I will suggest how the successive instances of the poem’s published versions indicate a development beyond what Yeats would say, in *A Vision* for example, that he already knows, toward a systematic understanding of history and the future potentially more comprehensive than *A Vision* in whatever version. I mean to argue that a hypothesis of poetic thinking as progressive intellectual work can better account for successive versions of this poem, and the “postmodern” reading of the poem that Yeats’s revisions make possible, than any political/textual/sexual unconscious (although Jameson and Moi make such a counter-argument conceivable). Positive intellectual work has a future beyond its own historical limits, and poetic thinking is an essential part of that work. I will show how Yeats’s poem works for its own postmodern reading, and what future follows from the work done with Yeats. I have argued elsewhere for René Girard as the most comprehensive theorist of a postmodern future beyond (terminable) deconstruction. Here I will limit myself to aligning the emergent theoretical potential in this poem, superior in its comprehensive power to *A Vision*, with Girard: “Love” and “War,” concord and discord, are the two alternative futures for the mimetic entanglements endemic to all cultural forms, futures that, left up to the gods or the gyres, ensure no future at all.

Although it is difficult to corroborate Yeats’s claim that Russell ever requested the poem, the recklessness of “Leda and the Swan” at least is there to see, especially in its earliest versions. The political turbulence of Yeats’s imagination at this time was better suited to “a wild paper of the young which will make enemies everywhere and suffer repression, I hope a number of times.” Yeats gave Leda to such a paper, *The Morrow*, in 1924, and his support for “a first beginning of new political thought” (*Letters*, 707). Yet the note from *The Cat and the Moon* quoted above, which accompanied *The Dial* publication of the poem as well, admits that bird and lady drive all that Yeats recognized as politics out of a poem that had confidently called up the Swan’s address to Leda *de haute en bas* as metaphor for the iron law of a new political order overcoming an older one, a fated rearrangement of history to be explained and maintained by “40 pages of commentary” (*Letters*, 709) in *A Vision* (1925).

The key stage in the revising of the poem takes place after the *In Morrow* version, in anticipation of its inclusion in *A Vision* (1925). Here is how the poem first begins:
A rush, a sudden wheel, and hovering still
The bird descends, and her frail thighs are pressed
By the webbed toes, and that all-powerful bill
Has laid her helpless face upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs!
All the stretched body's laid on the white rush
And feels the strange heart beating where it lies.¹

The answer of the first version to the question of Leda's consent to
this Act of Union (pace Heaney), implied by the poem's phrasing, all
but assumes that Leda abandoned thighs and body to the mastering
rhythms of Zeus's strange heart and feathered glory. Textual/sexual
politics have already taken such possession of the scene that all (na-
tionalist) politics have left the poem.

Yeats's revision of the first four lines of the To-Morrow version for
A Vision (1925) shockingly emphasizes Zeus's forced entry.

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.²

Yeats is now more attentive to the violent than to the sacred nature
of Zeus's annunciation. For the first time since Yeats began writing this
poem,³ the rape of Leda begins as a violent attack, not as the wonder
of an annunciation from above. In the To-Morrow version, "still" divides
its significance between "quietly" and "yet." Now, the force of "still"
emphasizes that Zeus has begun his sexual assault while he is still flying,
while Leda is still staggering from the blow.

In the same way, the earlier version for To-Morrow shares with the
reader Zeus's attraction to Leda's helplessness, locating the instigation
of their common desire in the object itself. In revision, a sexist-essentialist
view of "frail thighs" no longer precedes to explain the inevitable draw-
ing out of Zeus's manly nature. "Her thighs caressed / By the dark webs"
focuses rather on Zeus's chilling attention to the requisite details of
amorous conquest, spreading his clawed toes wide enough to caress
her thighs "just with the web."²

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;

The pornographic exclamation mark of the To-Morrow version ("highs!")
is also clearly at Zeus's power and at Leda's expense. How could any
woman's thighs but serve such an apotheosis of manly nature. But the
syntax of questioning, no matter how rhetorical or unquestioning, which
at first seems solely to enlarge upon Zeus's feathered glory, always must
bear a potential resistance to the politics of the poem the more that
Yeats, or any reader, poses it.

The Tower (1928) version of "Leda and the Swan," which begins
Yeats's final textual practice of marking these lines as questions, indica-
tes the future of this visionary labor: it is impossible to ask a ques-
tion repeatedly without, sooner or later, wondering what other answers
might be possible. Even if the question is answered, it is not always
possible to give the same answer, even to the same question. The his-
tory of various prior representations of Leda's rape (which have per-
haps preoccupied Yeats scholars as partially hidden sources more than
as public predecessors), in sequence with Yeats's revisions of this poem,
collectively indicate Leda now, by virtue of Yeats's late modern version,
as the point of indeterminacy from which Zeus's history can be ques-
tioned more and more comprehensively in future versions.

All questions in this poem derive logically from the first sin of
inquiry, which survived in all versions from the first version: "Did she
put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could
let her drop?" The earlier revision of an exclamation into a question
suggests that the least questionable stage of this question must be, "How
could Leda possibly know what we already know: the history engen-
dered on her by Zeus?" Any answer based on the surviving instances
of Leda in Greek mythology must be "no"; in mythology, as in the poem,
she is nothing—the mere pivot of Zeus's power to make his own his-
tory. The only possible "yes" could be that Leda "puts on" in the sense
of "being dressed in" Zeus's power; whenever we see Leda we "see" what
Zeus already had foreseen. Yeats's poem serves only as another link
in the iron chain of association that inevitably calls up the sexual/
textual politics of “the broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead” whenever Leda is mentioned.

But Yeats’s “40-page commentary” in A Vision (1925) is not unrelieved deconstruction, theory rendering natural the text’s necessary self-blindness,13 smugly estimating how far “Leda” must come to reach what we all know. “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. But all things are from antithesis, and when in my ignorance I try to imagine what older civilization she refuted I can but see bird and woman blotting out some corner of the Babylonian mathematical starlight.”12 Yeats admits that he cannot answer the questions posed by his own poetic thinking. What civilization is “refuted” by Leda? It could be either the civilization that her civilization refuted, 4000–2000 B.C., perhaps even 2000 B.C. to A.D. 1, where Leda already serves as an expression of Zeus’s history, a complicit or communicable symbol of Zeus’s refutation of her own culture.

Here is the essential difference between the theoretical potential of A Vision and poetic thinking: the basic fundamental questions about Leda—who is she, where does she come from, what is she thinking—which Yeats cannot answer, are annulled by the violent symmetry of the dominant formula of A Vision: “All things are by antithesis.” No problems here. Antithesis can explain and account for Yeats’s ignorance. The poem’s questions without answers are not permitted by the commentary to propose further thinking. Ignorance merely gives evidence for the symmetry of one gyre refuting another.

The relation between Yeats’s theory and Girard’s and the poetic labor that connects the limits of the one to the promise of the other, making a postmodern reading of the poem possible, is based on their common emphasis on Heraclitus’s fragment on War. (F25. “War is both father and king of all; some he has shown forth as gods and others as men, some he has made slaves and others free.”)13 Yeats follows Heraclitus’s formula for violence as the primary differentiating principle, but Girard explains Heraclitus from a more comprehensive hypothesis. “It was this Discord or War that Heraclitus called ‘God of all and Father of all, some it has made gods and some men, some bond and some free’ and I recall that Love and War came from the eggs of Leda.”14 For Yeats, Zeus’s violence proves his divinity and Leda’s mortality; his freedom, her bondage; violence fathers Love and War on her. All things are by antithesis. Girard argues that human violence, legislated by prohibition and ritual to prevent reciprocal rivalry, on the one hand, and to polarize reciprocity on the other, identifies one as the monstrously violent rival of all. One is responsible for everyone’s violence and, following his expulsion, for everyone’s peace. The difference between peace and strife, the origin of symbolicity itself, is fathered and maintained by violence misunderstood as a divinity.

For Girard, Christ’s divinity has been misinterpreted, sacrificed. His divinity is proved not by expulsion, but by his perfect and unique understanding of the necessarily mimetic entanglements of every human society. Christ deconstructs the sacred in the Gospels, offering his listeners the choice between peace fathered by violence, now exposed for the first time, or by positive, nonviolent reciprocity, without exclusions or victims. Christ’s alternative of a post-sacrificial, nonviolent reciprocal mimetic process is temporarily expelled by his Crucifixion, but the apprehension of the Kingdom of God keeps emerging in even the most sacrificial (racist, sexist) texts of western culture, because all exiles are now marked in some way with the sign of Christ’s interpretation of every expulsion as victimization: the victims are not uniquely guilty, and the persecutors do not know that they are “scapegoating.” Le Bouc emissaire (1981) reminds us that we read within this Judaico-Christian hermeneutic every time we interpret medieval narratives that blame Jews for all disorder as “texts of persecution.” Even when we have no corroborating historical evidence, we insist that the Jews are scapegoats. This deconstruction of sacrifice as a hypothesis is superior theoretically and morally to all texts of persecution, all mythologies of race and gender. The increasing strength of this truth is demonstrated by the near-universal understanding of the term “scapegoat.” Western literature as Judaico-Christian writing is the site of the contest of rival interpretations, violent and nonviolent, the accuser (Satan) gradually being ground to the defender (Paraclete) of victims. The West’s progress is marked by the gradual weakening of matrimonial and culinary choices, the desymbolization of all differences—even the father as differentiating principle (depaternalization).

The impertinence of arguing that Yeats is working toward the comprehension of (me and) Girard is not what I have in mind. My focus
is on what revisionary labor of Yeats makes a postmodern reading of his poem possible. How are we implied in the work of this poem toward future? “Leda” itself is evolving in the context of Judeo-Christian writing from a violent to a nonviolent reciprocity of greater theoretical and moral comprehension. The more Yeats’s poem considers the victimization that produces order and difference, the more questionable it all seems. Even if Yeats was a Fascist committed to the sexual/political bond of all-minus-one of sexist/nationalist victimization, fascism cannot account for Leda. Rather, the revisionary textual/sexual practice of this poem is in the service of a comprehension of all dynamics of exclusion.

Whatever Yeats’s avowed belief, the revised poem exacts a small but remarkable adjustment from the commenting prose of A Vision, for which the poem was once to serve as metaphor. In the 1938 version of A Vision, we read “what older civilization that annunciation rejected” instead of the earlier “what older civilization she refused.” This prose revision in the face of the poem’s revisions admits the civilization blotted out as Leda’s, but without her complicity; this civilization was rejected, not refuted, by Zeus’s action.

The additional versions of “Leda” already noted further develop the process of revision described in The Cat and the Moon and Certain Other Poems: bird and woman, first called on to function as a single metaphor of annunciation, put out the self-serving political explanation of a new age necessarily replenishing the soil exhausted by the previous one. Here, in A Vision (1938), a rejection rather than a refutation, attributed to Zeus, not Leda, further emphasizes the change from one age to another as an issue of power rather than knowledge. Thus, “Leda” joins company with another great poem of historical transformation, “The Second Coming,” quoted a few pages earlier in A Vision.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A shape blank and pitless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

“Surely” follows the iron law of antithesis. If mere anarchy is now loose, order surely develops out of disorder, as second comings surely follow first ones. But the “vast image” invoked by the expectations of theory gives Yeats what he did not already know: “Twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.” That is, historical Christianity is sacrificial, as Girard freely admits, putting the blame on Jews and every infidel thereafter for the failure of the pax Christi and treating them accordingly. Such cradle rocking orientalized all other religions as monstrous rivals, others, exiling them to the desert. These religions have been vexed to return as the nightmare of their rejecters. Drawn into violent reciprocity, they pay back one movement of resentment with its monstrous double. There is no way for any postmodern reader to dodge the prescience of Yeats’s metaphor for Bethlehem, now.

I am arguing more than the minimalist or formalist line, sometimes encouraged by Yeats himself, that system provided metaphors for poetry, as if any theory could serve this function. Yeats was serious when he put “The Second Coming” and “Leda” to work within the orbit of his system. Yet these metaphors resist Yeats’s system, engendering a hypothetical potential equal in seriousness but superior, both intellectually and morally, to the iron law of antithesis and the “poetics of hate.”

To recognize the pattern of a new age replacing an older one as a movement of rejection and of resentment is to recognize history as human, not fate, except insofar as humans refuse to understand the history that they have made for themselves by surrendering responsibility to the instincts, the gods, or the gyres. If Zeus’s annunciation rejects, rather than refutes, Leda’s culture, if the cradle vexes, rather than supersedes, “paganism,” these poems of historical change imply movements of power, not knowledge. Following from this, Yeats’s ignorance of Leda’s culture or the rough beast is likewise an issue of power, repeated, but not explained, by “history’s” antithetical movements. The
poem reenacts Yeats’s limits but in the service of posing a question with the hope of a real answer. The question makes the reader as well see his inability to see Leda, or the Semitic double, except as a representation of Zeus’s (or historical Christianity’s) sacred power.

If Yeats’s theory of history and politics cannot explain these poems, perhaps they can explain his theory. If Zeus’s history is a rejection of Leda, then this rejection constitutes Zeus’s knowledge. Patriarchal culture is founded on rejecting a matriarchy it will never know, which perhaps never existed in the form we imagine, except as a patriarchal nightmare. Each revision—each reading of the poem—strengthens the structure of inquisition, of resistance, precisely at the point of indeterminacy, of its own limits. Why can we not see? What does our blindness signify? To repeat, with increasing emphasis, the questions of this poem, is to ask why we have not yet imagined the revolutionary possibility of a modern Leda who brushes this amorous bird aside. This is the real future of “Leda and the Swan.” To take in this exhilarating image is to feel the whole structure of Zeus’s history lose “possession of the scene.” The revolutionary possibility of this poem, which Yeats does not realize in his own time, is allocated to a future that, it is to be hoped, will be ours: the imagining of a Leda who can (at the very least) refuse consent to Zeus, the positive equalizing of the sexes in a nonviolent society, where religion, if it is to have a future, means that all are ligated to each other through the imitation of love (not war) without exception.

NOTES

7. The Dial (June 1924): 391–95.