

W . B . Yeats' The Second Coming : Interpretation

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 it {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?

According to the interpretation which is given by (Frost : 2000) , the poem may be interpreted as :“Circling and circling in the widening gyre” — flying further and further out in ever-widening circles — the falcon goes beyond the retrieving whistle of the falconer. In Yeats’ poem, the falcon represents the people, the culture, the society of the age the falconer. The falcon represents the core of our moral sense, that which binds us in a sense of the good, of right and wrong. When the falcon begins to stray too far from the falconer, the falconer’s whistle brings it back to his influence and control, back to the center. If the falcon flies too far in its circling, it not only is no longer being controlled by the commands and the urgings of the falconer, it no longer even hears the falconer. If there is a moral imperative at the center of our flight, we seem no longer to be under its influence.

We are living, Yeats is saying, in a time in which the falconer — the sense of the good and true — seems to no longer have any hold on us. We have strayed too far from the center. That center does not hold, Yeats said, nothing guides us, nothing corrects us. We fly from extreme to extreme.

The prime of Yeat’s work was the first quarter of this century. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. The poem about the falcon and the falconer, called “The Second Coming” was written in 1919. It written specifically about the brutal putting down of a rebellion in Ireland by the British army. But the poem also foreshadowed an age of incomprehensible horror even then coming into being. In a letter in 1938 Yeats quoted “The Second Coming” in a speech about the rise of fascism: “Every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe,” he said. “The ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

It was an age beyond hearing the falconer. An age with no binding center. A time fully blossoming now into the age in which we live.

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.

The center cannot hold. Some, perhaps most, in our time, have no sense of where or what the center is. What is the ground on which we stand? What are the principles, the rules that bind us? What Falconer, Christ, Mahdi or Messiah, keeps us safe within

sight and, with a tug, returns us to the center? Do the Ten Commandments hold us? The Golden Rule? Koran, Books of the Elders and Ancestors?

No pope, priest, no clergy or Guide of fame or humility can, in this age, pretend to the power to keep the dogs of war at bay. The faithful each invoke their gods — as they always have. Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews slaughter each other by day and smile into the world's cameras in the evening. The sons and daughters of church-goers, fresh from child prayers and sweet singing in the choir, are raped or shot in the streets. "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

And if the center will not hold by the precepts of faith, will it hold by government? Will the leaders of states and nations call us back to the guiding voice of virtue and the good? Hardly a falconer among that lot, is there?

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Wasn't it ever thus? Was there ever a time in which princes or popes, holy books or sacred principles kept one megalomaniac or crusader madman at bay or one true believer from the throat of another? Perhaps not. But there were those believers and those individuals who still heard and lived and died by the sound of the Falconer, those whose flight never lost sight of the center. Many a Socrates, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, Beckett, Luther. Many a Christ of many cultures. A Moses and Martin and a host of prophets, Elizabeth Cady Stantons and Margaret Sangers: Those whose foot would not be moved."

And there were those who have been patient for the law. Remember that there were two sets of Commandments brought down from the Mountain. In that ancient story, Moses brought down the tablets to the people only to find them worshipping a golden calf. In his anger, Moses smashed the tablets. But then he took pity on the people, fashioned two more tablets — which God good-naturedly wrote on again — and restored the law to them so that they would not suffer in anarchy, without soul or center.

What now? Dare we hope? Dare we hope and act on hope? Cast a new vision and swear to make it be? Can there be a new time, a new age, a center rediscovered and a humankind transformed? Yeats wrote, "Surely some revelation is at hand; surely the second coming is at hand."

Into that unlikely time and most unlikely place came the child whom faith named "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Savior, The Prince of Peace." It has been, at best, a mixed princely reign. Here and there, in each age, a true saint. Here and there a heretic tortured to death and a child blown apart in His dear name.

Bringing us now (by the reckoning of us purists) to the close of the twentieth of Christian centuries, the close of the second of the eons since the first coming: and, wrote Yeats,

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?

What rough beast, indeed? What is being born in the deep and dreamless streets of our time? What Force — if any — will shape the future for good or evil? It seems that, for Yeats, the second coming will not be a pretty sight or a time to eagerly await. He described the “beast” as “... 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 ...” This sphinx-like creature, this beast coming to be born, is almost the exact opposite of the first coming. In fact, it is said that, for Yeats, the beast is the Anti-Christ, that cosmic force for evil that contends eternally against the Christ figure.

In our wild, undisciplined and frightened flight, surely the commanding sound of the falconer is heard again, and the tug felt toward the center, to come full circle to the center, the true thing, above all else, that we have always known: that we are related each to the other and to each creature and to each particle of the earth and universe. Any other proclamation is Anti-Christ, untruth, false gods in service of race, nation, wealth and power.