W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming": A Vision of Cyclical Collapse and Apocalyptic Renewal

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Written in the immediate aftermath of the First World War (January 1919) and first published in 1920, W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" has permeated global cultural bloodstream with extraordinary persistence. Its lines have echoed through Chinua Achebe's seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Joan Didion's essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), episodes of *The Sopranos*, and even a quip by Gordon Gekko in the film *Wall Street* (1987). Few poems capture the fragility of civilization with such prophetic intensity. Yeats articulates a profound anxiety about the disintegration of Western order that resonates acutely in moments of historical crisis. In our own era, where the notion of linear progress feels increasingly tenuous, the poem's evocation of chaos remains a touchstone for collective unease.

The Title and Christian Eschatology

The title draws directly from Christian doctrine that invokes the anticipated return of Christ. In biblical tradition, the "first coming" refers to the Incarnation—the birth of Jesus, which inaugurated a new historical era. The "Second Coming," as described in the *New Testament* (notably in *Matthew 24* and the *Book of Revelation*), will follow a period of tribulation and mark the end of the current age, ushering in Christ's millennial reign of peace. St. Matthew's Gospel vividly portrays the prelude to this event:

> For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved.

Yeats appropriates this framework not to affirm Christian hope, but to subvert it. He transforms a promise of redemption into a harbinger of monstrous renewal.

Yeats's Cyclical Theory of History

Influenced by thinkers like Oswald Spengler (whose *The Decline of the West* appeared around the same time), Yeats viewed history not as progressive but as vast, recurring cycles of approximately two thousand years. In his esoteric system, elaborated in *A Vision* (1925; revised 1937), these cycles are visualized as a "Great Wheel" with twenty-eight phases, corresponding to the lunar month.

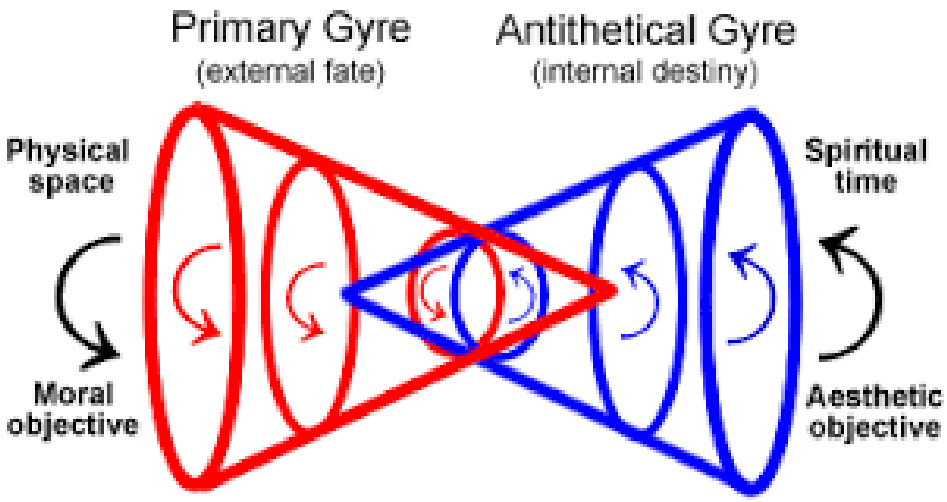

Image Source: https://irishdiscourse.wordpress.com/2020/03/15/turning-and-turning-yeatss-symbolic-gyre/

The gyre depicts two interpenetrating cones (or vortices): one expands as the other contracts. It embodies tensions between contraries such as concord and discord, life and death, or Self and Soul. This dynamic creates perpetual cyclical movement, where dominance shifts as one gyre reaches maximum expansion (chaos) or contraction.

The opening lines ("Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold') illustrate societal breakdown as the current historical gyre widens to its extreme, losing cohesion and unleashing anarchy. Yeats's own note explains that the end of an age occurs when one gyre fully expands and the other contracts, heralding the "revelation" of the incoming era (contrasting the pre-Christian gyre with the post-Christ one). Each civilization traverses this wheel over roughly two millennia. The Christian era, beginning with Christ's birth, is nearing its violent conclusion; the anticipated "Second Coming" thus serves Yeats as a potent metaphor for this pivotal historical turning point.

“Things Fall Apart”

The poem opens with a striking image of disintegration:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
>
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
>
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

Here, the falcon spiraling outward from its trainer symbolizes the loss of control and cohesion in society. Yeats, writing amid the carnage of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, and the Irish War of Independence (including civil strife in his homeland), diagnoses a world unmoored:

> 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.

This inversion where moderation falters and fanaticism thrives captures the moral and political inversions of the postwar era.

The Vision from the Spiritus Mundi

Contemplating the traditional Second Coming triggers a visionary revelation from the *Spiritus Mundi* (the world’s collective soul or Anima Mundi in Yeats’s occult philosophy). What emerges is not the lamb-like Christ but a grotesque sphinx-like figure rising from the desert:

> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
>
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun...

This beast combines human intellect with animalistic instinct and passion. It is a monstrous antithesis to the divine-human harmony of Christ. Unlike the biblical millennium, where “swords shall be beaten into plowshares” and love prevails, Yeats foresees a regime of moral indifference: “pitiless as the sun,” which illuminates the just and unjust alike, indifferent to human suffering.

The Rough Beast and the Anti-Christ

The poem's closing lines invert Christian narrative entirely:

> The darkness drops again; but now I know
>
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
>
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
>
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
>
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The “rocking cradle” of Bethlehem (Christ's birthplace) has disturbed a primordial slumber, awakening the ancient pagan world to nightmare. Now, as the Christian cycle wanes, a “rough beast” (evoking the biblical Antichrist) slouches toward that same sacred site, heralding not salvation but a new era of primal violence.

Yeats's Later Reflection

In April 1936, three years before his death, the seventy-year-old Yeats, by then a Nobel laureate of immense stature, received a letter from the novelist and activist Ethel Mannin, his former lover. She urged him to support a campaign to free a German pacifist imprisoned by the Nazis. Yeats declined direct involvement but directed her to his poem: “If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called ‘The Second Coming’.” He implied that it allegorically captured the apocalyptic atmosphere of post-war Europe, now resurfacing in the rise of totalitarianism—a crisis of authority where the centre, once again, could not hold.

Yeats’s “The Second Coming” endures because it distills the terror of historical rupture into indelible images. In subverting Christian eschatology through his cyclical vision, Yeats offers a stark warning: civilizations rise and fall, and what follows collapse may be far more savage than what preceded it. The poem invites each generation to confront its own widening gyre.