

3

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,²
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,³
20 And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

4

25 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;⁴
30 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Sept. 1926

Leda and the Swan¹

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

5 How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
10 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower²

2. Yeats had in mind the mosaic frieze of the holy martyrs in the church of San Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, which he had visited in 1907.

3. I.e., whirl round in a spiral motion. "Perne": or pirn; literally a bobbin, reel, or spool, on which something is wound. It became a favorite word of Yeats's, used as a verb meaning "to spin round"; he associated the spinning with the spinning of fate.

4. "I have read somewhere," Yeats wrote, "that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang." Cf. also Hans Christian Andersen's *Emperor's Nightingale*, which may have been in Yeats's mind at the time.

1. In Greek mythology Zeus visited Leda in the form of a swan. As a result of the union Leda gave birth to Helen and to Clytemnestra (wife of Agamemnon). Yeats saw Zeus's visit to Leda as an "annunciation," marking the beginning of Greek civilization. "I imagine the annunciation that

to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg, and that from one of her eggs came Helen and that from the other war" (*A Vision*). In the 1907 Cuala Press edition Yeats noted: "I wrote *Leda and the Swan* because the editor of a political journal asked me for a poem. I thought, 'After the failure of the nationalist, demagogic movement, founded by W. B. Yeats and popularized by the Encyclopedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so rich that it cannot grow that crop again for years.' Then I thought, 'Nothing is now possible but a movement from above preceded by some kind of annunciation.' My fancy began to play with the idea of the Swan for metaphor, and I began to write the poem but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it. My friend tells me that his conservative readers will misunderstand the poem." For the author's explanations while composing this poem, see "The Creative Process" in the appendices to this volume.

And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Sept. 1923

1924, 1928

Among School Children

1

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
5 To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way—the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

2

I dream of a Ledaean¹ body, bent
10 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy—
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
15 Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.²

3

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age—
20 For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage—
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

4

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento³ finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind

and was subsequently divided into two. "After the division, the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and threw their arms about one another eager to grow into one." The fact that Helen was born from an egg (as the daughter of Leda and the Swan) suggests Yeats's image for such a union.

3. In the 15th century a reference to Italian painting by his wife, Clytemnestra, the other daughter of Leda and the Swan.

4. The reference is to Maud Gonne (Yeats's daughter). The reference is to Maud Gonne also in lines 19–28.

5. Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes explains the myth of the primeval man was