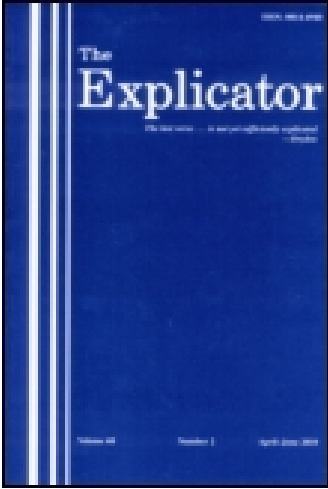


This article was downloaded by: [University of Newcastle, Australia]
On: 31 December 2014, At: 11:59
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,
UK



The Explicator

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vexp20>

Yeats's the Second Coming

Nathan Cervo ^a

^a Franklin Pierce College

Published online: 09 Jul 2010.

To cite this article: Nathan Cervo (1995) Yeats's the Second Coming, *The Explicator*, 53:3, 161-163, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.1995.9937263](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1995.9937263)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1995.9937263>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan,

sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

tance and reach God's Heaven. The *Ballad* would then include its own version not only of the *Inferno* but also of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

Yeats's THE SECOND COMING

Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" was published in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), a few years after Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which appeared just after the close of World War I and the Balfour Declaration (1917). In a long note on the widening "gyre" (line 1) mentioned in the poem, Yeats observed: "All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not for the continuation of itself but the revelation as in a lightening flash . . . of the civilization that must slowly take its place."¹ The outward gyre, Yeats tells us, is unlike the gyre before the time of Christ, which was narrowing. Under the expansive centrifugal force of the outward gyre, "the centre cannot hold" (3): "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (4).

Although the "anarchy" has been linked to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the "rough beast" (21) slouching "towards Bethlehem to be born" (22) has been spoken of as a prophetic embodiment of Fascism,² an explication of the word "beast" may show that, in this poem, Yeats foresaw the state of our present culture in the United States ("scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous") and associated the worldly success of this culture with chiliasm.

It is in this connection that the Balfour Declaration may be brought into play to shed some light on the nature of the "beast." In 1917, assisted by the eccentric English colonel T. E. Lawrence, discontented Arabs wrested Jerusalem from the Turks, and in 1918 Turkish resistance collapsed. (Lawrence's revolt in the desert is chimed in the poem by "shadows of the indignant desert birds" [17; the Turks].) The Arabs aimed at a Middle East that was exclusively Arabian. "But in 1917 the British government, trying to rally Jews throughout the world to the Allied cause, issued the Balfour Declaration (named for the foreign secretary) favoring 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.' Zionist aspirations and Allied promises thwarted Arab hopes."³

Within the context of the history of Christian millenarianism, Zionism may be said to have a decisive role: "One view of the Antichrist was that he would be a Jewish messiah who would promise to bring the people back to their land. If Christians put any stock in this hope, it was viewed as the Jews' final mis-

take. Their restoration would be but the prelude to the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the Antichrist.”⁴ The reJudaicization of Jerusalem would amount to a definitive split between the Old and New Testaments. Ironically, its effect would be the same as that envisioned by Marcion, who insisted on an exclusively christianized reconstituted Jerusalem. For Marcion (died c. 163), a wealthy shipowner of Sinope in Pontus who went to Rome (about 140 CE) and founded the semi-Gnostic Marcionites (144 CE), “the historical destruction of Jerusalem meant the final death of the Jewish Creator-God of the Old Testament,”⁵ a moralistic, yet capricious, despot akin to the Antinomian William Blake’s Nobodaddy.

The christology of the Marcionites is of some moment in this explication. In their view, the body of Christ was a mere phantasm. Not only were they anti-Judaic, they were anti-matter, espousing asceticism as their way of essentially spiritual affirmation. Yeats, who assumed the name “Demon Est Deus Inversus” (The Daimon Is God Turned Upside Down) upon his initiation into the Golden Dawn, an esoteric cult, points to the Marcionite nature of the “beast” in his poem “Demon and Beast,” which immediately precedes “The Second Coming” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. In “Demon and Beast,” both the ascetic and antinomian notes are struck when Yeats praises the “exultant Anthony [of Egypt]” (46) “[a]nd twice a thousand more [hermits]” (47). Contemptuous of civil society, supported in the West by Roman law, Yeats ends “Demon and Beast” thus: “What had the Caesars but their thrones?” (50). Earlier, Yeats had declared:

Yet I am certain as can be
That every natural victory
Belongs to beast or demon,
That never yet had freeman
Right mastery of natural things[.] (34-38)

“Right mastery” comes from living out the archetypes, from sustaining oneself on the rhizome of the Gnostic Pleroma, the Collective Unconscious, or Platonic anamnesis, of that spiritual race cast into matter and into human boundaries (bondage to matter). The “vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*” (12) is such an archetype. Specialized spiritual knowledge is viewed as an instinct of the elite.

In light of the above, the “rough beast” slouching “towards Bethlehem to be born” (21-22) may be identified, within the context of the tremendous dialectic between conventional and unconventional christology that is the subject of “The Second Coming,” as “the man of lawlessness” (*ho anthropos tes anomias*; II Thessalonians 2:3), the “man” (*anthropos*) here signifying the hermaphroditic, gender-inclusive Gnostic transcendental ideal of the Self. Paul fully teaches (II Thessalonians 2:3-12) that before the second advent, or coming, “the *anthropos* of lawlessness” must be revealed.

The “rough beast” is pointedly described as a sphinx, an Egyptian monument, “with lion body and the head of a man” (14), because, by means of the poem’s ideational dialectic, Yeats wishes to show that “our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization” is begging for a backlash, “a lightning flash”: “The revelation which approaches will . . . take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre”⁶ (that is, from the conventional Christian dispensation). The Judeo-Christian foundation of Western civilization, imitating Jesus (“And he was with the wild beasts”; Mark 1:13), will encounter the amalgamized theosophy of Egyptian esoteric alchemy and transfigure its defiance, producing “the civilization that must slowly take [our present governing culture’s] place.”

—NATHAN CERVO, *Franklin Pierce College*

NOTES

1. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 493.
2. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962) n. 2, 1355.
3. Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher, and Robert Lee Wolff, *Civilization in the West (Part 2: 1600 to the Present)* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981) 466.
4. Robert B. Eno, rev. art. of Stefan Heid, “Chilasmus und Antichrist-Mythos: Eine fruhchristliche Kontroverse um das Heilige Land,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 80:1 (January 1994): 127-128.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Collected Poems* 493: Yeats’s note.

Frost’s A SERVANT TO SERVANTS

In Robert Frost’s narrative poem “A Servant to Servants,” there is a puzzle: How did they stop the madman’s shouting? For over 75 years this question, so far as we can tell, has gone unanswered. We will review what critics have had to say about it, then show that a plausible solution can be found in the poem. As will be seen, it is a solution that greatly alters the meaning of the narrative.

From the scant attention given it by critics, one would never guess that the puzzle is important. Most of them have ignored it.¹ Others have either denied its existence (the narrator is lying²) or offered admittedly unsupported explanations, such as that the mad youth was murdered³ or castrated.⁴ What is missing from all discussions is the recognition that we need a solution to the puzzle if we are to understand the poem.