Essays on English
and American Literature
Essays on English and American Literature

By Leo Spitzer

EDITED BY ANNA HATCHER

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"Great spirits now on earth are sojourning," exclaimed John Keats in an early sonnet in praise of three of his contemporaries. Great spirits are sojourning, or have only lately departed from our midst, in our own age. And not a few of those have arisen in the realms of linguistics, philology, criticism. With the same naive bewilderment which contemporary scientists display, we might almost claim, as they do, that ninety percent of all the critics who ever lived are alive today. But numbers are of little moment in humanistic studies. Nobel or Pulitzer prizes are not bestowed on critics. Statues are but rarely erected to them. Their greatness can never be measured by quantitative standards, and is seldom granted unchallenged acceptance. Their chief bounty to their followers is in the zest, the stimulation, at times the exasperation, which they arouse in readers, and in the intensity of life with which even their works of circumstance are instinct.

Leo Spitzer was, along with E. R. Curtius, with E. Auerbach, with B. Croce, and with other eminent men still surviving like G. Lukacs and D. Alonso, among the truly great literary scholars of our age. America, which called him to the "paradise of exiles" which she offered to Europeans, gave him unstinted admiration. He taught at Johns Hopkins from 1936 on, published remarkable collections of essays at Vanni's in New York, at Smith College, at Princeton University Press, and scores of separate articles in learned journals. Still it may be regretted that Spitzer was not more often asked by university presses or by lecture foundations to compose comprehensive books, in which his passion for unity and structure in works of art would have expressed itself and the impatience of a ubiquitous conqueror of all the provinces of linguistic and literary knowledge might have been curbed.

Impressive volumes of Spitzer's essays appeared in Italy and Germany after his retirement from the Johns Hopkins University,
and have been warmly received. Since his death at Forte dei Marmi, on September 16, 1960, there have been hopes for other publications. Collections of essays in English will doubtless now appear in Spitzer’s adopted land, at which many of his most fruitful teachings were directed. The most pressing and the most timely need was to place at the disposal of scholars specializing in English (and American) letters a number of fugitive, but in truth of solid, rich, and permanently valuable pieces on literature in the English language. Professor Anna Granville Hatcher, the guardian of Spitzer’s memory and of his tradition in Romance lexicography and philology, has put the learned world in her debt by this felicitous as well as pious initiative.

The literatures in the English language are the last to which Spitzer’s attention came to be directed: he brought to his treatment of poets, from Marvell and Herrick to Keats and Yeats, of medieval songs and of Whitman’s cosmic pantheism, a mature wisdom, a range and a breadth, and an acuteness in deciphering subtle texts which long years of interpretation of other literatures had developed. His early training in his native Vienna had been in the classics, then in Romance philology. He recalled, in one of the few autobiographical confessions he ever wrote, the humorous and moving first chapter of Linguistics and Literary History (Princeton University Press, 1948), how precise, how remote from the modern world and its contingencies, how obstinately unaware of recent literature and of politics, was then the study of philology. Austria at that time admired and envied the refined charms of Parisian life; but stern professors of philology were mostly intent upon endowing their disciples with the best tools for the analysis of linguistic phenomena. Generations of medieval people who had lived, loved, fought, prayed, sung, and traded were seen as if they had been chiefly concerned with transmitting philological forms and distorted phonetic changes from some hypothetical vulgar Latin idiom to one another.

Spitzer never was thus to sever language from literature, and either of them from life. He observed every detail of language, and of style, with a microscopic attention. It is even more engrossing to scrutinize those slight deviations from usage, those
involuntary repetitions or recurrences, those stylistic idiosyncra­
sies of writers in a foreign language than in one's own. Scandi­
navians, Balts, Czechs, Dutchmen who by necessity or prefer­
ance master several foreign idioms and make a point of analyzing
stylistic phenomena with meticulous care have often proved the
best students of Romance languages and of English. From a
thorough examination of details which would remain unnoticed
by the native speakers of French, Spanish, or English, Spitzer
proceeded inductively to generalizations on the mental structure
of the writer. A dazzling concatenation of inferences thus
brought him to the discovery of secrets in the psychological, al­
most in the physiological, make-up of authors, which he then
laid bare to eyes less piercing than his.

The method is less objective than it appears at first to be.
Spitzer himself noted, in his essay on "Linguistics and Literary
History" (page 23), that his "personal way had been from the
observed detail to ever broadening units which rest, to an in­
creasing degree, on speculation." There is some fallacy, even
probably an inevitable element of trickery, in the explication de
textes, just as there is in the experiments devised by Emile's
tutor for Rousseau's ideal pupil. The texts selected must be sig­
nificant, typical, subtle, rich, or else the subtlety of the explicator
will be exercised in a void. The details from which Spitzer drew
a whole array of original inductions were not seized in a purely
haphazard fashion; his instinct, like that of a hunter, or of a
photographer, or even that of a lover, slyly told him which prey
would be most likely to yield. It is easy for the teacher demon­
strating in a seminar the fertility of his ingenious method to
pretend that he is merely eliciting, from some apparently indif­
ferent detail in a text, untold riches. But of course the immense
culture of Spitzer lay behind his attitude of an objective ob­
server. René Wellek, in an article written after Spitzer's death
which constitutes the fairest and the wisest evaluation of the
great scholar's work (Comparative Literature, xii, 1960, pp.
310-334) courteously indicated how mistaken the average men
among us would be if they thought they could emulate a giant to
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whom the line of Oceanus in Keats's Hyperion readily applies: "Knowledge enormous makes a god of me."

Like Socrates, Spitzer well knew which questions to ask, and that pregnant answers come only to the questions which have prompted them. He had not only a knowledge of half a dozen languages and literatures so vast that it crushes any humbler mortal; he also had mastered several ancillary disciplines, and his sharp insight had enabled him to retain only the best of Bergsonism, of Freudianism, of Hegel and Croce and Dilthey. He never was the captive of any system, and he preserved to the end, through glosses and footnotes and digressions, and admirably clear style and a delight in living and in feeling which preserved him from pedantry. His most lasting love was for poetry, and his devotion was to beauty and to grace. Quoting Goethe, who knew better than any Frenchman that to be sensual is also to be human (even all too human), he was amused when he could gently upbraid an American scholar who found the theme of Leda raped by the swan somewhat repulsive: "the graceful body of a maiden encompassed by the harmonious lines of the regal white bird" entranced him as it did Yeats in the poem under discussion.

More pedestrian minds may balk at some of the assumptions which underlie Spitzer's "criticism of beauties," as Chateaubriand had called the critical attitude which he wished to substitute for the earlier and carping "criticism of defects." He readily took it for granted that "a great masterpiece is great in all its parts." "Dans une grande âme tout est grand," also wrote Pascal, or whoever composed the Discours sur les Passions de l'Amour. Ingeniously, if not always convincingly, he endeavored to prove it for passages in Rabelais or Racine which others had judged to be defective; he might conceivably have done likewise, if novels had more often captured his attention, for digressions in Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoevski, and Proust which some of us would rather ascribe to those moments of relaxed tension or of slumber that Horace himself acknowledged to exist in Homer. We may even judge those weaknesses in great artists to be a winning mark of their nonchalance, as they become sure enough
of their mastery to disregard the conventional demands for unity and structure.

Spitzer would not. He shared the passion for unity and organicity in literary works which animates, in our age of fragmentation of knowledge, the many monists among critics who want at all costs to reach the One behind the transitory Many. Born as he was thirteen years before the close of the nineteenth century, when a sense of mystery and respect for the unknowable were replacing the former positivistic faith and when intuition was being enthroned where pure intellect had once reigned, Spitzer never consented to give up searching for reasons; the real to him—that is to say, every detail present in a work of art—was rational, and susceptible to explanation, provided the interpreter succeeded in fashioning the right key. Some of us, probably lazier minds and less stubbornly determined to “take upon us the mystery of things, as if we were God’s spies,” in dying Lear’s admonition, are resigned to see our knowledge hemmed in by ignorance. We do not claim to account for every strange whim of the inspiration of a genius. We would almost hail the irrationalist among critics who hopes to respect the irrationality of the work of art and, like the mystic, takes refuge in silence, or in beatific exclamations of rapture. Not so with Spitzer. He took issue with the American “new criticism,” which occasionally became too cocksure in its resort to facile categories and in its terminology. In truth, however, he and its proponents differed but little. Nevertheless Spitzer was, if never “too proud to fight,” still too proud to ally himself with any school.

His warnings against complacency and the gregarious acceptance of fads in our critical attitudes have been salutary. With all his subtlety, he never abdicated common sense. His method varied, as any critical method always must, with each talent, each kind of poetry to which he applied it. He well knew that the very best of methods, be it the explication de textes, easily degenerates into a set of recipes, mechanically and clumsily used by the followers of those who first invented it. In criticism as in educational reforms and as in politics, fifteen or twenty years are the usual maximum span of time after which the wear and tear...
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brings out the faults and obnubilates the features which had at first dazzled us in their novelty. The exclusive stress laid by many an English-speaking critic upon imagery, as the best initiation into an author's secret chambers, rightly filled him with diffidence. He was just as impatient at the preposterous allegorical interpretations of masterpieces which seduce the ingenious spirits of an age brought up on Joyce and Kafka. *A Winter's Tale, Measure for Measure, Don Juan* are not made more profound because they are presented as a refined code for a philosophical message. Fielding, in *A Journey from this World to the Next*, already had Shakespeare protest, in Elysium, against his all too subtle decipherers: "I marvel nothing so much as that men will gird themselves at discovering obscure beauties in an author. Certes the greatest and most pregnant beauties are ever the plainest and most evidently striking. . . ." Fielding was perhaps too robust an optimist. But the crowning achievement of an immensely erudite and subtle mind is indeed to learn anew how to be satisfied with a simple and direct interpretation when it is adequate.

The essays which are collected here were scattered in a number of learned journals where they are not easily accessible. They are all important elucidations of specific texts in English literature, into which Spitzer, foreign-born and approaching those texts with fresh reactions and a wealth of rapprochements with ancient and other modern literatures, read profound meanings. The poems to which Spitzer applied his acumen were not chosen as particularly difficult. Like poetry, criticism should propose as its aim to "make familiar objects seem as if they were not familiar." Thus fairly simple Middle English poems, replaced in their European context, appear laden with new power and strangeness. Donne's "The Extasie," half mystical, half sensual (more so perhaps than Spitzer will allow, if a little less than French interpretations of the freedom left to the bodies, once the souls have departed from them for a higher communion), receives fresh light from an unexpected parallel with St. John of the Cross and from Isolde's "Liebestod" in Wagner's opera.

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Herrick’s playful jewel, “A sweet disorder in the dress,” is interpreted as far transcending the seduction of some disorder in a woman’s garments: it reaches the more universal plane of art, with the forces of wildness and those of civility struggling, as often they did in seventeenth-century poetics.

Marvell’s gentle piece on the “Nymph complaining for the death of her Faun” is deftly analyzed by Spitzer as the metamorphosis of an ancient theme into a miraculously simple elegy in a baroque setting. Spitzer is no less at home in the English nineteenth century: audaciously, he affronted one of the most frequently elucidated, or obscured, of poems: Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” overwhelming one of its recent interpreters, dazzling us with analogies drawn from other literatures, but, as always, bringing the reader back to an enhanced enjoyment of the poem itself, as a critic should do. The shorter commentary on Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” bringing in Saint Paul, Racine, the French Parnassians, likewise remains witty and lucid, and never crushes the poem under erudition. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman here represent American literature; both have long been familiar to Europeans. It took more boldness to approach American advertising as popular art, as Spitzer did in a lecture first delivered at Smith College in 1948. Most exiles or emigré scholars would shrug their shoulders with superior scorn at American advertising and its “attempts at esthetic appeal.” Spitzer, on the contrary, stated outright that “to adopt a resentful or patronizing attitude toward our time is the worst way to understand it.” From a poster, conspicuously displayed in drugstores some years ago, depicting snow-capped mountains and orange groves, he took the motto:

“From the sunkist groves of California
Fresh for you.”

He then brilliantly analyzed all the evocative elements of poetry implicit in such a motto and read into and behind them a whole eudemonistic philosophy, with its promise of paradise to buyer and consumer. The Madison Avenue persuaders who hit upon his essay may well feel proud at being studied as gravely as lines
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of Shakespeare and Milton and Keats, and in no way found wanting.

Unlike most of the European-born scholars who came to America since 1930 and merely pursued over here what they had begun in their native land, but for a few occasional admonitions to the uncultured audiences of the New World, Spitzer undertook to observe, to analyze, and to appreciate the country which he had adopted. He deemed it a benefit falling to the lot of the emigrant scholar, as he stated in his preface to *Linguistics and Literary History*, that “his inner activity was . . . immensely enhanced and intensified” by his new surrounding. A second nature grew in him, which served “to make shine by contrast his first nature in the clearest light.”

If Spitzer learned much from America and generously acknowledged it, he also served the study, not only of foreign letters, but also of English literature in this country. With all its remarkable achievement, American scholarship in the English field tends to remain a trifle provincial and self-centered. Departments of English often look upon themselves as private citadels on the university campus, communicating only within their haughty walls, suspicious of their colleagues in social sciences, in philosophy, even in other literatures, or of those who advocate a comparative approach. They require a perfunctory test in two foreign languages from their graduate students, but they only reluctantly open books in those languages themselves. Their haughty, or perhaps shy, isolation is probably responsible in part for some disaffection with the study of the literature of England, as offering too shrunk a “usable context,” as Lionel Trilling deplored in a lucid article in *The Sewanee Review* (LXVI, 3, Summer 1958). Scholars in other European literatures are more readily invited by the very nature of their subject to stress contacts between the literatures of France, Germany, Russia, Spain with both philosophy and the fine arts. The broad approach of a universal man like Spitzer, whose knowledge admitted of no frontiers, who was unashamedly un-English in his approach, yet who threw ingenious or dazzling light on several
texts of English literature, should prove enriching to the specialists of English and refreshing to the laymen.

In another respect also was Spitzer "un-English." He did not meekly agree with those who differed from him or who contradicted him. He was not placidly satisfied with agreeing to disagree and with eschewing arguing and demonstrating. Many of the essays presented in this book were polemical in their origin and remain polemical in their character. That is an old European tradition, with Renaissance humanists and with German scholars. Linguists and archaeologists have fallen heir to that tradition in America, literary critics but seldom. Ideas, however, if they are to be taken at all seriously, deserve fighting for, or about. Literary appreciation involves the whole of man: his intellect, his philosophical and religious beliefs, his sensibility, his dreams, his senses even, and his own way of envisaging life. It is not surprising that, like politics, it should in some people take on the appearance of an affair of the heart, in which one does not easily yield to a rival.

A novelist seldom starts his writer's career from mere observation of life; he usually is spurred to creation by the reading of other novels. A painter most often starts from other paintings rather than from the imitation of nature itself. Leo Spitzer often needed the springboard of another scholar's inadequate or unsatisfying critique in order to redress it, supplement what was first proposed, broaden the original framework, and then unfurl his own wings. At times, like many a polemicist, he was prone to read too much into what the previous scholar had said. As in the case of Milton's sonnet, "Methought I saw my late espoused saint," which he was led to interpret by the previous commentary of his distinguished Johns Hopkins colleague, George Boas, Spitzer prolonged the thought of George Boas, attributed to him what he might have thought and expressed in order to be all the more victoriously confuted by Spitzer.

Few of those whom Spitzer thus refuted or castigated, however, would resent thus serving as a pretext for a magnificent display of erudite profundity; borrowing the language of the fox
in La Fontaine's fable, when he justifies the king of animals for devouring a few lambs, and occasionally their shepherd too, they might remark, when encountering the leonine figure of Spitzer in the Elysian fields:

"vous nous fites, seigneur,
En nous croquant, beaucoup d'honneur."

It is especially with his best friends and his closest colleagues that Leo Spitzer liked to engage in controversy: "both friendship and philological scholarship are dialectical in essence; friendship, which encourages the deepest interest in one's fellow scholars . . . must lead toward (friendly) disagreement." Thus Spitzer noted in his essay on Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears." Truth is what he loved above all else, and it was most safely pursued, for him, through the insights which the limitations of others provoked in him. Emerson used to contend that, next to good preaching, bad preaching was the most fruitful of all: it brought vigorous dissent. It is a solace for critics less universal than Spitzer to reflect that their inadequate attempts may have provoked one of their contemporaries to go further and deeper. The role of any critic should indeed be, not to solve any problems forever or for long, but to foment discussion and arouse keener intensity of life around the literary work under debate.
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Essays on English
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CHAPTER I

On Yeats’s Poem
“Leda and the Swan”*

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.

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
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
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?

Mr. Hoyt Trowbridge’s “Longinian analysis” of Yeats’s poem (MP, LI, 118-29), however subtle and far-reaching his observations may be, seems to me to suffer somewhat precisely from the goal which he has assigned to himself, that of proving that Longinus’ categories of literary criticism, even though in need of supplementation or correction in detail if they are to fit the modern poet’s approach, are still valid for the latter. In this manner Yeats’s poem is made to exemplify Longinus’ theories but fails to appear as an incomparable, unique poetic entity in itself. I think that, by the demonstration of the presence of the “five springheads” of the Longinian sublime, the poem tends

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to be converted into material for a Q.E.D. and, rather than a Longinian analysis of Yeats, to amount to a Yeatsian confirmation of Longinus. My experience with poetry would advise me to search in a particular great poem first for what is the most immediately striking, the most individual, the least “cataloguable”—rather than to dwell on those features which make it representative of a genus (however sublime the genus of the sublime may be): I would search for the characteristic in each poem instead of offering laudatory statements which may apply to quite different poems as well.

Now what strikes me most in the poem “Leda and the Swan” is the rendering of the time-place sequence in the portentous event of the rape of Leda by the swan-god. Mr. Trowbridge has, it is true, dealt with several elements in the poem concerned with time (less with those rendering space); but by the “catalogue-construction” of his article he was forced to disperse them under different headings: thus under “figure” (= “departure from normal syntax”) we are told about the effect of the “asyndeton” (I would rather call it “nominal sentence”) in the opening words “A sudden blow” and about the actualizing present tense in the description of the rape, a tense that yields in the end to the past tense (“Did she put on his knowledge . . . ?”), which, in removing us from the event, concentrates on its meaning; under the heading “diction” we learn of the “bold metaphor” by which the conception of Helen is expressed in terms of what was caused by Helen (“The broken wall . . .”); and under “composition” an opinion of Arnold Stein, not entirely indorsed by Mr. Trowbridge, is reported, according to which the limpness of the last verse with its imperfect rhyme (“drop”: “caught up”) would correspond to the indifference and languor of the “post-orgastic situation.” While all these observations may be not without value, they fail, scattered as they are in different paragraphs, to integrate into one coherent picture of a temporal-positional sequence. Nowhere does Mr. Trowbridge clearly state the basic situation as it offers itself to us in the poem and what develops in the poem from that basic situation. By treating the poem as an
already constituted entity (as something already read), he de­prives it not only of its pristine freshness (of the impression it makes the first time we read it) but also of its inner dynamics, which represents the truly poetic in it, of the flüssige Band (to use the Goethean expression) that holds the artistic entity to­gether. I may be allowed, even at the risk of mentioning the obvious, to establish the temporal-situational sequence in “Leda and the Swan.”

It is clear that the poem develops within a stretch of time that is marked by the temporal adverbs “still” in line 1 and “be­fore” in line 14. The event of the rape which fills this stretch of time begins at the moment (or coincides with the moment) indicated by the first three words: “A sudden blow,” with that sudden invasion that comes out of the nowhere of cosmic space, continues with the pervasive penetration of the bird-god into the “loosening” body of the girl, the moment of procrea­tion (“A shudder in the loins engenders there . . .”), and ends with the “post-orgastic” weakening of the grip of the invader that “lets her drop.” Thus the acme of strength appears in the direct brutal attack (whose unexpressed motivation we may supply by thinking of Leda’s beauty) of the first moment; all the subsequent lines offer a comparative decrescendo\(^1\) in bodily strength, while, conversely, the impact of the event grows more and more toward the end, at which time the event itself already belongs to the past (a circumstance that is marked by the preterite “Did she” in l. 14). This is one of the mysterious paradoxes of copulation and procreation (the theme of our

\(^1\)To the critic versed in French Parnassian poetry, this end of a—truly Parnassian—sonnet of Yeats with a decrescendo in the historical narrative coupled with an increase in reflection must be a surprise. How would a Hérédia have treated the same subject? Surely, his last line in the sonnet would have been one of those “purple passages” in which the whole sonnet culminates and in which history is foreshadowed, either in its glori­ous or its fateful impact. Either he would have had Leda see in a vision the burning of Troy (as the Centaurs “see” l’ombre herculéenne or Antony “sees” in the eyes of Cleopatra his fleeting galleys), or Helen would have emerged triumphantly (as does Aphrodite Anadyomene, another creature born from the “blood of the air”: “Radieuse, émergeant de l’écume embrasée / Dans le sang d’Ouranos fleurit Aphrodité”).
poem): the overpowering strength of a moment engenders events whose meaning will become clear only in their result in time (at no time can Leda become aware of this event—sex, while materializing its results by means of the body of woman, needs no mental collaboration on her part). By the sudden blow time has been arrested and history created. With this sudden blow, which itself has no antecedents, all subsequent events of history are given. The syntactically brusque beginning of the poem (the nominal sentence that spurns the empathetic potentialities of the verb) is the adequate rendering of an event offered without prehistory, itself creating history. Sex has ultimately no beginning, admits of no motivation. Yet, in spite of this truncation, we see in the temporal adverb of line 1, “the great wings beating still,” a past still vibrating—but this is only the past of the raper, whose sudden blow must be due to an accumulation of passion. What happens in the poem has already begun before its beginning. Toward the end of the poem we realize even more the sovereign independence of the temporal rhythm pulsating in the raper: it proceeds and dies on its own momentum: the act of begetting will be only “a shudder in the loins” for the begetter, while the events he has created will follow their own track which will lead to the fall of Troy and the death of Agamemnon; and we are told of these dire events before the orgasm of the swan is spent. The temporal rhythm of the sexual act and that of the history engendered by it diverge (therefore the unharmonious “limping” rhyme “caught up”—“drop”). It is the metaphysical paradox of the physical act of sex that death and destruction may have been created even before this process of animal life is ended. The short time sequence of the act finds here its expression in the short form of the sonnet within whose limits it is contained, while the sweep of the historical consequences extends far beyond the framework of the sonnet.

But what of the rhythm of the victim? Her experience has no rhythm. Throughout the poem, from line 3 on, she is represented as “caught,” she is still “caught up” in line 11: the inconspicuous particle up, put into the relief of the rhyme, denotes brutal interception of time, the arrest of time, which is
what the act of rape means for her to whose potential reaction the raper is indifferent.

Now we may pass from the temporal-rhythmical relationships suggested in our poem to the positional ones. For the rape amounts to a fixation of position as well as to an arrest of time: the swan is the vise in which the girl is “caught,” by whose powerful body she is encompassed: his wings beat “above” her, her breast is pressed to his, her body is “laid in that white rush,” the only movement granted her is that of the “loosening thighs,” the movement of surrender. And, of course, the reader finds himself, too, drawn into the vise, helpless and numbed like the girl: we, too, feel the helplessness, the terror, the horror of closeness imposed (what more ghastly than to feel a “strange heart beating,” to feel a heart that beats for one’s self, but not in diapason with one’s own?). Because what we really visualize in the picture unfolded in the poem is only the exposed parts of the entrapped body of Leda, our empathy inevitably goes toward her feelings immediately, directly, and only through her may we imagine also, delayed, the emotions of the passionate god: his heartbeat, the shudder of his loins in the act of begetting, the quasi-mechanical inevitability of the exhaustion which causes him to slacken his grip (one notices the nuance of inevitability in the verbal expression: “before the indifferent beak could let her drop”). The expressions “feathered glory” and “white rush” must be admired, not only because of their denotation of sublime aspects of the swan-god, but because the transposition of terms (= glorious feathers, a rushing white thing) suggests the way in which Leda’s first impressions have recorded themselves: central is the glory and the rush, the forces that overpower her (beauty, movement); marginal the feathers and the whiteness, the concrete elements. From the line “A shudder in the loins engenders there . . . ,” direct access to Leda’s feelings is denied us, for she seems reduced to a local indication: there. But what is the exact meaning of there? Its antecedent must be body in line 7. But what,

2 They are called “metaphors” by Mr. Trowbridge. But, according to ancient terminology, I would rather consider them as “figures,” examples, that is, of hypallage: e.g., fulva leonis ira instead of fulvi leonis ira.
in turn, is the meaning of body? Is it indefinite ("how can body . . . but feel . . . ?") = any human body, any human organism? If so, the precise there would not be in order. Perhaps body is better understood as a mass-word referring to body as a substance, a substance subject to molding by a super-human force (=flesh, human clay), as opposed to heart in the same line: it is Leda’s body alone that “feels” the strange heart in its local position (“where it lies”). The adverb there would then mean “in this medium or substance” and derives its pathos from the opposition between the passive female body and the world-shaking events of history that will be begotten “there”: “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead.” The double miracle, temporal and spatial, that has taken place then and there mirrors itself in the wording of the line. Mr. Trowbridge rightly emphasizes the “leap of thought” which the “bold metaphors” require of the reader: by the omission of the missing link, the birth of Helen (“the effect is latent in its cause”), the reader must go directly from the rape of Leda to the Trojan War. But can we assume, as Mr. Trowbridge would seem to suggest, that the leap of thought imposed on us is devised by the poet in order to “fully support” his thought, as though the thought had arisen first in the poet’s mind but had been in need of embellishment by “bold metaphors”?* May it not be rather that his thought itself arose

* Throughout his interpretation, Mr. Trowbridge speaks in terms of poetic art that makes crude reality beautiful. He thinks, indeed, that the subject matter of the poem in itself is “painful and even ugly.” But from the purely aesthetic point of view, what could be more beautiful than the graceful body of a maiden encompassed by the harmonious lines of the regal white bird? How often have ancient sculptors not been inspired by this subject (does not Ovid also mention in his *Metamorphoses* an artist who “fecit olorinis Ledam recubare alis”?). Did not Goethe call Faust’s dream of the rape of Leda (11, 2) “die lieblichste von allen Szenen?”—Goethe, who allows his Homunculus to blame Mephistopheles for his “popish” insensitivity to the Greek beauty of that scene:

Du aus Norden,
Im Nebelalter jung geworden,
Im Wust von Rittertum und Pfäfferei,
Wo wäre da dein Auge frei!
Im Düstern bist du nur zuhause. . . .
not only immediately clothed with linguistic garment but (to change the metaphor) realized its fulness only through the words? What is the thought? The mystery of copulation and procreation is that into a present moment a latent future inserts itself which one day shall be seen as a past that took root in that moment. Exactly so do the words of Yeats show the past (from the viewpoint of the future) already as a fait accompli, as existing in the moment in which its cause is engendered. No one can fail, of course, to grasp the correspondence (I prefer this term to “metaphor,” which suggests a quid pro quo) of content and form offered by the construction of the participles (instead of verbal abstract nouns: “the broken wall” instead of “the breaking of the wall,” etc.), whose epigrammatic concentration reflects the inevitability of Fate. But I maintain more: this construction, with its 2,000-year-old tradition in Latinity with which the poet must have been long acquainted, helped mold the thought itself. Moreover, it was precisely Roman historians or mythographers who preferred this construction (Livy: duo consules interfecti terrebant, “the murder of the two consuls”; Ovid: in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas, “the changes of shape”) which carries with it the ring of history. The same construction has been used with great effect by Racine, who often has his characters summarize past history in a series of traits éclatants (e.q. Athalie I, i):

Faut-il, Abner, faut-il vous rappeler le cours
Des prodiges fameux accomplis en nos jours,
Des tyrans d’Israël les célèbres disgrâces,
Et Dieu trouvé fidèle en toutes ses menaces;
L’impie Achab détruit, et de son sang trempé
Le champ que par le meurtre il avait usurpé?
Près de ce champ fatal Jézabel immolée,
Sous les pieds des chevaux cette reine foulée,
Dans son sang inhumain les chiens désaltérés,
Et de son corps hideux les membres déchirés;

Valéry: “Les belles œuvres sont filles de leur forme, qui naît avant elles.”
Des prophètes menteurs la troupe confondue,
Et la flamme du ciel sur l'autel descendue;
Élie aux éléments parlant en souverain,
Les cieux par lui fermés et devenus d'airain,
Et la terre trois ans sans pluie et sans rosée,
Les morts se ranimant à la voix d'Élisée?
Reconnaissez, Abner, à ces traits éclatants,
Un Dieu tel aujourd'hui qu'il fut dans tous les temps.

Here, though on a vaster scale than in our poem, scenes, detached medallion-like from the flow of history and presented as if recalled (rappeler) by memory, are centered about concrete persons or places that were affected by startling historical events—an effect which the use of verbal abstractions would not have allowed ("the destruction of the impious Ahab" is less vivid a description than "the impious Ahab destroyed"). In our poem it is the poet himself who "remembers" the traits éclatants of history; it is he who sees them as immediate and objective consequences of the rape. Leda, as she feels the full bodily impact of the divine beast, is only a channel through which the forces of history pass, or a place ("there") in which they work. The objective visualization of history culminates in the predicative expression: "Agamemnon dead"—a Roman newspaper headline, as it were.

As for the phrase "Agamemnon dead," Mr. Trowbridge has failed to mention the breaking-up of the first tercet brought about by the segmentation of its last line, the second part of which, syntactically connected with the second tercet, has only a rhythmical relationship with the first:

... And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up. . . .

And yet this slight rhythmical bond is enough to make us sense an analogy of thought between the two events "Agamemnon dead" and "Leda caught up": parallel to the death of Agamemnon, the last link in a long cycle of historical events, there is suggested a metaphorical death of Leda (which will give birth to
those very events): her "being so caught up" is indeed equivalent to a momentary death, to suspended animation. That moment of stupor, of unconscious conception, could not be rendered better than by the second member of a sentence suspended in the air between the two stanzas. The words "dead" and "caught up" are, as it were, "semantic (if not phonetic) rhymes": they signify also the two horns of the paradox of potential and actual history.

In the last lines we are offered the essence of the tragedy of procreation by rape. Leda is able only to sense the physical power of the god concealed behind the beast, she cannot sense or share the true god's dark vision. An eternally tragic aspect of sex is the possibility of procreation as the result of ruthless carnality blind to the other, the lack of reciprocity and communication in the crucial moment of copulation. It is on that moment that Yeats cruelly focuses our attention: "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" And this irony of fact in sex is heightened by the ironical choice of the verb to put on: Yeats is reminding us (as Professor Anna Hatcher points out to me) of the triumphant passage in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians 5:51-54: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

But when Leda "dies" to the divine swan, her body conquered in the union, she cannot put on his immortality. With this one word "put on," rich in Christian connotations, there emerges the

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5 *Put on* must be understood in the biblical passage as in to *put on a garment*: the Latin text has *induere*, the Greek ἐγένοσε ἅμα, "The body receives an addition of qualities which it did not possess before. It is 'clothed upon' with immortality" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. J. J. Lies, Cambridge, 1910).
toto coelo difference between the pagan and the Christian climate. For sex here is a pagan thing, a rush of brute blood in the air that is peopled by demoniac gods. Jupiter represents that destructive overflow of vitality (or that overflow productive in destruction) which we recognize in demoniac characters such as Faust and Don Juan and which obeys only its own rules, is passionate or "indifferent" at its own time, and acts according to its own inner compulsions: the expression in the last line "before . . . could let her drop" underlines the demoniac compulsion to which the divine bird himself is subject. The act of sex, this physical result of the demoniac, denies the victim access to the mind, which, together with the body, constitutes the terrain of the demoniac.

This explanation is, of course, predicated on the necessity of giving a negative answer (or at least of feeling the answer fraught with doubt) to the question: "Did she put on . . .?" In this last of a series of three questions asked in our poem (of which the first two are purely rhetorical), I see the apex of a line that develops from empathy to objectivity. The first question ("How can those terrified vague fingers push . . . ?") is entirely "empathetic": in what is called generally by the linguist erlebte Rede (style indirect libre), the author welds into his third-person narrative words or thoughts that one of his characters would have formulated in the first person (in our case, Leda would have asked herself: "how can my fingers push . . . ?—the rhetorical question is entirely hers). The second question ("and how can body. . . . But feel the strange heart beating?") comes from a sympathetic observer, who, however, no longer imagining the reaction of Leda, thinks in more generic terms—the rhetorical question is his own ("how can body . . .," to be translated, not with Mr. Trowbridge "body . . . feels the strange heart beating," but "body must feel . . ." = "human flesh must feel . . ."). The third question is an entirely objective one asked by the poet, whose reflective mood has increased as the personal event of the rape recedes into history (note the preterite did she), and for the first time a question full of doubt, suggesting as an answer, in my opinion, no "beautiful, but unformulable, truth" but the
tragic possibility that Leda in the moment of bodily union with the divine had no foreknowledge of the historical consequences of the rape. In my opinion, Yeats wishes to suggest a protest against the gods who let sex be the effect of power uncoupled with knowledge—an effect of their demoniac power. But if this is the correct interpretation, why did Yeats choose the interrogatory form, which must needs weaken his protest? One may assume that the poet, being a mortal human himself, feels able only to ask a question about the commerce of man with the divine; but this question, which in such a context must suggest an “at least” (did she, after having been violated and before being cast aside, put on...?), betrays to us his grave fear that it is possible for the gods to engender brutally, in the human flesh, with sovereign disregard for the human mind.

6 Mr. Trowbridge is, I believe, right in emphasizing, against other critics, that in this poem, contrary to other passages of Yeats, the episode of Leda and the Swan is not an annunciation of a new civilization.

7 Note the use of the word “beak” in l. 14 (while in l. 2 “bill” had been used): it is the character of the bird of prey that is emphasized at the end of the poem—irrespective of the degree of strength with which he holds his prey.