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903 Ecosystems of Thought

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March 18, 2024

## Embracing The Rough Beast

### *The Second Coming*

**W. B. Yeats, 1865 - 1939**

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?

The way the world has been described, and designed, is deeply steeped in hegemony and metaphysics, however, the authors in the Ecosystems of Thought class readings all posit a way out of thinking outside of the binaries and systemic issues that are inherent in the metaphysical view of the world. The following thinkers from the readings this semester all get at the idea of the necessity of a deeper, different, imaginative understanding, of how we as humans interact with our surroundings and each other. Edouard Glissant speaks of opacity in *the Poetics of Relation*, a way to relate to each other and describe identity. Anne Dufourmantelle speaks of Enigma in her book *In Defense of Secrets*, and Giorgio Agamben speaks of the immaterial in his *What is Philosophy?* Each of these thinkers, along with William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" provides a narrative and at least a partial roadmap to imagining a different way of relating to each other and the world in its precious and perilous state.

The poem, "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats kept creeping into my thoughts as I read over the last few weeks. The poem, written just after the First World War, is inspired by the chaos that the war brought upon individual and societal interactions. Humanity was faced with the idea of its demise on a mass scale, and many of the ways of war were brought to people's attention like never before due to the advancements made in photography and printing. People witnessed the atrocities of war in a new way. It was a time when "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats). An anarchy we have perhaps never re-harnessed, we have never come back from. Anarchy was perhaps "loosed" from Pandora's box, and we have had to navigate the last 100 years without hope. However, that does not mean there is none; artists and philosophers are part of those doing the work to imagine and create a different world.

Although Yeats wrote the poem from the point of view that we are doomed and that there is no “second coming,” I think the thinkers in this paper can help provide a different reading. Yeats wrote using religious imagery, the idea of the second coming of Christ, a symbol that would have been instantly recognizable to most, and Christ was, maybe, the only savior imaginable to Yeats at the time. However, I think reading the poem through a different lens, one in which we are looking for an answer and alternative ending free from metaphysical, binary, restrictive thought helps to give the poem a new interpretation especially when paired with the readings of Glissant, Agamben, and Dufourmantelle.

More than ever, we are constantly bombarded with (mostly negative) information, highlighting the various wars, famines, and human rights violations that are happening all over the world. Just like the original audience of Yeats’ poem, readers today are living in unprecedented times. Not only have we never experienced information, imagery, and technology in such a way, but much of how we are being forced to consume this goes against our most basic biological needs for survival. Although the poem alludes to a Christ-like figure that the narrator wishes would come to save humanity, I would disagree with this reading as it keeps us enveloped in a world of systems, hegemonies, and metaphysics. Rather, I would argue, that only an imaginative post-metaphysical philosophy can save us.

We are still in a time of great struggle and catastrophe, and it certainly seems as if the “center [still] cannot hold.” In this interpretation, the center would be a reference to the traditional modes of thought and identity that are no longer accepted as truth. For Glissant, “Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people” (Glissant 14). In the poem, the center is the warmongering, colonial, imperialist nation, spreading

itself unnecessarily. For Glissant, the center does not matter because it spreads outwards, the center, middle, and outside are the same. We are no longer relying on the center but rather looking elsewhere (or everywhere) for new ways of knowing and understanding.

The poem speaks to the problem of metaphysics, a way of thinking of and relating to the world that has resulted in “twenty centuries of stony sleep” (Yeats). The authors discussed in this paper have each grappled with the problem of metaphysics in their way, and developed a way of thinking, seeing, and relating to the world differently, outside of the strict boundaries of the metaphysical tradition. For Anne Dufourmantelle, Enigma “The secret is neither the enigma nor the mystery toward which it still points. Enigma and mystery fall more under the Latin *occulta* than the setting apart of *segrada*. Enigma is knowledge not yet unveiled by science or experience” (Dufourmantelle 10). The figure slouching towards Bethlehem in Yeats’ poem is an Enigma in this sense. We know something is coming but we do not have the language, technology, or understanding to grapple with and define it. This enigma, this mystery is “setting apart” the known from the unknown and providing a space in which to imagine the “rough beast” that is about to be born. Dufourmantelle writes, “Every secret is a becoming. What is secret is what makes itself secret” (Dufourmantelle 16). The second coming is a becoming, it is still a secret because it is not all figured out, it is the work of artist philosophers along with scientists and mathematicians to imagine and bring to light this, Enigma.

There is a secret in “The Second Coming,” something or someone is coming but we do not know its intentions, we only know what the narrator hopes for. Dufourmantelle writes, “Human communities are structured by these borders separating the divine and the secular, the living and the dead...The secret abolishes them” (Dufourmantelle 3). Figuring out this secret is a

key to both a general understanding of the poem and to reading the poem through the lens of the cautionary tale of metaphysical and binary thinking. What is so magical and necessary about this secret is how Dufourmantelle defines it, “Secret is the grounding of an oath—and, as such, is able to be betrayed” (Dufourmantelle 8). Once we know, we can change our minds. We are not beholden to the create that is coming towards us, we can change our minds about what we need, when we need it, the beauty of a world without hegemonic, binary thought and limiting metaphysical beliefs.

This is no easy task, as Dufourmantelle writes, “Unveilings are not without risk; the subject discovers that they are beholden to loyalties that “work upon” them, adorations that captivate them, hates that might annihilate them” (Dufourmantelle 24). Seeing the ‘rough beast’ that “Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” is a daunting and scary proposition, but as Dufourmantelle makes clear, not knowing could be much worse. These loyalties are the hegemonic fantasies that work upon us in our troubled system of identity and knowledge, with or without our full understanding and acknowledgment. This figure is hard to define and could bring promise or annihilation.

This is where Glissant’s concept of opacity is integral to how we relate to the world, and in some ways seems antithetical to the idea of secrets. He writes by way of definition, “The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (Glissant 191). There is an element of letting go in Glissant’s concept of opacity. An idea that we must come to terms with and understand that we cannot know everything. The opposite of opacity is transparency. When something is transparent, we can literally see through it, but

metaphorically as well, we feel like we arrive at a thorough understanding. Opacity denies us this certainty. Yeats' poem is completely opaque. We cannot understand what is happening, or what will happen in the future. There is a fog of opacity covering the chaotic landscape. For Glissant opacity provides a modicum of protection from being completely seen, and ultimately misunderstood. Much like the creature on its way to either save or annihilate humanity in Yeats' poem.

Interestingly, for Glissant, "Death is the outcome of the opacities and this is why the idea of death never leaves us" (Glissant 194). Death is also one of the two possible outcomes of Yeats' poem. Either the creature kills us all or saves us. The future is either destroyed or saved. We are either misunderstood or understood. Death, like opacity, can be a form of protection. For Glissant, opacity protects the diversity of identities in a post-colonial society. For Yeats' the opacity obscures the outcome, giving the reader more imagination, and therefore, say, in the future of mankind.

There is a sense of loss in the poem. Through no fault of our own, we cannot communicate or understand, "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" presumably over the din of the whirlpool opening up and threatening to engulf the entire planet. Maybe the "widening gyre" will evolve into a more rhizomatic shape, branching out in inconceivable ways, outside of its original purpose. Perhaps what is underneath this widening gyre is a more polyphonic and rhizomatic entity that provides growth rather than destruction. Glissant writes, "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other...the rhizome concept appears interesting for its

anti-conformism” (Glissant 11). This lack of conforming is this move away from metaphysics to a more creative and fecund space.

This space would be more rhizomatic, more polyphonic, there would be the hope of more. Glissant writes, “...simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community’s reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation” (Glissant 16). We need a poetics of relation with the creature coming to save us from the ills of metaphysical, binary thought that have plagued us. This creature is coming to provide us with a new way of interacting, a new way to relate to one another outside of the confines of our old ways of thinking.

As though speaking about this poem Glissant writes, “Christian individuation did not result in a return flow of history, a cyclical renewal; on the contrary, by universalizing linear time—*before and after Christ*—it brought chronology of the human race into general use” (Glissant 48). Yeats's poem is temporal but we do not know the period in which it is set, we merely take cues from when the author lived and the various events that were taking place during his lifetime. This has resulted in the problem that Glissant discusses above. We find ourselves in a fixed, linear time, tied to metaphysical thought. If time is linear and tied to religion, there is no way out. If we embraced other temporalities, for instance, the circular time so prevalent in Latin American magical realism, perhaps the widening gyre (an ever-growing circle) would not be such a cause for alarm to begin with.

Giorgia Agamben’s Appendix to his book *What is Philosophy?* is about how music, poetry, politics, and philosophy all could and should work together. Agamben and Yeats both speak of the muses, these unseen forces that have done so much for the world, that provide art,

poetry, and music to others without expecting anything in return. For Yeats, this muse is the *Spiritus Mundi* or world spirit, a kind of universal memory or muse, it is this specter that provides a first glimpse of the unexpected figure that might bring mercy to a troubled world. For Agamben, we need to go back to musicality as it is superior to language. Poetry, however, seems to provide a nice bridge between the two with its musical sensibilities and precisely constructed language. He clarifies, “A language without margins and frontiers corresponds to a music that is no longer museically tuned, and a music that has turned its back on its origins corresponds to a politics without consistency and hope” (Agamben 106). We need the hope that Agamben writes about here, again, this is what is missing from Yeats. It seems that Yeats has been able to bridge music, politics, and philosophy with this poem. As Agamben writes, “And if, following Hannah Arendt’s suggestions, thought coincides with the ability to interrupt the meaningless flux of sentences and sounds, stopping this flux in order to give it back to its music place is today the ultimate philosophical task” (Agamben 107). The poetic nature of his writing, the political undertones, and the hope for a better future make this poem a key piece of philosophy.

Interestingly, the last lines of Yeats's first stanza also seem oddly prophetic given the state of the world and politics, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.” He seems to have foretold the world of AI and misinformation that is haunting critical thought and infiltrating our political system. The way out is opacity, it is accepting where we have been, and understanding that we need to see the hope in the figure coming towards us if we are to free ourselves from the prison of metaphysical thought. However, Yeats speaks of a transformation that will occur, a transformation that can and will hopefully save us.

Dufourmantelle speaks of a process of transformation that never stops, “even in the frozen time

of trauma. For even in the most naked anxiety dwells a possible metamorphosis”

(Dufourmantelle 4). This speaks to a hope that seems to be missing from Yeats and the metamorphosis and transformation that can come from the anxiety of waiting for the beast.

W.B. Yeats’ poem, *The Second Coming* provides an excellent lens with which to discuss the problems and limitations of metaphysics. The poem’s religious undertones and imagery work well with the discussion of a world harmed by metaphysical thought and imagining a way out, which makes sense since religion and metaphysical thought stem from the same root. The concept of unveiling is threaded throughout these authors. The suspense of Yeats’ poem hinges upon the idea of an unveiling of what is slouching towards birth.

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