

W.B. Yeats—A Short Biographical Sketch

Parentage and Birth

William Butler Yeats was born in a Dublin suburb on June 13, 1865. His father, J.B. Yeats, was a painter of some distinctions whose friendship with Henry Irving, and with the later members of the Pre-Raphaelite school of painters, was to be of importance in his son's work. His mother was of the Pollexfen family of County Sligo. Through both parents he claimed kinship with various Anglo-Irish Protestant families who are mentioned in his work.

Schooling

Soon after his birth, Yeats's parents moved to London, and he went to school in Hammersmith, but much of his boyhood, and his school holidays, were spent in Sligo, where he stayed with his grand-parents. This County, its scenery, folk-lore and supernatural legends, colour much of his work, providing many and complex emotions, and certain symbols which are afterwards recollected in various poems. A second, and equally important, influence of place was to come later when, after enjoying for long periods the hospitality of Lady Gregory at Coole, he bought a ruined Norman castle* in that neighbourhood—the Tower which becomes a dominant symbol in much of his latest and best work.

The Start of His Literary Life

For a short time he studied painting, and retained throughout his life a passionate love and understanding of that art. But while he was still young, his father, always a profound influence upon him, introduced him to two prominent literary figures—Edward Dowden and John Todhunter. It was through Dowden's encouragement that some of his earliest poetry was published. His first success came with *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889). He quickly, became involved in the literary life of London of the 1890's: as a founder of the Rhymers' Club, and a friend of William Morris, W.E. Henley, Lionel Johnson, and Arthur Symons. In 1892, his first play *The Countess Cathleen* was published.

Interest in Theosophy, Plato, and Blake

His father's rationalism and the aftermath of the Darwinian controversy had prevented him from accepting orthodox Christianity, and he explored instead, theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, the writings of Swedenborg, and Boehme, and, above all, Blake, whose works he edited with Edwin Ellis during 1891-93. He turned to spiritualism, even to magic, but always his mind remained partially sceptical and ironic.

*Thoor Ballylee was its name.

Interest in Irish Politics

He took an increasingly active interest in nationalist politics, at first under the influence of John O'Leary, an old Fenian leader, who spent many years in exile in Paris, and later Maud Gonne, a revolutionary. Maud Gonne was a superbly beautiful woman with whom Yeats fell in love when he first met her at the age of twenty-three. It was for her sake that he became deeply engaged during 1897 and 1898 in a political movement intended to unite different nationalist elements in Ireland. Though his love for her came to nothing, she remained a constant source of inspiration for him, often under the symbol of Helen of Troy.

Interest in Indian Theology and the Upanishads

Out of the current of his time, he drew some knowledge of French literature: Mallarmé, Baudelaire, and, above all, Balzac. His friendship with the Indian Purohit Swami led him to Indian theology, and long afterwards he was to assist with a translation of the *Upanishads*. Fruits of his esoteric reading appear in several of his prose works which are important documents for the study of his thought. In 1897, a series of fortunate meetings resulted in the evolution of the Irish Literary Theatre which gave its first performance in Dublin in 1899. To the end of his life Yeats remained a director of the Theatre; in the crucial period of 1899 to 1907—the Abbey Theatre was founded in 1904—he managed its affairs, found and encouraged its playwrights (notably J.M. Synge) and contributed many of his own plays. This kind of drudgery was astonishingly prolific. He wrote much dramatic criticism, both general and in relation to the ideals of the Irish theatre; essays of major importance on Blake, Shelley, Morris, Spenser; essays on Shakespeare, symbolism, painting. A number of plays that he wrote during this period became part of the Abbey Theatre's repertoire. Of poetry, there is a succession of work, from "The Wind Among the Reeds" to the collected editions of 1906 and 1908 onward, much of their contents undergoing extensive revision.

His Admiration for Maud Gonne

In 1903, Maud Gonne married John MacBride, also a revolutionary; and Yeats was deeply hurt. Now he could merely record memories and old hopes, paying tribute to her great beauty and his own celebration of it. In a splendid series of poems (*Words, A Woman Homer Sung, No Second Troy*) in "The Green Helmet and Other Poems" (1910), he compares Maud to Helen. She is without blame for she is, like Helen, beyond praise or comment. This volume indicates an almost complete transition of style, for here Yeats introduces topical affairs and his own views and beliefs, as well as, recording the emptiness of his passion.

His Friendship with Lady Gregory

A notable fact of Yeats's life was his friendship with Lady Gregory, the widow of an Anglo-Irish land-owner. He had first met her at Coole Park, her

house in County Galway, in 1896, and the following year he had spent the first of many summers there. The years 1909-14 marked a decisive change in Yeats's life and art. During the previous decade, there had been a slow discarding of Pre-Raphaelite rhythms and colours and of certain Celtic and esoteric influences. Now the re-making of himself and his style became more definite. Many reasons may be suggested for this development: (a) the quarrel over the production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*; (b) the death of Synge; (c) loosening of the ties with the Abbey Theatre; (d) bitterness over his involvement in Irish politics, as in the affairs of the Municipal Gallery and the Lane pictures; (e) his friendship with Ezra Pound; and (f) a new range of study, particularly of metaphysical poetry under the stimulus of Sir Herbert Grierson's edition of *Donne*. All these are reflected in "Poems Written In Discouragement" (1913) and in "Responsibilities" (1914).

His Nationalism

Events now came upon Yeats like waves, providing an almost unlimited mass of poetic subject-matter. The Easter Rising of 1916 was perceived by him at first as an emblem of a triumphant nationalism (in *Easter 1916*, and *The Rose Tree*); thereafter (with characteristic ambivalence) as that which was to destroy the Anglo-Irish civilization in which he had found an ideal of aristocracy. World War I left little direct mark upon his writing, except for three major poems celebrating the death of Major Robert Gregory. In 1917, he published "The Wild Swans At Coole."

Maud Gonne's Rejection of His Proposal of Marriage

The Easter Rising of 1916 had taken Yeats by surprise. The revolutionaries whom he had come to despise attained heroic stature in this rising and it seemed to him that "a terrible beauty was born". Maud Gonne's husband (from whom she had been separated) was one of the sixteen leaders executed, and Yeats went to France and proposed to her again but, as in the past, she refused him. Then he asked her permission to propose to her adopted daughter Iseult, to whom he had addressed several poems in the preceding years. Iseult also refused him and in October 1917, he married Georgie Hyde-Lees whom he had known for some years. His marriage made his life serene, and it also provided the starting-point for an altogether unexpected combination of his romantic and his realistic strains of poetry. Mrs. Yeats then attempted automatic writing*, and she produced odd

*Automatic writing: By "automatic writing" is meant writing dictated to Mrs. Yeats by some supernatural agency. It seemed that she experienced an urge to write, and the writing came to her without any effort on her part. She just went on writing in a state of trance under the influence of some spirits. Yeats was fascinated by this sort of thing and, already having been interested in the occult, he accepted this automatic writing as a supernatural phenomenon.

sentences on subjects of which she knew nothing. Yeats was excited and stimulated, and spent hours every day on interpreting this automatic script. (On the basis of this automatic script, he eventually built up a system which he published under the title of *A Vision* in 1926, revised and overhauled in 1937).

His Poems; and the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature

"The Wild Swans At Coole" and "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" (1921) show the re-blossoming of his poetry. In such poems as *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, *Easter 1916*, and *A Prayer For My Daughter*, Yeats is able to write with authority. In such poems he blends his appreciation of beauty with a sense of the tragic elements of life. He gives significance to the ordinary events of life which his earlier poetry had avoided. His life had blossomed too. In 1922, he was elected a Senator of the Irish Free State and became the "sixty-year-old smiling public man"*. He spoke frequently at the meetings of the Senate, and on all matters connected with art or literature he was heard with respect. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The award gave public recognition to his work. He had bought Thoor Ballylee, a Norman tower in Galway, where he now lived for a part of the year. It was a visible symbol of the Anglo-Irish tradition which he began to explore excitedly, reading Swift, Goldsmith, Berkeley, and Burke. The birth of a daughter in 1919 was followed by that of a son in 1921. With this flowering of his life came the maturity of his style. As his youthful ambitions were realised, he saw the paradoxes of life.

Further Poetic Achievements

From then onward, Yeats reached the height of his achievement, a renewal of inspiration and a perfecting of technique. "The Tower" was published in 1928, "The Winding Stair" in 1929. In 1932, Lady Gregory, who had been for nearly forty years his friend, patron, and co-worker died; Coole Park, where so much of his poetry was written, became desolate. In 1936, he edited, with a long prefatory essay, "The Oxford Book of Verse", a selection which was sufficiently unorthodox to arouse hostile criticism. At the same time, he wrote a number of important plays. He felt a renewed interest in Indian philosophy, as evidenced by his part translation of the *Upanishads* in 1937. An increasing pre-occupation with the problem of the One, and the Many culminated in the pamphlet called "On The Boiler" (1939) of which the setting is Sligo quay. In the "Last Poems" (1939) many previous themes are gathered up and re-handled, with an immense technical range; using in particular ballad rhythms and dialogue structure, with an undiminished energy, as he approached his seventieth year, and culminating in *Under Ben Bulbin* and his own Epitaph. Of drama, there is the complex play "The Herne's Egg", the mysterious "Death of Cuchulain", and the brief

*The phrase occurs in the poem *Among School Children*.

but important "Purgatory" which T.S. Eliot had recognised as among the most important contributions to the verse drama of the twentieth century. One of the "Last Poems"—*Cuchulain Comforted*—was dictated a few hours before his death, which took place at Roquebrune in the south of France on January 28, 1939. The body lay in a cemetery there during World War II, until it was brought in 1948 for burial in the churchyard at Drumcliff, near Sligo, under the shadow of Ben Bulbin.

EXPLANATION

Lines 9—16. Robert Gregory goes on to say that he has joined the British Air Force not because of any legal compulsion, nor because of any sense of duty. Neither the speeches of public leaders nor the cheering of the crowds of people impelled him to fight on the side of England. It was simply the thrill of adventure that caused him to become an air pilot and to fight air battles in the clouds. He calculated the assets and liabilities of his life. The years that he had already lived seemed to him to have been purposeless. The years that lay before him seemed to hold no promise for him. This kind of aimless and purposeless life could be balanced against only death in war. (Thus, according to the speaker here, it is sometimes the love of adventure which serves as an incentive or stimulus to a man to participate in war. Persons who have this kind of temperament find the life of routine to be dull and empty. The essential issue is summed up in these two lines. "A lonely impulse of delight/Drove to this tumult in the clouds.")

(10) EASTER 1916

(From "Michael Robartes and the Dancer")

A Nationalist Rising, the Theme of this Poem

For a long time the Irish nationalists had been agitating for liberation from English rule. Feeling was running high when the First World War broke out. But there was a swing in favour of England, and Ireland offered its support to the Allied cause. For a time it seemed as if Ireland and England were at last to be reconciled in the struggle against a common enemy (Germany), but suddenly there came the Easter Rising of 1916, an Irish revolt against the English. Militarily the Rising was almost insignificant. Only a few hundred men took part in the Dublin fighting. They were led by Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and James Connolly. They seized several strategic points in the capital, and proclaimed the establishment of an Irish republic with a provisional government. However, their forces were defeated within a week. Sixteen of the leaders were shot by sentence of British courts-martial.

Yeats's Sense of Guilt in the Opening Lines

Yeats's poem celebrates this Rising and the leaders who had organised it. A note of self-criticism is conspicuous in the poem, for Yeats begins by saying that he has been guilty of complacent detachment in his attitude towards his fellow-Irishmen: "Being certain that they and I/But lived where motley is worn." Now he recognises that through the events of Easter Week his fellow-countrymen have achieved an admirable heroic intensity; they have achieved a permanence which he recognises and confirms by including them in his song. Qualities which he had previously seen only in men like Robert Gregory have shown themselves among persons whom he had been ridiculing. Heroic intensity has gone beyond the cycles of ordinary life, and achieved permanence in the midst of flux: "Hearts with one purpose alone.....the living stream."

The Sacrifice of the Martyrs Was Not Really Necessary

After recognising the heroism of Easter Week, Yeats wonders if the sacrifice of the martyrs was necessary: "For England may keep faith/For all that is done and said." In spite of these misgivings, however, Yeats ends by granting the men of Easter Week—MacDonagh, Connolly, Pearse, and even MacBride—the dignity and immortality of verse.

Yeats's Tribute to Persons Whom He Had Previously Under-Valued

The poem sets off a careful antithesis between the "polite meaningless words" which constitute the "casual comedy" of pre-revolutionary Ireland, the Ireland where "motley" had been worn, and the tragic "terrible beauty" that is born of the Easter Rising. In the second stanza are catalogued the men and women whom Yeats had previously undervalued—Constance Markiewicz, whose voice had grown shrill in political argument school-teacher Patrick Pearse; "this other", Thomas MacDonagh the "drunken, vainglorious lout", John MacBride (Maud Gonne's husband). Yeats says, that he has included John MacBride in his poem in spite of the fact that "he had done most bitter wrong/To some who are near my heart." All these persons, says Yeats, have resigned their parts in the "casual comedy", have been transformed utterly, have become independent and beautiful figures, with the result that "a terrible beauty is born".

The obsession of these persons "with one purpose alone", Yeats goes on to say, makes of them an unchanging object in a world of flux. They seem "enchanted to a stone". Like a stone, they trouble in their inflexibility "the living stream" which flows disturbed by them. In the midst of all the change three lies the stone.

The heart, in the last stanza, no longer "enchanted", has been sacrificed. Death is both metaphor and fact. The men are not sleeping. This is "not night but death". And it is a death which is the stuff of tragedy and which has been brought on by a heroic dream, a dream founded, like all tragedy, on "excess of love". Changed by not changing, dying uselessly, "bewildered" by love, Ireland's unexpected heroes create the ironic terrible beauty of tragedy in an otherwise "meaningless" time.

A Tragic Stature Achieved by the Martyrs

What if these persons were misguided? asks Yeats. "Was it needless death after all?" That does not in any way diminish their achievement: they threw off the motley and achieved tragic stature. Some commentators are of the view that there is an element of political prudence in the poem, that Yeats expressed misgivings because, uncertain about the ultimate political outcome, he was anxious not to antagonise the other side. But that is a cynical interpretation. The doubts or misgivings in the poem are characteristically Yeatsian; he is, in a sense the poet of mixed feelings. In any case we should

not expect him to be too sure about politics. Indeed, without this uncertainty, the poem would lose a great deal of its tension and complexity which make it one of the finest political poems. (The poet's mixed feelings about the Easter Week of 1916 are expressed much more emphatically in a poem, *On A Political Prisoner* which is about a woman he admires, Countess Markiewicz, who suffered imprisonment because of her part in Easter Week. It contrasts her imprisonment with her former freedom and asserts that she has foolishly sacrificed this freedom for the sake of mere abstract theories).

MEANINGS AND EXPLANATIONS

NOTE. This poem contains Yeats' reaction to the revolt of the Irish nationalists against English rule in the year 1916. The revolt was confined to the city of Dublin. The Irish nationalists were led by Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and James Connolly. The Rising was quelled within a week, and sixteen leaders were shot dead by the orders of British courts-martial. The poem contains Yeats' admiration for the heroic manner of death of these nationalists, though at the end he expresses a doubt whether it was really necessary for them to die.

I have met them.....is born (Lines 1—16) The poet speaks of the men whom he used to meet at the close of day when they returned from work. He would pass them with a nod of recognition or with a few words of formal courtesy. Sometimes, sitting beside the fire at the club, he would tell a story or a joke in order to amuse a companion, sitting next to him. But of one thing he was certain, namely, that he and the other Irishmen were leading a meaningless, almost comic kind of life. However, his whole viewpoint changed when a number of nationalist leaders of Ireland died as martyrs for the nationalist cause during the Easter week of 1916. He realised that, out of what he had thought to be an empty, purposeless, and absurd life there had emerged a "terrible beauty" represented by the martyrdom of those leaders.

Being certain that they and I/But lived where motley is worn (Lines 13—14)—The poet was sure that he and the others were leading a life of complacency which made them ridiculous. "Motley" refers to the multi-coloured clothes which a clown used to wear. The idea is that the Irish people seemed to be leading a clownish life.

A terrible beauty is born—This refers to the magnificent achievement of the nationalist leaders who met a terrible death and who thus gave evidence of their heroic dignity.

NOTE. In the first passage of the poem, we see the contrast between the "polite meaningless words" which constituted the "casual comedy" of pre-revolutionary Ireland, the Ireland where "motley" had been worn, and the tragic "terrible beauty" that was born of the Easter Rising.

This man is born (Lines 24—40)—This passage contains references to the persons whom Yeats had previously under-estimated but who

afterwards appeared to him to be heroes as a result of whose sacrifice a "terrible beauty" was born.

Thai woman (Line 17)—The reference is to Constance Markiewicz, whom Yeats had come to know when she was still unmarried and when she was living with her father, Sir Henry GoreBooth, at Lissadell. She was then acknowledged to be the loveliest girl in the county of Sligo, and had a great reputation as a horse-rider and hunter. She was thrown into prison as a result of her participation in nationalistic activities, while the men were executed.

This man had kept school—The reference is to Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), the poet and founder of St. Enda's School. He was one of the leaders shot by the English.

This other his helper and friend—Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916), the poet and critic. He too met the same fate as Pearse.

This other man—John MacBride, the man whom Maud Gonne had married. Yeats refers to him as "a drunken, vainglorious lout", who had done "most bitter wrong" to some who were very dear to Yeats. Yeats had nothing but contempt for the man whom Maud Gonne had married. But even this man rose to the occasion and attained a tragic dignity by his part in the Easter Rising. *vainglorious*—boastful. *lout*—clumsy fellow; clown.

He, too, has resigned his part..... is born—Even John MacBride has given up his role as a clown in the comedy of life, and he too is an entirely changed man because of his heroic role in the Easter Rising. As a result of the sacrifice of all these men, an awful beauty has emerged on the national scene.

Hearts with one purpose alone.....in the midst of all (Lines 41—56)—These persons were obsessed with one purpose alone. This purpose was the liberation of Ireland from English rule. This obsession made them an unchanging object in a world of change and flux. They "seemed enchanted to a stone to trouble the living stream". In other words, their inflexibility of purpose seemed to impede the flow of life. The horses, the riders, the birds, the clouds, the horse-hooves, the hens—all these represent change and flux. But these men hindered the normal flow of life, just as the flowing water of a stream is impeded by a stone that lies in its way. The lack of change in these men made them stone-hearted and tragic. (The living stream is defined in terms of time and action. The various objects mentioned by the poet "range", "change", "change", "slide", "plash", "die", "call", and they do so "minute by minute", "minute by minute", "minute by minute". In the midst of all lies the unchanging stone.

Too long a sacrifice.....is born (Lines 57—60)—A prolonged sacrifice hardens the heart. At what stage can we say that the sacrifice already made will suffice? It is not for human beings to determine this. It is for God to decide. All we can do is to mutter the names of those who have sacrificed themselves, just as a mother utters the name of her child with love and affection when, after the day's fatigue, the child has fallen asleep. The death of these men is like the sleep which comes to a man at night.

But, the next moment, the poet realises that it is not sleep which has come to these men but death. They have been overtaken by tragedy. Was it necessary for these men to die? It is possible that England would have kept her promises and offered freedom to Ireland. If England meant to do so, these men have sacrificed their lives in vain. But it must be admitted that their death has been brought about by a heroic dream, a dream of the liberation of their country. Perhaps they were confused by their sheer excess of love for their country. In any case, the poet "Would like to immortalise them in his verse. MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse have, by their martyrdom, raised themselves to great heights. They have become independent, beautiful figures, terrible and violent in their freedom. They have achieved a heroic intensity and have achieved a permanence which the poet recognises and confirms by including them in his poetry. Even if these men made a mistake in throwing away their lives, that did not diminish their achievement. They threw off the "motle" and achieved tragic stature.

(11) THE SECOND COMING

(From "Michael Robartes and the Dancer")

A Stirring Poem

The Second Coming is one of the finest of all Yeats' poems. There is about it the immediate conviction of pertinent emotion; the lines are stirring separately and in their smaller groups; and there is a sensible life in them that makes them seem to combine in the form of an emotion. In writing this poem Yeats was able to choose words which to an appreciable extent were the right ones to reveal or represent the emotion which was its purpose. The words deliver, the meaning which was put into them by the craft with which they were arranged.

Something Questionable About this Poem

And yet there is something questionable about this poem. What, for instance, is the exact meaning of the phrase "*Spiritus Mundi*" in Line 12? In one of his prose-writings, Yeats observes that his mind has been from time to time possessed by images which had no discoverable origin in his waking experience. Speculating as to their origin, he came to deny both the conscious and the unconscious memory as their probable seat, and finally invented a doctrine which traced the images to sources of supernatural character: "Those images that come in sleep are (1) from the state immediately preceding our birth; (2) from the "*Spiritus Mundi*"—that is to say, from a general store-house of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit." It apparently means that images so derived have both an absolute meaning of their own and an operative force in determining meaning and predicting events in this world. In another place, Yeats describes the image used in this poem (Lines 20—22), which he had seen many times, "always at my left side just out of the range of sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction."

Yeats's Magical Beliefs, Represented Here Emotionally

Here we come directly upon that central part of Yeats' magical beliefs which it is one purpose of this poem emotionally to represent: belief in what is called variously Magnus Annus, the Great Year, the Platonic Year, and sometimes in a slightly different symbolism, the Great Wheel. This belief, with respect to the history of epochs, is associated with the precession of the equinoxes which bring, roughly every two thousand years, a Great Year of death and re-birth, and this belief, with respect to individuals, seems to be associated with the phases of the moon, although individuals may be influenced by the equinoxes and there may be a lunar interpretation of history. These beliefs have a scaffold of geometrical figures, gyres, cones, circles, etc., by the application of which exact interpretation is secured. Thus it is possible to predict, both in biography and history, and in time, both forwards and backwards, the character, climax, collapse, and re-birth in antithetical form of human types and cultures. There is a subordinate belief that signs, warnings, even direct messages, are always given, from "Spiritus Mundi" or elsewhere, which the poet and the philosopher have only to see and hear. As it happens, the Christian era, being nearly two thousand years old, is due for extinction and replacement, in short for the Second Coming which this poem heralds.

The Words and Phrases Used in this Poem

In this poem Yeats combined the beliefs which obsessed him with the image which he took to be a specific illustration of the beliefs. As regards words and phrases in the poem, some flow from private doctrine, some from Yeats' direct sense of the world about him, and some from both at once. For instance, the "ceremony of innocence" (Line 6) represents for Yeats one of the qualities that made life valuable under the dying aristocratic social tradition. The "falcon and the falconer" (Line 2) has, besides its obvious symbolism, a doctrinal reference. A falcon is a hawk, and a hawk is symbolic of the active or intellectual mind; the falconer is perhaps the soul itself or its unifying principle. Lines 7-8 seem to mean something like this: The poet refers to the doctrines of the Great Year and the phases of the moon, whereby it is predicted as necessary that, at the time we have reached, the best minds, being subjective, should have lost all faith though desiring it and the worst minds, being so nearly objective, have no need of faith and may be full of "passionate intensity" without the control of any faith or wisdom. But these Lines (7-8) can be interpreted in another way also.

The Behaviour and Nature of Men of Power

This second meaning comes from the summary observation that this is how men are—and especially men of power—in the world we live in; it is knowledge that comes from knowledge of the "fury and mire in human veins"; a meaning the contemplation of which led Yeats (April, 1934) to offer himself to any government or party that, using force and marching men, will "promise not this or that measure but a discipline, a way of life".

The Imagery in this Poem

The Second Coming is a famous and startling poem. Its first part (Lines 1-8) would consist with any sort of religiosity. It is not a naturalistic passage. Either the falcon and falconer are symbolic, or else they are a boldly new and cosmic image; and there are the images of the centripetal force of the world turning to centrifugal, of anarchy being loosed upon it (by evil forces or by destiny), and of the blood-dimmed tide, which may have an occult meaning or may be a metaphysical image of war. The last two lines sound most naturalistic, and they might be distinguished elsewhere, but here they are the climax and we have to dwell upon them, because it is a metaphysical context which advances to their summary truth; and the more we dwell upon them, the more adequate they become.

The Coming of a Monstrous Ideal of Abstract Animal Power

The second part (Lines 9-22) sounds Christian in the beginning, but develops an image whose source is not the Scriptures but *Spiritus Mundi* and which concerns something like an Egyptian Sphinx, and the passing of Christ in his favour. The language is worthy of the matter. The poet's meaning in these lines may be stated thus: "Twenty centuries have passed, and the ideal they professed has come to perfect inaptitude and impotence; a new millennium will dawn, and we cannot tell what ideal it will obey; very likely it will be a monstrous ideal of abstract animal power."

The Destruction of the World Visualized in the Poem

The horror-vision of the destruction of the world in *The Second Coming* seems infinitely meaningful. After all, every man carries in him the buried conviction that the continuance of the world depends on his own existence. Jealous of the real world which kills and survives him, he delights in speculations of a grand finale which brings all to the same extinction which he necessarily faces. Yeats, carefully vague, manages to hint the end of all while explicitly prophesying the reversal of the world's gyre, the birth of a new, violent, bestial anti-civilisation in the destruction of the two-thousand-year Christian cycle. His "rough beast" (Line 21) is compounded from Christ's prediction (Matthew 24) of His future return and St. John's vision of the coming of anti-Christ, the beast of the Apocalypse. The "revelation" that is at hand thus acquires a double meaning.

Yeats's Prophetic Insight

Yeats here gives expression to his prophetic insight. To some extent he makes use of his "system" in the poem. The pattern of the double interpenetrating gyre is carefully worked out, even to the inclusion of paired circling birds: the falcon of the first stanza flies beyond the call of its master, and the indignant desert birds of the second stanza wheel about the lumbering Sphinx. These double gyres, binding *then to now*, point toward the destructive birth about to take place. In the real world, revolution, "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". As the gyre widens, "Things fall apart; the

centre cannot hold."* The "blood-dimmed tide" of violence (a tide dimmed both by blood and in the blood itself) is loosed on our world to drown "the ceremony of innocence"; ceremony, because in ceremony alone lie the vestiges of the sort of order Yeats briefly found at Coole Park, and innocence because innocence alone opposes all the sexual and social violence symbolised by the blood-dimmed tide. But that tide, for Yeats' purposes, has begun to move: fanatical men have seized power all over the world; "the good men, grown sceptical, "lack all conviction". The "vast image" (Line 12) Yeats draws from *Spiritus Mundi* (his warehouse of super-sensual Platonic forms) is, of course, a nightmare symbol of the coming time. This future, he predicted, in *A Vision*, would be hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, and the head of a man" having a pitiless, blank gaze. Yeats lets his "rough beast", slouch toward Bethlehem, the seat of the Christian era which it would supersede. (Yeats describes the Christian era as "dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peace its means and ends").

The Intensity of the Poem

The intensity of the poem called *The Second Coming* depends primarily upon our familiarity with ideas like "the second coming.....a rocking cradle.....Bethlehem". Yeats, that is, in order to express "his vision of absent things" lays hold of the only available public language, and adapts it in a number of bold paradoxes. The magnus foresees, but it is the poet who urges, and here, at the polemical level, lies the difficulty. The poem's tone is not coherent. Besides the memorable restraint of the Lines 7-8 ("The best lack all conviction while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity"), the rhetorical attack of the final lines is crude; it exploits the previously established relationship. With this in mind, it is possible to feel that the famous line 6 ("The ceremony of innocence is drowned") is a discreet example of the same exploitation. There is more anxiety than insight in the line. The poet claims an assurance that he does not feel: and what he is not sure about is whether the sanctities involved in "sleep.....vexed.....cradle" can or cannot withstand the future.

A Companion Poem to "The Second Coming"

In *The Second Coming*, Yeats has tried to generalise his immediate foreboding into a historical statement, but since the historical idea is itself

*Yeats described in great detail this historical process as it is symbolized in his double cones: "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. The revelation which approaches will, however, take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre....When the revelation comes it would not come to the Poor but to the great and learned and establish again for two thousand years prince and vizer."

ambiguous, it simply confirms the confusion of fear and hope from which the poet begins. This is then transmitted in the uncertain tone, and unjustified variation of intensity in the rhetoric. Uncertain of his own position, Yeats turns, so to speak, on his listeners. There should not, finally, be any question as to where Yeats stands in relation to "the rough beast". The companion poem to his prophecy is, after all, the restrained and assured *A Prayer For My Daughter* (1919).

MEANINGS AND EXPLANATIONS

Turning and turning.....passionate intensity (Lines 1-8)—The basic idea of this poem is related to the "system" which Yeats explained in *A Vision*. Yeats had a theory regarding the rise and fall of civilizations. A civilization begins with a moment of inspiration or revelation, such as the birth of Christ, and the progress of a civilization is like the unwinding (or "perning") of a thread wound on a cone or gyre. Thus, at first, a civilization is very narrow and intense, like the apex of a cone, but it gradually loses its impetus, broadens, and so dissipates its energies. As this happens, an opposite inspiration, which has been gaining strength, takes over and begins a new civilization.

The word "gyre" produces a sense of a circling, inexorable movement, both through the repetition of "turning" and the four-fold repetition of "in" sound. "Widening" suggests first the increasing scope of the movement and, in conjunction with the next line, its uncontrollability.

NOTE. These opening lines of the poem give us a picture of the disintegration which has overtaken the Christian civilization. The diminishing force of Christianity is conveyed to us through the idea that Christianity is like a falcon that has lost touch with the falconer, and has thus become directionless. Things are falling apart, and there is no stabilising force. Lawlessness and confusion are spreading over the world. The "blood-dimmed tide" is the tide of violence, a tide both dimmed by blood and in the blood itself. This tide has drowned the "ceremony of innocence". The "ceremony of innocence" represents for Yeats one of the qualities that made life valuable under the dying aristocratic social tradition. In ceremony alone lay the sort of order Yeats briefly found at Coole Park. (It is the ceremony of innocence because innocence alone opposes all the sexual and social violence symbolised by the blood-dimmed tide.) That tide has begun to move: fanatical men have seized power. The worst, full of passionate intensity (or fanaticism), seem ready to rule an earth on which the best men, grown, skeptical, lack all conviction.

Surely some revelation.....is at hand (Lines 9—10)—The indications are that some new revelation or a new "coming" is near. (The first revelation or the first "coming" was the birth of Christ which heralded the Christian civilization. Now the Christian civilization is disintegrating, and a new epoch

will begin. This new epoch will, however, be fraught with evil and wickedness as Yeats tells us in the remaining lines of the poem).

Spiritus Mundi—This phrase refers to a general store-house of images which have ceased to be the property of any personality or spirit. Images derived from this store-house have both an absolute meaning of their own and an operative force in determining meaning and predicting events in this world. Yeats believed that signs, warnings, even direct messages flow from "Spiritus Mundi", which the poet and the philosopher have only to see, hear, and recognise.

The shape with lion body and the head of a man represents mindless and merciless violence. "Moving its slow thighs" conveys the clumsy, powerful, stirring of the shape into life. The "shadows of the desert birds" reel away from it in the giddiness of nightmare.

That twenty centuries of stony sleep—the twenty centuries of Christian civilization during which this shape with lion body and the head of a man maintained a rigid sleep.

Bethlehem—the birth-place of Christ. (At the same place, a new birth will occur. This will be the birth of the "rough beast" which will in due course dominate the world, spreading violence and evil).

EXPLANATION

The Second Coming.....to be born ? (Lines 11—12)—The moment Yeats utters the words "the second coming", his eyes are troubled by a huge image that appears before him from the general store-house of images. This image is a nightmare symbol of the coming time. This is an image with a man's head and a lion's body. It is similar to the Egyptian Sphinx. This beast has a pitiless, blank gaze. As its slow thighs move, birds over the desert see it and begin to scream. During the twenty centuries of the Christian civilization, this beast has been sleeping but is now about to make its appearance in the world. This will be the "second coming" and it will supersede Christ who was born two thousand Years ago at Bethlehem. The new period in human history will be one of monstrous animal power. Thus this poem contains a horror-vision of the destruction of the world as we know it and the prophecy of an era of infinite cruelty and agony.