



## THE SECOND COMING KEEPS COMING

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### THE SECOND COMING

William Butler Yeats

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 Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;  
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  
Wind 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 an article that I read recently, Yeats' "The Second Coming" has been pillaged – that is, quoted – by writers and editors more than any other piece of literature with the possible exception of Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy. Ever since Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, writers have lifted phrases and images from the poem with the nonchalance of children taking food from the family refrigerator; indeed, as foreboding as the poem is, there's something comforting in the fact that it names feelings and fears that otherwise would have no names.

After all these years of being pirated, it's surprising that the poem hasn't degenerated in our view into a collection of clichés. Far from it. Though its lines have an eternal, engraved-in-stone quality about them, they also seem completely relevant; sometimes the poem seems like the only piece of writing that *is* relevant to the present political/cultural situation. The images of the lost falcon at the beginning of the poem and the slouching beast at the end – the loss of control on one hand, the release of primitive urges on the other – stick with us; better than all the pop culture images that we're continually bombarded with, they lodge right in our unconscious.

Which is curious, because “The Second Coming” isn't a particularly easy or clear poem. Much of it is based on Yeats' peculiar personal cosmology in which he saw history as a series of intersecting spirals of eras each 2,000 years long whose source is a kind of Universal Soul: thus the “widening gyres” and “Spiritus Mundi.” The actual “event” of the poem – a bird's-eye view of present-day chaos, followed by a vision of a sphinxlike figure slowly starting to move, then a curtain theatrically dropping followed by a second, even more obscure vision of a “rough beast” slouching like Charles Laughton's Quasimodo toward Jesus's birthplace – has a hokey, old-fashioned quality more appropriate to a horror film than a poem written in elegant High English. And what exactly is the relationship of the first vision to the second? Not clear at all. The narrator's repetition of words and phrases – the poet's efforts to communicate a sense of dread – feels melodramatic, postured, like a character in a silent film making all sorts of strained facial gestures to show how afraid he is. In places, this 97-year-old poem shows its age.

So what accounts for its immediacy, the sense that it not only sums up our experience of the present but our fears about the future? Why is it that every time we grope around for words to express our dismay at the present political and social scene – in the US, everything from the shootings of black people by the police to stark gaps between rich and poor to a Presidential election run amuck; in Europe from the continuing rise of the Right to the decline of the welfare state to the fear of refugees drastically altering national identities until they're no longer recognizable – we come back to lines like “the centre cannot hold” and “the blood-dimmed tide is loosed”?

I think it's that the poem's combination of vagueness and precision echoes our own limited knowledge. We're no better or worse off than the frightened narrator; we see and grasp about as much and as little as he does. We know that something big in our lives is changing, “moving its slow thighs,” and that the change is definitely not for the better. We



W. B. Yeats and Bertha Georgie Yeats

sense that after “twenty centuries of stony sleep,” the neglected sides of our nature are asserting themselves, and we may have to pay the price for our ignorance.

It isn't that hard to see some of the contours of the slouching beast, or beasts. If we look at Judeo/Christianity and democracy as two ways that human beings found to restrain some of their more primitive, selfish impulses for their common good, it's hard not to feel that both these traditions are in jeopardy. We seem to be heading into a period where strong men (and women), both in and out of government, will acquire more power and wealth through dysfunctional legislatures: these are Slouching Beasts with big wallets and big sticks. Altruism, self-sacrifice – both are about the ability to identify with the suffering of others (and the best part of the Judeo/Christian tradition) – are beginning to seem irrelevant in a time when it's harder for the middle class in Western countries to count on a decent place to live and a fulfilling job. In bad times, selfishness starts to look like an understandable response to worsening conditions: the ordinary citizen as Slouching Beast. And then there is the unavoidable fact that we have enemies who hate us and want to destroy us. We don't understand them, but we know that our values make them hate us even more: the Slouching Beasts from the East.

Many slouching beasts.

It seems to me that the most instructive lines in Yeats' poem are the ones that describe our present state: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.”

If his unclear vision of the future is the best that we can do, then “lack of conviction” may not be such a bad thing. Rather than wasting our energies through “passionate intensity,” that existential state of not-knowing at least allows us an empty space in which we can be conscious, aware. Our lives are – and will be – filled with challenges; we're going to need all the strength and equanimity that consciousness can bring us not to fall into further despair.