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ABSTRACT:

DAVID CANE: The Falcon, the Beast, and the Image: Dante’s “Geryon” and W. B. Yeats’ The Second Coming
(Under the direction of Prof. Dino S. Cervigni)

The following study aims to fill a void in Yeatsian scholarship by investigating the under-analyzed link between William Butler Yeats’ late poetic production and the work of the medieval Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), focusing primarily but not exclusively on Yeats’ poem The Second Coming. An overview of Yeats’ reception of Dante’s literary corpus highlights a constant and constantly increasing interest in the Florentine poet’s work on the part of the Irish writer. Close attention is paid to the role of Dante in Yeats’ problematic esoteric volume A Vision, both as a ‘character’ within the work itself and as a shaping force behind the famous ‘system’ which the work outlines, and which serves as the theoretical/ideological backbone for all of Yeats’ successive poetic output. Finally, this study attempts a detailed search for Dantine traces in The Second Coming, arguably Yeats’ most read poem and one that has been called an emblem and a microcosm of all his late poetry. An analysis of the passages from Inferno that serve as a backdrop for The Second Coming’s imagery reveals how this lyric incorporates Dantine elements to a far greater degree than has been observed to this point. Furthermore, a look at the poem’s process of revision reveals how the work, from the earliest manuscript drafts to the final version, was progressively brought closer to Dantine models and tones.
per i miei genitori

e per Steph
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ................................................................. vii

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................... 1

II. YEATS’ RECEPTION OF DANTE .................................................. 7

   The first “Dantean” decade: The 1890s ........................................... 9

   The second “Dantean” decade: 1915-1925 ..................................... 11

III. A VISION AND THE DIVINE COMEDY ................................... 19

   Dante in A Vision ................................................................. 24

   Parallel visions? ................................................................. 28

   The gyres ................................................................. 34

IV. THE FALCON AND THE BEAST: INFERNO 16-17 ...................... 37

   Liminality and centrality ...................................................... 38

   An allegory of allegory ...................................................... 41

   The reverse adaptation of the Book of Genesis ......................... 47

V. THE REVISION OF THE SECOND COMING ........................... 52

   A Dantean (re)vision ...................................................... 54

   Metric considerations ...................................................... 57

VI. TEXT, SUBTEXT, METATEXT .................................................. 61

   Text: Apocalypse ...................................................... 64
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aut.</strong></td>
<td>William Butler Yeats. <em>Autobiographies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AV</strong></td>
<td>William Butler Yeats. <em>A Vision</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Myth.</strong></td>
<td>William Butler Yeats. <em>Mythologies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E&amp;I</strong></td>
<td>William Butler Yeats. <em>Essays and Introductions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Robartes</strong></td>
<td>William Butler Yeats. <em>Michael Robartes and the Dancer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vn</strong></td>
<td>Dante Alighieri. <em>Vita nuova</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conv.</strong></td>
<td>Dante Alighieri. <em>Convivio</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inf.</strong></td>
<td>Dante Alighieri. <em>Inferno</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purg.</strong></td>
<td>Dante Alighieri. <em>Purgatorio</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Par.</strong></td>
<td>Dante Alighieri. <em>Paradiso</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“I have prepared my peace
With learned Italian things.”
-W.B.Yeats The Tower

“ed eran due in uno ed uno in due”
-Dante Inferno XVIII

Seamus Heaney once wrote that “it was obviously necessary for Yeats to test the truth of his insights against the case of Dante” (240). He made this remark in relation to the poem Ego Dominus Tuus, which features a dialogue between two speakers (Hic and Ille, namely “this” and “that”) who, at one point, voice contrasting opinions on Dante Alighieri. The lyric was first penned in 1915 and published in 1919 within the collection The Wild Swans at Coole. It would also appear as the “introduction” to the volume Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in which Yeats begins outlining that metaphysical-cosmological system which would be the subject of his treatise A Vision, and which would serve as the ideological backbone for much of his later verse.

The two polar views of Dante this poem presents are, respectively, that of a saintly man who had revealed his nature more candidly than anyone but Christ, and that of a superior artist who in fact had undertaken a very different operation, shaping his literary persona around what Yeats would later describe as his anti-self—the diametric opposite of the actual individual he really was. The poem was written at a time when
Yeats was just beginning to set out the postulates of the artistic-philosophical-theological system of beliefs that would characterize the entire late phase of his career, and which would be espoused comprehensively in his most tantalizing but arguably most important work: *A Vision*.

In the words of A. Norman Jeffares, *A Vision* combines Yeats’ view of Christianity with elements as disparate as “theosophy, astrology, neoplatonism, spiritualism, the magic and Cabbalistic traditions, the work of writers such as Swedenborg, Boehme and Blake” (1971, 35). The end result is a unitary system in which Yeats defines his ideas on history, religion and art. In *A Vision*, as we shall see, Dante Alighieri occupies a central position. He is in fact referenced in a very important section of the book, and is depicted as the phenotype of the most perfect artist. Yeats uses Dante as an *exemplum* for the category of the *Daimonic* man—namely, someone who has reached, through the complete reconciliation between himself and the *Mask* of his opposite, the limitless freedom of expression that is granted by achieving Unity of Being. Yeats writes:

> He is called the *Daimonic* man because Unity of Being, and consequent expression of *Daimonic* thought, is now more easy than at any other phase. [...] Dante, having attained, as poet, to Unity of Being, as poet saw all things set in order, had an intellect that served the *Mask* alone, that compelled even those things that opposed it to serve, and was content to see both good and evil. (*A Vision*, Ph. XVII)

Of course, as Heaney keenly reminds us, “when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures” (240). And Yeats’ Dante is precisely that: the Dante invented by Yeats. However, Dante was not a
fixed or well-defined element within Yeats’ chessboard of poetic figures and devices. Rather, he was a changing entity, which evolved and grew in importance as Yeats’ own reading of Dante was perfected throughout the years.

The 19th century in Britain saw what might be defined as the single greatest “Dante boom” in the history of literature. New enthusiastic readings and translations of Dante’s *Vita nuova* and of his *Divine Comedy* sparked, throughout the Anglophone world, an unprecedented wave of interest in the Tuscan poet’s work, which had in large measure been forgotten up to that point. Somewhat inevitably therefore, Yeats first approached Dante through the filter of the British Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites, whose readings, while instrumental in bringing the Italian poet back to critical attention, was limited by their heavily aesthetic interpretation.¹ There is ample evidence of Yeats having read commentaries and criticisms of Dante by Blake, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Rossetti, Hallam, and Pater (Bornstein 95). However, Yeats would eventually come to surpass the Romantic reading, producing an original and remarkable interpretation of Dante, which highlighted some of the most relevant issues that still trouble and engross scholars around the world today.

In an essay from 1994, the American poet-critic Robert Pinsky, while using a lexicon that differed from Yeats’, seems to be describing Dante’s infernal voyage exactly as a progression towards the anti-self:

> What is the *action* of *Inferno*? To go through this entire world, all the way through into Hell at the world’s core, and on through all of Hell to come out on the other side of the world.

¹ Prior to the wave of interest sparked by the Romantics, Dante had undergone a four-century-long period in which he had been largely forgotten. Bornstein argues that, with the possible exception of Milton, who not coincidentally would come to be seen as “the great precursor of the romantics”, and whose favorable views on Dante never convinced his contemporaries, Dante was, in the words of John Donne, “flung away” but the vast majority of British authors from Chaucer all the way to Blake.
This physical action, to go into it in order to come out of it, embodies a moral action as well: to penetrate the world’s ways and behold the realm of pain; to go through all the infernal spectacle of sin and suffering, and to emerge from that spectacle newly situated, on a terrain opposite from the beginning. (Pinsky 306)

The evidence from A Vision seems to suggest that Yeats would have agreed with these observations. It is quite clear to those readers “of intellect sound and entire”—the kind of readers Dante invoked so frequently throughout his epic—that the Comedy is not merely the end product of someone who successfully achieved communion with the anti-self, but that it in fact describes this very process throughout the work itself. Clearly, the Comedy is also a meta-text, narrating on one level the pilgrim’s journey through the three realms of the afterlife, and on another recounting its own history as a work of art. Yeats seems to have cracked, at least to some extent, this interpretative code to the work, disguised by Dante “sotto il velame de li versi strani” (literally: “under the veil of the strange verses”). And he seems to have absorbed the lesson and applied it to his own poetry, which in the last decades of his life appears to become increasingly concerned with its own creative gestation.

It is this paper’s argument that one of the fundamental texts in understanding Yeats’ adaptation of Dante is the poem entitled The Second Coming. The poem depicts an apocalyptic scene, and the advent of a “rough beast” oxymoronically slouching towards Bethlehem “to be born.” In accordance with Yeats’ view on cosmic and historical cycles, which will be touched upon in this essay, it is generally regarded as prophesizing the end

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2 For the sake of practicality, all passages from the Divine Comedy are cited in the translation of the Rev. Henry F. Cary, unless otherwise specified. The Cary translation, as Bornstein demonstrates, had been the primary reference for all British Dantists up to Yeats, and was the only translation Yeats ever quoted and the one he would always use when reading the Comedy. Significantly, Cary’s translation was titled “The Vision,” with “Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri” as the subtitle.
of the “twenty centuries” of the Christian Era:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but 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?

This brief lyric seems to have puzzled critics and commentators since its first appearance in the November 1920 issue of the American magazine The Dial. Over the past 90 years, a plethora of differing exegeses has seen the light, and an extraordinary number of interpretations have been proposed that, even when extremely convincing, are often perfectly incompatible with one another.

Nevertheless, The Second Coming appears to consistently acquire more and more relevance among Yeats scholars. Harold Bloom has labeled it “the central poem of the Yeats canon” (28), and therefore, in his view, the key work of “the major Anglo-Irish poet in the long tradition that goes from Thomas Moore to our contemporary Seamus Heaney and beyond” (9). Here, through an inter-textual analysis that will
inevitably require some detours and a certain amount of speculation, I will undertake a detailed exploration of the Dantean presence in *The Second Coming*, with the hope of shedding some light on the poem’s generative process as well as on its buried layers of meaning.
CHAPTER 2
YEATS’ RECEPTION OF DANTE

From his own writings, as well as from the massive output of secondary literature that has piled up since Yeats’ death, we gather beyond any possible doubt that the Irish poet, beginning in the 1890s, became extremely interested in Dante and his work, and that his familiarity with the subject matter increased tremendously with the years. Innumerable passages scattered throughout Yeats’ verse and prose display, more or less directly, a thorough acquaintance with Dante’s vulgar poetic production (the *Vita nuova*, the *Rime* and the *Divine Comedy*) and with his extensive theoretical, philosophical and epistolary output, both in Italian and in Latin. Yeats’ personal library included a variety of English translations of Dante, as well as many commentaries, exegeses, and critical texts on Dante, beginning with the early Romantics through Rossetti and Pater, and all the way to the 20th century Italian philosopher and critic Benedetto Croce.¹

It should be noted that, at least in the beginning, Yeats approached Dante strictly through the “filter” of British masters that had preceded him: most importantly William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but also Shelley, Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth, all of whom had taken a stance in the suddenly trendy field of Dantean criticism. Blake, of course, was commissioned a series of illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* in 1826, which he soon came to regard as his final great undertaking. The project was cut short by

¹ For the full list of titles in Yeats’ personal library, see Edward O’Shea’s *A descriptive catalogue of W.B. Yeats’ library*. The full list of titles is also available at the National Library of Ireland’s webpage: www.nli.ie
the artist’s death the following year, but only a few years earlier, and already at a very advanced age, the visionary romantic had painstakingly taught himself Italian in order to read Dante’s work in the original, well aware, as any poet is, of the treacheries and traps intrinsic to any act of translation.

In the late 1890s, Yeats would write two essays inspired by the seven illustrations of *Inferno* that Blake had completed, which would eventually be published together, in a potentially misleading inverse chronological order, as the volume *Ideas of Good and Evil*. It is Rossetti, however, who deserves the credit for having truly “introduced” Dante to the Irish poet. As Yeats himself would narrate in his volume *Autobiographies*, he had been profoundly impressed when, in his middle teen years, he had come across the Pre-Raphaelite painting *Dante’s Dream*, Rossetti’s largest in size, in a Liverpool museum:

> When I was fifteen or sixteen my father had told me about Rossetti and Blake and given me their poetry to read; and once at Liverpool on my way to Sligo I had seen *Dante’s Dream* in the gallery there, a picture painted when Rossetti had lost his dramatic power and to-day not very pleasing to me, and its colour, its people, its romantic architecture had blotted all other pictures away. It was a perpetual bewilderment […].
> (*Autobiographies* 114-15)

The information available allows us to speculate that this incidental “run-in” with Rossetti’s canvas represents the first, albeit indirect, meeting of Yeats and Dante. The painting, still considered by many to be Rossetti’s masterpiece, depicts a dream scene from the *Vita nuova*, the early masterpiece from Dante’s period of engagement with the *stilnovo* school, and a work of which Rossetti had also penned an important English translation.

> It is not completely clear from the above passage whether Yeats’ initial opinion of this canvas was a positive one, which only later he would reverse, or if his
“bewilderment” should be interpreted as a mostly negative, disturbing sentiment. What transpires, however, is that Rossetti’s painting had produced a strong, lasting impression. It is important to grasp at this point that Yeats’ initial approach to Dante was mediated by a 19th century British filter and that, interestingly, this filter was a prevalently pictorial rather than a literary one (first Rossetti’s painting and then Blake’s illustrations). In other words, and somewhat ironically, Yeats’ first impression of the writer that would ultimately become his foremost model, was not phonic or even textual, but strictly visual.

The first “Dantean” decade: the 1890s

According to George Bornstein, who compiled one of the few studies dealing exclusively with Yeats’ reception of Dante, the Florentine poet is explicitly mentioned “over ninety times in his published prose, sometimes at length,” and provides the primary inspiration “for parts of at least ten poems, three plays, and a story” (93). In his article, Bornstein is adamant about distinguishing between two main phases of Yeatsian interest in the work of the Florentine poet. A first period, roughly covering the decade of the 1890s, saw Yeats develop an initial fascination with Dante’s work, but his overall assessment of it seems to have few original aspects, rather aligning itself mostly with the Romantic writers that had sparked the Dantean “revival” in Britain. But Yeats’ initial encounter with Dante appears to have yielded a problematic and contradictory reading.

On the one hand, Yeats saw Dante as a great champion of Christianity, and as an author and thinker who was firmly rooted in the Middle Ages, and therefore in a time period that was infinitely distant from his own2. He regarded Dante’s literary output as

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2 In one prose passage, Yeats defined his own era as “a lyrical age” in which writers are compelled by cultural and historical circumstances “to break up their inspiration into many glints and glimmers, instead
possessing a unitary, “remote, imposing structure,” which was greatly removed from the artistic sensibility of his own time, and which illustrated “by contrast the smallness and yet the subtlety of the modern age” (Bornstein 97). On the other hand, however, Yeats seems to have been unable to free his interpretation from the under-arching verdict the Romantics had passed, which tended to align Dante with their own modern sensibility. The likes of Shelley, Byron, Coleridge and Keats had focused overwhelmingly on the aesthetic quality of his verse, and on the exterior pathos of his narrative, which they considered in its separate episodes but hardly as a whole\(^3\). As Antonella Braida has explained, the Romantics had read the *Divine Comedy* in a manner that was “subservient to the thematic and structural needs of their own poetry,” eventually coming to proclaim Dante as their first true predecessor (176).

Yeats, too, who tended to think of himself as the last Romantic, soon began to regard Dante as the first. In his early reception of the Florentine poet, the Irish writer thus forced such conflicting views into a precarious symbiosis which—one might speculate—must have hardly satisfied him. Perhaps for this very reason, during this first period of interest in Italy’s *sommo poeta*, Yeats allowed himself long, meandering disquisitions about Dante in several essays, articles and prose passages, but we find virtually no trace of letting it burn in one steady flame,” as Dante, in his opinion, had done better than anyone in history (Uncollected Prose 251-52).

\(^3\) According to Bornstein, Yeats had read essays and critical prose about Dante written by Coleridge, Shelley, Rossetti, Byron and others. However, with all the risks a generalization such as the following comports, the so-called “Romantic reading” of Dante can be seen to be best embodied by Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," where the Dantean rendition of the Homeric figure is praised as a paradigm of human dignity. The author of this poem exalts Ulysses as someone who, in face of the passing of time and the onset of old age, continues to "to strive, to seek, an not to yield." While this partly matches the Dantean Ulysses' desire to "seguir virtute e canscenza" in *Inferno* 26, Tennyson's appreciation of Ulysses is in stark contrast with Dante's stance. While the pilgrim (as have so many readers!) displays a strong admiration for the Greek hero, within the overarching message of the narrative Ulysses becomes in fact the object of an absolute, universal condemnation.
of Dantean style, imagery or themes in his more “formal” lyric production. In part, such profound difficulties of interpretation can be seen as typical: namely, a common initial obstacle to anyone seriously venturing into the boundless universe of the *Divine Comedy*. But more specifically, I believe these difficulties might have stemmed out of the contrast between Yeats’ own genial, independent mind and the prevalently aesthetic Romantic reading, nowadays critically perceived as limited and mostly misleading, which Yeats inevitably absorbed and almost automatically accepted. Eventually, however, the Romantic reading would no longer fit him, and he would need to move beyond it.⁴

**The second “Dantean” decade: 1915 to 1925**

After an extended period during which no significant progress appears to have been made in Yeats’ exegetical exploration of Dante’s work, but during which Yeats began frequenting Dublin’s esoteric circles and participating in occultist activities, his interest in Dante seems to have been rekindled suddenly around the year 1915. This second Yeatsian phase of increased interest in Dante, with which I am here most concerned, spans more or less the decade from 1915 to 1925, the years coinciding, respectively, with the drafting of the poem *Ego Dominus Tuus* and the beginning of *A Vision*.

The title itself of *Ego Dominus Tuus* is a quote from Dante’s *Vita nuova*, and specifically from the very same moment depicted in the Rossetti painting that Yeats had first seen about thirty years earlier. It is a personified Love (*Amore*) who speaks those

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⁴ While the mature Yeats would eventually come to locate in Dante the one tangible example of *Daimonic* artist, he still was never able to completely overcome his association of Dante with the Romantics. As Bornstein is keen to point out, in nearly every known instance where Yeats mentions Dante, he soon afterwards shifts his focus onto a Romantic poet. Such is the case also in Phase Seventeen of *A Vision, where Dante is compared/contrasted to Shelley, arguably Yeats’ favourite poet, described as an amazing artist who was nevertheless unable to attain *Unity of Being*. 
words (Latin for “I am thy master”—a kind of unholy rewriting of the First Commandment) to the speaker/protagonist of Vita nuova, in a turbulent and ill-defined oneiric vision. The poem has been said to contrast Dante, described as an author who fashioned his fictional persona from the exact opposite of the man he actually was, to Keats, seen rather as someone who created an exalted, idealized incarnation of himself, but not an anti-self.

More appropriately one should note how the poem stages a dialogue between two parties stating contrasting opinions (Hic and Ille), often seen to represent the objective and the subjective—leading some to suggest that the two speakers might as well have been named Hic and Willie (1996, 172).

Hic.

And yet
The chief imagination of Christendom,
Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind’s eye than any face
But that of Christ.

Ille.

And did he find himself
Or was the hunger that had made it hollow
A hunger for the apple on the bough
Most out of reach? And is that spectral image
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?
I think he fashioned from his opposite
An image that might have been a stony face.

Hic describes Dante as a sort of holy personage, a diviner-prophet second only to Christ, and while his statement is abruptly dismissed as naïve and rectified by Ille, it might be limiting to assume that Yeats’ view coincided with that of the second speaker.

Without delving too deeply into an exegesis of this text or speculating about what the opinion of the poet was at this point, one can nevertheless make some relevant assessments. What the above passage indicates is that Yeats had by now acquired a
firmer grip on his previously irreconcilable double-reading of Dante, and that he was pondering what seems to be one of the fundamental (and perhaps unsolvable) ambiguities intrinsic to the *Divine Comedy*: is it a “poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra” (“sacred poem / to which both heaven and earth have set their hand”), as Dante himself labels it in *Paradiso* 25.1-2, or is it merely an unsurpassable, immortal work of art? In other words, is it a work of God or a work of man? Within the text of the *Comedy*, Dante himself provides ample evidence for both readings, although in the treatise *Convivio* he insists that he is not a theologian, and that his work should be read according to the allegory of poets.

With a necessary oversimplification, one may say that all Dante scholarship through the centuries has been following one of those two main exegetical paths. One focuses on reading the *Divine Comedy* as a sort of holy scripture—a sanctifying, redemptive, messianic text sent to humankind by above, through Dante, in a period of extreme moral, political, and religious degradation. That is indeed what the *Divine Comedy*, at least superficially, claims to be, and such a reading fits perfectly with Hic’s depiction of Dante in *Ego Dominus Tuus*. And that is how a large portion of scholars, beginning with several medieval commentators, insist on reading it. The second school concentrates instead on the *Comedy* as a work of poetry, and therefore a highly meta-textual treatise on literary theory where the journey through the three realms of the afterlife corresponds to explorations of the many intricacies, possibilities and limits of art. The medieval scholar Benvenuto da Imola inaugurated this type of approach, for which support can of course be found in many passages of Dante’s *opus*.

More than one early biographer dismissed the idea of Dante as a profoundly
moral man—i.e. someone who had sinned in the past and dabbled in vain worldly affairs, but who had then understood the full extent of his perversions, and thus repented and cleansed himself, and who, in writing the *Comedy*, was ready to share his vision of salvation with the world. The most authoritative of these sources is Giovanni Boccaccio, who in his *Vita di Dante* (often referred to, incorrectly, as the *Trattatello in Loda di Dante*), a work which Yeats had read, while extolling beyond words the virtues and artistic achievements of Dante the poet, nevertheless describes him as a lecherous and self-interested man well into his old age. Boccaccio’s portrayal of a man whose sensual lust was surpassed only by his unquenchable thirst for knowledge is clearly echoed by *Ille*’s words. Ultimately therefore, more than a contrast between Dante and Keats, subjective and objective, or Yeats vs. an unnamed critic, this Yeatsian lyric appears to begin investigating the relationship between the person and the work. This topic, as many scholars have noted, would become a central thematic aspect in much of Yeats’ self-aware, later poetry. And it will be an important point of concern when we finally discuss *The Second Coming*.

Whatever the definitive meaning of *Ego Dominus Tuus* may be (and, as we shall see, the author himself wasn’t sure about it), the poem reveals a Yeats who had come to master his problematic initial reception of Dante. By 1915, Yeats had clearly reached a thorough familiarity with Dante’s work as well as with much secondary literature on Dante, and in this work he points his finger on what is still one of the key issues in the interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*. Yeats’ poem demonstrates that its author was acutely aware of a fundamental critical issue that criticism had mostly ignored for centuries. Today, thanks to the invaluable contributions of scholars like Charles S.
Singleton, all interpretations of the *Comedy* rest on the necessary distinction between Dante the poet (the authorial voice narrating the story, who will occasionally address the reader directly), Dante the pilgrim (the protagonist of the story), and the historical person Dante Alighieri. But until roughly a half-century ago, even the most acute readers insisted in confusingly and generically referring to “Dante” when discussing either of the three. In his approach to Dante’s work, Yeats appears to have been ahead of his time.

Not surprisingly, from this moment on linguistic, stylistic and thematic Dantesian traces in Yeats’ poetry become much more frequent. *Byzantium*, which I will touch upon later in this essay, *Cuchulain Comforted*, and, of course, *The Second Coming* are only a few of the lyrics where unmistakable Dantesian inheritances can be found. In *Cuchulain Comforted*, the opening stanza appears to be summarizing the *Comedy*’s protagonist’s journey just as much as it describes the Ulster Cycle’s folk hero in the post mortem narrative invented by Yeats:⁵

> A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
> Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
> Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

The closing lines, on the other hand, and without too much of an interpretative leap, can be read as a *summa* of many of the central themes in *Paradiso*: chorality, harmony, song, ineffability, the return to a pre-temporal dimension, and the transcendence of human expressive capabilities:

> They sang but had nor human notes nor words,

⁵ The six mortal wounds are also reminiscent of the 7 “P”, symbolizing the seven sins, which are marked on the pilgrim’s farhead at the entrance of Purgatory, which are erased one by one by the guardian angels of each of the seven terraces. Further, the human gazes from the branches may allude to the forest in the second *girone* of the Seventh circle, where the suicides are punished by being transformed into trees. And on a larger scale, they could even be seen as a recapitulation of *all* of the pilgrim’s otherworldly encounters, for the speaker is constantly interacting with *partial* characters (or semi-characters), incomplete sketches (some of which are much more defined than others) that branch out of the work’s narrative fulcrum and vanish as quickly as they had appeared, while the protagonist’s journey continues.
Though all was done in common as before,  
They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

The above passage echoes one of the most spectacular and memorable sequences of the third cantica, where the blessed souls of the heaven of Jupiter morph into the letters which spell out the words “DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM, the opening lines of the Liber Sapientiae:

Io vidi in quella giovial facella  
lo sfavillar de l’amor che lì era  
segnare a lì occhi miei nostra favella.  
E come augelli surti di riviera  
quasi congratulando a lor pasture,  
fan no di sé or tonda or lunga schiera,  
sí dentro ai lumi sante creature  
volitando cantavano, e faciensi  
or D, or I, or L in sue figure.

(“I saw / Within that Jovial cresset, the clear sparks / Of love, that reign’d there, fashion to my view / Our language. And as birds, from river banks / Arisen, now in round, now in lengthen’d troop, / Array them in their flight, greeting, as seems, / Their new-found pastures; so, within the lights, / The saintly creatures flying, sang; and made / Now D, now I, now L, figured i’ the air.” Par.18. 70-78)

As Vittorio Sermonti has put it, in this mystical semantic display “la parola di Dio si scrive, appunto, si disegna in lettere. Destituendo la metafora, il meraviglioso semplifica le ambiguità del mondo sensibile” (“the word of God is written, literally, is drawn with letters. In a dismissal of metaphor, wonder simplifies the ambiguities of the sensible world” Il Paradiso, 338).

And once their ultra-sensorial spelling is completed, the souls, made letters on the celestial canvas of God-the-painter, morph once again, this time into a the great signum of the Eagle:

poi, come nel percuoter de’ ciocchi arsi  
surgono innumerabili faville,  
onde li stolti sogliono augurarsi,
resurger parve quindi più di mille
luci, e salir qual assai e qual poco
sí come ‘l sol che l’accende sortille;
e quietata ciascuna in suo loco,
la testa e ‘l collo d’un’aguglia vidi
rappresentare a quel distinto foco.

(“Then, as at shaking of a lighted brand, / Sparkles innumerable on all sides / Rise scatter’d, source of augury to the unwise; / Thus more than thousand twinkling lustres hence / Seem’d reascending; and a higher pitch / Some mounting, and some less, e’en as the sun, / Which kindled them, decreed. And when each one / Had settled in his place; the head and neck / Then I saw of an eagle, livelily / Graved in that streaky fire” Par. 18.100-08)

And in their new form, the souls of the just finally speak as one:

e quel che mi conven ritrar testeso,
non portò voce mai, né scrisse incostro,
né fu per fantasia giammai compreso;
ch’io vidi e anche udi’ parlar lo rostro
e sonar ne la voce e “io” e “mio”,
quand’era nel concetto “noi” e “nostro.”

(And that, which next / Befalls me to pourtray, voice hat not utter’d, / Nor hath ink written, nor in fantasy / Was ever conceived. For I beheld and heard / The beak discourse; and, what intention form’d / Of many, singly as of one express” Par. 19.7-13)

Yeats’ lines seem therefore to have been directly inspired by this passage of Paradiso, where the dazzling crescendo of transfigured semantics culminates in a phenomenon which is humanly most impossible: the visual perception of sound.

According to Bornstein, Cuchulain Comforted is a final and crucial homage to Dante, in which Yeats has fully absorbed what he believed to be Dante’s lesson and has ascended, for the first time, to the poetic embodiment of the perfected romantic, which, until then, he could only theorize about:

First, he has grounded his vision fully in Irish lore. The figure of Cuchulain carries the national particularity for which Yeats praised Dante in contrast to Blake. Second, he adopts the dialectic of the anti-self which he found lacking in Keats. […] And finally, the poem displays the Vision of Evil which Yeats
excoriated Shelley for lacking. […] Yeats as author at last saw all things set in order. (Bornstein, 113)

Perhaps most tellingly, in this poem completed only a few weeks before his death, Yeats employs, for the first time in his career, the metric scheme invented by Dante for his *Comedy*, the *terza rima*, which Shelley had so frequently borrowed.

Dante’s influence, together with a vast array of direct quotes and references to his work, remained strong in Yeats’ non-lyric production from the later years. The play *Purgatory*, where the references begin with the title, and the essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (regarded by many as a less systematic but artistically superior precursor of *A Vision*), are good examples of this trend. However, as the next chapter will explore, a strong case can be made that ultimately it is indeed *A Vision* that represents Yeats’ most profoundly Dantean endeavor.
It is always problematic to approach *A Vision* from an academic prospective. While it may be labeled a philosophical, cosmological treatise, *A Vision* is primarily an esoteric work, stemming out of intense psychical experimentation. The initial version of the work, published privately in 1925, as well as the second edition, released in 1938, are but the end product of hundreds of medanic sessions, in which Yeats’ wife related to her husband the words of several extra-terrestrial “communicators.” This work does not fit nicely in the so-called canon of Western literature—the one, to be clear, that goes from Homer and Sophocles to Dickens and Arthur Miller. Nor, for that matter, will it ever be included in the official tradition of mainstream Western philosophy, spanning from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Marx and Heidegger. Rather, *A Vision* finds its place within that amorphous mass of “alternative” readings, which includes the early Gnostic texts and the *corpus hermeticum*, Swedenborg’s *Arcana Caelestia* and Madame Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*.

It was many years earlier, at the end of the 19th century, that Yeats first took an interest in occultism, joining the Dublin chapter of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a British offspring of the Rosacrucian society of which he eventually became president. Being that this was a secret society, not too much is known about this sect’s mission, rituals, practices, and about Yeats’ actual participation in it. What is known is
that Yeats’ initial enthusiasm, which prompted him to introduce several of his acquaintances to the Order, including Maude Gonne, was never dampened, and for the rest of his life he maintained a strong interest in esoteric knowledge.

And it was within Dublin’s occultist circles, around 1911, that he met Georgie Hyde Lees, a member of The Order who was 27 years his junior, and whom in October of 1917 he would take as wife (perhaps for numerological reasons, she would always be “George” to her husband). Without George, as Margaret Mills Harper is adamant to point out, *A Vision* and the powerful poetry of Yeats’ later years would have never been written. The psychical experimentation began a few days after their wedding, and continued for approximately three years. The sessions were conducted as a sort of Socratic dialogue between Yeats, who asked the questions, and a variety of different spirits, who answered through George’s pen and, later, through her voice. The material produced in these sessions was extremely vast, fragmentary and disordered, but would provide the basis for an all-encompassing esoteric description of reality—in Yeats’ words, “an unexplained rule of thumb that somehow explained the world” (*AV* 81). What follows is a brief and inevitably limited survey of some fundamental aspects covered in *A Vision*.

Yeats’ system is founded upon a firm belief in the cyclical progression of being and of time. The “gyres” are usually regarded as serving a fundamental double function, both symbolizing and summarizing the principal ideas contained in the work. The gyres describe a spiraling, concentric motion along two identical cones, the vertex of each coinciding with the center of the other’s base. This geometric figure encapsulates *A Vision’s* fundamental knowledge for it describes the oscillations between primary and
antithetical, and between objective and subjective, that are proper not only of the Earth’s historical cycles, but of all being. The gyres enclose the entire range of potentiality of both human history in its entirety and of individual human beings.

On the one hand, the gyres represent history’s repetitive alternation of 2000-year cycles, in which every cycle ends with the revelation of the following one.

[...] the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to the place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion (Robartes 33-34).

As an initial consideration, we may say that the beast of The Second Coming embodies, or, better, foreshadows the revelation of the character of the age to come, completely antithetical to that of the Christian Era, which, in Yeats’ mind, was nearing its conclusion.

However, the gyres also represent the range of possibilities of the human mind, and thus describe every possible personification of being, perennially in motion between two extremes, the primary-objective and the antithetical-subjective. Objectivity is associated with the widening gyre, while subjectivity is characterized by the inward movement of the narrowing gyre. At the moment of death, therefore, the objective man reaches the gyre’s greatest expansion, while the subjective man reaches the narrow end of the gyre. In each case, according to Yeats, the individual “has a moment of revelation immediately after death” (Robartes 33).

Each person’s “make-up” is determined by a particular balance of four faculties, the Will, the Mask, the Body of Fate, and the Creative Mind. The Will, also defined as
“normal ego,” is the unemotional and amoral part of the mind that “knows how things are done, how windows open and shut, how roads are crossed, everything that we call utility” (AV 83). The Mask may be described as the plane antithetical to the Will, and toward which the Will tends. It is defined as “the image of what we wish to become” in A Vision’s first edition, and as “the object of desire” in the second edition (AV 83). The Creative Mind is the constructive intellect which is aware of itself, and yet “contains all the universals,” including each and every individual’s innate set of memories and “platonic” ideas (AV 86). The Body of Fate is “the series of events forced upon [the being] from without,” and is therefore the fragment of reality that is unique to each human being and that most defines its “individuality” (83).

The differing connotations attributed to an individual’s Will and Mask, as well as to his or her Creative Mind and Body of Fate, determine a person’s collocation within the system’s 28 incarnations. Thus, Yeats has created a sort of neo-zodiac, since every human being belongs to one of the phases of the Moon, and displays its characteristic traits. However, a person’s phase is not determined by astrology, and there is no definitive way of assigning an individual to a particular phase. The 28 incarnations are characterized by labels such as The Image-Breaker (Phase Ten), The Forerunner (Phase Twelve), The Assertive Man (Phase Nineteen), The Multiple Man (Phase Twenty-Six), The Saint (Phase Twenty-Seven), and The Fool (Phase Twenty-Eight). Phases 7 to 23 are the primary ones and phases 9 to 21 are the antithetical ones, with phases 8 and 22 being on the divisional line. Dante is placed in Phase Seventeen, the phase of the Daimonic man, which is labeled as such for the reasons I have cited in the introduction.
The *Daimon* is another important concept in Yeats’ system\(^1\). Yet, this is perhaps the most enigmatic and personal of all Yeats’s formulations, and the one which varied the most in the author’s own conception. It represents the individual’s anti-being, and should not be confused with the Mask (which is opposite the Will) or with the Body of Fate (which is opposite the Creative Mind), although in several instances it is said to govern these two “dark” faculties. Instead, the *Daimon* represents all that is most different from the human being, and each *Daimon* is bound to the individual it is most unlike. However, while it is generally understood that there are as many *Daimons* as there are human beings, Yeats at times implied that on a more removed plane all *Daimons* were in fact one, and as such were in opposition to the unitary essence of all being.

In some cases, Yeats identified the *Daimon* with the unperceived force behind poetic inspiration itself. Since the living, and in particular the poetic, is fueled by the a continual struggles of opposite poles of attraction, the lucid simplicity of the *Daimon* counteracts the foggy richness of human complexity, enabling the process of artistic expression. And on yet another level, the *Daimon* is often interpreted in a gender perspective, and associated with that embodiment of unlikeness that is the sexual *Other*. As Margaret Harper explains, “like a cosmic Crazy Jane, [Yeats’] daimon is female; he embraced the concept from the script that daimons are of the opposite sex to the human beings in their charge” (302). James Olney further elaborates on the sexual characterization of the *Daimon*, and arrives, through a close reading of Jung, at identifying the Yeatsian *Daimon* with the Jungian archetype.

\(^1\) Upon admission to The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was given the name DEDI, an acronym of the phrase “Daemon Est Deus Inversus.”
Yeats offers an interesting synthesis of his understanding of reality, and of the interrelation between the four faculties, through an analogy with the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*:

The stage-manager, or *Daimon*, offers his actor an inherited scenario, the *Body of Fate*, and a *Mask* or rôle as unlike as possible to his natural ego or *Will*, and leaves him to improvise through his *Creative Mind* the dialogue and details of the plot (*AV* 83-84).

Obviously, it is impossible here to provide a full compendium of *A Vision* and of Yeats’ system. Many zealous scholars have written entire books with that exclusive goal in mind, and all have come to different, and arguably unsatisfactory, conclusions. In fact, *A Vision* itself can be said to be a compendium, and one which often appears to contradict itself and to not fully grasp the subject matter it deals with. As Harper writes in her conclusion, “all that is left to indicate the complete wisdom, of which ‘little hints and half statements’ remain and of whose entirety WBY himself seems ignorant, is ‘the doctrine of the Antithetical self’” (342). What is important to recognize, for the purposes of my discussion, is that it was exactly within this ever-changing framework of ideas, at a time when Mr. and Mrs. Yeats’ séances were really beginning to gain steam, that the poem *The Second Coming* came into being.

**Dante in *A Vision***

What separates *A Vision* from the vast majority of esoteric works and allows it to be approached from the standpoint of literary criticism, is the fact that its “cast” is almost entirely composed of writers. Once the 28 lunar phases had been firmly established, Yeats spent a considerable amount of time asking the communicators where to “place”
certain persons of particular interest to him. Laboriously piecing together the often perplexing and contradictory responses he received, he reached an understanding of each phase’s defining characteristics, and described them in the section “The Twenty-eight incarnations.” This section, unlike the rest of the work, underwent only minimal changes between the first and the second edition. And being that Yeats was a man of letters, the great majority of people he was interested in, and whose collocation within the “system” he requested, were historical figures known mostly for their contributions to literature.

Significantly, the very first words dispensed by the first communicator through George’s pen, as recounted in the introduction to the definitive edition, were: “No, we have come to give you metaphors for your poetry” (A Vision 8). On the one hand, from the scholarly point of view, A Vision is destined to remain a dangerous and uninviting territory, prompting such illustrious readers as W. H Auden to ask how a poet of Yeats’ stature could take “such nonsense” seriously. But on the other hand, being that the “system” it describes is undeniably at the basis of most if not all of Yeats’ poetry from that point on, and considering that in the work’s introduction the author presents these spirits as kinds of “literary aids”, it is impossible to cast aside the complicated and often perplexing information this volume contains.

Dante figures prominently among the Yeatsian exempla used to emblematize the 28 incarnations possible in human nature, being the foremost embodiment of the Daimonic Man and of that Unity of Being which Yeats reputed the highest potential state of artistic expression. In A Vision, Dante belongs to Phase Seventeen, with phases 12 through 18 being the phases of Unity of Being (AV 81). The other “residents” of this section are Shelley, Landor, Rossetti, and Yeats himself (Rossetti was removed in the
second edition, and Yeats, although he was firmly convinced of belonging to Phase Seventeen, does not mention himself in the phase’s discussion. But Shelley, as Yeats explains, was somewhat “out of phase” and therefore not completely Daimonic. This was in part due to the restrictions placed upon him by the age he lived in, which “was in itself so broken that true Unity of Being was almost impossible,” and in part due to his own makeup (AV 144).

Shelley […] in whom even as poet unity was but in part attained, found compensation for his “loss,” for the taking away of his children, for his quarrel with his first wife, for later sexual disappointment, for his exile […], in his hopes for the future of mankind. He lacked the Vision of Evil, could not conceive of the world as a continual conflict, so, though great poet he certainly was, he was not of the greatest kind. (AV 144)

Dante on the other hand, “having attained, as poet, to Unity of Being, as poet saw all things set in order” (A Vision 144).

Interestingly, Yeats presents the Daimonic state as closely associated with a pronounced and almost excessive violence, almost suggesting that in order to fully grasp that “continual conflict” which underscores all earthly dynamics, one must be an integral part of it. Landor, in fact, who is described as having “perhaps as much unity of being as his age permitted,” is introduced categorically as “the most violent of men” (AV 145).

And Dante, who is the sole exemplum among those listed by Yeats to have become one with the anti-self, is portrayed by Yeats as brutally violent in his real life:

Dante […] was, according to a contemporary, such a partisan, that if a child, or a woman, spoke against his party he would pelt this child or woman with stones. (AV 143)

We do not need, however, to seek proof of Dante’s violence within the work of early commentators or biographers. There is considerable evidence for his understanding of the
universally central role of violence, as well as for his own violent disposition, even within the *Divine Comedy*.

While a strong case can be made that violence permeates the whole netherworld, and in fact is at the base of all its internal dynamics, the Seventh Circle of Hell is where the sins of violence are specifically punished. This *cerchio* is among the largest one of the underworld, occupying a great amount of physical space within Hell’s “geography” (it consists of three very large sub-circles) and of textual space within the work (stretching from canto 11 to canto 17). And in one of the most shocking and action-packed passages of the first *cantica*, when in the Fifth Circle Dante the pilgrim encounters his former neighbor and nemesis Filippo Argenti, he lashes out at him with some incredibly bitter words. Even more surprisingly, after the brief exchange Virgil abruptly pushes this wrathful damned into the muddy waters of the Styx river. In Purgatory, the realm of the afterlife to which the Dante believed he was bound after his death, both author and character make it well known that it is pride (Lucifer’s sin) the sin of which they were most guilty. Pride, however, within Dante’s conception was closely associated with the sins of violence.

Perhaps most interestingly, there are several indications that Yeats placed the poem *Ego Dominus Tuus*, in which Dante’s two antithetical natures (that of the character-author and that of the historical person) are of primary concern, at the beginning of the mental itinerary which had lead to *A Vision*. It is quite obviously in that poem, published two years before his marriage and the beginning of the séances, that the concepts of anti-self, Mask, and *Unity of Being* begin to take shape. Clearly, Yeats had not immediately grasped the full extent of the meaning his poem contained. As George Mills Harper
relates, in one sitting Yeats “ask[ed] the control and George to explain the meaning of Ille’s well-known lines about the ‘mysterious’ double or anti-self at the end of ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’” (79). Milan Kundera has once said that great art is always “a little more intelligent than its author.” In this case, as in several others, Yeats used the séances to facilitate the process of auto-exegesis and gain a retrospective insight into a work which, like a true romantic, he had penned without fully comprehending.

An interesting consideration that A Vision scholars, to my knowledge, have not made to this point is that Phase Seventeen is not only where Dante appears: it seems to be a phase of Dantists. Shelley’s interest in Alighieri’s work is well documented and has been thoroughly analyzed. As a clear homage to Dante, he wrote a great many of his lyrics in terza rima, thus introducing the never-before-used rhyme scheme into Anglophone poetry. According to Braida, even in his most famous work, Prometheus Unbound, “an extensive borrowing of Dantine imagery is evident” (109). Walter Savage Landor, too, was a reader of Dante through the last 4 decades of his life, spent mostly in Florence, where he died in 1864. Although not mentioned in the 1937 edition, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was also assigned to this phase. And Rossetti, whose given name was no coincidence, being the son of an Italian Dantist, was of a life-long scholar and a prominent translator of Dante.

Parallel visions?

On first glance, Yeats’ A Vision and Dante’s Divine Comedy couldn’t be more distant. The former is a mostly unreadable, and utterly unclassifiable, concoction of astrology,

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2 Landor is buried in Florence’s “English Cemetery” (near Elizabeth Barrett Browning), and his residence of many years, in the nearby town of Fiesole, is known to this day as “Villa Landor.”
eastern philosophies, occultism, meta-historical theories and speculative literary criticism; it is an attempt to give a coherent form to the contents of nearly 4000-pages-worth of a pseudo-Socratic dialogue between Yeats and a series of allegedly extraterrestrial interlocutors. The latter is a great narrative poem widely recognized as one of the supreme masterpieces of all time. The former is full of “technical,” explanatory passages that admittedly had no aspiration of artistic value or aesthetic perfection. The latter is universally renowned as one of the highest artistic achievements ever produced, 14,322 lines of crystalline verse, displaying a variety of style and a mastery of poetic devices that is arguably unmatched by any other single work of literature. But there is no need to go on with a list (it would be a very long one!) of the blatant differences between these two works.

Nevertheless, a closer inspection reveals some striking similarities between A Vision and the Dante’s epic that are impossible to ignore. Firstly, it should be noted that, throughout the centuries, several commentators and scholars have proposed an “esoteric reading” of the Divine Comedy as well. The gaps that obviously exist in what is known of Dante’s biography have allowed for numerous speculations. Some scholars have questioned Dante’s Catholicism, inferring he was a Waldensian or even a pagan, and some have argued that he was a member of a secret, proto-Masonic organizations or an occultist society. René Guénon, for example, wrote a book discussing the hidden messages contained in the work, for which—he argues—the author would have left innumerable clues. He is keen to distinguish between “significato apparente e significato

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3 A contemporary of Yeats, René Guénon was one of the founders of the Traditionalist School, as well as a prolific researcher and writer in the fields of metaphysics, esotericism, eastern philosophy, satanism, Kaballah, numerology, Gnosticism and theosophy. His work L’esoterisme de Dante was published the same year as The Second Coming, in 1920.
nascosto” (“apparent meaning and hidden meaning”), reuniting that the Christian allegory and the multifaceted religious symbolism still belong to the former (Guénon 13). The latter, on the other hand, would involve the initiatory metaphysical progression of an esoteric sect of the Rosacruician/Templar kind, which is what the narrative, in his view, is truly concerned with. Furthermore, he believes that the idea of empire that Dante develops throughout the work refers only as a pretext to the “golden age” of the Roman Empire, and that only superficially does it embody Dante’s political utopia, rather alluding to a widespread esoteric cult.

Leaving aside these pseudo-academic considerations, which, as would be expected, are largely disregarded by “official” Dante scholarship, there are none the less several structural similarities between the Comedy and A Vision. Both works rest on a philosophical-theological-cosmological system that was highly original and unorthodox for its time. Dante’s system was in fact an extraordinary concoction of Aristotelism, Thomism, Augustinianism, early humanism, poetic invention, and his own original interpretation of sacred and patristic texts. Yeats’, as discussed, fuses together occultism, astrology, eastern and western philosophy, and theosophy, together with his adaptations of the ideas of contemporaries like Jung and Pound.

Like the Divine Comedy, A Vision rests upon an abstract but carefully defined geometric structure, and utilizes a diverse cast of characters to illustrate the many areas of that “topography of being” which it describes. Both works draw these exempla from different spheres. As has been noted, the majority of A Vision’s personages are writers,

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4 In Par. 33, while interceding for the pilgrim before the Virgin Mary, St. Bernard refers to Dante as one who has seen “le vite spirituali ad una ad una.” These words serve to present the protagonist’s journey, and by extension the entire Comedy, as a sort of encyclopedia of being, describing the whole range of human possibilities, much like what A Vision aims to be.
making this work, among other things, a sort of encyclopedic manual of literary criticism—a claim that can also be made by the Comedy. However, like Dante’s epic, Yeats’ text also brings into its pages figures from past and contemporary history (like Savonarola, Napoleon and Parnell), philosophy (Spinoza and Nietzsche), alchemy (Paracelsus), literary-mythological characters (Dostoevsky’s Idiot, Cuchulain), personal acquaintances (Lady Gregory, George Russell), and unspecified types (“an unnamed artist”, “many beautiful women”).

As is the case in Dante’s great epic, the author of A Vision becomes a character within the work, and one which we must assume to be partly fictionalized, not exactly corresponding to the historical W. B. Yeats. And finally, the making of A Vision, as well as the transformation the work underwent between the two editions, reveals a process of re-writing and reconfiguration that parallels Dante’s, whose youthful stilnovistic verse was filtered and reorganized into the Vita nuova, which in turn was validated by, and incorporated into, a greater organic narrative with the drafting of the Comedy.

Most significantly, though, both works describe the same exact phenomenon: an enlightening, beatific, transcendental “vision” made possible through the intercession of the Other—the beloved woman. If A Vision was born out of Mrs. Yeats’ medianic transmissions, Dante’s Beatrice too is presented, throughout the interlocked Vita Nuova and Comedy, as the sole “medium” for Dante’s attainment of a higher state of consciousness. In the Vita Nuova (and presumably in real life), Beatrice was responsible for initiating Dante to earthly love (and, of course, to poetry)—the first step, sinful but necessary, of man’s journey to salvation. Then in the second part of the work, after her physical death and a period of tormented mourning, she becomes the cause of the
protagonist’s rejection of sensual *eros* and of his turning to philosophy and theology—the second step.

The *Vita Nuova* famously ends with the foreshadowing of the *Divine Comedy*, where the author vows to “dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d’alcuna” (“write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman”). In Dante’s epic, it is Beatrice, as we learn in Canto 2 of *Inferno*, who was summoned among the highest spheres of Heaven, where the protagonist’s extraordinary voyage has been ordered, and then descended to the infernal limbo to invoke Virgil’s assistance, thus enabling the pilgrim’s journey to begin. And it is she, of course, who will take over for Virgil in the Garden of Eden atop Mount Purgatory, and guide the pilgrim into and through the first nine spheres of Paradise.

Margaret Harper writes that “it is a postmodern truism that the primary referent of any text is itself, but the *Vision* materials are about themselves in striking ways and to an unusual extend” (94). The question of authorship (and Harper seems to be chiefly interested in reclaiming George’s “authorial” role) is a primary issue in any discussion involving *A Vision*, a text that “creates its own author and authors; […] problematizes responsibility and authority” (Harper 94). While the cover of the book bears the name of William Butler Yeats, the knowledge it conveys is allegedly granted by extra-terrestrial entities, and in fact provided by George Yeats.

In a technical/editorial sense, Yeats is the author of *A Vison*. But someone else is the author of Yeats’ vision. The same, by all accounts, is true for the *Divine Comedy*, which alleges for itself the function of mere transcription of a supernatural vision (and within the work, Dante the author is repeatedly adamant in claiming the veracity of his
account). Textual self-referentiality per se was of course not an option for Dante. His concept of auctoritas, in fact, was grounded in an age which required that a poet’s every word refer to the Word. In Canto 24 of Purgatorio, Dante describes the authorial-poetic process in the famous exchange with the poet Bonagiunta Orbicciani:

E io a lui: “I’ mi son un che quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
Ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando”

(To whom I thus: “Count of me but as one, / who am the scribe of love; that, when he breathes, / take up my pen, and, as he dictates, write.” Purg.24.52-4)

It is therefore an external force that “dictates” the work to the poet-medium, much like the statements and answers which George “automatically” provided were, at least allegedly, dictated to her by the various communicators.

In Dante’s view, earthly love (“amor”) is the foremost terrestrial manifestation of divine love. In this sense, Dante’s Beatrice serves a double medianic function. Within the Vita nuova’s fictionalized autobiography of Dante’s youth, an erotically-charged, living, Beatrice triggers the poet’s “initiation” to sensual passion (and to lyric poetry), while the de-sexualized Beatrice of the Comedy (no longer a human but a blessed soul) is the enabler of Dante’s heavenly climb toward the absolute love which is God⁵. Not coincidentally, the passage to each higher sphere takes place with the protagonist gazing into Beatrice’s eyes, which in turn are fixed upon the Lord⁶. Ultimately, the beatific vision of the Comedy, and both the author’s and the protagonist’s attainment of a higher

⁵ Therefore, in drawing the comparison with Yeats, one may liken the living, erotically-charged Beatrice-in-flesh (the living, erotically-charged woman described in the Vita Nuova, as well as the allegedly historical Beatrice Portinari) to Maud Gonne, the “muse” responsible for Yeats’s early love poetry, and Beatrice-in-spirit (the sanctified, de-sexualized Beatrice of the Comedy) to George, who enabled Yeats’s “vision” through her mediumship.

⁶ For a discussion of the transitions from one heavenly sphere to another, see Peter Hawkins’ article “All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante’s Paradiso.”
state of consciousness, are made possible through the medianic function served by the female Other. Needless to say, that is the same mechanism presented in A Vision, which is also, therefore, a work “al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra” (“that hath made both Heaven and Earth copartners in its toil”).

The Gyres

It must finally be noted that a certain resemblance exists between Yeats’s gyres and Dante’s "map" of Paradise. Dante scholars emphasize the importance of the master metaphor of the Comedy, the pilgrim’s journey, which unfolds along spirals in Hell and Purgatory, and vertically in Paradise. And yet, it is especially the pilgrim’s movement in Paradise that may be compared to Yeats’ gyres on several grounds. In a visual sense, in fact, Yeats’ spinning, intersecting cones are strongly reminiscent of the Paradiso’s double structure, which may be envisioned as the superimposition of a widening gyre (from a physical-cosmological point of view) and a narrowing gyre (in a metaphysical, theological sense). The plane of maximum extension of the former coincides, as in Yeats, with the point of minimum extension of the latter. Let us further examine this point.

While the protagonist's itinerary in Hell and Purgatory proceeds in narrowing spirals, the paradisiac ascent, in a physical sense, is described as a direct path from the top of Mount Purgatory to God, along the same straight axis that goes from Jerusalem to the Garden of Eden, passing through Satan. However, while Hell and Purgatory exist within the three-dimensional boundaries of Earth, and are therefore realistically depictable, Paradise is a transcendental state of being and consciousness, where a fourth, moral-spiritual dimension is imposed onto the three physical dimensions. Astronomically
speaking, Dante abides by the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic belief in a geocentric system, where the planets rotate around the Earth in increasingly wider orbits. Therefore, as the pilgrim proceeds along the upward vertical line towards God, the celestial orbits revolve from the smallest (the Moon) to the largest (the Primum Mobile), designing around him what effectively is a widening gyre.

But God, as an adimensional absolute, is both a boundless, all-embracing infinity and a single point. The physical Geocentricity of the universe, for which God is beyond the last and widest of the heavens, coexists with a metaphysical Theocentricity, according to which all the cosmos revolves around that single point that is God. And it is towards that single point that the pilgrim ascends. Each of the nine celestial spheres are governed by one of the nine classes of Angels. The angels presiding over the smallest astronomical orbit (labeled simply “Angels”) being furthest from God, thus forming around him the largest of the spiritual, angelic orbits, and the angels presiding over the widest astronomical orbit (the Seraphims) forming the smallest of the spiritual orbits around God. An illustration of this phenomenon can be seen in table 5. So, like the spirals of Hell and Purgatory, the spiritual spirals of Paradise ultimately also describe a narrowing gyre. Of course, these are concepts that are not sensibly intelligible in their totality, and can only be grasped by approximation. And the heavenly climb experienced by the pilgrim is presented by Dante, through Beatrice's explanations, precisely as a kind of fictitious display, granted by God in order to make it possible for the pilgrim to transcribe his vision and relate his ascensus ad Deum.

Yeats’ gyres are a poly-simbolic structure, as they have their “origin from a straight line which represents, now time, now emotion, now subjective life, and a plane at
right angles to this line which represents, now space, now intellect, now objective life” (Robartes 32). However, they too are a kind of representational compromise, necessary to render comprehensible the cosmic dynamics which they symbolize. We read in A Vision:

[...]

The cones [...] mirror reality but are in themselves pursuit and illusion. As will be presently seen, the sphere is reality. (AV 73)

Although they can be described three-dimensionally as intersecting cones and two-dimensionally as intersecting triangles, these are but an abstraction, a simplified diagram of a universal mechanism not fully graspable by the human intellect.
CHAPTER 4

The Falcon and the Beast: *Inferno* 16-17

Before we move on to the analysis of *The Second Coming* itself, it is useful to undertake a brief survey of the main sequence contained in cantos 16 and 17 of *Inferno*, which provides the primary Dantean backdrop for the poem.\(^1\) In this section of the narrative, Virgil and a terrified pilgrim descend into the eighth circle of Hell riding on the back of the monster Geryon. The frightening dragon-like creature is described as having the “face of a just man” and a hybrid body that combines different animal features: lion, in its grotesque and practically useless paws; reptile, in its revolting serpentine body covered by an incredibly intricate and colorful decorative pattern; and insect, in its venomous scorpion-like tail. Furthermore, Dante’s amphibious “rough beast” flies through the air despite having no wings, its motion resembling instead that of an aquatic creature. Through the service performed by Geryon, the two infernal travelers are able to traverse the otherwise unbridgeable dark pit separating the seventh circle, to which the different categories of the violent are confined, and the eighth circle, where the sins of fraud are punished. Each line and each word of this episode has given ground to numerous comments and speculations, from the scene, in canto 16, where Virgil takes a rope that had been secured around Dante’s mid-section, and tosses it into the dark pit to lure up Geryon, all the way to the closing lines of canto 17, where the creature, having

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\(^1\) In *A Vision*, Dante makes his appearance in Phase Seventeen. While arguably a mere coincidence, *Inferno* 17 is the main source of Dantean imagery in *The Second Coming*. 
reluctantly performed its duty, jets back into the darkness with the speed of a bowed arrow.

**Liminality and centrality**

Paolo Cherchi employs an effective analogy when he states that canto 17 “is like a busy railroad station, where a number of tracks end and new ones originate” (225). Geryon himself, first of all, had in fact been introduced in the preceding canto. Likewise, the deafening roar of the waterfall generated by the Phlegeton, which, as it were, serves as the “soundtrack” for the entire episode, had already provided the incipit for canto 16. And one may even speculate that the “terribile supercio del puzzo” (“the horrible excess / of fetid exhalation upward cast” 11.3) described at the beginning of canto 11, the origin of which is never made completely clear, was already foreshadowing the arrival of this horrendous flying creature, which after all is referred to as “colei che tutto il mondo appuzza” (“he who with his filth taints all the world” 17.3).

Furthermore, one can easily detect in the monster’s traits, with its human face and its frightening animal body, the figurative **climax** of that theme of the multiple natures that characterizes the entire circle of violence (exemplified by the Minotaur, the centaurs, the Harpies, the tree-men, etc.). Also the many **impossibilium** that enrich this section—talking plants, crying statues, humans hunted by animals, rain of fire, etc.—seem to culminate in Geryon’s profoundly antithetical flight: a downward flight of a creature with no wings. Even the noise produced by the Phlaegeton, previously described as a weak little stream, is somewhat paradoxical.
At the same time, several themes and motifs that will be developed in the subsequent sections are introduced in this canto. When, for instance, Virgil states that “omai si scende per siffatte scale,” (“through stairs of this sort we must from here on descend” 17.82) he is alluding to the mode of transportation, implying direct physical contact with an infernal being, that will be employed by the pilgrim and his guide in the case of the giant Antheus (in canto 31) and of Lucifer himself (in canto 34). Furthermore, Virgil’s words in the canto’s opening tercet (“Ecco la fiera […] Ecco colei […]” 17.1-3) anticipate the deictic formula with which he will call attention onto Lucifer in the final canto (“Ecco Dite” 34.20). Above all, however, it is useful to remember how Geryon is an “imagine di froda” (“image of fraud”), projecting the reader’s attention away from the circle of violence towards the sins punished in the eighth circle².

Nevertheless, this revolting monstrum appears to be a purely transitional creature, properly belonging to neither circle. When it anchors onto the edge of the pit to board the exceptional passengers, it fully reveals its amphibious nature, keeping the head and the torso firmly stabilized while the rest of the body tosses about disgustingly in the pitch-black void below it. And as soon as the two passengers are safely delivered to their destination, the beast jolts back into the darkness from which it had emerged. This seems to demonstrate that its permanent “residence” is exactly in that “burrato” which separates the seventh and eighth circles.

If, on the one hand, as James Nohrnberg has observed, the Geryon episode constitutes “one of those greater thresholds out of which the overall narrative of the Divine Comedy is composed”—and therefore a profoundly liminal moment—it is

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² Even the pilgrim’s strange detour among the usurers speaks to the purely transitional quality of canto 17, as well as to its uniqueness. In the first half of the canto, while Virgil “convince” Geryon to provide its service, the pilgrim wanders all alone—for the only time in Inferno—into
likewise true that the dark pit inhabited by this creature represents, both arithmetically and narratively, the central point of the whole cantica (135). Firstly, it is the median point of hell’s “vertical geography,” having eleven physical levels above it (let us say eleven “floors”)—the Earth’s surface and the first seven circles, of which the seventh is divided in three sub-circles—and eleven more below it—the ten malebolge of the eighth circle and the frozen lake of the ninth.

But most importantly, the dark zone between upper and lower hell is located in the exact center of Inferno as a text. In his essay, Nohrnberg aptly defines Geryon as a centralized personification of liminality, and notices correctly how this creature encapsulates the characteristics of the entire underworld:

Cantos XVI-XVII are the median ones. Being so central, Geryon is fashioned in the image of the entirety of the underworld in which he lurks. Thus we see him [...] as a multi-layered image of hell from top to bottom. His downward spirals, compared to the narrowing gyre of a descending falcon (Inf. XVII, 115-131), serve to identify his motion with the funnel-shaped space enclosed by the underworld as a whole, while his body suggests its four chief strata. Half on land and half over the void, like a half-beached boat or an amphibious beaver, Geryon’s position identifies his nether-parts with hell’s most subterranean reaches, and his upper parts with what the pilgrim has already beheld. His natural face stands for the sins of the natural man (outer hell); his bestial thorax stands for the sins of the hardened heart and its violence (inner hell); and his serpentine tail stands for the compulsion to betray (the bottom of the pit). The final sting is Satan himself. The hairy paws, moreover, can refer to violence in the seventh circle; the patterns on the torso beneath the armpits, to fraud in the eighth; and the venomous fork of the tail, to perfidy in the ninth. Thus Geryon’s extended anatomy traverses hell by epitomizing its layers (137).

Nohrnberg’s observations are interesting and for the most part convincing. However, he fails to carry his analysis one step further, for he does not realize that Geryon does not
merely epitomize the infernal narrative, but it also represents the infernal text, and is therefore, within the allegorical sequence, a symbol of allegory itself.

An allegory of allegory

In a well-known passage of the Convivio, Dante defines the allegorical sense of scripture as “una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna” (“a truth concealed under beautiful lie” 2.1). Such a label fits Geryon in more ways than one. On the one hand, he is a hybrid and disgusting beast with the face of an honest man. On the other, his hideous and evil nature, embodied by his reptilian tail and scorpion sting, is entirely concealed under an extraordinarily ornate and colorful texture. Doubtless, the “truth” of Geryon lurks under a veiling of “beautiful lie,” just as the real doctrine of the Comedy is to be sought under the “close texture of the mystic strain.” And towards the end of canto 16, in the mounting suspense that prepares Geryon’s arrival, Dante recycles almost exactly the wording employed in the Convivio, foreshadowing the monster’s arrival with a reference to “quel ver ch’ha faccia di menzogna” (“that truth which has the face of a lie” Inf. 16.124).

The dazzling “tapestry” that coats and decorates the creature’s body is compared, in one of the many similitudes that enrich the episode, to Arachne’s tapestry (17.18),

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3 One may hypothesize a correspondence between Geryon’s four strata and the four levels of meaning illustrated by Dante in a passage, often referenced by Yeats, of the Convivio: literal, allegoric, moral, and anagogic. According to Dante, the first two are immediately evident to the reader, just as the creature’s face and his mammalian thorax are firmly anchored on land upon his arrival. The third and fourth levels can only be uncovered by a closer analysis of the text, much like the reptilian tail is only visible to the pilgrim when he looks over the brink and into the dark emptiness. And even then, the poisonous insect tail is at first not detected by the pilgrim. It corresponds to the fourth and least accessible level of reading, that which holds the work’s highest truths, capable of bringing the reader closer to the Divine. However, is complicated by the (in)famous Epistle to Cangrande (of uncertain attribution), where Dante, in illustrating his poetic methodology to the dedicatory of his poem, simplifies things and talks about merely two levels: the literal-exterior and the allegoric-symbolic.
whose negative connotations were well known in Dante’s time. In this regard, I quote a passage of commentary by Ronald Martinez:

The association of fraud (and the telling of tales) with spinning and weaving is ancient and virtually universal (compare such English expressions as “pull the wool over someone’s eyes”). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (6.1-145) Arachne challenges Minerva to a weaving contest. While Minerva makes a tapestry showing the benefactions of the gods, Arachne’s (which Ovid says is just as skillful as Minerva’s) shows the disguises, deceptions, and crimes of the gods. (Durling and Martinez 269).

But the tapestry does not merely allude, in a generic sense, to the art of storytelling. More precisely, it is a microcosm of the entire episode, which constitutes arguably the most stylistically ornate, even baroque, sequence of the entire poem, featuring an exceptionally dense array of technical and poetic virtuosities. No other page in the entire work displays a similar concentration of similitudes, diverse literary homages, and stylistic preciosities. Likewise, this canto is absolutely unique in its lexicon and in its linguistic shadings, as Giorgio Padoan has showed in his lectura.⁴

On the literary-artistic level, therefore, Arachne’s intricate tapestry (which nevertheless is not quite as intricate as Geryon’s) is a microcosm of the episode, which in turn is a microcosm of the *cantica*. In parallel fashion, on the strictly narrative level, Geryon’s flight epitomizes the primary action of the entire *cantica*, namely, a slow descent in narrowing spirals.⁵ And the beast’s flight, too, is reproduced “in miniature”

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⁴ Padoan goes into great detail explaining how this canto presents some absolutely singular lexicological characteristics: “su circa duecentocinquanta lemmi complessivi, ben una quarantina ricorrono qui per la prima volta, non pochi dei quali per inserirsi stabilmente nel lessico del poema […] e a questa quarantina, numero di per sé altissimo, viene ad aggiungersi un’altra trentina di vocaboli i quali addirittura non compaiono altrove nella *Commedia*” (Padoan 10).

⁵ A connection might also be drawn between the “cento rote” and the one hundred cantos of the Comedy.
within the sequence, in the famous similitude of the falcon that establishes the landing plane and prepares the conclusion of the canto:

\[\text{Come ‘l falcon ch’è stato assai su l’ali,}
\text{che sanza veder logoro o uccello}
\text{fa dire al falconiere “Omè, tu cali!”,}
\text{discende lasso onde si move isnello,}
\text{per cento rote, e da lunge si pone}
\text{dal suo maestro disdegnoso e fello;}\]

(As falcon, that hath long been on the wing / But lure nor bird hath seen, while in despair / The falconer cries “Ah me! Thou stoopst to earth,” / Wearied descends, whence nimbly he arose / In many an airy wheel and lighting sits / At distance from his lord in angry mood; Inf.17.127-32)

The quoted passage, which presents a centralized synthesis of the action of the entire Inferno, is of course the passage that would serve as inspiration for the opening image of The Second Coming. Putting together the pieces of the above discussion, we extrapolate that the concentric relationship (simile of Arachne’s tapestry
\rightarrow canto of Geryon
\rightarrow poetry and text of Inferno) corresponds to the one (simile of the falcon
\rightarrow flight of Geryon
\rightarrow narrative sequence of Inferno).

As is well known, the Divine Comedy recounts a universal parable, one in which the pilgrim-everyman’s difficult journey of redemption and salvation, ideally, should prompt a symmetrical salvific iter by the reader, and by the whole of mankind. But I certainly am not the first to claim that the Comedy, in addition to being a redemptive Christian allegory, is also a great metatext, a work that discusses literature and explores the boundaries of writing and of art. Some may even label it an “undercover” treatise of applied semiotics.

More importantly, the Comedy openly discusses itself and recounts its own poetic genesis. Umberto Eco defines the metatext as “un testo narrativo che ha il coraggio di
The Comedy, characterized by John Freccero as “a story […] whose principal theme is how the story came to be written,” is thus without a doubt also a meta-narrative (1968, 85). Yet, few have explicitly stated what to me seems obvious, namely that the Geryon episode constitutes the most completely meta-textual moment of the first cantica, and perhaps of the entire poema.

The incipit of Paradiso informs us that

La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l’universo penetra e risplende,
in una parte più e meno altrove.

(His Glory, by whose might all things are moved, pierces the universe, and in one part sheds more resplendence, elsewhere less.” Par.1.1-3)

Geryon’s pit would appear to be the physical location, among all those described by Dante, where the (divine) light sheds the least resplendence. While it is impossible to prove it beyond doubt, one may easily infer that this is the darkest point in all the Comedy, even more so than Cocytus, the frozen lake in the middle of which Lucifer is stuck for eternity. At the same time, as noted, it is located as much as possible inside the text—it is the text’s very core. The location of maximum removal from the Divine on the narrative plane coincides thus with the one of maximum immersion in the work. This would seem to be an appropriate terrain for a meta-textual type of discourse.

Together with Cerberus and Lucipher, Geryon represents one third of what we may call the “trinity of evil.” But unlike the other two monstra of this infernal triad, Geryon is not even “triune” (Cerberus is triune in the classical sources and is triune in Dante; Lucipher is not triune in the biblical source but is triune in Dante; Geryon is triune in the sources and is not in Dante). Rather, he displays an indefinitely multiple nature,
which at best can be described as double (man-animal) or quadruple (man-mammal-reptile-insect). Furthermore, Dante’s Geryon is the character in *Inferno* that is most different from its mythological “original,” rendered in both Ovid and Virgil as a three-headed anthropomorphous giant. He is arguably the *Inferno*’s foremost product of poetic invention. And in the Middle Ages, at a time when The Word of God was automatically accepted as the sole referent for the words of any *auctor*, originality and creativity were not to be sought, but rather repudiated as sins of authorial *hybris*.

A closer look should reveal that Dante did not forget to scatter around this episode, for those who knew where to look, a good number of unmistakable “meta-clues.” Firstly, Geryon’s coming is prompted by the intervention of Virgil, who throughout the work serves as the meta-poetic device *par excellence*, also interceding in other famously metatextual moments, like the troublesome entrance in the city of Dis (in canto 9), the “chat” with Ulysses (in canto 26), and the descent to the ninth circle aboard Nembroth (in canto 31). And, unlike any other instance in the infernal journey, the pilgrim is not even present during the actual “conversation” between his guide and his soon-to-be carrier, instead wandering all alone among the usurers of the seventh circle.

Furthermore, without attempting a conclusive interpretation of the “corda”—one of the supreme *cruces* of the Dantean epic—I shall simply point out how the only vaguely similar occurrence takes place when Dante-the-pilgrim places the reed around his waste in the first canto of *Purgatorio*, immediately after Dante-the-author’s invocation of a new literary course and his calling for the resurrection of the “morta poesì” (*Purg*.1.7). And curiously, just before the arrival of Geryon, precisely in order to reach the edge of the pit and “board” the monstrous vehicle, the two wayfarers had
inverted the usual infernal direction towards the left (Inf.17.28-9), almost to suggest that we have somewhat diverted from the main narrative and entered a purely meta-narrative textual locus.

However, the most blatant meta-clues lie in the lexicon with which Geryon’s coming is constructed on the page. At the end of canto 16, the pilgrim alludes to the still unknown entity, which he expects to soon emerge, as a “novelty” (“novità” 16.115), and immediately thereafter the author refers to him as “a figure”, or “a shape” (“una figura” 16.131). Finally, at the beginning of canto 17, when making his actual entrance, Geryon is described as “quella sozza immagine di froda” (“that filthy image of fraud” 17.7). Obviously, everything within the universe of the Comedy possesses some kind of allegorical connotation. However, in no other instance is the symbolic meaning of an allegorical component—be it a character, a place, a type of punishment, etc.—expressly revealed by the author. Here, we are told that what is making its way through the thick air, emerging from the inscrutable abyss, evoked as a “novelty” and then alluded to as “a figure,” is not yet a “beast” and does not yet have a name: it is an image. By so openly removing the exterior layer of symbolism—Geryon as the duplicitous embodiment of fraud—the author is clearly inviting the reader to a more thorough inquiry, in search of a deeper level of significance.

As Nohrnberg writes, the character Geryon, while “intensely fictional […] is as scrupulously realized as if he had a substantial existence.” Through a wide variety of meticulous naturalistic similes, the authors aims to convince his readers not of the realism, but of the reality of this supremely fictional being, both at the time of its arrival and during the aerial taxiing. And, even more surprisingly, for the first and only time in
Inferno, Dante-auctor resorts to swearing in order to convince us of the creature’s existence. And what is more, he swears “sulle note / di questa comedia” (literally: “on the notes of this comedy” 16.128-29), mentioning, in the process, the title of his work for the very first time. As Durling and Martinez correctly highlight, in a calculated paradox “the poet swears [that he is telling the truth] on what is obviously a fiction, [...] problematizing the fictional allegorical mode of the poem” (258).

The reversed adaptation of the Book of Genesis

To string together the threads of my discussion concerning the middle of Dante’s hell, and the strange being which lurks within it, I must include a few observations on the “sacred” source that is incorporated into this episode. I agree with Dino S. Cervigni in regarding this section as depicting “a primordial scene,” operating an unholy and profoundly negative re-writing of the first book of Genesis.

As a primal scene, this Dantean episode subverts the first three chapters of Genesis. Iahweh, who hovers above the waters, is replaced by Geryon, who also flies above the abyss, water, and darkness. Unlike the biblical serpent, Geryon seemingly does not tempt directly the wayfarer and yet leaves the protagonist further down in his kingdom. Adam’s disobedience is countered by the obedience of the Pilgrim, who nevertheless is caught in a fear exceeding that of the primogenitor after his transgression (Gen. 3:10). During the flight (17.122: “i’ vidi fuochi e senti’ pianti” “I saw fires and heard plaints”) and obviously much more at its conclusion, when he is left inside Malebolge, the protagonist is confronted by the total subversion of Iahweh’s creation (8).

Dante also obviously subverts the textual and narrative sequence of the Bible to the greatest possible extent, by placing his parodic rendition of the primordial chaos, which marks both the beginning of Holy Scripture and the beginning of time, in the narrative
and textual center of his unholy cantica (which instead begins “in the middle of the journey of our life”).

There is, however, an even more extreme subversive mechanism in place. Through the antiphrastic appropriation of the supreme act of God—the act of creation—within a supremely godless context, Dante utilizes the biblical source to lay the foundation for his metatextual discourse. He is here concerned, as noted, with a very different act of creation—namely, the act of poetic creation. The metatext, as Eco’s definition implies, is precisely the text that gets turned inside-out, revealing its “underbelly.” And the “flipping inside-out” of the biblical narrative begins, aptly, when the two wayfarers invert the course of their path and begin descending towards the right. But in order to appreciate the full extent of this well-guarded “game,” we must take a couple of steps back, and return to the problematic scene of the “rope”:

From the perspective of the bystander, the Pilgrim, the action centering on the cord remains unintelligible not only as it unfolds but also after it has taken place: never does the text suggest, let alone explain, what the complex rite of the cord might possibly signify nor does the text propose direct relationships between the cord and Virgil’s act, on the one hand, and Geryon’s appearance, on the other.

Throughout the episode focusing on the cord, the Pilgrim is totally unable to understand the meaning of Virgil’s action. […] The Pilgrim […] is doubly being dispossessed: first, when he ungirds himself upon Virgil’s command (16:110) and surrenders to him the cord (16:106-111); second, when he fails to understand, either before or after, what Virgil’s act signifies (11)

I might add that the entire sequence is made even more unintelligible for the reader, to whom no explanation is given for the actual inversion of course (which is presumably required by a physical obstacle quite evident to the wayfarers, like a crack in the ground, as in Inferno 21), and who is thus three-times dispossessed.
For the entire length of the episode, the pilgrim never speaks—an ascertainment which the reader can make only at the episode’s conclusion, but which in fact had been subtly hinted to in the closing lines of canto 16 (“sempre a quel ver c’ha faccia di menzogna / de’ l’uom chiuder le labbra fin ch’el puote” “ever to that truth, / which but the semblance of a falsehood wears, / a man, if possible, should bar his lip” 16:124-5), and clearly foreshadowed by the fact that the entire sequence, as Cervigni remarks, is ushered in precisely by a non-verbal form of communication. Even when he would like to ask Virgil to protectively embrace him, he finds himself unable, being paralyzed by fear, to produce any sound whatsoever (“sí volli dir, ma la voce non venne / com’io credetti: ‘Fa che tu m’abbracce’” “And [I] would have said, but that the words to aid / My purpose came not, ‘Look thou clasp me firm.’” Inf 17:92-3).

But the “double dispossession,” the unbreakable silence, the timid obedience, and the utter passivity of Dante the pilgrim are countered in this section by Dante the author assuming complete, unrestrained auctoritas over his work, in a most hybrid display of authorial disobedience. The descent of a muted, terrified protagonist is in fact being related by a soaring, audacious narrative “I” in the midst of an Icarus-like and Phaetont-like flight.

In the stylish and ornate canto 17, more than anywhere else in the work, the author “speaks” loudly and boastfully, flaunting his pride in being a supreme virtuoso of technique, of artifice, of poetry⁶. Thanks to the help of the great masters of antiquity,

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⁶ Even Benedetto Croce, a notorious opposer of allegorical readings, who instead proposed seeking merely the “poetry” of Dante’s work, commented on Geryon’s “stilishness” and noticed the overall “poeticity” of the sequence. Furthermore, Geryon’s graceful in-air motion is described with the same phrase (“ella sen va” 17.115) used to describe Beatrice walking through a crowd in one of the Vita nuova’s most famous sonnets, “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare.”
whose lesson he has laboriously absorbed, Dante the poet, riding the “fraudulent” beast of his ornate allegory, flies in circles through the scary yet wondrous dark pit of creativity. The author of *Inferno* is not the purgated and ever more saintly *poeta-theologus* that will recount the celestial ascent, but the sophisticated man of letters who harbors delusions of creation. This is the Ulysses-like *poeta-artista*, the poet-God.

Returning to the text, one should observe that, while the biblical creation is permeated with a sense of perfect order and limpid precision, the exact opposite is true here. In Geryon, everything is indissolubly mixed, fused together, and impure. This “rough beast” is male and female. It is human and animal. It is dragon, sea-serpent, insect, lion, falcon. It is Icarus and Phaeton, Persian carpet and mythic tapestry. It is a diver, a ship, an eel, a beaver, an arrow and a staircase. It is “beast” and “shape,” living creature and abstract “image.” Through Geryon, Dante the poet-God operates a complete reversal of Genesis, “inventing” a literary return to chaos. And in the very center of his work, he recreates that dark abyss—the undefined zone of potential poetry—from which the work itself has been generated.

In conclusion, one may say that, more than a beast or even an actual character, Geryon is a *place*, an infernal location. When aboard this mysterious entity, Virgil and the pilgrim are surrounded by such obscurity that all they can see is the creature (“[...] vidi spenta / ogne veduta fuor che de la fera” “The air I viewed, and other object none / Save the fell beast [...]” 17:113-4). By all accounts, we can deduce that they in fact are

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7 While Geryon as a “character” is almost certainly male, in the Italian text the first several pronouns and nouns with which it is referenced, significantly, are all grammatically feminine: novità, figura, fiera, colei, imagine, bestia, etc. Interestingly, several critics have attributed hermaphrodite status to Yeats’s “rough beast” as well.
not on Geryon, but in Geryon. With its interwoven vagueness and its hybrid indefinability, Geryon is an unmistakable emblem of that “region of unlikeness” (regio dissimilitudins) which the whole of the first cantica describes.

At the same time, as I have just demonstrated, Geryon is also the “hero” in Dante’s very own (meta)myth of creatio poetica. So when he appears to the pilgrim with his upper half well visible and firmly anchored upon ground, while his lower half is unseen, dangling in the dark vacuum below, he mimics the way the Inferno must have appeared to the author when he began writing this section: the first half of the cantica was stable—completed—while the second half was still invisible, for it was yet to be written, merely taking shape within Dante’s imagination.

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8 I believe it is not a coincidence that, in the Italian text, the monster’s name is an evident anagram of the word “region” (GERIONE=REGIONE).
CHAPTER 5
THE REVISION OF THE SECOND COMING

Much has been written about *The Second Coming*. Nearly all critics and scholars spend considerable time dissecting the lyric’s “British” sources, like Blake’s *The Book of Urizen* (from which the phrase “stony sleep” is directly derived), or Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (for the lines “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity”) and *Ozymandias* (for the general setting amidst the dunes of the desert, and the beast’s sphinx-like quality). However, hardly anyone acknowledges Dante as a source for the poem, and those who do, like Bloom and Jeffares, merely remark that the opening image of the falcon may be derived from canto 17 of the *Inferno*. Likewise, much has been written about *The Second Coming*’s revision. But no one yet has pointed out how, in comparison to the earliest drafts, the definitive version appears to be heavily laden with Dantean elements. What this chapter aims to demonstrate is the extent to which Dantean elements permeate the poem, and how the process of revision can be interpreted as an operation of “Dante-ization.”

The most comprehensive discussion of *The Second Coming*’s revision is found in John Stallworthy’s book *Between the Lines: Yeats’s Poetry in the Making*, where the first chapter is entirely dedicated to that poem’s problematic—almost tormented—genesis. Stallworthy had access to the first manuscript draft, which had been recovered by Mrs. Yeats from a wastebasket in which the author had tossed it, and therefore in dreadful
According to Stallworthy, the fact that immediately jumps out is the gradual cleansing of most political, national, and overtly historical elements. The early drafts of this work, initially inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, were heavily politicized, containing explicit references to “the Germans,” “Russia,” war casualties (“every day some innocent has died”) and Edmund Burke. As the revision continued, “the poem’s scope and focus […] widened. […] Yeats introduces more general terms such as ‘anarchy’, ‘the ceremony of innocence’, ‘the good’, and ‘the worst’” (Stallworthy 21).

In the final draft, the only spatial-temporal coordinates are provided by the time and place of the birth of Christ: “twenty centuries of stony sleep” and “Bethlehem.” Although faint remnants of the European historical events in the late 1910s may still be traceable, clearly the lyric has assumed a universal and universalizing quality. In its definitive version, the lyric appears constructed to transcend any specific local, geographic, temporal or historical-based reading, and to strike a chord with as great an audience as possible. The poem’s title, its biblically allusive infrastructure, and its Latin evocation of a “Spiritus mundi” (namely, “soul of the world”) disclose its intention to cast an appeal on the “collective unconscious” of the entire Christian world.

It might be significant to consider that the actual generative nucleus of the work was not even in verse; instead, “The Second Coming begins with a tantalizingly illegible prose draft” (Stallworthy 19). Therefore the poem does not have its beginnings in a purely lyric impulse, but rather springs out of a cryptic prose passage, apparently penned with great haste, in what seems to have been a moment of visionary, rather than poetic,

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1 The idea of a vast reservoir of collective experience, not unlike Jung’s collective unconscious, is a recurring one in Yeats, who termed it, at various stages, “Anima mundi,” “the Great Memory,” and “the Record.”
rapture. In comparison to the definitive version, only the words “gyre” and “falconer” are already present in this initial sketch. The falcon is there but is still called a “hawk,” as is the case also in the first iambic pentameter version, which is located on the same worn sheet as this mostly undecipherable twelve-line prose passage, immediately below it.

Stallworthy, who, like so many others, finds this aviary image to be immensely problematic, nevertheless argues that once “we realize that the bird was originally a hawk, we are on familiar territory.” He goes on to illustrate how hawks had played an important role especially in the poetic imagery of the first Yeats, citing passages from *The Celtic Twilight* or Yeats’ own footnote for *Meditations in Time of Civil War*. However, in light of my previous discussion, it is precisely this transformation from “hawk” to “falcon” that sheds precious light on the poem’s genesis. By recuperating the Dantean wording, Yeats reveals quite plainly the source of his image while nevertheless operating a crucial reversal of the passage alluded to. Not only does his falcon travel in a widening spiral away from his befuddled master, whose words he can no longer hear. Even more interestingly, Yeats places this image, which in Dante constitutes a central passage of a central canto—therefore very much *inside* the work—on the outer edge of his work, at the poem’s beginning.

**A Dantean (re)vision**

For Yeats, always a zealous revisionist of his own work, the idea of bringing an initial draft of a poem closer to a Dantean model was nothing new. We have evidence of this trend already in the 1890s. The final quatrain of *The Countess Cathleen in Paradise*, one of Yeats’ most revised lyrics from his early phase, in 1891, was quite distant from its
eventual appearance:

She goes down the floor of Heaven
Shining bright as a new lance;
And her guides are angels seven,
While young stars about her dance.

It is clear, as Bornstein does not fail to notice, “Yeats brought the lines closer to Dante in his 1895 revision” (101):

With white feet of angels seven,
Her white feet go glimmering,
And above the deep of heaven,
Flame on flame and wing on wing.

The color white, the flames and the wings seem to be unmistakably borrowed from a tercet in Canto 31 of *Paradiso*, which, in the Cary translation, reads as follows:

Faces had they of flame, and wings of gold:
The rest was whiter than the driven snow; *(Par. 31.13-14)*

Clearly, the young Yeats was already letting Dante guide and inspire him as he revised his work.

The revision of the poem *Byzantium*, written in 1930, demonstrates that Yeats, several decades later, had not abandoned the habit of looking to Dante when retouching his initial drafts. According to Bornstein, this lyric would have actually undergone an inverse process, and the final version would present a less evident Dantean makeup than it had in earlier drafts, where “the mummy functioned as a Virgil-like guide to the speaker” (Bornstein 110). Nevertheless, for the beginning of the second stanza, which appears to have been the object of much editing and correction, Yeats ultimately settled on the following lines:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade

In its definitive version, the passage is extremely reminiscent of the initial encounter, in the dark woods of the *Comedy’s* proemial Canto, between Virgil and the pilgrim, who in his clouded state is unsure whether the approaching figure is “ombra od omo certo” (“shade, or certain man” *Inf.* 1.66). Whatever the case, once again there is evidence that Dante was firmly on Yeats’ mind as he put the finishing touches on this poem.

In light of the above observations, it is surprising that nothing has been written about a similar kind of *motus ad Dantem* regarding *The Second Coming*. Bornstein and Jeffares, who do acknowledge Dante as a source for the lyric’s imagery, do not analyze the process of revision, while Stallworthy does not mention Dante at all in relation to *The Second Coming*. Jeffares states that Yeats “was extremely fond of the Dante illustrated by Doré which she [Iseult Gonne] owned. This edition contains a picture of Geryon emerging from the abyss with his body shaped like the path of a gyre upon a cone. The shape of the monster is unusual and would have impressed Yeats by its peculiarity. When he thought of gyres in connection with a poem to be written on the historical cycles the shape assumed by Geryon might well have come into his mind” (181, for Doré’s illustrations of Geryon, see tables 3 and 4).

However, from Stallworthy’s discussion of the poem’s revision, it is evident that the explicit Dantean reference of the opening lines, consisting in the reprise of the falcon-falconer wording, preserved in Cary’s translation, was not a part of the initial project. It came in a second phase, to which the additions of the “shape with lion’s body and with the head of a man” and of the “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” also belong. Interestingly, the manuscript reveals that at first the hybrid creature was intended to have
a triple rather than double nature, although the third component is undecipherable, as the
draft read “with lion body and with (       ) and the head of a man.” This would have made
the creature even more reminiscent of Geryon, whose face, especially in Blake’s visual
rendition, could very well have provided the inspiration for the “blank and pitiless” gaze
(see table 2). Clearly, at this stage of the revision Yeats was thinking of Dante.

**Metric considerations**

It is my contention, furthermore, that the universally famous incipit of *The Second
Coming* has in fact one other Dantean source, to be located in the last sonnet of the *Vita
nuova*, “Oltre la spera che più larga gira.” That Yeats would have deliberately drawn
from more than one of Dante’s works within a single lyric, or, as in this case, in a single
line, should not strike us as unlikely or even surprising. There is tangible evidence of this
mechanism being employed in other Yeatsian compositions. *Ego Dominus Tuus* is
probably the most blatant example of a similarly seamless conflation of different Dantean
elements within a single poem. The title itself, as noted, is a direct quotation of the *Vita
nuova*. Line 35 very obviously paraphrases a passage in one of the most famous moments
of the third *cantica*, in canto 17 of *Paradiso*, where Dante’s ancestor Cacciaguida
prophesies to his great-great-grandson his exile from Florence. Here is Yeats:

> [...] driven out
> To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread

And here is Dante:

> Tu proverai sí come sa di sale
> Lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
> Lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale

(Thou shalt prove / How salt the savour is of other’s bread; / How hard the passage, to
descend and climb / By other’s stairs. Par. 17.57-60)

Finally, the reference at line 26 to “Lapo” and “Guido” (Lapo Gianni and Guido Cavalcanti, two prominent poets of the 13th century and personal friends of Dante) reads like a homage to “Guido, I’ vorrei che tu Lapo ed io,” one of the most famous sonnets from the *Rime*, the complete collection of Dante’s lyrics2.

If the opening line of *The Second Coming* draws its imagery from an unforgottably vivid moment from Dante’s *Inferno*, it draws its meter and its rhythm from the first line of the *Vita Nuova*’s last sonnet, which most critics tend to regard as an anticipation of the tones and atmospheres of *Paradiso*.3 Again, a look at the revision process as analyzed by Stallworthy will be useful. The poem’s first draft in verse began as follows:

The gyre grow wider and more wide

Soon changed to:

The intellectual gyre is (        ) wide

Stallworthy is correct when he refers to the second of these provisory versifications as iambic pentameters, albeit not of the canonic sort (du-DUM, du-DUM, du-DUM, du-DUM, du-DUM) to which British poets throughout the 19th century had adhered, for the iamb seems indeed to be the dominant foot. But the echoing, swirling, almost dizzying opening line of the definitive version,

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2 The quoted passage from *Ego Dominus Tuus* also echoes the description of Forese Donati and the other souls of the sixth terrace of purgatory, where the gluttons atone for their sins by suffering constant hunger, and present a severely emaciated appearance.

3 Therefore, this other source of inspiration for *The Second Coming* also belongs to a profoundly liminal moment in Dante’s work, both textually and thematically. The final poem of the *Vita nuova* is in fact generally regarded as foreshadowing the tones of *Paradiso*, as well as drawing its imagery from celestial cosmography. For a complete discussion of this sonnet, see Cervigni’s comments in the Cervigni-Vasta edition of the *Vita nuova*.  

58
Turning and turning in the widening gyre

is by no means an iambic pentameter, as there is not a single iambic foot within it. In fact, the line is not even a pentameter, having only four tonic accents (*turning and turning in the widening gyre*). Rather, it can be defined as a dactylic hendecasyllable, that matches exactly the rhythm of *Oltre la spera*’s first line (DUM-du-du, DUM-du-du, du-DUM, du-DUM).

The undeniable “Dante-ization” in the imagery of the poem would certainly authorize us to speculate that a similar progression may have taken place on the metric/phonic level. It is a recognized fact that Yeats as a poet was always extremely attentive to the technical and stylistic elements of his verse, arguably much more so than the majority of modernist poets. And *The Second Coming* in particular seems to be one of his most meta-textual works, in which, for example, before being “loosed upon the world,” a stylistic and metric anarchy is deliberately loosed onto the poem, whose first four lines—highly unusual in Yeats’ poetry—all have a different rhythm, conveying on an aesthetic plane the impression of apocalyptic disorder the author is aiming for on the thematic plane.

But perhaps most importantly, there is also a certain unmistakable parallelism in meaning between these two opening lines. Rossetti, who translates all of Dante’s sonnets using impeccable iambic pentameters, renders this incipit as “Beyond the sphere which spreads to widest space” (86). A more literal translation might be “beyond the sphere which spins the widest.” The line refers of course to the last of heavens, the Primum Mobile, beyond which every dimension of physical space is completely transcended and the infinite goodness of God permeates and illuminates everything. But within Dante’s
Thomistic cosmological conception, this “spera che più larga gira” is also, of course, the greatest circumference in the Dante’s own “widening gyre” of Paradiso.  

Finally, it becomes almost impossible to regard the similarities in rhythm (and in content) between the opening lines of these two poems as a mere coincidence once we consider that “Oltre la Spera” is the only first line in Dante ending with the word “gira” (from the Italian verb “to turn,” or “to revolve,” which obviously shares the etymology of Yeats’s “gyres”), much as The Second Coming is alone among Yeats’s poems to present an opening line ending with the word “gyre.” The Geryon episode is, as I have discussed, a central moment in the first cantica, both literally and figuratively. Likewise, this sonnet which constitutes the other source for Yeats’s poem, is not just “any” sonnet by Dante. As the last poem of the Vita nuova, it represents a crucial moment in all of Dante’s poetry that serves as a sort of link between his “sinful” juvenile poetry and his mature “sacred” epic.

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4 Immediately after this sonnet, in the final paragraph of the work, the author writes: “appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione, ne la quale io vidi cose […]” Rossetti translates as “after writing this sonnet, it was given onto me to behold a very wonderful vision: wherein I saw things […]” and in his own footnote explains how “this [vision] we may believe to have been the Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, which furnished the triple argument of the Divina Commedia” (86)
It should not surprise us that Yeats does not mention Dante in his explanatory note for *The Second Coming*. Nor, for that matter, does he mention the Romantic sources (Blake, Shelley and Wordsworth) that are undoubtedly present. Like many poets, Yeats had no interest in plainly revealing all the layers of meaning he incorporated in his poems. Rather, the contrary seems to be true, and the auto-exegeses he provides for his lyrics often tend to complicate the critical reading rather than facilitate it. After all, had he wanted to convey his most original ideas in a clear and expository manner, he would not have written lyric poetry, which by definition is filtered through a veil of polysemic ineffability. But it should be clear by our previous discussion that Dante provides the central elements in this poem. Once we recognize the Dantean origin—canto 17 of *Inferno*—of the opening image of the falcon, it becomes evident that at least two other images, that of the “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” in the middle of the poem, and the “rough beast” of the closing scene, which like Geryon is difficultly definable, are direct inheritances from that very same passage of the *Comedy*.

It is likewise evident that in this poem Yeats aims to attain the same poetic and expressive dimension which he attributed to Dante, that of *Unity of Being*. Firstly he aims for it on the formal/stylistic level, by seamlessly weaving together his biblical, medieval and modern sources. Dante, of course, had sought to create a work that should stand as
the definitive compendium of all the culture and knowledge of his era. And Dante had also hoped to do so while at the same time creating the highest imaginable artistic expression of all times, displaying a technical virtuosity and an assortment of linguistic registers and styles that was to be (and was) absolutely unprecedented. Yeats, who believed he lived in a “lyric age” where a single work in verse of 14.233 lines was no longer possible nor desirable, appears to share this goal in The Second Coming, which contains an array of poetic styles, tones and meters that is incredibly vast for such a brief composition.

Not only does the poem smoothly unite the Dantean sources with the Romantic ones; it also operates a conflation/inversion of different Dantean elements. On the most superficial level, such a process is most evident in the opening line, where an image from Inferno is presented through a meter borrowed from the Vita Nuova. But more importantly, The Second Coming conflates the negative descent towards Evil and sin of Inferno with the positive climb towards Good and blessedness of Paradiso, a theme that is in fact foreshadowed in the first line, which combines a most infernal moment from Dante’s epic with the most “paradisiac” of his sonnets.

Though Yeats describes them as representing the oscillations of both the being and history between primary and antithetical, and between subjective and objective, the intersecting gyres are in fact also an emblem of the fundamental ambiguity detectable in most of his late verse, which seems to present a kind of double pull. The metaphysical and spiritual longing towards the beyond is in fact indissolubly mixed with an inescapable earthly pull towards earthly materiality. It is almost as if, in conceiving his famous symbol, Yeats compressed into one another the sinful spiral of Inferno and the
blissful ascent one of *Paradiso*, creating at once a visual representation of his ideology and an emblem of his poetics.

Of course, such a coexistence of opposite forces would also conform perfectly with Yeats’s view of *Unity of Being*, which, as we have noted, entails a detached and simultaneous outlook on both Good and Evil. Yeats seems to have accessed this “antithetical” state of consciousness in *The Second Coming*, where the triumphal Christian connotations evoked by the title are offset by the terrifying scenario in the poem, which describes what is in fact a reverse apocalypse and the coming of the Antichrist. In somewhat differing terms, Robert Foster confirms such an assertion when he states that “the surreal vividness of the apocalyptic imagery in ‘The Second Coming’ stands independent and entire, with no need of reference and explanation: as much as any Yeats poem, it expresses […] that curious clarity of vision which is not a clarity of detail, but rather of imaginative focus” (151). And Yeats is not scared of the frightful scenario he has conjured. As Yvor Winters has observed, “we must face the fact that Yeats’ attitude toward the beast is different from ours: we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying” (87). More appropriately, we may infer that Yeats must have found the much-revised poem to be finally satisfying. The beast, however, is looked upon with a sort of frigid indifference, typical of the artist who has attained the *Daimonic* state of expression.

Interpreting art always involves a certain amount of guesswork. This is especially true in the case of poetry, and all the more so in the case of works like Dante’s *Comedy* and Yeats’ *The Second Coming*, intentionally constructed as polysemic, “open” texts. The interpretation of the Geryon episode which I have provided is largely based upon my own
observations and analytical skills. Therefore, to assume that Yeats’ reading of the passage coincided with mine would be a double leap of faith bordering on folly. Nevertheless, an important consideration can be made at this point: both *The Second Coming* and the *Divine Comedy* as a whole lend themselves to a similar threefold exegesis. On the exterior level, they can be seen as describing the mystical experience of a pre-apocalyptic vision. An underlying layer pertains to a more “tangible” commentary on the historical-political context in which the two poems were penned. And on a most concealed plane, both works are carrying out a subtle, meta-poetic discourse concerning the genesis of their text and the nature of the creative process itself.

**Text: Apocalypse**

While the *Divine Comedy* is unanimously regarded as a sort of comprehensive re-writing of Holy Scripture, no other book of the Bible was incorporated into Dante’s poem, both as a direct source for many images and passages and as a general model for Dante’s allegorical system, as much as the Apocalypse of St. John (alternatively known as the Book of Revelations). The *Comedy* mirrors *Apocalypse* in several respects. The final book of the Bible, whose influence on medieval thought was exceptional, was seen as a kind of *summa* of all knowledge contained in the Holy Texts. The *Comedy* was likewise meant be a recapitulation of all Scripture, detailing in vivid, dramatic fashion, much like the Apocalypse, the universal struggle between good and evil. Furthermore, the *Comedy*’s “structural complexity, the density of its imagery, its highly symbolic character, and its complex number symbolism,” revolving mainly around the most perfect numbers, 3 and 7, are also direct inheritances from the Book of Revelation (*Dante*
More specifically, a large number of passages within Dante’s work pay homage directly to scenes from Apocalypse. The great pageant of the church atop Mount Purgatory, covering several cantos, constitutes “one of the most concentrated and detailed appropriations of apocalyptic imagery in all of literature” (Dante Encyclopedia, “Apocalypse” 52). But it certainly is not the only one. The denunciation of papal corruption in Inferno 19 blatantly echoes the words of Christ in Apocalypse 17. The river of life in Paradiso 30 is modeled on the river of Apocalypse 22, and even the appearance of Beatrice to the pilgrim in Purgatorio 29 evokes the coming of Christ in judgment. And, of course, the frightful figure of Geryon, though it is a hybrid mixture incorporating biblical sources like Behemoth and Leviathan, and mythological ones like the “original” Geryon (if even only in its name) and the Lernaean Hydra, is strongly reminiscent of the beast of Apocalypse.

On its most evident plane, Yeats’ The Second Coming is also, obviously, the description of an apocalyptic (or anti-apocalyptic) scene. And while resting upon the theoretical framework provided by Yeats’ system, the poem also investigates one of the central paradoxes of Revelation: the idea of overwhelming, ineffable confusion and of a post-human return to a Chaos as an effect of human rebellion to God, but nevertheless within the greater design of God’s perfect plan. In other words, the poem explores the concept, not fully graspable by human intellect, of absolute disorder in function of absolute order. As Thomas R. Whitaker writes, “the strangely compelling quality of those opening lines of ‘The Second Coming’ arises partly from the fact that the orderly operation of centrifugal force (mimed in the assonance pattern) produces uncontrollable
disorder” (Bloom 40). From the poem’s title itself, which refers to the main prophecy of *Revelation*, to its “rough” monster which is Yeats’ own appropriation of the beast of Apocalypse, the poem is pervaded by the sense of overwhelming eschatological and inscrutable revelation which characterizes all apocalyptic literature.

**Subtext: Contemporary events**

To say that the historical-political discourse acts a “subtext” within the *Divine Comedy* is somewhat limiting. Dante’s narrative is interspersed with infinity of references—direct, indirect, and encrypted—to the historical and political scenario of Italy (and especially of Florence) in the early 1300s. At the same time, the *Comedy* constitutes an extensive exposition of the author’s political agenda, which is articulated along the whole axis of the narrative.

The first Florentine whom the pilgrim encounters, the glutton Ciacco in *Inferno* 6, predicts the triumph of the Black Guelphs and ruinous fall of the Whites—Dante’s party—thus inaugurating that polemic *discursus*, which will proceed up to the highest heavens, pertaining to the social, cultural and political degeneracy of his age. The presence of St. Peter in the Empyrean underscores in itself the author’s universal condemnation of the papacy, since this is the only pope whom Dante mentions in *Paradise*. And even when approaching the ultimate vision of God, toward which both the text and the story tend, and into which they both disappear, the poet does not abandon his contemptuous invectives against the corruption of Florence, of the Vatican, and of Italian politics, nor does he conceal his bitterness over the downfall of the White Guelphs and his own exile. An interesting and famous parallelism consists in the local-to-universal
series of “political cantos” formed by the sixth canto of each cantica, dealing respectively with Florence, Italy, and Empire. The numerology involved in this from-local-to-universal intra-textual sequence—with 666 being the number of the beast in Revelations—inevitably invites comments on a sort of “political apocalypse”.

Obviously, a detailed analysis of the Comedy’s encyclopedic recapitulation of contemporary history and of its extensive commentary on the political and socio-cultural situation in Dante’s time is impossible here. Hundreds of volumes have been written which investigate these aspects thoroughly. But while the local-historical dimension of the Comedy pervades the entirety of this transcendental and universalizing work, it is nevertheless secondary to the religious allegory. Likewise, the political discourse it conducts, and the platform for radical change it intrinsically proposes, are secondary to the itenerarium mentis ad Deum—the spiritual progression it both describes and invites.

In Yeats’ The Second Coming, on the other hand, the explicit political discourse is quite literally a subtext, having been progressively concealed, or more exactly deleted, in the various phases of the poem’s revision, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. But while the direct references to the Russian revolution, to German soldiers, to war casualties, and to Edmund Burke were scratched out, and therefore effectively “buried” under the poem’s definitive draft, it can be argued that the political potential was actually enhanced in the final version of the poem, which in its “open” form lends itself to a far greater array of possible interpretations. Some are well-known and possibly over-estimated. The falcon-falconer duality, for example, has usually been read in historical terms, albeit with differing interpretations, as the falcon-Man drifting away irreparably from Christ-the falconer (Jeffares) or as the falconer-man losing his grip on the
surrounding reality (Bloom). And the lines “the best lack all conviction / while the worst are full of passionate intensity” are often read, by those focusing on Yeats’ right-wing sympathies, as a disgusted commentary on a debilitated upper class and a galvanized Marxist proletariat. Likewise, the whole idea of the arrival of an ill-defined monster inaugurating a new era is usually considered as foreshadowing, in what would therefore be a truly prophetic Jung-like vision, the instauration of European fascisms.

In addition to these well known readings, which have been proposed many times in many different shades, the poem’s loose polysemy—I would call it a “vivid vagueness”—has given ground to a great number of more far-fetched, even bizarre, attempts at a socio-political contextualization. Robert F. Fleissner, for instance, has suggested that the beast, emblematistically rendered as it slouches through the dunes of the Sahara desert, may actually represent the African continent, “coming into its own—politically, socially, psychologically, pedagogically” (99). Furthermore, he even proposes that the Bethlehem evoked in the final line might actually refer to an age-old British insane asylum bearing the same name, as well as hinting at “Bedlam,” which happens to be the Cockney (mis)pronunciation of Christ’s birthplace (Fleissner 100). In his view, this allusion would “provide a properly ‘demented’ image […] to account for a beast slouching towards a place ‘to be born’ when it is, in a very real sense, alive” (Fleissner 100). I agree with Simona Vannini, who compiled another lengthy study of the poem’s laborious genesis, when she argues that in the definitive draft “the historical background is completely integrated into a cosmological allegory” (132). Nevertheless, I must conclude that, in its finished form, *The Second Coming* remains firmly and deliberately grounded in its historical context, providing insight into the social, cultural, and political
dynamics of Europe in the late 1910s.

**Metatext: The second coming of the poem**

I do not think that Yeats would have taken too kindly to a detailed analysis of his poems’ revision, such as the ones Stallworthy, Vannini, and myself, have attempted. Once, he wrote “accursed who brings to light of day / the writings I have cast away,” and the manuscript drafts of *The Second Coming* had been tossed into a wastebasket. Yet, in a way *The Second Coming* seems to actually be telling its own story as a poem, and to be inquiring into the nature of the creative process.

As is obviously the case with the *Divine Comedy*, here too the poet is also a “character” within the work, and not only, as is nearly always true with lyric poetry, as the speaker—the person who says “I”—but as the triggering force behind the poem’s central scene. In fact, it would seem to be the very utterance of the words “The Second Coming” that gives ground to the visionary *raptus* and “produces” the *entrée en scène* of the hybrid creature:

> Surely some revelation is at hand.  
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
> The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
> When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
> Troubles my sight […]

On a textual level, the central scene is introduced by what is presumably a direct quote: the poet quoting himself in what is very literally the second coming of the words “The Second Coming” (or is it, counting the title, the third?).

Interestingly, Yeats appears here very aware of the oral character of poetry (and especially of lyric poetry), seemingly portraying himself as a speaker who “dictates” his
work, enunciating the words out loud. What is most significant, however, is that Yeats describes inside his poem the “birth” of the image which his poem describes, and in fact does so in a much more obvious way than Dante in *Inferno*. Furthermore, the “premonition” of line 9 (“surely some revelation is at hand”) resembles very closely the pilgrim’s own sensing of the arrival of something “novel,” (“‘E’ pur convien che novità risponda”, / dicea fra me medesmo, ‘al novo cenno’” literally: “‘surely it must be that something novel must follow,’ I said to myself, ‘so novel a signal’” *Inf.*17.115-16), which directly anticipates Geryon’s surfacing. And like Geryon, Yeats’ beast makes its entrance almost exactly in the middle of the work (the passage above comprises lines 9-13 of a 22-line poem).

As I mentioned, it would be preposterous to assume that Yeats would have shared my views on the central cantos of *Inferno* and agreed with my interpretation of Geryon. Still, as my analysis should have highlighted, cantos 16 and 17 of *Inferno* must have been clearly on Yeats’ mind (and on his desk) during the poem’s revision. And considering some of the thematic and linguistic choices the poet made in the final version, one might conclude that he had at least intuited the metatextual elements at play in that scene.

The Geryon narrative is firmly rooted in a complex mechanism of inversions and counter-inversions. The middle of a text which begins with the words “in the middle” has its source in the supreme textual beginning, the creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis. Furthermore, the episode also operates significant inversions of the biblical fall (Adam’s rebellious disobedience contrasted by the pilgrim’s passive submissiveness, and the serpent’s scheme contrasted by the helpful service which Geryon is called to perform) and of the mythological flights of Icarus and Phaeton (replaced by a downward
flight which does not lead to death). However, as we have seen, once we “flip inside-out” the text and break into the meta-narrative, we discover a “rebel” auctor who is in fact guilty of an Adam-like disobedience and an Icarus-like hybris.

Yeats’ poem, likewise, is constructed around a skillful game of inversions. Not only, as mentioned, does it depict an apocalyptic image that bares none of the triumphal connotations associated with the biblical Second Coming of Christ. The falcon, which Yeats has taken from the very middle of Dante’s Inferno, is placed on the outer edge of his work, at the beginning. And while Dante’s falcon was traveling downwards, in narrowing spirals, back to the plane where his master stands, Yeats’ bird flies further and further away from the falconer, in an upward and widening gyre. The “center,” too, is mentioned at the start of Yeats’ poem, effectively “de-centralized” and described as unable to serve its function as center (“the center cannot hold”). Yeats also subverts the “lighting” of the Geryon episode. The impenetrable darkness that houses Dante’s polysemous monster serves as backdrop for its frightening yet wondrous flight, and the two wayfarers begin seeing through it only when Geryon is about to land. Yeats’ poem, on the other hand, is full of light, and while the scene it describes remains clouded by a veil of semantic impregnability, it appears to take place in full daylight, and to be strangely illuminated by a “blank and pitiless” sun. “Darkness falls again” only once the main sequence has ended.

It is easy then to speculate that Yeats might have indeed located the biblical source for the episode, and that he “replied” to Dante’s appropriation of a most “initial” moment—the act of creation, which marks the beginning of the world and of time—with an evocation of a most final moment—the Second Coming of Christ, which marks the
end of the world and of time. That Yeats had understood Dante’s encrypted meta-clues is also suggested by some interesting choices of lexicon. First of all, what sprouts out of that *Spiritus mundi*, and also out of Yeats’ imaginative pen, is a “vast image.” The word “image” was also the one Dante used when depicting Geryon at the beginning of canto 17. And during its actual entrance, at the end of canto 16, the creature is alluded to as a “figura”, translated by Cary as “shape,” the same word used by Yeats to describe his rough beast (“a shape with lion body and face of man”). Yeats has therefore also inverted the words “image” and “shape” as they occur in Dante’s text. Finally, Yeats’ unanswered query in the closing lines of the poem (“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”) is also reminiscent of the pilgrim’s aforementioned remark, as both are wondering exactly what sort of beast (or historical era, or literary work) is about to come into being.

Perhaps, it is only natural that *The Second Coming* would have yielded such diverse and ultimately inconclusive criticism. What else should we expect from a Sphinx-like creature, other than an unsolvable enigma? And how can the exegesis of a poem describing a vision not be problematic, when the poet himself, within the poem, admits to being troubled by the exegesis of his vision? While never mentioning Dante in regard to *The Second Coming*, Whitaker significantly describes Yeats’ vision as an “image erupting from the abyss of himself and of his time” (Bloom 41). Clearly, Yeats’ beast, like Dante’s, is a figment of his imagination that can be read as a symbol of the work it inhabits. The unanswered question with which Yeats leaves us, and with which he (sus)ends his poem, would then reflect the lack of complete control over the work which every author must cope with. Thus, in yet another inversion of the Dantean model, Yeats’
poem presents an *auctor* coming to terms with the task, impossible in the term’s fullest meaning, of establishing his own *auctoritas*.

That Yeats did not know what the poem would eventually look like when he first set out to write it is obvious, after all, by the poem’s history. In fact, as previously discussed, what he set out to write was not even a poem! And indeed *The Second Coming*, as we read it, looks almost nothing like it did in the early drafts. But Yeats’ metatextual mechanism emerges in all its subtle mastery only if we accept that, as in Dante, the falcon represents—even coincides—with the beast. Within such an interpretive framework, the initial image can be understood as describing the falcon-poem flying further and further away from the falconer-poet, and would then find its counterpart in the “open” conclusion. Only in this perspective can the poem be seen as possessing the cyclical structure we might expect in a work about the gyres, as the opening image of the “fictionalized” poet described as he loses control of the fictionalized “poem” is mirrored by the “actual” poet’s—the speaker’s—admission of incomprehension in the final lines¹.

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¹ The falcon’s centrifugal motion in the opening also has an appropriately “aviary” mirroring image in the “shadows of the indignant desert birds,” winding in circles “all about” the slouching beast.
CHAPTER 7
PROPHECIES, EXILES AND STARS: A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

It is possible to go even further in this search for Dantean echoes in Yeats’ *The Second Coming*. There are other falcons, other lion-men, other biblical inversions, and other mysterious prophecies scattered all throughout the *Divine Comedy*. However, my discussion should have revealed is that the link between Dante and Yeats stretches well beyond a single poem by Yeats or a specific section of Dante’s epic. What I have attempted to demonstrate in this study is that a far deeper connection exists between Dante and Yeats than that which, to my knowledge, has been highlighted or even hypothesized to this point. And by no means do I believe to have exhausted the treatment of a subject that is, in my view, so difficult and vast. In fact, I have probably failed to even uncover the full extent of the Dantesque presence in *The Second Coming*. But my hope is that this essay may convince others of the degree to which Yeats incorporated Dante’s work into his own, and perhaps even move them along the path I have taken, towards a more thorough understanding of the Irish poet’s ideas, and towards a greater

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26 The image of the falcon is a recurring symbol throughout the *Divine Comedy*, employed prominently, and with very different connotations, also in Purgatory and Paradise. The line “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” seems to synthesize the words of Marco Lombardo, in *Purgatorio* 16, who in offering his explanation for the present state of Italian politics, dominated by corruption and amorality, blames the anarchy that inevitably ensues when there is not a clear separation of church and state (referred to as “two suns”). Continuing, the “shape with lion body and head of man” is also reminiscent of Sordello, who first appears to wayfarers eying them down silently and menacingly, “a guisa di leon quando si posa” (“as a lion on his watch” *Purg*. 6.66). And Yeats’ “twenty centuries of stony sleep” are quite reminiscent, if only on a textual level, of the “venticinque secoli” (“twenty-five centuries”) that Dante evokes to describe at once the timelessness and the undescribability of his ultimate vision, in the last canto of *Paradiso*. Finally, the “blood-dimmed tide” mentioned towards the beginning of the poem must be likened with the Phlegeton, the river of blood that generates the waterfalls around the pit where Geryon lurks.
appreciation of his poetic achievements.

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When introducing her discussion on the differences and the relationship between the two editions of *A Vision*, Margaret Harper leaves us with an interesting conundrum:

> What is an appropriate [definition of] someone like WBY, who wants to hear voices but is not sure, or not for long, that he does? Who searches out situations in which contact with a spiritual Other might occur, listens, and believes, and at the same time doubts, tests, and examines the various possibilities of deception and self-deception? (72)

A tentative answer might be that we call such a person an aspiring mystic, or, tu use a more colloquial expression, a “wannabe prophet.” It is a label that can easily be applied to both Dante and Yeats. Ultimately, the visionary tone epitomized by *The Second Coming*, which Yeats took on around 1915, not coincidentally at about the same time he rekindled his interest in Dante, can be seen as his single greatest Dantean inheritance. Like Dante, he would come to regard the historical world around him as having reached an unprecedented peak of societal, political and spiritual degradation. Like Dante, he began to consider himself as the prophet of the end of an age (in his case, the end of the Christian age), and instilled in his work an ambiguous combination of redemptive messages and harsh, unforgiving, universal condemnation.

While some scholars tend to regard the old Yeats as an embittered old man, he would always maintain that, ever since the “spirits” first communicated with him, he felt “happy” and fulfilled (besides being cured of his rheumatisms!). In my view, many of Yeats’ often unpopular and even shocking stances, such as his approval of eugenics, can be interpreted within the framework of the ideas presented in *A Vision*. The *Daimonic* man was to possess the ability to simultaneously and unemotionally contemplate the
visions of Good and of Evil. In Shelley, Yeats detected a kind of “softness,” and “accused” him of being unable to accept the perpetual conflict at the base of worldly dynamics. Yeats saw Shelley clinging to an unjustifiable optimism, and stubbornly holding out hopes for the future of mankind, even in the face of most upsetting events, such as the suicide of his first wife or the loss of his children. Yeats, on the other hand, thought himself to possess, like Dante, the vision of Evil. Clearly, the rough beast’s “blank and pitiless” gaze, in *The Second Coming*, is also Yeats’ own gaze, so similar to the “cold eye” he would later commission for his epitaph through the poem *Under Ben Bulben*.2

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It is somewhat ironic that Yeats would come to be regarded as the Irish national poet, for after all, as George Mills Harper has explained, he never felt at home in the country whose cultural identity and political independence he contributed to build:

He assumed the mask of the outcast and the exile as a part of a conscious plan for “creating in myself a new character, a new pose.” In a very real sense Yeats’ most impressive creation was himself, and it may well be that the most significant and the most lasting of the assumptions which became part of the finished whole was the romantic dream or image of the lonely exile. Literal exile in his early days, nonetheless real because it was not imposed by political force, became in later life a kind of spiritual aloofness supported and strengthened by his conviction that he was a stranger and alone even among his own people. “I have made for myself,” he wrote in 1930, “an outlawed solitude” (1974, 12-3).

A case can be made, however, that also the “romantic dream or image of the lonely exile” is indebted to Dante, whose exile was arguably the defining circumstance in his life and

2 Upon Yeats’ death, the poem *Under Ben Bulben*, considered his artistic testament, was found on his desk still under revision. In it, Yeats expressed his desire to be buried in Sligo’s Drumcliff Churchyard, and included the lines he wished to be written on his grave: “Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by”
the triggering impulse behind his most important work. In canto 25 of *Paradiso*, Dante famously voices his longing for a return to his often condemned yet beloved hometown, revealing his undying hope that the *Comedy* might represent his ticket back into Florence:

(If e’er the sacred poem, that hath made / Both heaven and earth copartners in its toil, / And with lean abstinence through many a year, / Faded my brow, be destined to prevail / Over the cruelty, which bars me forth / Of the fair sheep-fold, where, a sleeping lamb, / The wolves set on and fain had worried me; / With other voice, and fleece of other grain, / I shall forthwith return; and, standing up / At my baptismal font, shall claim the wreath / Due to the poet’s temple […]. *Par* 25:1-9)

Yeats, likewise, built his connection to his homeland almost exclusively on the page, inventing for himself an Ireland that was a sort of an antithetical mirror of himself, a most detached embodiment of *otherness* with which, as a *Daimonic* man, he was bound to transcendentally reconcile. In the words of George Mills Harper, “the mask of the exile was necessary to his plan if he was to be among the moulders of a nation and ‘not made upon its mould’” (1973, 13).

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Compared to the vast majority of contemporary Dante scholars and critics, Yeats had one significant advantage: he was a competent astrologer. But while Yeats lived at a time when astrology had already been relegated to the ranks of pseudo-science, in Dante's time the discipline carried none of the negative connotations that have been associated with it lately. Not only was astrology a legitimate science, which coincided with—or,
more precisely, included—astronomy, and all its strictly physical and mathematical
calculations; it was in fact supreme among sciences, since it dealt with those celestial
mechanics considered to be the “machine” through which God enacted his universal
plan.\(^3\)

According to Richard Kay, Dante would have drawn abundantly from the works
of Albertus Magnus, Michael Scot, Guido Bonatti, and Ibrahim bin-Ezra—the “pillars” of
medieval astrology—and interspersed his poem (especially \textit{Paradiso}) with far more
astrological references and allusions than is generally recognized. Similar views are
shared by Alison Cornish, who argues that Dante has achieved an extraordinary
“synthesis of science and faith” precisely through the astrological discourse carried out
by the Comedy.

In a striking incorporation of scientific theory into received
religion, Dante puts Aristotle’s erotic cosmological engine into
his profession of faith. […] Unlike any before or since, Dante’s
consistent use of the stars as paragons or models for reading
thus produces a synthesis of science of faith, learning and love,
or, to invoke the twin goals of Ulysses, Dante’s condemned
alter ego, “knowledge and virtue” (144).

And even to readers unfamiliar with astrology, like myself, the integral role which astral
forces play within Dante's epic can be intuited, on the most evident level, by the fact that

\(^3\) Dante’s estimation of astrology is evident from a passage of \textit{Convivio}, where he defines it as the highest
and most noble of the physical sciences: “e questa più che alcuna delle sopra dette è nobile e alta per nobile
e alto subietto, ch’è dello movimento del cielo; e alta e nobile per la sua certezza, la quale è senza difetto, si
come quella che da perfettissimo e regolatissimo principio viene” (\textit{Conv} 2.13.30). In the Middle Ages
astrology was offered as an academic discipline and was part of the curriculum of the most prestigious
universities. According to Kay, in 1404 the University of Bologna offered a degree program in \textit{astrologia}
consisting of fifteen courses, four of which “are exclusively mathematical, seven more are strictly
astronomical, and only four courses are devoted to astrological texts” (1-2). Furthermore, Kay provides
evidence of the terms “astrology” and “astronomy” being used interchangeably, most notably in the
writings of Thomas Aquinas. Dante only used the term “astrology.”
all three *canticas* end with the word “stelle” (“stars”)⁴.

Within his divine poem, furthermore, Dante repeatedly voices the conviction that his predisposition for the supernatural voyage was derived directly from his zodiac, as were his intellectual and poetic abilities. This concept is expressed most clearly in canto 22 of *Paradiso*, a canto that even on the numerological plane (2-2, or XXII) lends itself perfectly to a homage to the constellation under which he was born, Gemini, the twins.

> S’io torni mai, letitore, a quel divoto triunfo per lo quale io piango spesso le mie peccata e ’l petto mi percuoto, tu non avresti in tanto tratto e messo nel foco il dito, in quant’io vidi ’l segno che segue il Tauro e fui dentro da esso. O gloriose stelle, o lume pregno di gran virtù, dal quale io riconosco tutto, qual che si sia, lo mio ingegno, con voi nasceva e s’ascondeva vosco quelli ch’è padre d’ogni mortal vita, quand’io senti’ di prima l’aere tòsco; e poi, quando mi fu grazia largita d’entrar ne l’alta rota che vi gira, la vostra region mi fu sortita.

(So, reader, as my hope is to return / Unto the holy triumph, for the which / I oft-time wail my sins, and smite my breast; / Thou hast been longer drawing out and thrusting / Thy finger in the fire, than I was, ere / The sign, that followeth Taurus, I beheld, / and

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⁴ Both Dante and Yeats also had very clearly defined ideas of cosmic cycles, and of their personal significance within them. Yeats thought he lived near the outer edge of the widening historical gyre, towards the end of the 2.000-year cycle coinciding with the Christian era. Dante, on the other hand, saw his own collocation within history as profoundly “central.” According to Guénon’s esoteric reading, ‘l’anno 1300 rappresenta per Dante la metà della sua vita (aveva allora 35 anni) e la metà dei tempi; citeremo di nuovo Benini: ‘preso da un pensiero straordinariamente egocentrico, Dante situò la sua visione a metà della vita del mondo—il movimento dei cieli era durato 65 secoli e fino a lui, e doveva durarne 65 dopo di lui—e, con un abile gioco, vi fece convergere gli anniversari esatti, in tre specie di anni astronomici, dei più grandi eventi della storia, e in una quarta specie l’anniversario del maggiore evento della sua vita personale’. Ciò che deve soprattutto catturare la nostra attenzione è la valutazione della durata totale del mondo—noi diremmo piuttosto del ciclo attuale: due volte 65 secoli, cioè 130 secoli o 13.000 anni, dei quali I 13 secoli trascorsi dall’inizio dell’era cristiana formano esattamente il decimo. Il numero 65 è del resto notevole in sé stesso: la somma delle sue cifre dà ancora 11, e per di più questo numero 11 si trova scomposto in 6 e 5, che sono I numeri simbolici rispettivi del Macrocosmo e del Microcosmo e che dante fa derivare dall’unità principale: ‘…così come raia / da l’un se si conosce, il cinque e ’l sei’. Infine traducendo 65 in lettere romane, come abbiamo fatto per 515, otteniamo LXV o, con la stessa inversione compiuta in precedenza, LVX, vale a dire la parola *Lux*” (Guénon 84-86).
enter’d its precinct. O glorious stars! / O light impregnate with exceeding virtue! To whom whate’er of genius lifeth me / above the vulgar, grateful I refer; / With ye the parent of all mortal life / arose and set, when I did first inhale / The Tuscan air; and afterwards when grace / vouchsafed me entrance to the lofty wheel / that in its orbs impels ye, fate decreed / my passage at your clime […] / Par. 22:107-20)

Here, the pilgrim has ascended to the heaven of Fixed Stars, and has in fact found himself “riding” the wheel of the zodiac, (not) coincidentally “inside” the constellation of Gemini. As he moves aboard the wheel together with his “glorious stars,” he looks back, invited by Beatrice, on what he has left behind. The spectacular landscape that extends below him includes the concentric orbits of all the heavens he has traversed to that point, and, incredibly distant, the Earth.

Interestingly, the pilgrim’s re-conjunction with his astrological sign coincides with the final explicit address to reader, seemingly suggesting a sort of reconnection between Dante the author and Dante the character, who are also, of course, bound in a relationship of twinship. But—what is most significant to my discussion—the scene appears also to be describing the reconciliation of the being with his truest essence, which Dante would have thought to be defined by astral influxes. In yet another limpid structural symmetry, the protagonist of this extraordinary voyage takes one last glance at his physical dwelling and place of birth—the Earth, where his journey has started in the dark forest of sin, and which he now sees impossibly distant—just as he comes to inhabit his astral “regione” of birth—the constellation of Gemini. This can be seen as the acme of that journey towards a completely new “situation” alluded to by Pinsky, in the passage I have quoted in the introduction. But it is also, in Yeatsian terms, the completion of the

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5 While in recent years, with the advent of reader-reception theories, an extremely large number of passages in the Comedy have been interpreted as establishing a link between the author and his audience, until recently scholars only classified as addresses to the reader those passages where the narrator calls directly on his readers, with phrases such as “O reader,” or “Oh you who…” Interestingly, these “explicit” addresses to the reader are 22, the last one of which coming in canto 22 of Paradiso. For a discussion on this aspect, see Eric Auerbach’s essay “Dante’s Addresses to the reader.”
self’s progression towards the anti-self, the moment in which *Unity of Being* is achieved.

In a striking passage from one of his essays, Yeats provides valuable insight into his highly personal concepts of faith and of Christ:

> I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality, that the natural and the supernatural are knit together, that to escape a new fanaticism we must study a new science; at that moment Europeans may find something attractive in a Christ posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism, not shut off in dead history, but flowing, concrete, phenomenal. I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ [...] is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body. (*E&I* 518).

It should not surprise, at this point, that Dante is once again brought into the picture. Even more interestingly, in the *Divine Comedy* it is precisely following the scene I have just discussed that the pilgrim has his first beatific vision of Christ, in canto 23 of *Paradiso*. A possible conclusion which can be drawn is that such a revelation can only happen once the reunion between the being and “his” stars has taken place.

If Dante was made into the truest paradigm of the *Daimonic* man—he for whom *Unity of Being* is “easiest”—perhaps it helped that he was the only Phase Seventeen poet with Yeats’ same astrological sign. Foster has observed that “Phase Seventeen [of *A Vision*] is where WBY located both Dante and himself, destined by astrology to be superpoets,” but does not elaborate on this interesting point (286). Dante and Yeats were both Gemini, and in fact they might have actually been born on the same day. Dante’s exact birthday is unknown, but is placed somewhere between May 15th and June 15th of 1265. Yeats must have surely been aware that he was born *exactly* 600 years later on June
13th of 1865. From the point of view of astrological iconography, the twins are an evident symbol of the Yeatsian duality of being and its symmetrical opposite (Will and Mask, or the being and the Daimon). Given this almost frightening series of “coincidences,” it is by no means a stretch to say that Yeats may very well have seen in himself and Dante the ideal twins of European literature—the two über-poets of the Christian age.

While Yeats would always recognize his debt to the modern Anglophone tradition he was obviously a part of, it seems unlikely that in his maturity he would still think of himself as a Romantic poet. Rather, much of his later work, which even stylistically and aesthetically distanced itself increasingly from its earlier romantic tones, suggests that he perceived his role as something radically different. Yeats was—and he knew it—both a mystic and a skeptic questioner. He was a philosopher and an astrologer. He was a poet and a meta-poet. He was an unrequited lover who eventually attained his revelation through a woman in a desexualized relationship. He was an unconventional Christian and a homeless politician. He was part Icarus, part Cassandra, and part Job. He was a creature of separation, an exile by nature. And yet he was a seeker of unity, be it unity of state, of language, or Unity of Being. He truly was, in more ways than one, the second coming of Dante.

While purely speculative and impossible to prove, the placing of Dante’s birthday on the 13th of June would give ground to some interesting numerological considerations: Firstly, 1 and 3 are the numbers which identify God, who is one and triune. Secondly, they are the numbers around which the Divine Comedy is constructed, both as a text and as a narrative. As Vittorio Sermonti illustrates, “l’essenza della Commedia è il numero tre, ma la sua attuazione, che procede per incessante proliferazione del tre nei suoi multipli, si compie con l’imposizione del numero uno. Come ogni canto infila una serie variabile di terzine, arginata da un verso ‘rilevato’ o scempio, così il poema infila tre serie di trentatre canti, con la giunta di uno” (2 Sermonti 309-10). Finally, 1 and 3 are the only integers present in the year of the Jubilee 1300, during which the pilgrim voyage takes place. Given these considerations, one can assume that Yeats may have at least hypothesized Dante’s birthday to have occurred on the same date as his, exactly 600 years earlier (with 600 being also an obvious multiple of three).
ILLUSTRATIONS:

FIGURE 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante’s Dream*. 
FIGURE 2. William Blake, *Geryon*. 

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