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THE FALCONER IS DEAD: REASSESSING REPRESENTATIONS OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

Matthew Fogarty

In a letter addressed to Lady Gregory on December 26, 1902, William Butler Yeats first acknowledged the onset of what would become a lifelong fascination with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy: "Dear Friend," he confesses:

I have written to you little and badly of late I am afraid for the truth is you have a rival in Nietzsche, the strong enchanter. I have read him so much that I have made my eyes bad again. They were getting well it seemed. Nietzsche completes Blake & has the same roots—I have not read anything with so much excitement, since I got to love Morris's stories which have the same curious astringent joy (*CL3* 284)

Less than three months later, Yeats expressed comparable sentiments to the New York lawyer, John Quinn, who had recently gifted him all of the available English translations of Nietzsche's books:

I do not know how I can thank you too much for the three volumes on Nietzsche. I had never read him before, but find that I had come to the same conclusions on several cardinal matters. He is exaggerated and violent but has helped me very greatly to build up in my mind an imagination of the heroic life. His books have come to me at exactly the right moment, for I have planned out a series of plays which are all intended to be an expression of that life which seem[s] to me the kind of proud hard gift giving joyousness (*CL3* 313)¹

The magnitude of Nietzsche's influence on Yeats has been well documented. However, those who have examined the specific nature and extent of this influence often note that Nietzsche's writing afforded Yeats a certain validation for values and ideas to which he already subscribed. As Otto Bohlmann succinctly puts it, Nietzsche provided "substantiation and a stable base for ideas Yeats might have felt unsure of."² This is not to denigrate in any way the scope of Nietzsche's importance to Yeats. Indeed, Conor Cruise O'Brien has even gone so far as to suggest that Yeats "might never have developed into a great poet without Nietzschean permissions."³ But the complexity surrounding the matter of Yeats and Nietzsche's intertextual relationship serves as a timely

reminder of the fraught theoretical terrain that invariably surrounds the question of authorial influence.

With this complexity in mind, this essay revisits the function that eternal recurrence performs in Yeats's middle-period occultism and re-evaluates its compatibility with the Nietzschean mode of eternal recurrence with which it has traditionally been aligned. It should be noted that there are representations of eternal recurrence in Yeats's later works that endorse the life-affirming potential that is in many ways the quintessential hallmark of Nietzsche's philosophy. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," for example, the speaker strikes a defiant and affirmative note: "I am content to live it all again / And yet again if it be life to pitch / Into the frogspawn of a blind man's ditch" (VP 479: 57–59). Likewise, in "Lapis Lazuli," there is a certain tragic joy to be discerned from the speaker's contention that "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay" (VP 566: 35–36). However, the cyclical historical model that Yeats presents in *A Vision* relies upon a historiological construct that is far more deterministic than the sentiments expressed in these later works. Over the past fifty years, those who have explored how this historical model manifests in Yeats's literary work have repeatedly turned to "The Second Coming."⁴ Indeed, John Harrison has rightly pointed out that Yeats's "cyclical view of history" is not strictly compatible with Nietzsche's life-affirming antecedent.⁵ However, I would argue that Harrison's distinction does not go far enough. Focusing on *A Vision* and "The Second Coming," this essay demonstrates that Yeats's historical metanarrative and the occult principles that bolster it are fundamentally incompatible with Nietzsche's philosophical values.

The theory of eternal recurrence is arguably the most elusive of the many elusive ideas that feature in Nietzsche's philosophy. In its most traditional form, the theory proposes that, "whatever in fact happens, has happened infinitely many times and will re-happen an infinity of times, *exactly* in the same way in which it happens now."⁶ Its origins can be traced to pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, Buddhism, and Middle Eastern pagan religions.⁷ As a non-theistic cosmological hypothesis, it requires neither a beginning nor an end; or, to put it in Aristotelian terms, a hypothesis which requires neither a prime mover nor a final *telos*. With respect to Nietzsche's philosophy, there are passages in the *Nachlass*—the posthumously published notes he compiled between 1883 and 1888—that contemplate this theory's potential to function as a viable cosmological hypothesis. But these reflections are tempered by the persistent sense that Nietzsche identified a hitherto unknown and incredibly powerful axiological potential in all of this.⁸ Indeed, Alexander Nehamas has observed that one must at least attempt to demonstrate that such a hypothesis might be true if it is to be regarded as a genuine philosophical proposition, and Nietzsche never does so in his published work. Turning to *Thus Spake*

Zarathustra (1883–1885), Nehamas further notes that Nietzsche’s prophetic title character never actually suggests that this theory might function as a viable cosmological hypothesis.⁹ In the passage where eternal recurrence is most explicitly discussed, it is, in fact, the surrounding animals who regurgitate what they understand Zarathustra to have taught:

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being. Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built. Everything parts, everything greets every other thing again; eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself.¹⁰

Considered in the broader context of Nietzsche’s philosophy, these animals appear the embodiment of the “Nietzschean Herd,” both in appearance and in their pliant acceptance of a cosmological hypothesis that Zarathustra promptly dismisses as “a hurdy gurdy song.”¹¹

The only other passage in Nietzsche’s published work that discusses the theory of eternal recurrence in any detail is imbued with comparable ambiguity. In this instance, Ivan Soll observes that “the entire question of its veracity is neatly side-stepped by presenting it not as a truth but as a thought experiment.”¹² Published in *The Gay Science* (1882), this passage begins with an all-important question:

What if some day or night a demon were to [. . .] say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and [. . .] all in the same succession and sequence.” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?¹³

The ambiguity generated by this non-committal prompt is compounded by the question that immediately succeeds it: “Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’”¹⁴ Although a statement then follows, it incorporates yet another question: “If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this again and innumerable times again?’ would lie on your actions as the greatest weight!”¹⁵ Indeed, it concludes by posing one final question to the reader: “Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”¹⁶ Much like the prophetic Zarathustra, then, Nietzsche’s demon narrator never proposes that the theory of eternal recurrence might operate as a viable cosmological hypothesis. For these reasons, Nietzschean

scholars in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries almost univocally propose that Nietzsche reformulates the cosmological iteration of eternal recurrence to function as an axiological imperative: If you had to live the same life over and over again, would you be happy to make the same choices, or to adhere to the same value systems that underpin these choices?

This understanding of Nietzschean eternal recurrence can be traced to concerted post-war efforts to reclaim his philosophy from the taint of his posthumous association with Nazism.¹⁷ It was first advanced by Georges Bataille in *Sur Nietzsche* (1945):

I think the idea of eternal return should be reversed. It's not a promise of infinite and lacerating repetitions: It's what makes moments caught up in the immanence of return suddenly appear as ends. In every system, don't forget, these moments are viewed and given as means: Every moral system proclaims that "each moment of life ought to be *motivated*." Return *unmotivates* the moment and frees life of ends—thus first of all destroys it.¹⁸

The emphasis Bataille places on these ethical dimensions laid much of the intellectual groundwork for Gilles Deleuze's 1962 contention that Nietzsche's eternal recurrence establishes an ethical principle as rigorous as Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.¹⁹ Deleuze argues that, "as an ethical thought, the eternal return is the new formulation of the practical synthesis: *whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return*."²⁰ However, this reading of Nietzschean eternal recurrence has largely been ignored by those who have written about the potential correlations between this aspect of his philosophy and Yeats's occult speculation. For example, David Thatcher proposes that Yeats's interest in eternal recurrence was magnified by "Nietzsche's reformulation of it and from the attitude he adopted."²¹ Likewise, Erich Heller argues that Yeats's *A Vision* "owes something to Nietzsche's vision of [. . .] Eternal Recurrence."²² Frances Nesbitt Oppel suggests that, as Yeats "charts his own system" in *A Vision*, he tries "to follow Nietzsche into the paradox of Eternal Return, which demolishes sequential or linear time altogether."²³ Patrick Bridgewater claims that it was "Eternal Recurrence, as announced in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, that caught and held Yeats's attention."²⁴ For his part, Otto Bohlmann turns to *The Gay Science* to provide evidence of the supposed affinity between Nietzsche's and Yeats's engagement with the theory of eternal recurrence. He claims that Nietzsche "speaks of a demon who whispers the prophecy that your life as you lived it 'will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence [. . .] The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!'"²⁵ Although Nietzsche does use the term "prophecy" once when referring to theory of eternal recurrence in the *Nachlass*,²⁶ it appears

somewhat dubious to reformulate this passage's opening question as a statement and designate it a "prophecy." In doing so, Bohlmann jettisons the critical ambiguity generated by the demon narrator's initial utterance. It is, perhaps, understandable that Thatcher and Bridgewater do not consider the "thought experiment" argument. Both of their studies were published before Soll's 1973 re-evaluation of Nietzschean recurrence. It is more difficult to account for Bohlmann's and Heller's reluctance to acknowledge these developments in Nietzschean studies, as their respective works were published in 1982 and 1990. There is no question that Yeats identified a certain philosophical justification for his occult speculation within the depths of Nietzsche's philosophy. It is deeply problematic, however, to insinuate that Yeats's justification is well founded in Nietzsche's philosophy.

In the decades prior to 1969, when George Mills Harper and Katherine Raine began exploring Yeats's extant occult papers, it was generally assumed that these mystical interests could be separated from his literary works.²⁷ This longstanding critical consensus now appears rather extraordinary, especially in light of the fact that Yeats openly acknowledged the abiding relevance of these occult interests in his 1921 preface to *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*:

Goethe has said that the poet needs all philosophy, but that he must keep it out of his work. After the first few poems I came into possession of Michael Robartes' exposition of the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominum* of Giraldus, and in the excitement of arranging and editing could no more keep out philosophy than could Goethe himself at certain periods of his life. (VP 853)

Yeats is referring to the "philosophy" that was subsequently published in the 1925 edition of *A Vision*, in which he claimed to have gleaned these insights from a mysterious "Arabian traveller."²⁸ In the heavily revised 1937 edition, Yeats provides an alternative account of this philosophy's origins:

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of my life explaining and piecing together those sentences.²⁹

Yeats maintained that these ethereal entities chose to communicate using the terminology and themes that featured in his earlier occult exposition, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), and that this accounts for the similarity of these two texts. Regardless of whether or not one finds this proposition credible, the

system that appears in *A Vision* represents the culmination of Yeats's lifelong interest in all things phantasmagorical.

These occult interests were initially sparked by his relatives and their servants at the Pollexfen family home at Merville in County Sligo, who were unified by their infatuation with the paranormal, despite their disparate social backgrounds (*Life* 1 20–21). By the time he reached his early twenties, Yeats's interest in the supernatural had broadened to encompass strands of Eastern mysticism, which he first encountered in A. P. Sinnet's *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883).³⁰ Shortly after receiving a copy of the latter text in late 1884 from his aunt, Isabella Pollexfen Varley, Yeats discovered the Dublin Hermetic Society. Popular among many important figures in the Irish intelligentsia, such as AE (George Russell), Eglinton, Charles Johnston, Charles Weekes, and Claude Falls Wright, as well as scholars of Eastern philosophy such as Mir Alaud Ali, Professor of Persian, Arabic, and Hindustani at Trinity College Dublin, the Society provided a space for the exchange of ideas derived from Eastern schools of thought (*Life* 1 46–47). In April 1886, the Dublin Hermetic Society became the Dublin Theosophical Society, that is, an official branch of the Theosophy movement co-founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875. After moving back to London in 1887, Yeats became a member of Blavatsky's London Lodge, also known as the "Blavatsky Lodge," before joining the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890.³¹ Where the quasi-religious Theosophy movement drew inspiration from a heady mixture of Neoplatonism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a secret society dedicated to the study and performance of magic and occult practices. Yeats also discovered various modes of spiritualism while living in London, such as the automatic writing that would later give rise to *A Vision*.³² To add to this already potent and eclectic range of occult influences, one might also point to Yeats's familiarity with Rosicrucianism, Cabbalism, Gnosticism, alchemy, astrology, and the Tarot, to say nothing of his interest in the Western mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg, Jakob Böhme, and William Blake.³³

Between 1925 and 1937, while Yeats immersed himself in a range of Eastern beliefs and practices, he also familiarized himself with the work of Giambattista Vico, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Oswald Spengler.³⁴ Indeed, Yeats acknowledges the many similarities between his and Spengler's historical metanarratives in the preface to the 1937 edition of *A Vision*. He does, nonetheless, contend that his paranormal communicators shared this "symbolical map of history" with him before the 1918 publication of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.³⁵ The section titled "Dove and Swan," in which Yeats sets out this historical metanarrative, was one of only two sections that were republished more or less untouched in the second edition. This is not really surprising, however, as Yeats would have found little in these Eastern schools of thought, or in the works of

Vico, Schopenhauer, and Spengler, to have prompted a reconsideration of this historical determinism.

In addition to appearing in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*,³⁶ the collection in which Yeats underscored the significance of the philosophy that bolsters this historical model, the esoteric discourse of *A Vision* makes its presence felt from the outset of “The Second Coming”: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (VP 401: 1–3). In the context of *A Vision*, Yeats uses the term “gyre” to denote the two interpenetrating cones that form the nucleus of his elaborate amalgamation of various strands in Western mysticism. For example, he acknowledges the correlations between his gyres and Swedenborg’s contention that “all physical reality, the universe as a whole, every solar system, every atom, is a double cone.”³⁷ Yeats draws additional inspiration from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), which was principally conceived as a riposte to Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* (1758). Blake challenged Swedenborg’s steadfast adherence to the primacy of orthodox moral structures, and indeed the mutual exclusivity of perceived opposites. Instead, Blake proposes that conflictual forces are “necessary to human existence.”³⁸ This Blakean influence makes itself most keenly felt as Yeats assigns the qualities of “Concord” and “Discord” to each of his gyres.

Even at this most basic level, the principles that underpin Yeats’s design are incompatible with Nietzsche’s philosophical values. Writing on the potential value of “mystical knowledge,” Nietzsche plainly stipulates that such “explanations are thought to be deep; the truth is they are not even shallow.”³⁹ There may be certain parallels between Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian energies and the Blakean contraries that Yeats associates with his concordant and discordant gyres.⁴⁰ As Charles I. Armstrong has noted, these parallels are likely attributable to Yeats’s and Nietzsche’s familiarity with the pre-Socratic philosophies of Heraclitus and Empedocles, both of whom placed great emphasis on the metaphysical significance of contraries.⁴¹ However, Nietzsche would have objected most strenuously to Yeats’s somewhat Hegelian attempt to systematize these conflictual energies into what he called a “logical form.”⁴² The structural arrangement of this logical symbiosis is also at odds with Nietzsche’s philosophy insofar as it designates the concordant gyre as “primary” and its discordant opposite as “antithetical.” As Yeats puts it:

the subjective cone is called that of the antithetical tincture because it is achieved and defended by continual conflict with its opposite; the objective cone is called that of the primary tincture because whereas subjectivity [. . .] tends to separate man from man, objectivity brings us back to the mass where we begin.⁴³

This idea that an individual might begin their journey on the “primary” side of Yeats’s schema and eventually return there having traversed the antithetical terrain of the opposing gyre implies that the subject’s natural position is akin to that which Nietzsche repeatedly renounces as herd mentality. In spite of these fundamental incongruities, it has long been believed that Yeats’s occult speculation in *A Vision* is compatible with Nietzschean eternal recurrence. For instance, Bridgewater has proposed that Yeats was attracted by “the many parallels between Nietzsche’s work and the occult literature with which he was already familiar.”⁴⁴ Bohlmann stretches the point further by claiming that “many of the premises” which underpin this “intricate system [. . .] clearly find much precedent in Nietzsche, who lends immediacy to ancient notions.”⁴⁵ Notwithstanding Harrison’s rejection of the perceived affiliations between Yeats’s and Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, these misapprehensions concerning the similarities between Yeats’s occultism and Nietzsche’s philosophy have stood unchallenged for over thirty-five years.

Although Bridgewater and Bohlmann do acknowledge that Yeats’s system is more elaborate than the cosmological version of eternal recurrence which they attribute to Nietzsche, they do not consider how these elaborations render this system at odds with Nietzsche’s philosophical principles. This is especially true of Yeats’s reliance on Böhmean mysticism. Yeats’s deployment of the term “tincture” alerts us to the influence of Böhme, for whom it designates a miraculous, life-giving energy that facilitates all growth and transformation.⁴⁶ It is ultimately this miraculous energy that transforms Swedenborg’s “double cone” into a spiralling double vortex of perpetual motion that facilitates growth and transformation within the contrasting parameters set by Blake’s intimately related contraries. With regard to “The Second Coming,” it is Böhme’s tincture that keeps the Yeatsian gyres “turning and turning” (VP 401: 1). However, Nietzsche was characteristically firm in his insistence that “the believer in magic and miracles reflects on how to *impose a law on nature*—: and, in brief, the religious cult is the outcome of this reflection.”⁴⁷ Indeed, he was equally forthright in his dismissal of astrological practices and the foolish pride of those who believe “the starry firmament revolves around the fate of man.”⁴⁸ And yet, Yeats further complicates this amalgamation of Western mysticism by setting “a row of numbers upon the sides,” denoting “a classification [. . .] of every possible movement of thought and life, [which] correspond to the phases of the moon.”⁴⁹ Yeats called this metaphysical construct the “Great Wheel” and proposed that every individual is preordained to pass through these twenty-eight stages of incarnation. As Ellmann explains:

the soul may be said to pass through all the phases within a single lifetime, beginning with the completely unindividualized or objective state of infancy

(phase 1), rising to the full individuality or subjectivity of maturity (phase 15), and sinking back at last into childhood and mere oblivion (phase 28), where it dies and then after a period begins the round once more.⁵⁰

This suggests that each individual is effectively manoeuvred through these twenty-eight phases of incarnation, ensuring that all their lived experiences correspond to a process that sees them pass from the primary, objective state, through the antithetical, subjective state, and ultimately returned to the primary, objective state, where the cycle begins anew.

Critics who separate “The Second Coming” from the philosophical backdrop set out in *A Vision* have tended to interpret the poem as a relatively straightforward meditation upon the oscillating socio-political climate of interwar Europe. Certainly, the poem “responds to and participates in the pan-European militarization of politics that put an end to nineteenth-century liberalism,” as Seamus Deane suggests.⁵¹ This reading is borne out by the topical allusions that feature in the early drafts. As Helen Vendler has observed, these include references to the French and Russian revolutions, and possibly the militant unrest in early twentieth-century Ireland.⁵² However, the specificity of Yeats’s “response,” and the precise nature of this “participation,” comes far more sharply into focus when the poem is set against this philosophical backdrop. The significance of this backdrop is underscored by the disparate interpretations of the poem’s “falcon” metaphor advanced by Ellmann and Denis Donoghue. The former argues that Yeats “was careful not to require knowledge of his prose [and] made it possible to suppose that the gyre is merely the falcon’s flight.”⁵³ Donoghue cautions against discounting the importance of *A Vision*, however, noting that such readings tend to pay disproportionate attention to the poem’s socio-political context and reductively translate “the falconry into specifically political terms.”⁵⁴ The key difference is that Ellmann perceives the “falcon’s flight” as being emblematic of Yeats’s gyres; whereas Donoghue rightly points out that these gyres are signified by the act of “falconry.” This distinction is not insignificant, nor is it a simple matter of semantics. These contrasting interpretations point toward the time-honored philosophical question of free will versus determinism. By Ellmann’s estimation, the falcon remains in control of its own destiny as the gyre is generated by the falcon’s flight. But when the act of falconry is associated with the image of the gyre, as Donoghue suggests, it operates as a powerful metaphor of humankind’s unawareness of the ordinance this casual configuration exerts. Hence, “the falcon cannot hear the falconer” (*VP* 401:2). Falcons are renowned for their flight speed and capacity to rapidly shift direction. And yet, these majestic birds are routinely trained to hunt upon command. From the vantage point of *A Vision*, the relationship that binds the unknowing human subject to the ordinance of the Great Wheel shares a great deal with the affiliation that binds the falcon to its falconer.

Donoghue's clarification becomes all the more significant when the implications of Yeats's philosophical conjecture are considered, not only at the microcosmic level that relates to every individual's lived experience, but also at the macrocosmic level that applies this cyclical process to the collective history and cumulative fate of all humankind. This is the "symbolical map of history" that Yeats republished largely without revision in the 1937 edition of *A Vision*.⁵⁵ He calls this macrocosmic version of the Great Wheel the "Historical Cones." This construct implies that all of humankind's known history is nothing more than a carefully choreographed and repetitive oscillation between these primary and antithetical gyres. Like some prodigious square dance, doomed to eternally repeat itself, these macrocosmic cycles, or "Great Years," are directed by the same amalgamation of mystical and astrological principles that comprise the Great Wheel. As Matthew Gibson explains, the term "Great Year" was used by both Neoplatonists and Stoics to describe a "continuum in history, computed to be either 36,000 or around 26,000 years long, [. . .] involving the alignment and return of the planets to the same point."⁵⁶ Whatever about the overall length of this astrological cycle, Yeats notes that the two thousand years of Christianity is "an entire wheel," much "like the two thousand years [. . .] that went before it."⁵⁷ The apocalyptic imagery described in "The Second Coming" bears witness to the decline of the two-thousand-year Christian cycle. In fact, the "twenty centuries of stony sleep" (19–22) described by the poem's speaker corresponds with Yeats's contention that the "Christian era, like the two thousand years [. . .] that went before it, is an entire wheel."⁵⁸ If one follows Ellmann's lead, assuming that the falcon's flight is emblematic of the turning gyre, it seems reasonable to conclude that the contemporaneous collapse of European order is manifested in the falcon's apparent incapacity to heed the falconer's directives. When set against the historical metanarrative constructed in *A Vision*, however, this collapse appears entirely analogous with the necessary chaos that is ushered in with the dawning of the antithetical era. From this perspective, chaos does not reign supreme in "The Second Coming" because "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" (*VP* 401:2). This phrase instead refers to humankind's obliviousness to the fact that this chaos has been predestined to occur as the concord initiated by the primary gyre gives way to its antithetical opposite. As the speaker succinctly puts it, "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (*VP* 401:3).

While acknowledging that "Yeats himself liked to talk as if it made everything predestined," Ellmann argues against a fatalistic reading of Yeats's design and insists that one may still "choose between several alternatives."⁵⁹ In theory, this might be true of the microcosmic existential level that Yeats associates with his Great Wheel. However, this non-fatalist reading simply cannot function at the macrocosmic historical level that Yeats associates with the Great Years. Should one possess the capacity to make meaningful life

choices, as Ellmann proposes, these choices would invariably, by their very definition, possess the capacity to alter the uniformity that Yeats ascribes to the recurring historical cycles that comprise the Great Year. If, for example, a substantial mass of subjects freely chose to adhere to “primary” principles during an “antithetical” age, could it still be characterized by the values Yeats associates with the antithetical gyre? Indeed, it was the matter of the system’s fatalism that elicited the strongest criticism from Yeats’s friend, George Russell (AE):

I feel to follow in the wake of Mr. Yeats’s mind is to surrender oneself to the idea of Fate and to part from the idea of Free Will. I know how much our life is fated once life animates the original cell, the fountain from which the body is jetted; how much bodily conditions affect or even determine our thought, but I still believe in Free Will and that, to use the language of the astrologers, it is always possible for a man to rise above his stars. Now Mr. Yeats would have me believe that a great wheel turns ceaselessly, and that I and all others drop into inevitable groove after groove. It matters not my virtue to-day, my talent which I burnish, the wheel will move me to another groove where I am predestined to look on life as that new spiritual circumstance determines, and my will is only free to accept or rebel, but not to alter what is fated.⁶⁰

We would do well to take Russell’s misgivings under advisement; he was certainly no stranger to the occult circles in which Yeats moved.⁶¹ More than this, however, the determinism that he identifies at the nucleus of Yeats’s metaphysical configuration appears to permeate the form and meaning of “The Second Coming.”

For all its descriptions of the impending terror that will arise in conjunction with the dawning of the antithetical age, there is little variation from the decasyllabic metre established in the poem’s opening lines. In fact, where there is a slight deviation in the first stanza from the iambic pentameter that features predominantly throughout, this deviation is specifically contrived to establish a certain parallelism between the poem’s form and content. The initial foot in the poem’s opening line, “Turning” is a trochaic inversion of the dominant pattern in the lines that follow. As a consequence, the textual form works in tandem with the “Turning” it describes (VP 401:1). This structured uniformity persists even while the speaker insists that “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (VP 401:3). In this instance, the semicolon fuses two separate, yet closely related clauses using a strict iambic pentameter that flouts the line’s expressed meaning. This forges an alliance that is, within the context of the poem, as symmetrical as it is disruptive because this dissolution of order and descent into chaos is not in itself chaotic. The poem’s formal structure never relinquishes its power over the content; it coaxes stealthily and from a distance, much as the causal

configuration represented by Yeats's falconry looms ever constrictively and yet beyond the comprehension of his falcon. This decasyllabic pattern is sustained throughout the five lines that complete the first stanza, where the speaker's cool and detached register further infuses these apocalyptic descriptions with a certain sense of inevitability: "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" (VP 401:4–8). It is also telling that the spondaic feet at the beginning of line four stresses that it is "mere anarchy" that "is loosed upon the world." Indeed, this anarchy is "mere" precisely because this dissolution of order is an entirely natural and preordained by-product of Yeats's antithetical age. In addition to the quartet of slant rhymes that lend the first four lines of this octave a loose sense of stability, "gyre," "falconer," "world," and "hold" (VP 401:1–4), Vendler notes that this first stanza is "constructed in a series of half-lines, separated by medial breaks, in which the 'left' half represents the dissolution of form, and the 'right' half represents the threatened world order":

Chaos	Order
Turning and turning	in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear	the falconer
Things fall apart	the centre 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. ⁶²	

Even the violent, oceanic imagery that Yeats uses in this stanza implies the presence of some underlying gravitational force; a force strong enough to orchestrate and conduct this ostensibly spontaneous implosion.

As Deane proposes, it is possible to determine "what the falcon, the tide, the ceremony, the best, [and] the worst" refer to from the surrounding poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.⁶³ Nevertheless, the meanings ascribed to these poetic components take on greater significance if one is familiar with the version of eternal recurrence that Yeats outlines in *A Vision*. The second and final stanza of the "The Second Coming" also exploits the radical sense of oscillation that characterizes this mode of historical determinism. Drawing on the intertextuality set up by the poem's title, which evokes the day of judgement traditionally associated with the return of Jesus Christ, this stanza imbues the "rocking cradle" and the town of "Bethlehem" with all the ungodly menace that Yeats ascribes to his antithetical age. This is not "the glorious Second

Coming of Christ,” as Vendler succinctly puts it, “but a reprise, in grotesque form, of a new energy at Bethlehem.”⁶⁴ Deane has rightly observed that this poem engages with the contrasting themes of “ending” and “beginning” in a way that problematizes the distinction between the two.⁶⁵ But the origin of this difficulty is twofold. On the one hand, it arises because the poem’s speaker refuses to draw a value-based distinction between the contrasting principles that will reign supreme in the disparate historical cycles that clash in Yeats’s text. On the other hand, it remains elusive because, for Yeats, these cycles are just equivalent constituents of an all-encompassing whole. Much like the first stanza, the poem’s second stanza adheres to a certain formal consistency; in fact, its fourteen decasyllabic lines comprise a variation on the traditional sonnet, composed in a predominantly blank verse, that parallels the carefully controlled chaos of the first stanza. In this way, the formal synchronicity that underpins the apocalyptic imagery conjured up in this second stanza further mirrors the underlying causal force that orchestrates the fate of humankind in accordance with Yeats’s historical metanarrative.

It is certainly true that Yeats’s “shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” (*VP* 401:14–15) is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s “blond beast.” As Patrick Bixby explains, this creaturely signifier is “associated with everything from the dauntless heroes of ancient Greek culture to the predatory instincts of the lion” across the breadth of Nietzsche’s writing.⁶⁶ However, the determinist iteration of eternal recurrence that underpins the historical metanarrative that Yeats communicates in *A Vision*, and makes its present felt at the levels of form and content in “The Second Coming,” does not align with the axiological reformulation of eternal recurrence that modern and contemporary scholars associate with Nietzsche. Notwithstanding the ostensible similarities between Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian energies and the Blakean contraries that feature in Yeats’s cyclical design, it is difficult to substantiate Bridgewater’s and Bohlmann’s contention that there are many parallels between Nietzsche’s philosophy and Yeats’s middle-period occultism. If indeed there are correlations between Nietzsche’s philosophy and Yeats’s occult speculation in *A Vision*, they are akin to those described by Harold Bloom as “misprision,” insofar as Yeats misreads Nietzsche “to clear and imaginative space” for himself.⁶⁷

In addition to the incompatibilities previously noted, it is difficult to reconcile this occult speculation with one of Nietzsche’s most basic and immediately recognisable philosophical principles, “God is dead.” This proclamation of God’s death does not only reject *all* monotheistic claims to absolute authority; it rejects all claims to absolute authority, whether they are made in the name of religion, science, morality, politics, or quasi-religious occult speculation. In his 1873 essay, “David Strauss, the Confessor and

Writer,” Nietzsche admonished those who wished to inscribe a “new faith” by “constructing the broad universal highway of the future”; in fact, he equated such efforts equated to those of a “trundling hippopotamus” whose “growling and barking had changed into the proud accents of the founder of a religion.”⁶⁸ Just one year later, in an essay entitled “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche warns that the individual who learns:

to bend his back and bow his head before the “power of history” at last nods “Yes” like a Chinese mechanical doll to every power, whether it be government or public opinion or a numerical majority, and moves his limbs to the precise rhythm at which any “power” whatever pulls the strings.⁶⁹

By the time Nietzsche published *Human All Too Human* in 1878, he had already rejected the ascetic determinism espoused by his one-time mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer, and concluded that one “must remove the motley leopard-skin” of Schopenhauerian metaphysics “if one is to discover the real moralist genius behind it.”⁷⁰ All of these remarks appeared in Nietzsche’s writing before he proclaims God’s death for the first time in *The Gay Science* (1882), in which he further cautions that “there may still for millennia be caves in which they show [God’s] shadow. – And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well.”⁷¹ It is not simply that eternal recurrence holds a different significance for Yeats and Nietzsche, as Harrison observes in his analysis of “The Second Coming.” The version of eternal recurrence that makes its presence felt in this poem stands in diametrical opposition to the life-affirming potential that Nietzsche wishes to unlock with all these denunciations of claims to absolute authority. Indeed, for Nietzsche, even the shadow of God-like omnipotence that manifests in the form of Yeats’s falconer is dead.

NOTES

- 1 It may be the case that Yeats did not read Nietzsche’s work in a focused and intense fashion prior to 1902. But he almost certainly encountered the German’s ideas no later than April 1896, when his short story, “Rosa Alchemica,” appeared in the April issue of *The Savoy* magazine alongside the first of Havelock Ellis’s trilogy of essays on Nietzsche’s life and work. See “Rosa Alchemica: A Story by W. B. Yeats,” in *The Savoy*, No. 2, ed. Arthur Symons (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), 56-70. In fact, two of Yeats’s essays on “William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy” appeared in the magazine’s July and August issues, alongside Ellis’s subsequent essays on Nietzsche. See “William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy: His Opinions Upon Art (The First of Three Articles by W. B. Yeats),” in *The Savoy*, No. 3, ed. Arthur Symons (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), 41-57, and “William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy: His Opinions Upon Dante (The Second of Three Articles by W. B. Yeats),” in *The Savoy*, No. 4, ed. Arthur Symons

- (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), 25–41. URL: <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=savoy1896>
- 2 Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of the Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 7.
 - 3 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance: The T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at Eliot College in the University of Kent, at Canterbury, November, 1969* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 63.
 - 4 See, for example, Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 223–43, Denis Donoghue, *Yeats* (London: Fontana, 1971), 90–94, Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 172–81, Peter Hühn, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry: Studies in English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century*, trans. Alastair Matthews (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 177–86, and Patrick Bixby, “Frightful Doctrines: Nietzsche, Ireland, and the Great War.” *Modernist Cultures* 13, no. 3 (2018): 334–38.
 - 5 John R. Harrison, “What rough beast? Yeats, Nietzsche, and Historical Rhetoric in the ‘The Second Coming,’” *Papers on Language and Literature* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 373.
 - 6 Arthur Danto, “The Eternal Recurrence,” in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 316.
 - 7 Martin S. Bergmann, “The Conflict between Enlightenment and Romantic Philosophies as Reflected in the History of Psychoanalysis,” in *The Origins and Organization of Unconscious Conflict: The Selected Writings of Martin S. Bergmann* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017), 101.
 - 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 544–50.
 - 9 Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 143–46.
 - 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 329.
 - 11 Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 330.
 - 12 Ivan Soll, “Reflections on Recurrence: A Re-examination of Nietzsche’s Doctrine, *die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*,” in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 323.
 - 13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194.
 - 14 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194.
 - 15 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194.
 - 16 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194–95. Emphasis in original.
 - 17 This literal reading of eternal recurrence was among the many misinterpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy that proved amenable to Nazi philosophers, such as Alfred Baeumler, who used it to legitimize the Party’s dogmatic principles in *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker* (1931). See Max Whyte, “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Bauumler’s ‘Heroic Realism,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (2008): 180.
 - 18 Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), xxix. Emphasis in original.
 - 19 Kant’s categorical imperative is a refinement of the golden rule, which suggests you should treat others as you would like to be treated. Kant proposes that one should act only as one would like every other rational subject to act in order to establish a more objective ethical principle.

- 20 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 68. Emphasis in original.
- 21 David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England, 1890–1914: The Growth of a Reputation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press 1970), 171.
- 22 Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 133.
- 23 Frances Nesbitt Opper, *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902–10* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 61.
- 24 Patrick Bridgewater, *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony: A Study of Nietzsche's Impact on English and American Literature* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), 73.
- 25 Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche*, 157.
- 26 Kaufmann notes that Nietzsche uses the phrase “A Book of Prophecy” in this section of the manuscript in reference to a plan for a book, *The Eternal Recurrence*. See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 544.
- 27 For an overview of the scale and importance of these papers, see George Mills Harper, “Yeats’s Occult Papers,” in *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. George Mills Harper (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), 1–11.
- 28 W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 19.
- 29 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 8.
- 30 Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 33.
- 31 For a detailed exposition of Yeats’s involvement with the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, see Ken Monteith, *Yeats and Theosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), and George Mills Harper, *Yeats’s Golden Dawn* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974).
- 32 Margaret Mills Harper has written extensively on the automatic writing exercises that gave rise to *A Vision* and the pivotal role performed by George Yeats in this collaborative production. See, for example, Harper, *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 33 Timothy Materer, “Occultism,” in *W. B. Yeats in Context*, eds. David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 237–46.
- 34 Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *AVB* xxiii–li.
- 35 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 11.
- 36 The poem was written in 1919 and originally published in *The Dial* in November 1920. See W. B. Yeats, “Ten Poems,” *The Dial* LXIX, no. 5 (1920): 455–66.
- 37 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 69.
- 38 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), xvi.
- 39 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 121.
- 40 In *The Birth of Tragedy*, first published in 1872, Nietzsche uses the terms “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” to describe two opposing artistic energies. He associates the Apollonian with the kind of measured restraint exemplified by the practice of sculpting; the Dionysian with the intoxication of music and its capacity to facilitate the erosion of all subjectivity. See Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 33–38. This was Nietzsche’s first book, written when he was just twenty eight years old and still very much under Schopenhauer’s pessimistic spell. He rejected much of what appeared in this book in his preface to the 1886 edition, entitled “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”. See “The Birth of Tragedy,” 16–27.

- 41 Charles I. Armstrong, "Ancient Frames: Classical Philosophy in Yeats's *A Vision*," in *W. B. Yeats's A Vision: Explications and Contexts*, eds. Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire V. Nally (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), 96.
- 42 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 72.
- 43 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 71–72. Emphasis in original.
- 44 Bridgewater, *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony*, 69.
- 45 Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche*, 173.
- 46 For a detailed description of the function performed by the tincture in Boehmean mysticism, see Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 122–24.
- 47 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hoilngdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64. Emphasis in original.
- 48 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 14.
- 49 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 78.
- 50 Ellmann, *Yeats*, 226–27.
- 51 Deane, *Strange Country*, 172.
- 52 Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171.
- 53 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 237.
- 54 Donoghue, *Yeats*, 91.
- 55 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 11.
- 56 Matthew Gibson, "Yeats, the Great Year, and Pierre Duhem," in *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult*, eds. Matthew Gibson and Neil Mann (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2016), 179.
- 57 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 267.
- 58 Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd edn., 267.
- 59 Ellmann, *Yeats*, 230.
- 60 George Russell, "A Vision," *The Irish Statesman*, February 13, 1926, 714.
- 61 Like Yeats, Russell was a member of the Theosophical Society. In fact, both Yeats and Russell were founding members of the Dublin Lodge of the Irish Theosophical Society, established in 1886. Russell derived the pseudonym, "AE," short for "Aeon," from the name of the first created being according to Gnostic mythology. Russell did not join The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, however, as he held misgivings regarding the practice of ritualistic magic.
- 62 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 172–73.
- 63 Deane, *Strange Country*, 173.
- 64 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 172.
- 65 Deane, *Strange Country*, 173.
- 66 Bixby, "Frightful Doctrines," 324.
- 67 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.
- 68 Friedrich Nietzsche, "David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14.
- 69 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 105.
- 70 Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 222.
- 71 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 109.