

Ceremony of Innocence and Death by Water: An Encounter with Yeats' "The Second Coming"

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Biography

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Abstract

Ceremonies of tradition tend to imprison traditional "readings" in what have come to be known as "best readings," "the accepted interpretation," "the traditional understanding." Some texts are so anchored into prescriptions from other texts, that they constrain the interpretive possibilities of their "reading." Yeats' ubiquitous poem, "The Second Coming," has strong and traditional ties to the poet's prose work, *A Vision*. In particular, Yeats' teachings on the "gyres" in *A Vision* have chained any reading of his poem to a distinctive historiography and world-view; yet the prescription in Yeats' prose might prove to be an unfortunate gloss for his poetry. The imagery and other structures in "The Second Coming" reanimate the gyres in a way that *A Vision* does not anticipate. The poem's play between nature and the imagination debunk any preconceived ideas about the structure and function of the "gyres," either on the part of the poet or the

reader. Indeed, the gyres challenge Yeats's own understanding of them, as his poem's effects undermine his intent and his mythology. The poem presents an invitation to view 'difference,' seemingly cast in images of conflict, as contiguity. The antinomies in the poem play out not as polar opposites, but in the rapport of rhythm. In perhaps one of his more subtly powerful poems, Yeats has unexpectedly presented a gyre with properties beyond *A Vision*, and empowered the gyre to deconstruct the mythos of revelation, chaos, an idea of nature gone awry.

CEREMONIES AND OTHER rituals bear the safety of expectation and the familiar, monotony and complacency. A Rabbi declares a boy a man, a Bishop lays on the hands, lovers utter the stereotypical words of promise, and the pause for applause, briefly pregnant, always occurs in the same place. Always innocence hangs in the balance, teetering on the fence of the subjective and the objective, illusion and delusion, childhood and adulthood, the idea of reality and the actuality of the real. Interestingly, for a mind like William Blake's, such antinomies resolve in tension, and are not so clearly antipodal opposites or binary oppositions. Exploring the "contrary states" of the human condition, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are unified by the very humanity of such a contrariness, and betray a comfort with angst, and a wistful acceptance of ennui and loss, characteristics perhaps quintessentially characterized in his "Nurse's Song" pair.

Innocence:

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
 And everything else is still.
"Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies."
"No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover'd in sheep."
"Well well go & play till the light fades away

And then go home to bed.”
 The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd
 And all the hills ecchoed.

Experience:

When the voices of children are heard on the green
 And whisp'rings are in the dale,
 The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
 My face turns green and pale.
 Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
 And the dews of night arise;
 Your spring & your day, are wasted in play
 And your winter and night in disguise.”

The children and the nurses participate in the same reality, the former forever free of the perspective of the latter, and the latter informed and chilled by the perspective of the former. Both poems represent the familiar, and describe the same rituals of childhood play from different vantage points; the children are the celebrants of innocence and the nurses are the lay custodians of experience. The poems are “before and after” shots of the same ceremony, unfolded in innocence and unceremoniously ended in experience, “shewing the contrary states of the human soul.”

William Butler Yeats has utilized an elegant geometry for the contrary states he so loved to deconstruct: the fluid gyres that appear in several of his poems. In his study, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann describes the protean nature of the gyres, which at once are three dimensional “whirling cone[s]” and two dimensional intersecting triangles, static and dynamic, representing “the antinomies which had always been present in his [Yeats’] mind.” Quoting Yeats (from *A Vision*), Ellmann notes that the gyres symbolized not only objectivity and subjectivity, but also “‘beauty and truth, value and fact, particular and universal...’ The “interpenetrating gyres...mirrored and remirrored...all movements of civilization or mind or nature.”

Northrop Frye’s generalization of Blake’s thought might easily apply to the workings of nature and the imagination in Yeats’ poetry: “the imagination turns nature inside out.” Literary criticism and the substance of Yeats’ and Blake’s work have colluded to declare both poets

prophets; and Ellmann has tied Yeats' prophecy to his formulations in *A Vision*, and refers particularly to "The Second Coming," whose "prophetic authority" owes its power to the mechanics of the gyres of subjectivity and objectivity discussed in that seminal prose work. Yeats' gyres, seemingly entrenched in the Western historiography of the eternal recurrence (as well as in mysticism), deconstruct the interpretations of historical events as they deconstruct the poem that houses them. Left to the paratextual glosses of Yeats' prose paper trail, the poem remains anchored into its traditional interpretation: a 2000 year cycle has ended and history is thrust into a new age whose values are opposite to those of the previous cycle. Christ yields to antichrist, the "best" yield to the "worst," innocence to evil. When the poem's system of language decontextualizes the gyres from their prescribed signifiers and signifieds in *A Vision*, an alternate reading is free to rise from the text. The prophetic content of the poem shifts paradigms as Yeats plays off of the inversions, perversions, and reversions of nature and the human imagination. In "The Second Coming," Yeats introduces the imagination to nature as if for the first time; and the human mind's assumptions about nature fall under the scrutiny of the gyres, which seem to have minds of their own, or at least a mechanism of their own, a mechanism that lifts them out of the context of *A Vision*. Indeed, the gyres challenge Yeats' own understanding of them, as his poem's effects undermine his intent and his mythology.

"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?

Yeats wastes no time in presenting the drifting apart of man and nature, the “falconer” and the “falcon,” the ground and the sky, and pronounces the disconnection between earth and heaven. The ambiguous “widening” of the “gyre” describes not only the static change of conical diameter as the falcon ascends from its human vortex, but the gyre itself in flux: the widening occurs on two axes, the axis of the shape-shifting, expanding gyre, and the axis of increasing diameters of any given section of the gyre as they approach the base of the cone (oriented skyward). “Widening” need not refer to political rifts, tears in garments or sinkholes in a dynamic way. Canyons are said to “widen” at the point where the distance of opposing sides increases; so too with rivers and their mouths. This static understanding of “widening” is its commonest. The paradigm shift between the static and dynamic nature of “widening” must be appreciated within the connotation of the word. The ambiguity of the “widening” structure and function of the gyre that emerges from the play of the poem’s images betrays the apparatus in Yeats’ prose glosses for the gyres. While the flight of the falcon conforms to the shape of the gyre as it transcribes its own course of dwindling communication with the falconer, the gyre expands to accommodate the falcon’s trajectory, as nature breaks free of the illusion of order imposed by the human imagination. Gyres do what gyres do; they do not adhere to the willfulness of the imagination. While the mathematical solution rests in the differential equation that interrogates the change in geometrical space with respect to the change in distance between any two antipodal points in any conical circumference, the aesthetic and historical solution must content itself with dissolution: “things fall apart.” The images in the first stanza, crystal clear as discrete images, become murky and tentative as they come into relationship with one another. Because the points where the falconer stands and the falcon flies are never fixed within the orbiting gyre, their relationship is not only geometrically unstable, but unstable in meaning as well, for falconry

becomes un-centered, and its principles redefined. The images of blood, water, drowning and ceremony become ritualized as they loosen their grip on the implicit violence and conflict as the New Testament references of the second stanza reflect on them. In short, nothing is what it seems to be in the first stanza because the natural properties of the gyre are in tension with the symbolism imposed on them intertextually by Yeats' para-mythologies. The poem presents a distinct uncoupling of nature and the imagination, as the meaning that struggles to be born from its imagery flouts its inconsistency with the sign system that Yeats used in their composition.

In this sense, Yeats amends any application of Frye's dictum: nature turns the imagination inside out. A gyre turned inside out remains a gyre, even as the imagination of the falconer relinquishing control is flipped outside of its construct, and its ability to perceive and understand is transformed; "the centre cannot hold" because its locus in space has changed. While the larger movement between the first and second stanzas of the poem might mark the shift from the objective to the subjective, the polarity between the solution and dissolution in the first three lines of the first stanza have already marked the subjective and objective instability of that larger motion. This loss of stability becomes clearer from the falconer's point of view. Standing at what he must believe is a fixed point on the surface of the earth, the falconer sees the falcon transcribe a helical pattern in the air; so long as the flight is regular, the falcon seems to rise in concentric circles whose centers lie in a line perpendicular to the earth's surface connected to the point where the falconer stands. This description holds only if the gyre remains static, and of the same dimensions. This gyre, however, "widening" in space and set into whirling motion, is a geometrical chameleon, and changes its dimensions despite retaining its natural integrity of shape. Like a child's spinning top, it does not remain stationary, but moves, according to nature (the physical property of torque), across the surface of the floor, like a tornado unpredictably wreaking havoc in its natural innocence. "The centre cannot hold" because it is a fragile construct of the imagination which is helpless in the face of the random richness of nature.

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" as the imagination confronts the unpredictability of nature. The falcon's disobedient flight breaks the falconer's illusion of control and his sense of order in the universe. Like literature itself, falconry is a leap of faith. While the gyre must yield to its natural mathematical solution, and obey the laws of time and space lest it lose its nature and therefore its integrity, such laws elude the imagination, especially as it is anchored into "laws" of falconry whose respite is faith. Faith and anarchy are ideas born in the "ceremony of innocence," doomed, in this poem, to death by water. "Anarchy" is a childish term and always signals a desire for a return to simplicity and even a Blakean innocence. This

“ceremony of innocence” is something distinct from innocence itself; for it is always informed by experience, and begins in the formation of “anarchy” itself. The Greek root form, *-arkhia*, refers to a ruler, or type of rule or governance. “Anarchy” derives directly from the Greek *anarkhia*, from *anarkhos*, “without a ruler.” More obscurely yet more directly applicable, the related Greek verb, *arkhein*, “to rule,” “to begin,” “to command,” with its derivative *arkhe*, “rule,” “beginning,” enables Yeats’ “anarchy” to play off the fickleness of the gyre. When “anarchy” is momentarily decontextualized from its political denotation and allowed to reverberate innocently within the context of the “widening,” whirling gyre that derails the falconer, the word refers to the falconer as the source, the beginning and the ruler of the falcon’s flight, and suggests contiguity of the falconer with the logos: *En arkhe hein ho logos* (In the beginning was the logos [John 1:1]; more direct reference to the New Testament occurs in the second stanza). The falconer as *arkhe* underscores what Yeats has put at stake in his poem: the very structures of heaven and earth, of politics among nations and among individuals, of Christ and man, of “the best” and “the worst,” of good and evil, of the absolute nature of the divine mind. The sequence of images of the falcon’s drift from the falconer, the “centre,” hurled into the periphery by the shifting and growing gyre and losing its grip, and the resulting fragmentation of the cosmos and the unleashing of anarchy, has set up a grammar of antithesis, and the creation of a new world order in which “the best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity.” The subtle prelude to this change in the world’s self-understanding is the drowning of ritual, the death by water of “the ceremony of innocence.” And like the childish tantrum that gives rise to a word like “anarchy,” with its cry of foul play and breaking of the rules, such a ceremony will not die without the din of kicking and screaming, of battle and struggle.

Like the machinery of “anarchy,” the “blood-dimmed tide” is also “loosed” in a paroxysm of apparent violence. Unlike the violence nature has visited upon the human imagination, the violent interaction between “the best” and “the worst” is apparently not merely psychologically lethal, but physically lethal as well. The tide itself is dimmed by real blood, as it has been since time immemorial in human struggles on the sea, from Odysseus’ travails through Scylla and Charybdis and every subsequent battle on ocean and beachhead. In this kenosis of human life into the sea, “the ceremony of innocence” meets its watery death. Such ceremonies are often subjunctive in mood, expressing as they often do the contrary to fact, as they celebrate something that should be, rather than something that is. In such ceremonies falcons hear the falconer, and the majesty of their flights genuflect before the falconer’s will. Gyres dance en pointe in the ballet choreographed in the human imagination. Centers wield their gravity as suns rule their revolving planets. The source is clear and actions flow with symphonic order and

dignity.

The poem's liturgical acts of falconry and drowning beg the question of valid ceremony. The couplings fastened by the imagination are uncoupled at their mention; "hardly are those...[images] out [w]hen...vast... troubles" emerge: nature foils its representation in the imagination. Ironically, this subjective experience of "Spiritus Mundi" provides the grammar of the objective perception of images set forth in the first stanza. Predicates undo subjects; antitheses unhinge theses in the same poetic phrase. Falcons mock falconers. The best "lack;" the worst are "full;" centers yield their positions and therefore their identity; things disintegrate. Synergy becomes entropy: in the universe of Yeats' poem the gyres have spoken and "thing fall apart." There are no innocents in "The Second Coming;" everything is touched by transforming experiential events. Yeats seems to debunk the ceremony and unmask the participants, as the falcon's defiant flight indelibly imprints itself in the imagination-altering psyche of the falconer. All humanity has blood on its hands as the same blood leaches into the sea, swallowing any would-be innocents, innocence, and its ceremonies. The only refuge Yeats leaves the imagination is eschatology.

The deconstructed culture encased in the gyre of brutal objectivity in the first stanza does such violence to the poem's persona that he must turn his sight away abruptly, as if awakening from a nightmare. Yeats has this persona answer one nightmare with another. Trying to hide in New Testament eschatology, the persona reads the signs of the times as heralding the parousia: "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand." The quaintness of recourse to "the end of the world" and the search for solace in the ultimate victory of good over evil will become a charlatan as the persona's chosen nightmare unfolds. The persona reiterates the phrase again in his mind's eye with what seems like sarcastic irony: "The Second Coming!" (of course, the sarcasm plays out in the irony of the unexpected). On the heels of these words, another abrupt shift occurs in the persona's imagination. A "vast image" from Yeats' own repository of vast images, "Spiritus Mundi," comes before him and "troubles my sight." This persona's center is as stable as the center of the falcon's flight, yet this persona does not seem to have been paying attention to the death of innocence in the first stanza. His fanciful thoughts are peripatetic, and they beg the question of the number of personae that inhabit the poetic landscape. Like the beguiling number of nurses in Blake's songs, the shifts of perspective in this poem suggest more than one personae, or at least a changing of masks, which is, of course, etymologically delicious and brings the palimpsest of texts at work in the poem into sharp relief. Moving from objective observer and omniscient judge in the gyre of the first stanza, to the

subjective feeler of the second stanza ready to resurrect “the ceremony of innocence” by constructing the apocalypse from the pieces of the “blood-dimmed tide” of an exploded culture, Yeats begins to construct another gyre, one set into motion by an entity emerging from the parched landscape of the desert as this mask behind the mask conjures up and animates a slouching “shape.”

Its locus tentative and unresolved, the troubling “image” takes on the shape of the Egyptian Sphinx. “With lion body and the head of a man,” and with “a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,” this fantastic creature moves into view with its “slow thighs” plodding deliberately to its inevitable incarnation. Like its location in the desert, the creature does not quite come into focus, and moves like the reeling “shadows” that define it, shadows that are as “indignant” as “the desert birds” who are heir to the falconer’s falcon. Partly disembodied into “gaze” and “shape” and “thighs,” the creature remains inchoate; for it has not yet been born, though, “its hour come round at last,” it is conceived and its characteristics determined, as it “slouches to Bethlehem to be born.” Nonetheless, the image is instructive to the persona, secure in the new knowledge that the creature’s conception occurred in a “vexed...nightmare” instigated by the birth of Christ. The babe in swaddling clothes in his “rocking cradle” dreamed up Armageddon, and his apocalyptic adversary. As relentlessly and tirelessly as the workings of nature upon the imagination, Yeats turns innocence inside out, deconstructing the incarnation of goodness and purity, positing the oppositional incarnation of evil in the subconscious of none other than Jesus himself. The entry of the Christ into human history sets another falcon aloft, as the forces of the earth in sympathy with the creature align themselves in opposition to the presence of Christ. The “twenty centuries” of Christianity, in moribund “stony sleep,” conjure up its evil opposite, an evil twin, as if it were a natural process for opposites to be cognates, a process not unlike the behavior of iron filings between two magnets, aligning in the magnetic field as if choosing sides, posturing for battle. This evil, sphinx-like creature, conceived in sarcastically ironic exclamation, emerges from the dry desert dust, in sharp contradistinction to the watery drowning pool that swallows up innocence, and, instead of bringing peace and hope and resolution, biting ushers in a new age ruled by the beast, a nightmare made real, at least real enough for the persona’s declaration of knowledge, his formulation of the “revelation” demanded in explanation of the world turned upside down and inside out.

As Eliot’s “Gerontion” asks, “after such knowledge, what forgiveness?” In the universe of “The Second Coming,” there is no forgiveness. When the persona states, “but now I know,” he betrays an ignorance of his participation in a “ceremony of innocence,” the ceremony of Rene Girard’s “monstrous double,” the grammatical dark side of simplistic religious dualism (see

Bloom. p. 18). The oppositions so clear to the persona are anything but clear. What he claims to “know” skulks in the “darkness” that “drops again.” He seems to awaken from a trance-like state induced by “*Spiritus Mundi*.” His vision of the beast dissipates in the darkness from which he incredibly asserts, “now I know.” His certainty, all certainty, is a lie of the poem. Any certainty at all on the part of this persona is so tied up in the instability of subjectivity as to be worthless to the persona in the face of the slow but inexorable motion of the conceptus of evil toward the womb of Bethlehem.

The poem’s own grammar of ‘statement and retraction’ forces a reevaluation of the persona’s epistemology. The negative corollary of “know” is the “nightmare.” While the persona casts the meaning of events in terms of pure good and pure evil, the poem has provided the reader with a stronger position from which to interpret. In the dramatic irony at work between the reader and persona, the text informs the reader that the beast is the dream-vision manifestation of the falconer, and “the indignant desert birds” caricature the falcon. The second stanza of the poem is the symptom of the persona who grapples with the data given in the first stanza. What seems like the schizophrenia of the poetic voice is the attempt by a single persona to sublimate what he interprets to be the horrors of the demise of natural order. As such, the symptom is a metaphor of the choice confronting the fearful persona. The poem, like Lacan, insists on the letter in the persona’s representation of his sublimation, giving the reader the advantage of the analyst over the analysand; and the reader can confront the desire of the persona, and begin to interpret the text presented in the persona’s voice (see Lacan pp. 146-178). The creature is a figment of the human imagination, which has been so assaulted by nature in this poem that its trustworthiness is called into serious question. The uncertain, or at least interrogative, nature of the two-pronged knowledge acquired by the persona is underscored by Yeats’ choice of the question mark that concludes his poem. Does the persona “know” that (1) two centuries of Christianity have been “vexed to nightmare” and (2) “what rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem” or not? Images from a trance and knowledge born in darkness debase the quality of such knowledge. The only certainty offered in this poem is the certainty of the death of the “ceremony” and the dynamic growth and motion of the gyres. In this regard, the persona’s appeal to certainty is stillborn. The ill-formed gyre of the second stanza whirls itself into a lather in the imagination of the persona, and fabricates a subjective solution to the dissolution of both culture and the unnatural constructs within the human imagination. It is only as certain, however, as the knowledge given to the persona by the Sphinx, deceptive and a cheat by mythological standards.

The ostensible antitheses structured into the opening lines of the poem can have resolution, but such resolution demands that the “widening gyre[s]” of subjectivity and objectivity pass through one another in a synthesis in which the values in the poem’s two stanzas are transformed by each other, neutralizing the shaping of difference into conflict. Ellmann has noted that the interpenetrating gyres can form the shape of the seal of Solomon, or they can form an “hourglass” as the opposite points of the triangles rest on the baseline of the other. In either case, the gyres must speak to each other, they must communicate geometrically, as the falcon and falconer, the center and circumference. The best and the worst redefine the relationship of the one to the other. The gyres, as nature’s emissaries bearing resolution, must reshape flight, geometry and telemetry as they introduce a paradigm shift from the dualism of pure good and pure evil, of Christ and antichrist, to a realignment of imagination with the way nature really is. Freed from the masks of objectivity and subjectivity and the context of form, the gyres prophesy not the historical rise of fascism, or post-war Europe’s new self-understanding that it has entered a new age, but the end of nature and the imagination spiraling away from each other. The gyres work by blurring the distinction between the subjective and the objective and hastening their final canceling each other out. In this way, the gyres also redefine difference in terms other than conflict: the paradigm moves from difference as other to difference as contiguity and reflection. Yeats does not allow the poem to forget that the beastly sphinx emerges not from nature, but from an imagination anchored into the old paradigm. Nonetheless, the poem allows difference to resolve into contiguity as Bethlehem reasserts itself as the source of whatever is to come, whatever choice is made.

The meaning and function of the gyres must not be left to the sign system of *A Vision*, or Ellmann’s reading of that system. Like the falcon, the gyres have their own nature, and their own natural law. A better gloss for the gyres is perhaps another of Yeats’ brief poems, “The Gyres,” truncated here:

The Gyres! the gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth
 Things thought too long can be no longer thought
 For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
 And ancient lineaments are blotted out. [1-4]
 ...
 The workman, noble and saint, and all things run
 On that unfashionable gyre again. [23-24]

Even the rocky-faced Delphic oracle answers to the inexorable motion of the gyres, which, as noted earlier, are for Yeats the symbol for the eternally recurrent cycles of history and human life. Gyres are three dimensional cones and two-dimensional triangles; they spin and orbit; they change their dimensions yet retain their geometrical integrity; they intersect with one another, ostensibly giving rise to the subjective and objective political and social structures, and human self-understanding. Since they are always in motion and in dynamic flux, their intersections are always transitory, and any calculation of their intersecting areas and volumes are subject to change from moment to moment. They do not seem to function as symbolic transitions from age to age, from political system to political system. They do, however, seem to represent the rhythm of existence and of relationships, not merely diachronically in the movement of historical epochs as Yeats believed as he wrote his poetry, but synchronically, in the motion of moment to moment, in the reading of his poetry. The gyres mean rhythm: they are not the symphony, but musical time. They are not musical tones and colors, but the beat, the pulse at music's heart.

The gyres encase a world; they do not ossify it. The falcon cannot break the gyre, and though it "cannot hear the falconer," the gyre hears the falcon for the falconer. The gyre's dynamism ratifies falconry, and the falconer need not despair of the falcon's flight. "Things [do not] fall apart; the center [can] hold:" the falconer must yield to the rhythm of the gyre, and shift his "centre" as the gyre moves in space. "Anarchy" is indeed "mere anarchy," for it is reborn at childhood's end into the matrix of the gyre: fluid, flexible and resilient. "Anarchy," once negative and judgmental, becomes merely descriptive. The "ceremony of innocence" drowns, but like "The Wasteland's" 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,' will rise again. The drowning is figurative, a metaphor of the dynamic motion of the gyre, restorative, affirming. The blood that dims the tide is of the ceremony itself; it is the blood of "innocence," the blood of Christ. The falconer is a liminal entity, on the border of two worlds, the reality of the gyre, and the self-centeredness of limited existence. He awaits the gyre, which is eager to baptize him into a life that resonates with the rhythm of the gyre. He, too, is eager, eager to drown in the ceremony of innocence, only to arise from the tide, in sympathetic vibration with the death and resurrection of Christ.

The poem lies about "the best" and "the worst." While "the worst" are often "filled with passionate intensity," a "lack" of "all conviction" recasts any understanding of "the best." These antimonies whirling in the gyre reflect the "vast image" that forms the deception in the second stanza. The "best" and "worst" refer to the contingency of the falconer. The "worst" results from

choosing the status quo--a falconer nonplussed by the flight of a falcon that embraces the contour of the gyre. The "best" refers to a falconer choosing to be re-centered by the rhythm of the gyre. The "worst" refers to the worship of the sphinx-like beast rising from dry sands; the "best" refers to the choice of metaphorical drowning, a death by water. The sluggard gyre of the second stanza prophesies the world of the falconer who makes the easy, obvious choice. It is a world of night and day, light and dark, good and evil, Christ and the beast of the Apocalypse, in their dualistic and unsatisfactory simplemindedness. It is a world of monotony, a world of such deceptive clarity of moral and political choices that there is no free will, no creative tension. There are no productive polarities here, only pure positives and pure negatives that cancel each other out, leaving the falcon in a vacuum and a falconer shriveling in the desert of "indignant birds."

The gyric structure of prophecy in "The Second Coming" has a modest goal: to present nature's invitation to the imagination to view nature from nature's perspective. The disasters in this poem are perceptions of a persona on the brink of discovery, the discovery of the music hidden in the noise of conflict. The threat of the dissolution of culture is an invitation to be balanced in the gyre. The entire culture is not falling apart; it merely molts, shedding what is old, allowing the new and vibrant to pursue the future; as "The Gyres" state: "things thought too long can be no longer thought." This spent thought is caught up in the slouching sphinx; the promise of renewal is in the drowning and rising of the "ceremony of innocence." Meaning is to be found in the resonance with the natural music, the rhythm of the gyre, not in the empty promises of a nightmare. This meaning bankrupts the fabrication of opposites and the demonization of the other. Difference is not to be polarized, but harmonized. Extremes, the constructs of the imagination trying to cope with a nature that often defies an easy fit in human models, seek resolution in the resonance in the betwixt and between, the playground of what has become known as deconstruction. Like Blake who always knew the play of life was betwixt the antinomies and not resting at either pole, Yeats has unexpectedly presented a gyre with properties beyond *A Vision*, and empowered the gyre to deconstruct the mythos of revelation, chaos, an idea of nature gone awry; such is the play in perhaps his most widely read poem.

Epilogue

"The Second Coming" is about the threat of the occurrence of what has already come. It is about the threat of more of the same. Its hope rests in the falconer who can abandon his illusion of control and embrace a faith in the falcon. Its curse is its tendency to imprison the imagination within the limits of the imagination. Even so, curse and hope reside on a

continuum, a razor's edge of contiguity.

Criticism is a process of selection, and Yeats' poem was intertextually selected for investigation by recent events on the world scene. As passenger-filled planes pierced proud towers in their silent ceremony of innocence, the grinding rhythm of the poem's opening lines leapt to my mind's eye as it was confronted by a rush of images from past, present and future. In strange synchronicity, what at first seemed so clear became increasingly roiled in the rapid flickering of image and sound byte. Yeats' falconer seemed to occupy several loci on the face of the earth, demonstrating an ample supply of Girard's "doubles," as passionate intensity conspired to reduce the expression of difference to terms of conflict. The connectedness of peoples and cultures seemed to dissolve, as the choosing of sides seemed to feed the slouching beast on his way to a tiny place in the Middle East. As Sean O'Conaill has noted in his review of Girard's *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, the "greatest tragedy" of the attempt to "build a worldview, and historiography, around the right to accuse," and define difference as conflict, is the perpetuation of the evil other and the perpetuation of scapegoating (2001). There are times when poetry and politics merge, and art imitates art, art imitates life and life imitates art simultaneously. Peoples and personae often confront the same nightmares.

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