EN 402: British Poetry

Unit 27

"The Second Coming" by W.B.Yeats: A Discussion

"The Second Coming" as Harold Bloom notes is often considered "as Yeats's central poem" (317). It was composed in 1919 and was first published in the magazine *The Dial* in 1920. It later came out in the volume, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*(1921)

Title: The title alludes to the first arrival of Jesus Christ to deliver mankind from its sins and alsohints at the anticipation of his second appearance as promised in several biblical prophecies as found in the Gospels (Matthew XXIV-XV, Mark XIII, etc.) and also in the Book of Revelation.

Context: The poem has been understood to be composed as a direct reaction to specific socio-historical events.

- **The First World War:** The immediate context of the poem as its year of composition hints at, is most certainly the chaotic world order in the aftermath of the unforeseen mass scale devastation caused by WW1. Prior to WW1, the Western society was assumed to be inching towards the pinnacle of perfection with people acquiring their basic needs comfortably and leading

content lives made easier by newer scientific discoveries and inventions. The war changed everything. Not only did the surrounding reality change and the society break down with the unprecedented violence and mass killings, there was also a forceful rupture of the relatively abstract yet fundamental emotional, philosophical and spiritual cohesive links that used to connect mankind and render meaning to man's existence. In the atmosphere of all-encompassing hatred and fear, people no longer could distinguish between good and evil with absolute certainty. Yeats' poem therefore is an examination of this phase of human history plagued by individual despair and the collapse of society along with its value system.

- **The Russian Revolution:** The Russian Revolution of 1917 forms another vital context for the poem (In fact, the first draft of the poem refers to contemporary German invasion of Russia in July 1917).

  Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik Party organized the proletariat peasantry of the country against the bourgeois social structure where the Czars continued to economically prosper while the rest of thenation was steadily declining towards acute economic crisis. The movement gathered force resulting in a revolution and soon Czar Nicholas II was overthrown from monarchy. However, the movement which was primarily aimed at the liberation of the downtrodden, socially exploited and economically weak proletariat class, gradually headed towards a different direction of Soviet totalitarianism. Political mayhem and chaotic violence erupted and people started getting disillusioned with what originally seemed to be the noble causes

of the revolution. Yeats earlier reservations with the socialist movement got reinforced. In a 1919 letter to George Russell, Yeats wrote: "I consider the Marxian criterion of values as in this age the spearhead of materialism and leading to inevitable murder." The poem therefore also harks to this state of political chaos and helpless confusion.

- **The Irish National Independence Movement:** Ireland's the then socio-political movement to gain freedom from years of British imperialism and its concomitant political turmoil also forms a backdrop for the poem. Yeats was intensely involved in the national quest for independence but he had his own reservations with the notion of violent reactionary means as essential to achieve such a goal as earnestly believed by many of his compatriots. Yeats's earlier poem "Easter 1916" goes on to dwell on this anxious dilemma regarding whether to conform to or condone such violent extremism even while pursuing an essentially noble goal.

Though rooted in these specific historical contexts, the poem when studied in its entirety assumes a much more universal tone for it can be seen almost as an elegy lamenting the gradual erosion of the fundamental cohesive notions of rationality and morality as well as the loss of faith in spirituality and fraternity in that'age of anxiety'or the early decades of the 20th century.

Literary influences:

Two primary literary influences that can be traced in relation to this particular poem of Yeats are William Blake's *The Book of Urizen* and P.B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. In "The Second Coming", Yeats shares Blake's prophetic vision and just like Blake, attempts at appropriating and redefining Christian theological tropes and symbols. Yeats also shares Shelley's belief regarding the significant status of a poet who has the responsibility of recording history of a society passing through a tumultuous phase of transformation. Notes Harold Bloom:

> As much as any other poem by Yeats, *The Second Coming*bears its direct relation to Blake and Shelley asan overtly defining element in its meaning. The poem quotesBlake and both echoes and parodies the most thematically vital passage in Shelley's most ambitious poem, *Prometheus Unbound.* (317)

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;
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?

"Turning and turning in this widening gyre": The cyclic progression of history.

[The notion of gyre is linked inextricably linked to Yeats's concept of history. The complex idea of 'gyre' gets detailed treatment in Yeats's *A Vision.* A gyre can be assumed to have an architectural structure of two interpenetrating and revolving conical helixeswith the narrow cone of each touching the centre of the base of the other. As one narrows down while revolving, the other expands. This is basically how history progresses according to Yeats with ideologies and counter ideologies of respective ages. Yeats, himself notes that

> this figure is true also of history, for the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is

> represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion. The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuation of itself but the revelation as in a lightning Hash, though in a Hash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated, of the civilization that must slowly take its place.(Yeats in Finneran, 1989, p. 493).]

The gyre here is 'widening' signifying that an age is reaching its culmination in the process of history. And thus all these turbulences and chaos as society maddened by it is almost on the verge of total derailment. This though disastrous is in some way inevitable part of human history.

[*Note how from the very first word the poem gives an idea of kinesis or motion which in turn again is linked with the idea of change.]

"The falcon cannot hear the falconer": The falcon might be considered to be a metaphor for the human race and the falconer can be anything that guides it, namely spirituality or religion or morality or even a figure like Christ. The falcon not being able to hear the falconer suggest the breakdown of faith and communication in between man and his guiding figure or ideal.

In the sport of falconery, the falcon is often blind folded and it has to follow the voice instructions of the falconer to chart its route of flight. This process requires deep connection between the two and faith on the part of the falcon. The collapse of communication most

surely would lead a falcon into uncharted dangerous territories. Human beings, too, devoid of the guiding principles, are bound to go astray. Moreover, falcons being predatory birds are meant to hunt. Human beings, too, devoid of the guiding principles of spirituality, would ultimately recourse to savagery in this atmosphere of general confusion and chaos.

[Norman Jeffares notes

> The falcon represents man, present civilisation, becoming out of touch with Christ, whose birth was the revelation which marked the beginning of the two thousand years of Christianity. (242)

*Note that the image of a falcon has associations with Christian theology. Hopkins' early poem "The Windhover" features a falcon.

Again by making the falcon the subject here instead of the falconer, Yeats reverses the hierarchy suggesting the breakdown of order.

Also note that falconery is an aristocratic sport. Is Yeats somehow also lamenting the gradual decay of aristocracy?]

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold": The world is at a disjuncture with the rapid failure of cohesive ideas that keep humanity intact. The principle of rationality emerging directly out of the Enlightenment which in turn has been the major driving force for the Western world, is no longer feasible. All grand narratives are being defeated and chaos reigns supreme.

[*Note how Yeats deliberately keeps the point of collapse vague by using the word 'Things' and thereby universalizes the breakdown.)

*Chinua Achebe takes the title of his novel *Things Fall Apart* from Yeats's poem]

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world": Again the idea of absolute collapse is reiterated. The passive tone here signifies that the anarchy is not attributed to any particular source, rather it might be an inevitable phenomenon in the progression of history as believed by Yeats.

[*Harold Bloom: "'Anarchy is 'mere' because the value-systems that could judge it portentous are being overwhelmed." (321)]

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned": Biblical references suggesting extreme violence and bloodshed.

[*Refers to the events of Exodus, the Book of Revelation as well as the Great Deluge.]

The Biblical language is extended to the language of ritual – 'ceremony'. Truth is no longer to be found in the rituals associated with Christianity. Death of all that is pure and held in high esteem in Christianity. Also it might suggest that innocence which ought to be celebrated no longer holds meaning.

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity": Value systems have been compromised in this age of utter destruction and confusion.

Alludes toShelley's *Prometheus Unbound:*

"The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill."

[*Note how the 'best' and the 'worst', 'lack' and 'full' are juxtaposed to reinstate the absolute chaotic order of state.]

The first stanza ends here depicting a detailed picture of the breakdown of the social fabric under unprecedented violence and inhumanity.

For Yeats, however, such extreme societal turmoil, brings with it a promise of a new era.

"Surely some revelation is at hand/ Surelythe Second Coming is at hand": Emphatic assertion reinstating the belief that after such extreme anarchy and violence something of a paradigm shift is close by. The use of the word 'revelation' gives the language a Biblical dimension and introduces the idea of privileged knowledge which the poetic persona, almost a visionary here, can access. The use of the anaphora 'surely' goes on to assert the intensity of belief here that the

new age will emerge out of the shreds of destruction and it is nearer than ever in arrival.

"The Second Coming": Repetition of the phrase endows greater significance as if it is almost an invocation by a prophet who goes into a trance-like state to experience a supernatural vision.

"Hardly are those words out/ When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*/ Troubles my sight":Repetition of the phrase as if works like some dark magic and brings forth a strange vision, clouding and disturbing the poet persona's consciousness.

'Spiritus Mundi' or spirit of the world is akin to C.G. Jung's concept of 'collective unconscious'. It can be understood as a reservoir of archetypal images. For Yeats it is a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be the property of any personality or spirit.

The image emerging out of 'Spiritus Mundi' as opposed to 'Spiritus Sancti' or the Holy Spirit, goes on to suggest that this 'second coming, subverting expectation' is not Christian in nature. It does not bear the news of the arrival of a Christ like messiah but rather the emergence of a figure who is almost an anti-Christ.

[*Notes Stan Smith:

> This *'Spiritus'* or *'Anima Mundi'* is, for Yeats, the repository from which all his mostpowerful symbols and images derive. Literally, it means the 'spirit' or 'mind of the world' spoken of in early mystical writings. In the notes to a poem he speaks of it as 'a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit'. In 'The Tower' he refers to 'images, in the Great Memory stored'. The work of the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung offered Yeats what he regarded as a 'scientific' explanation of it as

the 'collective unconscious', that collection of archetypes we are supposedly born with- the race memory. (104)]

"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 vision that the poetic persona experiences is that of a vast Sphinx-like strange figure emerging out of the desert. What is striking over here is how this image simultaneously alludes to and yet subverts the expectation of the arrival of Christ. If Christ was an amalgam of the human and the godly, thisfigure is a strange cross between the human and the beast. The brute physical strength of a lion combined with the sharp intellect of a man, makes it a formidable and fearsome force.Its eyes devoid of empathy and mercy as it wakes up from an ancient sleep. Around this terrifying juggernaut, hover 'dessert' or carrion birds signifying how it leaves behind a trail of death and destruction as it starts moving slowly. What is interesting is that such is the terrifying nature of this imposing creature, that even birds which feed on dead bodies are reluctant to go anywhere near to it and only cast shadows hovering from way above.

[Desert is almost an archetypal image conveying a sense of desolation and death. "The Waste Land" repeatedly evokes this image both literally as well as metaphorically.]

[The Sphinx as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* is often understood to be a harbinger of bad luck, plague and destruction. The employment of the Sphinx image immediately brings to mind these association. But the Sphinx asking riddles to anyone wishing to enter Thebes was also itself

a riddler, an enigma of sort. Does the poet, then want to focus on its intrinsic strangeness and enigmatic identity rather than its terrifying bruteness? Is it monstrous in appearance only because it is something vastly unfamiliar? Does Yeats wants to remain ambivalent about its specific intent of arrival? Can we, the readers, interpret the Sphinx with its bricolage presence as a symbol of the Postmodern movement emerging out of the wreckage of the grand narratives of Modernism, a movement of which Yeats himself was a high priest?]

The darkness drops again: The vision culminates and leaves behind an aftertaste of the heavy burden of the knowledge.

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? : As the moment of insight passes over, the poetic persona comes out of the trance like state with a greater realization. The Christian era, almost twenty centuries in expanse and in a state of pacifying inert existence, almost sleeping under the comforting notions of its age old theological and spiritual belief system, has suddenly been made to wake up from slumber. The grave realization that as the era inches towards its culmination, it is not some Christ like messiah who would take birth and appear for a second time to redeem mankind for its sins is indeed nightmarish. The cradle is rocking, but instead of the birth or the second coming of Christ, subverting all hopeful expectations what arrives is a rough beast, an anti-Christ. This entity, out of the machinations of cyclic progression of history is strangely destined to be born at a place where its antithesis once arrived. What is interesting however is how the poetic persona seems yet unsure of the exact nature and intent of this rough beast? Is it an inevitable

occurrence of history that the beast would appear and feed the fires of the already maddening chaos and destruction? Or is it a deliverer, a harbinger of newer time, more suited in the role of a messiah for the upcoming age? Does this very ambiguity sums up the essential nature of the query with which the poem ends?

[Ivor Winters notes:

> we must face the fact that Yeats's attitude toward the beastis different from ours: we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying-he is Yeats's judgment upon all that we regard as civilized. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality.(10)

Tudor Balinisteanue observes:

> Such frightening falling apart of established authority, mere anarchy loosed upon the world, inspired in Yeats the apocalyptic vision of the beast which struggles to become born in the violence of the world's remaking. But this violence is a whirl of contrary tendencies: even though destructive it is also darkly creative [...] The revolving gyres unravel the world at the same time as they weave a new one: a terrible beauty is born in which both grace and violence are manifested. (21)

Stan Smith notes:

> The 'rough beast' of that poem is most centrally the beast of Bolshevism called up by the 1917 Russian Revolution, two years old when it was written, and engaged in a civil warbacked by western military intervention. For Yeats, this wasonly the most potent instance of that 'mere anarchy' which was everywhere drowning the old imperial powers in a 'blood dimmed tide', in the wake of the Great War. (105)

WitPietrzak observes:

> Surprisingly, it is not the beast that is nightmarish but the past age whichYeats assumes started with the birth of Jesus Christ. The past two millennia have been a nightmare while the reign of the beast "troubles" the speaker quite likely in the sense of "puzzles" in that he admits to not knowing what the beast will be like. (117)
>
> In "The Second Coming" the obvious evocation of the end of one civilisation and thedawning of the era of the beast emphasises the binary course of history. (283)]

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