



Yeats and Science Fiction

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Abstract: The young Yeats spent some years editing the poems of William Blake, and Yeats inherited much of Blake's contempt for science, Blake's sense that Newton was the devil who murdered the living cosmos and substituted dead mathematical abstractions. For all his life Yeats felt hostile to the extreme objectivism of Newtonian physics; but as he grew older he read popularized accounts of Einstein's work, and he came to believe that advanced scientific thought was starting to converge with Yeats's own philosophical beliefs—Berkeleyian and occultist. Yeats believed this partly because he misunderstood some of the ideas of recent physics. But scientists themselves were in fact trying to work toward a vision of reality congruent with poetry (Whitehead called Shelley an excellent scientist; Crookes considered that the ectoplasmic emanations from spirit mediums might represent a new state of matter). And in a certain sense Yeats was right: later developments in physics have shown that the act of measuring can actually influence the physical world, so that mind and matter are indeed a far more integrated system than Newtonian physics would allow. In the course of this paper I will look not only at Yeats's philosophical writings but also at a number of examples from Yeats's poetry in which scientific ideas, such as wave vs. particle constructions of reality, are prominent.

Yeats and Science

“We are the last Romantics,” Yeats wrote in a famous line, and Yeats inherited much of the British Romantic hatred of science. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* imagines a world in which science has usurped the divine prerogative of creating life, but has manufactured only a sad parody of a human being; Keats considered that Isaac Newton “had destroyed all the Poetry of the rainbow by reducing it a prism”—as Keats wrote in *Lamia* (1819),

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy? [i.e., natural philosophy, or science]
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow ...

But of all the Romantics it was Blake who hated science the most; and Blake was the poet whom Yeats studied with the greatest care—Yeats spent some years in the early 1890s editing Blake's poems. A brief look at Blake's attitude toward science will provide us with the right background for understanding Yeats's attitude toward science.

Perhaps Blake's most memorable denunciation of science occurs in a manuscript poem of

uncertain date:

Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau
Mock on Mock on! tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind
And the wind blows it back again

And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye
But still in Israels paths they shine

The Atoms of Democritus
And Newtons Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore
Where Israels tents do shine so bright (from the Rossetti MS)

As far as Blake was concerned, the work of scientists and rationalists was to annihilate man, to shatter the world of experience into dust (atoms, particles); and the work of poets was to restore the vitality to the cosmos that science labored to remove. To Blake, Newton was the man who killed the universe, who substituted a picture of dead planets and dead stars circulating in a void, governed by dead forces, for the breathing energy of things. Materialism is the enemy of imaginative vision; and Newton was the world's chief materialist. If properly perceived, the universe isn't a clockwork show, a celestial machine; it is a continual accession into sanctity, supernatural vision.

What are the errors of Newton and rational men in general? Why do we tend to misunderstand the nature of reality? The first difficulty is a problem in perception. To Blake, we each of us have two sets of eyes—the physical eyes, which see only the outer husks of things, the dead skin of the cosmos—and the eyes of imagination, which see the vivacity of things, all that's hidden from the physical eyes. In a verse letter of 1802 to his friend Thomas Butts, Blake wrote that his vision was “twofold Always. May God us keep / From Single vision & Newtons sleep.” Blake is a poet obsessed with the Fall of Man, and one of the chief aspects of man's Fall is the coarsening, the thickening of his sense organs. Indeed in one of his more radical poems (*The Book of Urizen*), Blake suggests that man's eye once could see 360 degrees around, man's nose could smell in all directions; but now our eyes are recessed in sockets, our noses sheathed in nostrils and bent downwards. Our senses are much diminished.

For an example of single vision vs. imaginative vision, I turn to a Notebook draft

exposition of his painting *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in which Blake imagines two ways of looking at the sun:

I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is a hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Questiond, "When the Sun rises do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight: I look thro it & not with it.

(Both Blake and the miser see the sun as a symbol—but the miser's capacity to symbolize is stunted, crippled by his obsession.) The sun is not alone in its power to open out into vision—even small things can mutate astonishingly when seen by the spiritual eyes: according to the poem "Auguries of Innocence," one can see "a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower." When our senses are unclogged by means of imagination, even the minute things reveal boundless delights. This is why, in "Mock on," the grains of sand into which Newton has crumbled the universe are actually gems; the eye of imagination can see light playing in each grain, can constitute Israel's tents (the Holy Land, Paradise) upon the sand—while Newton and Voltaire are self-blinded by their own corrupt dead model of the cosmos. What Newton and Voltaire broke down, Blake can reconstruct.

So Newton and his friends can't see right. Their other great difficulty is that they can't think right—their thought is governed by logical and geometrical abstractions. Blake once painted a painting called *Newton in the Waters of Materialism* (1795). Here Newton is a handsome naked young man, sitting on the bottom of the ocean, hunched over a scroll—around him the tendrils of sea-anemones are streaming in the water; he is intently drawing a circle on the scroll with a golden compass. He is trying to solve an old mathematical problem called squaring the circle—that is, constructing with compass and ruler a square that has exactly the same area that a given circle has. He will never solve this problem, because there's no ratio of two whole numbers that's equal to pi.

The young Yeats repeated these denunciations of science. He was particularly obsessed with mocking astronomy: in fact the first lyric in his *Collected Poems* is "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1885), in which the Arcadian shepherd advises his imaginative friends to flee from astronomers:

Seek, then,

No learning from the starry men,
Who follow with the optic glass
The whirling ways of stars that pass--
Seek, then, for this is also sooth,
No word of theirs--the cold star-bane
Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,
And dead is all their human truth.

The night sky seems to have disturbed Yeats with its sheer chill fixity of being—as he write in *The Wanderings of Oisín*:

You stars,

Across your wandering ruby cars
Shake the loose reins: you slaves of God,
He rules you with an iron rod,
He holds you with an iron bond,
Each one woven to the other,
Each one woven to his brother
Like bubbles in a frozen pond ...

Forty years later, when Yeats wrote his occult book *A Vision*, he still remembered this image when he wanted to describe a condition of imaginative lapse, surrender to the external world: “The decadence . . . [that] awaits us, being democratic and *primary*, may suggest bubbles in a frozen pond—mathematical Babylonian starlight” (*A Vision* [1925], p. 213). A creative temperament always struggles to realize high images of desire; a scientific temperament always abdicates desire, satisfied with fidelity to the rigid world of fact.

After these early denunciations of the scientific mentality, Yeats ignored science for a long time: in his 1897 essay “The Autumn of the Body” he noted simply that Victorian poets such as Browning and Tennyson had perverted their art by trying to absorb “the science and politics, the philosophy and morality of its time”; a new, better sort of poetry was arising, a symbolist poetry “always contracting its limits,” that would rigorously exclude all science and other prosaic matters:

Man has wooed and won the world, and has fallen weary . . . with a weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves. He grew weary when he said, “These things that I touch and see and hear are alone real,” for he saw them without illusion at last, and found them but air and dust and moisture. . . . The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things. (*Essays and Introductions*, pp. 190, 192-3)

It seemed, then, that Yeats was completely satisfied with his relation, or rather his utter absence

of relation, to science. But then a remarkable thing happened: a new physics came into being, that its questioned the hardness, the realness, of the objective world, a physics that itself believed, like Yeats, that the universe consisted of dust and vacuum.

The new models of the atom shook everyone, even people as anti-scientific as Yeats. In 1911 the painter Kandinsky, a theosophist like Yeats, welcomed these developments: “professional men of learning . . . finally cast doubt on that very matter which was yesterday the foundation of everything, so that the whole universe [totters]. The theory of the electrons, that is, of waves in motion, designed to replace matter completely, finds at this moment bold champions” (cited in Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987], p. 23). Kandinsky thought that everything perceivable to the senses was a sort of immaterial spiritual vibration; and it seemed to him that science was finally proving that matter itself didn't exist—there were only vibrations, “waves in motion.” It was as if Rutherford and the other great physicists of the age were taking off their lab-coats and becoming Rosicrucian priests.

When Einstein's theories started to become known to the general public, Einstein too seemed a poet of hazes and fogs, a symbolist in the guise of a physicist. D. H. Lawrence was disturbed by the dematerialization of things that Einstein seemed to promote:

We are all very pleased with Mr. Einstein for knocking that eternal axis out of the universe. The universe isn't a spinning wheel. It is a cloud of bees flying and veering round. Thank goodness for that, for we were getting drunk on the spinning wheel. (D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* [1922], pp. 66)

Another novelist, Wyndham Lewis, a committed believer in objectivity, strongly resisted Einstein's dreamlike evacuation of the universe:

Science has to possess impersonal units of some sort. It consequently assembles the movements it is studying into 'events' or serial 'groups'--but always groups and aggregates: and so, as regards the 'nature' it shows us, it arrives at a sort of shimmying, contourless metis. Some groups are conspicuously *slow* in the movements . . . for instance, a mountain remains very much longer in the same place and of the same shape than does an ocean-wave. So the mountain has a certain spurious status as an object, and is disliked by time-science accordingly. . . . natural science, observing [large immobile objects], knows that they are only humbugging, in a sense. They are, in their degree, as liquid as the wave or as gaseous as a puff of smoke. That is what was meant by the 'cloud capp'd towers,' etc., of *The Tempest* [4.1.152]--a reaction, as well, against 'common-sense.' But it is still proper to note that the latter remark about the impermanence of what men regard as permanent, is put into the mouth of a magician . . . For operations involving *disappearances* are their *métier*. (*Time and Western Man*

[1927], pp. 358-59)

Shakespeare's Prospero says that the whole world vanishes and leaves not a wrack behind—we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little lives are rounded with a sleep. For Wyndham Lewis, Einstein is a second Prospero, annihilating all fixed form, reducing mountain ranges to very slow waves, or to gas.

But every reduction of the material to the immaterial was potentially exciting for Yeats, just as it was for Kandinsky. As Yeats was assembling *A Vision*, arranging and turning into prose the notes that his wife dictated in mediumistic trance, he tried to find analogies to their occult wisdom in the work of respectable thinkers. He delighted in finding in Spengler's *Decline of the West* a metaphor about the drilled eyeballs of Roman statues that Yeats had himself used in the seminal essay behind *A Vision*, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*; and he read Lyndon Bolton's *An Introduction to the Theory of Relativity* to find out whether Einstein had anything that might usefully contribute to his project. In the end he made very little use of this book—he may have felt that he didn't understand it well enough—but his rejected typescripts show a struggle to integrate science with the wisdom from the land beyond death:

I find among my documents the statement that a gyre represents a life lived in a higher dimension . . . and we may consider the full gyre itself half a rotating four dimensional sphere. (*Critical Edition of A Vision [1925]*, Notes, p. 31)

I suspect that Yeats had no idea what a rotating four-dimensional sphere might be—he simply enjoyed the phrase for its high mysteriousness, its outrage to normal constructs of space and time. The only vestige of such phrases in the 1937 published text of *A Vision* lies in a passage of sardonic humor in a short story used in *A Vision*'s prefatory material:

Michael Robartes called the universe a great egg that turns inside-out perpetually without breaking its shell. (*A Vision [1937]*, p. 33 [1931])

I wonder if this odd sentence might have something to do with Einstein's notion that space itself might have positive curvature, like a sphere, or negative curvature, like a saddle.

But if Yeats was uncertain how to treat Einstein, in his old age he embraced another physicist, Sir William Crookes, quite whole-heartedly:

I once heard Sir William Crookes tell half a dozen people that he had seen a flower carried in broad daylight slowly across the room by what seemed an invisible hand. His chemical research led to the discovery of radiant matter, but the science that shapes opinion has ignored his other research that seems to those who study it the slow

preparation for the greatest, perhaps the most dangerous, revolution in thought Europe has seen since the Renaissance, a revolution that may, perhaps, establish the scientific complement of certain philosophies that in all ancient countries sustained heroic art. (*Variorum Plays*, p. 569 [1934])

Crookes was the physicist who developed the cathode ray tube, by sending an electric current through rarefied air; the “radiant matter” mentioned by Yeats has nothing to do with radioactivity, but instead refers to a fourth state of matter, beyond solid, liquid, or gas, that Crookes (incorrectly) described. Crookes was also the president from 1896 to 1899 of the Society for Psychical Research, and was persuaded that an unknown psychical forces did exist:

A beautifully formed small hand rose up from an opening in a dining-table and gave me a flower; it appeared and then disappeared three times at intervals, affording me ample opportunity of satisfying myself that it was as real in appearance as my own. This occurred in the light in my own room, whilst I was holding the medium’s hands and feet. (*Quarterly Journal of Science*, 1874)

Crookes also confirmed photographically the existence of a spirit, Katie King, summoned by the medium Florence Cook—according to an anonymous report,

... even the most skilled confederate could not dissolve bit by bit before the eyes of creditable witnesses viewing the event in gaslight. Nor could a confederate make her wrist so fluid that a thumb and forefinger could pass through it. Katie King’s white robe is typical of ectoplasmic entities. (“The Reality of Katie King,” in William Crookes, *Researches into the Phenomena of Spiritualism* [Two Worlds Press, 1904])

In his work as a physicist, Crookes noticed that cathode rays caused certain substances to phosphoresce; and it seemed to Yeats that Crookes’ scientific and psychic researches were converging--that ectoplasm was receiving a sort of public confirmation. Behind the world there lies an eerie glowing; and out of that glowing there may coalesce the most hair-raising forms.

The science that tended to unrealize the world, to make it permeable to the human mind, plastic to human desire, pleased Yeats greatly; but he knew that a good deal of scientific research tended not toward the subjectifying of the objective world, but toward the objectifying of the subjective world. Yeats feared this materialistic science that threatened to demote all imagination to flimsy vanity. One such scientist was Alfred North Whitehead, whom Yeats deplored as follows:

[Whitehead] advocates “objectivism,” that is to say substantially what I described to you as the philosophy of early India, as distinguished from that of Zen . . . Whitehead describes the mechanical theory thus:--“The sense-data or sensations are projected by the mind so as to clothe appropriate bodies in external nature. . . . The poets are entirely

mistaken. . . . Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.” (*Correspondence of W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore*, pp. 86-87 [1926])

Actually this is, to some extent, a misleading report of Whitehead, who sought to glorify the poetic imagination, not to demote it to some realm of pretty dreams:

. . . the mind in apprehending also experiences sensations which, properly speaking, are qualities of the mind alone. These sensations are projected by the mind so as to clothe appropriate bodies in external nature. Thus the bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely the offspring of the mind. Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent: the nightingale for his song: and the sun for its radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly. (*Science and the Modern World*, p. 80 [1925; 1929])

Whitehead wished to acknowledge poets as the legislators of mankind. Indeed, Whitehead went on to praise the scientific accuracy of Shelley's "The Cloud" (1820), as a response to "the endless, eternal, elusive change of things: 'I change but I cannot die'" (p. 125).

And yet, though Yeats likes Crookes for granting the human mind ability to control secret forces in the physical world, and is suspicious of Whitehead for turning imagination into a mere manner of apprehension of the physical world, in a way Crookes and Whitehead are doing the same thing: if one seems to say that everything, whether idea or thing, is equally subjective, and the other seems to say that everything, whether idea or thing, is equally objective, each is flattening the distinction between subject and object. What Yeats really despises is Newtonian dualism, according to which the physical world is over there, and the mind is over here, patiently hesitatingly, trying to come to terms with it. Actually Yeats was in some ways right: quantum mechanics has shown that the act of measuring can actually transform the universe. According to the famous Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen effect, there is an instantaneous change in one paired particle when the spin of its mate is measured. In other words, the universe is in a state of continual interaction with the human mind: the monistic view seems to be correct, for human intelligence and the physical world constitute a unitary system.

Yeats discovered objectivism not only in the science of Whitehead, but in literature as well: Yeats considered that the advanced literature of his time was essentially objectivist in character, reducing all mental phenomena to material facts. In the letter I quoted a moment ago,

Yeats declared that Whitehead advocates “‘objectivism,’ that is to say substantially what I described to you as the philosophy of early India.” This philosophy is what he elsewhere calls the *Samkara* school:

Certain typical books--*Ulysses* [1922], Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* [1931], Mr. Ezra Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos* [1930]--suggest a philosophy like that of the *Samkara* school of ancient India, mental and physical objects alike material, a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint; man no hard bright mirror dawdling by the dry sticks of a hedge, but a swimmer, or rather the waves themselves. In this new literature . . . man in himself is nothing. (*Variorum Plays*, p. 568-69)

Yeats thought that modern literature took William James' metaphor of the Stream of Consciousness quite seriously: consciousness is a river in exactly the same way that the Mississippi or the Rhine is a river, one just as real, just as objectively *there* as the other, both carrying the universe with them, in one case oilslicks, orange peels, styrofoam cups, and dead cows, in the other case not only oilslicks, orange peels, styrofoam cups, and dead cows, but also equations governing the speed of falling bodies, snatches from Aristotle and Shakespeare, feelings of intestinal bloat and sexual desire.

As far as Yeats was concerned, *Ulysses* and *The Waves* were not, as many critics have thought, experiments in too-subjective literature, but experiments in too-objective literature: ideas and sensations were demoted to the level of physical objects, and the human perceiver demoted to pure nonentity, that is, to a state in which he or she is nothing except the great tumbling heap of things that constitute the mind. There is no imaginative force shaping the mind's contents into something beautiful; instead there is simply the mind's abdication to the random: “Mr Ezra Pound, Mr Eliot, Mr Joyce, Signor Pirandello . . . either eliminate from metaphor the poet's phantasy . . . or . . . break up the logical processes of thought by flooding them with associated ideas or words that seem to drift into the mind by chance” (*A Vision* [1925], pp. 211-12). Yeats felt the power of this sort of objectivist literature, in which streets follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent (to cite a famous objectivizing simile from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”); but Yeats also felt that he should resist it, strive toward a literature of choice rather than chance, beauty rather than a slosh of drifting ideas and feelings. One of Yeats's favorite images from Irish mythology was that of Cuchulain taking up his sword and fighting the waves; and to some extent Yeats saw it as his mission to be a sort of twentieth-century Cuchulain fighting *The Waves*, *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.

I don't know whether Yeats understood much of the scientific debate between a wave model and a particular model of light and matter; during Yeats's lifetime it became clear that light could not be strictly understood either as a wave or as a flow of particles, because it had some characteristics of both; and de Broglie discovered that electrons—units of matter—also behaved to some degree as waves. I suspect Yeats would have delighted in this indeterminacy, because the oxymoronic aspect has a certain feel of poetry; and Yeats thought that all science begins in poetry: “Science is the criticism of Myth. There would be no Darwin had there been no Book of Genesis, no electron but for the Greek atomic myth” (*Correspondence of W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore*, p. 154 [1929]). But in any case Yeats felt to a certain extent that he was a guardian of an old Romantic particle aesthetics, to be defended against the wave aesthetics of Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and so forth. The beautiful forms that they disintegrated into a gray soundless Whiteheadian hurrying, Yeats would cherish and protect.

Yeats's terms for these aesthetic particles were *symbol* and *image*—transcendental and decontextualized entities, evidently exempt from time and space. Indeed Yeats devoted much of his life as a poet to liberating them from the bonds of our usual constructs of reality; in an early essay he distinguishes low emotional symbols from high intellectual symbols:

It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or of the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off mortality, the tower of ivory, the queen of waters . . . (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 161 [1900])

Later in his career Yeats tried to heighten the eeriness of his symbols and images by creating extraterrestrial landscapes, almost like those of surrealist painting, populated by bright uncanny creatures disdainful of human life, such as the sphinx, Buddha, and dancing girl of “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” (1918):

On the 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;

And right between these two a girl at play

That, it may be, had danced her life away,
For now being dead it seemed
That she of dancing dreamed.

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.

One lashed her tail; her eyes lit by the moon
Gazed upon all things known, all things unknown,
In triumph of intellect
With motionless head erect.

That other's moonlit eyeballs never moved,
Being fixed on all things loved, all things unloved,
Yet little peace he had,
For those that love are sad.

O little did they care who danced between,
And little she by whom her dance was seen
So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought,

For what but eye and ear silence the mind
With the minute particulars of mankind?
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top.

In contemplation had those three so wrought
Upon a moment, and so stretched it out
That they, time overthrown,
Were dead yet flesh and bone.

Nothing could be less like *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land* or *The Waves* than this poem: instead of conglomerations of random brain-movements Yeats provides isolated and perfected glories, carefully limned by the shaped stanza-form of the ode.

Perhaps Yeats's greatest effort at lifting the materials of his poetry out of the swirling flux of human life occurs in the two poems "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926) and "Byzantium" (1930). In the first we find a bird made of gold, an image of Yeats's own form once abstracted out of his earthly shape into the domain of symbols and images:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

But Yeats's friend T. Sturge Moore complained that this unearthly image wasn't unearthly enough:

I prefer with Wittgenstein, whom I don't understand, to think that nothing at all can be said about ultimates, or reality in an ultimate sense. . . . Your *Sailing to Byzantium*, magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies.
(*Correspondence of W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore*, p. 162 [1930])

Yeats replied that this objection "showed me that the idea needed exposition" (p. 164). Moore was alluding to the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"; and Yeats's "Byzantium" pushes speech to its limit in order to point at the unspeakable. Here is the revised and supernaturalized golden bird, with most of its connections to human life, perhaps even to human language, as severed as possible:

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

Expressions such as "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork" frustrate the referentiality of language, and place the bird in the domain of the unspeakable. But as the poem comes to its conclusion, an amazing thing happens: the golden bird and the other artifices of eternity—the mummy, the flames begotten of flame—start to drown in a flood:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,

Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

The waters of natural generative life seem to overwhelm the self-begetting or sterile constructs of the afterlife—as Helen Vendler points out, the force of the verb *break* seems spent long before the dolphin-torn sea appears on the scene (*Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays*, p. 118). There is a tension between an aesthetic of finite images of beauty and terror—a particle aesthetic—and an aesthetic of uncontrollable flux—a wave aesthetic; it's far from clear that the particle aesthetic can maintain its tenuous grip on the poem. But perhaps Yeats is more a modernist, more a scientist, than he knows; perhaps a flood or an endless blind hurrying is exactly where he feels at home. In an early draft of this stanza he wrote “Blind images that yet / Blinder images beget”—the images of the natural world are shapeless, blind, indifferent to beauty or precision. There is a visionary Yeats, a seeing Yeats, a Yeats who wants to stare at miracle; but there is also a Yeats happy to be blind in the torn and tormented sea. As he wrote in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1927):

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men ...

Part of Yeats strongly resisted the notion of a blind, chaotic sort of art—he wanted shapeliness, old-fashioned beauty; but part of Yeats felt that the truth of twentieth-century life was Whitehead's truth, a scientific vision of blind meaningless scattering, and like Beckett Yeats tried to find a form to accommodate the chaos.