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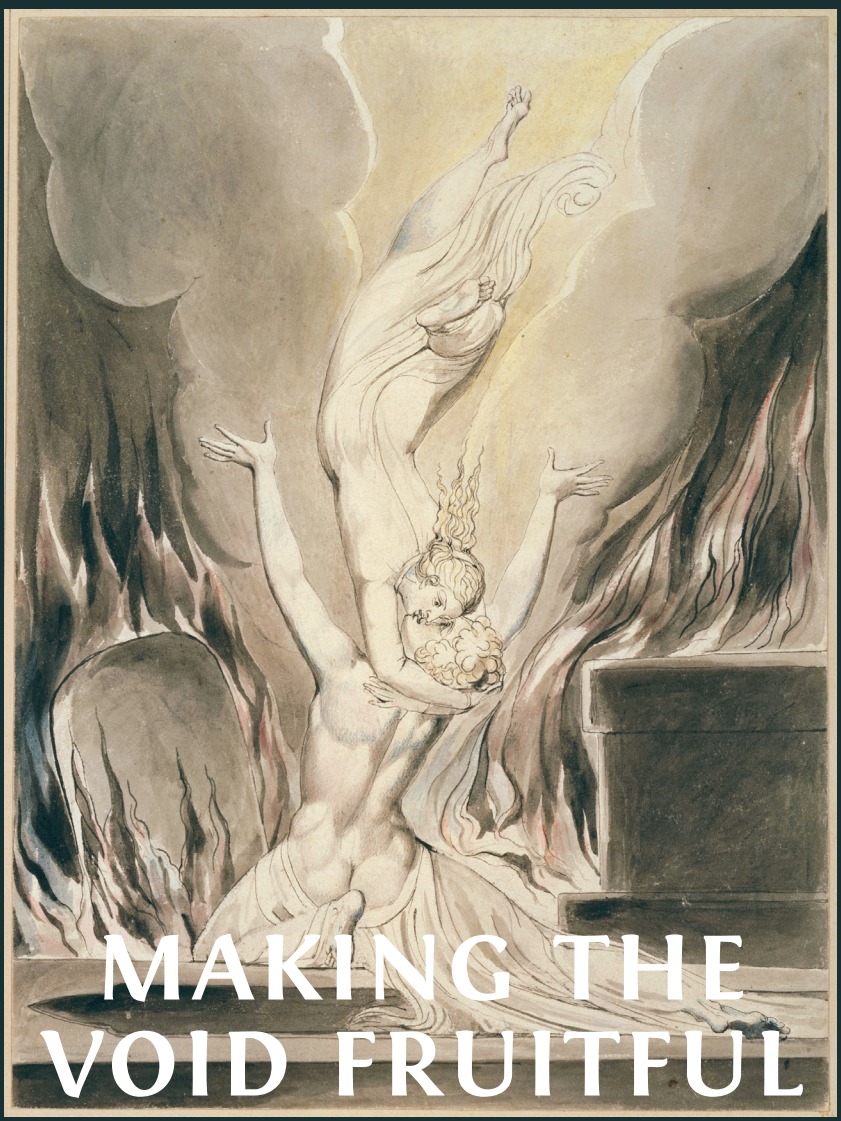

MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover

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4. The Byzantium Poems and Apocalypse in 'The Secret Rose' and 'The Second Coming'

The quest-theme, first established crudely in *The Seeker*, beautifully if ambivalently in 'The Stolen Child,' 'The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland,' and 'Who Goes with Fergus?,' and, perhaps most seminally in 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,' also provides the structure for the two 'Byzantium' poems. Before discussing the last of the Rose poems, 'The Secret Rose,' I would therefore like to jump ahead three decades, leaving behind for a few moments Fairyland and the Celtic Twilight in order to engage the more vigorous poetry attending the imaginary voyages to a very different Otherworld. Taken together, the two 'Byzantium' poems feature, first, a sailing after knowledge and, second, a process of purgation, both of which turn out to be simultaneously spiritual and erotic. The *subject* of both 'Byzantium' poems is the opposition of flesh and spirit, natural flux and spiritual form; but their shared *theme* is that these antitheses are polarities—Blakean Contraries inextricably interdependent. The 'Byzantium' poems seem proof of the artistic truth of Yeats's Golden Dawn name, *Demon Est Deus Inversus*, and of Blake's proverb, 'Eternity is in love with the productions of time.' That proverb, the tenth, is from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's affirmation of the polar nature of being, privileging, in the dialectic of necessary Contraries, 'Energy' and the active 'Prolific' over the 'Devouring,' the passive and religious (Plates 3, 7, 16). Yeats is pulled between these Contraries.

In 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1926), a sixty-year-old and temporarily impotent poet, painfully aware that the world of youth and sexual vitality is 'no country for old men,' sets sail for and has finally 'come/

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To the holy city of Byzantium.' But is all changed? The opening stanza's 'young/ In one another's arms, birds in the trees,/ —Those dying generations—at their song' are reversed yet mirrored in the final stanza. 'Once out of nature,' the aging speaker, his heart 'sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal,' imagines that heart, purged in 'God's holy fire,' consumed away and himself (with what Denis Donoghue once wittily characterized as 'the desperate certainty of a recent convert') transformed into a bird of 'hammered gold and gold enameling,' set 'upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come.'

In a 1937 BBC broadcast, Yeats glossed the golden bird and Virgilian golden bough as symbolic 'of the intellectual joy of eternity, as contrasted to the instinctual joy of human life.' That Platonic/Plotinian contrast with nature is most certainly there. But these golden artifacts are still, however changed, recognizable 'birds in the trees,' so that, whatever the ostensible thrust of the poem, the undertow of the imagery recreates—as in the 'white breast' and 'disheveled' stars of the supposedly tumult-free final stanza of 'Who Goes with Fergus?'—the world being 'rejected.' Further, the now-avian poet is singing to 'lords and ladies' of Byzantium, the sexual principle surviving even in that 'holy city'; and his theme, 'What is past, or passing, or to come,' repeats—in a Keatsian 'finer tone,' to be sure—the three-stage cycle of generation presented in the opening stanza: 'Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.' 'Caught in that sensual music,' those 'dying generations […] neglect/ Monuments of unageing intellect.' But the golden bird set on the golden bough, however symbolic of ageless intellect, still seems partially caught in that sensual music, singing of the cycle of time to lords and ladies. Despite the poem's haughty dismissal of 'any natural thing,' nature is the source of art, which, in turn, expresses nature; and the audience will always necessarily be men and women.

I've referred to 'Byzantium'—borrowing the adjective from 'Mohini Chatterjee,' the poem that immediately precedes it—as Yeats's most 'turbulent' engagement in the tension, marked by conflict and continuity, between flesh and spirit, natural and supernatural, Time and Eternity. Though he admired the first 'Byzantium' poem, Yeats's friend Sturge Moore expressed a serious reservation: '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' (LTSM, 164). It's difficult to believe that this was news to Yeats; but, agreeing with Moore to the extent that his friend had shown him that 'the idea needed exposition,' he set out to address the issue in a second poem.

The result, written in September 1930, was 'Byzantium,' a poem that complicates rather than resolves Sturge Moore's intelligent quibble. Holy and purgatorial though the city may be, as the 'unpurged images of day recede,' the 'Emperor's' soldiery are described as 'drunken' and 'abed,' perhaps exhausted from visiting temple prostitutes, since we hear, as night's resonance recedes, 'night-walkers' song/ After great cathedral gong.' Amid considerable occult spookiness, including a walking mummy (more image than shade or man), two images of the eternal emerge: the works of architect and goldsmith, both transcending and scorning the human cycle, sublunary and changeable: 'A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains/ All that man is,/ All mere complexities,/ The fury and the mire of human veins.'

The second emblem of eternity reprises the first poem's icon of 'hammered gold and gold enameling,' the form the speaker of 'Sailing to Byzantium' imagined himself taking once he was 'out of nature.' This avian artifact,

> 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 and blood.

However golden and immutable it may be, that the miraculous bird can be moon-embittered and scornful suggests that it may be 'almost as much nature' as the golden bird Moore found insufficiently transcendent in the first Byzantium poem. Even in the overtly *primary* or soul-directed 'Byzantium' poems, the *antithetical* or life-directed impulse is too passionate to be programmatically subdued. We remember (as with the 'Byzantium' poems' precursors, Keats's 'Nightingale' and 'Grecian Urn' odes) the rich vitality of the sexual world being 'rejected' in the first poem, and the possible ambiguity of the famous phrase, 'the artifice

of eternity.' And the final tumultuous stanza of 'Byzantium,' especially its astonishing last line, evokes a power almost, but not quite, beyond critical analysis.

The multitude of souls ('Spirit after spirit!') riding into the holy city, each 'Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,' cannot be controlled, even though that surging power is said to be broken by the Byzantine artificers and artifacts. The poem ends with a single extraordinary burst, asserting one thing thematically, but, in its sheer momentum and syntax, suggesting quite another:

> 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 marbled floor is not only the site for the preceding stanza's ritual of purgation, where the spirits are envisioned 'dying into a dance'; the floor itself seems to be 'dancing,' the city almost lifted off its dykes under the inundation of the prolific sea of generation. There is a protective barrier against the full impact of the waves. The Emperor's smithies and marbles, we are twice told, 'break' (defend against, order, tame) these 'furies,' these 'images,' and the sea itself. All three are the direct objects of that one verb; but, as Helen Vendler has observed, 'Practically speaking, the governing force of the verb "break" is spent long before the end of the sentence is reached.'[1] The artistic defenses erected to order and transform the flood end up emphasizing instead the turbulent plenitude of nature, and those spawning 'images that yet/ Fresh images beget.'

We end with what is, phonetically and in tension-riddled power, one of the most remarkable single lines in all of English literature: 'That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.' Along with the images that yet fresh images 'beget,' that final line overpowers even the teeming fish and flesh—all that is 'begotten, born, and dies,' the 'salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas'—of 'Sailing to Byzantium.' The dolphin is at

1 Vendler, *Yeats's* Vision *and the Later Plays*, 118. The floor is ambiguously 'marbled.' One draft, referring to the 'emperor's bronze & marble,' suggests statuary, as in the statues of 'Among School Children,' that 'keep a marble or a bronze repose.'

once the mythological savior and transporter of souls to paradise and kin to us, who share its complexities of 'mire and blood.' Inversely, the 'gong,' though emblematic of Time, also, since it recalls the semantron of the opening stanza, the 'great cathedral gong,' has to be seen and heard as tormenting the surface of life, yet pulling the sea of generation up, to the spiritual source of life's transcendence. Once again—though more powerfully than usual—we are caught up in the dialectical conflict between time and eternity, sexuality and spirituality, self and soul.

§

We may now return to 'The Secret Rose' (1896) which appeared in Yeats's third collection, the autumnal *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). This *fin-de-siècle* and *symboliste* volume (his friend Arthur Symons's influential *The Symbolist Movement in Poetry* appeared the same year), evokes a fallen world, soon to be visited by a longed for apocalyptic wind. This volume includes what may be Yeats's most beautiful early poem. The exquisite 'Song of Wandering Aengus' projects ultimate union between the temporal and eternal as a sublime yet sexual mingling (as in that dreamt of 'Faeryland,' where 'the sun and moon were in the fruit') of lunar apples of silver and solar apples of gold: a marriage of alchemy and Deuteronomy. I discuss this poem in Part Two in connection with Maud Gonne.

Less entrancing poems in *The Wind Among the Reeds* feature a world-weary speaker who, to quote the longest-titled poem in a volume of many long titles, 'mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World.' That consummation devoutly to be wished is far more dramatic in 'The Secret Rose,' which I have deliberately delayed discussing until now. The last of Yeats's explicit 'Rose' poems, it begins and ends, 'Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose': a rondure suggesting that all will be enfolded (the verb 'enfold' appears twice in the poem) within the petals of the symbolic flower. The Seeker is among those questers who have 'sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,/ Or in the wine vat,' a questing alternately Christian or Dionysian. Wandering Aengus sought his elusive beauty (the 'apple-blossom in her hair' allying her with Maud Gonne, associated from the day Yeats met her with apple blossom) through hollow lands and hilly lands suggestive of a woman's body. The Seeker in 'The Secret Rose'

also, over many years, 'sought through lands and islands numberless [...]/ Until he found'—unsurprisingly since this poem, too, was written for Maud Gonne—'a woman, of so shining loveliness' that *one* desired consummation suggests another. No sooner is the beautifully tressed woman of shining loveliness 'found' (a state projected in 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' where 'I *will* find out where she has gone') than we are told:

> I, too, await
> The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
> When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
> Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
> Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
> Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?

This early apocalypse, with its approaching 'hour' and final questions, looks before and after. That 'surely' anticipates ('Surely some revelation is at hand;/ Surely the Second Coming is at hand') Yeats's most powerful, terrifying, yet longed-for apocalypse: his reversal of the *Parousia* of Christ in the century's most-quoted poem. '*Surely thine hour has come*': foreshadowing the advent of the rough beast, 'its hour come round at last,' this line echoes and reverses Jesus' initial retort to his mother, who suggests that he miraculously resupply the wine that has run out during the wedding at Cana: 'Woman, what has this to do with me? My hour is not yet come' (John 2:4). As Helen Vendler has recently suggested, that allusion is compounded by its Shakespearean reverberation in the remark of the French nobleman on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, who looks forward to English corpses and the carrion crows that will 'Fly o'er them, all impatient for their hour.' That line from *Henry V*, Vendler observes, 'adds the malice and impatience that will be incorporated by Yeats in his image of the rough beast.'[2]

Just as the apocalyptic 'hour' of 'The Secret Rose' looks before as well as after; and just as 'The Second Coming' had a genesis both occult and literary, so too with the apocalypse of 'The Secret Rose.' In both cases, the primary literary source is Blake. The slouching rough beast of the later poem fuses (among other creatures) Blake's sublime Tyger

2 'Loosed Quotes,' 133–34. Vendler argues that critical focus on the opening octave of 'The Second Coming' has caused this 'intricate' poem *as a whole*—in which Yeats ultimately repudiates and disavows the 'vain human temptation to prophesy'—to be 'regularly misread' (139).

with his striking illustration (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and elsewhere) of bestial Nebuchadnezzar slouching on all fours. In 'The Secret Rose,' whatever its Rosicrucian sources, the precursor passage is Blake's description, in the apocalyptic final 'Night' of *The Four Zoas*, of 'The stars consumed like a lamp blown out,' which reappear as Yeats's 'stars,' extinguished after being 'blown about the sky/ Like the sparks blown out of a smithy.' Even Yeats's substitution of a smithy for a lamp pays tribute to Blake's blacksmith-god, Los (in Eternity, Urthona).

The Blakean echo is hardly accidental. Of Yeats's three 1890s Rosicrucian short stories, the first, *Rosa Alchemica*, is most closely related to 'The Secret Rose.' The hero of *Rosa Alchemica*, the magician Michael Robartes, is a student of comparative literature, especially drawn, as was Yeats, to the prophetic poems of William Blake. Blake's epic *The Four Zoas* (first titled *Vala*, and abandoned in manuscript in 1807) was rediscovered and published in 1893 by none other than Yeats (and Edwin Ellis). In the finale, from which Yeats lifted his image of stars dying after being 'blown' about the sky like 'sparks,' redeemed 'Man' (meaning the redeemed human being), having finally purged all the evil in himself, looks at infinity unharmed. Los 'rose in all his regenerative power'; the hour of transformation has arrived:

> The sun has left his blackness & found a fresher morning,
> And the mild moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless night,
> And Man walks forth from midst of the fires, the evil is all consumed:
> His eyes behold the angelic spheres arising night & day;
> The stars consumed like a lamp blown out, & in their stead, behold:
> The expanding eyes of Man behold the depths of wondrous worlds.
> (IX.822–27)

Here we have the potentially divine 'Man' envisioned by so many Gnostics, Hermeticists, Cabbalists, Rosicrucians, and Alchemists. The great Gnostic Valentinus was unknown to Yeats, who was, however, familiar with the half-mythological medieval alchemist, Basilius Valentinus, whose 'Twelve Keys' are cited by Yeats in *Rosa Alchemica*. This Valentinus compares 'the fire of the Last Day to the fire of the alchemists, and the world to the alchemist's furnace,' in which 'all must be dissolved before the divine substance, material gold or immaterial ecstasy, awake' (Myth, 270). Basilius Valentinus' 'new man, more noble in his glorified state' than he was before 'the conflagration,' is a 'Man' fully human, liberated from all imprisoning limitations, whether of materialism, the

Lockean / empiricist senses, or political tyranny.[3] In the final lines of *The Four Zoas*, Urthona, the eternal form of Los, 'rises from the ruinous walls/ In all his ancient strength.' (One of Yeats's, and Joyce's, favorite phrases of Blake comes from an 1800 letter to William Hayley: 'The ruins of Time build mansions in Eternity.') In Blake's anything-but-static Eternity, Urthona, though still ready for the creative strife of Contraries in the Blakean Eden, is now armed to wage 'intellectual war,' the 'war of swords' having 'departed' (IX.849–51). In his most famous appeal (in what is now known as the hymn 'Jerusalem') for an imaginative art prophetically inspired and intended to achieve individual and societal redemption, building a new 'Jerusalem' in England, Blake says his 'sword' will not 'sleep' in his hand. But his weaponry (sword, 'Bow of burning gold,' 'Arrows of desire,' spear, and 'Chariot of fire') is to be employed in ceaseless '*Mental* Fight.' He has, Gnostics would say, achieved *gnosis*, a state anticipated in Yeats's longed for apocalypse in 'The Secret Rose.'

These two apocalypses are benign. That of 'The Second Coming,' though also anticipated and partially longed for, is different. The 'vast image' of the sphinx-beast that rises up from 'sands of the desert' had its occult (as opposed to literary / Blakean) origin in an 1890 symbolic-card experiment conducted with Yeats by MacGregor Mathers, head of the Golden Dawn, an experiment also participated in by Florence Farr, not only a great beauty, accomplished actress and musician to whom Yeats was attracted, but a gifted adept. Yeats suddenly saw 'a gigantic Negro raising up his head and shoulders among great stones' (Mem, 71), changed in its published version to 'a desert and a Black Titan' (Au, 180). In his description of the occult experiment with Mathers, Yeats acknowledges that (unlike the 'crowning moment' achieved by Florence Farr) 'sight came slowly, there was not that sudden miracle as if the darkness had been cut with a knife' (Au, 185). That simile reappears in the drafts of 'The Second Coming.' Introducing the moment preceding the vision of the vast image rising up out of *Spiritus Mundi*, Yeats first wrote: 'Before the dark was cut as by a knife.' That he cancelled the

3 In *Rosa Alchemica*, Yeats cites the 'ninth key,' to which should be added the 'Fourth Key': 'At the end [...] the world shall be judged by fire,' and, the alchemist adds, alluding to Isaiah, 'After the conflagration, there shall be formed a new heaven and a new earth, and the new man will be more noble in his glorified state than he was before.' Waite, I, 331.

line is one of several indications of the shift from the poem's opening certitude to the *un*certainty of the second movement, beginning with that twice repeated but nevertheless equivocal 'Surely.'[4]

Like 'The Secret Rose,' 'The Second Coming' ends in a mysterious question mingling breathless anticipation with ambiguity, in an uncertain certitude. The final movement begins 'But now I *know*,' yet ends with a question, the mark of the excited yet terrified reverie that defines the Sublime. Whatever visionary certitude is claimed, knowledge was reserved, in the drafts, to the apocalyptic 'rough beast' itself: 'And now at last *knowing its hour* come round/ *It* has set out for Bethlehem to be born.' In the published text, Yeats ends, grammatically, with an assertion. But his subjective perplexity, at variance with the objective omniscience of the opening eight lines, compels him to conclude with a question mark—a terrified and humbling response reflecting that of the Hebrew apocalyptic visionary, Daniel.

In his long note to the poem, occultist Yeats anticipated and welcomed a post-Christian civilization. But then there is the actual poem. Unlike the opening octave of oracular declarations (a parody of naively *optimistic* Christian certitude), the second part, its fourteen lines taking the unexpected form of an unrhymed sonnet, is less aloofly visionary than human and uncertain. In the Ninth Night of *The Four Zoas* and 'The Secret Rose,' destruction is the prerequisite to re-creation, the consummation of time and the onset of eternity, or at least the re-emergence of a better historical era. That archetypal pattern dominates Yeats's occult note to the poem, in which, having reproduced the double cone of *A Vision*, he informs us that 'the end of an age' is represented by 'the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction.' What will be swept away is not only *primary* Christianity but 'all our scientific, democratic, fact-finding […] civilization,' to be replaced by an *antithetical* aristocratic civilization, based on the esoteric materials allegedly given to Michael Robartes by a fictive Arab sect (the 'Judwalis'), but sounding decidedly Nietzschean. 'When the revelation comes it will not come to the poor but to the great and learned and establish again for two thousand years prince & vizier. Why should we resist?' (VP, 823–25)

4 I quote the drafts as transcribed in my *Yeats's Interactions*, 65, and, for the beast 'knowing *its* hour', 100.

This is the welcome change, the confident occultist assures us, to be ushered in by the birth of the rough beast. But the poem itself has a decidedly different tale to tell. For, 'surely,' the newborn age is likely to take the *un*-civilized, chaotic shape prefigured by its brutal engendering. With that plot shift or *peripeteia,* the theoretician and cold-eyed clairvoyant in Yeats yields to the poet and man whose vision of the beast, however titillating, *truly* 'troubles my sight.' Yeats is here in accord with the response of Daniel (two centuries before an echoing John of Patmos in Rev. 13) to the final and most 'terrifying and dreadful' of the 'four great beasts' he sees in a dream: 'my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me [...] I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it' (Dan 7:19–20, 8:15–27).

This deeper insight, knowing that we do not know, in a Daniel or a Yeats, is also a form of *gnosis*, but a higher form, more human and accurate than recklessly prophetic and oracular.[5] In her 1996 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska celebrated the three words, 'I don't know,' a small phrase that 'flies on mighty wings.' She noted that 'Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know."' Her predecessor as a Nobel laureate, the man who wrote that long note about history-determining gyres and cycles, was an occultist and something of a right-wing crank. The man who envisioned and wrote 'The Second Coming' was a poet, and the poem that emerged burst the limits of Yeats's own accompanying prose note. As D. H. Lawrence reminds us, 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.'[6]

5 The dangers of pseudo-historical cyclicism are exemplified by *The Fourth Turning: What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (1997), by William Strauss and Neil Howe, a book that asserts that violence must necessarily precede full 'Awakening.' The projected crisis may not 'require total war, but it does require a major discontinuity or *ekpyrosis*—the death of an old order and the rebirth of something new' (51). Barely tolerable in Yeats, this apocalyptic gibberish has been enthusiastically endorsed by Steve Bannon and other architects of the seditious attempt on 6 January 2021 by Donald Trump and his more conspiracy-addled followers (QAnon, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, et al.) to carry out a violent insurrection in an attempt, with the passive complicity of a craven Republican Party, to overturn the 2020 US presidential election. See Adele M. Stans.

6 Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 14. Szymborska, 'The Poet and the World.'