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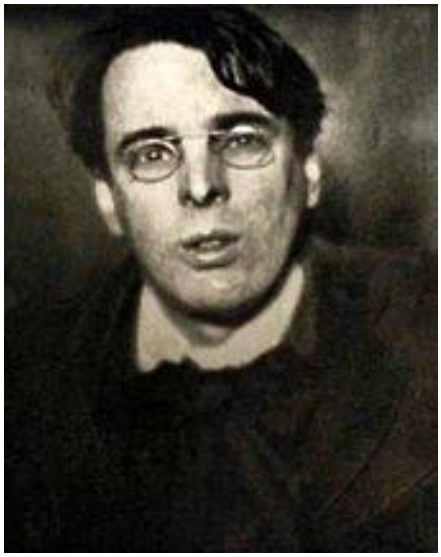
William Butler Yeats: 'The Second Coming'

Editor's note: On the heels of Tuesday's April 23 Pennsylvania primary election, following is the last in a series of Classic Book Notes on politics by JES Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It first appeared as Book Notes #33 in November 2020.

Dr. Roth is also at work on a written tribute to the late Rev. Charles Brock and will lead a special program celebrating Rev. Brock's life and work on Wednesday, May 22 at the JES.

For more information about that event, including how to register, click here.

To revisit Rev. Brock's 2022 Global Summit lecture, "John Milton, Abigail Adams, and Thomas Jefferson: Revolution Yesterday and Tyranny Today?" when he received the Thomas B. Hagen Dignitas Award, click here.



"Things fall apart …"
"The centre cannot hold …"
"The best lack all conviction …"
"… the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Touchstones of the modern, long before there was an internet, these phrases became literary memes voicing the 20th century's era of upheaval. Then in the early 21st century after 9/11, ISIS, Brexit, and the presidential election of 2016, they flowered yet again. As Michiko Kakutani reported in The New York Times in February 2017, they were "quoted more in 2016 than in any other year in three decades." [1] Via *Factiva*, Ed Ballard in The Wall Street Journal documents their increasingly frequent appearance in the late 20-teens. [2]

Why? Why have these watchwords from William Butler Yeats' "*The Second Coming*" returned with such incantatory power?

Maybe it's the ***Yeats Test***. As Fintan O'Toole said in The Irish Times in 2018

> "There are many ways to measure the state of the world, and economists, ecologists, and anthropologists labour mightily over them. Opening the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo last week, I suggested another one: the ***Yeats Test***. The proposition is simple: ***the more quotable Yeats seems to commentators and politicians, the worse things are." (Emphasis Added).*** [3]

Like Machiavelli, has Yeats become someone we turn to in times of political chaos and confusion? In an earlier ***Book Notes*** on Machiavelli, I noted Patrick Boucheron's insight:

"… interest in Machiavelli always revives in the course of history when the storm clouds are gathering … if we're reading him today, it means we should be worried. He's back: wake up." [4]

And back Yeats is. Joni Mitchell set the entire *"The Second Coming,"* with her own additional lyrics to music as a sort of summation of the 20th century and a warning to the 21st. It's an interesting listen, but it also shows the difference between great art and lesser art. For Mitchell put back what Yeats took out saying explicitly what he implied.

Great artists show. They do not tell.

Mitchell tells; Yeats shows.

Regardless, a recording of Mitchell's *"Slouching Towards Bethlehem"* can be found **here** and Mitchell's lyrics can be found **here** Two of the mid-20th century's master works take their titles from Yeats' poem. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's now classic 1958 ***Things Fall Apart*** – the most frequently quoted of the phrases – details the clash of traditional African and colonial cultures. ***Things Fall Apart's*** major character, Okonkwo, sees his world begin to disintegrate around him as the stories – the cultural glue – cementing his society fray under the pressure of English cultural colonization.

For what is a culture but a series of shared stories? When they change, the culture changes and when the culture changes, the stories change. One either adapts or perishes. Okonkwo cannot change – he cannot adapt. He commits suicide, although that is only a physical act. Culturally, emotionally, he was already dead. Clinging steadfastly to the old ways, he could neither understand nor accept that "There is no story that is not true … The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others." [5] Unable to accept that, he was incapable of cultural adaptation.

Joan Didion, whose ***The White Album*** was the subject of the very first ***Book Notes*** back in March, which can be found **here** also found both inspiration and, perhaps not solace, but a kindred soul in Yeats. As she writes in the *Preface* to her 1968 – that fateful year – collection of essays, ***Slouching Towards Bethlehem***:

> "This book is called *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* because for several years now certain lines from the Yeats poem … have reverberated in my inner ear as if they were surgically implanted there. The widening gyre, the falcon which does not hear the falconer, the gaze blank and pitiless as the sun; those have been my points of reference, the only images against which much of what I was seeing and hearing and thinking seemed to make any pattern." [6]

An exploration – not quite anthropological – of the hippies in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury in 1967's spring and summer of love, the collection's title essay – "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" – begins:

> "The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. It was a country in which families routinely disappeared, trailing bad checks and repossession papers. Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and now would never learn the games that held society together". [7]

"…(C)hildren who were never taught and now would never learn the *games* that held society together" suggests the shared wisdom of Yeats' poem, Achebe's novel and Didion's essay. Didion can be arch. Change one word, as she later did in her justly famous opening to ***The White Album***, change *"games"* to *"stories"* and one sees what falls apart, why the center cannot hold.

"We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience" she says in that later work. She is correct. And when the stories change or begin to fray and fragment, the center begins to give way, the social fabric begins to dissolve and society begins – *things begin* – to fall apart. One then finds oneself like Okonkwo in a world one never made, a world one cannot understand; one finds oneself like the lost children of the '60s adrift in a culture whose guideposts seem written in a foreign language; one finds oneself like many 21st century Americans clinging to a gone world, strangers in a multicultural land in which their stories no longer make sense of their experience.

Yeats biographer and Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford, Roy Foster, says in attempting to explain the incantatory power of Yeats' language "There's a sense that old forms of authority are outmoded … a sense of insecurity, instability, risk, and a feeling that something appalling is around the corner." [8] "(O)ld forms of authority are outmoded" – what is more authoritative than the story, the stories, binding one's culture together into a coherent whole?

When the old stories' authority wanes from the challenge of new stories, from the challenge of other stories, society shudders and, as in Yeats' "Easter 1916," "a terrible beauty is born." [9]

It is a death moment; it is a birth moment. Whichever, the passage is fraught.

What is the poem whose powerful language and images speak across the century from Yeats' 1919 to our 2020? It may not be Yeats' greatest poem, for he was a master of the English language, but it is likely his most famous.

Here it is in its entirety:

The Second Coming

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: 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? [10]

A wonderful reading by Dominic West's of *"The Second Coming"* can be found **here.**

Who was William Butler Yeats?

Billy Yeats, as I sometimes irreverently called him, was my favorite poet during the days long ago when I studied literature. Once, during one of my many trips to Ireland, I dragged my wife Judy to Sligo to pay homage at Yeats' grave with its headstone's famous epitaph "Cast a cold eye on life, on death, horseman pass by." [11] I've been to Coole Park where Yeats, meditating on time's passing, first saw *"The Wild Swans at Coole"*:

from The Wild Swans at Coole

"… But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake someday
To find they have flown away? [12]

So, I'm biased, but not uncritical.

With Seamus Heaney, Yeats was one of Ireland's two greatest poets spanning the 20th century from the 19th century's Irish Home Rule movement to on the eve of the 21st century 1998's *Good Friday Agreement*. They were both Irish nationalists and gifted wordsmiths. But they were also very different men and very different artists.

Heaney, a Catholic son of a farmer from Ulster, understood what it meant to be a majority-minority in one's own country. Less ethereal, far more grounded than Yeats, much more, hmmm, not realistic but a realistic romantic, Heaney spoke for and through the people, as in "Digging."

from Digging

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away. [13]

Born in Sandymount in County Dublin in 1865, Yeats was gentry. His father, John Yeats, at first studied law but later art. His mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen, came from a wealthy merchant family in Sligo, to which Yeats' family moved soon after his birth. Yeats was raised as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, which, guided by a minority of landowners, Protestant clergy and members of the professions, dominated Ireland

politically, economically and socially from the 17th century until the early 20th century. The nationalist revival of the late 19th century challenging the Ascendancy's hegemony had a profound effect on Yeats' development of his own identity, of his development as a poet and his understanding of Irish identity. [14]

Which is to say, although both were Irish, Heaney's and Yeats' stories telling them what it meant to be Irish differed greatly. Heaney, born the year Yeats died, 1939, entered a world in which Irish nationalist identity, although still bitterly contested in the north, was established in the south. Yeats, born 74 years earlier, entered a world in which one Irish identity, his, was dissolving under pressure from the revival of an ancient Gaelic Irish nationalism. Seeking to reconcile his torn identity, as an Irish nationalist, a great part of Yeats' art was the creation of that revived Irish identity. As, for example, in "Easter, 1916" in which Yeats memorializes the Irish patriots executed for the armed insurrection during Easter Week in April 1916 against English rule. Yeats, creating the story of their martyrdom in order for it to have sense in Irish history, shows the transmutation of ordinary citizens into martyrs at a culture's birth:

from Easter, 1916

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

. . . I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,

Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. [15]

The story is too complex for a brief ***Book Notes***. Its relevance here is that Yeats understood firsthand, in his blood as it were, what it meant when *things fall apart*. Written in 1919, in the immediate aftermath of World War I and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, *The Second Coming* shows the sense of disorientation, the sense of anxiety, the sense of fright as one culture collapses giving birth to an unknown new culture. And, because it could be anything or many things – authoritarian, democratic, anarchic – the unknown seethes with dread.

The first stanza sets the stage for the second:

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.

The metaphor of the *gyre* is of an ever-widening circle or helix as the falcon gets farther and farther away from the falconer – the center that cannot hold – until, the weakened center can no longer hold the falcon, the circle collapsing as the falcon flies aimlessly. Delicate things, metaphors themselves shrivel under the weight of too much explanation. Simply – the falconer is the story (stories) holding society together. As their circle widens, as the stories proliferate drowning one another out, the falcon – the people – can no longer hear them. Communications breaks down. Unable to be heard, no longer able to be shared, the stories lose their power to bind. “The center not holding, things fall apart.”

As things fall apart, “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” blood flows as violence blossoms and “everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned” – that simple but hopeful belief that it will all work out. “The best,” those denizens of the center trying to understand all sides, trying to ameliorate, “lack all conviction” while “the worst” – those partisans at society’s edges – are “full of passionate intensity.” As David Lehman says in “A Poet’s Apocalyptic Vision,” “The aphorism retains its authority as an observation and a warning. We may think of the absence of backbone with which certain right-minded individuals

met the threats of National Socialism in the 1930s. …" [16] And I might add Islamic and domestic, white supremacist terrorism in the 20-teens.

Full of foreboding, the poem's second stanza foresees a world besieged:

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?

Struggling, as hearers of stories always do, to make events make sense, the poet invokes *the second coming*. For Yeats, that is not a Christian invocation. He uses the phrase because he knows in the Christian west its power to focus attention. He is working a much older vein. "(A) vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*" troubles his sight. *Spiritus mundi* means "spirit of the world." It connotes something akin to Jung's collective unconscious – a universal storehouse of human images. The poet doesn't know what the 'vast image' is but, "pitiless as the sun," working out its own destiny, it is indifferent to human needs.

It is perhaps too simple to say Yeats was a pagan, but he believed, as did the ancients, that history was cyclical. That in the broadest patterns, it repeated itself. He did not believe in progress, or at least moral progress. Just as the ancient world was turned upside down by the rise of Christianity, so too will the Christian, the Western world be upended by the "rough beast, its hour come round at last" slouching towards Bethlehem.

Specific interpretations of *The Second Coming* are both tendentious and irrelevant. The poem's power comes not from its specificity, but from its evocation of the moral and psychological horror at society's collapse. When the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our experience no longer work, society melts into a war of all against all. It is the fear, the sense of foreboding that society's stories are shredding, fraying, and losing their ability to communicate shared values that causes people to quote Yeats. Or to at least quote those

phrases that express their unease, their anxiety, their sense of some approaching catastrophe resulting from their inability to make the world make sense.

Just as is happening in America's culture wars, which are really disagreements about which story is the American story. Or, if it is not one story, what tapestry, what mosaic of stories, blends them together to make sense of the American experience? Much of our current anxiety emanates from a latent fear that *our* story will be subsumed by our neighbors' story or the people across town's story leaving us adrift – strangers not in a strange land but strangers at home.

Or, more ominously, maybe there is no story.

And when that happens, someone – some rough beast or some gentle lamb – will tell a new story.

The terror is in not knowing which the storyteller will be – a lamb of gentleness and inclusion *or* a beast "with lion body and the head of a man/A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun. …"

Coda

I should probably end with the above paragraph, but outside the sun is shining and I want to be positive. Although the following poem inspired a few misbegotten children of the 1960s to attempt a return to nature, it still speaks to that calm joy one gets walking on the peninsula or puttering about in one's garden – the sheer delight of simply being alive, feeling the sun on your face, and listening to the wind. You might also want to look into Yeats' "*The Fisherman,*" which can be found **here.** For now, let's close with Yeats' poetry.

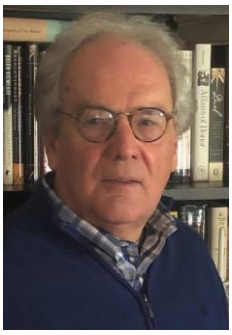
The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

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.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core. [17]



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End Notes

1. Kakutani, Michiko, *" 'A World in Disarray' Is a Calm Look at a Chaotic Global Order,"* **The New York Times** (February 13, 2017) available here accessed November 2, 2020.
2. Ballard, Ed. "Terror, Brexit and U.S. Election Have Made 2016 the Year of Yeats," **The Wall Street Journal** (August 23, 2016) available here accessed November 2, 2020.
3. O'Toole, Fintan. *"'Yeats Test' criterial reveal we are doomed,"* **The Irish Times** (July 28, 2018) available here accessed November 2, 2020.
4. Boucheron, Patrick. **Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear**. Trans. Willard Wood. (New York: Other Press, 2018), p. 52.
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6. Didion, Joan. *A Preface* in **Slouching Towards Bethlehem**. (New York: A Delta Book Dell Publishing, 1968), p. xi.
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9. *"Easter, 1916," in* ***The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.*** *(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 177-180.*
10. Yeats, William Butler, *"The Second Coming,"* in **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 184-185.
11. Yeats, William Butler, *"Under Ben Bulben,"* in **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 341-344.
12. Yeats, William Butler, *"The Wild Swans at Coole,"* in **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 129-130.
13. Heaney, Seamus, *"Digging,"* in **Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996**. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 3.
14. *"William Butler Yeats," in* ***Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*** *available at* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._B._Yeats *accessed November 3, 2020.*
15. Yeats, William Butler, *"Easter, 1916,"* in **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 177-180.
16. Lehman, David. *"A Poet's Apocalyptic Vision,"* in **The Wall Street Journal** (July 24, 2015) available here accessed November 3, 2020.
17. Yeats, William Butler, *"The Lake Isle of Innisfree,"* in **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 39.

leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

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[Cascade Creek Restoration]