From an Existential Vacuum to a Tragic Optimism

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By

Barbara A. Heavilin

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For Charlie, whose love, assistance, and encouragement
have made this book come to fruition
And for my daughters, Gladys Marie and Nancy Loree

I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "Yes" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. (51)

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

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Cover art Michelangelo Buonarroti's the Creation of Adam is from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and is, according to Wikipedia, "a faithful photographic reproduction of an original two-dimensional work of art" in the public domain.

PREFACE

JOHN H. TIMMERMAN
CALVIN COLLEGE

Since the Greek and Roman roots of modern literature, one grand theme has emerged: humanity's relationship with the divine. Wars and rumours of wars, love adorned and lovers scorned, God's voice and the silent void—all seem cast under the grand umbrella. Sometimes a source of comfort, sometimes the subject of inchoate wrath, the relationship between God and human beings has always avoided categorical neatness and exegetical simplicity. Consequently, in the modern era, critical theories and the journals devoted to the topic have sprung up in profligate numbers. *Religion and Literature, Religion in Life, Christianity and Literature, and Christian Scholars' Review* are just four of the better known. Despite such attention in the latter half of the twentieth century, does that mean there is no more to say about the subject?

On the contrary, the issues are just becoming clearly defined, and to that end Barbara Heavilin's fine book, *Viktor Frankl's "Tragic Optimism": The Existential Vacuum and the Presence of God in Modern Literature*, makes a remarkable contribution. Effectively staged in three sections, Heavilin selects as her connecting thread among various modern literary works the philosophy of Viktor Frankl. His concept of the existential vacuum captures the impact of the overwhelming weight of naturalistic modernism in the twentieth century. As she writes in a discussion of Yeats's "The Second Coming": "With the death of Christianity, the absence of God, and the loss of morality, there is no language, no meaning; no appeal for mercy, justice, morality—just emptiness, blankness, pitilessness." That is the void. And the relativistic flattening of modernism places the authors under study there in the emptiness, searching for an alternative or a way out.

But Heavilin's study is not one more lament over an age without ultimate values. In part this is so because her guide Viktor Frankl would not have it so. In both *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (1984) and in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (1997), Frankl rebaptizes Saint Augustine in modernism's murky waters, making

him *useful* for our times. As Heavilin explains it, the sense of meaninglessness that is the existential vacuum is first disturbed by a syncretic trio of creativity, love, and moral choice. Such actions or states of being resemble transcendent norms of meaningful life. So it is, therefore, that behind meaning there must lie being. This, then, forms Heavilin's critical approach: examining the nature and qualities of modernism in an author's work, and then searching for patterns of transcendent meaning either stated or suggested within that work.

I have suggested that Frankl remained under the theological imprimatur of Saint Augustine. A further word must be said about that. Frankl shares Augustine's concept, as set forth in *City of God*, that ultimate meaning locates in ultimate Being, which may be named Good or God. Furthermore, for Augustine it was Unchangeable Good. The world of humanity, however, is constantly subject to change. Augustine, we remember, was fighting a two-fold battle: one with the Pelagian heresy of two dominant powers, one good and the other evil; and the second for the freedom of human choice. Evil, he was certain, exists, but it was in no way a match for God. So Augustine introduced his theory of deprivation—the more evil one becomes, the less being, meaning, and goodness one has. Frankl recognized this deprivation. But so too, it seems, did such authors as are examined in this study. They are not puny little creatures weeping before a much diminished light. They are often heroic in their struggle, even when apparently going down to defeat. The greatest battle they wage is to wrestle meaning out of the ultimate confrontation with death. And while choices may be freely made, they seldom are easily made. The lines between good and evil often blur to shades of gray, and sometimes the divine light is opaque. So it is that Heavilin chooses to explore those more nebulous interstices of uncertainty.

In Part I, "Reflections of God in the Poetic Vision," Heavilin discusses what Frankl calls "tragic optimism," or the search for hope when there is no apparent reason for hope. Four poets—Coleridge, Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot—demonstrate her thesis that modernism began with the "inward gaze" of Romanticism, which turned into the flattening existential vacuum of the twentieth century. Particularly effective in this section is a close reading of several of Yeats's poems as spiritual catalysts for dealing with modernism. Yeats places us at the point of dramatic tension; the reader participates in the poem and has to choose against the modern tide or to be swept under by it.

T. S. Eliot, as one might suspect, takes a major role in this section that discusses the transition to modernism. In this case, Heavilin engages a compelling narrative with the always recondite *The Waste Land*. The

poem, she writes, "is a poem of fragmentation, psychic emptiness, and pervading loss—a poem in which the cosmos is neither rational nor orderly." That very same description applies equally to modernism. But, in this case, Heavilin adds: "In this poem's backdrop there are echoes of a time when life had meaning, and the world, though fallen, nevertheless still reflected its origins in Eden—with God, human beings, and the earth all in harmony." These echoes of a bygone world are what Heavilin seeks out, as she does also with the poems of Coleridge and Hopkins in this section.

As a well-known expert in John Steinbeck studies, it is not surprising that Heavilin focuses in Part II, "American Angst: Emptiness and Possibility in John Steinbeck's Major Novels," on *The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*. The linking theme among the three is that of giving versus having. Giving is an act of grace (*charis*), corresponding with Frankl's view of the human "saint" who freely gives. "Having," the trait of modernism, typifies the present age and corresponds with Frankl's view of the human "swine," the gluttonous desire for more.

The third part, "A Tragic Optimism: The Triumph of Good in the Fantasy Worlds of Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling" strikes me as the master stroke of this study. The analyses of these three major fantasy authors are clear and perceptive in their own right, and Heavilin's applications to modernism are convincing. The very point of fantasy (as argued by Tolkien in his *On Faerie Stories*) is not to carry the reader away, once and for all, from the real world, but to step aside from it for a short while in order to see it more clearly. Fantasy is never an escape from modern life, but an engagement with it. Thus, each of these three authors, whose works are also inspirited with the divine, create a vision by which to engage our reality.

By stepping aside for a time from this harried earth, fantasy characters nonetheless confront the same psychological and spiritual challenges of this earth. The reason for creating this other world is to confront more directly and openly what in our world has been subsumed in system and fact. It is what Heidegger called Facticity: the blind acceptance of things as they are and the human need to wrest individual identity from that in order to achieve Authenticity. Heavilin discusses authoritatively in C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength,* where the highly-ruled and structured N.I.C.E. seeks to destroy the small, spiritually-incarnated Logres, or City of God.

I left this study deeply satisfied. It possesses a wholeness of vision seldom encountered. Its analyses are crisp and discrete, but they unify under that vision and the philosophy of Frankl. There are some familiar

works here, encountered like old friends in new wardrobe. There are sufficient new encounters to keep the imagination and reason stimulated. Finally, I found it an important book to anyone who thinks seriously about the condition of our modern age and what alternatives might be offered to it.

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INTRODUCTION

FROM AN EXISTENTIAL VACUUM TO A TRAGIC OPTIMISM: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND PRESENCE OF GOD IN MODERN LITERATURE

> The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century. . . . Man . . . sometimes . . . does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism). (110)
>
> —Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

> An ultimate being—paralleling the ultimate meaning—or to speak in plain words, God, is . . . being itself or Being (246).
>
> —Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*

At a 2008 Oxford Round Table titled "Allusions to God in Prose and Poetry," my husband and I presented a paper entitled "'A Tragic Optimism': 'The Existential Vacuum' and God in the Poetic Vision," which served as the impetus for this book. The oxymoronic terms, "tragic optimism" and "existential vacuum," are taken from psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which maintains that even in direst circumstances human beings may find meaning in creativity, love, and moral choice. In an ensuing work *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl broadens his discussion of "meaning": "An ultimate being—paralleling the ultimate meaning—or, so to speak in plain words, God, is not one thing among others but being itself or Being" (147). Trusting in his readers' common sense and innate knowledge to recognize this basic longing and need, Frankl does not define what he means by "meaning." Following Frankl's lead, this study, then, sets aside both those critics who find the attempt to discern authorial meaning fallacious and also those who maintain that authorial meaning is essential to interpretation.[1] Nor does Frankl feel the need to identify or define "God," whose presence in modern literature is the focus of this book and who is considered either problematic or supposedly non-existent in much modernist literature.

The perspective on the presence of God in literature, however, has evolved over time—from a present and caring God to a non-existent or disinterested God. This evolution has manifested itself in a shift away from a recognized spiritual dimension lasting until about the seventeenth century. Perspectives on God's presence evolved into a focus on societal ills with the Neoclassicists in the eighteenth century, then to an inward turn toward the self with the Romantics in the nineteenth. The transformation continues through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the form of a narcissistic self-obsession observable in both Modernist and Postmodernist texts. Literature has thus tended to move away from an *upward* contemplation on God, to an *outward* gaze at humanity, to an *inward* inspection of an isolated self that is severed from connections to the deity and to others. To elaborate, Milton's *Paradise Lost* with its lofty intent "to justify the ways of God to men" precedes an age of satire focused on social reform—most often with the hope of positive change, but sometimes with the fatalistic view that humankind is beyond redemption. With the Romantics, this outward gaze at society takes an inward, subjective turn, as for example, Shelley's rather histrionic affectation that he has fallen on life's thorns and bleeds. This shift in focus from considering the mind of God, to contemporary social ills, to the isolated self results in a body of literature wherein God largely disappears from the scene—a reflection of a shifting scientific and philosophical bent towards empirical verification of "truth" and a sceptical view of faith and mystery.

Still, the modern age struggles against a pervading and inescapable presence of God, with writers such as Mark C. Taylor's complaining about God's continuing presence even after He has been proclaimed dead:

> The news of the death of God cannot really reach our ears until its reverberations are traced in the notions of self, history, and book. The echoes of the death of God can be heard in the disappearance of the self, the end of history, and the closure of the book. (7)

Taylor's resounding proclamations and broad generalizations, however, constitute assertions that are not well substantiated. Similarly, Gregory Erickson struggles to explain what the title of his book on God's absence in modernist literature means:

> The title of my book, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, is meant to signal something different from Miller's "disappearance of God" or Nietzsche's or Altizer's "death of God." If God has disappeared it implies that he *was*, and was perceivable in some way, and if God is dead it too suggests that he *was*, that he *is* no more, and that some action *killed*

> him. If, as I prefer, God is deemed absent, then it implies no necessary presence at any time, but only that there is an awareness of a lack of that presence. It is meant to resonate with the opposite of presence, but also the sense of something missing, reminiscent of Sartre's "God-shaped hole," and also the desire for a (potentially nonexistent) God. (3)

There is great pathos in Erickson's attempt to define what he means by "the absence of God," a definition that finally acknowledges that an awareness of God's absence "is central to how we perceive the world." He asserts further that "whatever we choose to call God, we feel a sense of longing for him that transcends issues of belief, faith, and presence" (3). In his conclusion, "Epilogue: the Other Side of God: Reading in the Dark," he defines God in modernist literature as "a God idea that exists as presence and as nonpresence, as artistic trope and as superstitious remnant" (199).[2]

Taking an opposing stance, this book on meaning and the presence of God in modern literature defines God as a Person whose presence is felt even when his absence is portrayed most poignantly. The modernist view of humanity when God seems absent is reflected, for instance, in Robert Frost's "The Oven Bird," a poem in which the bird sings of "that other fall we name the fall," leading to the plaintive question, "what to make of a diminished thing." Frost's response to this question of what becomes of human beings after "the fall" is appalling: separated from the God in whose image they are created, human beings are lost, with the person now reduced to a "thing." Similarly, in Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," a woman with all of her cherished things around her—a mug of coffee, oranges, a brightly colored chair, a cockatoo portrayed on a lush rug—still feels herself lapsing into thoughts of the Sabbath, the Christian story of sacrifice, and like thoughts that destroy her contentment. She thinks of Jesus and conflates the Son of God with the sun. Although she tries to cherish her "things" in place of thoughts of "heaven," seeks to discover divinity within herself, and attempts to measure all things from herself, the end result is "isolation" and "darkness" as the day draws to a close. The poem ends with no God, no light, and no connections either to nature, to others, or to the self. Stevens thus portrays what can be made of Frost's "diminished thing," cut off from God. In God's seeming absence, however, his presence is felt in the woman's poignant reminiscences that cannot escape thoughts of the meaning of the Sabbath, of God, and of heaven.

In addition, this book uses the term "modern" primarily to identify that literature since the Romantic Period that takes a dramatic inward turn to focus on the self. Also, this book conflates "modern" with "modernism"—a movement to which Leon Surette ascribes "the Nietzschean ethos of

relativism and skepticism" (209). By their inward focus on the self, the Romantics take an opposing tactic to that of the Neoclassicists who preceded them, whose focal point was society at large—an age which held the mirror of satire to reveal human folly. The Romantics replaced this steadfastly outward gaze on the world with an interior landscape. To illustrate, Wordsworth seeks to discover "the essential passions of the heart" (7) and proclaims that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," originating from "emotions recollected in tranquility" (21). Romanticism's inward turn thus marks the beginning of the modern age.[3]

This book also employs a new theoretical approach to literature: Victor Frankl's logotherapy (from the Greek "logos" for word or reason and often related to divine wisdom), a unique form of existential analysis. This study provides a contrast to the Freudian theory embraced by some literary critics. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl contrasts Freudian and Adlerian theory with his own meaning-based existential analysis:

> I speak of a *will to meaning* in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the *will to pleasure*) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the *will to power* on which Adlerian psychology, using the term "striving for superiority," is focused." (*MSM* 104)

Frankl had ample opportunity to verify this theory while imprisoned in Nazi death camps—including Auschwitz, where the synecdoche "chimneys" came to stand for the gas chambers, whose reality was too horrifying to be named directly. Frankl's theory stems from this experience, during which he objectively observed and studied the reactions and behaviors both of his fellow prisoners and himself. Some inmates, he found, not only endured, but were able, on occasion, to transcend circumstances. Neither pleasure nor power was pertinent to their condition, for their lives had been reduced to the lowest human denominator. Hence, they had control over nothing except to choose their own attitudes towards the death and suffering surrounding them. Nonetheless, in this final freedom to choose, they possessed the potential to discover some meaning for their miserable lives.

On the basis of his observations of the power of human endurance and transcendence—the discovery of meaning even in the midst of harrowing circumstances—Frankl diagnoses the malaise of the current age as an "existential vacuum," a sense of meaninglessness. He suggests that a panacea for this malaise may be found in creativity, love, and moral choice—even when faced with suffering or death. These human actions

reflect a higher way—or what Frankl calls "another dimension, . . . the capacity to rise above conditions." In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, he takes this discussion a step further, maintaining that there is "an ultimate being" who parallels an "ultimate meaning—or, so to speak in plain words, God, . . . not one thing among others but being itself or Being (capitalized by Martin Heidegger)" (147). Verified by his experiences during the Holocaust, in clinical practice, and while teaching at Harvard, Stanford, and elsewhere, Frankl's theory of meaning and Ultimate Being offers another paradigm far different from other existential and psychological criticism. Serving as a foil for Freudian literary theory with its analysis of sexual imagery, dreams, and fantasies, Frankl's form of existentialism focuses on a most human quest and longing to discover meaning, even when there seems to be none—a quest and longing often reflected in modern literature. If only by implication, the quest itself suggests a higher dimension, a felt presence of God. As Frankl affirms, human beings have the power to transcend the "existential vacuum," to discover meaning—or even ultimate meaning and Ultimate Being in God—enabling them to live with a sense of "tragic optimism" (*MSM* 111–13; 139–54).

This book observes both the current age's "existential vacuum"—a malaise of emptiness and meaninglessness—and its longing for meaning and God as reflected in three genres: poetry, novel, and fantasy. Part I, "Oxymoronic Reflections of God in the Poetic Vision: Tragic Optimism in Yeats, Coleridge, Hopkins, and Eliot" addresses "tragic optimism"—hope when there seems no reason for hope—in selected poetry. On the one hand, this poetry reflects the dread horrors of war, devastation, and chaos that—together with a prevailing sense of alienation, fragmentation, and emptiness—prevail in these modern/postmodern times. On the other hand, in their portrayal of innocence, beauty, creativity, and love, these poets suggest a panacea for these woes, a means of transcendence, and a felt presence of God.

Part II, "American Angst: Emptiness and Possibility in John Steinbeck's Major Novels" presents a study of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*—novels that together form a uniquely American epic trilogy. *The Grapes of Wrath* begins in medias res with the Oklahoma Dust Bowl and The Great Depression; *East of Eden* takes readers to the beginnings of the Edenic dream of paradise in California; *The Winter of Our Discontent* propels them forward into the modern world of greed and opportunism. Together these novels tell the story of a nation's avarice, corruption, and betrayal offset by magnanimity, heroism, and hospitality. The characters are, for the

most part, representative Every Americans, in whose lives are reflected a nation's worst vices and best hopes. The discussion of these novels is set against the backdrop of Frankl's ways of finding meaning and fulfilment —all obliquely implying the felt presence of God, who is the ultimate meaning and the Ultimate Being

Part III, "A Tragic Optimism: The Triumph of Good in the Fantasy Worlds of Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling" defines fantasy and science fiction as a mirror by which to view reality. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series are considered in the light of Frankl's paths to meaning and the ultimate meaning to be found in God. In a postmodern, fragmented age, these works affirm a continuing vision of God (often through His felt absence) and also a most human yearning for meaning even when there seems to be none—providing, as Frankl maintains, "a tragic optimism."

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	*Abolition of Man*
CPP	*Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*
CS	*Chamber of Secrets*
CTSE	*Companion to T. S. Eliot*
DH	*The Deathly Hallows*
EE	*East of Eden*
FR	*The Fellowship of the Ring*
GB	*The Goblet of Fire*
GOW	*The Grapes of Wrath*
HBP	*The Half-Blood Prince*
JB	*Jerusalem Bible*
MSM	*Man's Search for Meaning*
MSUM	*Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*
NKJV	*New King James Version of the Bible*
NOAD	*New Oxford American Dictionary*
OP	*The Order of the Phoenix*
PA	*The Prisoner of Azakaban*
RK	*The Return of the King*
SS	*The Sorcerer's Stone*
SSL	*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*
ST	*Steinbeck's Typewriter*
THS	*That Hideous Strength*
TTT	*The Two Towers*
WOD	*The Winter of Our Discontent*

PART I

OXYMORONIC REFLECTIONS OF GOD IN POETIC VISION: TRAGIC OPTIMISM IN YEATS, ELIOT, COLERIDGE, AND HOPKINS

> Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient. . . . Poetry might be defined as a kind of language that says *more* and says it *more intensely* than does ordinary language. (3)
>
> —Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*

> Let us first ask ourselves what should be understood by "a tragic optimism." In brief it means that one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the "tragic triad, . . . a triad which consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: (1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death. . . . Saying yes to life in spite of everything . . . presupposes that life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. (139)
>
> —Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Maintaining that the primary motivation of human beings is to discover meaning for their lives, Viktor Frankl diagnoses a prevalent societal malaise as an "existential vacuum," a bleak inner sickness of the soul. In the light of Frankl's observations of the wounded psyche of modern and postmodern times, this section examines selected poems of William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Gerard Manley Hopkins (*MSM* 111). On the one hand, together with a prevailing sense of alienation, fragmentation, and an inner void reflecting their times, these poets reflect on the horrors of war, devastation, and chaos. On the other hand, in their portrayal of innocence, beauty, creativity, and love, they suggest a panacea for these woes, a means of transcendence, a felt presence of God, and a tragic optimism.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM DESPAIR TO A TRAGIC OPTIMISM: YEATS'S SEARCH FOR ULTIMATE MEANING IN "A SECOND COMING" AND "A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER"

"Another dimension, a world beyond man's world": Yeats's Desire for Ultimate Meaning

> An ultimate being—paralleling the ultimate meaning—or, so to speak in plain words, God, is not one thing among others but being itself or Being (142).
>
> —Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*

> I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed in the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire (48).
>
> —Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

> And prayer comes round again.
>
> —W. B. Yeats, "A Prayer for Old Age"

In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Viktor Frankl poses a rhetorical question: "Is it not conceivable that there is still another dimension, a world beyond man's world, a world in which the question of ultimate meaning . . . would have an answer?" (144). Based on inconceivable suffering and loss during his imprisonment in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, his answer to this question is a resounding "Yes." Going beyond an "ultimate meaning," Frankl writes further of an Ultimate Being: God. His account of his time as an inmate in Nazi death camps provides examples of those who likewise discovered this ultimate meaning and Ultimate Being. To illustrate, he writes of those "saints" who find ultimate meaning by acting responsibly toward their fellow human beings, those who are accountable, finally, to their God. With humility, he acknowledges these "saints" as the "best of us," those courageous fellow inmates who

went into the "gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the *Shema Yisrael*" on their lips (19; 136).

William Butler Yeats, too, writes of God and meaning, taking an opposing stance to that of Ezra Pound who rejects "God and every kind of unity" and "calls *the ultimate reality* anarchy" (254, emphasis added).[1] Although he is not among such poets as Dante, Milton, Herbert, and Donne who are noted for their religious themes and insights, Yeats's poetic prayers speak to sincerity, faith, and trust in God. In "A Prayer for My Son," to illustrate, the speaker stands beside his newborn son's cradle and prays that this child may be protected from all harm, and he thinks of Mary and Joseph in their flight to Egypt to save the Christ Child from Herod's murder of the innocents. He envisions their hurrying across unknown terrain, anxious to protect the Child from danger, protecting Him the only way they can, "with human love." Like this Holy Family, Yeats lives in times threatened by conflict and violence. Like them, the only protections from danger he can provide are flight, love, and prayer. Similarly, in "A Prayer for My Daughter," he asks for his child's safety and well-being. In "A Prayer for Old Age," Yeats prays for himself, asking that he be remembered as a poet who sings "a lasting song"—one that comes from "a marrow-bone"—or, as the poet states in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," from the "rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Also, on occasion, Yeats explores the role of God in the affairs of human beings. In "Leda and the Swan," to illustrate, he recalls the myth of the rape of the young girl Leda by the god Zeus, who has taken on the form of a swan. Questioning the myth's implications for the relationship between the divine and the human, he asks, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (ll. 13-14). That is, did Leda then foreknow that the child conceived in this rape is Helen, the most beautiful and desirable of women? Did she now know that because of men's desire for this daughter, the walls of Troy would fall, leaving a mighty civilization burning? Did she realize that returning home from the Trojan War, the Greek King Agamemnon would die at the hands of his wife's lover? By his single question, Yeats encapsulates these human tragedies. At the same time, he characterizes the god Zeus in a synecdoche, reducing him to "the indifferent beak" that coldly and uncaringly lets the girl drop after he has ravished her. Further questions underlie the poem: Do gods care about the plight of human beings? Does God care about the plight of human beings? This brings us to that old question: How does a beneficent, loving God let bad things happen to people? There is, of course, no answer.

On the other hand, in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Yeats looks at the other side of the coin: can good things come from bad? The Bishop arrogantly observes that Crazy Jane's body is now showing signs of age, with sagging breasts and protruding veins—the crassness of his remarks but thinly veiled by his appeal to religion and heaven. Crazy Jane responds, however, with a view of the human condition very similar to that of Viktor Frankl's observation that meaning may be found even in suffering: "Nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent" (ll. 17-18). Meaning here derives from great suffering, and the outcome implied is felicitous indeed. To be "sole" is finally to have achieved a true sense of self and identity, to be fully oneself. To be "whole" is to be undamaged, unimpaired, perfect. Jane has more knowledge of the human spirit and spirituality than does the Bishop. She knows more than the Bishop about the "Heaven" towards which he supposedly is pointing. She has faith that there, in that other dimension, she will not be impaired either physically or mentally. She will be wholly herself, wholly well, as she was meant to be.

In some of his prose writings, too, Yeats is explicit about the role God plays in literature—and, by implication, in human life. For example, in diary entry "XL. Three Essentials," echoing Immanuel Kant, he suggests that literature is now decadent because it does not have its foundations "in Freedom, God, Immortality." He regrets that these values have faded "before Bacon, Newton, Locke," leading to the decadence of literature:

> Because Freedom is gone we have Stendhal's 'mirror dawdling down a lane'; because God has gone we have realism, the accidental; because Immortality is gone we can no longer write those tragedies which have always seemed to me alone legitimate—those that are a joy to the man who dies. Recent Irish literature has only delighted me in so far as it implies one or the other, in so far as it has been a defiance of all else, in so far as it has created those extravagant characters and emotions which have always arisen spontaneously from the human mind when it sees itself exempt from death and decay, responsible to its source alone. (Yeats 256)

Reminiscent of Frankl's avowal that human beings are ultimately responsible to God for their actions, Yeats believes that the writer is finally responsible to God as the "source" of creative inspiration. In opposition to modern realism in literature, which opposes the ideal and adopts scientific and empirical verification (what can be seen is what is), Yeats maintains that reality does not lie in the happenstance of everyday, but in Providence. Hence, it is God to whom the artist is accountable in the end. In light of this responsibility, Yeats further asserts that human beings should not take personal credit for their art; nor should they write solely in their own self-interest; nor should they write in fear of critics.

Like Frankl, who maintains that in God there is Ultimate Meaning and Ultimate Reality, Yeats believes, then, that "Freedom, God, Immortality" are essential foundations for a literature that endures. Musing on the reality of God in an earlier diary entry, the poet thinks of Ezra Pound, who "rejects God and every kind of unity, calls *the ultimate reality* anarchy" (254, emphasis added).[1] But Yeats himself finds in God "the ultimate reality," or, in Frankl's terms, "an ultimate being—paralleling the ultimate meaning" (*MSUM* 147). In another diary entry, [2] Yeats struggles with an inner conflict between two choices that seem on surface to be mutually exclusive; at the same time, he wants both to have the freedom of personal autonomy and to "surrender to God of all that I am":

> I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. . . . Again and again I have tried to sing that approach—*The Hosting of the Sidhe*, 'O sweet everlasting voices,' and those lines about 'The lonely majestical multitude'—and have almost understood my intuition. Again and again with remorse, a sense of defeat, I have failed when I would write of God, written coldly and conventionally." (255)

Yeats's paradoxical realizations—those moments when he celebrates his own uniqueness and freedom and those times when he desires to surrender everything to God—are only seemingly contradictory. In the richness of divergence, between two seeming contradictions, there lies truth: a human being may be unique and free, yet may acknowledge a Creator who has given these gifts. Further, Yeats's poetic prayers for his daughter, his son, and himself in old age are not cold and conventional, but warm and honest, revealing the longings of a father who wants to protect his children and of a poet who faces the end of his life and work.

"Things fall apart": Despair and Death of Meaning in "The Second Coming"

> . . . what rough beast . . .
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
> —W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

In the year 1919, in the aftermath of World War I and during the Easter Uprising in Dublin—a disastrous political turmoil in which the woman whom he loved, Maud Donne, was actively involved—Yeats wrote two contrasting poems: "The Second Coming" and "A Prayer for My Daughter." The first portrays a world in which all meaning and hope

seems lost, whereas the second displays a "tragic optimism" in a prayer of blessing, earnestly beseeching for both the physical and moral protection of a beloved baby daughter, Anne. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly observe that "the values represented by Anne—custom, ceremony, innocence—look even more fragile and endangered next to 'The Second Coming's assurance that 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned.' And the horror of the rough beast's 'rocking cradle' is magnified by its link to the baby's 'cradle-hood and coverlid,'" the two poems thus commenting on or illuminating one another (12). Hence, these poems present antithetical worldviews. In the first, the absence of God is reflected in a world on the brink of collapse; in the second, God is present in the love of a father praying that his infant daughter be spared from harm even in a world gone wrong. Like the contrasting worldviews of T. S. Eliot's almost-nihilistic *The Waste Land* and his call for love in *Little Gidding*, in this momentous year, when the world has been torn apart by warfare, Yeats's worldview goes beyond the hopelessness of "The Second Coming" to a cautious optimism in "A Prayer for My Daughter." For both Eliot and Yeats, this shift away from meaninglessness and despair reveals an interior landscape that moves beyond hopelessness to embrace a fragile hope, grounded in love.

In "The Second Coming," the speaker despairs as chaos and darkness descend upon the earth, threatening annihilation. All meaning for human life is lost as "mere anarchy" and "the blood-dimmed tide" are set loose in the world by some unnamed force of evil. The entire poem hinges around the seemingly contradictory adjective-noun combination "Mere anarchy" that poses a paradoxical question: how can "anarchy," or chaos and tumult, be described as "mere" or insignificant? The only appropriate solution to this paradox is divergent; there are no easy answers. "Mere" is illustrated by what follows in the poem. It refers first to the irony that "the worst" representations of humanity—those who are ignorant, lacking convictions, with no sense of morality or ethical responsibility to others—are devotedly, passionately, and intensely focused on their evil conniving. These "worst" people all exhibit Frankl's existential vacuum, which shows itself in a desire for power and an absence of meaning.

Underlying this encroaching scenario is Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's 1887 prophecy in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* about the death of Christianity and morality and the birth of nihilism:

> Christianity as *morality* must now perish, too: we stand on the threshold of *this* event. . . . What meaning would our whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*?

> As the will to truth thus gains self-consciousness—there can be no doubt of that—morality will gradually *perish* now; this is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe—the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps the most hopeful of all spectacles. (3.27)

In *The Will to Power* in the ensuing year 1888, Nietzsche expands his prophecy to portray the end result of nihilism—a world psyche in grips of horror, "tortured tension," and fear:

> What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (4)

Leon Surette notes that Yeats's "Second Coming" shares "Nietzsche's apocalyptic perception that he stood at the end of an era. For Yeats it was the two-thousand-year-old Christian era, whose baptismal rite ("the ceremony of innocence") he imagined being drowned in the onset of a new era symbolized by a 'rough beast'" (171). It is implied that "this rough beast," like Nietzsche's Antichrist, will be "victor over God" (*GM* S24). Like Nietzsche's culture that moves "as toward a catastrophe," Yeats's "worst" people have lost a sense of center; they have no core, no love. In this sense "mere anarchy" has no strength, at least not the kind that holds a civilization together. But on the other side of the paradox, Yeats envisions these morally and ethically weak "worst" ones taking control of the world through the strength, power, and chaos of anarchy, bringing a civilization to its demise. This paradoxical "mere anarchy," then, lies at the poem's core, as all evil threatens to break loose in a world now morally defenseless and weak, primarily because "the best lack all conviction" (l. 7).

This paradox intensifies the horror of Yeats's view of his times and the world condition. Anca Vlasopolos's interpretation of this poem as one "of intensified hatred" is puzzling (159). Rather than hatred, the poem expresses anguished loss, with a world of order, meaning, and innocence reduced to a terrifying anarchy. While this "mere anarchy," with its accompanying existential vacuum, is played out against the backdrop of an Augustinian world where good and evil are sharply delineated, the influence of the good—those "best" ones whom Yeats portrays as lacking

"all conviction,"—fades away as the "passionate intensity" of evil comes to the forefront.

Thus, in an elegiac tone of loss, the poem establishes the tragic premise that although there has been good in the world, it is now at the point of vanishing and will never return to the forefront. The image of loss is poignant, symbolically portrayed by the falconer, holding his gloved hand aloft, waiting for the return of his bird. Lost, the falcon, however, circles ever farther away because it cannot hear its master. The affectionate tie between bird and trainer is broken, and the results are disastrous for both: "Things fall apart. The center cannot hold" (l. 3). By implication, human beings, like the falcon now beyond hope of return, can hear neither God nor the voice of reason, having lost the center essential to purpose and meaning. As Frankl has observed, this center, that provides purpose and meaning for life, may be found in love for others, joy in work well done, and choices well made—even for those faced with suffering and death. But now there is no center to light the darkness, and some unnamed, shapeless, evil force sets loose "mere anarchy" and a "blood-dimmed tide" that drowns "the ceremony of innocence"—those warm and sacred moments that punctuate our humanity with joy.

In contrast to the contradictory adjective-noun sides of the depiction of evil in the paradox "mere anarchy," the depiction of good in the noun with its adjectival modifier, "ceremony of innocence," is in perfect accord and harmony. Ceremonies are those religious rites of marriage and christenings as well as those anniversaries and family traditions that give meaning to life. The word "innocence" derives from a word Diane Kelsey McColley defines as "not-nocence, . . . harmlessness toward other creatures" (xvi); thus Yeats's portrayal of the drowning of the "ceremony of innocence" is a tragic memorial to times of peace and harmony, when no harm is threatened. Now both ceremony and innocence are subject to violent death, drowned and swept away in a "blood-dimmed tide."

Such loss is dramatically depicted in "The Second Coming" by a drama in miniature that portrays a threatening and rapidly occurring change in the world. There are seven characters and seven scenes: first the falconer and his lost bird; then an unnamed force, to be followed by "the best" and "the worst" of humanity; next an indistinguishable "shape"; and, finally, a slouching beast. After the opening scene of the falconer holding his hand aloft as he waits in vain for the falcon which has flown circling beyond the reach of his voice, an unnamed force of evil is also a character, bringing calamity with it. This mindless anarchy drowns human goodness, that is symbolized by those cherished innocent ceremonies. The speaker maintains that there is a cause-and-effect for this disaster: "*The best* lack