

Nicholas Meihuizen

The nature of the beast: Yeats and the shadow¹

Abstract

Yeats's 'rough beast' in "The Second Coming" emerges not only 'out of Spiritus Mundi, but out of an era that was especially attracted to various encodings of the unconscious, a trope, so to speak, made famous by Freud and Jung. I argue that certain psychological discourses are inherent in an era sceptical of foundationalism, that Yeats's poem is a manifestation of the machinery of this scepticism, and that, ultimately, aspects of the poem foreshadow Postmodernist interrogations of received 'truth'.

1. Introduction

In attempting to establish Postmodern, anti-foundationalist elements in Yeats, this article contends that the sphinx-like beast in Yeats's "The Second Coming" can profitably be viewed in terms of certain psychological discourses, the Jungian discourse in particular. I make this contention, firstly, because I feel that the Jungian reading has a literal value in the case of the Yeatsian existential project, which, despite its emphasis on cyclicity, never lost sight of the need for psychological integration. For example, at the centre of the ceaseless flux of historical and psychological forces in Yeats's *A Vision*, is his conception of "Unity of Being", an integrative state, where, within the limits of "emotional", "aesthetic", "reasonable" and "moral" frames, the "Four Faculties" of our nature are "reflected inward" (Yeats, 1962:73, 88). Yeats's conception of unity also incorporates archetypal figures related to the anima, shadow and mandala of the Jungian collective unconscious (Meihuizen, 1992:101-3), and, by extension, to Jung's own notion of psychological integration, or 'individuation' (Jung, 1969: 40). The second reason that I turn to psychological discourses in attempting to cast new light on Yeats, is that the topology of the unconscious seems particularly appro-

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper originally delivered at the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature conference held at Ain Shams University, Cairo, 18-22 July 1993.

priate to the era in which “The Second Coming” was produced. It was an era that rested on the anti-foundationalist bases of Postmodernism – the beginnings of Freudian probings into the psyche, Paterian aestheticism, French Symbolism, the philosophy of Nietzsche, to say nothing of a less orthodox *fin de siècle* interest in mysticism and psychic research. As a follower of Madame Blavatsky, and later as a member of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was, in fact, peculiarly alert to forward-looking currents in modern thought, rather than merely circumscribed by pseudo-Magian paraphernalia, as our modern sensibility often enough perceives him to be.

Psychological theories are important to the mythological machinery of this period, whatever our final judgement concerning Freud’s psychoanalysis or Jung’s analytic psychology. James Olney, in his book on Yeats and Jung, *The Rhizome and the Flower* (1980), indicates Yeats’s general familiarity, at least, with (to quote from a reported conversation which took place in October, 1916), “Freud and Jung and the Subconscious Self” (H.W. Nevinson in Olney, 1980:5). Although Olney (1980:6) establishes that the poet exhibited no detailed knowledge of Jung, it seems clear from the above-mentioned conversation that Yeats was certainly responsive to the seminal theories of Freud and Jung.

In Jungian terms, the shadow represents the instinctual level of the collective unconscious, which often manifests itself in dreams and visions as a beast, demon or monster. This projection of an aspect of the psyche can be viewed as a function of one of the inherent contents, or archetypes – as the shadow is – of the collective unconscious. According to Jung, if the archetypes are integrated with the conscious mind, psychological healing or individuation can take place (Jung, 1969:288). Although Jung distinguishes between the collective unconscious and the personal unconscious, which Freud does not do, the shadow can also be seen in terms of the Freudian libido (a label maintained by Jung in his earlier writings, as we will see), underlining the presence, despite differences in emphasis, of a shared contemporary trope.² Yeats’s *Spiritus Mundi*, although it originally appears much earlier in the poet’s thought as the “great memory that renews the world and men’s thoughts age after age” (Yeats, 1908:89), brings to mind the Jungian collective unconscious, and it is significant, considering the poet’s familiarity in 1916 with the ‘Subconscious’ of Freud and Jung, that the ‘rough beast’ – as either shadow archetype or related libido image – emerges from ‘out of’ this realm.

² Freud objected to Jung’s early usage (1912) of the term *libido* in a blanket manner to include all the instincts. In 1917 Freud insisted that “the name of libido is properly reserved for the instinctual forces of sexual life” (Freud, 1973:462).

The approach adopted in this article privileges the realm of the archetypes, those transcendental signifiers whose presence undermines the expectations attached to any rigidly adhered-to discourse. An archetypal reading thus accommodates the diverse but related images to be examined, accommodates the violence of Revelation along with earlier traditions and typologies, and is therefore in accord with the range of Yeats's historical cyclicity implicit in the gyre motions in the opening lines of the poem: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer". (The historical imperatives inherent in this gyre motion are made clearer by the diagram of the 'historical cones' in *A Vision*, which indicates the proximity of the present age to the area of maximum expansion in a gyre cycle, and therefore to the beginning of a new cycle (Yeats, 1962:266).) The article will draw upon related material in Madame Blavatsky, Oriental and Occidental mythology, and Surrealism. It will conclude by positing, in a Lacanian manner – entirely compatible with the subject matter – , the supremacy of the signifier in Yeats's poem. In all of the above explorations, the Sphinx remains a constant presence.

2. The Miller vision

One of Jung's areas of study that actually involves the sphinx image is based upon a Miss Frank Miller's personal account of certain of her visions, dating from 1906. A copy of this text appears in the Appendix of Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*, first published in 1912:

Then I felt a great relaxation come over me, and I remained as completely passive as possible. Lines, sparks, and spirals of fire passed before my eyes ... Then an impression that something was on the point of being communicated to me ... The head of a sphinx suddenly appeared in the field of vision, in an Egyptian setting: then it faded away. At that moment my parents called to me, and I immediately answered them in a perfectly coherent way, a proof that I was not asleep (Jung, 1956: 458).

Jung responds to the above passage as follows:

The word 'sphinx' suggests 'riddle', an enigmatic creature who propounds riddles, like the Sphinx of Oedipus, and stands on the threshold of one's fate as though symbolically announcing the inevitable. The Sphinx is a semi-theriomorphic [animal-shaped] representation of the mother-imago, or rather of the Terrible Mother, who has left numerous traces in mythology ... [T]heriomorphic representations of the libido ... are well known to the doctor from the dreams and fantasies of his patients, where instinct is often represented as a bull, horse, dog, etc. ... Hybrids and monsters ... are not at all infrequent. Bertschinger has given us a series of illustrations in which the lower (animal) half in particular is represented theriomorphically. The

libido so represented is the 'animal' instinct that has got repressed (Jung, 1956:179).

Jung (1956:180) also claims that "the theriomorphic symbols always refer to unconscious manifestations of libido". Jung's conflation of beasts seems reasonable considering other available views. Jorge Luis Borges (1974:77), for instance, in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, indicates that the four beasts of the Apocalypse "come together in the sphinx", and gives other variations commensurate with the creatures in Ezekiel and Revelation.

3. Related beasts

These shadow-creatures are also manifested in a work whose linguistic patterns, it has long-since been established (Stallworthy, 1963:23), clearly underpin "The Second Coming", a section of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1968), with its terrifying Furies, snake-haired and winged (l. 338ff.). Related to the Furies is Echidna, who, like the Whore of Babylon of Revelation, is superimposed, as it were, on a dragon, and is the mother of every hellish horror (Jung, 1956:216). Echidna mated with the dog Orthrus, and subsequently gave birth to the Sphinx of Greek myth (Jung, 1956:182). Indeed, in *Prometheus Unbound* Mercury addresses one of the Furies as "Sphinx, subtlest of fiends" (l. 347). Although Jung ignores the Egyptian focus of Miller's vision, his perception of the enigma attached to the Greek sphinx is readily transferable to an Egyptian context, with its overtones of an ineffable and mysterious culture. Madame Blavatsky, in a work familiar to the young Yeats, *Isis Unveiled* (Tuohy, 1976:33), draws upon precisely this context to suggest that which is ineffable, opposing it to the 'hopeless materialism' of the age:

And so stand these monuments [sphinxes, propylons, obelisks] like mute forgotten sentinels on the threshold of that *unseen* world, whose gates are thrown open but to a few elect.

Defying the hand of Time, the vain inquiry of profane science, the insults of the *revealed* religions, they will disclose their riddles to none but the legatees of those by whom they were entrusted with the MYSTERY. The cold, stony lips of the once vocal Memnon, and of these hardy sphinxes, keep their secrets well. Who will unseal them? Who of our modern, materialistic dwarfs and unbelieving Sadducees will dare to lift the VEIL OF ISIS? (Blavatsky, 1988 vol. 1:573).

In a sense, with his prophetic poem, Yeats responded directly to Madame Blavatsky's challenge, unsealing the lips of the sphinx to hear the chilling message from beyond the veil. But Blavatsky's bias towards the East is well-suited, in fact, to an age that had seen over a century of keen (albeit often misguided) Orientalist studies in the West, Quinet and Schlegel's 'Oriental Renaissance'

(Said, 1984:253). And although the notion of the enigmatic East was a cliché even in the early Victorian epoch (cf. Said, 1984:272), Blavatsky and Yeats's empathy for their subject rescues it from the constraints of the merely stereotypical.³

4. Yeats's sphinx

Yeats's sphinx has a gaze "blank and pitiless as the sun"; in this regard it is pertinent that Jung (1956:202) should observe (in 1912), "The psychic life-force, the libido, symbolises itself in the sun". According to Joseph Campbell, in the volume of *The Masks of God* that deals with Oriental religion, the solar principle of ancient Egypt, Sekhmet, associated with a lion or predatory bird, is one aspect of Hathor. Hathor, as the moon, is mother of the moon-bull whose consort is Sekhmet. The moon-bull's "son by Sekhmet is the ruling pharaoh – symbolised in the human-headed, lion-bodied Sphinx" (Campbell, 1962:91). Thus Sekhmet is the destructive pole of an ultimately harmonious cosmic configuration in which both destruction and creation are intricately linked. The pharaoh, as sphinx, is at the centre of this configuration, and so has access to both poles. From this point of view the antinomic comings of Christ, the King of Kings (a title Shelley imputes to the pharaoh in "Ozymandias" – one of the precursor poems to "The Second Coming" (Stallworthy, 1963:22-3)), are compatible with Campbell's pharaonic myth.

Harold Bloom (1970:323) reads "The Second Coming" as a record of Yeats's exultation in the face of the brute power of the destructive pole. Bloom's polemics here centre on his refusal to give credence to Yeats's mythological framework. While Yeats accepts the advent of the beast in the context of apocalyptic

³ What of Orientalism's appropriation of the Orient, as is made clear in Said's reading? Important for me is the suggestion that 'appropriation' is, as Julia Kristeva (1983:33) points out, inherent in any act of interpretation. There are, though, different types of appropriation. In simple terms, appropriation can be oppressive or enriching. Said's quarrel is with the oppressive type. An enriching appropriation would benefit all parties. In South Africa elements of African music have been beneficially appropriated by white musicians, and European elements now surface in arresting ways in local black music. In the field of literature the appropriation (along with the transformation) of English by black writers is seen as politically empowering (Cronin, 1990:295). Now, does Yeats appropriate in an oppressive or enriching fashion? There is, no doubt, something clichéd about his presentation of an Eastern image, but the cliché mobilises a strength entirely in keeping with the divine nature of the sphinx and its link with pharaonic power, as outlined by Campbell. Also, Yeats acts from the level of the autonomous discourse of the Great Memory, where rough beast is not limited to any one culture. Perhaps his assumption of this field of transcendental signifiers is questionable, but not his application of it. That is, in the context of the language game of the *Spiritus Mundi*, a context defined not arbitrarily by a single individual but by various traditions, including the Platonic, Yeats is justified in his utilisation in this particular way of the rough beast.

vision without apparent protest, unwilling to resort to suppression of the libido (the vision, despite the fact that it 'troubles' the poet's sight (l. 13), is never interfered with by him), he does so from the point of view of the integrated cosmogony familiar to the ancient Egyptians.

Questioning the assumed power in the reference, Bloom (1970:318-9) sees any associations with Christ in Yeats's text as false and unwarranted, the beast, in his view, having no clear connection with the Christian Second Coming. In a recent article, "The Second Coming": Coming Second; Coming in a Second", Seamus Deane (1992:94) makes a related point: "[the beast] is, in a very specific sense, like the Beast of Revelation, an Anti-Christ, a reverse image of the First Coming but not a prelude to the Second". But where Bloom can only see a perverse glorification of the "composite god" of a "Gnostic quasi-determinism" projected onto an era (Bloom, 1970:324), Yeats, from the fuller context of an archetypal perspective – which includes the violent Christ Militant of Revelation – , sees an inherent principle of life. This principle is fully in keeping with the Jungian notion of integration of the shadow (also evident in a reference Deane makes to the "therapeutic moment" of the poem (Deane, 1992:94)), or the ancient Egyptian notion of the collaboration among Hathor, the moon-bull and Sekhmet.⁴ Yeats does not exult in the Vision of Evil here embodied, as is apparent from the first section of the poem with its emphasis on the horrors of the age, but he does recognise its inevitability (cf. Yeats, 1962:144).

5. Surrealism

After our scrutiny of the more traditional elements of "The Second Coming", we now trace an imagistic connection in the contemporary Surrealist arena, which brings us closer to the roots of Postmodernism. I have in mind, in particular, an enigmatic collage by Max Ernst, dating from 1934, which incorporates an Egyptian sphinx's head (Ades, 1974:47). In the early 1920s, Ernst, along with other Surrealists such as André Breton, found in Freud "a possible guideline for the liberation of the imagination" (Ades, 1974:31), and, indeed, was keenly sensitive to current psychological writings. Because of this, it may be, he, as much as Yeats, was alert to the significance of certain images.

⁴ According to Yeats, Shelley "lacked the Vision of Evil, could not conceive of the world as a continual conflict" (Yeats, 1962:144). George Bornstein, in *Yeats and Shelley*, drawing on this passage, understands it to mean that "any vision of the triumph of the good, undertaken for any reason whatsoever, involve[s] a misrepresentation of evil and consequent falsification of the good" (Bornstein, 1970: 202). In Jungian fashion, an integration of good and evil is a necessary precondition of life.

The head in Ernst's collage conveys a disturbing impression of Otherness. But though, in establishing this impression, the head lies *outside* the window of a train compartment, it is so prominent as to be virtually *within* the compartment, which is itself an analogue for a version of the Romantic quest (cf. Bloom, 1971:13-35), whose goal is a heightened sense of self, a reintegration of the Other. And that the human figure in the compartment is as much of a monster as the sphinx, suggests the danger of assimilation attached to repression of the shadow. Pondering on the above points, we might construe in Ernst's collage a macabre internalisation of the quest romance (Ades, 1974), which localises various historical and psychological factors contiguous with the contemporary currency of the sphinx image – including the projects of the Romantic precursors of Modernist and Postmodernist vision, and the findings of Jung and Freud.

6. Modernist and Postmodernist elements in Yeats

Thus, however traditionalist in substance Yeats's prophetic poem is – drawing implicitly or explicitly on the range of precursors and images examined in earlier sections of this article – its particular mobilisation of this substance, in the context of the 'Subconscious' nature of the *Spiritus Mundi*, well suits Modernist interest in psychology and the unconscious. And the strategy of presenting the unconscious as a shadow figure converges with the syncretic mythologizing widely practised at the beginning of the Modernist period. Frazer's *Golden Bough* is not unique in terms of its syncretic probings; and even Madame Blavatsky produces her own syncretic study in a book already mentioned, *Isis Unveiled*, first published in 1877. The Jungian proclivity towards theriomorphic shadow figures mirrors a general trend, as reflected in the Miller document, the Ernst collage, and Yeats's poem. To judge from the preceding evidence, let alone the predilections of the period, the instinctual and its concomitants were again assuming importance after a period of neglect. For instance, in an excerpt from *The First Surrealist Manifesto*, of 1924, André Breton writes:

It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer – and in my opinion by far the most important part – has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud (Breton in Lippard, 1970: 12).

Jung and Freud both help to give psychological credibility to the instinctual, but in the end it is Jung who treats it with a respect akin to that of the ancients for their libidinous theriomorphic gods, so resplendent in their Otherness. And Yeats's poem, for all its apocalyptic terror, would promote a similar sense of the numinous, in the way it suggests that the qualities of an era are not simply linked

to external social and historical forces, but are also linked to interior, psychological forces, as embodied in the shadow-like rough beast.

If Freud, with his emphasis on the necessity of separation in the achievement of subjecthood (Waugh, 1992:201), reinforces the Modernist notion of a self-contained, discrete subjectivity, Jung evokes an open-ended, permeable subjectivity, more in keeping with the post-World War Two era. Thus, Yeats's Jungian sense of a multi-faceted self-hood, prone to cycles of incarnations and the interventions of the *Spiritus Mundi*, can be seen as participating, through its fundamental polyvalency, in certain Postmodern interrogations of received 'truth'.⁵

7. The significance of the Orient

The Yeatsian interrogation of the rational universe is particularly evident in the poet's relationship with the East. It was no accident that the East played a prominent role at the close of the Victorian era (Tuohy, 1976:32). The East was inscribed in the Occidental mind as a major source of anti-foundationalist counter-rationality, and in a sense Yeats's Eastern topography, and his insistence upon the viable functioning of a visionary capacity beyond the limitations of mere reason, encapsulate his appreciation of the value of the alternative discourse of the East. On encountering Madame Blavatsky's disciple, Mohini Chatterji in Dublin in late 1885 or early 1886, Yeats himself claimed: "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless" (in Tuohy, 1976:35). Yeats, like Massignon, was able to move beyond a superficial or merely scholarly engagement with the Orient, being profoundly attracted from his youth by the non-materialism of Eastern philosophy. So much so, indeed, that he devoted much of his time to related pursuits – spiritualism, mediumship, magic, and at the end of his life, together with Shri Purohit Swami, translations of the Upanishads and Patanjali's yoga sutras (Raine,

⁵ The language game of the poet might be seen as comprising three areas of interaction: with self, the contemporary world and tradition. These areas can be further subdivided into, for example, categories of assimilation and rejection, the emergent and residual, oppositional and alternative, process and product, signifier and signified – the terms of whatever other language game it is that the critic is involved in. While any one area or category might be emphasised, Yeats appears to combine them all. Self fits smoothly and easily into the areas of the contemporaneous and the traditional. Of course, this type of polyvalency incorporates the various binary oppositions of the categories, where self might, for example, assimilate or reject aspects of contemporary life or poetry; pose an oppositional discourse on the one hand, as in *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, or an alternative one on the other, as in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"; set up a dialectic between base and superstructure as in "Adam's Curse", where the distinction between the two categories in this instance becomes blurred indeed; unite the processes of the self with the products of tradition, as in "Sailing to Byzantium"; erect a monumental signified in *A Vision*, only to have it slip beneath the signifier, when all system is read as comprising "metaphors for poetry" (Yeats, 1962:8)

1986:332-3). In addition, for Yeats, the East is something of an analogue of the unconscious. In *A Vision*, Yeats accepts the Hegelian identification of Asia with Nature, in a context that incorporates the Greek Sphinx in its capacity as the voice of Nature, or the voice of the instinctual (Yeats, 1962:202):

Hegel identifies Asia with Nature; he sees the whole process of civilisation as an escape from Nature; partly achieved by Greece, fully achieved by Christianity. Oedipus – Greece – solved the riddle of the Sphinx – Nature – compelled her to plunge from the precipice, though man himself remained ignorant and blundering. I accept this definition.

8. A Lacanian perspective

Yeats's observation, which is alert to the linguistic dimension of the riddle, ties in with the Lacanian location of the letter *in* the unconscious, which, in suggesting that the unconscious is structured like a language, constitutes in itself a fairly early Postmodernist attempt at destabilising the logos (Lacan, 1977:159). In what sense can this notion that the unconscious is structured like a language be applied to Yeats's project in "The Second Coming"? Anika Lemaire (1977:7) interprets this central Lacanian concept as follows:

The repressed is of the order of the signifier and the unconscious signifiers are organised in a network governed by various relationships of association, above all metaphoric and metonymic associations.

Thinking of "The Second Coming" in this light one is struck by both the metaphoric and metonymic aspects of the rough beast of the unconscious. Lacan appears to emphasise metaphoric and metonymic process, or the substitution and displacement of terms as inherent mental acts, rather than the simple presence of metaphors and metonyms. Nevertheless, Yeats's rough beast implies the type of process Lacan has in mind. Bestial, it images a bestial age in a metaphoric sense; but it is the metonymic signature of the age as well, in the same way that the cross is metonymic signature of the Christian era. We must bear in mind Jakobson and Peirce's notion that symbols, as much as conventional language, incorporate signifier and signified. Paraphrasing Jakobson, Lemaire (1977:24) notes, "The Symbol acts through a learned, instituted contiguity between signifier and signified". Yeats's rough beast draws on a range of 'instituted' relationships, a fact which contributes to the richness of association attached to this signifier and its final autonomy from any single definition.

In Lacan signified, or externalised concept, represents the conscious, and signifier, or autonomous sound-image, represents the unconscious. Considering the independent nature of the vision as presented in the poem, the following sound-images in "The Second Coming" are autonomous of both the conscious intention of the poet and any limited range of signifieds:

... 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

Signified slips under signifier, as the realm of symbol, incorporating metonymy and metaphor, is foregrounded. This is perhaps one way, at least, of presenting the inherent polysemy of Yeats's mythopoeic vision as it is embedded in his rough beast.

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University of Zululand