

PERUSING THE PAROUSIA: A FORMALIST READING OF YEATS'S 'THE SECOND COMING'

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A formalist reading of W.B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming' succinctly demonstrates why and how this method of criticism, instead of grasping at a vague multiplicity of intimated readings, is able to bring light to the depths of this poem and illuminate the blood-dimmed tide. Such a reading uncovers the fact that the poem is ultimately concerned with humanity's palimpsestuous creation of meaning in an epistemologically underdetermined world. By asserting that the certitude couched in God as the guarantor of all order and meaning is self-deceiving, by holding that a new guarantor will soon replace God, and by presenting this figure as an as-of-yet unfashioned artifact, the poem foregrounds the cognitive determinism that gives rise to the creation of artificial *logoi* that cannot confer certitude but must nonetheless be taken by humanity to do so. An analysis of some of the tensions surrounding God qua guarantor of certitude makes it clear that such certitude is merely apparent.

The poem, at the outset, creates tensions between natural order and chaos, between restraint and release, and between certitude and ignorance. These tensions are resolvable by the idea that any control, restraint, or certitude is ultimately artificial. The poem begins to create the tension between natural order and chaos through the falcon/falconer imagery. The referents of each of these figures are initially confusing insofar as one is eschatologically primed in reading the poem by its title. This may lead to an interpretation wherein the falconer represents God and the falcon represents man. This reading is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the falcon is moving further and further away from the falconer, in an ever-widening gyre, not coming closer to God as one would think would occur at the end of days. Secondly, the relationship between a falcon and a falconer is a relationship defined in terms of dominance and predation: a falconer trains and controls a falcon with the purpose of using it as a device for killing and, unless one ascribes to a rather militaristic view of Christianity, this relationship does not fit. While these issues may lead to the conclusion that the falcon/falconer relationship does not characterise the relationship between man and God, a paradoxical situation arises because the falcon/falconer imagery does, in fact, characterise the relationship. The appearance of a *reductio* may be removed by maintaining that this relation is epistemological in nature and not moral or ontological.

Morally, the relationship between man and God may be likened to that of the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep: it is a relationship characterised by guidance, protection, and some degree of freedom. Epistemologically, the

relationship between man and God is more accurately encapsulated in the falcon/falconer imagery: God creates, guarantees, and restrains ultimate meaning and order in the universe. God may do this in two interrelated ways. In one sense, God may be seen as teleologically ordering the world. Certitude and meaning are accordingly derivable, in the broadest sense, by identifying predication as a function of some Leibnizian ‘best of all possible worlds’—things are the way they are because God has a plan that is, of necessity, perfect. In another sense, God may be identified as that nexus wherein the link between phenomena and noumena is guaranteed—God keeps the laws of the universe and representational apparatuses functioning as they should. It is this second sense that is explored in this reading of the poem.¹ To return to the falcon imagery, as man (falcon) turns further away from God (falconer) as the ultimate arbiter of meaning and order, as he turns in a ‘widening gyre’, God’s epistemological control lessens and lessens until it cannot be felt. To put it another way, as God becomes an insufficient conduit between phenomena and noumena, humanity is left without a principled way of ordering experience, and the very warp and woof of the world begins to unravel: ‘Things fall apart’, and ‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’ (3-4). This is not some social or political anarchy, but an epistemological anarchy of the highest order—it is mere anarchy, that is, it is total and complete. When God can no longer serve as the link between phenomena and noumena, all that is left is the bewildering Humean succession of sensation, with no apparent *logos* to impart meaning or continuity. That anarchy is released rather than created creates a further tension in the poem between release and restraint.

The idea that anarchy is released upon the world intimates that an anarchical state of affairs has been extant but restrained. The repetition of ‘loosed’ in the fourth and fifth lines makes clear that ‘anarchy’ and ‘the blood-dimmed tide’ have been restrained up until now, and whatever bonds have held back the tide have been broken. It should also be noted that the grammatical structure of the fourth and fifth lines forces an identification between ‘mere anarchy’ and ‘the blood-dimmed tide’ (i.e., the use of a comma to separate the lines rather than a semicolon establishes the identification). The use of ‘tide’ in this instance is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it emphasises the enormity of the loss of meaning—it is an oceanic event, an event so massive, that it cannot escape notice. Secondly, ‘tide’ intimates cyclicity in the state of affairs, which means that anarchy held sway at some time in the past, specifically, previous to God’s ordering of the world. It is crucial that this ordering is not understood as the literal, physical, ordering of *Genesis* but, rather, the epistemological ordering that occurred when God was established and maintained as the guarantor of meaning and certitude in the world. The restraint/release tension in the poem is resolvable, then, by identifying the anarchical state of affairs as diachronic, with God’s ordering functioning as a veil hiding the state of affairs from humanity’s immediate awareness. When this veil falls, awareness of anarchy is loosed, and

a tide of epistemological destruction is released which overwhelms and drowns the innocents.

Just as a returning tide destroys the ramparts and parapets of a child's sandcastle, so too does the 'blood-dimmed tide' overwhelm the intellectual architectures of humanity. The use of 'blood' in 'blood-dimmed tide' inclines one to imagine a torrent of violence and bloody conflict. While the dimming of the tide does suggest violence, it is not the violence of martial conflict; rather, it is the tidal violence with which the previous order of the world is ripped away. Similarly, the drowning of 'the ceremony of innocence' does not connote something as literal as hands holding a head underneath water, but an overcoming by force of the 'ceremony'. The idea of ceremonial innocence sets up an important tension in the poem. 'Ceremony' denotes a structured, or formal, ritualism, while 'innocence' denotes ignorance or lack of knowledge. A ceremony's existence is predicated upon the idea that its constituent parts each signify something greater than themselves; in other words, rituals are composed of symbols. Innocence, understood relative to ritualism, can be understood as a lack of knowledge concerning the signification of rituals—awareness extends only to the actions of the rituals, not their meaning. This tension between 'ceremony' and 'innocence' is resolvable by understanding the 'ceremony' to be a series of empty motions, gone through without knowledge of their significance. The 'ceremony of innocence', then, represents the idea that while man has hitherto believed in some ultimate guarantor or order and meaning, this belief has taken the form of empty motions. Humanity believes that whatever meaning or order it ascertains in the universe is ultimately explicable in terms of God, and when this avenue of final justification becomes untenable, the world becomes alien and anarchical. In such a world, the 'best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity' (7-8).

In this new world, the 'best' who 'lack all conviction' refers to the best off, or people who are less affected by the release of the 'blood-dimmed tide' of epistemological destruction: the sceptics.² For a sceptic, the epistemological clearing-away of the tide simply does away with formal, empty constructions, thereby confirming some of his or her doubts. Those people who couch their understanding of the world in the 'ceremony of innocence', however, are left much worse off; they are left in a chaotic, and ultimately unintelligible, world. At this point in 'The Second Coming', the poem offers the provisional conclusion that meaning and order are absent from the world, and that those who are sceptical of some unifying *logos* will be better suited to deal with this change in circumstances. What is problematic with this provisional conclusion, however, is that it is immediately undercut by the poem's announcement of a new guarantor of meaning.

After the laudation of scepticism, the poem asserts that a new unifying *logos* is coming, mines extant archetypes to formulate it, and produces the tension that the certainty surrounding the new unifying *logos* is, in fact, thinly-veiled

uncertainty. After concluding that the sceptical are in a better epistemological position than those filled with ‘passionate intensity’, the poem goes on to assert that the chaos of the first section of the poem (1-8) must be a harbinger of a new revelation (9). The Second Coming must be at hand (10). The repetition of ‘surely’ in lines 9 and 10 serves two purposes. It establishes an implication between the earlier discussed chaos and the Second Coming, with chaos serving as the antecedent in the implication. It also underscores the certainty of the revelation through the use of ‘surely’. This surety in the face of chaos seems confusing. The earlier, anarchical portion of the poem is concerned with describing the dissolution of God qua guarantor, while lines 9 and 10 hail God’s return in that capacity. This confusion can be dispelled by bearing in mind that the released anarchy is not some sort of precursor to eschatological judgment, but is instead the result of God’s loss of status as the guarantor of meaning. The certainty, then, is certainty in the idea that God is returning as an epistemological guarantor; it is an epistemological revivalism in which the falcon returns to the falconer and reforms the twisted circle. This interpretation is confounded, however, by the fact that the symbol associated with the Second Coming is not the lion of the tribe of Judah, but a mysterious ‘shape with lion body and the head of a man’ (14). The revelation of a new guarantor, then, is not the one that the title of the poem initially seems to suggest, but rather, a strange symbol out of *Spiritus Mundi*. The oddity of this choice for the symbol of the new guarantor is furthered by the fact that the Sphinx image is underdetermined.

The poem seems to underdetermine the Sphinx symbol insofar as there are two possible referents that may be drawn from *Spiritus Mundi*: the Greek Sphinx or the Egyptian Sphinx. When Oedipus correctly answers the Sphinx of Sophocles’ tragedy with ‘man’, she kills herself. Bearing this in mind, it is tempting to infer that the Sphinx represents the old guarantor of meaning, and that man, by seeing this atavistic entity for what it is, and supplanting it with himself as the seat of meaning, causes it to collapse upon itself. This is an elegant explanation, but it is incorrect for a simple reason: the Sphinx of the poem has ‘A shape with lion body and the head of a man’ (14), while the Sphinx of Greece is a female. The Sphinx conjured out of *Spiritus Mundi* must therefore be the Egyptian one. The choice of the Egyptian Sphinx is puzzling because it is an image shrouded in mystery. There is an alienness about it which is emphasised by the description of its ‘blank gaze’ (15)—it is inscrutable. All that is known is that it is bestial (‘lion body’ (14) and ‘rough beast’ (21)), lacking in humanity (‘pitiless’ (15)), and that it ‘Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born’ (22). Insofar as Bethlehem was the birthplace for the previous guarantor of meaning, and insofar as the poem describes the Second Coming, the implication is that the Sphinx is intended to be a replacement for Christ, and thus the object of the Second Coming. The Sphinx, then, is meant to be a symbol for the new certainty of which the poem speaks; that is, the Sphinx

represents the coming of a new guarantor of certitude. The tension between the anarchical state of the world and the certitude with which the revelation is received may be resolved by understanding the revelation to be a revelation without particulars; that is, while it is revealed that a new guarantor approaches, the details of this symbol remain vague. Before the particulars of the Sphinx can be delineated, the revelation is interrupted by the dropping of ‘the darkness’ (18).

When the ‘darkness drops again’ (18), the poem returns to a direct awareness of the anarchical state of affairs while contextualising this awareness in terms of the insight gained regarding anarchy and order. The dropping of the darkness refers to the completion of the vision out of *Spiritus Mundi*. After this vision is complete, a return to awareness of the anarchical state of the world is only natural. This awareness of the anarchy is qualified, however, by the insight that has been gained (‘ . . . but now I know . . . ’ (18)) regarding God qua guarantor of order or certitude. ‘Twenty centuries of stony sleep’ (19), then, refers to the time during which humanity remained ignorant of the fact that God’s conference of meaning and order was a mere veil shadowing the anarchy that lay beneath—it was a time of ceremonial innocence. The vexation ‘to nightmare by a rocking cradle’ (19) refers to the fact that the ascription of *logos* to the Christ symbol caused an epistemological state in which awareness of the world did not reflect reality, or, at least, could not be verified as doing so. But, as the revelation reaches its conclusion and ‘the darkness drops again’ (18), the speaker knows that a return to a nightmarish state is once again at hand, with the inscrutable Sphinx figure serving as the new guarantor of meaning and, by extension, the new agent of nightmarish vexation. The certitude evidenced at this point in the poem seems to be undercut by the questioning tone of the poem’s close, however. There appears to be a tension, then, because while there is certainty that some conveyor of meaning is coming, the uncertainty concerning the form and content of this conveyor vitiates the confidence in the new advent. This tension is resolvable, and, indeed, the more general tension between certainty and uncertainty is resolvable when it is explicated in terms of man’s need for certitude and his willingness to accept spurious types of it for the sake of having some form of meaning.

The questioning at the close of the poem is explicable by understanding the certainty of the second section as a certainty in that in losing one arbitrary *logos*, man will create a new one and for a time forget that the ‘ceremony of innocence’ does not signify. In this way, the questioning at the end of the poem merely becomes a questioning as to what form this new *logos* will take, not a questioning whether some new *logos* will come into being—its need for an ordered universe makes humanity constitutionally determined to postulate such *logoi*.³ This can be better understood by highlighting the cyclicity of the poem. Within the very title of the poem one finds the beginning of a cyclical tone: the ‘Second Coming’, all eschatological connotations aside, intimates a

return or a recurrence. This cyclical tone is continued in the first line of the poem: ‘turning and turning’ conjures a cycle. While the turning immediately refers to a widening spiral, and not a circle, the dissolution images that follow the description of the gyre intimate that the cyclicity of the falcon/falconer relationship has been disrupted—the falcon should fly in a circle, not a widening gyre. The poem furthers the cyclical imagery through the image of the reeling birds (17). The circling of the birds around the Sphinx implies that there is a cyclical element associated with the figure. This is strengthened by the fact that the Sphinx’s hour has ‘come round at last’ (21), which can mean either that its advent has been preordained, or that its appearance has come back around and that its existence lies within a cycle. If the object of the poem were the eschatological Second Coming, then this would imply that the Sphinx’s hour is both preordained and cyclical; however, since the object of the poem is the replacement of one arbitrary *logos* by another, the Sphinx’s hour must be interpreted as a cyclical occurrence, lacking connotations of preordination. The cyclicity of the poem then refers to cyclicity in producing some guarantor of meaning, some ultimate *logos* through which the world may be apprehended. This idea is concretised by the archetypal exchange that occurs between the Christ figure and the image of the Sphinx.

The choice of the Sphinx from a preexisting set of archetypes shows that the replacement of the Christ figure is not a replacement by genesis, but a replacement by like kind. The Sphinx image, while inscrutable and underdetermined, is nonetheless a familiar archetype (otherwise the image would not reside within *Spiritus Mundi*). In the Sphinx symbol, man does not have a cipher by which to decode the world; rather, he has an as-of-yet underdetermined pre-made mode of understanding the world. While the *logos* remains uncertain in its specifics, it is certain that there will be a *logos*, and that it will not be different in kind from the previous one. This *logos* will confer structure and meaning to the universe through a unified symbol, but this conference is arbitrary. The uncertainty at the end of the poem becomes uncertainty over the specifics of the new symbol, while remaining certain that the replacement will occur. While God may no longer impart meaning to the universe, something will. This recurrence of an empty *logos* in a phenomenally anarchic world finds further expression in the structure of the poem.

Properly grasping the structure of ‘The Second Coming’ is essential to understanding the poem; unfortunately, due to the subtlety of its construction, the importance of the poem’s structural elements can be easily overlooked. The most obvious structural signifier is the break between lines 8 and 9. Such a break would seem to indicate a shift in subject or focus. This is borne out in the poem’s transition from uncertainty and anarchy in the first part to surety and order in the second. This shift is underscored by the repetition in lines 9 and 10 of the first and last words in each line (‘surely’ and ‘hand’, respectively). The incantatory nature of these lines seems self-convincing and calls to mind the

idea of ceremonial innocence from line 6, which strengthens the idea that the certitude in the second section of the poem is spurious. This is further borne out in the poem's rhyme scheme and meter.

There are no clear rhymes or metrical patterns in 'The Second Coming'. While some may argue that 'hold' and 'world' in lines 3 and 4 rhyme, such a rhyme is questionable; and, seeing as the remainder of the poem lacks any rhymes (excepting, of course, the identical words in lines 9 and 10), and rhyming 'hold' and 'world' would produce no special semantic significance, it may reasonably be asserted that the poem lacks a rhyme scheme. The lack of an ordering principle in terms of rhyme scheme reflects and reinforces the poem's loss of *logos*—just as the world has become anarchic, so too has the poem. The meter of the poem further instantiates this idea.

A cursory examination of the meter of the poem leads to the conclusion that there is no apparent metrical pattern, which may lead to misinterpretation of the overarching meaning of the poem. In the first section of the poem, there is no dominant meter that emerges, and, as such, it is symptomatic or reflective of the anarchic tenor of that section. While there is no dominant stress pattern in the second section, there is a recurrent pattern in the number of feet per line—tetrameter—with only a few exceptions (lines 13, 14, and 21 are pentameter, and line 22 is trimeter). These exceptions may not be as seemingly exceptional once the partial pattern is analysed in relation to the poem's larger meaning. If the metrical variability of the first section of the poem is taken as reflective of the epistemological chaos there instantiated, then one might argue that the second section's emergent tetrameter, coupled with the variability of the type of feet in each line, reflects the spurious certitude that is offered in the section. On this sort of reading, the idiosyncratic final line (its predominate meter is dactylic trimeter) underscores the fact that any stabilisation that occurs in the section is illusory. The meter, then, like the other structural elements of the poem reflects and reinforces the idea that humanity will attempt to negotiate the gap between phenomena and noumena, or uncertainty and certitude, by postulating epistemological ciphers with which to decode and order the universe.

The main tension of 'The Second Coming' may be seen as the tension between fundamental uncertainty concerning the makeup of the world and humanity's need for order and certainty. This tension is resolved by showing that man must have some underlying *logos*, some signpost by which to gauge the universe. This signpost will be artificial, will be replaced occasionally, and will not be radically different from previous signposts—to be otherwise would make the world alien and unknowable. This process exists in a cycle. Periodically, man will come to see the arbitrariness of the dominant *logos*, with the result that the ordering of the world predicated upon that *logos* will dissolve. A period of epistemological chaos will ensue until a new guarantor of order and meaning is chosen. While uncertainty will exist over the exact particulars of the new guarantor, one may be certain that it will not differ in any radical fashion

from any previous guarantor. In such a way, not only is there a Second Coming, but an infinitude of comings, lying along the perimeter of a circle that will occasionally resolve itself into a gyre. Is such a reading consistent with Yeats's own thought? Some might argue that the true value of a formalist analysis lies in its ability to remain consistent with contextual information, and, as such, this necessitates a brief demonstration of the consistency of this analysis with Yeats's beliefs and body of work.

The most basic objection to the previous analysis is that Yeats may have been writing about the literal Second Coming. This objection may be based on the fact that Yeats was seemingly Christian. Although it is true that Yeats repeatedly declares his faith in God in his work, such faith is anything but orthodox. In 'The Need for Audacity of Thought', for example, Yeats explicitly denies his belief in the incarnation and in the Second Coming in its 'Christian form' (Frayne and Johnson 463–64). Furthermore, in Yeats's 1930 diary, he intimates that the Second Coming, as he sees it, is epistemological in nature, and not ontological. He says: 'Dissatisfaction with the old idea of God cannot but overthrow our sense of order for the new conception of reality has not even begun to develop, it is still a phantom not a child' (Yeats, *Pages From a Diary* 24). Thus, it seems unlikely that the chaos and dissolution of order in the poem refer to the anarchy that traditionally accompanies God's direct entrance into historical circumstances. While Yeats's religious beliefs do not undermine the formalist reading of the poem, it is not immediately apparent how his occult and supernatural beliefs may impact on it.

Many of Yeats's other works discuss either directly or indirectly the problematic nature of epistemological access. In *A Vision*, for example, Yeats repeatedly makes it clear that all of existence resides within the scope of various antipodal gyres (see especially 237). Direct access, or access to noumena instead of phenomena, is accordingly problematised because people themselves may embody a particular pole of a gyre relationship or be dominated by an aspect of the 'Great Wheel', which may determine their apprehension of the world.⁴ Even when supernatural assistance is granted to visionaries such as Yeats, the access afforded is open to doubt—in *A Vision*, Yeats speaks of 'frustrators' who would convey misleading information to him and even attack Yeats and his family (16). Direct access to 'the world' and its fundamental order is thus a function of uncertain avenues. The epistemological reading of the poem, then, need not be read as contradictory to Yeats's phasal apprehension of the world, but as reflective of it. This assertion of consistency is strengthened by examining the offered analysis in terms of Yeats's theory of gyres.

The epistemological reading is not only consistent with Yeats's theory of gyres, but it actually instantiates an antipodal gyre relationship. The first section of the poem may be understood as a gyre reaching its fullest expansion ('widening gyre') and preparing to make the transition into a new gyre. One could argue, then, that the structural break between lines 8 and 9 represents the

fullest expansion of the first gyre, the point at which the greatest disorder has been reached, and that line 9 represents the beginning of a new gyre and a greater degree of order.⁵ On such a reading, the poem represents the transformation of the Christian epistemological gyre from old primary to new antithetical.⁶ While a more detailed analysis of how ‘The Second Coming’ instantiates Yeats’s gyre theory would doubtlessly be valuable, for present purposes, it is enough to show that the formalist reading under discussion is consistent with Yeats’s theory. A final and more often discussed issue that must be addressed is the political nature of the poem.

A common reading of ‘The Second Coming’ focuses on the execution of the Tsar as the motivation behind the poem’s creation, which may make a purely epistemological reading suspect. Donald Torchiana argues that the poem was originally conceived in response to the socialist revolutions in Germany, Russia, and Italy, and that in early drafts of the poem, Yeats draws connections between Marie Antoinette, Marxism, and the threat that revolutionary socialism posed (Torchiana 214). Simona Vannini, however, expresses graphological scepticism, arguing that in early drafts of the poem, ‘have’ and ‘come’ have been misread as ‘Marx’ and ‘Communism’, thereby overemphasising the importance of particular historical incidences as ciphers for a poem that studiously avoids direct historical references (Vannini 115–16). Of course, the political and social upheavals of Yeats’s time could have been in his mind as he wrote the poem; nevertheless, the fact that the poem is departicularised to the extent that it is makes it more reasonable to eschew such particularity in favour of a more inclusive reading of the poem, a reading where the actions of nations, mice, and men become causally indeterminate, anarchic, and terrifying.

Analyses of the works of W.B. Yeats are never straightforward. This is especially the case with Yeats’s poetry. It is tempting to draw upon as many of Yeats’s other works as possible in the hopes of finding some sort of consilience or Rosetta stone. Such ventures are fraught with peril and may often prove counterproductive. Formalism, however, offers the means to obviate such quagmires and instead uncover the internal unity of Yeats’s works. The formalist analysis offered here demonstrates how this theoretical approach can not only produce an internally consistent reading of ‘The Second Coming’, but also how a formalist reading may shed light on the larger body of Yeats’s work.

NOTES

¹ This reading remains ontologically agnostic. The poem, as is shown in the course of this essay, does not concern itself with the literal existence of God or Christ because it is not concerned with the literal Second Coming.

² ‘Scepticism’, within the boundaries of this article, does not refer to any particular historical form of scepticism such as the movements associated with

philosophers like Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, or the German Idealists; rather, ‘scepticism’ refers to a position characterised by intellectual agnosticism in the face of first principles and the systems derivable from them.

³ It is worth explicitly noting that these *logoi* need not be identified with deities. While an initial reading of the poem might lead one to make such an identification, the ‘Sphinx’ might just as easily be identified with materialism, for example—a *logos* that has proven itself arbitrary in the face of problems with inter-theoretic reduction. What is essential, in the present reading of the poem, is that an arbitrary locus of meaning will be asserted as a replacement for the previous one.

⁴ In *A Vision* Yeats discusses how people can be either ‘antithetical’ or ‘primary’ (just as gyres may be antithetical or primary) and how every person is dominated by different phases or ‘incarnations’ of the Great Wheel at different points in their lives (80–89).

⁵ It is worth noting in passing that such an argument, stretched to an extreme, might hold that the absence of language reflexively highlights the epistemological breakdown through the lack of any ostensible signification; i.e., the absence of language at the break drives home the fact that the lack of an epistemological centre undermines the representational capacities of language itself (in more than a simple post-lapsarian way).

⁶ ‘When the old antithetical becomes the new primary, moral feeling is changed into an organisation of experience which must in its turn seek a unity, the whole of experience. When the old primary becomes the new antithetical, the old realisation of an objective moral law is changed into a subconscious turbulent instinct. The world of rigid custom and law is broken up by “the uncontrollable mystery upon the bestial floor”’ (Yeats, *A Vision* 105).

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