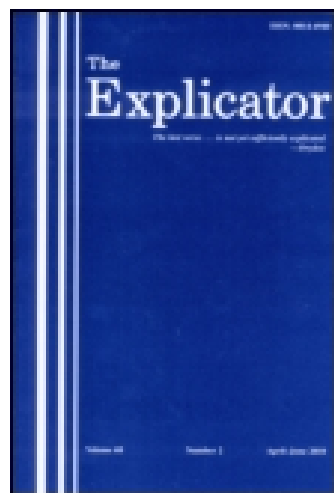


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Yeats's THE SECOND COMING

I think we can gain something from reading Yeats's "The Second Coming" in light of Gérard de Nerval's "Delfica," which influenced it. In its final version (1854), Nerval's sonnet ends:

Cependant la sibylle au visage latin
Est endormie encor sous l'arc du Constantin:
—Et rien n'a dérangé le sévère portique.

But the sibyl with the Roman countenance
Lies still asleep under Constantine's Arch:
—And nothing has disturbed the severe portico.

The *portique*, though it is not unlike an arch, seems to refer back to the *péristyle* in the second quatrain:

Reconnais-tu le TEMPLE au péristyle immense,
Et les citrons amers où s'imprimaient tes dents?
Et la grotte, fatale aux hôtes imprudents,
Où du dragon vaincu dort l'antique semence.

Do you recognize the Temple, with great colonnade,
And the bitter lemons you pressed on your teeth?
And the cave, fatal to careless visitors,
Where sleeps the vanquished dragon's ancient seed?

A major theme of this rich poem, one of a set called *Les Chimères*, is the preservation of classical culture, at least in memory and song, through the long Christian epoch effected by Constantine; his arch might be taken as the new religion's symbolic gateway into the capital of the classical world. But just as the classical world vanquished a rough beast, whose seed lies asleep, so the Roman sibyl, slumbering by the arch, dreams of a new arrival. Her prophecy no doubt slumbers too, but Nerval tells his listener that it will come true:

Ils reviendront, ces Dieux que tu pleures toujours!
Le temps va ramener l'ordre des anciens jours[.]

They will come back, those Gods you always mourn for!
Time will restore the order of the ancient days[.]

The second line (line 10 of the sonnet) is virtually a quotation from Virgil's Fourth Eclogue (line 5): "the great order of the ages is born anew." In its first published version (1845), under the title "Vers Dorés," the sonnet had an epigraph from line 4: *Ultima Cumaei uenit iam carminis aetas* ("Now is come the last age of Cumaean song"). In its 1853 version ("Daphne") the epigraph was taken from line 6: *iam redit et Virgo* [. . .] ("Now the Virgin returns . . ."). The sibyl, then, despite the implication of the title, seems to be the Cumaean Sibyl, whom Aeneas consults in Book 6 of *The Aeneid*, and whose *carmen*, though hardly a love song, seems hinted at in the opening quatrain of the sonnet:

La connais-tu, DAFNE, cette ancienne romance,
 Au pied du sycomore, ou sous les lauriers blancs,
 Sous l'olivier, le myrthe ou les saules tremblants,
 Cette chanson d'amour [. . .] qui toujours recommence!

Do you remember, Daphne, that old romance,
 Under the sycamore, under white laurels,
 Under the olive, myrtle, or trembling willows,
 That song of love [. . .] that again and again begins!

Whatever sibyl she may be, Nerval presents us with two phases of culture, the classical and the Christian, and perhaps a third, preceding the classical, symbolized by the dragon, suggestive of the one Cadmus slew to found Thebes. When her hour finally comes, the sibyl, we may believe, will awaken, her prophecy will take effect, and the new order of the ages will arrive. Perhaps the dragon, or its seed, will awaken, too, for it is not clear from this or the other sonnets in the set that Nerval had worked out a scheme of historical cycles like that of Yeats; at the time of writing "The Second Coming," Yeats was far from settled on his own system, as his hesitation over whether it was "twenty centuries of stony sleep" or "thirty centuries" (as the first published version has it in *The Dial*) suggests. But Nerval hints that more than the song will always begin again. The sibyl and the dragon's brood are in a kind of "stony sleep," one by the arch, the other in the cave; if they represent contrary orders of culture then they may awaken by turns, but for all we can tell they may awaken together. Whatever the case, Yeats makes more explicit than Nerval that the dying Christian epoch will receive the new classical one through a Christian portal, in a kind of cosmic poetic justice. Nerval has his Latin prophetess sleep by the great monument of the first Christian emperor, as if she is one of the oracles that fell silent at the coming of Christ (as her name, Delfica, underscores). Yeats, on the other hand, places his rough beast's birth in Bethlehem and with fierce irony evokes in his title the return of Christ, reminding us that, in the book of Revelation, the Lamb of God arrives on horseback with a sword. Both poets, but especially Yeats, finally hearken to the interpretation of Virgil's eclogue that made it a prophecy of Christ's first coming, by virtue of which Virgil became an honorary proto-Christian like the prophets of the Old Testament.

Yeats had to know Nerval's sonnet. Nerval is the first subject of Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which he dedicated to Yeats. Symons singles out Nerval's sonnets as among his three greatest works, and two sonnets are quoted in their entirety in French. "Delfica" is not mentioned, though one phrase of it ("le Temple au péristyle immense") is included with two passages from others (19). Yeats quotes Nerval at least once, though not from a sonnet, in "The Symbolism of Poetry," and he quotes Virgil's Fourth Eclogue in "Book IV: The Great Year of the Ancients" in *A Vision*. Although at least twenty years separate his likely encounter with "Delfica" from the composition of "The Second Coming"—years in which he conceived his cycles and his gyres—it is illuminating to take Yeats's poem as a rethinking of Nerval's prophecy of a new (or renewed) classical order that will replace Christianity. Had Yeats been writing in French, his readers would have taken "The Second Coming" as an allusion to Nerval; as it stands, it is enriched by being read in Nerval's company.

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KEYWORDS

Christian culture, classical culture, Cumaean Sibyl, cycles of history, rough beast, Virgil's Fourth Eclogue

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