

Room for a view

The gaze of history

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), poet, playwright, Irish nationalist, theosophist, Nobel Prize winner and sometime fascist, wrote one of the most frightening poems in the English language when he composed “The Second Coming.”¹ Here is the first of two stanzas:

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.

It was January 1919. Yeats had on his mind, among other things, the Great War, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Easter Rising of 1916, a failed revolt of Irish nationalists against English rule.

Yeats had discovered, four days after his wedding in 1917, that his bride had a gift for automatic writing. Her ostensibly involuntary scribbling provided material for Yeats’ mystical text, *A Vision* (1925), in which he constructed an arcane schematization of human history. Historical eras waxed and waned like phases of the moon; human events played themselves out in catastrophic cycles lasting 2000 years. Yeats represented the tension between successive eras and the next as two interpenetrating cones, or gyres. At the apex of each gyre a new civilization, antithetical to the last, sprang up from a well of irrationality; it played itself out in a weakening spiral, ending in decadence and dissolution. “Each age,” he wrote, “unwinds the threads another age has wound.”

“The Second Coming” invokes the unravelling of the Christian era, or, on a more local scale, the birth pangs of Irish independence. The sleeping sphinx stirs; revolution is imminent, waiting for a concentrated moment of conviction.

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: 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?

Despite his fascination with the gyrations of history, and his two terms as a senator of the Irish Free State, Yeats lamented the loss of civility and grace that resulted from political struggle. Repulsed by the waste and brutality of violence he was, nonetheless, fascinated by its transformative power.

The fascist undertone of Yeats’ aestheticized politics, his deterministic view of history and the maddening nonsense of his fabricated occultism became too much for me in the strained hours of a night spent cramming for a graduate exam in modern poetry. I never read Yeats after that, until the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington drove me to the comfortless harbour of this poem.

Indisputably, Yeats had a gift for carving out a perfect, harrowing phrase. “A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.” Blank and pitiless is the gaze of the terrorist.

So, too, is the gaze of vengeance.

Anne Marie Todkill
Deputy Editor
CMAJ

Reference

1. Yeats WB. *Collected poems*. London: Macmillan; 1933.

