A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats

A poem. I thought 'After the individualist, demagogic move-
movement, founded by Hobbes and popularised by the Encyclo-
paedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so
exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries.'
Then I thought 'Nothing is now possible but some movement,
or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation'.
My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan metaphor
and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took
such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it,
and my friend tells me that 'his conservative readers would
misunderstand the poem.'

(The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems, 1914)

Melchiori (WMA 73–114) discusses the genesis and symbolism of
the poem very fully. He sees the short poem 'The Mother of God'
(CP 281) as a Christian counterpart to the Leda annunciation, and
he traces the effect of Gogarty's poems on the composition of
'Leda and the Swan' and its imagery, in particular that of 'To the
Liffey with the Swans':

... As fair as was that doubled Bird
By love of Leda so besotted,
That she was all with wonder stirred:
And the Twin Sportsmen were begotten.

The poem appears in AV (A) heading the section Dove or Swan
in which Years wrote 'I imagine the annunciation that founded
Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a
Spartan temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched
egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from
the other War'. Cf. also AV (B) 268.

Yeats had a coloured photographic copy of Michelangelo's
famous picture at Venice, but Charles Madge, the Times Literary
Supplement (20 July 1962) has argued that an Etruscan bas-relief in
the British Museum is closer to the poem's imagery and a more
likely source for it than the Michelangelo painting.

7 that white rush: Melchiori, WMA, draws attention to Spenser,
Prothalamion 3, 39–45:

Two fairer birds I yet did never see:
The snow which doth the top of Pindus stewed,
Did never whiter shew,
Nor knew himself when he a Swan would be

The Tower 241–242

For love of Leda, whiter did appeare:
Yet Leda was, they say, as white as he,
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare.

10 The broken wall: Henn (LT 235) quotes Todhunter's Helena
in Troas which Years admired for the link between Leda and Helen
of Troy:

O pitiless mischief! Thee no woman bore
Wooed by the billing of the amorous swan.
Yea, Leda bore thee not but Nemesis
To be the doom of Troy and Priam's house.

Henn has also discussed the meaning of the poem:

Two Annunciations form a pattern in history: Leda and the
Virgin. The Virgin is linked, mistakenly, to St Anne, via
Pater's Essay. Both events concern the union of godhead
and woman. Both produce momentous births. The eggs of
Leda give rise to the fall of Troy; from them emerge the
legend of two destined women Helen and Clytemnestra. Helen
has long been a personal symbol for Maud Gonne. The swans
are archetypal, everywhere; in Spenser, emblems, paintings,
Celtic myth, and concretely on the Lakes at Coole. The swan
stands for power, phallic strength, purity, spirit and spirits
(as all white birds), fidelity, fire and air (as the dove); the
ineffable Godhead. In the act of congress the loaning thighs
and the white rush are antithetical aspects. Into the softness
and whiteness is concentrated all the sensuality of touch. The
outcome of the union is further history or myth, pagan or
Christian, Love and War. But what of the woman? Yeats
speculates continually on the emotions of woman in such a
crisis. Did Leda or Mary by that act become half or wholly
divine? Did a god share with beast the lassitude that
overcomes all animals, save only the lion and the cock? Shudder
is of the sexual act, the moment of orgasm, as all husband-men
know; but it is also anticipation in fear. (LT 256–7)

ON A PICTURE OF A BLACK CENTAUR BY EDMUND DULAC

This poem was written in September 1920 and first appeared in
SPF with the title 'Suggested by a Picture of a Black Centaur'.

Title: Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac: The poem,
according to Mrs Yeats, was begun in relation to a picture by