 1920s, though the later ones are not included in *Yeats's 'Vision' Papers*.

[2] The "Frustrators" were a group of anti-Instructors, apparently centred on the figure that W.B. Yeats had originally fancied his personal *Daimon,* Leo.

[3] The automatic script and sleeps, as well as the first drafts preceding *A Vision A*, are collected in *Yeats's 'Vision' Papers* under the general editorship of George Mills Harper (1992, 3 vols); volume 4 appeared later (Harper 2001). Later drafts, both for *A Vision A* and, more importantly, for *A Vision B* are less easy to access, but the series of essays by Neil Mann and Wayne Chapman on the Rapallo Notebooks includes some important intermediate drafts (see Mann 2022; Chapman 2023; Chapman and Mann 2024 (forthcoming); Mann and Chapman 2025 (forthcoming).

[4] In a headnote to his essay on *A Vision*, Frye mentions having abandoned a "project of tracing its development for its sketchy first edition" (1976, 245).

[5] In 1901 W.B. Yeats had quoted a colleague in the Golden Dawn that "myths are the activities of the Dæmons, and that the Dæmons shape our characters and our lives" (*CW5*, 80-81, cf. *E&I*, 107; the source *CW3*, 281, *Au*, 373), and contact with the "Leo Africanus" ca. 1912 (see Adams, Harper 2013).

[6] These collective *Daimons* have some kinship with the Golden Dawn's idea of the *egregore*, the psychic entity created as a thoughtform by a group of collaborating people, except that the collective *Daimon* or Coven seems to precede and bring the group into being. See W.B. Yeats, "Is the Order of R.R.&A.C. to remain a Magical Order?" (1901) (Appendix K) of Harper 1974, 261.

A differs significantly from that of *A Vision B*, but neither presentation is fully clear. I have examined elsewhere how Yeats's conception and thinking continued to shift and evolve as he developed a fuller understanding of the system, so that from anti-self, the spiritual counterpart of a human, acting as a lover and antagonist, it developed over the 1920s into an archetype of the individual embracing multiple lives over millennia (Mann 2019, 153ff).

The *Daimon* also stands out against the geometric schemes and regular cycles that dominate most of *A Vision*, operating through fleeting moments of crisis and the irregular lightning flash, such that Graham Hough considered it "a relic of an earlier formulation" that "cannot properly be fitted into the system", but "too vivid and imaginatively living to be abandoned" (1984, 111-113). The picture given by the manuscript drafts is fuller and makes it clear that Yeats still considered the *Daimon* "the chief person of my drama", but he appears to have found it impossible to deal with adequately[7]. As a poet, Yeats perhaps felt easier expressing it in symbolic form, and he used a variety of symbols for the *Daimon*, representing the *Daimon* itself and the individual's contact with the *daimonic* or personal divine most commonly through birds and beasts[8].

Such symbolism had already been central to Yeats's poetic practice for many years, but it was reinforced and refocused by material from the automatic script, such as drawings of birds, animals in emblems of the phases, and their symbolism[9]. An aspect of the symbolism was clarified when Yeats was told in May 1921 that "Daimons or spirits when acting in connection with daimons take animal or bird forms" (Harper, Martinich, Harper 1992, vol. 3, 278-279; cf. 76)[10]. Yeats used this idea and illuminates some of the symbolism of *Calvary* by quoting a fictional letter from Michael Robartes, telling of *daimonic* animal forms in the context of his Arabian travels. A young Judwali shows him "certain marks on the sand" outside the tent of a visitor with "a reputation as a wonder-worker"; to Robartes, they look like "the marks of a jackal", but he is told that "they were made by the wonder-worker's 'Daimon' or 'Angel' " (*VPl*, 789, *CW2*, 696). Robartes is told that, because the man is an extroverted traveller, "his Daimon has the form of a beast, but your Daimon would have a bird's shape because you are a solitary man" (*ibidem*). Importantly, unlike the *Daimon* itself, this animal form is not an image of opposition but of likeness: the gregarious *primary* person has a beast that runs in a pack, while the *antithetical* person has a lonely bird (*ibidem*)[11]. Robartes writes that "Certain

[7] NLI MS 36,272/18/1, corrected typescript titled "Book I | Dramatis Personae", page numbered 2; cited in Mann 2019, 157; Adams 1955, 281. In another draft, he complained that "what [the Instructors] said of the daimon, & it was little, long seemed unintelligible. I once said 'Will I ever understand' & the spirit replied 'Not while you live' " (NLI MS 13,582 [Rapallo Notebook E, ca. 1929], [9r], page numbered 23; cited in Mann 2019, 155).

[8] The adjective "daemonic" features in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (*VP*, 427; *CW1*, 209), and the *Daimon* itself appears in a poem that remained unpublished (see Mann 1992), but otherwise W.B. Yeats avoided direct reference in poetry or drama.

[9] The number of sketches of birds is particularly striking (e.g. Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 1, 57, 123, 179, 368, 427, 435, 445, 449-450, 487; Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 302, 304, 310, 319, 377, 424, 452, 458); animals are also used in emblems of the phases (e.g. Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry, vol. 1, 138, 148), and their symbolism is explained (e.g. Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 1, 251; Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 312-313).

[10] When not associated with a *Daimon*, more mutable spirits, such as those of the Instructors, might take other forms, but "they took cat form by day owl form by night, when acting in connection with daimon. Always animal or bird for daimon" (Harper, Martinich, Harper 1992, vol. 3, 76).

[11] At the date this introduction was written (*Four Plays for Dancers*, 1921), W.B. Yeats held that a "man's Daimon […] is of course of opposite in sex to the man" (13 August 1920, Harper, Martinich, Harper 1992, vol. 3, 32) and, for instance, GY's "male daimon" and WBY's "female daimon" used the "spiritual memory" of the other human "in all matters of this script" (14 April 1919, Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 248, 247; see also Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M. 1992, vol. 3, 291); cf. "The Daimon, the Sexes, Unity of Being, Natural and Supernatural Unity" in *AVA*, 26-30; *CW13*, 24-27.

birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity" (*ibidem*)[12], and in *Calvary* the musicians sing that "God has not appeared to the birds" (*VPl*, 787-788; *CW2*, 335-336), referring to the *antithetical* or subjective portion of humanity. More personally, the Yeatses were told that "Anne's daimon", expressing her *antithetical* Phase 16 would be a "Wild white swan" (Harper G.M., Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 386) and Michael, at Phase 14, was represented by a black eagle (e.g., Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M. 1992, vol. 3, 65; *AVB*, 17; *CW14*, 13)[13].

If birds and beasts represent individual *Daimons*, they can also be symbols of the collective union of all *Daimons* or the divine[14]. This is particularly important when dealing with the moment that the *daimonic* or divine breaks through into human life and history. On the microcosmic scale this is the special moments of crisis that allow the "expression of *Daimonic* thought" (*AVA*, 75; *CW13*, 63; *AVB*, 140; *CW14*, 105) or the recognition that "genius is a crisis that joins that buried self [the *Daimon*] for certain moments to our trivial daily mind" (*Au*, 272; *CW3*, 217). On the macrocosmic scale this is the contact of the divine with the mundane world of history at the special moments of influx when a new dispensation is inaugurated every two thousand years, and Yeats represents this confluence of human and divine in the encounter of woman and bird. More ambiguously, he also adopts mythical beasts, especially phoenix, unicorn, and sphinx, to represent the avatar or the *daimonic* counterpart. Even more ambiguous is the "rough beast" that features at the end of "The Second Coming", which is also connected to the transition from one dispensation to another, but in a manner that is unclear.

1. Bird and Woman

In paralleling the classical and the Christian dispensations, Yeats adopted the double symbol of bird and woman to represent an annunciation (DeForrest 2012). The *antithetical* annunciation made to Leda is a rape by Zeus in the form of a swan, which contrasts with the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary in the form of a dove that heralds the *primary* dispensation. This duality is never made explicit, however, and even the import of title of "Dove or Swan" remains unexplained in *A Vision*. The second element is made clear in the comment "I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda…" (*AVA*, 181; *CW13*, 151; *AVB*, 268; *CW14*, 195) and presented in the opening poem "Leda and the Swan" ("Leda" in 1925), where the rape is brutally detailed and realised[15]. In contrast, the dove and its role are insubstantial: the bird never appears outside the title itself[16]; there is no sentence to match "I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece…" (*AVA*, 181; *CW13*, 151; *AVB*, 268; *CW14*, 195); nor is

[12] W.B. Yeats can, of course, also write of more companionable "nine-and-fifty swans" at Coole (*VP*, 322; *CW1*, 131), but is selective in symbolism, while the sociable doves are perhaps appropriate to a *primary* annunciation.

[13] Younger readers are most likely to have encountered the concept of the "Daimon" first in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* novels (1995-2000), where the "dæmon" takes on an animal form, usually of the opposite sex. There is no evidence, however, that Pullman draws on W.B. Yeats rather than the idea of the witch's familiar taking animal form or of the popularised version of North American traditions of a "spirit animal". There is a further echo in J.K. Rowling's use of an animal "Patronus" in the Harry Potter novels.

[14] For God as the collective of *Daimons* or congeries, see Mann 2019 ch. 10, esp. §10.6 and §10.4; Gibson 2012, esp. 112-115; Mann 2012b, esp. 170-171.

[15] See, for example, Cook 2021; Cullingford 2021; Groarke 2023.

[16] Doves are (surprisingly) rare in W.B. Yeats's writings: there is one in "The Indian to his Love" (1886, *VP*, 78; *CW1*, 12), and "doves" in "How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent" (1887, *VP*, 710; *CW1*, 729 var) and *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889, *VP*, 3ee), all early works. In the plays, 'dove' occurs only once, as a term of endearment in *The King's Threshold* (1904, *VPl*, 305).

there any reference to an annunciation or a miraculous birth, as Yeats relies upon his readers' general knowledge and familiarity with Christian traditions and art to make the – potentially shocking – connection between the two images and to fill in the implications.

The violent physicality of Yeats's description in "Leda and the Swan" is partly attributable to the Hellenistic bas-relief he knew from Élie Faure's *History of Art* (Fig. 1), rather than the often softened artistic depictions he also knew (such as those of Leonardo or even Michelangelo, see Melchiori 1960, 151ff.), but it also embodies an *antithetical* emphasis on sensuous experience, image, and form. The sonnet's sestet looks forward to the impact of Leda's children on mythic history, before returning to the post-coital moment and the paradox of the "brute blood of the air" representing divine "power" and "knowledge" (*VP*, 441; *CW1*, 218).

In "The Mother of God", "the great wings beating still" of "Leda and the Swan" are paralleled by the "Wings beating about the room", yet here they are disembodied and almost illusory (*VP*, 499; *CW1*, 253). The Virgin is, however, aware of her child's transcendence – she speaks of bearing "The Heavens in my womb" and of feeding a "fallen star" (*VP*, 499; *CW1*, 253) – implying that she has shared in some divine knowledge, if only from the Archangel Gabriel. The two poems thus partially enact the differences of the two dispensations, the immanent and human *antithetical* opposing the transcendent and spiritual *primary*[17].

Fig. 1 – Relief carving of Leda and the Swan from Élie Faure, trans.
Walter Pach, *The History of Art: Ancient Art*, page facing chapter 1, Public Domain

[17] Though the *primary* is referred to as "humane", in the sense of compassionate, the *antithetical* is connected with humanity and multiplicity, the *primary* to the divine and unity (see Mann 2012a 5ff; see also Mann 2019, Table 4.1, 66-68).

These birds represent the divine influx of a whole religious era. Elsewhere, without any obvious millennial aspect, Yeats presents an Irish version of the myth in *The Herne's Egg* (1938), where the priestess Attracta is the bride of the Great Herne and claims to "share his knowledge" (*VPl*, 1033; *CW2*, 528): "I lay with the Great Herne, and he, / Being all a spirit, but begot / His image in the mirror of my spirit" (*VPl*, 1039; *CW2*, 534), though Congal is sure that he and six companions "lay with her last night" instead (*VPl*, 1031; *CW2*, 527).

We might expect the coming influx to be symbolised by a bird too, and Michael Robartes speaks of taking Mary Bell to the desert with "the lost egg of Leda, its miraculous life still unquenched [...] where she must lay it and leave it to be hatched by the sun's heat" and wonders "what would break the third shell" (*AVB*, 51; *CW14*, 37). This delayed hatching emphasises that the influx "which dominates an *antithetical* dispensation" is "not so much a breaking out of new life as the vivification of old intellect" (*AVB*, 208; *CW14*, 153-154), yet it seems to deny the coming transition its divine impetus.

In drafts from 1928, Yeats also considered calling the Masters of each cycle after a mythical bird, the phoenix: "The Twelve beings who start the twelve months of my year are called incarnations of Buddha in the east but as we have [no] name for them I shall call them the twelve Phoenixes because a Phoenix rises from its predecessors ashes" (see Mann 2022, 85, 132). Yet, in portraying the coming avatar, Yeats had long thought in terms of other mythical beasts.

2. Unicorn

Yeats tried, against the expressed preferences of the automatic script's Instructors, to represent the avatar as both the unicorn and the sphinx. These beasts, particularly the unicorn, are also symbols of the *Daimonic* dimension. Yeats wrote of the unicorn depicted on George Yeats's bookplate (see Fig. 2): "that beast is the daimon" (27 May [1926], *CL InteLex*, 4875); this may imply that it is a specific symbol his *antithetical* wife's *Daimon*[18], but it seems that it is a general symbol for the *Daimon* as a concept, especially coupled with the lightning flash – the script for 31 May 1919 had answered "What is Unicorn" with "Daimon" (Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 294; see Mann 2012c).

[18] A charging unicorn appears in Edmund Dulac's portrait of George, and Ann Saddlemyer examines the symbol fully in Saddlemyer 2013.

Fig. 2 – George Yeats's bookplate, designed by Thomas Sturge Moore, Public Domain[19]

Looking for a symbol for the avatar of the coming dispensation, Yeats sought to extend this symbolism further, and despite being told in the same session that he could not "apply symbol of Unicorn to New Avatar" (Harper G.M., Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 295), almost two years later he writes of having "to abandon the term Unicorn for an Avatar" (11 January [1921], Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M. 1992, vol. 3, 65), which implies that he still thought of it as such. Yeats clearly wanted to find a broader role for the symbol, proposing to use "'UNICORN' for group mind" on 26 November 1920, and even differentiating between Red and White Unicorns (57), only to decide a day later that he wanted " 'Group mind' to be called a Dragon, red or white. | Unicorn to be kept for Daimon" (58)[20]. Since a group mind is embodied as a single *Daimon*, there was some logic to the connection, and Yeats evidently wanted to harness the association of the unicorn with the *daimonic*, but he evidently ran the risk of diluting or confusing the symbol itself with his other associations, including destructive purification and the divine avatar.

[19] For GY's bookplate, see also Saddlemyer 2013 and *Yeats Annual 18* Plate 12. W.B. Yeats refers to it as "that admirable faun or stag springing from the broken tower", which seems a strange mistake, but it might have become confused in his mind with the stag from the complementary dream (see G.M. Harper, Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 162, 176) that he writes about in "Towards Break of Day" (*VP*, 398-399; *CW1*, 187).

[20] The "group mind" refers to "Cones of Nations and Movements of Thought", named in *A Vision A* neither *unicorns* nor *dragons* but "Covens": "I myself chose the name Coven, that being the name of the groups of Scotch Witches described in the witch trials, for I imagine the Nations and Philosophies as having each, as it were, a witches' cauldron of medicinal or devil's broth in the midst" (*AVA*, 171; *CW13*, 139). The term was dropped from *AVB*.

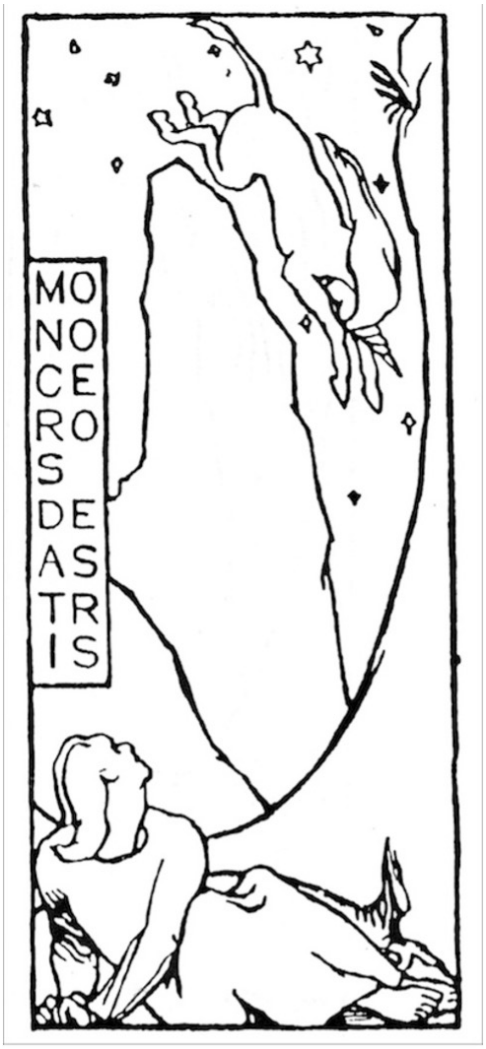

Fig. 3 – Design by Thomas Sturge Moore, used by the Cuala Press in 1915, Public Domain

Yeats had already associated the symbol with cleansing destruction in *Where There Is Nothing* (1902) and *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908), where the unicorn features as a symbol of purity and iconoclasm, breaking the moulds to establish a new order. It figures in Golden Dawn symbolism, with the initiate of the Practicus stage being given "the mystic title of MONOCRIS DE ASTRIS, which means 'the Unicorn from the Stars' ", and Yeats used a version of the title in a woodcut he commissioned from Thomas Sturge Moore, which featured without explanation on the title page of the Cuala Press's printing of Yeats's *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (1915)[21]. In *Where There Is Nothing*, Paul Ruttledge recounts a vision where he is beset by beasts that symbolise "the part that builds up the things that keep the soul from God":

[21] Regardie 1937, vol. 1, 118. W.B. Yeats corrected the GD's *monocris* to *Monoceros de Astris* in the design he commissioned from Thomas Sturge Moore (Fig. 3). See also *CL4*, 342-343, note 6.

> Then suddenly there came a bright light, and all in a minute the beasts were gone, and I saw a great many angels riding upon unicorns, white angels on white unicorns. They stood all round me, and they cried out, 'Brother Paul, go and preach; get up and preach, Brother Paul'. And then they laughed aloud, and the unicorns trampled the ground as though the world were already falling in pieces. (*VPl*, 1131-1132; *CW2*, 650)

The unicorns' association with worldly things falling apart and spiritual revival was further emphasised when Yeats and Lady Gregory rewrote this play as *The Unicorn from the Stars*. Martin has a vision similar to Paul's, in which "the horses we were on had changed to unicorns, and they began trampling the grapes and breaking them", and they are said to mean "virginal strength, a rushing, lasting, tireless strength" (*VPl*, 659-660; *CW2*, 209). He later says they "were breaking the world to pieces – when I saw the cracks coming I shouted for joy! And I heard the command, 'Destroy, destroy, destruction is the life-giver! destroy'" (*VPl*, 669; *CW2*, 214).

The Player Queen was first started ca. 1908, but it had a protracted gestation, and the figure of a unicorn enters into the drafts in 1915 or 1916, associated with chastity and its opposite. After the automatic script sessions began, its association with shattering and renewal reappears, along with more millenarian associations in *The Player Queen*, where Septimus announces "the end of the Christian Era, the coming of a New Dispensation, that of the New Adam, that of the Unicorn", and says that he "will bid him trample mankind to death and beget a new race" (*VPl*, 745-746; *CW2*, 359). Now a single beast rather than the groups of *Where There is Nothing* or *The Unicorn from the Stars*, the unicorn is thus viewed as destroying the outmoded order, indifferent to human desire, and repeatedly associated with trampling human structures or the grapes of wrath[22].

In "The Adoration of the Magi", the three simple but learned peasants from the west of Ireland figure as the complement to the "wise men from the east" of St Matthew's Gospel (2:1). The middle brother enters a trance and, while the god Hermes speaks to his brothers through him, he has a vision of the Christian nativity with the magi adoring Jesus and hears Hermes scorning them for abandoning their heritage – "Foolish old men, you had once all the wisdom of the stars" (*VSR*, 169; *M2005*, 204). In the revised 1925 version of the story, in place of the revelation of the old gods' secret names, Yeats added a mystic nativity. Hermes, speaking through the middle brother as medium, declares that:

> The woman who lies there has given birth, and that which she bore has the likeness of a unicorn and is most unlike man of all living things, being cold, hard and virginal. It seemed to be born dancing; and was gone from the room wellnigh upon the instant, for it of the nature of the unicorn to understand the shortness of life. (*VSR*, 168-169; *M2005*, 203)

In choosing the unicorn to symbolise an avatar, Yeats was harking back to the beast's role as a symbol for Christ in the Middle Ages, in a tradition that drew on references in the Psalms and the legend that its wildness was tamed by a virgin (see Beal 2019). In his updated version, the unicorn, still virginal and unique, is hard and alien, joyfully destructive of barriers and illusions.

The brothers fail to see the new avatar (if it exists) and seem closer to the shepherds than the magi[23], yet such is the reversal of the ages: virgin and whore, magi and shepherds, compas-

[22] In T*he Unicorn of the Stars*, the word "trample" certainly appears to be linked to Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic", coupled with the image's source in Revelation 14:19-20, though this may indicate Augusta Gregory's associations more than W.B. Yeats's as "her share in it is so great" (*VPl*, 1309).

[23] In the notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), W.B. Yeats associates the figure of Hanrahan with "the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather permanent possessions, or the adoration of the shepherds" of Luke's Gospel, whereas "Michael Robartes is the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its possessions, or

sionate and pitiless, Christ mourned "over the length of time and the unworthiness of man's lot to man, whereas his forerunner mourned and his successor will mourn over the shortness of time and the unworthiness of man to his lot" (*AVB*, 136-137; *CW14*, 102)[24]. The unicorn, understanding "the shortness of life" (*VSR*, 169; *M2005*, 203), symbolises this successor.

In its blithe destructiveness, the unicorn recalls Shiva dancing the destructive *tandava*, and in his notes on *The Resurrection*, Yeats recalled his own early engagement with "a sort of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin" as the antithesis to the surrounding Victorian myth of progress (*VPl*, 932; *CW2*, 722). In hindsight, he saw this feeding into a notion that "Our civilization was about to reverse itself, or some new civilization about to be born from all that our age had rejected, from all that my stories symbolised as a harlot, and take after its mother; because we had worshipped a single god it would worship many or receive from Joachim de Flora's Holy Spirit a multitudinous influx" (*VPl*, 932; *CW2*, 723; see Reeves, Gould 1987). In connection with this sense, in the early 1900s, he "began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction" and which he said was "Afterwards described in my poem 'The Second Coming' " (*ibidem*; see Melchiori 1960, 37ff)[25].

3. Sphinx

Though the figure that actually appears in "The Second Coming" can hardly be described as "a brazen winged beast", the comment from the introduction to *The Resurrection* indicates that its emotional affect must have been similar for Yeats himself, including the association of "ecstatic destruction". In fact, the poem's vision describes "somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man", a figure most readers picture as an Egyptian sphinx[26]. This figure comes to view specifically in answer to the conviction that a "revelation is at hand... the Second Coming is at hand", suggesting the imagery associated with the Revelation or Apocalypse of St John. Yet the poem uses little or none of that symbolism, unless the figure of the "rough beast" that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" (*VP*, 402; *CW1*, 190) at the poem's close is seen in terms of one of the beasts in Revelation, a position that is not usually adopted by critics but is probably the understanding of many readers[27]. Though the poem, therefore, uses the language of Christian eschatology (see Martin 1990), Yeats's view is closer to that of Madame Blavatsky when she wrote:

the adoration of the Magi" of Matthew (*VP*, 803). The old brothers have more in common with Hanrahan.

[24] The reference to "one whom the things that are to-day have cast out" echoes Jesus's quotation from Psalm 118, "The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner" (Mark 12:10), which was the basis of the Golden Dawn "Mystic Title of PORAIOS DE REJECTIS which means 'Brought From Among The Rejected'" (Regardie 1938, vol. 2, 88), conferred at the second grade of Theoricus.

[25] This Introduction for *The Resurrection* was written ca. 1931, so a long time after the perceptions described and even a dozen years after "The Second Coming".

[26] In Persian and Indian tradition there is a human-headed lion called a manticore, which also usually has a scorpion's tail (see Bull 1995). It is worth remembering that the god Vishnu's earlier avatars were in animal forms, and that the fourth, Narasimha or Nara-sing, is a man with the head of a lion (see Bhowani Sethi 1973).

[27] The dragon or Satan (Revelation 12:9) gives power to a beast that rises "up out of the sea" or abyss (Revelation 13: 1-10; 11:7); a second beast comes "up out of the earth" (Revelation 13:11-18), subordinate to the first beast and causing people to worship it. There is also the beast of the abyss (Revelation 11:7), usually identified with the "scarlet-coloured beast" ridden by a harlot that appears later (Revelation 17:18). If W.B. Yeats's "rough beast" is the same as the shape "in sands of the desert" – which is far from clear – it would seem to be a version of the second beast from the land, also called the false prophet (Revelation 19:20, 20:10), though significantly different in appearance. The reference to its birth in Bethlehem implies recapitulation or parody of Christ's birth, thus aspects of the "antichrist", a term found in the Epistles of John, often associated with Revelation's Beast of the Sea.

at no time since the Christian era, have the precursor signs described in Matthew [ch. 24] applied so graphically and forcibly to any epoch as they do to our own times [...] Millenarians and Adventists of robust faith, may go on saying that 'the coming of (the carnalised) Christ' is near at hand, and prepare themselves for 'the end of the world.' Theosophists – at any rate, some of them – who understand the hidden meaning of the universally-expected Avatars, Messiahs, Sosioshes and Christs – know that it is no 'end of the world', but 'the consummation of the age', i.e., the close of a cycle, which is now fast approaching. (1887, 174)

Many readers find the figure of the rough beast a menacing embodiment of vaguer fears about the state of the world, and indeed "The Second Coming" has given a potent group of symbols to the century that has followed its publication in 1920 and been quoted frequently to convey disquiet and foreboding about news events or the near future[28]. Several writers have teased at the poem's multiple layers of meaning and the significance of this "rough beast". In terms of Yeats's system, is this beast the avatar of the new dispensation? Its herald? Its symbol? A symbol of preceding disorder? Its *Daimon*? How do other images and symbolic figures in Yeats's later work relate to it?

In the automatic script of June 1918, Yeats had proposed calling "the new initiate of the next" cycle, Christ's successor, "the Sphynx" and was told that this was "possible but many"(Harper G.M., Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 1, 468), suggesting that any symbol should indicate the plural or multitudinous nature of the coming influx and avatar. He was still using the symbolic name in January 1919 (Harper G.M., Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 2, 190) and, as with the figure of the unicorn, Yeats continued to view the sphinx as a possible representation of the coming avatar for some years, at least artistically, indicating that it retained this association for him personally. Both figures are evidently mythical, solitary and supernatural.

It appears that at a relatively early stage, Yeats considered representing the avatars or Masters who usher in the successive ages as Buddha, Christ, and Sphynx respectively (May 1920; see Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M. 1992, vol. 3, 18). The dating of Buddha's life may be what rendered this scheme unviable[29], but for a while Yeats viewed the three as a form of triptych, and this view probably informs "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes"[30]: a female sphinx faces the figure of Buddha, with the two "like heraldic supporters guarding the mystery of the fifteenth phase" (*AVB*, 207; *CW14*, 153), and the central phase of the full moon is represented by a dead girl dancing[31]. Yeats later explained that one of them represented the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn – the sphinx – while the other represented the conjunction of Venus and Mars – Buddha, but incorrectly, as "I should have put Christ instead of Buddha, for according to my instructors Buddha was Jupiter-Saturn influence" (*AVB*, 208; *CW14*, 153). The probable cause of the confusion is that Yeats sees Christ's birth as taking place at the pivotal Phase 15 of the twenty-six-thousand-year cycle, so in the poem he placed a predecessor, Buddha, and a successor, the sphinx, on either side of the full moon. In the scheme with the conjunctions, the start of each two-thousand-year religious cycle

[28] See e.g. Lehman 2015; Tabor 2015; Chakravarty 2019, Lynskey 2020; Simon 2020; Sennott 2023.

[29] Though the chronology varies, in W.B. Yeats's day Gautama Buddha's birth was generally placed around 560 (BCE) (for instance in Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* 2:881, which W.B. Yeats relied on when writing *A Vision* [*WBGYL*, 864; *YL*, 855]). His lifespan preceded Periclean Athens by a century, but was not early enough to initiate the prior dispensation.

[30] "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" is dated to 1919 in Ellmann 1954 and Jeffares 1984 but the poem is probably from 1918, see Chapman 2002.

[31] This figure, "a girl at play / That, it may be, had danced her life away, / For now being dead it seemed / That she of dancing dreamed" (*VP*, 383; *CW1*, 173), prefigures the image of "death-in-life and life-in-death" of the second stanza of "Byzantium" (*VP*, 497; *CW1*, 252), also associated with Phase 15. For the "heraldic supporters", see MacDowell 1993.

also takes place at Phase 15 of a civilisation, but with a *primary* dispensation starting a little later, under the influence of Mars and Venus, while an *antithetical* dispensation starts earlier under the influence of Jupiter and Saturn[32]. This ties back to the children, Anne and Michael Yeats, and their astrological birth charts, as symbols of the alternating ages. Michael at Phase 14 is the Jupiter-Saturn influence that initiates an *antithetical* age, the mummy wheat of Egypt and its sphinx.

Yeats explains in *A Vision* that, among many other things, the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction is subjective and "introspective knowledge of the mind's self-begotten unity, an intellectual excitement", while that of Mars and Venus is objective and "outward-looking mind, love and its lure" (*AVB*, 207; *CW14*, 153). "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" characterises the Saturn-Jupiter sphinx as "triumph of intellect" contemplating "all things known, all things unknown", in contrast to the Mars-Venus teacher's focus on "all things loved, all things unloved"(*VP*, 383; *CW1*, 173). In the short poem "Conjunctions", the meeting of Jupiter and Saturn is accompanied by "a crop of mummy wheat!" (*VP*, 562; *CW1*, 294) and much had been made in the nineteenth century of supposed experiments in which "Ancient Egyptian wheat could germinate after millennia buried in tombs" (see Moshenka 2017; see also DeForrest 2012, 154). In Yeats's thinking, the influx "which dominates an *antithetical* dispensation" is "not so much a breaking out of new life as the vivification of old intellect" (*AVB*, 208; *CW14*, 153-154) and the legend of mummy wheat represents the renewal of the *antithetical* current after twenty centuries of *primary* dominance, or the "triumph of intellect" represented by the sphinx reawakens.

This is the image represented in "The Second Coming" with the revivification of the *antithetical* current that has been dormant for the two thousand years following the birth of Christ:

> […] now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (*VP*, 402; *CW1*, 190)

Whether the "rough beast" of the last lines is the same as the figure seen in the preceding vision or as the sleeper (or both) is left unresolved, yet they are evidently associated. The "stony sleep" seems particularly appropriate if the human-headed lion is connected with the limestone Sphinx at Giza[33].

It is indeed likely that Yeats was drawing on an idea that the Egyptian sphinx represented the astrological symbolism of Leo and Virgo or Leo and Aquarius, which became popular in occult circles at the beginning of the twentieth century. The sphinx's form was frequently explained in

[32] The Mars-Venus influence is equivalent to the beginning of the zodiac, where Aries is ruled by Mars and Taurus by Venus; the Jupiter-Saturn influence is the end of the zodiac, where Aquarius is ruled by Saturn and Pisces by Jupiter. Starting after the beginning, therefore, the *primary* comes under Mars-Venus, while the *antithetical* starts before the end of the previous cycle, under Saturn and Jupiter. See Mann 2019 §14.4.1. The details are complicated by the fact that the conjunction relates to the position of *Creative Mind* (symbolic sun) rather than *Will* (symbolic moon), thus Anne, with *Will* at Phase 16, represents this *primary* conjunction of Mars and Venus, while Michael, at Phase 14, represents the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction. This article is adapted from a longer treatment that deals more fully with the children as representatives of the ages, "Second Comings: W.B. Yeats and the Avatars of the New Age" (<www.yeatsvision.com/Yeats_Avatars_of_New_Age.pdf>, forthcoming).

[33] In the earliest extant draft of these lines, Anne Brannen and Thomas Parkinson read: "The darkness drops again – but now I know | ~~weary of the [?Egyptian] sleep at last all things | Sleep stony~~" (NLI MS 13,588[14], 6r), in Brannen, Parkinson 1994, 158-159. The words are uncertain, though a capital E can be discerned, and Jon Stallworthy summarises these lines as "illegible scribble", in Stallworthy 1963, 23.

Renaissance Europe as a symbol of the Nile's flooding, taking the hind parts of the lion and the head of a maiden, as "in those two months Leo and Virgo have dominion" (Bellonius 1553, 3r, my translation). This idea was developed further by certain nineteenth-century researchers, who were looking to date Egyptian antiquities and thought that the creation of the sphinx might refer to a particular juncture in the precession of the equinoxes or solstices[34]. This connection was taken up with enthusiasm by some esotericists. For instance, in 1901, the Boston-based magazine *The Sphinx* contained the following meditation in "The Mystery of the Sphinx":

'I am the Sphinx […] I am the fabled monster of the desert, having the head of Virgo and the body of Leo […] When the finger of time points into the Cycle of Aquarius, then will the Sphinx of the heavens arrive at the Autumnal Equinox. I am the Sphinx and the key to time in the heavens, and thus do I unlock the cycles of time […]'. (Hatfield 1902, 94)[35]

The equinoxes are the usual marker for measuring the Great Year of precession, giving rise to the term the "precession of the equinoxes". As the vernal equinox passes from Pisces to Aquarius, the autumnal equinox passes from Virgo and Leo, so that at the period around the boundary point could be symbolised by the sphinx. Yet this version of the sphinx has a woman's head[36], and the figure of "The Second Coming" is clearly with "the head of a man" (*VP*, 402, *CW1* 189). However, this hybrid too was susceptible to astrological interpretation, since the Water Carrier, a male human figure, is the constellation opposite to Leo in the sky, and as the vernal equinox passes into Aquarius, the autumnal equinox passes into Leo[37]. The Yeatses' 1920s library list contains a work by J. Henry Van Stone that examined the symbolism of the zodiac, and includes in its description of Aquarius:

The Egyptian Sphinx combines in its form the pictorial symbols of Aquarius and its opposite sign Leo. The Great Sphinx of Gizeh, that most ancient and mysterious monument, is to-day a grim and solitary figure... The Egyptian colossus has the body of a lion with a bearded man's head (not a *woman's* as in Greece), and upon the forehead is placed the uraeus serpent... In later days the Greek philosophic writers refer to it as the Agathodaemon, 'the good spirit', and nearer our time the Bedouin has looked upon its marred and age-worn image with fear and awe and called it Abu'l Hawl, 'the Father of Terrors' […] In the power and strength of the lion's body controlled by the human intelligence guided by the asp of Divine Wisdom, the Sphinx is seen to be the personification of Aquarius-Leo. The potentialities of Leo, which in their higher aspect, are very great, become manifested in the polar opposite, Aquarius. (Van Stone 1912, 80-81, listed in O'Shea 1986, 289)[38]

[34] Among the authorities cited by esotericists, see, for example, Drummond 1821, 138-141; Lockyer 1894, 337.

[35] The attributions of vernal and autumnal are also reversed for the southern hemisphere.

[36] The very first mention of this figure in draft was, however, like that of "Michael Robartes and the Dancer", "a shape with lion body & with woman s breast & head" but replaced in that same draft by "And the head of a man", (Brannen and Parkinson 1994, 156-157).

[37] The Golden Dawn also used the name of Sphinx to represent a conjunction the four classical elements. These are symbolised by the four faces of the Cherubim or Four Living Creatures bearing the Chariot of Jehovah in Ezekiel's Vision: "*As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle*" (Ezekiel 1:10, cf. Revelation 4:7). These are identified in turn with the four "fixed" signs of the zodiac, Aquarius, Leo, Taurus, and Scorpio (claiming the Eagle as a "higher" form of the Scorpion). In the Theoricus Ritual (2=9), the Hiereus recites: "The Sphinx of Egypt spake and said: 'I am the synthesis of Elemental Forces. I am also the symbol of Man. I am Life and I am Death. I am the Child of the Night of Time' ", before the challenges of the four elements: first Aquarius, "the Sign of the MAN", then "the Sign of the LION, Child of Fire", with Leo, before moving on to "the EAGLE, Child of Water" and "the Sign of the Head of the OX, Child of the Elements" or "the Bull of Earth" (Regardie 1938, vol. 2, 75-78).

[38] In "The Mystery of the Sphinx: An Astrologer's View of the Image and Constellations Leo and Aquarius; the Sign

Van Stone seems unsure whether the Sphinx is a "a grim and solitary figure", "the Father of Terrors", or "the Agathodaemon, 'the good spirit' ", an ambiguity that is potentially also present in Yeats's "rough beast". The gaze of this androsphinx may be "blank and pitiless"[39], but harshness is to be expected of the *antithetical* avatar and the age's *Daimon* and, although the reeling birds, the vexed sleep, and the slouching beast may cause the reader unease, they are not in themselves evil. Indeed, if they are seen as such it is perhaps because "The *antithetical tincture* is noble, and, judged by the standards of the *primary*, evil, whereas the *primary* is good and banal" (*AVB*, 155; *CW14*, 115; cf. *AVA*, 89; *CW13*, 73).

The beasts and birds associated with the annunciations are symbolic of the agathodaemons, the spirits accompanying the avatars that represent or initiate an age. Yet just as the individual's *Daimon* does not have "the pure benevolence our exhausted Platonism and Christianity attribute to an angelic being" (*AVB*, 230; *CW14*, 167) and seeks to "bring our souls to crisis"(*Au*, 272; *CW3*, 217), in the macrocosm, the advent of the new dispensation and its avatars is a crisis connecting the spiritual centre with the historical and mundane level of human action.

4. Revivifying the Old

For Yeats, the advent of the *primary* dispensation at the beginning of the Common Era "blotted out" the *antithetical* age of the heroic ancient world with "that fabulous formless darkness" of Christianity described by the philosopher Antoninus (*AVB*, 278; *CW14*, 202 and note 60, 447-448), and "blotting out" implies a forceful supplanting that cannot erase but can obliterate what went before. Similarly, two thousand years earlier, with the *antithetical* annunciation to Leda, Yeats sees "bird and woman blotting out some corner of the Babylonian mathematical starlight" (*AVB*, 268; *CW14*, 195). The Christian *primary* dispensation was, in some ways, a return to this earlier *primary* age of Babylon, as the song from *The Resurrection* makes clear:

> The Babylonian starlight brought
> A fabulous, formless darkness in;
> Odour of blood when Christ was slain
> Made all Platonic tolerance vain
> And vain all Doric discipline. (*VP*, 438; *CW1*, 216)

The *primary*, represented by the astronomy of Babylon and the Crucifixion, drowns out the virtues of the classical world. The growing power of the *primary* gyre is seen as the triumph of irrationality, of miracle and blood sacrifice, over philosophical reason and artistic light (*AVB*, 274-278; *CW14*, 199-202). And as the returning *primary* of Christendom drew on the archetypes of its Babylonian predecessor, so the returning *antithetical* will draw on the archetypes of its ancient predecessor. This is expressed in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" as the whirling return of the old order:

of the Son of Man", Anna Pharos sees the sphinx as the axis of sun and Earth opposite each other in Leo and Aquarius: "In the equinoctial cycle of 25,000 years, are two grand occasions when at the equinoxes, the sun and earth, in the signs of Leo and Aquarius, form the figure of the Sphinx: one of which grand phenomena occurred some 12,500 years ago... and strange to say, that *we* are the generation destined to see the Sphinx phenomenon again in the heavens; for at this present time the Sun, having reached the opposite point occupied 12,500 years ago, is now entering Aquarius, while the Earth is entering Leo […]", *The Sphinx* 3 (November 1900), reprinted in *The Flaming Sword* 14:52 (16 November 1900), 12-13.

[39] Early in the automatic script, *primary* or "objective pity and despair" (Harper G.M., Adams, Frieling, Sprayberry 1992, vol. 1, 174) emerged, later associated with Christ (291-292).

So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead […]. (*VP*, 430; *CW1*, 211)

What has been right and wrong in the waning system will be replaced by a return of what preceded it. In "The Gyres", the old classical order of Empedocles and Hector once gave way to the new, as "Things thought too long can be no longer thought […] And ancient lineaments are blotted out" by *primary* "Irrational streams of blood". These new things in their turn become the old order, and eventually the *antithetical* returns, so that "all things run / On that unfashionable gyre again" (*VP*, 564-565; *CW1*, 299).

The "vivification of old intellect" (*AVB*, 208; *CW14*, 154) can be represented by germinating mummy wheat from Egypt or from Asia Minor, the "old mummy wheat" and the "full-flavoured wine out of a barrel" from the cave where the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus passed centuries unconscious ("On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac", *VP*, 442; *CW1*, 219). In "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends", Yeats presents another symbol for this *antithetical* archetype: "the lost egg of Leda, its miraculous life still unquenched", which Michael Robartes plans to carry to the desert to "leave it to be hatched by the sun's heat" (*AVB*, 51; *CW14*, 37). Dormant for "twenty centuries", the egg's life will come forth, like the human-headed lion, "somewhere in sands of the desert".

The emergent being(s) will symbolise the influence that inaugurates the coming *antithetical* age whether as the multiple avatars or their *Daimon*. They may be human, like the progeny of Leda's first two eggs – the avatars themselves – or bestial, whether bird, unicorn, or sphinx – the *Daimon* of the avatars, whether individual *Daimons* or the single collective *Daimon* of a group (at one stage called a Unicorn). The *Daimon*, though represented by a form that is like its human – sociable beasts for *primary* people and solitary for *antithetical* – is in fact the human's opposite, a *primary* person having an *antithetical Daimon* and an *antithetical* person a *primary Daimon*[40]. The Sphinx as antagonist of Oedipus could thus be seen as either his *Daimon* or as a manifestation of *Daimonic* crisis in his life. Yeats notes that "Oedipus – Greece – solved the riddle of the Sphinx – Nature – compelled her to plunge from the precipice" (*AVB*, 202-203; *CW14*, 149), and this may be part of the reason why Yeats substituted the children of Leda with Oedipus as the representative of the pre-Christian *antithetical* avatar(s) in "A Packet for Ezra Pound" (*AVB*, 27-29; *CW14*, 20-22)[41], thus foreshadowing the coming *antithetical* avatars. The Sphinx as a *Daimon* inspires the human, hero or avatar, to action and creation, though it will also be indifferent to whether it brings comedy or tragedy to their life.

As commented earlier, most readers of "The Second Coming" register a feeling of threat in Yeats's description of the shape with its "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun... moving its slow thighs" and the "rough beast" that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" (*VP*, 402; *CW1*, 189-190). The echoes of the biblical Apocalypse or Revelation would imply that this is the Beast that will be defeated by the Lamb, which is the true Second Coming. Yet, within the construct of *A Vision*, there is little reason to expect the new avatar to be the unifying, humane, peaceful influence seen in Christ, as the coming age is "expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical" (*AVB*, 263; *CW14*, 192).

[40] This is far clearer in *A Vision A* (see "The Daimon, the Sexes, Unity of Being, Natural and Supernatural Unity" esp. *AVA*, 29-30; *CW13*, 26-27). The distinction is less pronounced in *AVB* (see Mann 2019, ch. 9, esp. §9.3 and §9.4).

[41] Originally published in 1929 as *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (1929, 35-37).

What should the previous *antithetical* avatars lead us to expect? Putting aside the impossibility of the dates and treating them solely as mythic archetypes, the children of Leda and Oedipus were not bringers of peace. Castor and Pollux were loving brothers and part of the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece, becoming the Dioscuri, patrons of travellers and athletes; Helen was beauty personified and the cause of the Trojan War; and Clytemnestra's vengeance on Agamemnon continued the curse of the House of Atreus. Oedipus's intelligence and wit helped him solve the riddle of the Sphinx, but his arrogant rage led him to kill an old man who turned out to have been his father; his incestuous marriage was partially expiated by his horror and self-exile from Thebes, epitomising tragic fall, and ending with his earthy crucifixion at Colonus (*AVB*, 27-29; *CW14*, 20-22).

Within Yeats's myth, the future avatar should have more kinship with these figures than with the divine teachers. Yeats foresees a similarly turbulent and contentious future:

> I imagine new races, as it were, seeking domination, a world resembling but for its immensity that of the Greek tribes – each with its own *Daimon* or ancestral hero – the brood of Leda, War and Love; history grown symbolic, the biography changed into a myth. (*AVA*, 214; *CW13*, 176)

The divisive tribalism of the new age that Yeats appears to envisage positively is what Rudolf Steiner sees as the deception of Ahriman:

> All that comes from old differences of family, race, tribe, peoples, is used by Ahriman to create confusion. 'Freedom for every nation, even the smallest [...]' These were fine-sounding words. But the powers hostile to man always use fine words in order to bring confusion and in order to attain the things that Ahriman wishes to attain for his incarnation. (2006, 25-26)

This Theosophical strand is significant because George Yeats was interested in Steiner's work[42]. Steiner envisaged a series of physical incarnations or avatars of good and evil, which parallel Yeats's system in certain respects. The principles of evil were two: Lucifer, the over-reacher, and Ahriman, the constrictor. Lucifer was said to have incarnated in the East (China) in the third millennium before Christ; Christ's incarnation in the Near East and the Mystery of Golgotha was viewed as the crucial pivot of the ages; then Ahriman was expected to incarnate in the third millennium after Christ, in the West (probably the Americas). However, in Steiner's view neither Lucifer nor Ahriman was simply an incarnating being, being rather tendencies or forces that act on humanity, both fundamentally evil but conferring some benefits on humankind, whether Lucifer's wisdom or Ahriman's science, especially if mediated by Christ and largely rejected.

There are no simple equivalents between Steiner's ideas and Yeats's. If the "rough beast" of the "The Second Coming" is the *Daimon* of a new era, the pitiless face and the stony sleep seem to indicate something close to Steiner's cold Ahriman as a new sphinx to face a new Oedipus. Yet for Yeats the "rough beast" relates to the *antithetical* revelation of the religious gyre, while the materialism and scientism associated with Ahriman are a manifestation of the dominant secular *primary*, specifically the "widening gyre" (*VP*, 410; *CW1*, 189), which "is sweeping outward" and "All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre" (*VP*, 825; *CW1*, 659)[43]. Though Yeats is definitely a partisan for the *antithetical*

[42] George Yeats was part of an Anthroposophical discussion group (Saddlemyer 2002, 58). Though Steiner first used the dichotomy of Lucifer and Ahriman ca. 1908, his lectures on Lucifer, Christ, and Ahriman come mainly around 1919.

[43] The *primary* influences also include reaching the last phases of both the two-thousand-year gyre of religion, and of the one-thousand-year gyre of history as described in *AVA*, 213-14; *CW13*, 176-77; see Mann 2019, ch. 14.

age foreseen in the system and might even regard himself as a prophet of that dispensation, in the shorter term, he acknowledged to Olivia Shakespear that his "own philosophy does not much brighten the prospect, so far as any future we shall live to see is concerned" (9 April [1921], *CL InteLex*, 3899; *L*, 668). And certainly from our current *primary* perspective, the rough beast appears threatening, because "The *antithetical tincture* is noble, and, judged by the standards of the *primary*, evil" (*AVB*, 155; *CW14*, 115; cf. *AVA*, 89; *CW13*, 73).

Following a crisis in relations between the United Kingdom and the United States in 1895, Yeats wrote to enquire of Florence Farr:

> Has the magical armageddon begun at last? [...] The war would fulfill the prophets and especially a prophetic vision I had long ago with the Mathers's, and so far be for the glory of God, but what a dusk of the nations it would be! for surely it would drag in half the world [...] Could you come and see me on Monday and have tea and perhaps divine for armageddon? (*CL1*, 477)[44]

He seems to have viewed the prospect with some equanimity, with relish almost. While Augustine Martin has pointed out the need "to distinguish between Yeats's early intimations of apocalypse from his later", he also traces "the continuity between them", and that, as the earlier Armageddon would be followed by an alchemical transformation to a golden age, so the convulsions of the end of one cycle and birth pangs lead to a new *antithetical* order (Martin 1990). The *Daimons'* perspective views the world as a theatre, seeing human life in aesthetic terms, "caring not a straw whether we be Juliet going to her wedding or Cleopatra to her death; for in their eyes nothing has weight but passion" (*Au*, 272; *CW3*, 217). Similarly, at a more global level, Yeats asks why Shelley's Demogorgon bears "so terrible a shape" when its arrival frees Prometheus and ushers in a new world (*E&I*, 420; *CW5*, 118), concluding that "we must not demand even the welfare of the human race, nor traffic with divinity in our prayers. Divinity moves outside our antinomies, it may be our lot to worship in terror; 'Did He whom made the lamb make thee?' " (*E&I*, 425; *CW5*, 122). Yeats's divinity will not listen to prayers or even concern itself with human well-being, so for those born at the transition between cycles, their lot may be to live in difficult times.

Despite some provocative postures on Yeats's part, such as "The Great Day" or *On the Boiler* (1938), Yvor Winters is surely wrong to conclude that "Yeats admires violence in general and has little use for Platonic tolerance, Doric discipline or the civilization produced by Christianity" (1960, 7)[45]. Yeats values "Platonic tolerance" and "Doric discipline" but sees them blotted out by "a fabulous, formless darkness" that answers the question of the Syrian in *The Resurrection*: "What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if at the

AVA's image of the end of the cycle, "that vast plaster Herculean image, final *primary* thought" (*AVA*, 214; *CW13*, 177) derives from a vision of George Yeats's in April 1921 when she "seemed to look at a double cone & at the far narrow end [she] saw a seemingly herculean christ" which was "all... appearance", later interpreted as: "Objective strength where created by the outward gyre is a delusion, the deceptive christ at the end of the cone, but there is objective strength which has a subjective origin, which is produced by the forerunners of the second master" (Harper G.M., Martinich, Harper M.M. 1992, vol. 3, 87). Christ was the First Master, so the Second Master is the coming *antithetical* avatars; this raises further questions of whether the "rough beast" could be either a delusive manifestation of strength or is a forerunner of the Second Master.

[44] Years later, W.B. Yeats remembered that Mathers "began to foresee changes in the world, announcing in 1893 or 1894 the imminence of great wars", and questioned whether "this prophecy of his, which would shortly be repeated by mediums and clairvoyants all over the world" was "an unconscious inference taken up into an imagination brooding upon war, or was it prevision?" (ca. 1922, *Au*, 336; *CW3*, 257-258).

[45] On W.B. Yeats and violence, see, for example Farag 1978; Nally 2009; Wood 2010.

moment when knowledge and order seems complete that something appears?... What if the irrational return? What if the circle begin again?" (*VPl*, 925; *CW2*, 490). Christ's miraculously beating heart represents the irrational that lies outside our antinomies and outside our knowledge, "the terror of the supernatural" (*VPl*, 935; *CW1* 726).

The unicorn seems to embody the part of Yeats that could, as mentioned earlier, feel "a sort of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin" (*VPl*, 932; *CW2*, 722) or of the revolution of the gyres that brings "the desolation of reality: / Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!" ("Meru", *VP*, 563; *CW1*, 295). As in "The Gyres", however, "We that look on but laugh in tragic joy" (*VP*, 564; *CW1*, 299), taking the *Daimons'* view of life as drama, but maybe also finding the beginning of the new germ with the *daimonic* familiars where there is nothing, in the "dark betwixt the polecat and the owl" ("The Gyres", *VP*, 565; *CW1*, 300) or where the cat "Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness" ("The Statues", *VP*, 611; *CW1*, 345).

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Yeats's Works: Abbreviations

Au	*Autobiographies* (London, Macmillan, 1955).
AVA	*A Vision: An Explanation of Life Founded upon the Writings of Giraldus and upon certain Doctrines attributed to Kusta Ben Luka* (London, T. Werner Laurie, 1925).
AVB	*A Vision* (1937; revised, London, Macmillan, 1962).
CL1	*W. B. Yeats. Collected Letters. Volume I, 1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986).
CL4	*W. B. Yeats. Collected Letters. Volume IV, 1905-1907*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006).
CL InteLex	*The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, gen. ed. John Kelly, Oxford University Press (InteLex Electronic Edition) 2002; letters cited by accession number.
CW1	*The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume I, The Poems* (*Second Edition*), ed. Richard J. Finneran (1989; New York, Scribner, 1997).
CW2	*The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume II, The Plays*, ed. David R. Clark & Rosalind E. Clark (New York & London, Palgrave, 2001; New York, Scribner, 2001).
CW3	*The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume III, Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell, Douglas N. Archibald, J. Fraser Cocks III, Gretchen L. Schwenker (New York, Scribner, 1999).
CW5	*The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume V, The Later Essays.* William H. O'Donnell with Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994).
CW13	*The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume XIII, A Vision, The Original 1925 Version*, ed. Catherine E. Paul & Margaret Mills Harper (New York, Scribner, 2008).
CW14	*The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Volume XIV, A Vision, The Revised 1937 Edition*, ed. Catherine E. Paul & Margaret Mills Harper (New York, Scribner, 2015).
E&I	*Essays and Introductions* (London and New York, Macmillan, 1961).

L	*The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954; New York, Macmillan, 1955).
M2005	*Mythologies*, ed. Warwick Gould & Deirdre Toomey (London, Macmillan, 2005).
NLI	Manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland (followed by MS number).
VP	*The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1957). Cited from the corrected third printing of 1966.
VPl	*The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach assisted by Catherine C. Alspach (London and New York, Macmillan, 1966). Cited from the corrected second printing of 1966.
VSR	*The Secret Rose, Stories by W.B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould, and Michael J. Sidnell (1981; 2nd ed. rev. and enlarged, London, Macmillan, 1992).