

First Name(s) Surname

Teacher's Name

Introduction to Literary Theory, AN-112

1st October 2003

The Reality of Symbolic Imagery:

The Sources of the Beast in "The Second Coming"

Two things can help one to a better understanding of any literary author in addition to his own works: critical essays written about him, and critical essays which he wrote about others.

This is particularly true of William Butler Yeats, who was a prolific writer of literary criticism as well as a theoretician of his own poetry. Moreover, in the case of such an intriguing work as "The Second Coming," which is also loaded with symbolic elements, such a combined reading can even provide one with a point of departure, which would otherwise be far more difficult to find.

One may still think that my choice of Yeats's essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," written in 1901, is rather arbitrary as regards the interpretation of one of Yeats's own poems. After all, Yeats was much more interested in Blake's poetry than in that of Shelley, it seems, and his philosophical system also appears to be closer to that of the early Romantic visionary. My selection can nevertheless be justified; and in the process I will refer to passages from Yeats's essay as well as from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

Referring to Shelley, Yeats claims in the first section of "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" that in *Prometheus Unbound* "[t]he speaker . . . might almost be Blake, who held that the Reason not only created Ugliness, but all other evils" (68). Later on, he defines the Furies who come to torture Prometheus in Shelley's lyrical drama as "ministers of ugliness and all evil," stunningly applying Blake's terms to Shelley's poetry without inverted commas (76). This has a double meaning: on the one hand, Yeats identifies his own view on this topic with that of Blake, and on the other, he claims that Shelley's views can also be related to Blake's philosophy.

As Jeffares (204) points out, an even more direct link between “The Second Coming” and *Prometheus Unbound* can be discovered if we juxtapose the following lines of the respective poems:

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.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, Act I, ll. 625–28; Shelley’s works cited from Baker)

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

(“The Second Coming,” ll. 7–8; Yeats’s works cited from Yeats, *Collected Poems*)

Not only are the two passages astonishingly similar as concerns their content and way of expression but their form shows a significant resemblance as well. Both texts are written in blank verse (a verse form which, since Milton, had mostly been reserved for profoundly philosophical thought in both lyric and epic poetry, cf. Ferencz), and the Fury’s thoughts are rendered into short, descriptive sentences, which also characterise the first section of “The Second Coming.” In light of these similarities, I believe it is right to apply this essay of Yeats’s as an expression of his own opinion with reference to “The Second Coming,” all the more so, since it can help us identify the possible source for the image of Yeats’s ominous beast. Let us first see the description itself, taken from ll. 13–17 of “The Second Coming.”

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.

Much has been revealed (and even more guessed) by critics as to what the meaning of this symbol can be; but I will here focus on its source instead, which is, in my opinion, quite illuminating if one is to appreciate Yeats's poetic technique. In "The Philosophy," he makes the following statement, discussing Shelley's imagery:

The ministers of beauty and ugliness were certainly more than metaphors or picturesque phrases to one who believed the "thoughts which are called real or external objects" differed but in regularity of recurrence from "hallucinations, dreams, and the ideas of madness," and lessened this difference by telling how he had dreamed "three several times, between intervals of two or more years, the same precise dream," and who had seen images with the mind's eye that left his nerves shaken for days together. (76–77)

Although we do not know whether Yeats's nerves had ever been left shaken by the vision of such images as depicted in "The Second Coming," this passage can to a great extent be applied to his own visionary experience as the source for his inspiration. This explanation is further confirmed by his own account, quoted by Jeffares, of a session with MacGregor Mathers, who once presented him with a cardboard symbol to meditate over. Consequently, he received a vision which, incidentally, involved the beast described in "The Second Coming." Yeats himself tells us that the creature was, indeed, a real vision, and Mathers informed him about the nature of the beast: it had been "a being of the order of Salamanders" (Jeffares 205).

But how can an individual, however universal the inspiration or visionary experience he has received may be, claim that this has anything to do with reality? For this is precisely what Yeats does, presenting his own vision to us in a prophetic manner. The answer to this intriguing question can be found in Yeats's view about the collective unconscious, whose workings he praises so much in Shelley's poetry. Considering Shelley's early symbols, Yeats claims that these were "images that rose in what seemed the idleness of his mind" ("The Philosophy of Shelley's

Poetry” 78). Special emphasis, however, must be put on the word ‘seemed,’ as Yeats believes that this “idleness of his mind” in fact enabled Shelley to contact the ‘collective unconscious,’ the storehouse of symbols such as his own “rough beast.” In “The Second Coming,” this storehouse is called “*Spiritus Mundi*,” or the spirit of the world, something as real and perceivable (to our spiritual senses, at least) as the world itself. Why it is normally impossible for us to see these visions is, according to Mary Shelley, the fact that “we, clogged by ‘error, ignorance and strife’ see them not till we are fitted by purification and improvement to their higher state” (Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” 73).¹ It seems Yeats honestly believed in the reality of this storehouse of symbolic images, which found expression in, among other writings, his essay on “The Symbolism of Poetry”: “Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive . . . the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies” (31), where the moment of contemplation is like a gateway that appears “when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation” (32).

The nature of the “rough beast,” on the other hand, is in close connection with the nature of the “Second Coming” in Yeats’s philosophy. However ugly and evil this image may seem, it is not more than the inevitable consequence of the turning gyres and is thus described without moral considerations. In fact, one is inclined to agree in this question with Prometheus, who in Shelley’s drama maintains that “I weigh not what ye do, but what ye suffer, / Being evil. Cruel was the power which called / You, or aught else so wretched, into light” (*Prometheus Unbound*, Act I, ll. 480–482).

¹ The embedded quotation is from the “Conclusion” of Shelley’s *The Sensitive Plant*, in which “error, ignorance, and strife” (l. 123) are contrasted with the eternal existences of “love, and beauty, and delight” (l. 134).

The Furies, Shelley's counterparts of the "rough beast" as far as their symbolism is concerned, also give an apt description of themselves some lines earlier, in a passage referred to specifically by Yeats in his essay:

As from the rose which the pale priestess kneels
 To gather for her festal crown of flowers
 The æreal crimson falls, flushing her cheek,
 So from our victim's destined agony
 The shade which is our form invests us round,
 Else we are shapeless as our mother Night.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, Act I, ll. 467–72)

It is quite easy to see that there is a deep analogy between the shapeless Furies, who are given form merely by the shadow of agony, and the "rough beast," around which "[r]eel shadows of the indignant desert birds" ("The Second Coming," l. 17). Thus, the rough beast is not more than the fulfilment of destiny, and therefore rather different from the Christian notion of Christ's second coming. The major anomaly is explained by Yeats's idiosyncratic philosophical system, in which a sense of circular or spiral development can be traced. In the 1925 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats phrased the following, seemingly paradoxical axiom: "all things dying each other's life, living each other's death" (Jeffares 204). His "second coming," therefore, is not a final judgement of the world, only the end of another cycle, which is to be followed by other incarnations at intervals of 2000 years (cf. ". . . but now I know / That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle. . ."). This is also in keeping, as Kathleen Raine remarks, with the Blakean maxim presented in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and hate, are necessary to Human existence" (149).

The new incarnation, or the apocalyptic appearance of the “rough beast,” takes place at the end of such a cycle, which in turn began with the incarnation of Christ; hence the reference to “a rocking cradle” in a manner just as ambiguous as the situation in *The Second Shepherd's Play*, where the Babe is substituted with a goat, symbolising Christ's passion as well as referring to the devil by means of its horns. The two periods can be depicted as interpenetrating cones; the cone of the good reaching its greatest extension, and therefore lowest energy (“The best lack all conviction. . .”), whereas evil is “full of passionate intensity.”²

What, then, is Yeats's conclusion concerning the Second Coming? As Raine has discovered, the image of the “rocking cradle” as the symbol for reincarnation may have derived from a passage in Blake's *Jerusalem*, a text which argues that “the reincarnating souls [are] driven from birth to birth by fear”:

This World is all a Cradle for the erred Wandering Phantom,
 Rock'd by Year, Month, Day & Hour; and every Two Moments
 Between dwells a Daughter of Beulah to feed the Human Vegetable. (166)

What this “rough beast” of reincarnation will be like, one can only guess. Here, Yeats relies on his own visionary experience, but by finishing his poem in a question, he acknowledges

² It must always be pointed out that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in Yeats's system mean something different from their traditional religious interpretations, they allude to something more basic, not an external law, but the internal law of one's truth to oneself. The structure of the poem also reflects this contrast between energy and passivity; the first section, with its simple, descriptive sentences, mirrors the falling apart of the world of the “innocent” (in a manner similar to Endre Ady's “Kocsi-út az éjszakában”: “Minden Egész eltörött. . .”), and the passivity of “the best,” while the second section abounds in powerful images of energy, all referring to the forces of evil. The same idea is reflected by the metric structure of the poem as well.

that not even a poet prophet can give a conclusive answer to what the exact nature of the new incarnation will be. Raine relates the last two lines of “The Second Coming” to Blake’s “The Mental Traveller,” where Blake describes an immensely complex system of extreme dualities and a contrary motion between “the [male] Babe” and the “Woman Old.”

The identity of the Babe with Christ is established by the image of the crown of thorns; and with Dionysus by the tearing of the heart out of his side by a “Woman Old”; as Juno commanded the Titans to tear the heart out of the side of the child Dionysus. The Babe grows to manhood and breaks his manacles, binding in turn the woman, who has meanwhile grown younger. The reversal continues until the man, old and exhausted, “wanders away,” and his place is taken by “a little Female Babe,” who in turn begins to grow up, is pursued by the now rejuvenated male principle, ages, and becomes “a Woman Old.” Again comes the reversal, with the only difference that the male Babe who in his first appearance was “smiling” is now “frowning,” as if at some Second Coming the Christ-child were to appear not in meekness but in wrath. (Raine 152)

This means that the “rough beast” of the Second Coming is in fact identical with the Christ-child, it is only its surface characteristics that have changed. This is also why the precise form of the incarnation cannot be foretold. The poet prophet, Yeats, is content with telling us that we should expect the Second Coming, and his baleful conclusion prepares us to face the new incarnation, which will definitely be more wrathful than the first coming of Christ was:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

References



Baker, Carlos ed. *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. New York: Random House (The Modern Library), 1951.

Ferencz, Győző. W. B. Yeats Seminar. ELTE, Spring 1999.



Jeffares, A. Norman. *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1984.

Raine, Kathleen. "From Blake to *A Vision*." In: *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the*



Work of W. B. Yeats. Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble Books, 1990. 106–176.

Yeats, W. B. *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1982 (1950).

---. "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry." In: *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961.

65–96.



---. "The Symbolism of Poetry." In: David Lodge ed. *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*.

London: Longman, 1972. 28–34.

