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Lyric and the Gestation of Poetic Language: Yeats's Poetic Labor in "Among School Children"  
The 2021 Cowan Chair Lecture from Dr. Fred Turner

1. Labor and Beauty

Among all the definitions of lyric, two fundamental characteristics emerge. One is that it is in the voice of the poet in person--it is not spoken as a proxy for the tribe, or in the ventriloquism of drama, or as the prophet of a god, or as the teacher of doctrine. The other characteristic is that it *sings*: the singer's soul is revealed in the song, the dancer is the dance.

This last phrase is of course from Yeats's "Among School Children," that autobiographical meditation on the nature of beauty and on the art and labor of creating it. It is also an example of its subject. Let [us read] it.

[Among School Children](#)

By [William Butler Yeats](#)

**I.**

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,  
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.

**II.**

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
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,  
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,  
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

**III.**

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—  
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.

**IV.**

Her present image floats into the mind—  
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it  
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind  
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?  
And I though never of Ledaean kind  
Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,  
Better to smile on all that smile, and show  
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

**V.**

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed,  
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape  
As recollection or the drug decide,  
Would think her son, did she but see that shape  
With sixty or more winters on its head,  
A compensation for the pang of his birth,  
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

**VI.**

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;  
Solider Aristotle played the taws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;  
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings  
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

**VII.**

Both nuns and mothers worship images,

But those the candles light are not as those  
That animate a mother's reveries,  
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.  
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences  
That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—  
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

### VIII.

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Note that Yeats is expressing powerful feelings, which any creative writing student can do in a journal, or teen in a tweet. But what makes this poetry great is that this is a self that is worth listening to, for whom millennia of philosophy, major events in history, an active and creative life, brilliant friends, and the whole body of human poetry and science and theology are part and parcel of his subjectivity. And this is a poetic singer of massive, but understated virtuosity. As a senator in the government of liberated Ireland, one of Yeats's duties is to serve as a school inspector. The fact that Ireland puts a poet in its government means that the country is betting on him to do something that a mere politician or administrator could not do. He is being made partly responsible for the education of a new nation. How do we prepare children to be creative citizens? Is poetry of any real use? Thus begins a propulsive series of questions that continues to the end of the poem.

He is immediately distracted from his task—shocked and smitten by the beauty of one girl, who reminds him of his own great love, [Maud Gonne](#), when she was a child. Where does this schoolgirl get such beauty? What is beauty? What does his labor of governing, and the schoolchildren's labor of training, and the nuns' labor of teaching and worship, have to do with this amazing beauty?

She's only a common girl, not like the aristocratic Maud—but Yeats knows, as a democrat and a modern man, that we are all one species, and the daughters of the swan share a genetic heritage with ordinary paddlers like geese and ducks. In the old myth, Zeus raped Leda in the form of a swan, mixing divine with human blood, and begot Helen of Troy, who hatched from the egg that Leda bore. If Maud is Yeats's Helen, then she inherits her body partly from

Leda, partly from the god. Do we all have divine blood? It's only a myth, though, an image; but isn't the miracle of beauty like the entry of a god into the world?

This image of the egg inspires a further mass of imagery, which then becomes a language for pursuing the original questions further. When he and Maud were intimate, it seemed to him that youthful sympathy had made them biologically one, like the yolk and white of an egg. They were like the original happy human beings in the myth that Aristophanes proposes in [Plato's Symposium](#), before they were severed into alienated halves by the jealous gods, driven to seek out their missing halves. Or perhaps he and she were like Helen and her semi-divine quadruplet brother Polydeuces—"yolkmates," to perpetrate a horrible pun—or was Yeats the *other* twin brother, the mortal Castor, who died and must be rescued from the underworld?—only a half-brother and not semi-divine?

And these questions raise the idea of labor—the work of giving birth, the work of making. The children are being taught to be citizens, to be workers, to be mothers—to read, write, sing, sew and create order around them. Is it more important that they be beautiful people, or effective workers or mothers? Their mothers labored to give birth to them. Can work make them beautiful, or are they innately beautiful? The word "labor" contains a vital ambiguity: is this work a making or a begetting? Is art—the making of beauty—a work or a birth? If the labor is a kind of work, then it has the virtue of intentionality, but at the cost of spontaneity. If it's an automatic spasm of the body from which the pregnant girl wants to escape, then how can it be beautiful? Isn't the "honey of generation"—the drug of sexual pleasure promised by the beauty of the lover—just a betrayal, a bribe by nature to endure the pain and effort of childbirth? Is the nectar, which the flower offers, but the wages of the bee for its work of matchmaking? Is beauty itself just an enticement to do the work of the species?

But nuns and mothers and poets are not just being *pushed* or *compelled* by a biological urge but *pulled* or *drawn* by images that we recognize as higher than our individual interest or value. And Yeats now begins to meditate on the inspiring role of images: his own image of his youthful lady-love, the schoolgirl as an image of that lost love, the images the teaching nuns worship, the image that a mother has of her child. But what would his own mother think of the official old man he himself has become? Can the reality match the image? And what is this beauty, this quality that makes an image so compelling?

To pursue his investigation, he must honestly discount the kind of arguments and attitudes that are all-too-characteristic of sixty-year-old-smiling public men, who are far away from the passionate beauty of their former days. How is the self constructed? Though Yeats has endorsed—by accepting for use—Plato's Aristophanic myth of the divided unity of the sexes, he rejects Plato's philosophical division between nature and the ideal forms. Nature is not a random passive spume that makes visible the determinative Idea or undying soul to which it clings. He rejects the [social constructionism of Aristotle](#), who educates by corporal punishment, even when the pupil is Alexander himself. He even finds [Pythagoras's](#) prosthetic unification of [physics and music](#) lacking—the music is not the same as the physical measurement of it. All these theories are what an old scarecrow—the tattered coat upon a stick that is an old man—*would* say.

Yet in the old man's defense we might note the fact that Yeats's poetic technique in this poem is absolutely masterful, the threefold alternating rhyme-pairs concluded by a couplet forming a stanza of his own invention. The scarecrow has within him the artist. To handle such a form and make it conduct a complex coherent argument with astounding grace and economy is a labor indeed. But still, which kind of labor is it? Making or begetting?

He is looking for something else—not just matter in play, not just abstraction either. It's a heartbreaking force of love and desire, something that is of time, alive and moving and dying, not dead and eternal, even as it paradoxically symbolizes heavenly glory. The heart must be broken open if it is to feel, and that feeling has more authority than the philosophical distinctions of the scarecrows. He finds that force in the Presences that passion, piety or affection knows, in the images that animate the dreams of the nuns and the mothers (and by implication those of Yeats about the young Maud inspired by the lovely Irish child). Certainly, those tender little church images of the virgin and child in the nuns' chapel are fixed and inanimate, unlike the beloved shape on the lap of the living mother. But they are no less heartbreaking; and how can a made thing like a statue (or a poem?) arouse such passions? Here he must again turn to the question of what is art itself, and since what makes art art and not just some other activity is beauty, he must turn to the deepest question of all: what is beauty?

“Glory” is the divine word for “beauty,” and glory in this sense is what [Kant](#) claims as Jahweh's final and conclusive defense in response to Job's implied accusation against Him. God may not be just in this instance, nor even good, in the sense that He is willing to put Job through all his suffering to win a point against Satan. But when Jahweh gives Job a glimpse into the grand workshop of His creation, and instances the neighing horse and the eagle and the morning stars dancing over the mountains, Job must concede. Beauty overwhelms both justice and goodness as a rebuttal to the charge of life's pain and brevity.

So Yeats comes down to it, faces the challenge, and gives us two images of his own, that may perhaps resolve the question of which kind of labor is art. These images are what I call “[chijikijilus](#),” after my Ndembu teachers in Africa—blazes that mark the shamanic entry into new linguistic and real territory, and provide landmarks by which we can find our way back with our spoils. The blossom and the dance.

Labor is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the root, the blossom, or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Let us now try to unpack these symbols, these images Yeats has thrown together (*sym-bolein*), these metaphors (carryings-beyond) that sum up not only this poem but all his previous work. Yeats, as I have said, was a modern man, and well aware of the philosophical and scientific issues of his day: it was part of his duty as a senator in a new nation. So I will use ideas of evolution and emergence that are familiar to educated people today as a way to explicate what Yeats means and to show its philosophical usefulness.

## 2. The Chestnut Tree

If the flower, the blossom, is Yeats's first "blaze" upon the boundary of existing definitions, why choose that of the chestnut-tree? Surely the more traditionally hieratic flowers would be more promising material—the rose, that Eliot uses as the mystical omphalos in [Four Quartets](#), so full of rich cultural associations, or the less cumbersome lily, or even the day's eye, the humble daisy, the exquisite triune iris, or the royal Japanese chrysanthemum.

Yeats has bigger fish to fry here. He wants to see the process whole, as Goethe does in his great poem "[The Metamorphosis of the Plants](#)," so he chooses the hugest flowering he can think of, and includes the whole plant, lock, stock, and barrel. Plato uses the same technique to talk about justice: display it on the grand scale of a city.

The chestnut is, of course, a nut tree, and we can not only see clearly the beautiful brown testicular "conkers" of the horse-chestnut bursting from their prickly green scrota every autumn, but roast and peel and eat the sweet chestnut at Christmas time. The nut is the tree's seed, its potential for new birth. Natural beauty—in this case the chestnut flowers that often attract clouds of bees—is the way living organisms propagate themselves. Beauty for *life* is to have a *future*—a future that not only *inherits* what you are, but also *shares* yourself with your conspecifics, and *creates* further meanings—unique individuals—as your progeny. The nut is the tree's investment in another dimension: not the closed timeless ones of space, but the strange, open, hazardous one of time.

The tree is "great-rooted." It dies if it is uprooted or if it is cut off from its roots. Yeats is a traditionalist and knows that the past is the source of our sap, our vitality. Yeats felt that the modernist rejection of the past, like Maud Gonne's mess of political shadows, could kill the life of the nation. If the present is to make a new moment, it can only make it out of the past.

The tree is a "blossomer." The blossom is the essence of the tree, its sexual organ, its most intimate statement of what it is. The chestnut tree bears huge conical white or pink panicles, colloquially called "candles" (harking back, perhaps, to the candles that light the images worshipped by the nuns, the candles of Nativity), and they are a powerfully suggestive sexual image too, not only visually but also in their fragrance. Sexual reproduction—the reshuffling of the genes in meiosis and fertilization—is the most powerful and swiftest (and riskiest) agent of evolution, as opposed to the "safe" policy of reproduction by division or cloning, which leaves the work of variation to random mutation. Sexual reproduction produces *individuals* that have their own especial character. When pollen and ovule come together, the result is a nut that will make a tree that is of the chestnut species, but is also unique in a way that makes it a candidate to

be an ancestor of a new subspecies and perhaps a new species. Sexuality is the potential branchiness of the history of living things, the great refutation of the idea that one-line determinism rules the future. The family tree reconciles the one with the many: many roots, one trunk: one trunk, many twigs and leaves. Beauty, perhaps, has something to do with this branchiness.

Look closer at the panicle of the blossom. The individual flowers rotate about the almost woody main stalk in a modified 3D Fibonacci spiral—a gyre, Yeats would have said. Each flower is carried by a tiny tender green stalk of its own, a pedicel, related in length to the main stalk as the main stalk is related to the larger twig that supports it (which may also carry other panicles). The whole raceme is a geometrical microcosm of the tree as a whole. And the clever chestnut tree has generalized the idea from the bole to the branch to the twig to the flower, individuating each branching according to sun and wind and rain and damage as it goes along.

Are we looking at the fine print too closely? Is the fine print actually there, or are we imagining it? Poets are not supposed to be such sticklers for detail, or are they? Consider Gerard Manley Hopkins's exquisitely detailed disquisition "[On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue](#):"

"Now where shall I begin?" said the Professor. "I will begin here", and he pulled off one of the large lowest fans of the chestnuts. "Do you think this beautiful?"

"That? The chestnut-fan? Certainly: I have always thought the chestnut one of the most finely foliated of trees."

"You see it consists of seven leaves, the middle largest, diminishing towards the stalk, so that those nearest the stalk are smallest."

"I see," said Hanbury. "I had never noticed there were seven before."

"Now if we look about we shall find--yes there is one. There is a fan, do you see? with only six leaves. Nature is irregular in these things. Can you reach it? Now which do you think the more beautiful, the one with six, or the one with seven, leaves? Shut out, if you can, the remembrance that the six-leaved one is an anomaly or imperfection: consider it symmetrical."

"Well I daresay the six-leaved one may improve the foliage by variety, but in themselves the seven-leaved one is the handsomer."

"Just so," said the Professor; "but could you give any reason?"

The dialogue goes on for many pages, yielding richer and richer insights. Poets are obsessive about this sort of inner hidden consistency. I don't care whether Yeats had read Hopkins's marvelous dialogue—he could have, Hopkins published it in 1865. Poets arrive at the same place often in their wanderings. Anyone who must struggle with a thousand possible ways of saying something while keeping to the meter, rhyming with utter naturalness, having the images resonate together rather than damp each other, making a clear argument and preserving the plotline, must have internalized the analog of some kind of amazing factorial-finding quantum computer and acquired a bulldog tenacity about exactness. Yeats's poem is quite happy to wait

for those who will really take his images seriously. So let us press on, using what vocabulary we can to trace the almost prelinguistic course of Yeats's meditation.

The [Fibonacci spiral](#)—based on the [Fibonacci series](#): 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55...—can be described as the simplest of all fractals, the basic algorithm of generativeness. All living things grow more or less according to its gentle constraint—the next phase of growth cannot exceed the sum of the two previous phases. The series can also be seen as a progressive way of getting a more and more accurate case of A:B::B:C. 1 is to 2 only roughly as 2 is to 3; but 13 is to 21 fairly exactly as 21 is to 34, and 34 to 55 is even closer. If you go a hundred or so steps further along the series, the analogical relationship gets so close that it approaches the exactness of the mathematical constraints of the universe. The series is aiming at a ratio, about .618 to 1 (but expressible only as an unrepeating irrational decimal)—and this is the famous Golden Section, Phi, the human eye's favorite proportion.

Fractals are generated by an iterative, self-organizing algorithm that can invent an infinite variety of forms (all, though, in the same “style,” depending on the particular algorithm). An algorithm is a mathematical procedure—we use one to do long division by hand. Our long division comes to an end with the answer, but this kind of iterative and self-referential algorithm doesn't. Instead it maps out an amazing territory, a terra incognita that can never be fully known. The recipe for the [Mandelbrot Set](#), for instance, looks like this: take a complex number Z, multiply it by itself, add one, and then do the same thing with the result, and keep feeding back the answer into the equation as the new Z. “Rinse and repeat,” as the old joke goes. Make a collection of such numbers and plot them on a graph according to whether they explode into infinity or bounce about on the edge between nothing and infinity. The simple recipe gives an extraordinary result: the [“Radiant Snowman” with his infinitely complex aura that can be expanded forever](#), revealing new novelties of shape.

The Mandelbrot Set is one of the foundations of chaos theory, which has provided us with an alternative anthology of definable forms to the Euclidean collection of straight-edged and simply curved shapes, and to the later Newtonian/Leibnizian collection of regular complex curves. These fractal Forms are dynamic rather than eternal or determinate, discontinuous rather than continuous, a place where space morphs into time. As a poet I would argue that the quest of such poets as Goethe (with his [metamorphoses](#)), Hopkins (with his [inscapes](#)), Thoreau (with his [fractal melting sandbank](#)), Rilke (with his [orphyic tree](#)), and Yeats himself, to find an alternate geometry for the living world than the ones provided by the science and math of their times, was answered in the twentieth century by the new mathematicians of chaos and complexity. Math can sometimes follow poetry.

The basic iterative algorithm of life is, according to the theory of evolution: Mutation Selection Heredity Mutation Selection ... It, too, produces a wild variety of forms—but in real, moving, 3D, physical fact, not just on a paper or electronic graph space. There is no limit to the potential combinations that can be generated out of its simple DNA-RNA-protein seed. Plato saw his Ideal Forms as attractors for physical processes such as growth, and Aristotle developed the idea with his conception of the formal and final causes. But nature was passive before those

determinative rulers, a spume playing randomly upon a paradigm. The new attractors, the new images, derive from and react upon the physical and temporal process itself—nourish'd, as Keats said about love in "[Endymion](#)," upon its proper pith, nurtured like a pelican brood. Or, as Yeats says even more economically, "self-born." These are attractors that do not return us to a "ground state", a *Grund*, as the Germans say, but draw us on to new living forms.

Which brings us to the dancer.

### 3. The Dancer

Although Yeats has surely seen chestnut trees colossally swaying in the winds of June, he needs a more perceptibly dynamic and autonomously active image—a sort of fast-action movie of the process he is trying to define. And he wants to insist on the continuity of the human with the living history of the world, and avoid any sense that he is depreciating human beauty to elevate natural beauty. He is being exact as well as passionate—the true sign of the poet. The dancer, unlike the church images, does not keep a "marble or a bronze repose." Yeats has been on the edge of a very old dialectic throughout the poem, and the contrast between the flower and the dancer on one hand, and the hard stillness of more durable materials like brass, bronze, and marble on the other has brought him back to Shakespeare:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

([Sonnet LXV](#))

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme

([Sonnet LV](#))

Yeats's poem is explicitly about aging, after all. Time is traditionally the enemy of beauty; the youth's beauty fades, to leave a mess of shadows, a scarecrow. Even stone and metal corrode and fall to dust. And poetry is traditionally the way to "keep/Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away" as Hopkins puts it in "[The Leaden Echo](#)." Poetry, unlike statuary, is not the hostage of its material embodiment; it is the same sonnet whether written in iron gall ink, or printed, or projected by electrons onto a computer screen.

But the poem's beauty is not a ghostly paradigm of things either. For Shakespeare it is an action, for Yeats it is a movement of piety, passion, affection. The dancer is a living being. She is a body, but a body swayed to music. She is an animal, but an animal that has become conscious, and with the "brightening glance" she gives the poet as she sees him looking at her as she dances, she looks back when she is looked at. The ambiguity of "swayed to music" expresses an important distinction: as a dancer she is deliberately swaying, but she is also being ruled, or

swayed, by the music. And the music itself is not a “ghostly paradigm;” we are back with the singing schoolchildren of the first stanza, very real children singing their hardest for the important gentleman from the government. Music is the most transient of all the arts, and yet the most memorable.

Notice that the poem, which had begun as an autobiographical meditation, has suddenly become an ode. “O chestnut tree,” “O body swayed to music.” It’s in the second person, and in the form of address—“O”—that we use for the divine and in the presence of the glory of the divine. The world’s process is not an it but a thou. Just as the girl had shocked Yeats out of his third-person role of smiling public man, so we are shocked by Yeats’s shamanic invocation, his archaism and personal engagement.

We realize that we are more like a flame than like a rock, more like a dance than like a body, more temporal and transient. Not that rocks and bodies are unnecessary. Dance needs the physical constraint of gravity to give the dancer purchase and consequence. Gravity—here an acceleration of 32 feet per second per second—is our immediate reminder of the link between space and time. Dancers use it to defy it. The limits of temporal existence are the language by which we express the divine. And this is precisely what makes us divine. Only through time time is conquered, to go back to Eliot.

It’s not that existence precedes essence, as the existentialists say; rather, growing emergent process precedes existence, act precedes being. [Goethe’s Faust](#), struggling to translate the beginning of the Gospel of John, finally decides to translate it as “In the beginning was the ACT.” Yeats is questioning three thousand years of commitment to the idea of unchangingness as the stamp of “real” reality. Real reality for him now is not the ground but the fruiting, not the *arche* but the game that grows out of the *arche*. Or rather, it is both. We cannot know the dancer from the dance. Another ambiguity: we can’t *tell* or distinguish the dancer from the dance, or we can’t, just by seeing the dance, know the mysterious inner nature of the dancer.

Time, then, not eternity, is the great divine gift of the world.

#### 4. The Cosmology of Beauty

It is here, I believe, that Yeats locates his conception of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world—exactly in its cumulative transformingness. It’s important to note that it is a cumulative, not just an arbitrary process of change. The chestnut tree is great-rooted, and that is where its life comes from, the Earth, the physical history of the universe. Yeats’s tree joins all those other world-trees whereby our species has traditionally depicted the growth of the world: the Norse Yggdrasil or Barnstock, the Hebrew tree of life, the Hindu Akshaya Vata, the Buddhist Bodhi tree, the Egyptian Iusaaset, the Persian Haoma, the Chinese Fusang, the Mayan Wacah Chan, the Ndembu Mudyi tree.

So far we have been following Yeats’s thought about the tree of life (for us moderns, the tree of geological and evolutionary descent) on an elevation view, so to speak, looking at the tree from the side and understanding its diagrammatic/poetic meaning in terms of its upward and

downward growth. But just to push this odd exercise further, let us look at the tree in plan view, from the top or even from the bottom (as in Georgia O'Keefe's amazing painting [The Lawrence Tree](#)). The tree is now an exploding ball of branches, and since the blossoms tend to lean outward from the trunk, the explosion is tipped all over with white or pink darts or arrowheads pointing toward its future growth. We have here a pretty good diagram of the expanding universe: the base of the trunk, where germination occurred, is the location of the big bang, and we are the very pistils and stamens of the flowers. In between is Darwin's great branching tree of living descent, speciation, heredity, mutation and selection.

The old core is not lost, notice. The whole history remains, buried safely below its new layers of growth. "...I came to believe," Yeats says in [Per Amica Silentia Lunae](#), "in a great memory passing on from generation to generation... Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea."

Without sawing the tree down, let us look with the eyes of the mind at the tree-rings beneath the dead bark of the present and the living phloem and cambium beneath, down through the xylem to the heartwood. Do we not have here a powerful image of the history of the universe itself? At the center is the big bang of the tree's germination, the pure mathematics of its code. The first ring is the physics of the universe, the mathematics that actually got realized into light and energy. The next ring is the chemistry that sprang into being as soon as the universe, in its expansion, cooled enough so that stable atoms could exist and combine according to their [Mendeleev grammar](#). Then comes the ring of self-replicating matter, the realm of life, and above it the regime of living organisms that can control their own evolution by social selection and sexual reproduction. And above that ring is the world of conscious beings, ourselves, contemplating our history through the methods of epic memory and evolutionary research. The final ring is the ring of poetry and the arts, where the living cambium makes new tissue for the tree and puts out branches of possibility into the future.

Beauty, then, is our experience of the creative self-generation of the universe, particularized in life and further particularized in human life. The feeling of beauty is the "honey" that rewards us for this achievement of recognition. Art and poetry are the actual participation of human beings in that creative process, and the experience of art and beauty is but a swifter and closer version of what we see in nature's profusion of generation. Poetry is fast evolution; evolution is slow poetry.

As we walk through the long schoolroom, questioning, the beauty of the poem, like the Irish girl in the second stanza, shocks us with its dismissal of all explainings-away. If our work is to educate a nation, as Yeats's was, we have to ask the right questions, as he does.