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There On That Scaffolding:
Yeats's Objectification of the Artist in "Long-Legged Fly"

by JOHN TIMBERMAN NEWCOMB

Within the sometimes misty fields of meaning in W. B. Yeats's late poems, "Long-Legged Fly" has proved particularly elusive to readers and critics. Though it has always been seen as one of Yeats's most highly evocative lyrics, "Long-Legged Fly" has been consistently, if variably, misread and underrated. The interpretive stumbling block has often emerged from a lack of understanding of the poem's extremely complex narrative method. I use the term narrative consciously, since all critical readings have rightly assumed that underlying the lyric structure are three narratives—the stories of three of Yeats's central historical personages, Caesar, Helen, and Michael Angelo. But the generic displacement between the lyric form and the narrative import of the poem has meant, in an age of lyric-centered critical formalism, the general neglect of the implications of the poem as a narrative transmission. A satisfactory reading must do what has not been done—call into question the ways by which the poem conveys historical narratives of determining importance for Yeats's view of the course of human civilization. The conventional view of this issue has been to see the speaker—or, as I will suggest below, the speakers—employing an unproblematic direct address which appears to involve the reader as an actor in three historical scenes—dramatic places of spatial and temporal coherence. But a few vivid physical details, striking as they are, do not a drama make. What the narrative mimesis realizes is actually only small areas in close focus around the three observed figures: Caesar's eyes and hand, maps below him; the girl's body and shuffling feet; Michael Angelo's niche between scaffolding and ceiling, and his moving hand. The remainder of the visual scene, and hence most of the dramatic historical narrative, is left implicit.

Faced with such highly evocative yet barely adumbrated scenes, many commentators have wandered up a dramatic garden path into trying to fill in the many gaps of detail. In one of the most authoritative critical readings, B. C. Southam even suggested that the speaker and listener of the second stanza are inside the Trojan horse observing Helen, who has inexplicably slipped away to this (not so) lonely place within Troy, where she practices her dance within a few feet of the revengers ("Life and the Creator" 176). James Allen rightly pointed out that Southam's suggestion is at variance with the other stanzas, in negating the importance of Helen...
as an historical figure, since any Trojan girl would sound the alarm if she heard people clumping around inside a Greek gift horse (51). What Allen’s rejoinder did not note is that Southam’s dramatic situation—speaker inside Trojan horse—is totally incongruous with Helen’s historical destiny as Yeats saw it, which was to bring about, not to foil, the destruction of Troy. For Yeats, if Helen has already been carried off by Paris and the Greeks have already penetrated the city walls, then undisturbed or not, her part is done; historical destiny will do the rest.

The dominance of this sort of critical exchange, concerned with the articulation of the poem’s tantalizing details into “dramatic” terms, has obscured the more fundamental issue of how the poem fits into Yeats’s theory of history, retelling as it does some of the poet’s favorite historico-mythic narratives. Discussions of the poem to date have demonstrated that it is easier to raise questions about the scenarios of other readers than to move outside the “dramatic” frame of reference. The beginning assumptions of dramatic coherence, made nearly universally, have led to readings which are ultimately both unsatisfying, mired in arguments over various too-literal scenarios, and dissatisfied, as if forced into the conclusion that “Long-Legged Fly” is less a fully realized work of art than a proto-poem, containing hints rather than revelations. Taking a cue from Yvor Winters’s dissatisfaction with the poem, Robert Hodges developed a “revisionist” reading which attempted to reconcile the perceived weaknesses of both poem and readings by claiming a large measure of comic irony in the poem’s presentation of historical destiny. In doing so, Hodges came nearer an understanding of the poem’s narrative complexity, noting correctly that the three stanzas could not depict moments in which the course of history hangs in the balance, because Yeats’s theory of history did not allow it. But in stopping with a single level of narrative irony, Hodges left himself even less satisfied with the value of the poem, reducing it to “a satire on historical hindsight, not the compressed statement about the effect of genius on history and art for which it has so long been taken” (30).

However, satirizing historical hindsight, which is undoubtedly part of what the poem does, need not be exclusive of making a brilliantly compressed and serious statement about the effects of figures such as these three on history and art—which the poem also does. The logic by which both are accomplished begins by acknowledging the poem’s rejection of conventional dramatic coherence. The poem is not a movie camera filming the reader into historical episodes, or even a projector presenting vignettes for viewing on a flat surface. In fact, the poem is not dramatic at all; it is, however, a sort of narrative, being the written record of a mind describing its own movement through various levels of voice. This statement implies an interpretive reorientation towards the functioning of the self-conscious complexity of the poem’s narrative voices. Like an old Irish tale-spinner, Yeats is giving us a multiplicity of types of narrators, the im-
plications of all of which must be considered in order to describe the operation of the poem. Thus the questions of detail which have taken up much previous critical writing—whether Caesar is Julius or a later emperor, which military engagement he is preparing for, the location of the girl’s lonely place—are unanswerable and unnecessary.

This is not to say that questions of historical and poetic narrative are not central to the poem. In fact, by resisting visual mimesis as the hinge in adequately articulating the poem’s import, this difficult narrative structure works to foreground those very activities, as the poet-figure engages in them, as the subject for the poem. Rather than trying to fill in gaps in the dramatic lyric form, then, I will work to connect the poem’s evidently evocative elements—images, narratives, personae—with their history in Yeats’s poetic and cultural thinking. The intertextual resonance generated between “Long-Legged Fly” and the poet’s other work should point towards a revaluation of the poem as one of his most characteristic and integrally conceived works. Although not autobiographical in a direct sense, as “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” or “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” are, “Long-Legged Fly” constitutes a strong summation of the poet’s central theories of human history, using a carefully chosen group of his mythic-historical paradigms. Further, the thematic articulation achieved with these paradigms joins with the poem’s particular narrative and lyric structure to demonstrate an ingenious process of artistic self-representation which places the poem among the greatest of Yeats’s magnificent late poems.

The bare bones of the poem’s narrative structure can be described like this: the speaker of the refrain has created three fragments of descriptive narration, expressed by three speakers in parallel positions of minor authority: an attendant upon Caesar, an unidentified observer of the girl, and a Sistine functionary. These three simple personae go no deeper than a rather literal dramatic level. They are all servile and officious, inclined to petty tyranny. Not too inconspicuously peeking from behind these caricatures of self-importance, three sub-speakers are discernible. Unlike the speakers, these are projections of the poet himself, products of Yeats’s development of the concept of the poetic mask. They make knowing allusions, use words loaded with Yeatsian symbolism, in undermining their rather stupid surface characterizations. If one of these stanzas, without the refrain, were an entire poem, each of these sub-speakers would seem to us more or less a “normal” Yeatsian persona; they can be distinguished from the intently serious refrain-speaker by their witty irony. Although each sub-speaker represents a distinct example of Yeats’s various poetic masks, all three serve to create a similar layer of narrative distance between poet and speaker. This ironic distance functions to further the poet’s historical cyclism by rejecting the totally unYeatsian idea held by the three speakers: that history can be totally changed by altering specific moments.
The first sub-speaker suggests Yeats's mask of the aspiring man of action, who admiringly describes Caesar as the archetypal active man in the manner of Yeats's earlier explorations using Major Robert Gregory. Like the persona of "Ancestral Houses," he regrets the dissolution of the great work of these "violent bitter men" (Collected Poems 198), yet affirms that it is all part of the cyclic nature of human history. He demonstrates his belief that human creation and destruction cannot be long separated through the physical details with which he surrounds Caesar. The pony, for example, is a tame reflection of the great horses ridden by fiery Gregorians throughout Yeats's work, from the early The Wanderings of Oisin all the way to the final line of the epitaph of "Under Ben Bulben"—"Horseman, pass by." That ponies and not wild horses serve Caesar's realm suggests its enfeeblement. Similarly, the dog has an ignominious history in Yeats's poetry. Yeats associates the English, and Irish unionists, with a dog having its day ("The Ghost of Roger Casement" 304 and "Three Songs to the Same Tune" 277); in closing Responsibilities, he attacks several enemies by calling them "passing dogs" who defile what he holds dear. Yeats has rather consistently presented the dog as a noisy, despoothing nuisance whose human analogues, Paudeens, have hounded heroes—Casement, Parnell, Caesar—until they lie defeated, their causes beaten flat. Furthermore, the speaker's command to dispose of these worrisome animals by shackling links them, and his civilization's fall, to a sign of the very thing which will, in Yeats's view, eventually destroy Caesar's empire: the "distant post" of Christianity, which Yeats saw as the domain of spirit-shackled (and shackling) men. The attendant's foolish belief is that these harmless animals can change the course of history. He insists on the necessity of silence for Caesar's meditation, seeing the animals as momentarily but dangerously disruptive. The sub-speaker laughs at this attitude, knowing the eventual futility of Caesar's efforts, whether he win or lose this particular battle. These animals can be gotten away from Caesar now, obviously, but not forever. The sub-speaker makes the animals into sinister portents rather than literal dangers.

The sub-speaker of the second stanza, who likewise undercuts his speaker-attendant, represents the mask of Yeats the middle-aged classicist who spends much of his time admiring the beauty of young females; his close cousins appear in "Leda and the Swan" and "To a Child Dancing in the Wind." This sub-speaker mocks his speaker as a self-righteous old voyeur, who tries to mask the prurience of his observation through intellectual snobbery, condescending to the girl's activity as a vulgar "tinker shuffle." As in the other stanzas, this fissure between speaker and sub-speaker invites the reader to realize the folly of misunderstanding, as the speakers do, the role of such shapers of history as these three. In fact, to emphasize the importance of this understanding, Yeats has returned to one of the mythic narratives he has found most centrally useful in articulating his concept of historical necessity: the myth of Helen of Troy.
In other "Helen" poems, as here, Yeats links Helen's great destiny to her consistent passivity; he nearly always presents her as some part a child. She fulfills her destiny not by acting, just by being who she is. Yeats has taken great pains to chronicle her destiny, all the way back to her conception (in "Leda and the Swan"); through her passively idyllic courtship by Paris ("When Helen Lived," _Collected Poems_ 108); up to a description of Troy's proudly doomed fascination with her in "Three Marching Songs": "Troy backed its Helen. Troy died and adored" (324). Particularly after he separated her identity from that of Maud Gonne, Yeats saw Helen as an unthinking, unknowingly destructive force expressly made for the purpose of annihilating one civilization, thus indirectly creating another, following the historical movement of the gyres. The rehearsal of this centrally important story again suggests that the function of the poem's narrative dimension is to provide theoretical illustrations of Yeats's career-long historical schema.

The third sub-speaker also laughs at his rather prudish surface voice, who, in his concern for the pubescent girls' "purity of mind," keeps children out of a holy shrine of the Lord. Not realizing the depth and subversiveness of the artistic obsession, the speaker-attendant believes that if the artist is disturbed by the children, he will not produce for glory of church and state. The foolishness of this view lies not only in assuming, as the other speakers do, that one moment might be crucial to the whole enterprise, but in not realizing that Michael Angelo is an enemy, consistently depicted by Yeats as an artist who expresses the physical side of love and creation at least as much as the spiritual. Through the texture of the stanza, this sub-speaker suggests that the attendant's short-sighted, oppressive attempts to guard the _status quo_ foster the unnatural Christian dissociation of body and soul which Michael Angelo gloriously fuses in his "Creation." The anti-sexual action of shutting the door on the children indicates the speaker's repressiveness, as does the enforced (unnatural, to the Protestant Yeats) celibacy of his clerical order. Like Crazy Jane and the wild old wicked man, this sub-speaker scorns such prudery, and rejoices in physical as well as spiritual love. Like another of his counterparts, the speaker of "Under Ben Bulben," he enjoys the fact that a man's creation of a flat representation of a half-awakened man "Can disturb globe-trotting Madam / Till her bowels are in heat" (_Collected Poems_ 342) four hundred years later. In keeping with Yeats's historical scheme, this third sub-speaker knows that the attendant's efforts are futile: those children cannot be kept out forever; the painting will excite sexual desire; Christian civilization will fall.

Once again, the specific figure chosen to illustrate this assertion, Michael Angelo, is one of paradigmatic historical significance for Yeats. In his major theoretical account of the fall of the Christian edifice and of his historical cyclism as a whole, _A Vision_, Yeats placed Michael Angelo in a pivotal position. The artist's lifetime nearly spanned the exact middle,
the fifteenth and sixteenth phases, of the Christian era (roughly 1450-1550). He was thus able, as the Byzantine workmen were a thousand years before, to create a work which fused the physical and spiritual, into a representation of unity of being which would "disclose / How sinew that has been pulled tight, . . . / Can rule by supernatural right / Yet be but sinew" ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer," *Collected Poems* 174). Yet Michael Angelo was for Yeats the artist who tipped the balance of Christian civilization from its fullest point of equilibrium into a downward slide toward disorder and decay. As if troubled by this paradox, Yeats says in *A Vision*, "I do not myself find it possible to make more than the first half of the period [from 1450 to 1550] coincide with the actual moment—Phase 15" [that of the fullest unity] (291). In other words, Phase 15 began to shift into Phase 16 soon after 1500, a conclusion no doubt helped by the poet's knowledge that Michael Angelo created Adam in the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512. Despite his ability to create works which contain a unity of the physical and spiritual, Michael Angelo was ultimately a man of the sixteenth phase, whose works, along with those of Raphael and Titian, "awaken sexual desire" and "threaten us" in a way that the "intellectual beauty" of Botticelli and Leonardo did not (291). From these three later artists, especially from Michael Angelo, Yeats says,

all is changed, and where the Mother of God sat enthroned, now that the Soul's unity has been found and lost, Nature seats herself, and the painter can paint only what he desires in the flesh, and soon, asking less and less for himself, will make it a matter of pride to paint what he does not at all desire. (293–94)

Thus, at the same time the artist creates an object of aesthetic perfection, he starts a process of erosion and destruction—"the breaking of the Christian synthesis" (291). As in the other stanzas, the connotative resonance of Yeats's description of this creator's role emerges both from the poet's career-long concerns and from the meticulous texture of detail in the few lines of "Long-Legged Fly." The sub-speaker's comparison of Michael Angelo's activity ("sound") to that of mice suggests this ineluctably destructive capacity. Yeats has used mice before (in "Ancestral Houses") as a figure of elusive, erosive destructive forces. The houses of that poem, the works of "some powerful man" (*Collected Poems* 198), are destroyed by mice, even by the great man's own inept great-grandson, who "'s but a mouse." A mouse in the Sistine Chapel thus suggests that Michael Angelo's work, and the awakening to what Yeats calls "nature" which accompanies it, will undermine and destroy the foundations of the building and the theocracy it represents.

Similarly, the description of the minute movement of the artist's hand—"to and fro"—suggests that the artist's actions are destructive as well as creative. "To and fro" evokes the passing of time and life through the swinging of a pendulum, and more faintly, through the action of the reaper's scythe. But even more, in several of his poems Yeats has
specifically associated the phrase “to and fro” with a hypnotic, undermining “creative” activity, as in “The Stolen Child,” where the boy is tempted by the faeries who leap “to and fro / And chase the frothy bubbles / While the world is full of trouble / And anxious in its sleep” (19). Likewise, Cuchulain’s nerves and ruling ability are eroded by the “singing to and fro” of his son and conqueror Conchubar, in “Cuchulain’s Fight With the Sea” (34). More explicitly, the action “to and fro” implies the passage of time and the erosion of civilizations through the complex motion of the gyres, on which Yeats’s historical cycles run. In “The Two Trees,” for example, Yeats speaks of the cycle of history as “[t]he flaming circle of our days, / Gyring, spiring to and fro” (48). Thus the “to and fro” movement, like the rest of the description of Michael Angelo’s creation, clinches the poem’s demonstration of the inseparability of creation and destruction of human civilizations. Caesar, the girl, and Michael Angelo are all creative figures, whether through intellectual, physical, or aesthetic means. Yet at the same time they create, they also destroy.

The historical cyclism of “Long-Legged Fly” falls consistently into line with Yeats’s expositions of the system in poems like “Lapis Lazuli” and “Two Songs From a Play.” Through the figure of the long-legged fly, the refrain adds an encompassing commentary on this central theme of the poet’s, from yet another level of poetic voice. As Mario L. D’Avanzo has suggested, Yeats’s metaphor of the water insect to represent the creative mind in the process of thinking most likely comes from Coleridge’s famous definition of the power of the imagination, which best “reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities” (23). The metaphor describes a state shared by the three creators of the poem: in delicate balance, their creative imaginations hover upon the silent atmosphere much as a water-strider, a long-legged fly, hovers with the appearance of standing or walking on the water. Yeats thus suggests that such figures can create a suspension of and in their minds, a transporting equilibrium between the physical world and complete imaginative transcendence.

As well as offering this fairly obvious gloss on the creative status of the three figures, the image of the long-legged fly richly suggests both the prolific and deathly sides of existence, carrying the dichotomy of creation/destruction to a structural unity between stanzas and refrain. The extreme fragility of the fly as an individual living entity provides a sobering reinforcement of the gigantic, trans-individual scope commanded by Yeats’s theories of human history. Like the human creative experience, the fly’s tableau of harmonized, self-determined consciousness will soon disappear, snapped up by a larger insect, or swept dead into the elemental stream of matter. Even more than simply suggesting mutability, however, the water strider, like its human counterparts, lives off the destruction of other beings (it feeds on nearly anything in the stream, especially insect larva). Of course, the generic term fly exudes an atmosphere of decay and
death, a common symbolic usage extending back to the Bible ("lord of the flies"). Thus Yeats uses the fly to validate another of his important ideas about human existence: that vital creators naturally have the stench of destruction and death about them, as we have seen in the three stanzas, and in poems such as "Blood and the Moon."

At the same time, the long-legged fly signifies the notion of man's creative capacity, both personal and historic. Aside from the powerfully creative connotations of its ability to walk on water, the fly's long legs suggest a sort of awkward grace; a great capacity for action relative to its size; a distinction from other flies and insects. Slightly removed from the water it exists on, the fly exudes a quality of contemplative transcendence of the present moment which is borne out by Yeats's use in other poems of long-legged creatures as carriers of cultural continuity and wisdom. In "Lapis Lazuli" the poet says directly that the long-legged bird is "a symbol of longevity" (Collected Poems 293). Flamingoes, "aged and wise," adorn the mystical landscape of "Anayusha and Vijaya" (11), while the old crane of Gort gains new wisdom in "The Three Beggars." This crane and the "long-legged moor-hens" of "Easter 1916" (179) fish in a stream which is obviously a stream of time, in the latter poem of historical time, in the former an existential durée which could be called a stream of consciousness. Thus long-legged creatures on streams consistently indicate in Yeats a particular center of transcendent consciousness, perceiving the relation of itself to the stream it observes. The refrain and its eponymous figure provide for this side of the poem a summary comment of remarkable compression and metaphoric dazzle.

Despite its centrality and integrity in the poem and in Yeats's work as a whole, however, this historical cyclism is not the most powerful thrust of "Long-Legged Fly." A discussion of the roles of the three scenes and the refrain without an understanding of the relationship between these narrative levels cannot penetrate to the heart of the poem’s narrative structure. Beneath the literal speakers and their sub-personae, there is a third level of consciousness, the refrain-speaker, who makes the metaphoric leap and creates the fly image, which in imaginative terms dwarfs the simple descriptions of the three creators:

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His [Her] mind moves upon silence.

The fact that the refrain is italicized, not just separated from the body of the stanzas, suggests that a different level of speech altogether has come into play. The words of the refrain-speaker are best described as coming from the mind in which the poetic and imaginative thought of the stanzas takes place. With its imaginative leap, the refrain turns the material of the stanzas into an assertion of synthetic creative intellect in which this master-persona, who encompasses all six of the personae of the stanzas, becomes a figure of Yeats musing at his desk, self-consciously thinking of
three longtime projections of himself, who will in turn create three specific speakers. Because this figure asserts himself clearly and separately in the refrain, however, he becomes yet another figure created by the artist. In the sequence of receding mirrors of personae that Yeats has set up, what we apprehend is the mind of Yeats thinking of a representation of his mind, who in turn imagines three versions of himself, each of whom thinks of a silent creator who has affected his civilization, creating an observer-speaker to describe those creators. In using this extremely complex narrative structure, which has apparently turned the little poem into a conundrum for many readers, Yeats realizes a brilliant structural analogy which is his own version of Michael Angelo's "proof." This analogy suggests that such artists can objectify their creative state of mind, can communicate with understanding their own creative processes, and can thus tangibly represent the unity of being; ultimately the poem becomes, simultaneously, Yeats's theoretical assertion, historical illustration, and personal demonstration of the power of the artistic imagination.

What I have been implying, but have not yet demonstrated, is that the poem's elaborate narrative structure parallels the description of artistic creation which is directly expressed through Michael Angelo. To do so I must turn back to the specific textures of the three stanzas. It should be fairly obvious that the third stanza differs importantly from the first two. In fact, this tripartite sequence traces a dialectical process which is Yeats's demonstration of the superior position, both existentially and historically, of the artist over the man and woman of sociopolitical power. In each stanza the subject of observation is engaged in a creative meditation; but Michael Angelo is the only one who resolves the divisions of being that Yeats was concerned with, and is the only one who approximates Yeats's own artistic activity.

The first creator, Caesar, embodying Yeats's conception of the hero, commands a military and political body of primary men. The descriptive title "master" indicates that Caesar is akin to the "tall men and swordsmen and horsemen" of "The Curse of Cromwell" (Collected Poems 302), who forged their civilizations. Caesar's consciousness has at the moment of the description receded from the physical world for a period of creative thought, suggested by the closure of his being "in the tent." The poet says that Caesar's eyes are "fixed upon nothing," a phrase which makes "nothing" into a positive object. That he can fix upon nothing and make something out of it—that is, create a plan of battle from sheer conceptual brilliance—marks Caesar as a creator of civilization, who works like the heroes of "The Gyres" (291), whose work is to "disinter the noble, workman, saint" from "any rich, dark nothing," renewing the cycle of civilization. "Nothing" in both these cases indicates an innate capacity deep in the human character which enables creation. Out of nothing we create: Yeats's thesis expressed through Caesar. But the self-created men-
tal edifice which enables Caesar to think clearly is too completely intellectualized for Yeats. He associates Caesar’s genius with maps, which circumscribe the whole of existential physical reality into geometric abstraction. The phrase “a hand under his head” (rather than “his hand”) serves to dissociate Caesar’s body and mind. Since creation is incomplete without destruction, Caesar’s excessive intellectuality gives this thesis an incomplete cast, just as his counterparts in “The Gyres” are carefully distinguished from the creative artists (“workmen”) they are meant to patronize.

The girl of the second stanza (Helen) is Caesar’s antimony and expresses the antithetical term of Yeats’s dialectic. Her role is as the destroyer of the kind of primary civilization Caesar holds together: she will make his topless towers burn. Whereas Caesar is coldly intellectual in thought and action, the girl consists of almost pure desire for physical and emotional sensation. Her only intellectual activity is to think wrongly that nobody watches. She dances in a sort of creative trance, purely for her own physical pleasure. “One part woman, three parts a child,” implies her lack of intellectual sophistication, as does the simple fact of her dancing, which in Yeats nearly always connotes unthinking, sheerly physical action: the dancer of “To a Child Dancing in the Wind” (Collected Poems 120), for example, knows and cares nothing of the “monstrous crying” of the windy adult world. The faeries of “The Stolen Child” (19) dance carelessly in a languorous world of sensation; the mad “Sweet Dancer” (293) has completely lost her intellectual comprehension. Dancing is a physical frenzy, in which this girl achieves her own plenitude of being. That she “practices” suggests that her life’s work is simply to carry on the kind of intensely physical existence which her “tinker shuffle” suggests. The girl’s feet practice the shuffle; Yeats says nothing about her mind’s participation. They are not disembodied feet, as Caesar’s hand was, because the girl is all body, as Caesar was all mind. Caesar shapes history through his force of intellect and will, the girl through the destruction that the force of her physicality will cause. Yeats’s antithesis: we will naturally destroy what we have created; this urge manifests itself physically. The girl, of course, is incomplete also, since her physical and intellectual qualities are no more in equilibrium than were Caesar’s.

Meticulous structural parallelisms between the stanzas and the refrain suggest that the synthesis implied here is a specifically artistic one. The direction of their creative achievement is defined by the minuscule movement each creator makes, linking them to the imaginative transcendence of the fly as it hovers, moving yet sustaining itself, over the flowing stream. The shuffle of the girl’s feet mimics the movement her mind makes upon the course of silent creative consciousness, as do the non-motion of Caesar’s hand under his head, and the motion of Michael Angelo’s hand “to and fro.” In the flattest terms, then, Yeats is placing the girl’s creative capacity in her feet. Caesar’s head is our visual focus, and
indeed, his creativity emerges from his brain, with his active body ("hand") completely "under" the influence of his intellect. Michael Angelo's creative center is not such a disembodied, motionless hand, but his "own" integrated hand, a part of the physically active body like the girl's feet, but one obviously associated with artistic creation. In a real sense, of course, a painter's mind is in his hands; yet the mind must have a major part in forming the conception to be transmitted to the hands. Michael Angelo's "hand" (body) and "mind" (intellect) are one in his painting.

Michael Angelo thus synthesizes the intellectual-active and physical-passive sides of existence, and achieves a fuller unity of being. He is not simply a creator but an artist; his act is not the creation of a primary civilization, or its destruction for future creation, but the creation of a physically and spiritually affective object which transcends the vagaries of dog and pony, and of dances picked up on the street. The great crux of his achievement is to reproduce in communically objective terms his creative being on the chapel wall, in a medium which can outlast not only bodily decay but sometimes even the decay of civilizations. In contrast, the immortality of the achievements of Caesar and the girl depends on the memorializing powers of artists—Homer, Marlowe, and Yeats. To reinforce this advantage, Yeats gives Michael Angelo, unlike the other two creators, a definite identity, time, and place of existence: Michelangelo Buonarroti, in Rome, between 1508 and 1512. In contrast, Caesar could be nearly any one of a hundred Roman rulers within half a millennium, anywhere in the western world; the girl, not explicitly identified as Helen, could be anywhere, at nearly any time. Yeats thus suggests that artists become objects of history, thus as immortal as anything is, much more forcefully than do creators and destroyers of civilization.

In his "Creation" Michael Angelo not only creates some objects on the wall but, through the synecdochic figures of God and Adam, an entire cosmos. This work of art thus offers Yeats not simply a convenient example of these demonstrations of the historical power of artistic creation; it is clear that the "Adam" is the central paradigm of artistic creation for the poet, containing the qualities he would want his own "golden birds" to have: sinews capable of exciting equally the observer's intellectual, emotional, and physical admiration—evidently "out of nature," yet eternally recreating it. His repeated explorations of the "Adam" all celebrated its glorious synthesis of physical and spiritual. For Yeats this work objectified, immortalized its creator. In poems like "Sailing to Byzantium," "Under Ben Bulben," and "Long-Legged Fly," this ideal was Yeats's own goal, as he tried to objectify himself into his creation as Michael Angelo had put his "eagle mind" into Adam. Its ingenious treatment here clinches the position of "Long-Legged Fly" as a paradigmatically central poem.

Since we have taken the refrain-speaker of "Long-Legged Fly" as a figure of Yeats as poet, it is now a logical step to posit a correspondence
between the exemplary creator Michael Angelo and Yeats himself. Encompassing the refrain-speaker as the refrain-speaker encompasses the other speakers, Yeats creates the poem, an entire object complete with title and tangible form, analogous to Michael Angelo’s chapel ceiling. The most elegant feature of Yeats’s audacious comparison is a formally organic analogy which uses the specific subject matter of both the poem and the painting:

Michael Angelo (1) creates a representation of his creative capacity, God (2), whom he depicts as creating Adam (3), whose actions originate and continue to affect the existence of men (and of “globe-trotting Madam”) (4).

William Butler Yeats (1) creates a figure of his creative capacity, the refrain-speaker (2), whom he describes as creating vividly iconic representations of historical creators (3), who have affected and still affect their civilizations, signified by the observer-speakers (4).

Yeats’s elaborate layering of personae thus becomes a representation of the creative process:

an artist (1) develops out of his or her whole physical, intellectual, and emotional makeup an idea (2), which he or she molds into a concrete object (3), which then can have significant and longstanding effects upon its observers (4).

In “Long-Legged Fly” Yeats has finally organized his aspirations of self-objectification into analogy with his longtime artistic paradigm, Michael Angelo’s “Adam,” and even more, has created a poetic form which reproduces the analogy. In addition, central nodes of Yeats’s theory of history are demonstrated organically in the poem: the cyclic history of civilizations, and the supremacy of the artist in coping with this cyclism. It is inaccurate, however, to imply that Yeats’s ideas are diffused impersonally through this central poem, however; in many ways, “Long-Legged Fly” is a highly personal work. Evocations of Yeats the man pervade the poem from the representation of himself as imaginative thinker (refrain-speaker) down through his poetic masks and their speakers: Yeats the worshipper of heroes and beauty, Yeats the wild old wicked man; and finally, through the image of the fly, Yeats the long-legged bird and the wise old crane. Physical resemblances aside, the fly represents Yeats as much if not more than the creators he has described, exactly because he has described them. They only continue to create for us because he has provided for it. His is the mind which has been fulfilling Coleridge’s definition, hovering in imaginative equilibrium throughout the creation of the poem. Writing when he was over seventy and in poor health, Yeats must have found the fly appropriate for expressing what growing old felt like: to possess the gigantic creative capacity of an old poet at the peak of his powers, trapped inside a weak fly-physique, like a “tattered coat upon a stick” (Collected Poems 191) with little expectancy for going much further. Once again the fly image provides the elegant summary of the objectification, not only of the artist figure, but of the living man himself.
Thus seen analogically and autobiographically, Yeats's elaborate system of personae becomes not a bunch of smelly red-herrings but the stuff of genius. He has created the only object worthy of the mind of an old modernist, a self-reflexive "monument of its own magnificence," which sits in the golden bough of his book, and sings of past, present, and future to the ladies and lords of Yeatsiana. Yeats's successful series of self-representations in "Long-Legged Fly" meant to him a kind of immortality, akin to another paradigmatic fetish of ancient and medieval civilizations, the iconic representation of a body on a sarcophagus. Yeats explored the continued life suggested by this kind of icon in several important poems, particularly in "Vacillation," where St. Teresa lies "undecayed in tomb, / Bathed in miraculous oil, sweet odours from it come, / Healing from its lettered slab" (Collected Poems 247). In the third stanza of "Long-Legged Fly," Michael Angelo suggests such a posture as he reclines on his scaffolding. Yet the poem allows him to work on undeterred by bodily death, eternally re-embodying himself in both of the mirroring figures on the ceiling, through whom he remains undecayed: as the figure of God, he is the eternal creator; as the figure of Adam, he is the eternally beautiful object of creation. The artist has made himself immortal, and even more, from this slab of painted stone, he exudes the continued "healing" power to affect living men and women. In "Long-Legged Fly" and these other poems, Yeats has made his own application to this undecayed tradition of St. Teresa, Father Rosenkreuz, and especially Michael Angelo. In the last section and epitaph of his "last" poem "Under Ben Bulben" Yeats makes this connection explicit, encouraging us to picture him lying there at Drumcliff exuding those miraculous oils. Through late poems like this and "Long-Legged Fly," Yeats establishes our last vision of him as both the embalmer and the embalmed, having lettered his own epitaph on his slab, proclaiming to us his whole corpus, offering its "healing" power to his ideal readers, the passing horsemen.

Works Cited