

YEATS'S CELTIC HELIOLATRY AND/OR ELITISM

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Abstract

The present article intends to explore a delicate subject matter: whether or not the Anglo-Irish poet, W. B. Yeats's political orientation was of fascist origin indeed or it was only a matter of choice in point of poetical creation under his views on world and life and his elitist opinions. Therefore, in the first part, the article aims at examining Michael North's study with view to demonstrate that Yeats's poems and, in fact, his entire literary creation were a matter of search for the “unity of being” and the “perfect poetic expression”, which he had never ceased to look for along his life time. The second part of the article aims at demonstrating that his poem “The Second Coming”, which launched the contradictory opinions regarding Yeats's political orientation, was nothing more than the poet's conclusions comprised also in *A Vision* and which was not only his opinion, but it inscribed in a row of similar opinions pertaining to philosophers of the moment regarding the cycles of life on earth.

Keywords: Political opinion, Anglo-Irish literature, modernism, liberalism, identity

Introduction

In point of modernism, Yeats's view was debatable. He did not embrace the other men of culture's view according to which the art of 20th century had to leave behind the past and build the new era on innovation in artistic expression. Nevertheless, despite his opinion on modernism, he was considered and still is among the modernists. This is not because he agreed with the view of the epoch to forget about past and begin something new. On the contrary, he thought that there is a collective memory which gathers everything has ever written or thought of and that all the people whether they like or not, may sometime address to this common heritage. In short, Yeats succeeded in being modern, not because he desired it, but because most of all he capitalized Ireland's glorious past as depicted by the Irish legendry of heroes and gods. He did not aim at being modern, but because he was

continuously in search for the perfect poetic formula, he discovered the rich vein of the Irish folklore. His aim was to confer value to what Ireland had most precious in its past, thus he became the one of the most important figures of the Irish Revival.

On the other hand, along with the perfect poetic expression his searches went towards understanding his self, towards understanding his identity, his sense of belonging, towards understanding the fate of a nation so troubled for so many years. These searches explain his political orientations, which were only ideological, he did not sign for any party of the moment. Therefore in the following pages we are going to explore Yeats's choices towards perfect poetic expression, towards unity of being, towards identity. We are going to do this by embarking upon Michael North's study and in the second part by examining the poem *The Second Coming*.

Michael North's Study *Political Aesthetics of T.S Eliot, Yeats, Pound*

The political opinions and sympathies of T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound have always been considered delicate topics. In *The Political Aesthetics of T.S. Eliot, Yeats, and Pound*, Michael North gives a relevant and pertinent interpretation of Eliot's conservatism, Yeats's authoritarianism and elitism, and Pound's fascism and anti-Semitism. He begins his study by quoting a statement of Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish intellectual who defined fascism as the aestheticization of politics. Starting from this statement and taking into account that aestheticism and politics are usually put together when one tries to solve through art economic or political contradiction, M. North asserts that calling Yeats, Eliot, and Pound fascist is not completely absurd, although they were not "card-carrying members of a fascist party."¹⁷ And yet, without thoroughly analyzing the actual involvement of the three poets in political activities and without analyzing their critical theories in point of point of politics, it would be absurd to call all of them fascist and relate them to the horrors committed by this political regime.

In order to understand these three writers' position to fascism, we must first take a look at the relationship between aesthetic modernism and modern politics. Generally speaking, modernity means material progress as the result of enlightenment, political freedom and cultural renaissance. In theory, modernity seemed perfect for the society of the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and yet, in practice, it proved to be a complete failure. Technology, cultural modernism, and liberal democracy seemed to be the factors that contributed to its downfall. In this

¹⁷ Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.vii.

equation, aesthetic modernism also plays an important part. On the one hand, it is part of the entire process of emancipation, and on the other, it counter-attacks the whole process. Liberalism, as the result of modernism, led to the idea of absolute freedom and individuality. And yet, absolute freedom or individuality cannot exist in a society that works on rules and principles. Thus, modernity becomes rather ambiguous, because it incorporates irreconcilable opposites, and judging from this point of view, it can be considered more or less a mockery, because as long as an individual belongs to a community, he cannot achieve absolute freedom.

Considering the inconsistencies that came along with liberalism, it was no surprise for Yeats, Eliot or Pound that this system would eventually fail. Even in theory liberalism was quite difficult to describe, because not even the major modernists could completely agree on every issue. Therefore it is no surprise that the three poets could not decide whether to militate in favour of the community or to support individual freedom. For the three, the idea of a community based on shared values seemed more eloquent, but by adopting this idea, they clearly manifested their anti-liberalism, and because they completely rejected liberalism, they were considered supporters of fascist modernism. However, in order to decide whether or not Yeats had anything to do with the fascism invented and installed by Mussolini in Italy, we need to take a look at Yeats's political beliefs first.

W.B. Yeats expresses his personal views on what a poet should represent in an essay on magic as early as in 1901. This essay was later published in *Essays and Introductions* in 1961 and here the poet asserts his artistic creed and his life philosophy. As the poet confesses, he believes in the practice and philosophy of what is called magic and "evocation of spirit". He asserts that he also believes in three doctrines which "had been handed down from early times" and "had been the foundations of nearly all magical practices": first "that the borders of the mind are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another", creating a single mind; second, that the borders of our memories are encompassed in the memory of Nature itself; and third, that the great mind and memory can be evoked by using symbols (Yeats: 1961, p. 33).

Nowadays W. B. Yeats is the most appreciated modern poet of the twentieth century. And yet, not all scholars consider him 100% a real modernist since Yeats himself dismissed modernism on several occasions. As a poet whose main preoccupations were poetry or politics, in the beginning of his writing career he used the term "modern" as a severe criticism, and fifty years later he asserted that he belongs to that category of poets who "wrote as men had always written," (North: 1991, p.21) thus separating himself from the writers that followed T.S. Eliot's literary trend. Both as a young poet and then a mature one, Yeats refused to accept the

modern world built by technology. He felt that with industrialization and excessive urbanization the world would lose its normality, its beauty, and even its identity. He believed that people should look back at the past to create a brighter future, and therefore he could have been neither a supporter of a world in which progress and development were more important than history, nor a poet who appreciated poetry that discussed of this world.

With his creed on one hand and with his long period of creation beginning in the end of the nineteenth century and going on in the twentieth century on the other hand, with his work ranging from the revival of old Irish legends, then on a more genuine poetical vein filled with his personal symbolic system, his existence and artistic career may be said are both traditional and modern. W.J. McCormack in *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History From 1789 to 1939*, asserts that “Yeats is more revealing of the values of Modernism than Eliot is, precisely because he is less ‘pure’ a Modernist” (McCormack: 1994, pp. 296-297). Yet Yeats’s modernism emerges from the modern quarrel between him and his Self, which ultimately transforms into a quarrel of individualism and nationalism, right and duty, freedom and history (North: 1991, p.21). The battles take place between his ego and his anti-self: battle for national identity, battle for his misunderstood love, battle to reach a consensus regarding his poetical creation and even though modernity was not his target, in trying to solve the conflicts lying deep down in his soul, he became a genuine modernist.

Yeats and Ireland have always been on the same route, and because Ireland was heading towards modernity with its Anglo-Irish Literary Revival, Yeats, as one of the head of this movement, was following the same path. The Revival pushed forward the modern state, but at the same it brought Ireland closer to its historical and cultural identity. Ireland was in the position to ask from England complete independence. Irishmen wanted to be politically and economically equal with the Empire, which meant they had to organize the state on modern principles, but they also wanted their historical and cultural identity to be recognized, accepted and used as a background to create a true Irish identity. These two ideals were quite difficult to combine, and consequently, political turbulences occurred inside the state. Now Ireland had to deal not only with British rule, but also with the disparities within the society.

Within this context, Yeats’s politics could not be different from the politics of his natural country, given his permanent presence in the middle of events. The conflicts within the Irish society seemed endless, and in an attempt to understand his own place in that society, “Yeats was to trace both fascism and communism, back to Hegel’s attempts to resolve the liberal contradiction between right and duty, individual and community” (North: 1991, p.22). The poet’s position was uncertain. As an Anglo-Irish in an Irish

community, he wanted to understand his own place, the position of the entire Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, as well as the connection between poetry and politics, and because society could not offer him a suitable answer, he tried to discover by himself the answer to the questions that tormented him. And because fascism and communism were the doctrines that also tried to solve this puzzle, it is only natural that Yeats resorted to them in order to find an answer. And yet, he is not to be condemned for this, because at their origin, these doctrines only tried to reconcile the conflict between difference and unity, between individual right and public duty, a conflict which unfortunately can be solved only in theory, since the applicability of these regimes turned out to be a complete failure. Elizabeth Cullingford quoted by Michael North, claims that Yeats aimed to achieve his “much-desired unity” not “by a narrowing of vision but through acceptance of diversity” (North: 1991, p.22). The question that emerges naturally is how Yeats was supposed to achieve that, even at the poetical level, if his own country was not able to find a way out of this puzzle. Even if at a hypothetical level, Yeats tried to achieve this goal in his poetical work. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, named a “utopia” by Michael North, attempts at restoring the connection between right and duty. It is the first example where Yeats tries to obtain reconciliation between these conflicting ideals, though maybe incidentally. In *Autobiographies*, the reader finds out the way the poem emerged from a book. After his father had read to the poet passages from *Walden*, he planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree. At first, the poem arose from a youthful impetus, from a hidden desire, as a consequence of his adolescent troubles, as the poet himself explains: “I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived seeking wisdom.” The idea of the poem came to him while walking through Fleet Street in London “very homesick I heard a little twinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. Form the sudden remembrance came my poem...” In a letter to Katharine Tynan the poet gives another explanation saying that the feelings expressed belonged to a persona, though in reality they were the poet’s own feelings. Innisfree is in fact, Sligo, the place where the poet wanted to return whenever he was overwhelmed by the unpleasant atmosphere in London.

In his study, Michael North finds it however that “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is no longer the result of an adolescent daydreaming of passions and love and women, but a clear statement for right and duty. The critic suggests that the poem represents the climax of the story of the Prodigal Son. In quoting Jeffares, they both imply the idea that “I will arise and go now to my father” borrows more from the biblical parable than the verbal formula in the sense that the idea from the poem coming to him while walking in

London, feeling homesick and longing for Sligo, where everybody knows everybody, instead of London, where nobody knows him, was rather a patriotic call. Though a less documented reader does not know for sure whether Innisfree is England or Ireland, for a reader familiar with the history and mythology of Ireland the name Innisfree may remind of Innisfail, island of the stone, one of the poetic names for Ireland. Thus, Innisfree obviously represents Sligo and implicitly Ireland in a stark contradiction with London and implicitly England. The political implication is discreet however. The word “cabin” from “And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made” becomes the symbol of a past life that still exists in the mind of any true Irishman. In the second stanza the message becomes pretty clear: “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow”. This line alludes to the moments when, from one reason or another, there were street clashes between the republicans and the English, and because the poet seeks peace “there”, in Innisfree, we are entitled to say that Innisfree is indeed Sligo, the place where the poet went to escape the urban bustle.

“And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.” (Yeats: 1985, p. 44)

The period when the poem was written refers precisely to the moments after Charles Stewart Parnell's death. Parnell was a Protestant landlord, the parliamentary champion of land reform and then leader of the land reform, who became the most beloved of the men in Ireland. The Land Act in 1881 for which he fought paved the way for additional reform and it was the first victory after 270 years of unsuccessful agitation for land reform. Then the period comprised between 1890 and 1910 was a period of tranquillity and even registered modest progress for Ireland. The following period distinguished itself through a nostalgic turn of the Irish population to an exploration of their ethnic and national identity. In 1893, the Gaelic League was founded by Douglas Hyde, the president of the future Irish Free State, marking a revival of the Irish language and culture. Though there were differences of opinion between Hyde and Yeats, since Hyde initially believed that Gaelic language should be restored in Irish institutions and Yeats considered Ireland could create its own culture and national identity even without restoring Gaelic language, it was unanimously acknowledged that William Butler Yeats was the greatest English language poet of his era, because through his poetry he advocated for his country's Irish roots and a national identity built on true Irish values.

The last stanza presents various references that move the poem in two directions, toward two different ideals, as if the poet tried to solve the conflict between the individual and the community. As Michael North says,

Yeats was never a sophisticated political thinker, yet he is aware that these do not need to be in opposition, because some sort of compromise can be made in order to reconcile the two. *Innisfree*, seen as Ireland, is the place where individuals are allowed to be different within their community, creating thus a stark opposition with England, where there is an attempt to impose some sort of cultural homogeneity on everybody. The verisimilitude of this idea is reinforced by a passage of *John Sherman*, Yeats's only novel, where the author writes: "In your big towns a man...knows only the people like himself. But here one chats with the whole world in a day's walk, for every man one meets is a class" (Yeats: 1991, p. 9). The same idea is presented in a letter to Katharine Tynan: "Down at Sligo one sees the whole world in a day walk, every man is a class. It is too small there for minorities" (Yeats: 1953, p. 153), therefore the poet believes that London is a large town where the existence of classes is possible, but each individual is isolated from the others, while Sligo is too small for classes, but each man has the liberty to be unique in his own way. The dichotomy here is between small settlements, seen by the author as more unified, and large urban area, where people tend to live in isolation, while at the same time they are forced to live together. Under these circumstances, England is seen by Yeats as a place of isolation and loneliness, while Ireland is seen as a paradise where personal uniqueness and social harmony are at home.

As Michael North puts it, *Innisfree* represents Yeats's attempt to define his freedom. Nevertheless, Yeats's concept of freedom is a controversial one because it cannot be related to the ease of movement. *Innis* is the Irish for island, therefore it is a place surrounded by a lake, but because this lake is also on an island surrounded by a sea, *Innis* becomes a place of complete isolation, and freedom is understood as preventing the interference of others. At this point, because of the association between freedom and isolation, the former gets negative connotations. And because individual freedom as it is presented by Yeats cannot be defined unless it is opposed with external freedom, we can also discuss about an antithetical structure of the poem. *Innisfree* is the place where the poet can be free from London, therefore the patriotic character of the poem is obvious. And yet, the poem does not present any direct political reference, therefore it would be unjust to accuse Yeats of having a hidden agenda.

In the poem, M. North also discovers a linguistic conflict. Quoting Norman Jeffares, North relates that *Innisfree* means *Heather Island* and, in Irish, it should be spelled *Innis Fraoigh*. But because Yeats chose to use an Anglicised version of an Irish word, North suggests that in Yeats's case, we can talk about a divided allegiance that is characteristic to all Anglo-Irish. Furthermore, bringing an Irish name in his English verse could also be

translated as an expression of the poet's individual isolation in England (North: 1991, p. 25).

Next, Michael North suggests that Yeats is imprisoned by an idea of freedom through the fact that he places himself on an island with the aim of being free. And yet, it is obvious that the poem relies on antithetical concepts. It encompasses both the idea of freedom and that of a communal past. The author rejects modernity, but at the same time he proclaims the concept of freedom on which modern politics and modern industry depend. And because "one can hardly return to Innisfree without having left it, just as one cannot regret the past without having lost it," (North: 1991, p.26) the poem is in fact about loss and longing, two important themes that establish the nostalgic tone of the poem and confirm that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is indeed a modern poem, not only because of the sense of nostalgia that pervades each line of this poem, but also because of the author's attempt to reconcile in this poem the antithetical concepts that usually define modernity and modernism.

As a writer that came to be recognized as modern precisely because of his overt opposition to modernity and modernism, Yeats could not have set the political climate of his country apart from his poetry. In his writing he often sought to harmonize the opposing ideals that governed the Irish society, but because the means he used were not enough in a country dominated by a general turmoil that had shattered people's confidence in politics, he sometimes only managed to extend the gap between those ideals. The Irish Revival seemed at first the appropriate solution to the Irish situation, and through it Yeats hoped to provide a new resonance to Ireland's national identity. But how could he have managed to solve this conflict since not even the most prominent political figures of the day managed to solve the differences between cultural nationalism and the liberal state? Evidently, the task he had taken was not one to be easily accomplished by only one man, and we will continue this paper with a brief presentation of the issues that led to the failure of the Irish Revival.

In the beginning of his literary career, Yeats was under the influence of John O'Leary, and because O'Leary was a strong supporter of Thomas Davis, Yeats's trust in Davis's cultural nationalism came naturally. After many years of disillusionment, O'Leary began to understand that Irish independence could only be gained by means of force. Consequently, he came to believe in a sort of nationalism that excluded any kind of liberal element, sharing thus the ideas of the members of the Young Ireland, who wanted Ireland to be unified by political doctrine. Yeats, on the other hand, was more inclined towards an intellectual and historical nationalism that would restore Irishmen's trust in the true Irish values and decided to begin

what he would later call “the revolt of the soul against the intellect” (quoted by North, p. 28).

As Michael North asserts, Yeats rejected the liberalist ideal not only because he did not want Ireland to follow the path imposed by the British Empire, but also because the bases on which this system was built seemed weak enough to be able to provide the equality that everyone seemed to want. For Yeats, however, equality was not an attainable option. He wanted a country in which both unity and diversity would coexist; for the idealised image of Ireland that he had portrayed for himself could have only been created by joining two seemingly contradictory elements that would define not only Ireland’s cultural background but it would also speak of the conflict within the author’s mind. In Yeats’s case, we can discuss about a fragmented identity, for he was always caught between his Irish-ness and his Englishness, a double-edged problem that would reflect itself throughout his writing, which more than once seemed to play the role of a reconciliatory element between his Ego and his Self.

The theme of the double was very fashionable among modern writers and although Yeats might not have deliberately incorporated it in his work, his poetry reveals the double perspective of his aestheticism and political ideals. But before we can discuss further on this matter, we should take a look at the theme of the double as well as on various concepts such as identity, subjectivity and otherness, which are essential for our endeavour. As explained by modern philosophers of the twentieth century, there are several stages in the development of the concept of identity and subjectivity. The first stage is identified in Alphonso Lingis and Paul Ricoeur’s theories. According to them, subjectivity can only be attained in direct relationship with otherness, for the individual cannot be defined or analyzed unless by contrast with others.

Noteworthy philosophers suggested that western civilisation is in continuous progress, lacking thus the sense of finality. Because of that, it can often be described as harboured by frustration and nihilism, the individual himself becoming the victim of these two. Through the image that sciences provide, the individual becomes aware of his limits, and yet, it is precisely the individual’s contribution that keeps civilisation and history as well in continuous evolution. Thus, the individual becomes the absolute power, capable of creating everlasting history.

The self, as part of subjectivity, is defined only in contrast to the other, and the two can only exist within temporal coordinates. Time, as Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas agree (Burdescu: 1999, p.34) is not an ideal category existing a priori, but rather a spontaneous element within one’s consciousness, a perpetual re-enacting of the present. Life itself is a summation of events happening “now”, over and over again, and as soon as

one moment is over, the present becomes past. And yet, the past cannot be seen as a force that leads to the loss of the present, but rather as a drive that allows the present to exist, a process that gains meaning within the consciousness. Time is generally understood as a sequence of moments, but because the moment has no past and no future, Levinas sees time as a self-contained entity, with no connection to the self or the consciousness. And yet, the Self perceives time and occupies temporal coordinates.

The twentieth century psychoanalysis reveals the most dramatic aspects of the double. Carl Gustave Jung and Sigmund Freud were the psychoanalysts who defined the concepts derived from the analysis of the human conscious and unconscious mind: the Ego, the Self and the Shadow (or the Shadow-aspect). According to them, the Ego consists of two parts, a psychic and a somatic one, it works on the reality principle and it mediates between satisfying the individual's natural urges and being socially responsible and acting according to moral or social standards, operating thus in both the conscious and the unconscious mind. In other words, it is the result of the confrontation between the somatic elements and the external reality.

The Self encloses both the unconsciousness and the consciousness. Jung suggested that the Self plays the major role in the development of the individual personality, whereas the Ego represents only a small part of one's identity. But the real important element for our demonstration is the Shadow, an obsessing element closely related to the concept of "double". Jung defines the shadow as the dark side of human personality. It has been known since ancient times that human personality comprises both good and evil, and apparently the Shadow is responsible for the evil part that generates the darker and obsessive aspects of human personality. These aspects are the result of a confrontation between consciousness and the Shadow, the latter determining the manner in which moral judgement is applied to actions undertaken by the Ego.

Freud takes the task of defining the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious by using the concepts of Ego, Self and Super-Ego. According to him, there are three layers of the psyche: the conscious, the unconscious and the preconscious. These three layers form a coherent structure of an individual, called Ego, respond to external stimuli and are responsible for any perception and reaction of the individual. The Ego is the active, conscious counterpart that chooses what to repress. It is also the part of the Self that deals with perceptions and it becomes aware of the repressed material through the intervention of the Self. The Ego is responsible for wisdom and reason, while the Self is dominated by passions. The double appears thus as another representation of the Ego, the part that fights against the destruction of Ego, "a replica of one's unknown face" (Jung: 1983, p.

92). With artists, the double finds its origins in the biographic component itself and extends to the work and language. Yeats makes no exception. His entire existence is marked by the double. While living in London, he was dreaming of Sligo, the place that offered him peace and stability, despite the internal struggle that Ireland had to face under British domination. The Irish people's character itself is double-faced: formal, yet nationalist, emotional, and yet restrained. Moreover, the young poet had to deal with the issue regarding his identity. As a descendant of Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, he could not find his place neither in the British nor in the Irish society, and at home, he would feel somehow suppressed by an over-dominating and sceptical father who would seek to implant his own ideas into his son's mind. Because of that, the young boy whose taste for poetry had been developed by the reading of famous English writers would seek refuge in Celtic mythology, occultism and the Irish landscapes that allowed him to dream as a child.

Yeats's biographers claim that Anglo-Irish Ascendancy found in W.B. Yeats the proper environment to represent both the oppressed and the oppressor (Burdescu: 1999, p. 185). While claiming that the Anglo-Irish have brought an immense contribution to Gaelic culture, he also suggests that Anglo-Irish culture has been assimilated by the local one. At the same time, while advocating for a national Irish literature, he denied the importance of writing in Gaelic and considered that the true Irish spirit can be expressed in English just as well. The antithetical elements that governed his childhood, and implicitly his personality, extend themselves not only in his work, but also in his political creed. In point of race, he defended his Gaelic roots, but he was also the supporter of the idea of an English Ireland, one that would continue to speak and write in English, and yet it would manage to keep its spirituality intact. Through the Irish Revival he tried to accomplish all that, and yet, the more he tried to explain what the Irish culture was about, the more he made everything more ambiguous and even more antithetical.

According to Michael North, Yeats's attempt to create a unified culture for Ireland was not successful because the idea itself of unity achieved through acceptance of diversity is foolish. Therefore, it is no surprise that the weapons he had used to train his Irish audiences and to somehow impose through art a sort of cultural nationalism would turn against him. When the audiences objected to the exact elements that Yeats identified with Irish-ness, he considered that they have been touched by the English spirit, failing to notice that the elements he chose to celebrate were the one the English attributed to the Irish for centuries: wilderness, violence and savagery (North: 1991, 33).

The failure to create the cultural nationalism that the artist had pictured for his country, as well as the negative criticism of his play, determined Yeats to discover its weakness, and implicitly go for a more liberal approach. In defending Synge, whose play *Playboy* stirred up riots among the audiences, Yeats resorted to the doctrine of individual rights, the element that defines democracy itself. At the same time, he rejected democracy, for it was the principle that had led to the failure of the English society. The attack on his plays made Yeats believe that his idea of educating the masses was ineffective and decided thus to educate the elites. At this point, he was still convinced that Ireland should be represented by unity, and yet, when referring to true Irish people he was actually talking about the aristocracy, for he had come to realize that only the elites were capable to dedicate their lives to Ireland, while the masses with which he had sympathized in his youth did not follow the same path. His position at this point is rather controversial, because his idea of unity now means imposing a certain ideal of life on the masses.

As a senator, Yeats favoured some liberal ideals, but at the same time he continued to distrust democracy. He was against censorship based on moral grounds, he supported religious freedom and individual rights, but he still favoured elitism. These contradictions in point of political beliefs are in fact the result of the author's Anglo-Irish background. In his political career he advocated more for the rights of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, as North suggests, and he did it even if that meant embracing and resting his arguments on an ideology he did not really believe in. Some critics suggest that Yeats even went as far as to identify his own class with the Irish nation; however one can argue that such an idea is exaggerated, since Yeats never clearly stated such a thing.

Later in life, after he had abandoned the political career, Yeats's image of the State was that of a family. The controversy now arises from his idea that the family must be kept strong through selective breeding, an idea not so different from Nazi's belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race. As North puts it, at this point it is almost impossible to believe that the man who now supports the idea of controlling the biological form of a nation had sometimes militated for the divorce law.

Yeats's entire political creed can be defined as an attempt to reconcile a part and the whole. The part can be identified either with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy or with the elites, while the whole is represented by the masses. He believed that the part that distinguishes itself from the whole should become the representative part, even if violence is required to do so. His model was now Mussolini's fascist doctrine that promised to stand "against the masses, against human standardization" (North: 1991, p. 71). Eventually, Yeats came to realize the fascism was nothing more than just another mass

movement not so different from communism and even democracy and he ultimately reaches the conclusion that the antinomies between individual and community, duty and right, freedom and community, part and the whole cannot be reconciled. After all, his embracing of various doctrines is nothing more than an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of liberalism. He admits that his attempt to harmonize these opposites had failed, but he claims that it is the beauty of human nature to deal with issues that resist solution.

“The Second Coming” – a Poem on Gloomy Premonitions (Joyce, Jung, Camus, Sartre, Blaga, Hitchcock)

“The Second Coming” was written during the Black and Tan Troubles in Ireland (Seiden: 1962, p.234) in 1919, and it first appeared in *The Dial* in November, 1920. Later republished in the collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the poem explores “the theory of cycles which governs the sequence of events” (Bowra: 1964, p.233). *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* is a carefully structured collection that contains poems inspired by the Easter Rising, as well as others for which the main source of inspiration was *A Vision*. The collection contrasts personal happiness and social turmoil. As a newlywed, Yeats had recently entered a period of marital happiness that allowed him to analyze clearly the external chaos. As usual, the biographical note is obvious in these poems too. The collection starts with a poem that shows that the artist’s obsession for Iseult Gonne is finally over, continues with several poems whose purpose is to show how wonderful his young bride is, and ends with a poem dedicated to his new-born daughter. However, the collection also includes a series of poems that remind of the turbulence in Ireland and all over Europe at that time, poems that display the collision between supernatural forces, as well as poems that describe the dark and gloomy atmosphere that seems to have captured the whole world.

“The Second Coming” belongs to the second category. It is quite interesting to see how Yeats chose to combine poems that praise marital life and those that point out the imminent danger that threatens human existence itself. Perhaps this combination was not quite unintentional, or meaningless, and perhaps the idea it tries to deliver is that the author had finally managed to reach a state of tranquillity that allows him to enjoy personal happiness despite the external disorder. “The Second Coming” presents an image of disaster and it is usually interpreted as a prophetic manifesto for the arrival of a new god or for the end of world itself. The poem opens with an apocalyptic tableau:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre/
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/
Thing fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;/
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/

The ceremony of the innocence id drowned;/ The best lack all convictions, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats: 1985, p.210)

“The Second Coming” is perhaps one of the finest poems in which Yeats made use of his own visionary system outlined in *A Vision*. In his occult mythography he talks about a cyclical patterns and he states that every 2000 years a new spiritual leader is born and a new era begins. According to his theory, we are now in an objective era, and most likely this will be followed by a subjective one, in which all the values and principles that rule our world will have no meaning. He predicted that this era will reach its end when a “rough beast will slouch towards Bethlehem to be born”, the exact episode that he incorporates in this poem. Yeats gives an interpretation to this scene from the point of view of a poet and a priest, using a modern myth. The poem is set in modern Ireland, which becomes a microcosmic symbol that poet uses to project the present moment in history into a vision of the past and future. As we can notice, the speaker describes the array of signs that indicate that the present must collapse (everything falling apart, anarchy, the loss of innocence, etc.) and that soon a supernatural creature will be born to end everything.

Daniel Albright in *Notes to the Poems* gives a plausible explanation of how the poem was born (Albright: 619). He argues that according to Orthodox Christianity, the ones who have faith are prepared and are gladly expecting Christ to come down to Earth once again. Apparently, after a Second Coming, Christ will establish a kingdom of peace and joy on earth. Yet the purpose of the poem is to predict something else. At the end of the millennium, it will not be Christ who arises, but his opposite, a savage and merciless God – a rough beast – who will establish a different system of values that will stand against everything presented by Christ. Albright’s *Notes to The Poems* present Yeats’s own references to the poem, in which Yeats described the system of gyres. Thus, Yeats argues that:

“All the progress of the human soul and the progress of history can be analysed mathematically as the movement of two interlocking spinning cones, the apex of one screwing into the centre of the base of the other. As the reader finds out from *A Vision*, the movement consists of a simultaneous diminishing of the cone and an expanding of the other. In our age the primary cone, the cone of the Christian era, objective and self-effacing, has expanded almost to its maximum extent. But as it has enlarged, it has weakened, lost its fervour and the turning point of the gyres, a new god, the Antichrist, will be born, at the narrow point of the antithetical cone and will inaugurate a subjective age, violent, arrogant, hierarchical, polytheistic, aesthetic and immoral.” (Albright: 1992, p.619)

Norman Jeffares, in *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, specifies that Yeats had in mind the story of the mythical Judwalis and

Robartes (Jeffares: 241) when he wrote this poem, a fact that proves that Yeats was a minute observer of the human soul and the events influencing both his personal life and his career. He considered Yeats's explanations on the poem quite complex, a strong evidence of Yeats's being a man of great thinking, who analyzed and designed the human thought, as he himself felt.

As if in response, Daniel Albright contends that historical patterns may provide a proper interpretation for the poem, and yet "The Second Coming" can be read as a direct response to the Great War of 1914-1918, on the one hand, and on the other it is a transcription of a vision he had during a process of image-making he got acquainted with while he was attending an occult experiment led by one of the founding members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats talks about this experiment in *Autobiographies*:

"He gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes. Sight came slowly...there rose before me mental that I could not control: a desert and black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins. Mathers explained that I had seen a being of the order of Salamanders because he had shown me that symbol, but it was not necessary even to show the symbol, it would have been sufficient that he imagined it... [I discovered] that for a considerable minority...the visible world would completely vanish, and that world, summoned by the symbol, take its place" (Yeats: 1999, pp. 162-163).

The vision he had, made him more aware about the end of the millennium, and, as the legend goes, every 2000 years a spiritual war of imagination will lead to the birth of a new world. The use of blank verse instead of the rhymed one so often favoured by Yeats and so representative for English lyric poetry shows Yeats's intention to give a better image of the disintegration of civilisation. The initial intention of the author might have been to create rhymed lines, since there are also rhymed lines in the poem ("Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"), but he obviously abandoned the idea in order to create an images as close as possible to the one he had seen during the occult experiment.

The poem opens with a vivid picture of a falcon in flight "turning and turning in the widening gyre". By using the image of the falcon, Yeats, the master of visual symbol, provides the possibility to interpret this symbol in different ways. If we interpret the poem according to its biblical connotations, the falcon flying away from the falconer is the man who has deserted Christ. From *A Vision* we find out that the gyres the author talks about are cone-shaped, and since the falcon turns in gyres starting from the narrowest point, which represents Christ's birth, to its widest one, which represents the end of an era, the evolution of mankind is only natural. In the beginning, every new leader gains popularity quickly, but as the time goes

by, its popularity decreases continuously, and when mankind finally forsakes its leader, a new one has to be born, and with him a new era begins. The following images succeed like in a film. The falconer vainly calls out the indifferent falcon, in other words, mankind is so immersed in sin and immorality that it cannot even remember Christ's teaching: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer", and as a consequence, "the blood-dimmed tide" floods the world. The image of the falcon and falconer received different interpretations. For instance Seiden perceives them as the medieval knight's sport of hawking. Daniel Albright quotes Yeats asking Thomas in the automatic script for 17 1918: "Is not world as spiral ascends getting farther from reality" and gives then a passage from 1910 draft of the *Player Queen* anticipating the image of ruin (Albright: 1992, p. 620). Jeffares simply implies that the lines may derive from Dante's inscription of how he and Virgil reach the eighth circle of Hell seated on Geryon's back, who in Cary's translation moves in wheeling gyres:

"Of ample circuit, easy they descent.../ As falcon that hath long been on the wing/ But lure nor bird hath seen, while in despair/ The falconer cries 'Ah me! Thou stoop'st to earth'!/ Wearied descends whence nimbly he arose/ In many an airy wheel and lighting sits/ At distance from his lord in angry mood..." (Jeffares: 1996, pp.109-110)

A more troubling interpretation determined by Yeats's openly-stated trust in aristocracy to control the course of humanity puts the falcon and the falconer in the position of servant and master. In this case, the aimless flight of the falcon might suggest that without the falconer's guidance, the results would be disastrous: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". In the light of this theory, Yeats might suggest that the destructive forces that have taken over the world might be the consequence of a dysfunctional relationship between aristocracy and the masses. Yet again, this is just another interpretation, but the author must be given credit for creating a poem that seems so related to occult studies and at the same time so rooted in reality. Whatever interpretation we consider more appropriate, one thing remains the same: the widening gyre and the flood are the dark side of an imaginary moon and the cone of our primary civilization.

The next line "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" suggests similar points of view in the opinion of the three critics. For Seiden, for instance, it represents the moment when Yeats, after having named his symbols, goes on describing the social, religious and political conditions. Daniel Albright analyses the verses according to *A Vision* where anarchy and the adoration of violence are presented as the characteristics of the end of a historical era. Jeffares' analysis situates itself in the light of *The Trembling of the Veil* where Yeats wrote that he had not foreseen "the growing

murderousness of the world” and that when writing *The Second Coming* he had the troubles of Ireland in mind, as well as the Russian Revolution:

“What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the influence of its lunatic faculty of going against everything which it believes England to affirm) to Marxian revolution or Marxian definition of value in any form. I consider the Marxian criterion of values as in this age the spear-head of materialism and leading to inevitable murder. From that criterion follows the well-known phrase ‘Can the bourgeois be innocent?’ (Jeffares: 1968, p.242)

Yeats continues his poem with the line “The ceremony of innocence is drowned”, suggesting that social manners and religious faith are being neglected or destroyed, in Seiden’s opinion. Everything is turned upside down: the rulers of mankind – the “best” or the falconers – have lost their conviction whereas those designed to be ruled – the “worst” or the “falcons” – feel their confidence is full of intensity. The same line in Jeffares’ commentary bears similarities with Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*: “The good want power, but to weep barren tears / The powerful goodness want...” (Jeffares: 1968, p. 242). For his interpretation of the poem, Daniel Albright quotes Yeats telling to Ethel Mannin in 1936 to “look up a poem called *The Second Coming*. It... foretold what is happening... every nerve trembles with horror of what is happening in Europe”. In this case, the poem receives political connotations. The author seems to condemn the atrocities committed by the political regimes of the beginning of the twentieth century: communist, fascist, nationalist, etc., with no exception. He believed that the irrational violence of World War I and the Russian Revolution, as well as the random atrocities that Black and Tans committed in Ireland were signs of an approaching apocalypse in point of social stability and political dominance.

In the political disquietude of Ireland, an image full of love is revealed before the eyes of the poet: “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” A new age, classical and aristocratic will be born. Nevertheless the image full of hope is dimmed by another image: “A vast image out of Spiritus Mundi/ Troubles my sight”. The frightful image of the troubled world makes him look into the supernatural and there he finds the image of creature with lion body and the head of a man, which can be identified as the symbolic Sphinx of antiquity, finally overcome and put to sleep by Christ’s conception and birth (Seiden: 1962, p.235). The image of the “reel shadows of the indignant desert birds” analyzed together with the first two lines of the poem suggests that the falcon has been “reborn as its anti-self.” (Ross, 2009, p.221) Once again the dominant theme is that of historical cycles, thoroughly discussed by Yeats in *A Vision*:

“Each age unwinds the threads another age had wound, and it amuses me to remember that before Phidias, and his westward moving art, Persia fell, and that when full moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and at that at the outset of our westward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell; all things dying each other’s life, living each other’s death.” (Yeats: 2008, 183)

The Spiritus Mundi/ Anima Mundi/ Soul of the World is defined by Yeats himself as “a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit”, while Daniel Albright, defines it as the treasure house of images not invented by man but given to him from beyond. In western tradition, the vast image received from Spiritus Mundi, the lion with the human head, moving sensuously on the sands of the desert, with “a blank gaze and pitiless as the sun”, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born is obviously a sort of warning regarding the birth of the Antichrist:

“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 toward Bethlehem to be born?” (Yeats: 1985, p. 210)

Both Jeffares and Albright mention that Yeats considered the Christian era as being two thousand years long. As for the “rough beast”, Albright associates it with unicorns, Yeats’s symbol for decadence, which “prances, inspire, trample grapes, copulate with queens and prostitutes, causing general havoc” and states that around 1904 Yeats wrote:

“I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction. And then the poet predicts the end of the fin-de-siècle art that he loved: After Stephane Mallarme, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau...after our own verse...what more is possible? After us the Savage God.” (Albright: 621).

For the last line of the poem “Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born” - Albright discovers the interpretation in *Exploration*, assembled by Yeats’s widow in 1962 and containing some book prefaces: “the next civilisation may be born, not from a virgin’s womb, nor a tomb without body, not from a void, but of our own rich experience.” He also asserts that Yeats liked to describe the origin of the antithetical civilisation as sensual thrashing, a spasm of horror. Unterecker suggests that Yeats might have created his poem relying on what Jung called archetypal patterns. He claims that Yeats, who was already in his mature years, might have felt what any other man feels when he realizes his end is close – that everything will completely change after him. The thought might result from some sort of jealousy generated by the idea that everything around will continue to exist and somehow tempered by the consolation that everything is going to end

anyway. Yeats, however, does not talk about a physical destruction of the world, but rather about a reversal of the world as we know it.

Seiden finds a paradox in the poem. He says that in *A Vision*,² Yeats writes about the supernatural influx with which a civilisation begins, which is both antithetical and primary, both lunar and solar. Therefore, despite the fact that Christ stands in opposition with the classical antiquity, he was also a primary God for the two thousand years following his birth. The falcon, the primary god for this era, was thus antithetical and ruthless for the previous era, and the Sphinx, the antithetical god for this era but the primary god for the next one is a symbol of both sorrow and joy. The falcon paved the way to cultural rebirth on the one hand, but on the other it extinguished the past. The Sphinx (the rough beast) will bring better times perhaps, but it will also destroy whatever precedes its reign.

Conclusions

W. B. Yeats succeeded in being “far more Irish”¹⁸ than many of his contemporaries, so-called Irish. He may not have intended this from the beginning, though his active membership in Irish Revival and his presence in the events of the moment show the contrary.

In the context of modernizing times, the writers’ desire for emancipation came as a consequence of their day-to-day life. Modernism led to individuality which proved a failure since the individual pertaining to a community cannot achieve absolute freedom.

W. B. Yeats expressed his artistic creed and his life philosophy in an essay published in 1901, according to which the memory of Nature is the keeper of all great values of mankind. Yeats dismissed modernism and believed that industrialization and urbanization would lead to abnormal world. Nonetheless, Yeats was considered both traditional and modern (W. J. McCormack: 296-297); traditional through the revival of old Irish legends and modern through the quarrel between him and his self. By reviving Irish legendry, he became one of the heads of Irish Revival; by the quarrel between his self and him, by his nationalist position through emancipation of the Irish State he was a modernist.

Ireland had an ambiguous position through its desire towards emancipation, on the one hand and the disparities in the Irish society, on the other. As an Irishman, Yeats’s politics could not be different from the politics of his native country. In order to find an answer, the poet resorted to

¹⁸ „We are far more Irish than all the Saints and Martyrs – Parnell-Pearse-Madam Markiewicz-Maud Gonne- De Valera- and no-one ever thinks of speaking of them as Anglo-Irish. Our nearest English blood is a 100 years ago – Grandfather William Pollexfen’s mother Ann Stephens came from Wexford.” (Lily Yeats quoted by R.F. Foster, W. B. Yeats-A Life, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.5)

Fascism and Communism, which at first seemed to reconcile the conflict between difference and unity. Yeats's aim was to achieve "unity of being" by accepting diversity. Since his own country could not solve this puzzle, how a poet could have done it. The poem "The Lake of Innisfree" could be given different interpretations in this sense: longing for his beloved Sligo and a declaration for right and duty, an attempt to define freedom. Fortunately, Yeats came to realize that Fascism and Communism were mass movements and that the reconciliation between part and whole could not be achieved.

"The Second Coming" (1919) explores the theory of cycles which governs the sequence of events. The poem was republished in a collection of other poems *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, containing poems describing the dark and gloomy atmosphere in the world of those times. In the poem, Yeats made use of his own visionary system outlined in *A Vision*, speaking about cyclical patterns and every 2000 years a new spiritual leader is born. Objective era will be followed by subjective era in which principles and values will have no meaning. This subjective era will reach an end when "a rough beast will slouch towards Bethlehem to be born", which, as a matter of fact, is a line in the poem. This line can be given myriad of interpretations, as it has already happened with both contemporary thinkers and later with nowadays critics.

What is certain, nonetheless, is that, despite contemporary accusations, W. B. Yeats, the Noble prized, though his literary endeavours won a place among the greatest artists and thinkers of the world – the common heritage of the humankind – and along with other Irish writers (Swift, Joyce, Shaw) made Ireland known in the whole wide world and that his work is forever open to interpretations, as it actually happens with the scholars and students participating every year in Yeats International Summer School, in his beloved and celebrated Sligo.

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