

The Second Coming

— and all the world is in a state of confusion

The poem "The Second Coming" belongs to the period when Yeats' metaphysical gloom deepened, assisted by personal, political and occult prompting. The cycle of the gyres in his vision moves towards chaos, as the age presided over by Jesus and associated with light gives way to night-time, when

"Flings fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Here anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The title of the poem suggests a Christian reference but as always, Yeats seems to assimilate Christ to his own mythology and "The Second Coming" of Christ as envisaged in Christian tradition has little connection with Yeats' vision of two thousand years cycles of history giving place one to another, with the expectation of anti-thesis as the most evident sign of chaos.

The opening eight lines of "The Second Coming" tend to remain in the mind, offering words that mean many things to many men. The falcon in the second line lifts beyond the call of its master. The falconer could be God as it is the centre from which man is distancing himself. Man is renouncing the principle of beauty, hence the tide of anarchy is "loosed upon the world."

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

The best have grown sceptical and their worst are full of intellectual hatred. There is intensity, but no order in the present world. Frantical men have seized power over the world. The worst are full of "passionate intensity" and they seem ready to rule an earth on which

good men have grown sceptical. with the line: —

"Surely some revelation is at hand
Surely the second coming is at hand"

We arrive at the more dramatic and mysterious part of the poem - personally, he refers to the specific cycle of change indicated in "A Vision" where for good or ill, the old order passes irrevocably - "Surely the second coming is at hand." This more Christian notion is swept away immediately, in a mood which replaces traditional hope with foreboding: "Troubles my sight." The "vast image" yokes down from spiritual Manai, his warehouse of supersensual Platonic forms, is of course a nightmare symbol of the coming time.

Then, again he draws an image with a man's head and a lion's body and assigns it a pitiless blank gaze.

"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
Real shadow of the indignant desert birds."

The shape could be the sphinx and here a work of art is coming independently alive. This again lies outside the usual complexities of 'yates' thinking about the relationship between art and life. Once more the suggestions are sinister. The moving of the "slow thighs" suggests a belated but monstrous birth and the line "real shadow of the indignant desert birds" appears to suggest that even preyed birds thrown up by the present era are overthrown by the greater horror now threatening. In the poem 'a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun' appears to remove the sun from the cycles, and gives it sinister connotations. This differs from yates' normal use of sun (and moon) so may be we have to associate the sun with its 'desert' role

as killer rather than giver of life. In the following lines

"That twenty centuries of stony sleep
were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle"

The 'rocking cradle' symbolizes the disturbances that take place at the root of the civilization. Yeats hints at the reversal of the world's gyre, the birth of a new violent, bestial anti-civilization in the destruction of the two thousand years Christian cycle. The 'stony sleep' is presumably the slumber of the 'rough beast' during the Christian century. In the concluding line the rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born in the violent overthrow of our own civilization, an overthrow which will bring us to a time "when all is ruin once again."

The poem is among Yeats' most famous despite its obscurity possibly because it introduces a whole group of poems concerned with "the different correlation between Christ and modern times on the one hand and on the other between Christ and the historical cycle that his coming invalidated."