

What Rough Beast Indeed?

A New Reading of “The Second Coming” Informed by “Demon and Beast”

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Canonical poems too often stagnate into unchallenged interpretations because critics avoid reading against the traditional grain. I present an embarrassing personal example: though I consider myself a critical reader, I recently heard Shelley's "Ozymandias" read as if for the first time. From high school advanced placement courses and tutorials through Romanticism courses and English literature surveys, I have consistently applied the same interpretation to this poem: what humans create must inexorably crumble in the face of passing epochs. I read Ozymandias's words ironically, for his kingdom lay as the statue's shattered remains, decayed and wrecked. He believed his kingdom invincible, but ultimately descended into the Egyptian desert dust.

Upon hearing the poem recited again, I perceived for the first time the detailed and long-lasting shattered visage:

whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed....

The poem tells little of the ancient king, but reveals the everlasting power of the artist. Though Ozymandias, Greek name for Ramses II, lived in the time of biblical Moses, the artist's rendering of the king's face reveals even now the passion and leadership of that King of Kings. The poem celebrates the artist's function of defying time. Though the king no longer rules and his kingdom lay in dust, the artist remains in the still recognizable great statue's ruins.

"Ozymandias" so interpreted introduces a recurring theme in Yeats's poetry. As he aged Yeats became more concerned about his own survival and the survival of Protestant ascendancy aristocracy in war-torn and increasingly Catholic Ireland. He married late, purchased and renovated an ancestral home, sired two children, and wrote of leaving his legacy—personal, artistic, political—to his home and his class. Art's survival through time's destructive power

appealed to Yeats because it represented the possibility of his own survival through the apocalyptic convergence of gyres.

At few other times did destruction seem more immediately immanent for the ascendancy than during the Anglo-Irish War and the resulting Irish Civil War. *The Tower*, and most particularly “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” demonstrates Yeats’s discomfort about and reaction to the ravaging war. By purchasing and restoring the ancestral tower, Thoor Ballylee, he chose to create despite the raging madness surrounding him. He sought desperately for a way to outlive the ravaging war and the coming apocalyptic end of the age.

Many of the poems included in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, most written before those in *The Tower*, suggest a desire to survive through destruction as did the Ozymandias sculptor.¹ “The Second Coming,” the poem most closely aligned with “Ozymandias,” has been interpreted as Yeats’s anxiety at World War One and the Irish Civil War’s destruction.

According to this interpretive school he perceives in these wars hints of future convergence of gyres and the corresponding destructive replacement of old order with new order, a destruction that includes him and his ascendancy class. The last two lines are read as a rhetorical question, the answer to which has not yet been determined. The end has been interpreted like that of “Leda and the Swan,” ambivalent and typically Yeatsian in its indecision.

I suggest an alternative reading. “The Second Coming” follows “Demon and Beast” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Too often in Yeats’s canon, a poem’s interpretation focuses attention on the poem’s formal construction and referential function, not on its context within its collection. Yet Yeats intended that these poems be collected in their printed order. Critics have

¹ *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* was first published in 1921, though prepared for publication in 1920. Most of the poems contained in the collection were also published in 1920 in *The Dial*. *The Tower* was published in 1928. Clearly *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* better demonstrates Yeats’s temporal closeness to the events of Easter, 1916 (*Manuscript Materials* xx-xxi).

written little about “Demon and Beast;” I believe interpretations of “The Second Coming” have suffered as a result. I suggest that, after closely reading “Demon and Beast” and applying that interpretation to “The Second Coming,” Yeats intended the poem to definitively answer its own concluding question.

Michael Robartes and the Dancer

Little critical attention informs this short collection. Lacking a unified theme like *The Wild Swans at Coole*, which precedes it in Finneran’s edition, and *The Tower*, which follows it, this collection combines three separate mini-themes: gender and love, destructive Irish politics during the Civil War, and beast imagery. The collection immediately follows the last poem in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, ironically entitled “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes.” “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” seems an apt transition into the collection, for it combines the themes of gender and love with beast imagery in a vision of Maud Gonne dancing between a Sphinx-like beast (seemingly a female version of the beast in “The Second Coming”) and a Buddha. It also introduces the collection’s political theme in Yeats’s deliberate ambivalence toward the violence surrounding him, “who never gave the burning town a thought” (57). I do not intend a full discussion of “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,” but suggest that Yeats intended *The Wild Swans at Coole* to end with this poem as both conclusion to the volume and transition into *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.

The collection’s first four poems introduce the voice of a woman, a new move for Yeats. While the move may not be convincing, it demonstrates Yeats’s early concern for gender and his desire to be more “progressive.” The move ultimately fails in the short, underdeveloped lines of “She” in “Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” but succeeds in the sexually powerful and

voracious woman of “Solomon and the Witch.” The next five poems—“Easter, 1916,” “Sixteen Dead Men,” “The Rose Tree,” “On a Political Prisoner,” and “The Leaders of the Crowd”—represent the collection’s political poems. In these Yeats questions the legitimacy of the Anglo-Irish War and the Irish Civil War, vacillating between siding against the British and against the Irish as well, backing himself into a corner from which he can do nothing but write. The last six poems—“Towards Break of Day,” “Demon and Beast,” “The Second Coming,” “A Prayer for My Daughter,” “A Meditation in Time of War,” and “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee”—represent the collection’s beast poems and their effects upon Yeats. In each Yeats presents a beast in slightly different configuration. “Towards Break of Day” presents Arthur’s legendary white stag leaping through a waking dream. “Demon and Beast” presents his own body and soul as demon and beast, imprisoning his intellectual construction of self. “The Second Coming” presents an Ozymandias-like inverted god figure slouching to be born. “A Prayer for My Daughter” presents his newborn daughter sleeping through the monstrous storm outside, disturbingly akin to the previous poem’s rough beast. “A Meditation in Time of War” presents the Almighty as “One animate” spiritual reality contrasted to humanity’s inanimate “phantasy” physical nature. “To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee” presents Yeats’s reaction to the previous destructive beasts, leaving his art for civilization’s re-builders to see. I focus in this paper on Yeats’s configuration of beast in “Demon and Beast” and “The Second Coming.”

“Demon and Beast”

In the first stanza, Yeats introduces the beast images with, “That crafty demon and that loud beast / That plague me day and night” (2-3). To provide a gloss on Yeats’s use of the word

“demon,” reference to his involvement in the mystical Golden Dawn must be made. According to Ellmann, Yeats “attained the inner order of the Golden Dawn” in 1893 and “bound himself with a solemn oath” to work towards becoming “self-born, born anew.” He chose for his order name *Demon Est Deus Inversus* (D.E.D.I.), suggesting his dual human nature and his desire to undergo personal transmutation, becoming “the pure spirit of perfected man” (96). Among members of this and other secret orders, Yeats was known as D.E.D.I., and even signed correspondence with the abbreviation (124). Using the term “crafty demon” in the poem evokes an aspect of Yeats’s self-construction, most probably his spiritual identity and desire to attain “pure spirit of perfected man.” Describing the beast as “loud” suggests a more sensual aspect of his character, perhaps his physical identity. “Demon” and “beast” resonate with one another, as if one is physical manifestation of the other. He configures demon and beast as soul and body, an intellectual configuration of self. That these two—demon and beast, soul and body—plagued him night and day suggests an imprisonment to this self-construct. He escapes the tyranny of this intellectual self-construct only “For certain minutes at the least,” (1) though he suggests that he continually struggles: “Though I had long perned in the gyre / Between my hatred and desire” (5-6). This first stanza illustrates Yeats’s struggle to escape from intellectually constructed self, from the demon and beast of soul and body. The struggle for Yeats must also be a vacillation between some seldom-achieved escape from self and the intellectual construct of self as demon and beast. It is this state of escape to which the second stanza turns, introducing that state with the last two lines of the first stanza: “I saw my freedom won / And all laugh in the sun” (7-8). The lines suggest a manic quality to his escape from self.

The last two lines of the first stanza also intimate the vision quality of this escape state, for he “sees” his freedom won as in a dream. This dream may well represent a drug-induced

hallucination. Yeats experimented early with drugs, mostly hashish but later occasional opiates. Arthur Symon, member of the Rhymers, a group Foster describes as Yeats's self-configured "mutually supportive literary circle," introduced Yeats to recreational hashish use (108-9). In the late 1890s Yeats experimented with drugs to induce visions and enhance artistic creativity:

[I]t was no accident that the language was by turns narcotic and hallucinogenic. WBY had learned to take hashish with the shady followers of the mystic Louis Claude de Saint-Martin in Paris, and with Davray and Symons the previous December. In April 1897 he experimented with mescal, supplied by Havelock Ellis, who recorded that "while an excellent subject for visions, and very familiar with various vision-producing drugs and processes," WBY found the effect on his breathing unpleasant; "he much prefers haschich," which he continued to take in tablets, a particularly potent form of ingestion (Foster 178).

By 1898 Yeats attempted psychic communication "astrally and chemically (mescaline on 16 September, hashish four days later). Unsurprisingly, visions followed" which Yeats recorded in his "visions notebook" (196). That "all laugh in the sun" may allude to his ironic realization that, though drugs little helped his creative process, they contributed to his visionary freedom from intellectual self-construct.

In his vision state Yeats enacts the move of "All Souls Night," "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and many later poems, calling up ghosts of the dead. This event occurs in the Irish National Gallery, filled with paintings of dead Anglo-Irish nobles (including his own ancestors) and an Irish Franciscan. Whereas Yeats concludes "All Soul's Night" refusing to tell his "certain marvelous thing" and refuting his own art, this poem calls the ghosts from the art. While mummy wrappings, the trappings of the dead, essentially "mum" his artistic voice in "All Souls Night," the dead effectively live again through art in his escape vision, a significant departure from the selfish nihilistic theme of "All Soul's Night." The move of "Demon and Beast" enacts the same move as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," for calling up ghosts of

the dead leads to the poem as creative expression. In “Demon and Beast,” however, such imaginatively fruitful conjuring of spirits happens only after escaping his construction of self.

Within this vision these portrait ghosts welcome him and beckon him into their gallery company, a potentially uncomfortable move for the aging Yeats. The escape from self that allows this vision seems also to allow animation in these paintings, suggesting that escape from self represents the ability to share in the experience of the dead. When Strafford smiles “as though / It made him happier to know / I understood his plan” (13-15), Yeats clearly equates the understanding gained in this escape vision with realizing the plan of the dead. I suggest their plan is to survive through art. Wadding belonged to a more enlightened Catholic Church of the sixteenth century, while Strafford and the Ormondes belonged to the ascendancy. Both groups felt threatened by Ireland’s current violent, bloody civil war and by popular, priest-controlled, reactionary Irish Catholic nationalism. Yet each group survives in the gallery’s art and beckoning ghosts. This echoes the lasting move in Shelley’s “Ozymandias”: the king’s visage, though shattered, retains both artist’s shaping hand and king’s domineering snarl. Yeats himself made a similar move in “The New Faces,” in which “the living seem more shadowy than they [the ancestors, the first dead]” (8). In “The New Faces” Yeats configures art as giving the first dead new and everlasting life: art is that “where we wrought that shall break the teeth of Time” (4). The move to suggest art as a means of surviving resonates within Yeats’s poetic corpus and informs the escape vision of “Demon and Beast”: he is beckoned to become as the portraits have become, ghosts surviving the devastation of civil war. He ultimately understands their thoughts as their plan to survive, equating their thoughts with his own “thoughts”—creative expression or art: “For all men’s thoughts grew clear / Being dear as mine are dear” (19-20).

The third stanza enacts his sorrow at the physical world's intrusion into his escape vision. Demon and beast, soul and body, his intellectual constructed self, intrude upon his thoughts in the guise of gulls perning and splashing around a portly green-pated bird on a lake. Yeats repeatedly uses the image of an intrusive bird disturbing his escape from the physical world. In "Her Triumph" a "miraculous strange bird" (12) shrieks into his chivalric escape vision. In "A Memory of Youth," remembering a time when he loved Maud Gonne and considered that love returned, a bird interrupts his reverie and steals the pleasure of the remembrance. "Were it not that Love upon the cry / Of a most ridiculous little bird / Tore from the clouds his marvellous moon" (19-21). Returning to "Demon and Beast," as he transitions from escape reverie to physical reality he realizes that, having escaped from demon and beast ("being no more demoniac" 30), a simple bird shocks him into action. This shocking transition from escape vision to physical world, from freedom to possession, "Could rouse my whole nature" (33). Yeats configures the pain of this transition as an impetus for creating art, a means of survival revealed in the ghosts' plan. Understanding the pain that often accompanies artistic creation anticipates his move in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," in which violence and suffering become part of his creative agony, necessary to the process of artistic expression. The rousing of nature through painful transition also suggests a more sinister implication, that painful destruction may actually enhance the creative process.

In the fourth stanza Yeats, in a moment of clear self-understanding, states that rousing his nature, a "natural victory," is a product of his intellectual self-construct. His escape vision suggests a better way of engaging in the creative process: escaping the tyranny of intellectual self-construct, avoiding the pain of creation, and remaining alive in his art. Rather than suffering through the apocalyptic destruction of civil war and attempting to salvage joyful creativity from

dolorous destruction, he wishes to linger in the escape vision by living through art, not existing through physical pain. The move is that of “The Stolen Child” and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”:
 escaping, configuring himself as above and beyond the physical events surrounding and threatening his existence. Yet he acknowledges that no matter how well he escapes the tyranny of demon and beast into imaginary escape vision, body and soul always manage to pull him back into the physical world. Thus he ironically undercuts his claim of “being no more demoniac” by suggesting that, as long as he lives, he cannot escape the intellectual self-construct of body and soul. It is here that growing old becomes a welcome event, not an anxious moment. “Chilled blood”—sluggishness of body and soul—allows him to enter more such escape visions, the “sweetness” that he craves: “And that mere growing old, that brings / Chilled blood, this sweetness brought” (38-39). He wants the freedom from demon and beast to linger longer than moments, for “half a day,” perhaps (42).

The last stanza brings the sweetness he craves to a culminating definition. Yeats configures the starvation of monastic Anthony and his followers in the Egyptian desert as an “exultant” occasion. He envies their “sweetness” of denying the physical, of entering into the euphoria of dying. Death allows them to enter the vision state he so desperately craves and provides freedom from body and soul, from demon and beast, from intellectual self-construct. Just as the escape vision allowed him to see that the dead ghosts survive beyond their own lives and struggles, he envisions his death like that of the monks, denying the physical and awaiting his everlasting life through his art. He foresees his existence through art beyond his physical life and the physical struggles of Ireland. He makes the same move in “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness” by suggesting that, come apocalypse, ascendancy’s destruction, or his own demise, he will keep working and his work will live.

What About that Rough Beast?

The last lines of “Demon and Beast” suggest the move of “The Second Coming.” Though death come to him and destruction to his ascendancy descendents, exultant victory over natural things will be accomplished by living through his art. This reading of “Demon and Beast” informs Yeats’s configuration of beast in “The Second Coming,” a configuration unascertained in an isolated reading of the poem. The demon and beast of “Demon and Beast” necessarily inform the rough beast of “The Second Coming” in view of the poems’ proximity to one another and their use of identical words for the beast. I conjecture that the rough beast of “The Second Coming” represents Yeats himself, controlling the demon and beast construct of self by escaping the tyranny of physical existence.

“The Second Coming”

In this first stanza Yeats vacillates through more bird imagery. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre” (1) recalls his earlier statements from “Demon and Beast”: describing himself he writes “I had long perned in the gyre” (5), while describing the white gull he writes “gyring down and perning there” (26). All these bird images indicate Yeats’s vacillation between the elusive freedom of the escape vision and the encompassing tyranny of soul and body. That “the falcon cannot hear the falconer” (2) suggests some natural order has been upended, destroyed by “mere anarchy” loosed upon the world. Introducing the poem with imagery of vacillation suggests that “The Second Coming” may be another “sweet” vision in which Yeats has escaped the tyranny of intellectual self-construct. The poem’s title suggests a

visionary quality, inferring St. John's biblical Revelation of the end times and second coming of Christ, particularly referring to the battle of Armageddon in loosing "the blood dimmed tide."²

This first stanza presents a world in which all is inverted, in which the natural order gives way to some other organizational system. Master and servant relationships are abolished when the falcon cannot hear the falconer. The "ceremony of innocence is drowned" (6) through its own perverted and deadly baptism. That "the best lack all conviction" (7) refers to Ireland's intellectual skepticism and paralysis. Yeats returns to this theme in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," retreating to his tower and escaping the violent cry of the rabble. On one hand he sees in Ireland soldiers, praiseworthy men of action, writing admiringly in "The Road at My Door" of "An affable Irregular" (1) and "A brown Lieutenant and his men" (6). Yet he also understands the destructive violence and intellectual ignorance inherent in such action, writing in "The Stare's Nest at My Window,"

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned (6-9).

By the end of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" Yeats configures the soldiers from "The Road at My Door," previously admirable men, as transformed into intellectually paralyzed, single-mindedly violent drones. He writes of the intellectual nothingness for which they grasp,

The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage hungry troop
Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or face
Plunges toward nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide
For the embrace of nothing (11-14).

Returning to "The Second Coming," Yeats's configuration of the "best" transformed into violent, intellectually paralyzed drones also describes "the worst full of passionate intensity" (8), who share unthinking opinions and act upon anti-intellectual beliefs. He describes himself nearly

² Revelation 16: 14-16

drawn into this anti-intellectual action, claiming that “I, my wits astray / Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried / For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay” (14-16) in “I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness.”

Undoubtedly Yeats presents this inverted order as the coming apocalypse, when the gyres converge and history passes from one cycle to the next. Situated immediately after “Demon and Beast,” the first stanza enacts an escape vision like the previous poem. The “vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*” (12) is, in fact, another of Yeats’s escape visions, an example of a “sweetness strayed” into the future. Significantly Yeats configures the vision of approaching apocalypse almost positively, using the word “mere” to describe “anarchy.” In “Demon and Beast” he makes the same gesture, describing positively the aging process: “mere growing old.” Yeats’s fascist ranting from later poems suggests his high level of comfort with ideas like anarchic nihilistic destruction. Using the term “mere anarchy” in which “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold” (3) also suggests the insignificance of anarchic destruction within his escape vision. By escaping his soul and body construction of self he finds the means to escape the physically destructive apocalypse of civil war and disintegration of the natural order. The second stanza of this poem details more specifically his escape vision of the apocalyptic future.

Yeats evokes the relationship between this poem and St. John’s revelation in the first lines of the second stanza: “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand” (9-10). He enters an escape vision in which apocalyptic future reveals itself. In this vision, made possible by his escape from constructed self, the beast emerges. Because of the beast’s proximity to Yeats’s evocation of the Second Coming, critics often interpret this beast representing a destructive anti-Christ figure. While the poem’s imagery certainly invites religious connotations, Yeats’s earlier self-construction as *Demon Est Deus Inversus* suggests a

much closer parallel to Yeats himself. Since demon and beast represent Yeats's intellectual constructed self as soul and body in the previous poem, this awakening beast represents Yeats himself. A clear reference to Shelley's "Ozymandias," this beast emerges in Yeats's escape vision as his surviving self in art. As the ghosts in the portrait gallery and the king's stony visage grant their creators' existence beyond the ravages of time and apocalypse, so Yeats envisions his own survival of apocalypse and destruction in the awakening beast. Even though he envisions Ireland as having collapsed in the apocalyptic changing of the gyres, his Ozymandias-like self remains, soul and body of demon and beast.

The Yeats-beast of this vision, the "image out of *Spiritus Mundi*," emerges Sphinx-like "in sands of the desert" (13) just as Anthony and his two thousand followers remain "withered to a bag of bones" ("Demon" 49) on the Egyptian desert shore. The beast exhibits god-like power of the sun that had shone upon his laughing freedom and dried the bones of the starved monks. The beast is no longer that which controls Yeats's roused nature. In this escape vision Yeats configures the beast as created and controlled by the vision itself. Transcendental Yeats as pure spirit controls and dictates the slow awakening of Yeats as body and soul in art. The desert birds, which once had jarred his reverie with their physical presence, now reel indignantly as intangible shadows with no effect. The beast "moving its slow thighs" (16) evokes the "chilled blood" of old age from "Demon and Beast" while also inferring steady and sure sexual procreation and foreshadowing the beast's later Bethlehem birth.

When "the darkness drops again" (18) Yeats's escape vision ends and he re-encounters tyranny of demon and beast, of physical and intellectual self-construct. But the vision of "The Second Coming" remains with him and reminds him that, come apocalyptic destruction to Ireland or death to his soul and body, he will survive through his art as Ozymandias-like beast.

He embraces the confluence of gyres knowing that he will survive in his art. At the end of the twenty centuries, when epochs invert through the converging gyres, it is he, *Demon Est Deus Inversus*, who will be reborn as god-like beast. The rocking cradle vexing the twenty centuries to nightmare contains his own creative process.³ Envisioning soul and body born into the next gyre, the destruction of apocalypse leads to rebirth through art, Ozymandias style. The poem ends, not with a question, but with an answer. “What rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” (21-22) The beast is an aging Yeats, slouching with chilled blood and slow thighs toward Bethlehem to be reborn through his art. The second coming is his own, an artistic reincarnation far beyond the physical violence of contemporary Ireland.

This poem extends that “sweetness” which Yeats so desperately desired in “Demon and Beast,” for the vision remains through one more poem to reveal the future in which he controls the beast and the demon. My insistence upon reading “The Second Coming” in its context within *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* extends to the next three poems in the collection. This radical re-reading of “The Second Coming” in light of “Demon and Beast” informs canonical “Prayer for My Daughter” and short “A Meditation in Time of War” and “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee.” Although I intend no thorough investigation of these poems, I offer these few suggestions for new readings. Realizing that Yeats undercuts his own stances as often as he makes them, I provide only one side of a re-reading of these poems and leave open the probability that my suggestions have already been undercut by other critics in the field.

³ At this point the discussion of “A Prayer for My Daughter” could begin, but I postpone the significant contention for an entirely new section below.

Relating to the Collection as Context

“A Prayer for my Daughter” presents Yeats’s newborn daughter Anne sleeping through a howling storm “half hid / Under this cradle-hood and coverlid” (1-2). This newborn intentionally evokes the rough beast of “The Second Coming,” “slouching toward Bethlehem to be born.” Yeats configures the beast as his own second coming, physical survival through art, birth of pure spirit (the escape vision as creative process) into controlled physical existence as beast. Yet the birth of Anne also suggests a physical rebirth through which he will survive biologically after apocalyptic destruction. After comparing this physical procreation of self through Anne to the spiritual birth of self through beast in the second stanza—“Imagining in excited reverie / That the future years had come” (13-14)—Yeats disparages his physical procreation. Configuring her physical appearance as that which will attract or repel appropriate or inappropriate suitors, Yeats turns this prayer for his daughter into a lament on the potentially ineffective future of physical reproduction. Fearing she will attract a bridegroom full of “arrogance and hatred” (77) that might taint Yeats’s bloodline and doom his descendents to their own intellectual apocalyptic end, Yeats returns to his “sweet” vision in the prayer’s penultimate stanza.

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
 The soul recovers its radical innocence
 And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
 Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
 And that its own sweet will is heaven’s will;
 She can, though every face should scowl 70
 And every windy quarter howl
 Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

He finds his solution in his self-delighting escape vision, in his “own sweet will”—rebirth through his art, not through his soul and body.

Reading “Prayer for My Daughter” in light of this interpretation of “The Second Coming” reinforces the strong move made in “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” particularly that made in the last poem, “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness.” Instead of relying upon his daughter’s bridegroom to provide a lasting “house, / Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious” (“Prayer” 73-4) or relying on his own tower-home to provide creative life that “overflows without ambitious pains; And rains down life until the basin spills, / And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains” (“Ancestral Houses” 3-5), Yeats chooses instead to “turn away and shut the door” (35). He wishes to retreat into his escape vision in the last lines of “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness”:

The abstract joy,
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. 40

“Abstract joy” and “daemonic images” certainly evoke the beast of “The Second Coming,” while the “ageing man” evokes “Demon and Beast” which describe the relative ease of experiencing escape vision as physical faculties become sluggish and impaired. That he equates visions experienced as an aging man with those experienced as a growing boy may also suggest a strong affinity between earlier drug-induced hallucinations and his current age-induced escape visions. Certainly Yeats mistrusts physical reproduction as a means of surviving the converging gyres in “Prayer for My Daughter.”

“A Meditation in Time of War” emphasizes the brief visionary state of his escape, realizing for the briefest time his physical insignificance in the face of spiritual animation. He configures his own rebirth through art as a means of becoming “that One [who] is animate” (4). Perhaps “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee” best encapsulates the theme of living

through art. In the words carved into the stone which “remain when all is ruin once again” (6), Yeats envisions himself existing beyond his own death.

Reviewing the other poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in light of this newly offered reading of “Second Coming” might reveal a unifying pattern for the collection. In this I stand on shifty ground, so provide only the sketchiest of suggestions to direct rereading. The dialogical poems between man and woman—“Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” “Solomon and the Witch,” and “An Image from a Past Life”—may configure Yeats’s vacillating dialogue between escape vision existence and intellectual demon and beast constructed self. Evidence from the earliest printing of these poems in manuscript and in *The Dial* indicate that the dialogical “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” immediately followed “The Second Coming,” suggesting some connection between the two. Perhaps Yeats configured the dragon of “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” as the beast of “The Second Coming.” If so, then the argument presented by “He” in the first verse paragraph may be an internal argument over future existence in art between intellectual constructed self and escape vision existence. The “She” who clarifies and summarizes, who gets the last word, may represent his growing understanding that physical beauty and procreation may not offer the most efficient solution for his survival.

Perhaps the political poems—“Easter 1916,” “Sixteen Dead Men,” “The Rose Tree,” “On a Political Prisoner,” and “The Leaders of the Crowd”—work to suggest Yeats’s growing dismay at the immanent destruction Ireland faces. As he previews the approaching apocalypse and examines the real possibility that his figure of Ireland in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* may well have caused some of that bloodshed (Ure 69), the political poems may also work to force Yeats into a defense of continued poetic production. He answers his own internal indictment with the solution of “The Second Coming”: he must create poetry in order to survive the destruction.

That *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* as a collection has received little critical attention elicits no negative response because it defies unified discussion as a collection. That “Demon and Beast” has received so little attention shames Yeats scholars. Even taken as an independent poem, Yeats’s self-awareness in this poem alone deserves attention. He recognizes his own self-constructed D.E.D.I. demon and beast identity as restrictive and tyrannical. He identifies his escape into dream space as an effort to escape his soul and body, a move made elsewhere but seldom so self-consciously. He suggests a method for surviving the civil war and the apocalyptic destruction surrounding him that had not been previously identified except in *The Tower*. Even had these characteristics not been identified, Yeats scholars should certainly have struggled with this poem because of its proximity to “The Second Coming,” particularly when aware of Yeats’s deliberate building of meanings in poem after poem.

I find the interpretation of “The Second Coming” presented in this paper a much more satisfying reading of the poem. Yeats’s early configuration of self as D.E.D.I., his struggle and need to survive into the next gyre, and his insecure self-identity all read seamlessly into this interpretation. This reading also abandons the need to place the poem within a loosely Christian tradition, a move that has baffled previous critics. Finally, this reading avoids the temptation of identifying the beast as some historical epoch or character, a move that far too many critics have made. Yeats is beast, pure spirit physically reborn in art.

Bibliography

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