‘The Second Coming’ by William Butler Yeats

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was born in Dublin, Ireland, which at that time was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland following the Acts of Union (1800). He was a poet and dramatist of international renown, one of the leading Irish poets of the twentieth century, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. He was an Irish nationalist, and served in the first parliament of the Irish Free State following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. He had a committed life-long interest in occult, esoteric, and spiritualist practices which overlapped with a mystical and folkloric Irish identity. Written in the aftermath of World War One and during the Irish War of Independence, ‘The Second Coming’ is one of his most famous poems. While informed by the disorder and breakdown around him, the poem conveys Yeats’s bleak vision of a much larger, almost cosmological, scheme of history drawn from his occult studies. In Yeats’s system, history is understood as an endless oscillation between diametrically opposed worlds of meaning and values. In the poem, this is crystalised in the image of the “rough beast” with a “blank and pitiless” gaze, slouching its way to be born in the crib of Jesus Christ—usurping the second coming of Christ anticipated by Christians. The poem has bequeathed a number of resonant phrases to the English language, which have had a life far beyond the poem: “the centre cannot hold,” “the best lack all conviction,” and, its closing question, “what rough beast […] / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Yeats is frequently referred to as an apocalyptic poet by literary commentators. The apocalypticism in his work can be understood in two senses: in the utter collapse of the established order of values and meanings, albeit to be replaced by its opposite, and in the nihilism of a theory of history in which final salvation is displaced.

Yeats’s Life

Yeats was born in Dublin in 1865 and grew up predominantly in Sligo with his mother’s family while his father worked in England, then in London and Dublin. He spent much of his adult life in London before 1917, though he was frequently in Ireland and much involved in the Irish literary and theatrical scene. Reacting against his father’s religious scepticism, he became involved in heterodox and occult spiritual ideas as a teenager. His first publication was a dramatic poem *Mosada* in 1886, and he began to develop a public profile as a poet after the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* in 1889. He

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would also develop a significant profile as a writer for theatre and as a supporter of national theatre in Ireland. His interest in esoteric and alternative spiritualities (especially Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) preoccupied him throughout his life, and his poems and plays are marked by a symbolic and imaginative register drawing on that interest which is often allied with nationalism and a romantic Irish and Celtic identity. Yeats was much affected by the Easter Rising in April 1916—a republican rebellion against British rule in Ireland. Following his marriage to Bertha George Hyde in 1917, Yeats moved to Ireland on a more permanent basis. With his wife, Yeats experimented with automatic writing and developed a complex philosophy of history from information supplied by spiritual communicators through his wife which provided him with a symbolic framework, helping him to come to terms with the upheaval of the Irish War of Independence (January 1919–July 1921). His contact with spirits and his new philosophical system directly informed his most famous collection of poems, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which includes what is perhaps his most famous poem 'The Second Coming' (Yeats's lyric poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (1888) may rival 'The Second Coming' in the public consciousness). Following the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, Yeats was appointed a senator in the Free State Parliament. In the 1930s, he was involved in the quasi-Fascist Blueshirt movement and the eugenics movement. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923, and he died in the South of France in 1939 (Brown 2016).

Yeats's Apocalypticism and the "Gyre"

In many respects, apocalyptic themes were a motivating force across Yeats's work. As well as his most famous apocalyptic poem 'The Second Coming' (1921), 'The Valley of the Black Pig' (1899), 'The Magi' (1913), and 'Meru' (1934) stress apocalyptic themes, as do plays like *The Shadowy Waters* (1900), *The Hour Glass* (1903), *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908), *The Player Queen* (1922), and *The Resurrection* (1927). In the 1920s, Yeats privately published a book called *A Vision*—subtitled *An Explanation of Life Founded upon the Writing of Giraldus and upon Certain Doctrines Attributed to Krusta Ben Luka*. The book is an attempt to capture the complex mystical and esoteric system of meaning, symbol, and historical progression revealed to Yeats by the spirit interlocutors he communicated with through his wife. Harold Bloom referred to the work as "technically an apocalypse" (Bloom 1970, 216). George Watson's (1976) account of "Yeats's View of History" draws attention to a broadcast on 'Modern Poetry' by Yeats in 1936:

> *I think profound philosophy must come from terror. An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the pre-suppositions of our thoughts, those Fathers of the Church Lionel Johnson expounded, drop into the abyss. Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions: Is there reality anywhere? Is there a God? Is there a Soul? We cry with the Indian Sacred Book: "They have put a golden stopper into the neck of the bottle; pull it! Let out reality!"*

Watson goes as far as to call Yeats a "connoisseur of apocalypse, the avid chewer of the corpses of civilization, delighting in ruin and chaos because they offer such *powerful* images for poetry" (Watson 1976, 42). Frank Kermode says that Yeats is an exemplar of the literary attitude to apocalypse of his time: He is "certainly an apocalyptic poet" (although, Kermode says, he does not take the apocalypse literally) (Kermode 1968, 98).

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‘The Second Coming’ was published in the aftermath of the Great War which was, as David Rudrum has put it, “a time when an apocalyptic sense of the end of an era was every bit as tangible as it was at the close of the twentieth century” (Rudrum 2008, 59), and the poem captured that mood. The poem is built around Yeats’s concept of a “gyre,” which refers to the great cyclic sweep of history first described in his *Vision*. A notoriously difficult concept to describe, the gyre is centred on the moment when a great transition occurs between one form of historical meaning system and another; it is apocalyptic to the extent that it requires the collapse and symbolic reversal of the established order. Paul Deane describes the system:

> *As one gyre widens, the other narrows, until a crisis point is reached every two thousand years. At this crisis point, one gyre has grown as wide as it may, and is spent; the other gyre, narrowed to its limit, can narrow no more. This crisis signals the birth of a new civilization based on entirely different principles; it begins to expand, while the old gyre recedes. (Deane 1995, 641.)*

In Yeats’s words:

> *a narrowing and a widening gyre reach their limit, the one the utmost contraction, the other the utmost expansion, they change places, point to circle, circle to point … and continue as before, one always narrowing, one always expanding, and yet bound for ever to one another. (Yeats 1925, 131. Quoted by Jeffares 1951, 89)*

The transitions are between two eras, one subjective in character, the other objective. Each phase lasts 2,000 years. In Yeats’s accounting, the Greco-Roman phase from 2000 BCE to 1 CE, transitioned to the Christian in 1 CE, which would itself soon give way—a movement of which Yeats discerned the signs in his own day (Hirschberg 1979, 305). ‘The Second Coming’ is Yeats’s poetic exploration of that occurrence, marked by the World War, the flu pandemic, and the national uprising he lived through, and entailing the collapse of meaning systems undergirding the civilization he was part of.

The Second Coming

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.
>
> Surely some revelation is at hand;

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

The poem is in two parts: the first reflecting on the breakdown of the existing order of the world, and the second on the new order that will emerge to replace it. The first line refers to the “gyre” which seems at first to have a passing significance referring to the turn of the falcon through space (in conventional use, “gyre” refers to a vortex or spiral in the ocean), but is ultimately a grand symbol for the historic transition or reversal of symbols and meanings. The breakdown of the existing order is captured in the image of the falcon wheeling around the falconer but disconnected by the ever-increasing circles of its trajectory; no longer responding to control as the falconer’s calls are lost in the space between them. So, “anarchy is loosed upon the world” as the transition approaches; “the centre cannot hold” and the “best lack all conviction” as the social and political order degrades.

The second part explores the character of the new order that will replace the old one that is collapsing. The central image is the sphinx-like “shape with lion body and the head of a man” with “gaze blank and pitiless.” It has “indignant desert birds” reeling around it: their flight is disorderly and chaotic in contrast to the structured flight of the falcon—albeit the falcon and falconer are lost to one another. In a manoeuvre condemned by Bloom as “a misleading and illegitimate device for conferring upon the poem a range of reference and imaginative power it does not possess and cannot sustain” (Bloom 1970, 318), Yeats commandeers the notion of the second coming from Christian apocalypticism to describe the monstrous sphinx lumbering into life. While Christianity expects the renewed appearance of the loving messiah, the one who comes this time—Yeats imagines—is his opposite. This opposition suggests we can read the falconer of the first stanza as Christ, and the falcon as the civilization which no longer hears him. In fact, the Christian era has been the nightmare of the sphinx-creature’s slumber since the birth of Christ—alluded to in the “rocking cradle.” The entire process is finally captured in a perversion of the immaculate and salvific scene of the birth of Christ: as behind the scenes of history the “rough beast […] Slouches towards Bethlehem” to become incarnate as the spin of the gyre is reset.

Theologically, the apocalypse Yeats envisages has no process of salvation. The usurpation of Christ’s place imaged by the poem, and the cyclic nature of the gyres of history, generates a relentless and ultimately fruitless outcome utterly defanging the teleological eschatology of Christianity. The incarnation of a Christian messiah in a blind, oscillating, perpetual machine is no messiah in a Christian sense because it can offer no conclusive salvation. The nihilism emerges, in the end, not merely from Christ’s replacement

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by the beast, but from the usurpation of a Christian teleological model of history by Yeats's cycles of gyres.

Sources and Further Reading

For a brief introduction to Yeats's life, see Terence Brown's article in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2016), and David Holdeman's (2006) *Cambridge Introduction to W.B. Yeats*. A more detailed biography of Yeats, with a more complex account of his wider context, and that of 'The Second Coming' in particular, including the mystical and occult elements, is provided in Brown's (1999) *The Life of W.B. Yeats*. There are numerous critical readings of 'The Second Coming' and the range of Yeats's works available, as there are biographies and memoirs. For a detailed critique of Yeats's borrowing of the Christian idea of a second coming of Christ, see Bloom's *Yeats* (1970)—and the rejoinder from Seamus Deane (1997).

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