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THE "ROUGH BEAST" AND HISTORICAL NECESSITY: 
A NEW CONSIDERATION OF YEATS'S "THE SECOND 
COMING"

On April 8, 1938, William Butler Yeats, commenting on the world political scene in a letter to his friend Ethel Mannin, wrote:

If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called The Second Coming. It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening. I have written of the same thing again and again since. This will seem little to you with your strong practical sense, for it takes fifty years for a poet's weapons to influence the issue.¹

"The same thing" was the emergence not only in Nazi Germany, but in Italy, Spain, Russia, and China of strongman dictators, all of them potential avatars for that "rough beast" whose own impending appearance in a desperate and chaotic world Yeats's "The Second Coming" had not so much prophesied as anticipated in that note of questioning dread on which the poem concludes: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"²

By now those fifty years and more have elapsed since that poem's original publication in November, 1920 (Variorum, p. 401n.), and history has provided numerous candidates in answer to the question, not the least among them the figure of Adolf Hitler, who visited his own demonic wrath upon any ethnic, religious, and political group which did not fit into his concepts of racial purity or share his vision of a thousand-year Reich. While those various candidates for the distinction have hopefully proved themselves to the world-at-large to be sufficient answer to Yeats's question (and no doubt would have been sufficient proof of the poem's predictive powers for Yeats himself, had he lived to see World War II), they have not proved to be answer enough for the critics of the poem. Rather, attempting to read the poem on more cosmically apocalyptic levels than the mere mundane of heinous atrocities and intolerable tyrannies and oppression, and seeing as well the obvious potential for a connection to be made between Yeats's "rough beast" and the Beast of Revelation 13, they would have us face ultimate meanings and answer


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the question with our own worst fears. Thus, Morton Irving Seiden can write that Yeats "concludes his poem with a warning that the Second Coming of Western tradition is to be not the expected return of Christ, but the Second Coming of the Antichrist"; and that "we are profoundly stirred not so much by Yeats's joy as by his horror and his fear . . . [in the face of] the terror of anarchy, the burden of nightmare, and the tragedy of a hope so far removed from the discordant present as to be almost meaningless." For Richard Ellmann, meanwhile, "The Second Coming" gives no hint of the redeeming or even salutary qualities of the new dispensation," and "the final intimation that the new god will be born in Bethlehem, which Christianity associates with passive infancy and the tenderness of maternal love, makes its [the beast's] brutishness particularly frightful" (Ellmann, p. 260). Finally, although Harold Bloom identifies "the Egyptian Sphinx . . . [as] the rough beast who slouches toward Bethlehem to be reborn, not born, in place of the rebirth of Christ," he at least has the good sense to admit that that would occur "not literally, but [as] . . . what would actually be a demonic epiphany."

Even those critics who regard Yeats's beast on less cosmically awful levels have to concede that any positive values assigned to its coming are matters of faith, while all of the negative associations are supported by historical actualities. For Frank Tuohy, then:

The identity of the "rough beast" is part of a question which the poet leaves unanswered. Anarchy brings forth its antithesis, which may be exceedingly nasty, but for the poet, who looks at history aesthetically rather than morally, may also be exciting and stimulating and not necessarily unwelcome. If the "rough beast" suggests the Black and Tans or the Fascists, this is a piece of good fortune that Yeats could not have foreseen.

John Unterecker, though he, like Bloom and Ellmann, focuses on the poem's cosmic implications, admits likewise some positive value to the concluding vision:

Yeats . . . explicitly prophesies the reversal of the world's gyres, the birth of a new, violent, bestial anti-civilization in the destruction of the two-thousand-year Christian cycle. His rough beast, compounded from Christ's Matthew 24 prediction of His future return and St. John's vision.

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of the coming of the Antichrist, the beast of the Apocalypse, gives a
double meaning to the "revelation" that is at hand.  

Unfortunately, Unterecker does not go on to explicate the nature of that
"double meaning," assuming, apparently, that it is all too obvious.

Oddly enough, many of the critics refer to the cosmology which Yeats
expounded in A Vision to support their readings of the threatening
dimensions of the beast, since "The Second Coming" with its opening
image of the falcon "turning and turning in the widening gyre" makes
use of a key symbol from that cosmology, i.e., the gyres or intersecting
cones. As we have already seen, Unterecker makes specific reference to
"the reversal of the world's gyres" in his discussion of the beast's signifi-
cance, while Ellmann, in his discussion of the same topic, in addition to
quoting from a pertinent note to the poem, merely notes that "A Vision
paint[s] a pleasant picture of the new god than might be expected, and
... [is] not wholly consistent with the poem" (Ellmann, p. 258). Finally
Bloom legitimately, albeit parenthetically, gripes at a key juncture in his
own treatment of the poem that he does not know "how to keep A Vi-
sion's terms out" (Bloom, p. 323). What is odd, however, is that they all
seem to have missed the point, for, as I shall demonstrate in the remain-
der of this paper, not only do A Vision's terms clarify the dimensions of
Yeats's rough beast, but they give that otherwise cryptic utterance a re-
soundingly positive value compatible with other relatively contemporary
evaluations of the direction in which mankind is moving.

Put simply, all that the gyres mean is that human history can be sym-
bolized in two continuously intersecting cones, one primary or solar or
objective (e.g., Apollonian), the other antithetical or lunar or subjective
(e.g., Dionysian). In those terms, Christ Jesus was a primary dispensa-
tion, and the coming new dispensation—not covenant—will be antitheti-
cal. Read "antithetical" as Antichrist and the source of much of the
confusion—including Yeats's own from time to time—can be seen in-
stantly. The movement of the gyres, however, while they must be seen as
being in cyclical conflict, is complementary, not so much as white com-
plements black or positive complements negative or good complements
evil, but as goings complement comings, reintegration complements dis-
integration, and reconciliations complement sunderings. To begin with,
Yeats's own extended note to "The Second Coming" ought at least to
clarify that poem's visionary underpinnings apropos of the gyres:

At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that

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7 John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats (New York: Farrar,
before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion. The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated, of the civilization that must slowly take its place (Variorum, p. 825).

What, then, according to A Vision, will that new civilization be like? For surely it is only in attempting to answer that question by working directly from within rather than generally from outside the very cosmology that fostered the Yeats poem that the symbolic identity of the rough beast can be rendered, if not as positive as the Second Coming of Jesus, then at least as positive as the processes of historical necessity which oblige mankind to endure his goings forth as surely as his comings hither.

Yeats's claims for A Vision, which was first published in 1925, were perhaps too extravagant. In a dedicatory epistle to Ezra Pound he writes: "I send you the introduction of a book which will, when finished, proclaim a new divinity." Though A Vision's system of symbols and their geometric interactions may not in fact proclaim a new divinity, it would not be misleading to say that they do describe a process of societal and spiritual evolution whereby individuals and the race collectively move through twenty-eight so-called phases, each like hours on a clock—called the Great Wheel—tick ing out the comings and the goings of the gyres, and each phase defined in terms of human types. Each defined that way, that is, except for Phases One and Fifteen, which are also the two key phases for our immediate purposes. They are both discarnate or supernatural phases representing, respectively: the dark of the moon and the full of the moon; the perfection of the soul and the perfection of the body; wisdom (Sapientia) and beauty (Pulchritudo); and the fine point of the antithetical cone (the perfection of the world or collectivity) and the fine point of the primary cone (the completion of the Christ or individuation). According to that same schemata, Western civilization in 1927 was passing through Phases Twenty-three, Twenty-four, and Twenty-five (cf. diagram, A Vision, p. 266); and in the poem "The Phases of the Moon," Michael Robartes, a fictitious adept and alter ego invented by Yeats in early attempts to publicize his own system (purportedly given to him by spirit communicators through the medium of

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* W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 27. All references to the text will be made from this edition.
his wife Georgie between 1917 and 1921), makes it clear that “Hunch-
back and Saint and Fool” are the final key to the mystery which the
student of the occult in his shadowy tower (as likely Yeats himself at
Thoor Ballylee as any other novitiate) cannot unravel (A Vision, pp. 59-
64).

Another portion of A Vision, however, unravels the mystery whose
only mystery for us should be the obscure occultisms in which it is
phrased. In the section entitled “The Great Wheel,” Yeats goes into un-
disguised detail about each of the twenty-eight phases or incarnations. It
is in that section that we learn that the Hunchback, the Saint, and the
Fool are the typological embodiments of the characteristics of Phases
Twenty-six, Twenty-seven, and Twenty-eight respectively, those phases,
in other words, which Western civilization, as of Yeats’s writing, would
shortly be entering (A Vision, pp. 176-82). Still, it is Phase One that we
must focus on in our consideration of “The Second Coming,” for it is in
that phase, which follows Phase Twenty-eight, that the antithetical influx
to replace the dissipating primary dispensation will occur; that is to say,
in Phase One that the rough beast will be born. Thus, in another, earlier
treatment of the cosmology, while Yeats was still speaking through the
fictitious Robartes, we learn that: “After an age of necessity, truth,
goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace, comes an
age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war
. . .” (A Vision, p. 52).

At this juncture there is a slight confusion, however, for Robartes had
introduced his postulation by mentioning “the third antimony of Im-
52). If “antithesis” equals antithetical, then “thesis” must equal pri-
mary; thus the incoming “age of freedom” would be primary, not anti-
thetical. Because of such a confusion in the terminology, it is not made
clear if that new “age of freedom” which Robartes predicts was the
Christian era, which itself fostered as much superstition as it fostered
faith, replacing the rationalities of the classical Greco-Roman civilization
which it supplanted, or the truly coming new age which will supplant our
own Christian era. Fortunately, it is the fictitious Robartes’ Watson,
Owen Aherne, who clarifies matters somewhat by asking: “‘Even if the
next divine influx be to kindred [i.e., that age of freedom] why should
war [which concludes the list of that age’s characteristics] be neces-
sary?’” (A Vision, p. 53). Despite the inadvertent crosswiring of terms
like thesis and antithesis with the far more key terms, primary and anti-
thetical, then, the next divine, antithetical influx will be that age of free-
don, and the rough beast shall be the avatar of that coming age’s
characteristics.

Still, how rough and how a beast, for certainly as much as we are
asked to anticipate an age of evil and war, we are also encouraged to anticipate an age of freedom and kindred and art. Too, we should keep in mind that, as opposed to our age's stultifying preoccupations with the levelling forces of democracy, it shall be an age of some manner of aristocracy. Once more, it is when Yeats speaks openly, as he does in his treatment of the twenty-eight incarnations, that a measure of clarity and logic replaces the obscurantisms of occult jargon. Here, then, is his description of Phase One, i.e., of the coming antithetical influx anticipated questioningly in "The Second Coming":

This is a supernatural incarnation . . . there is complete passivity, complete plasticity. Mind has become indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood . . . the more perfect be the soul, the more indifferent the mind . . . [for it is] the final link between the living and more powerful beings . . . All plasticities do not obey all masters, and . . . those that are the instruments of subtle supernatural will differ from the instruments of cruder energy; but all, highest and lowest, are alike in being automatic (A Vision, pp. 183-84).

The key, perhaps, is in its being a discarnate phase in which "acts can no longer be immoral or stupid, for there is no one there that can be judged" (A Vision, p. 183). It is for one thing, then, not the Last Judgment of the Apocalypse which the Beast will precede, but more a shifting and sifting from one level of being to another, as well as a period clearly "beyond good and evil."

Yeats was familiar with the works of Friedrich Nietzsche from as early as 1902, and critics have traced much of A Vision's postulations on alternating cycles of human history back, by implication, to similar theories of Nietzsche's. The following is, I think, a pertinent passage from his Beyond Good and Evil, a work which, among other things, argues for the necessary development of a human aristocracy of the spirit. Note, too, the allusions to a war-like, barbarian culture ruled foremost by concepts of kindred and caste:

Let us tell ourselves without indulging ourselves how every superior culture on earth got its start! Men whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every frightful sense of the word, men of prey, men still in possession of unbroken strength of will and power-drives—such men threw themselves upon weaker, better-behaved, more peaceable races . . . in which the last life powers were flickering away in flashing fireworks of intellect and corruption. The distinguished caste in the beginning was always the barbarian caste; their superiority lay primarily not in their physical but in their psychic power; they were more whole as human beings (which on every

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* Seiden, p. 49; Ellmann, pp. 91-92.
level also means "more whole as beasts").

Phrases and images from this passage reverberate strikingly against similar passages previously quoted from Yeats, particularly his note on "The Second Coming" and Robartes' predications for the coming age; but the significance of the passage is better told by ignoring sources and analogues for the sake of focusing on their shared view of the human element in history as being primarily a psychic or spiritual element. I for one am painfully aware that one of history's most bitter ironies will be to link forever Nietzsche's concepts of the Übermensch with Hitler's crackpot racial theories and his policies of mass genocide. A far more interesting though far less noted irony, however, can be found in those astounding similarities between Nietzsche and Yeats's comments in poetry and prose on the dimensions of the human element in the coming age, not the least astounding among those similarities being that Nietzsche too envisions the human as beasts, but makes his the more wholly human, while the critics, as I have amply illustrated, would have us see Yeats's beast as anything but. Does Yeats himself, however, even if he might not have been fully aware of the furthest implications of his own cosmology, do likewise? Does A Vision view the coming human as essentially bestial, and if it does, does it do so in positive or in negative terms?

Phase Two is, obviously, the subsequent phase to Phase One; more important, it is, rather than supernatural and discarnate, natural and human. If the rough beast is to emerge from the divine antithetical influx of Phase One, his characteristics will be defined for us in Yeats's description of the human type embodying the spiritual qualities of Phase Two. Here is that description. If that coming creature lives in conflict with his fate, Yeats says that "he gives himself only to violent animal assertion and can only destroy; strike right and left." Unquestionably, the rough beast of "The Second Coming," with all of that image's negative connotations intact, comes to mind; but those are only the negative aspects of the embodiment of Phase Two. His positive aspects—that is, what he achieves if he lives in accordance with his fate, giving "himself to Nature as the Fool . . . gave himself to God"—are no less suited by that phrase, rough beast; nor, however, is he any less that wholly human—and not in either case demonic—figure than the Übermensch which Nietzsche anticipates and argues for the spiritual release of. Describing those aspects with which fate will thus endow the creature, Yeats writes:

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He is neither immoral nor violent but innocent ["beyond good and evil"]; is as it were the breath stirring upon the face of the deep; the smile on the face of a but half-awakened child . . . remembered as a form of joy, for he would seem more entirely living than all other men, a personification or summing up of all natural life.

And no less christic, we might add, since earlier critics of the poem have persistently asked us to regard the rough beast in the most eschatologically christocentric terms. No less christic, if the Christ is always the anointed one, the chosen vessel carrying God’s perfected Will among a still-to-be-perfected mankind. A divinely human creature, as Christ Jesus was the humanly divine, is then, in Yeats’s own words, as likely, if not more likely, an apt description of the “rough beast . . . slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem to be born”; for so much is the embodiment of the characteristics of Phase Two according to A Vision. “The new antithetical tincture (the old primary reborn) is violent,” Yeats goes on to admit, continuing the description, but “it forces upon the primary and upon itself a beautiful form” with “the muscular balance and form of an animal good-humour with all the appropriate comeliness of the Dancing Faun.” Furthermore, should “the rare accident [of wholly accepting one’s fate] . . . not occur, the body is coarse, not deformed, but coarse from lack of sensitiveness, and is most fitted for rough physical labour” because “[if he is] born amid a rigid mechanical order [such as we have seen the old primary become], he would make for himself a place, as a dog will scratch a hole for itself in loose earth” (A Vision, pp. 106-107). Finally, it is interesting to note that one of the last images called forth in A Vision is of “a Communist . . . ploughing on the Cotswold Hills, nothing on his great hairy body but sandals and a pair of drawers, nothing in his head but Hegel’s Logic” (A Vision, p. 301). For that as well is the “rough beast” questioningly anticipated in “The Second Coming”; but in no case is he represented as anything the human should fear or despise or disown, for he is, to repeat Yeats, that “summing up of all natural life,” the perfection of the human animal to this point.

It is understandable that Yeats, a poet simultaneously working within the implications of the system expounded in A Vision as well as living the very history that seemed to have brought all of “The Second Coming”’s most dreadful possibilities to fruition, might have missed the very point which I contend that A Vision makes in response to the question on which the poem ends. We should not, however, be so willing to forgive the incredible lapses of judgment which subsequent critics are guilty of, for others besides Nietzsche and Yeats have spoken within the last century and a half and less of an emerging new age which would not so much require as necessitate by the sheer force of biological, psychological, spiritual, and historical evolution the concomitant emergence of a
new mankind. Nor need we look as far back as to Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* and his hopes for America’s sons becoming New Adams, creatures of a transcendent joy for life and with an inner power and quality of spirit; or for that matter to the prophetic aspects of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* or to the visionary conclusion to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. More recently, and far more scientifically, Teilhard de Chardin, speculating on the logical possibilities of the Omega of the Apocalypse by tracing the direction of biological evolution within a christocentric framework, began writing, at virtually the same time that Yeats was worrying through *A Vision* with its proclamation of a new divinity, a work entitled *The Phenomenon of Man*. De Chardin writes:

> It is . . . a mistake to look for the extension of our being . . . in the Impersonal. The Future-Universal could not be anything else but the Hyper-Personal—at the Omega Point.¹¹

For the failure that threatens us to be turned into success, for the concurrence of human monads to come about, it is necessary and sufficient for us that we should extend our science to its farthest limit and recognize and accept . . . not only some vague future existence, but also, as I must now stress, the radiation as a *present reality* of that mysterious centre of our centres which I have called Omega (de Chardin, p. 267).

It seems perfectly logical, even if not necessarily permissible, to see in de Chardin’s Omega Point the Phase One of Yeats’s schema, and to see in that intensely personalized and radiant “*present reality*” or Omega the Natural Man, radiating joy wholly and innocently and summing up all of life, of Yeats’s emergent Phase Two.

Finally, Carl Jung, also writing with this same chaotic period for Hebraic-Christian, Greco-Roman Western civilization in view, a culture which Oswald Spengler during the 1920’s had relegated to the ashheap of outworn modes and tired ritual, noted that:

> There are no longer any gods whom we can invoke to help us. The great religions of the world suffer from increasing anemia, . . . the so-called conquest of nature overwhelms us with the natural fact of overpopulation and adds to our troubles by our psychological incapacity to make the necessary political arrangements. It remains quite natural for men to quarrel and to struggle for superiority over one another. . . .

If so much sounds like Nietzsche, it is when Jung suggests the only possible outlet from such a dilemma that he sounds like Yeats:

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As any change must begin somewhere, it is the single individual who will experience it and carry it through. The change must indeed begin with an individual; it might be any one of us.\textsuperscript{18}

Whether that individual be seen as the Communist on Cotswold Hill or the rough beast of "The Second Coming" or the man of Phase Two or de Chardin's Omega, the individual must be seen as the wholly human; otherwise—and only otherwise—there would indeed be no common human value to either our hopes or our fears.

If the foregoing was the barest inkling of the expressed hopes of the finest thinkers and men of letters of the last few preceding generations, those concurrent fears that it might in fact all turn out rather quite badly were simply given poetic voice by Yeats in his conclusion to "The Second Coming"—and even then they were stated as a question. To accept that the breakthrough, as terrified as we might be that we may lose the best as well as the worst of the old in doing so, must be made by sheer necessity in any event and that, when it is, it will signal no loss whatsoever and will rather be the true "prize of the spirit,"\textsuperscript{18} one which this race has labored to earn, is the only way, to paraphrase other lines from the Yeats poem, to restore to the best the unsentimental conviction that mankind is perfectible and to allow the worst to turn their own passionate intensity, if not into plough-shares, at least into less deadening realities and demeaning fictions. For our enduring is

\begin{quote}
\begin{small}
Proof that there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind:
Profane perfection of mankind
\end{small}
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