IMAGE AND IDEA IN YEATS' *THE SECOND COMING*

By Donald Weeks

THERE are poets whose art is an accumulating cluster of images that become more and more identified with specific ideas. I believe Yeats to have been such a poet, in whom a cluster of images grew in significance to produce the great poems of the period from the first World War to the second. Generally accepted as one of Yeats' finest lyrics is *The Second Coming*. I believe that the poem gains in richness by being considered in the light of associations that had long preoccupied Yeats, and that are frequently found together in his writings: Shelley, and especially his *Prometheus Unbound;* the Great Memory; and the Second Coming.

Yeats came by his admiration of Shelley from his grandfather, who "constantly read Shelley,"[1] and from his father, J. B. Yeats, who used to "read out the first speeches of the *Prometheus Unbound*" at a time when the father's influence upon the son's thoughts "was at its height." Yeats had already begun to play the rôle of the poet which he sustained all his life. He chose as his first model Alastor, "my chief of men and longed to share his melancholy, and maybe at last to disappear from everybody's sight as he disappeared drifting in a boat along some slow-moving river between great trees." His "mind gave itself to gregarious Shelley's dream of a young man, his hair blanched with sorrow, studying philosophy in some lonely tower, or of his old man, master of all human knowledge, hidden from human sight in some shell-strewn cavern on the Mediterranean shore."[2] Because his father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds, Yeats began to write play after play in imitation of Shelley, and of Edmund Spenser. The result was that his poetry became "too full of the reds and yellows Shelley gathered in Italy,"[3] a condition which Yeats then tried to cure by fasting and sleeping on a board.

Prometheus Unbound was the first book which Yeats in a mood of romance "possessed for certain hours or months" as the book he longed for. It became for him "my sacred book." When Yeats was twenty (1885), he proposed to the members of the Hermetic Society "that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind were but literal truth. I had read *Prometheus Unbound* with this in mind and wanted help to carry my study

[1] Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), p. 7.
[2] *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 58, 150.
[3] *Ideas of Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), p. 4.

through all literature."[4] When Yeats wrote in 1900 his essay on the *Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry*, he was spending his fourth summer at Coole. The chief poem of this summer was the *Shadowy Waters*. Yeats says in his essay, "I have re-read *Prometheus Unbound*, which I had hoped my fellow-students would have studied as a sacred book, and it seems to me to have an even more certain place than I had thought, among the sacred books of the world."[5] He was then thirty-five. It is a psychological cliché to say that any poem so profoundly admired by a man growing into a great poet himself has made an ineradicable impression.

In the same essay Yeats tells us when and where he re-read *Prometheus Unbound:* "I have re-read his *Prometheus Unbound* for the first time for many years, in the woods of Drim-da-rod, among the Echte hills, and sometimes I have looked towards Slieve-nan-Orr, where the country people say the last battle of the world shall be fought till the third day, when a priest shall lift a chalice, and the thousands years of peace begin."[6] Here for the first time in Yeats I find the association of *Prometheus Unbound* with the second coming. In her *Poets and Dreamers*, published in the same year as *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Lady Gregory begins her essay on "Mountain Theology" with the same legend:

> Mary Glynn lives under Slieve-nan-Or, the Golden Mountain, where the last battle will be fought in the last great war of the world; so that the sides of Gorteveha, a lesser mountain, will stream with blood. But she and her friends are not afraid of this; for an old weaver from the north, who knew all things, told them long ago that there is a place near Turloughmore where war will never come, because St. Columcill used to live there. So they will make use of this knowledge, and seek a refuge there, if, indeed, there is room enough for them all.[7]

This essay is not dated, but others in the book are, and none is dated later than 1902. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that here was a legend which Yeats learned when Lady Gregory took him, for the sake of his health and his art, collecting folklore among the neighboring cottages. Since Mary Glynn lived about ten miles from Gort, she was among the neighbor folk.

In the *Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry* Yeats for the first time associates Shelley with the idea of the Great Memory, which becomes so important in Yeats' work: "He seems in his speculations to have lit on that memory of nature the visionaries claim for the foundation of their knowledge." Later in the essay Yeats writes:

[4] *Autobiography*, pp. 273, 78, 80.
[5] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 91. [6] *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111.
[7] *Poets and Dreamers* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1903), p. 104.

I imagine that, when he wrote his earlier poems, he allowed the subconscious life to lay its hands so firmly upon the rudder of his imagination, that he was little conscious of the abstract meaning of the images that rose in what seemed the idleness of his mind. Any one who has any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning, if indeed they do not delude one into the dream that they are meaningless, one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has any one, who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day in some old book, or on some old monument, a strange or intricate image, that had floated up before him, and grown perhaps dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but a part of some great memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep but a little foam upon the deep. Shelley understood this, as is proved by what he says of the eternity of beautiful things and of the influence of the dead, but whether he understood that the great memory is also a dwelling house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell. He had certainly experience of all but the most profound of the mystical states, of that union with created things which assuredly must precede the soul's union with the uncreated spirit.[8]

Previously Yeats had made an observation on *Queen Mab* which illustrates this passage and throws light on what happened to Yeats himself.

The passage where Queen Mab awakes 'all knowledge of the past,' and the good and evil 'events of old and wondrous times,' was no more doubtless than a part of the machinery of the poem, but all the machineries of poetry are parts of the convictions of antiquity, and readily become again convictions in minds that dwell upon them in a spirit of intense idealism.[9]

Neither Yeats' poetry nor his prose shows any special preoccupation with Shelley or the Great Memory from 1903 until January 1918, when *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was published. In a letter to his father, Yeats described *Per Amica* as a "little philosophical book—60 pages in print perhaps—'An alphabet.' It is in two parts: *Anima Hominis* and *Anima Mundi* and is a kind of prose backing to my poetry. I shall publish it in a new book of verse, side by side, I think. Reviewers find it easier to write if they have ideas to write about—ideas like those in my *Reveries*."[10] The essays were published with one accompanying poem, *Ego Dominus Tuus*, the ideas in which are pertinent to *Anima Hominis*. The prologue to *Per Amica* is dated May 11, 1917. The "Maurice" addressed in it must be Ezra Pound, with whom Yeats lived in Sussex during the summer of 1916. Yeats tells how on his return to London their conversations had so obsessed him that he had to write the book to

[8] *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 105, 112–114. [9] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[10] J. B. Yeats, *Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 238.

have his say. The importance of *Per Amica* in the development of Yeats is that it shows the beginning of the dominant ideas of the later *Vision*, at this stage still general, still poetic.

Anima Hominis is dated February 25, 1917. The essay develops the ideas of the mask and the opposite. It explains the beginning of what is to be one of Yeats' most persistent images.

> Many years ago I saw, between sleeping and waking a woman of incredible beauty shooting an arrow into the sky, and from the moment when I made my first guess at her meaning I have thought much of the difference between the winding movement of nature and the straight line, which is called in Balzac's *Seraphita* the "Mark of Man," but comes closer to my meaning as the mark of saint or sage. I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when the vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning, in the humility of the brutes. I do not doubt those heaving circles, those winding arcs, whether in one man's life or in that of an age, are mathematical, and that some in the world, or beyond the world, have foreknown the event and pricked upon the calendar the life-span of a Christ, a Buddha, a Napoleon: . . .[11]

In *Anima Mundi* Yeats tells how he had experimented with dreams and visions and had come to believe in a Great Memory. He quotes much from Henry More's *Anima Mundi*. He cites Shelley, "A good Platonist," as having "set this general soul in the place of God," and as having said wise things about the nature of dreams. Later in the essay Yeats says, "When I remember that Shelley calls our minds 'mirrors of the fire, for which all thirst,' I cannot but ask the question all have asked, 'What or who has cracked the mirror?' I begin to study the only self that I can know, myself, and to wind the thread upon the perne again."[12] Yeats had previously used this cracked mirror image in *Rosa Alchemica* (1897). Its appearance in the midst of a mystic experience makes it seem relevant at this point. The I of the story accuses Michael Robartes, who wants him to become initiated into the Order of the Alchemical Rose:

> "You would sweep me away into an indefinite world which fills me with terror; and yet a man is a great man just in so far as he can make his mind reflect everything with indifferent precision like a mirror." I seemed to be perfectly master of myself, and went on, but more rapidly "I command you to leave me at once, for your ideas and phantasies are but the illusions that creep like maggots into civilisations when they begin to decline and into minds when they begin to decay."[13]

[11] *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 45–46.
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 90.
[13] *Early Poems and Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 476–477.

The speaker is angry. He is about to rise and strike Robartes with an alembic from the table when he is drowned in a wave of peacock feathers, a wave that becomes flame and is full of voices. He knows that he has struggled for hundreds of years and is now at last conquered. He hears a voice over his head crying, " 'The mirror is broken in two pieces,' and a more distant voice cry with an exultant cry, 'The mirror is broken into numberless pieces' . . . " He swirls up through space, through forms caught in the eternal moment, until "All things that had ever lived seemed to come and dwell in my heart, and I in theirs . . . "[14] He then falls through a starry space, awakes, and says to Michael Robartes that he will go wherever Robartes wills. Whether the experience of *Rosa Alchemica* was fiction or reality, it seems related to *Per Amica* exactly as such early lyrics of Yeats as those on the rose are related to later lyrics like *The Second Coming*. In *Per Amica*, after remembering that Shelley had called our minds "mirrors of the fire for which all thirst," Yeats goes on to describe personal experiences that suggest the episode from *Rosa Alchemica* and, it seems to me, the philosophy of Prometheus in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*.

> At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened some book of verse. Sometimes it is my own verse when, instead of discovering new technical flaws, I read with all the excitement of the first writing. Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant, the open book beside me, or closed, my excitement having over-brimmed the page. I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them: Everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs; I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end. It seems as if the vehicle had suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that one half imagines that the images from *Anima Mundi*, embodied there and drunk with that sweetness, would, as some country drunkard who had thrown a wisp into his own thatch, burn up time.
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> It may be an hour before the mood passes, but latterly I seem to understand that I enter upon the moment I cease to hate.[15]

As Yeats put the matter in the epigraph to his 1914 volume of poems, "In dreams begin responsibilities." In the epilogue to *Per Amica*, addressed to "Maurice," Yeats quotes Mallarme: "All our age is full of the trembling of the veil of the temple."[16] "The trembling of the veil" was to become not only the title of the second volume of Yeats' autobiography, but also the serious theme which was to lift to greatness Yeats' next two volumes of poetry, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), in which *The Second Coming* appeared.

I do not know precisely when *The Second Coming* was written. It

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 477. [15] *Per Amica*, pp. 91–92. [16] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

appears in print for the first time in the *Nation and Athenaeum* for November 1920, and in the *Dial* for the same month. That same autumn the poem appeared in the *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* printed at the Cuala Press. The poem which follows *The Second Coming*, *A Prayer for My Daughter*, is dated June 1919, but there is no way of determining the relation of *The Second Coming* to this date. From internal evidence which I shall discuss later, I believe Yeats must first have written the poem in the summer of 1918 at Ballinamantane House near Coole and Ballylee, or in the summer of 1919 at Ballylee. It is perfectly clear from reading the *Collected Poems* that *The Second Coming* is one of the group of poems which was written out of Yeats' *Vision*, several of which, as Yeats admitted, are unintelligible without the reader's knowing *Michael Robartes and His Friends*.

The story of Yeats' *Vision* is well-known: how four days after his marriage in October 1917 (*Per Amica* was written in the spring of that year) Yeats discovered his wife to be a medium, how out of the record of her communications came the *Discoveries of Michael Robartes*, which he later expanded into *A Vision*. It was dissatisfaction with what he called his earlier "unnatural story of an Arabian traveller"[17] that led Yeats to the exposition called "Great Wheel." To me, the necessity for Yeats' exposition is clearly foreshadowed by the statement in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, "I do not doubt those heaving circles, those winding arcs, whether in one man's life or in that of an age, are mathematical . . . ."[18] "The Great Wheel" is the mathematics of Yeats' vision; it was "finished at Thor Ballylee, 1922, in a time of Civil War,"[19] Mrs. Yeats' exposition having ended in 1920. The additional books of the *Vision* were finished by 1925.

"The Great Wheel" is rich in suggestions of Shelley, especially in the chapter on the "Twenty-eight Incarnations," in which Yeats discusses the double personalities of many historical figures. Shelley appears under phase 17, the Daimonic man. But it is more important to keep in mind the theme of the *Vision* as Michael Robartes puts it in the *Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends*, "Have I proved that civilizations come to an end when they have given all their light like burned-out wicks, that ours is near its end?"[20] Without elaborating unnecessarily Yeats' exposition of the Great Wheel, I want to point out two statements which Yeats makes about the Thirteenth Cone. He says:

The cone which intersects ours is a cone in so far as we think of it as the antitheses to our thesis, but if the time has come for our deliverance it is the phase-

[17] *A Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 19.
[18] *Per Amica*, p. 46. [19] *Vision*, p. 184. [20] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

less sphere, sometimes called the Thirteenth Sphere, for every lesser cycle contains within itself a sphere that is, as it were, the reflection or messenger of the final deliverance. Within it live all souls that have been set free and every *Daimon* and *Ghostly Self;* our expanding cone seems to cut through its gyre; spiritual influx is from its circumference, animate life from its centre. "Eternity also," says Hermes in the Aeslepius dialogue, "though motionless itself, appears to be in motion." When Shelley's Demogorgon—eternity—comes from the centre of the earth it may so come because Shelley substituted the earth for such a sphere.[21]

There is an interesting footnote to this passage, which I think further demonstrates the point I have been making that *Prometheus Unbound* was always available to Yeats' mind for illustration of an argument: "Shelley, who had more philosophy than men thought when I was young, probably knew that Parmenides represented reality as a motionless sphere. Mrs. Shelley speaks of the 'mystic meanings' of *Prometheus Unbound* as only intelligible to a 'mind as subtle as his own'." I think the appeal of such a statement as Mrs. Shelley's to Yeats is obvious. He took her at her word.

Later in the *Vision* Yeats discusses the changes which came from the birth of Christ and the changes which will come with the Great Year—1927, as Yeats had figured it out. The Great Year must "reverse our era and resume past eras in itself; what else it must be no man can say, for always at the critical moment the *Thirteenth Cone*, the sphere, the unique intervenes."[22] Yeats then quotes the five lines of *The Second Coming* beginning, "Somewhere in the sands—"

I hope I have shown that three ideas and their associated images remained in Yeats' mind for some thirty years: the Second Coming, the Great Memory, and *Prometheus Unbound.* I feel that these ideas gained intensity and complexity as they became part of Yeats' vision. Now I want to suggest the chain of associations that led to *The Second Coming.* I think it is obvious that poems popped from Yeats in emotional excitement and were then subjected to that technical refinement of which he became a great master. What I am giving as possible successive steps in the creation of a poem must have been, with Yeats, lightning-swift associations that seemed simultaneous. Lest I have given the impression that *The Second Coming* was written while Yeats was working on *A Vision,* I will repeat the statement that Mrs. Yeats' exposition ended in 1920. Then Yeats began to examine the fifty some copy-books of automatic writing preparatory to writing the system. I have already said that *The Second Coming* was first published in November 1920. But in

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 210–211. [22] *Ibid.*, p. 263.

discussing poetry, I believe that when one has shown certain associations to be of long standing in the poet's mind, one may safely use to throw light on the poem the same associations in the poet's writing after the creation of the poem. I have at all times assumed the persistence of certain ideas and images in Yeats.

1. I begin with the fact that since his late teens Shelley, and especially *Prometheus Unbound*, had been of great interest to Yeats.

2. From 1916 at the latest Yeats was increasingly concerned with the decline of the west, the trembling of the veil, the Great Year, the Second Coming, and the warnings of the end which came to man from the Great Memory. I think these ideas gained greater intensity with Mrs. Yeats' exposition of the Great Wheel.

3. Among the fuses which set a poem off may be its dominant idea, its dominant image, or its first image. Since the first paragraph of the poem can be explained as having arisen from the first image, I assume the falcon to be the beginning of the creation of the poem. There are three possibilities here. The simple explanation that Yeats had recently seen a falconer and his bird is too simple, and not in accord with the richness of associations in Yeats' work of this period. The second possibility goes back to a practice of Yeats. In the *Cold Heaven* from the 1914 volume of poems, *Responsibilities*, Yeats speaks of staring into the "cold and rook-delighting heaven" until "imagination and heart were driven so wild" that only memories were left. In the third poem after, the *Magi*, Yeats sees the wise men "in the blue depths of the sky." Yeats wrote in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* of the desirability of passing into a slight trance to allow images and associations free play in one's mind. He himself had cultivated this practice. A poet dreaming on his tower, a bird across the sky, the memory of the *Magi*—here is a possible chain of associations.

The third possibility involves associations with the hawk. In the Cuala Press edition of the *Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) appeared one of Yeats' Noh plays, *At the Hawk's Well*. It was the third of a series linked psychically; the fourth of the series was *Calvary*.[23] Among the lyrics in the *Wild Swan* is the *Hawk*, in which the bird also will "not hear the falconer." Later in a note to *Meditations in Time of Civil War* written at Thor Ballylee in 1922, Yeats says of the seventh poem:

> I suppose that I must have put hawks into the fourth stanza because I have a ring with a hawk and butterfly upon it, to symbolize the straight road of logic, and so of mechanism, and the crooked road of intuition: 'For wisdom is a butterfly and not a gloomy bird of prey.'—1928.[24]

[23] Hone, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

[24] *The Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1935), p. 448.

That Yeats was not always consistent in his use of images is clear from a note on "Calvary" in *Four Plays for Dancers:* "Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone or alighting upon some pool or river . . . ."[25] The hawk as symbol of subjectivity seems less relevant to *The Second Coming* than the hawk as symbol of logic. Since the poem moves at once to a picture of the age of mechanism, the hawk seems not improbable as symbol of logic. But the three possibilities I have suggested are not exclusive.

Although I am not saying that these associations happened just so, I must insist that in a poet who treasured subtlety as Yeats did, there is a clear flickering of similar images from poem to poem in work of the same period.

4. The association of the hawk with mechanism and the phrase, "the widening gyre," may have brought into Yeats' mind a passage from the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, with all the implications of *The Second Coming* which that poem has. I refer to the torture of Prometheus by the woeful sight of "a youth with patient looks nailed to a crucifix" (I, 585–586). The Fury taunts Prometheus with this emblem of those who endure wrong for man. He tells Prometheus (the italics are mine):

> In each human heart terror survives
> The ruin it has gorged: the loftiest fear
> All that they would disdain to think were true.
> Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
> The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.
> They dare not devise good for man's estate,
> And yet they not know that they do not dare.
> *The good want power*, but to weep barren tears.
> *The powerful goodness want;* worse need for them.
> The wide want love; and those who love want wisdom;
> *And all best things are thus confused to ill.*
> Many are strong and rich, and would be just,
> But live among their suffering fellow-men
> As if none felt; they know not what they do. [I, 618–631]

In *The Second Coming* Yeats wrote:

> 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. [3–8]

[25] *Four Plays for Dancers* (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 136.

I find these passages alike not only in idea but also in rhythm. The superiority of Yeats seems demonstrated by the difference between the last line of the Shelley and the last line and a half of the Yeats, the passionate intensity of the worst having more terror than Shelley's "they know not what they do," in spite of the allusion here to Jesus' "Forgive them, for—"

5. If the unbinding of Prometheus can logically give rise to the thought of *The Second Coming*, I think it likely that the idea of *The Second Coming* was reinforced by the sight or memory of "Slieve-nan-Or, the Golden Mountain, where the last battle will be fought in the last great war of the world." Since the memory would do as well as the sight, it makes little difference whether the poem was written at Ballylee during the summer of 1918 or 1919, or in London or Oxford during 1920.

6. The "vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*" came, I think, from the last poem in the *Wild Swans at Coole*. It is the *Double Vision of Michael Robartes*, a poem which John Aherne wrote Yeats accorded with Robartes diagrams.

> On a grey rock of Cashel I suddenly saw
> A sphinx with woman breast and lion paw,
> A Buddha, hand at rest,
> Hand lifted up that blest . . . [II, 1–4]

Later in the *Vision* Yeats pointed out that he should have said *Christ* not *Buddha*, since Buddha was a Jupiter Saturn influence and therefore bad.[26] Whether Yeats actually had this double vision I do not know. The poem says that he did.

> Although I saw it all in the mind's eye
> There can be nothing solider till I die;
> I saw by the moon's light
> Now at its fifteenth night. [II, 9–12]

> And after that arranged it in a song
> Seeing that I, ignorant for so long,
> Had been rewarded thus
> In Cormac's ruined house. [III, 17–20]

Cormac's house was the home of the Gaelic gods on the grey rock of Cashel.

But Yeats had had a single vision, the vision of the beast. Yeats explains in the introduction to *The Resurrection* in *Wheels and Butterflies* the origin of this vision: "Had I begun *On Baile's Strand* or not when I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the

[26] *A Vision*, pp. 54, 207–208.

range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing ecstatic destruction?" Yeats wrote a footnote to the phrase ***brazen winged beast:*** "Afterwards described in my poem 'The Second Coming.' "[27] This would indicate that Yeats kept the image in mind from about 1904, when *On Baile's Strand* was first produced, until 1918–19. He seems to have dropped in *The Second Coming* the laughter of the beast.

Of course the Book of Revelations has associations that might have enriched the meaning of the image "out of Spiritus Mundi." There is nothing in Revelations to suggest that the beast was a sphinx. Yeats changes the Greek female sphinx to the Egyptian male sphinx, more appropriate perhaps to the "sands of the desert." The beast of Revelations with its number, 666, has a history related to the Great Year, a history which Yeats must have known.

The image of the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem with which *The Second Coming* concludes needs no special explanation. It is quite plainly an association of the idea of the beast, the Anti-Christ, with the birthplace of Jesus. There may be some association with Yeats' earlier poem, *The Magi*, in which the wise men, "by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied," hope to find again in Bethlehem the "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor." The phrase, "the bestial floor," suggests a kind of uncontrollable mystery different from the Second Coming of Christ.

It is not easy to exaggerate the associations current in a poet's mind at the time of his finest work. *The Second Coming* belongs to such a period in Yeats' life. Although it is not possible ever to say that associations arose only in a certain order, it is possible to describe the ideas and images alive in the poet's mind at the time of the writing of the poem. I hope I have done this with *The Second Coming*.

Finally, a note on Yeats and *Prometheus Unbound*.

Yeats stayed at Coole during Lady Gregory's last illness. Here in the winter of 1931–33 Yeats read again Balzac and *Prometheus Unbound*, "for the third time," Hone says, a statement which seems meaningless to me.[28] The reading apparently inspired Yeats to write his essay, *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Yeats acknowledges that Shelley "and not Blake, whom I had studied more and with more approval, had shaped my life . . . ." But the shaping was not altogether good: " . . . and when I thought of the tumultuous and often tragic lives of friends or acquaintances I attributed to his direct or indirect influence their Jacobin frenzies,

[27] *Wheels and Butterflies* (London: Macmillan, 1934), p. 103.
[28] *Op. cit.*, p. 455.

their brown demons." Yeats decided that Shelley was nightmare-ridden, afraid of death, and therefore not a true mystic, because "his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty to satisfy desire, not a symbolical revelation received after suspension of all desire." Yeats concludes his essay with a tribute to Balzac:

> When I was thirteen or fourteen I heard somebody say that he changed men's lives, nor can I think it a coincidence that an epoch founded in such thought as Shelley's ended with an art of solidity and complexity. Me at any rate he saved from the pursuit of a beauty that seeming at once absolute and external requires, to strike a balance, hatred as absolute.[29]

The reader, while glad that Balzac had such influence, may also agree with Yeats that "we are never satisfied with the maturity of those whom we have admired in boyhood; and, because we have seen their whole circle—even the most successful life is but a segment—we remain to the end their harshest critics."[30]

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[29] *Essays 1931 to 1936* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1937), pp. 61–62, 58, 62.
[30] *Autobiography*, p. 211.