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# Yeats, Eliot, and apocalyptic poetry

Nancy Helen Fletcher  
*University of South Florida*

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Yeats, Eliot, and Apocalyptic Poetry

by

Nancy Helen Fletcher

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Major Professor: Phillip Sipiora, Ph.D.  
Hunt Hawkins, Ph.D.  
David Schenck, Ph.D.

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## Yeats, Eliot, and Apocalyptic Poetry

Nancy Helen Fletcher

### ABSTRACT

Yeats and Eliot merit comparison because they wrote poetry that has been described as apocalyptic in the same historical period and in the same general geographic area but described entirely different visions. These particular works of Yeats and Eliot are appropriate because they represent two widely varying viewpoints on the causes, nature and desirability of what each author felt would be the coming apocalypse. Therefore, more can be learned by comparing the very different outlooks of the poems than by considering each poem separately.

Yeats sees humanity as both the victim and the beneficiary of a series of inescapable historical cycles. He views the destructive pressures on civilization as coming from an outside agency. Yeats continues this theme in many of his poems, such as "Lapis Lazuli": "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay," as well as other works (Yeats, *Collected* 291, l. 35-36). On the other hand, Eliot feels that the imminent apocalypse was a result of the decadence of civilization, a direct result of humankind's rejection of the God of the Anglican faith, a failure that implies a more personal responsibility. Since Eliot's view implies freedom of choice, he found that humanity held the ultimate responsibility for its own salvation or desolation. Eliot differs from Yeats in that he describes an entirely internal, spiritual destruction.

In this paper, I examine Yeats' "The Second Coming" and Eliot's "The Hollow Men" as examples of completely different visions of the near future, demonstrating the need for a more adequate definition of the term "apocalyptic poetry." While two poems are much too small a sample for such a broadly based project, my study will point the way to a possible reassessment of the perhaps overly broad application of the term "apocalyptic poetry."

## **CHAPTER ONE—Introduction**

### *Significance of the Study*

There is an ancient Oriental curse: "May you live in interesting times." The era during which William Butler Yeats and Thomas Stearns Eliot composed their poetry seems tailor-made for this expression. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, educated people expressed doubts about humanity's place in the universe and the existence of God clamored for expression. Critic Victor Strandberg of Duke University theorizes, "Unlike medieval man, whose religious belief served as a blindfold against despair, modern man has looked the Gorgon squarely in the face. He has known all forms of despair: despair of himself, of his value and destiny; despair of one another, of the meaning of civilization; and certainly, despair of God – of His goodness, or power, or existence" (475). Without the stabilizing force of religion, humanity stumbled and cast about for new Gods and philosophies. Although few critics would argue against the theory that the times in which the poets wrote were conducive to an apocalyptic genre, there has been too little analysis of the differing kinds of apocalyptic poetry. The aim of my project is to draw a clear distinction between "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats and "The Hollow Men" by Thomas Stearns Eliot as apocalyptic visions and so to approach the works of the two poets in a way that has not been done before. While the two poems are visions of the future, the poets have completely different ideas of the nature of the coming change.

Yeats and Eliot merit comparison because they wrote poetry that has been described as apocalyptic in the same historical period and in the same general geographic area but described entirely different visions. These particular works of Yeats and Eliot are appropriate because they represent two widely varying viewpoints on the causes, nature and desirability of what each author felt would be the coming apocalypse. Therefore, more can be learned by comparing the very different outlooks of the poems than by considering each poem separately. I contend that there are approximately as many definitions of apocalypse as there are religions. Within those definitions there may be many possible groupings for the myriad variations on the apocalyptic theme that have been expressed as poetry. Therefore, an examination of these two specific poems will provide evidence of a possible need to re-define the genre. While two poems are much too small a sample for such a broadly based project, my study will point the way to a possible reassessment of the perhaps overly broad application of the term "apocalyptic poetry."

### *Review of the Criticism*

Critic Graham Hough, in his book, The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats marginally approached the subject with one of the better definitions of apocalypse as it relates to literature (63-64). Cornelia Cook, in her article "Fire and Spirit: Scripture's Shaping Presence in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," makes mention of "The Hollow Men" in her general treatment of Eliot and spirituality (85-86). However, the closest that modern literary critics come to a direct comparison of the two authors is James Longenbach's

"Matthew Arnold and the Modern Apocalypse," which explores Yeats and Eliot along with other authors who have written in the apocalyptic mode (845-852). While critics such as Frank Kermode and Donald Childs have examined and explicated the more prominent works of both poets separately, books and articles that compare Yeats and Eliot as apocalyptic poets are nearly non-existent.

Critics seem to agree that Yeats and Eliot wrote apocalyptic poetry, but often differ in their views of the exact nature of apocalypse. Brown calls Yeats' poem, "a poem of Victorian crisis, a revolt couched as apocalypse against the dominant myth of social progress" (44), referring to the physical, secular world. However, Cook, in discussing Eliot theorizes: "Apocalyptic is not primarily about the end of the world, but about received vision. The most significant characteristic of apocalyptic, then, is the divine revelation" (74), a definition that echoes Eliot's efforts. Some critics and historicists believe that the word "apocalypse" derives from the Greek and means literally, the lifting of the veil. The Oxford English Dictionary favors the Greek derivation, tracing usage of the term back to the Wyclif Bible in 1382 (O.E.D.). The linguists and scholars of that comprehensive dictionary claim that apocalypse also means, "The 'revelation' of the future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos" (O.E.D.). The term may also be defined as "The book of the New Testament in which this is recorded" (O.E.D.). It is further noted that in modern usage the word apocalypse means, "By extension: Any revelation or disclosure" (O.E.D.). Thus, it is not surprising that literary critics often differ on the specifics that define apocalyptic literature.

Many critics insist that apocalyptic literature, perhaps attempting to borrow authority from the distant and unreachable past, purports to incorporate secret knowledge that has been re-discovered. Scholar Bruce Jones, writing for the Journal of Biblical Literature favors this interpretation, "The term "apocalyptic" implies an uncovering of something which has been hidden until now. Thus, we rightly apply the term to books of secret teaching which are presented as predictions from the past, culminating in the present . . . . Appeal to the past heightens the significance of the present" (Jones 326). According to Jones, apocalyptic material assumes the knowledgeable patina of "secrets of the ages--lost for centuries" often favored in modern books and movies (326). Jones' definition can certainly be associated with a Yeatsian version of apocalypse as demonstrated in "The Second Coming."

Yeats' theory that the history of civilization is one of cycles of progress and decline is not original or unique to his writing. As historical records document, many civilizations have risen to greatness precipitously, only to fall into decline seemingly at the height of their glory. Distinguished scholar Frank Kermode, in his article "Sensing Endings," investigates Yeats' eschatology more directly as he explores "Catastrophism, which hypothesized many total cataclysms and many new creations: so that there might exist between the events of a past time and the present a relation of typicality with deviance"(157). This interpretation hints that there might be typical secret knowledge in the past, or at least a typical tendency to assume that such knowledge exists. Kermode's "many total cataclysms and many new creations" (157) agree with Yeats' mythology, expressed in Visions and "The Second Coming," of a cyclical view of history, implying

Kermode's belief that there could be some realism in Yeats' grotesque images of the future.

Critic Jonathon Roberts argues that Wordsworth experienced "a different model of apocalypse in which text and history meet and are fused in personal situation, a moment of revelation: in Wordsworth's writing, apocalypse is particular, not general, and is understood in retrospect, not through prophetic foresight" (361). Roberts further categorizes Wordsworth's approach to apocalypse as "non-violent" and "non-eschatological" (361). Therefore, for at least some authors, apocalypse has little to do with violence and is experienced as a personal epiphany. This particular definition of apocalyptic literature shares some characteristics with Eliot's "Hollow Men."

Critic Graham Hough, in his book The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats, attempts to define the apocalyptic genre. He claims that apocalyptic literature has reached the status of an accepted literary mode and points out strikingly salient characteristics existent in "The Second Coming": "Most of the characteristics that belong to such literature--riddling or fictional or visionary introductions; claims to universality which go uneasily with fragmentariness and incompleteness; a gnomic and authoritative manner; strange or baffling assertions put down without argument or support; symbolism that partly belongs to the common cultural stock, but suddenly becomes enigmatic or incomprehensible" (64). However, as in other definitions of apocalyptic literature, the terms used by Hough are somewhat vague and defy clear definition. For instance, whether an author's manner is "gnomic and authoritative" is a highly subjective judgment.

Other important authors, writing in the same era, deny the very concept of apocalypse. Poet and philosopher Robert Frost, perhaps injecting a note of reason, found all the talk of apocalypse a bit elitist, theorizing "We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world's history . . . . It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God" (Frost 105). Yeats and Eliot recorded a pivotal point in western civilization, but each had a different vision. The poets were part of the same literary community. They believed that their societies and civilization in general were on the verge of total and complete collapse and expressed themselves, as was their wont, by writing poetry.

#### *Overview of the Methodology*

It is not possible to understand or evaluate a work of literature without being aware of the conditions under which it was produced. In my study, a new historicist approach is singularly appropriate because the conditions in the world provided the impetus for both poems. As educated people cast about for new directions, one of the most promising was the scientific method. People of that historical period believed that humans were rational beings who could understand anything they needed to discover about the cosmos by observation combined with intellect. One of the great intellects of their time or any other, Charles Darwin, upset the apple cart of traditional Victorian philosophy with his well-researched scientific declarations in On the Origin of Species. The tremendous historical weight of the "Great Chain of Being"<sup>2</sup> and hence of the place of humans, beasts, and every other thing in the universe shuddered and shifted as

humanity was forced to re-evaluate its relative importance in the cosmos. Therefore, it is not surprising that many writers of that historical period reflected the chaos in their work. Critic Victor Strandberg declares: "Under the double impact of Darwin's contention that man is only an animal and Freud's contention that he is hardly a noble animal at that, modern writers have indeed tended to scale man sharply downward in the great chain of being" (476). With even the traditional Great Chain of Being under assault, humankind struggled in a profound crisis of spiritual identity.

It is not surprising that the intense interest in developments in the field of psychology gave birth to both new human accomplishments and deviations. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung struggled to unlock the secrets of the psyche as civilization teetered on the edge of chaos. In an era in which mental illness was still believed to have mystical causes, Freud's idea that even infants are sexual beings scandalized those who insisted on a strict Victorian morality. His theories of the unconscious advanced ideas later popularized by Jung. Although some members of the medical profession ridiculed Freud's theories as poor science because his theories could not be tested as potentially falsifiable, other scientists, such as Freud's protégé Carl Jung, expanded on them in a way that found an echo in the later visions of Yeats.

Carl Jung was a protégé and then a colleague of Freud's who later differed with his exclusive focus on sexuality as the origin of all mental illness. Jung furthered the work of Freud on the unconscious by positing a universal as well as a personal unconscious. Somewhat anticipating the later theories of Northrop Frye, Jung theorized that this collective unconscious held a vast quantity of symbols and imagery common to

all human cultures. Yeats employs this type of imagery in "The Second Coming" as he discusses an image emerging from Spiritus Mundi, defined by Yeats as "a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit" (Smith). Jung further believed in a healthy skepticism about rationality and logic, a viewpoint that also influenced Yeats' personal mythology.

During the years surrounding the world wars, people groped for answers to questions of purpose and identity. The tremendous energy of commercialism and the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries searched for channels in which to expand. The potential for progress and new business seemed unlimited. However, it seemed that all the governments of the civilized world were in turmoil. The First World War, which humanity in its arrogance or perhaps wishfulness named The Great War, had devastated the European continent. Mother Russia, with her Marxist Bolsheviks and her White and Red armies, was locked in the death-throes of a revolution. The destruction of aristocratic society that Eliot favored and its values, while greeted with enthusiasm by the proletariat, had not introduced a stable replacement. Politicians attempted to heal some of the scars of war with the League of Nations, but the dream of a united world soon collapsed without the interest and the input of the agricultural and manufacturing behemoth of the United States of America. In addition, on the political front, women were acquiring the right to vote for the first time in some countries and clamoring for it in others. Answers to the "woman question" were many and varied, but it was obvious that a monumental change in the status of women and

certain other oppressed groups was in the offing, again calling into question man's place in the Great Chain of Being.

The cold rationality of the scientific method and the vagaries of politics had replaced the certainties of religion and monarchy, but it was becoming obvious that society had spiritual and emotional needs that were not being adequately addressed. Yeats discussed this issue with Irish nationalist John O'Leary in a letter written in 1892: "I have all-ways considered my self a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world" (Collected Letters 303). Biographer Terrence Brown agrees, postulating that Yeats' poem reflects, "Victorian crisis, a revolt, couched as apocalypse, against the dominant myth of social progress" (44), although Yeats was by no means alone in his spiritual dissatisfaction.

Biographer Peter Ackroyd documents the battle of T.S. Eliot with similar concerns. Eliot reveals that, "public events had provoked in him a mood of despair . . . he described in vivid terms the feelings of loathing and repugnance which the contemporary situation induced in him" (109). However, Eliot, unlike Yeats, postulated other origins and different manifestations of what he believed was a sickness of the soul of humankind. It has been speculated that Eliot's well-publicized conversion to Anglican Catholicism colored his perceptions of the present and the future. Through their poems, Yeats and Eliot recorded a pivotal point in western civilization, but the authors had completely different visions.

Yeats sees humanity as both the victim and the beneficiary of a series of inescapable historical cycles. He views the destructive pressures on civilization as

coming from an outside agency. Yeats continues this theme in many of his poems, such as "Lapis Lazuli": "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay," as well as other works (Yeats, Collected 291, l. 35-36). On the other hand, Eliot felt that the imminent apocalypse was a result of the decadence of civilization, a direct result of humankind's rejection of the God of the Anglican faith, a failure that implies a more personal responsibility. Since Eliot's view implies freedom of choice, he found that humanity held the ultimate responsibility for its own salvation or desolation. Eliot differs from Yeats in that he describes an entirely internal, spiritual destruction. In this paper, I examine Yeats' "The Second Coming" and Eliot's "The Hollow Men" as examples of completely different visions of the near future, demonstrating the need for a more adequate definition of the term "apocalyptic poetry."

## CHAPTER TWO—William Butler Yeats

### *Biographical Information*

Yeats wrote a unique and unorthodox brand of apocalyptic literature, as could be expected by a study of his life and philosophy. John S. Kelly, Professor of English at Oxford University reports, "T.S. Eliot said that Yeats was 'one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them'" (viii). Like most artists, his work is, to some extent, a reflection of his upbringing. According to Brown, William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin on June 13, 1865, the son of John Butler Yeats, a sometime artist who was studying law when he met and married William's much wealthier and more conservative mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen. The older Yeats soon despaired of the legal profession and moved his little family to Pakistan to further his career. The main entertainment for the children raised in this foreign land was their mother's tales of the fairies and the supernatural spirits of her home in Sligo. This early exposure to the occult and the supernatural informed Yeats' poetry in later years.

Yeats enrolled in the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin (Kelly 6), and quickly became enamored of the Pre-Raphaelites. Brown suggests: "Yeats, in revolt against the materialism of his age and its doctrine of social progress, was only one, if perhaps the most gifted, of an alienated minority in conflict with their elders, for whom such aestheticism – art as a supreme good – rather than socialism or imperialism, represented a

credible alternative to the meaningless, vulgarizing rhythms of modernity" (58). The aesthetes, with their disdain for the traditional attitudes and lifestyles, attracted Yeats with their sense of their own superiority over the faceless masses. The young poet was also exposed to many diverse political opinions that were to shape Ireland in the decades to come.

It was in Dublin, as an art student, that the young poet was first exposed to the rhetoric of the famous Fenian revolutionary John O'Leary and other purveyors of Irish nationalism. Ireland was ripe for change; the great Irish potato famine of the 1840's had probably killed a million people and caused the emigration of at least that many. Economist Timothy W. Guinnane reports, "Between 1700 and 1845 Ireland's population more than quadrupled to over 8 million people" (303). This dramatic rise in population preceded a decline that has been attributed to many causes. O'Leary's Fenian Brotherhood believed the main cause of Ireland's troubles to be British rule. The Irish nationalists saw many of Great Britain's economic policies and reactions to the mass starvation of Ireland's people as woefully inadequate. The combination of the famine and British insensitivity fueled the fires of rebellion in what remained of the Irish population.

Yeats took great pride in being aggressively, inimitably, unalterably Irish.<sup>1</sup> Yeats published his first work, "Song of the Fairies" and "Voices" in the Dublin University Review (Kelly 7), the same year in which he "Attends an evening meeting in C.H. Oldham's rooms in TCD to discuss how to bring a national spirit into DUR with F.J. Gregg, Douglas Hyde and George Coffey among those present" (Kelly 7). Charles Oldham was a prominent economist, professor, and author as well as an early Irish

nationalist. Douglas Hyde was later to be the first President of Ireland. Yeats was also active in the more conventional side of Irish politics. He was appointed to the Irish Senate by the Free State government and served two terms (Kelly 223). Although he attempted to remain uninvolved in the actual fighting (George Yeats was wounded by a bullet fragment in the same month that Yeats was appointed to the Senate), Yeats remained active in the political arena. Yeats' nationalist poem "Easter 1916," which was published just a few weeks before "The Second Coming," makes his sympathy for the revolutionaries obvious (Kelly 212). However, not all of Yeats' acquaintances were revolutionaries. Brown characterizes Yeats as having had friends and acquaintances from various economic classes with diverse political opinions (58). As Brown reports, "Apparent contradiction, however, was becoming a feature of the young Yeats's developing artistic personality – toying with socialism, joining an elite hermetic religious order, publishing poems and stories of Celtic mysticism in an imperialist organ" (58).

Yeats' association with Fenian Irish revolutionaries is well-established, but the poet also had friends and admirers from the other side of the political fence. Yeats' employer and friend was W.E. Henley, the editor of the conservative National Observer; the poet's other mentor was the Fenian O'Leary (Brown 58). Yeats' life and work was also strongly influenced by Lady Gregory Augusta of Coole Park, who was probably responsible for the poet's fascination with the grace and charm of the landed aristocracy. However, all of these associations, influential though they undoubtedly were, pale in comparison with Yeats' love affair with the complex Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne. The poet's romantic infatuation with Gonne and later with her daughter served to fuel his

nationalism throughout most of Yeats' adult life (Brown 47-52). These friendships, associations and meetings mark the beginning of a fascination with the national character of Ireland that was to continue throughout the lifetime of the poet.

### *The Occult and the Supernatural*

Yeats wrote A Vision: an Explanation of Life with the assistance of his wife, the former George Hyde-Lees. Although she was 24 and Yeats was 51 when they married, Yeats found in her not only a soulmate, but the personal manager that he had been needing for years. Yeats declared in a letter to his friend and benefactress Lady Gregory, "My wife is a perfect wife, kind, wise, and unselfish . . . . She has made my life serene and full of order" (Saddlemeyer 107). However, apparently, their honeymoon was anything but serene. It was then that George astonished her new husband with her attempts to become a psychic conduit for automatic writing (Saddlemeyer 46). Both George and her husband had been involved in occult research before their marriage. They first met at a meeting of the occult group, the Golden Dawn (Saddlemeyer 113-115). Indeed, it may well have been George's occult activities that made her attractive to Yeats. Susan Johnston Graf suggests, "Yeats writes about his longing to have a wise woman for a wife as early as May 1914, when he penned "On Woman," a poem about the Old Testament that suggests that Solomon acquired his much vaunted wisdom from discussing matters with his wives" (104). Yeats, who took the magical name "Demon Est Deus Inversus" (Cervo), investigated many of the occult organizations, from Madame

Blavatsky's to the Golden Dawn and other societies concerned with magic, but eventually became disenchanted with all of them.

Yeats and his wife employed investigative methods in his work on the occult that were an anathema to the more conservative explorers of the supernatural. Although both Yeats and George involved themselves extensively in the mysticism of the magical society of the Golden Dawn, the magical society considered George's forays into automatic writing radical and extremely dangerous. As Saddlemeier reports, "The Golden Dawn officially disapproved of 'passive mediumship' and automatic writing was forbidden . . . Theosophists also disapproved of séances and attempts to make contact with the dead" (115). The magicians of the Golden Dawn disagreed with automatic writing because the spiritualists or receivers when in the trance condition had no control over what kind of spirit they would encounter. The magicians feared possession by unfriendly spirits. George, when in a trance-like state, appeared to contact various guides, or Instructors, as George and Yeats called them. Biographer Saddlemeier reports, "The purpose of the visitations gradually became clear: a philosophical system was to be revealed that explained the 'psychology of the individual', 'the mathematical law of history', 'the adventure of the soul after death', and 'the interaction between the living and the dead'" (113). This material, collected by Yeats and George, finds expression in several of Yeats' later works, including "The Second Coming."

Much of the mythology employed in "The Second Coming" finds confirmation and a broader expression in Yeats' A Vision: an Explanation of Life, which the poet was researching at the same time that "The Second Coming" was created. While "The Second

Coming" was published in 1921 (Kelly 214), Yeats and his wife compiled the material for A Vision until April of 1925 when Yeats finally gave the manuscript to George so that she could complete the mathematical charts and graphs which enhanced Yeats' theories (Kelly 240). The treatise gave pictorial and textual reality to Yeats' ideas of a philosophical system. Yeats' view of history was similar to the old Greek notion of enantiodromia (Hough 96). In A Vision: an Explanation of Life, Yeats explains that history consists of cycles, or gyres, that opposed one another. In his book, Yeats asserts that humanity was nearing the end of one of these gyres and therefore about to enter the gyre antithetical to the Christian era. "The Second Coming," a part of this bizarre world of the near future, was created as an opposition to the story of the birth of Jesus Christ (Hough 89 – 120), whose birth had initiated the present gyre.

Many parts of A Vision: An Explanation of Life display theories and characteristics that are consistent with scientific theories of a more conventional nature. For instance, Yeats used as a measurement the Great Year, which corresponds closely to the precession of the earth postulated by more conventional scientists every 26,000 years (Vendler 93 – 104). The poet included quite a bit of arcane and complex mathematics and many charts and graphs of his system in the book. The significance of A Vision to my thesis is that it provides a complete and concrete description of the physical reality underlying the historical cycles of history and what Yeats felt would be the coming apocalypse. It is documentation that Yeats believed that impending gyre would manifest itself in measurable, objective scientific reality.

### *Influences and Images*

Yeats' belief that the history of the world swings in cycles that cannot be changed by humankind was well known even during his lifetime. He used symbolism borrowed from many sources in "The Second Coming" as well as many of his other works to give color and vitality to his mythology. For example, many critics note that Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" documents the annunciation of Leda and the beginning of a new historical cycle, much as the annunciation of Mary began what Yeats viewed as the Christian cycle. Thus, although Yeats strongly disapproved of the Christian religion, he borrows from and incorporates a significant Christian belief as he refers to "Bethlehem" in "The Second Coming." However, it is obvious that, "To Yeats, the Second Coming grotesquely sketched in the poem is hardly the Christian Parousia, the celebration of the universal presence of the Savior coming on clouds of glory to judge the world" (Cervo). In a skillful effort to give emotional authority to his homemade mythology, Yeats borrows images from many religions and theories to convey his personal belief in the cycles of history.

Yeats explains his views on such symbolism:

I believe . . .

- (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

(Essays 28)

The theory of the "great memory" (28) postulated by Yeats is echoed in the theories of Jung regarding the collective unconscious: These images are "primordial" in so far as they are peculiar to the whole species, and if they ever "originated" their origin must have coincided at least with the beginning of the species" (Jung 78). Whatever their origin, Yeats asserts that these images are contained in a kind of psychic storehouse, the "Spiritus Mundi" (l.12) of "The Second Coming." However, it cannot be denied that certain images from Yeats' poem bear a striking resemblance to those of authors with which he was familiar, although Yeats use of the images often conveys a somewhat different theme than the original. For instance, as George Bornstein suggests, "Behind the poem lurks [Shelley's] "Ozymandias," with its picture of a monumental ruin in a desert" (202). However, while in "Ozymandias" the malevolent stone ruin is deteriorating into obscurity (Shelley), in "The Second Coming" the stone figure is ascendant, rising and coming into its power, an opposition that suggests the influence of Blake (Bornstein 202). In addition, the poetic depiction of a desert to indicate desolation is not an uncommon device. It is difficult to attribute this desert to any geographical location.

Yeats was in his fifties and a prodigious reader when he penned "The Second Coming." The theme of his poem is informed by the philosophies of his most of his favorite authors, most notably Shelley, Blake, and Nietzsche. William Blake refers to the theory of contraries in his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell":

Without Contraries there is no progression. Attraction and  
Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to  
Human existence . . .  
Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active  
springing from Energy (43)

Yeats saw the contraries of the revolution of the gyres as consistent with the theories of Blake. Furthermore, Blake insists in "Proverbs of Hell": "Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps" (45) perhaps anticipating, in some aspects, the later work of Nietzsche. I believe that Yeats' attitude toward the cycles of civilization is a personal expression of his "tragic joy;" he abhorred the chaos and violence of the cycles, but believed it to be inescapable if the human race was to advance.

Blake's theory of contraries substantially informs the theme of Yeats' poem. The theory is apparent in the contrary symbolism of the Christian avatar Jesus and the coming of Yeats' avatar, the "rough beast." In addition, the opposing gyres that form the basis of the mythology of Yeats' poem are certainly contraries. As Yeats explains, "I am Blake's disciple, not Hegel's; contraries are positive. A negation is not a contrary" (Variorum 835). Thus, Yeats' seemingly dispassionate tone when describing the contraries of "The Second Coming" is actually a tone of scientific detachment as he describes contraries necessary to the progress of the civilization. Furthermore, Yeats grounds his mythology in reality. As Bornstein suggests, "In A Vision: an Explanation of Life, Yeats boasted that he had improved on Blake by turning historical characters into elements of his mythology" (196). Whether Yeats' differences from Blake were actually an

improvement, his philosophy is certainly more clearly articulated. Whether either Blake or Yeats described reality has been called into question many times; I am confident that they both believed that they did so.

Another of the major influences on Yeats' poem is Friedrich Nietzsche. Yeats muses, "Nietzsche completes Blake and has the same roots" (Letters 379). Blake presents his philosophy in the form of poetry, but rarely explained it. In many poems this practice leaves Blake's meaning open to interpretation. Nietzsche, on the other hand, wrote reams of philosophy but still baffles scholars as to his exact meaning. However, Nietzschean philosophy as presented in The Birth of Tragedy holds that the world's cultures form two general types, the Apollonian and the Dionysian (119-138). The Apollonian form of culture was characterized by a worship of reason, beauty, and truth; Dionysian culture focused on passion, strength and the more primal side of man's nature (Nietzsche, Birth 120). Yeats, in describing Nietzsche as completing Blake, refers to the more complete Nietzschean explanation of the theory of the contraries of the two cultural modes. Also, Nietzsche theorizes that the Apollonian culture had held sway on the earth since the time of the ancient Greeks. This chronology agrees roughly with Yeats' timeline for the historical cycles of growth and destruction that figured prominently in many of Yeats' works.

Nietzsche and Yeats shared similar views on conventional religion. Nietzsche, like Yeats, abhorred Christianity and describes "Christianity as the most excessive, elaborately figured development of the moral theme that humanity has ever had to listen to" (Birth 9). However, it legitimately could be argued that both authors confirm the

importance of the Christian religion by their ubiquitous repudiation of its tenets. Nietzsche believed that Christianity's time was nearly over, and that the time of the Dionysian culture was at hand. The era of the Dionysian culture was to be characterized by "sensuality and cruelty . . . enjoyment of productive and destructive force, as *continual creation*" (Will to Power 539). The "continual creation" mentioned by Nietzsche could easily be associated with the alternating gyres of Yeats' poem. Nietzsche believed that only the strong could acknowledge suffering as a necessary part of reality, learn from it, and therefore enjoy it. Thus, although Yeats is sometimes accused of enjoyment or a dispassionate response to the coming cycle, his response actually echoes the philosophy of Nietzsche: "Beyond pity and terror, *to realize in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming – that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*" (Nietzsche Reader 261). Thus, Yeats' religious philosophy shares many aspects with that of Nietzsche. Both authors found an end to the Christian era in some ways desirable.

Yeats' philosophy, as explained in A Vision: an Explanation of Life, included the necessity for the birth of a contrary avatar to complement the birth of the Christian avatar, Jesus. At one time, he even thought that he and George would become the parents of that avatar (Brown 271). Since there is no evidence that Yeats believed that George was likely to give birth to the physical form of a beast, it must be concluded that the "rough beast" of Yeats poem was either a metaphor or a reference to the spirit of an otherwise human-appearing creature. The horror and the drama of "The Second Coming" rely on the actual existence of the rough beast. Hough makes the valid objection that Yeats stipulates its reality but offers no other proof (Hough). However, Stallworthy theorizes

that Yeats uses the vague symbolism that Hough deplors because any symbol "clearly defined . . . is drained of much of its imaginative potency" (21). The power of the poem is contained in what the poet hints and infers as much as it resides in what he says.

However, as is his practice in the quasi-scientific A Vision: an Explanation of Life, Yeats is not cryptic or obscure in "The Second Coming." The progression of the poem is frighteningly logical. As John R. Harrison reports, "Yeats did not believe his philosophy to be either obscure or idiosyncratic ... In fact the symbolism in "The Second Coming" is . . . entirely logical and consistent (Harrison). Yeats' portrayal of the "rough beast" necessary to his poem is certainly no less logical than the Christian portrayal of a being who can perform miracles and come back to life.

#### *Explication of "The Second Coming"*

The title, "The Second Coming" is an example of the layering of symbolism that is common in Yeats' poem. The phrase "second coming" suggests to most Americans and Europeans the Christian usage, the second coming of Jesus Christ referred to in the Christian bible. The coming of Christ to earth is associated with a vindication of all of the just and godly people and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, to most people a positive and hopeful sign. However, the title is also an example of the use of Blake's contraries, since the poem actually describes the antithesis of the coming of Christ to earth, the coming of the antithetical future era's "rough beast." The poem presents the coming of the beast dispassionately. However, in most people the changing of the gyres and the coming of the beast engender an emotion contrary to the positive

outlook of the Christian version. The title at first reading inspires hope and positive feelings and then dashes those expectations as the reader realizes that the coming of Christ is not what the poem prophesizes.

The first line of the poem, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (l.1) clearly refers to the opposing historical gyres of Yeats' A Vision: an Explanation of Life. As previously discussed, the idea that history moves in cycles is familiar to many philosophers and historians. The gyres of the poem represent these alternating cycles of civilization. As one gyre came to an end, the violence and the chaos then present in the world heralded the coming of the new gyre that would have a focus antithetical to that of the old. As Brown reports, "Past and present are juxtaposed to indicate that an order of things which found expression in a previous era is repeating itself in the modern world under another guise" (211). Thus, the coming gyre would mean the end of the current civilization.

Yeats' poem continues, "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (l.2), quickly defining man as apart from nature (Caladrino 85). While man continues his inexorable progress, his eventual end is not tied to the fate of nature itself, which, represented by the falcon, has escaped humanity's domination. Critic Joseph Caladrino theorizes, "The falcon's disobedient flight breaks the falconer's illusion of control and his sense of order in the universe" (87). This part of the poem establishes that man is no longer in control--if indeed he ever was--of nature or of his fate. Mankind is depicted as a hapless victim of impersonal forces that he can neither affect or control, the cycles or gyres of civilization.

The structure and sound of the poem also reinforce its images. The lack of control demonstrated in the previous lines explains the desperation in the staccato sound of "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (l.3). The line is actually two discreet statements separated by a caesura to emphasize that even the wholeness of the line is shattered. Through the use of the passive voice, the next few lines:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; (l.4-6)

describe the chaotic vision, although they do not attribute causation. This lack of attribution for the cause of the anarchy is even more terrifying than a specific referent.

Critic Stan Smith agrees, making the cogent observation: "The passive voice . . . gives the impression of a process in which human agency is no more than a hapless instrument and victim of vast impersonal forces" (Smith). Even the tense of the poem contributes to the quality of immanence present throughout the poem. George Bornstein agrees, theorizing that the entire poem is written in the present tense to reinforce the clarity of the images and give the reader a sense of the immanence of the coming of the new age (201).

In addition, the rhetorical organization of the poem employs several literary devices to emphasize its message. In the lines, "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming!" the repetition of "Surely" and the phrase "Second Coming" continue and add to the feeling of immanence already evoked by the preceding lines as the tension in the poem builds. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity" (l.7, 8) is an example of a

synecdoche since the words "best" and "worst" refer to the best and worst people. However, the lack of a specific referent for exactly what kind of people infers the question; Are these people orators, politicians, rulers, or possibly authors? Again, the lack of specificity contributes to the tension already present in the poem. Adding to the layers of meaning already present, Blake's theory of the contraries is also in evidence with the juxtaposition of the "best" with its antithesis "worst."

The description of the creature itself is rife with symbolism that is attributed to "*Spiritus Mundi*," (l.12) the universal storehouse of primal symbols that are common to all people. The creature is located "somewhere in the sands of the desert" (l.13), a traditional hang-out for new gods and prophets. The lack of a specific location other than the desert serves to universalize the origin of the creature in much the same manner that "*Spiritus Mundi*" universalizes the origin of the symbols that describe it. The poem seems to indicate that the creature could have been resting in "twenty centuries of stony sleep" (l.19) anywhere in the world while it awaits its turn in the relentless cycles of civilization. The "twenty centuries" coincides with the time since the birth of Christ and the beginning of the Christian gyre, another of the poetic references to Yeats theories as expressed in *A Vision: an Explanation of Life*. The juxtaposition of the "lion body" with the "head of a man" indicates the strength and power of an intelligent creature and could also represent a contrary. However, the "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" (l.15) and the deliberate grammatical error of "moving its slow thighs" (l.15-16) paint a picture of a creature that belongs to Nietzsche's Dionysian era.

Finally, the ending lines of the poem are among the most chilling as the question is posed: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (l.21,22). The unusual verb "slouches" gives an indolent, low-class overlay to the mental picture of the beast. Smith hears echoes of "suppressed class feelings" in the verb, suggesting "proletarians slouch" (Smith), a possible reminder of the conflicted feelings that many people entertained concerning the aristocratic class. The reference to "its hour come round at last" again ties the poem to Yeats' book of philosophy. The mention of "Bethlehem" borrows authority from Christian stories about the birthplace of Jesus, who also is supposed to have had an existence before his turn as the avatar of the Christian gyre. Part of the cycle of the renewal of the gyres was the birth of a new avatar to replace the outgoing Christian Jesus. Whether or not this was a popular belief at that time, there is ample evidence that Yeats believed the coming birth of the avatar to be a real event. Logic insists that if the birth of the Christian savior can be viewed as occurring in the physical world, an unproven belief accepted by most of Europe at that time, the birth of Yeats' avatar must be granted the same possibility. Therefore, I believe that "The Second Coming" describes situations in the physical world that were consistent with Yeats' psychic research. He did not attribute agency for the chaos to mankind, but rather to the vast impersonal historical cycle of the gyres.

## CHAPTER THREE—Thomas Stearns Eliot

### *Biographical Information*

While Yeats saw humankind as both the victim and the beneficiary of vast, impersonal historical cycles, T.S. Eliot had a different vision, no doubt caused in part by his upbringing. A devout Anglophile turned émigré, Eliot was actually born in the great American mid-west, in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888 (Ackroyd 15-16). His father Henry was a prominent businessman in the stable if unexciting field of brick-making; his mother Charlotte, from whom he received his middle name, often wrote religious poetry although it was not of the same caliber as that of her son:

. . . and while my eyes  
Are closed I see it all. There is no hell.  
More horrible than this. The shriek, the yell,  
The insult and the jeer . . . (Ackroyd 19)

This type of approach to religion certainly made an impression on the young T.S. Eliot and influenced his poetry in later years with its "scriptural echoes" (Cook 68). According to Ackroyd, "Her [Charlotte's] influence never left him [T.S. Eliot] and, indeed, she made sure that it did not" (19). Eliot wrote his mother long letters frequently until her death.

Both parents were in their forties when T.S. Eliot was born, the somewhat spoiled baby of the Eliot family, which had six surviving children (Ackroyd 16). The young boy searched for a personal identity from an early age: "Eliot said he was brought up to

believe that there were 'Eliots, non-Eliots and foreigners'" (Gordon 5). The St. Louis of Eliot's boyhood was rife with urban squalor and pollution and the young poet felt no sense of identification with his surroundings. The great American move to the cities had begun; as Akroyd reports, "This was a society which offered no living or coherent tradition, a society being created by industrialists and bankers, and by the politics and religion which ministered to them" (24). Perhaps his early childhood explains, in part, the lack and emptiness that Eliot felt when contemplating the religious or the spiritual.

As a child, Eliot was probably schooled in one of the local 'dame' schools. Having passed the entrance exams for Harvard in 1906, Eliot soon distinguished himself as a scholar, planning to complete his Bachelor's degree in three years instead of the usual four (Ackroyd 30-31). It was here that Eliot began reading the works of Baudelaire, Dante, Symons and Laforgue that would later influence his poetry (Ackroyd 34). It was also at Harvard that Eliot first saw Bertrand Russell lecture and for the first time read Yeats, who did not impress him (Gordon 29-30) According to Gordon, "Later, he [Eliot] recalled that he had read Yeats, "but it was the early Yeats. It was too much Celtic Twilight for me. There was nothing except the people of the 90's who had all died of drink or suicide or one thing or another" (Gordon 30). Yeats and Eliot actually met several times during their careers, but were of such different temperaments that they never worked together.

It was on a holiday vacation from Harvard that Eliot met American author and poet Conrad Aiken, who was to become one of Eliot's few lifelong friends. While studying for his Master's degree in his final year at Harvard, Eliot worked with two

teachers, philosopher George Santanayana, with whom he did not get along, and Irving Babbitt, who impressed him greatly (Ackroyd 35). Babbitt was responsible for introducing Eliot to the investigation of the mysteries of Oriental religion that occupied him for several years (Ackroyd 37). In addition, Eliot acquired a notebook and began recording fragments of his poetry in 1910; it was at this time that Eliot first recorded the phrases that were later to be included in two of his most famous poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" (Ackroyd 39). It is significant to note that Eliot had a gift for pulling together various and disparate notes and pieces of poetry into a coherent whole; his notebooks were in constant use.

Feeling the need for a more diverse exposure to life, the young poet decided that, against the wishes of his family, he needed to go to France for poetic inspiration. Once in Paris, Eliot took courses in French Literature at the Sorbonne, and it was here that he became enthralled with the work of Henri Bergson (Ackroyd 40). Although at first, Eliot was totally mesmerized by the man, by 1913, this phase had passed and Eliot began to publicly criticize Bergson (Ackroyd 41). Although Eliot found his ideas on stream of consciousness fascinating and agreed with his anti-intellectual stance, Bergson's theories on the nature of God diverged markedly from the Catholic stance.

It was during Eliot's year abroad that he was introduced to Jean Verdenal, with whom he struck up an immediate close friendship. The two went everywhere together and Eliot was devastated when Verdenal joined the army as a medic and was killed in 1915 (Ackroyd 43). Aside from the friendship of Verdenal, Eliot seems to have felt quite alone in Paris, but between 1910 and 1911, he completed "The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" and dedicated his first book published in England to Verdenal (Ackroyd 43).

Eliot decided to return to Harvard as a doctoral student in philosophy and remained there for the next three years (Ackroyd 46). Like his mentor Babbitt, Eliot decided to explore the Eastern religions and took Sanskrit, Indic Philosophy and Buddhism (Ackroyd 48). However, his studies left him unfulfilled, and in 1913 he bought a copy of F.H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality (Ackroyd 48). Bradley's work so impressed him that later, Eliot actually wrote his dissertation, "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley," and sent it to Harvard, although he never appeared to defend it. (Ackroyd 71). Although he eventually moved on to other philosophies, Eliot commended Bradley: "Of wisdom Bradley had a large share; wisdom consists largely of scepticism and uncynical disillusion . . . And scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding" (Selected 399). In his book of selected essays, Eliot quotes Bradley as saying, "Reflection on morality leads us beyond it. It leads us, in short, to see the necessity of a religious point of view" (Selected 403). Although he later repudiated many of Bradley's ideas, Eliot, in his conversion to Anglican Catholicism, seems to have agreed with him about the need for religion.

During his scholarly career, Eliot was employed at Harvard as a teaching assistant in philosophy. He also took some graduate courses with Bertrand Russell in 1914 and was much impressed by his course in symbolic logic (Ackroyd 50). However, when he was offered a traveling scholarship, Eliot quickly returned to Europe, where his old friend Conrad Aiken introduced him to Ezra Pound (Ackroyd 54). Ezra Pound can claim a

literary relationship to both Eliot and Yeats. Pound, like Eliot was a displaced American; upon arriving on the literary scene in Europe, he became acquainted with Yeats, whom Pound revered as a great poet and critic. Pound actually became Yeats confidante and personal secretary in 1913, an arrangement that was to benefit both poets. (Lander 50). Yeats and Eliot felt similarly about Pound's input; he wrote to his friend Lady Gregory: "Ezra is the best critic . . . He is full of the middle ages and helps me to get back to the definite and concrete . . . All becomes clear and natural" (Lander 51).

Eliot first met Pound in London when he consulted him about getting some of his work published. Pound became his friend, business manager and, with much of Eliot's work, notably including "The Waste Land," Eliot's editor (Lander 52). Pound was so involved with the work of Eliot that he included a reference to Eliot's "The Hollow Men" in his Canto 74: "Yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper" (Laughlin 121). According to author James Laughlin: "*The Hollow Men* is, of course, a religious poem. Pound liked to call Eliot an Anglo-Cat" and sometimes addressed him as the Reverend Eliot" (122). This habit of calling each other black dialect names becomes significant when discussing the epigraph of "The Hollow Men."

However, religion was an area that separated the philosophies of the two poets. Pound became known for his interest in Confucianism and the Eastern religions, while Eliot disparaged his religious views as, "Essentially a hodgepodge of irreconcilable, antiquated views that included among other things, medieval mysticism, Yeats Celtic myths, and a steam roller of Confucian rationalism" (Lan 135). Eliot, although he had investigated many of the same religious interests at one time, was focused on Anglican

Catholicism at the time of the writing of "The Hollow Men." Critic Feng Lan further notes: "In their critical dialogue, Pound disagreed with Eliot in reducing all social problems to a religious crisis" (136), a habit that Eliot followed in creating "The Hollow Men." Although the two authors did not agree on religion, Pound's influence on the life and works of Eliot is undeniable.

Ezra Pound created some large changes in the life of T.S. Eliot, but Eliot himself was responsible for some even larger changes. In 1915, he met and made what he must have considered a romantic marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, young woman from a highly respectable English family (Ackroyd 61). Since Eliot had few other romantic attachments, the marriage came as somewhat of a surprise to his friends and family, who did not receive the news gladly. The newlywed Eliots, initially plagued with financial concerns became reacquainted with Bertrand Russell, whom Eliot had met as a lecturer during his Harvard days. However, the two authors were in disagreement as to religion; Eliot asserted, "Mr. Russell believes that when he is dead he will rot" (Ackroyd 163), in direct opposition to the views of Eliot.

As the Eliots began married life, an unpleasant reality intruded on them; they were broke. When Russell became aware of the Eliot's financial plight he invited them to stay with him in his flat in London. Since Eliot was prone to long absences and his marriage was never a happy one, it is speculated that Russell was having an affair with Vivien (Ackroyd 66-67). Vivien was a bright, vivacious young woman who was known for being a bit eccentric. However, her condition deteriorated into mental illness and

substantially affected Eliot's life for many years until she was finally ruled a danger to herself or others and confined in a mental institution (Ackroyd 64).

### *Images and Influences*

One of the difficulties in ascribing literary or philosophical inspirations and influences to the work of Eliot is that the poet was a literary collector. As F.W. Bateson remarks, "The magpie-instinct – not only for 'fragments of systems', but for all sorts of 'shining fragments' of imagery or phraseology – was unusually highly developed in him" (39). Eliot was in the habit of recording in his journals small snippets and pieces of the work of other authors along with his own occasional thoughts and then, sometimes years later, incorporating the fragment of material in one of his poems. Eliot sometimes transposed themes, at other times sentences or phrases, with inconsistent regard to the original author's purpose. Further complicating the situation, Eliot was a voracious reader and may have been subconsciously influenced by many authors without realizing it. However, I will document some of the major and obvious influences on Eliot's poem.

One of the earliest influences on Eliot's writing was the work of Charles Baudelaire. Eliot reveres him as an "artist exclusively for art's sake" (Selected 372), a personification of the anthem of the aesthetic movement. However, Eliot also identified with Baudelaire on a more personal level. He theorizes, "That Baudelaire is essentially Christian" (Selected 373), and that: "He is discovering Christianity for himself; he is not assuming it as a fashion or weighing social or political reasons" (Selected 373). Whether this was true of Baudelaire, it was certainly true of Eliot who, on June 29, 1927 was

"baptized and received into the Church of England at Finstock Church in the Cotswolds" (Ackroyd 162). Baudelaire's thoughts also shared a commonality with Eliot's about the poetic possibilities of the urban cityscape. As Gordon suggests, "It was his first image of a wasteland, a scene he was to make his own" (27-28). The emptiness of the cityscapes of St. Louis, Boston, and other European towns seemed to resonate with the moral and spiritual emptiness that Eliot portrays in his poem.

As noted earlier in my essay, another philosopher whose work may have affected Eliot for a time was Henri Bergson; Eliot attended one of his lectures at the College de France (Ackroyd 40). Ackroyd believes that the charismatic Bergson and his concepts of "real time" affected Eliot's writing of his famous early poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (Ackroyd 40). However, by 1913, Eliot repudiated Bergson for his supposed fatalism and his mentor Russell agreed, calling Bergson "a committed enemy of rational thought" (Guerlac 12). There is a scholarly disagreement on the overall effect of Bergson on the writings of Eliot. Some critics point out that despite Eliot's initial fascination with Bergson, the fact that he later denied the validity of Bergson's philosophy is proof that he was not a major influence on Eliot's writing. However, critic Mary Ann Gillies reminds us that for Bergson, striving for perfection was more important than achieving it, a theory not incompatible with Eliot's later Christian beliefs (67). Gillies theorizes that Bergsonian ideas continued to percolate through Eliot's unconscious throughout his career, coloring both his prose and his poetry (66). Eliot was an intentional and acknowledged collector of snippets and phrases from other authors;

perhaps he also did some unintentional collecting. While Gillies may be correct in her assumption, the contents of Eliot's unconscious will undoubtedly remain a mystery.

Eliot's reading, particularly in his later years, encompassed some of the great religious writers of the past. He writes: "There never was a time, I believe, when those who read at all, read so many more books by living authors than books by dead authors; there was never a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past" (Selected 352). One of the great religious writers whose poetry so impressed Eliot was St. John of the Cross. Although he wrote in Spanish, St. John of the Cross' command of symbolism and religious imagery impressed Eliot, notwithstanding St. John's philosophy of asceticism as a path to achieving unity with the living God. St John's writing on the method for achieving this advises the penitent to empty himself of all earthly emotion and desire: "We are not treating here of the lack of things, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are treating of the detachment from them . . . it is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them" (Murray 98). Eliot echoes this philosophy strongly in his treatment of the quality of emptiness in "The Hollow Men."

Another early and quite profound influence on the writing of Eliot was Dante. Although for a great writer, T.S. Eliot's production was quite limited, in 1929, he wrote an entire volume of Dante: "I have found no other poet than Dante to whom I could apply continually, for many purposes, and with much profit, during a familiarity of twenty years" (Dante 11). In his book, Eliot praises Dante for his "lucidity of style" and "clear

visual images" (Dante 22), and suggests that the poetry of Dante "can communicate before it is understood. The impression can be verified on fuller knowledge" (Dante 16). Eliot is saying is that while the reader may or may not be familiar with the author's allusions, the meaning and the emotion of the passage are conveyed with great clarity. What is striking about this technique is that it can easily be identified in many of the poems of T.S. Eliot, including, of course, "The Hollow Men." The reader is given a wider scope in responding to the poetry because its meaning is, in many cases, ambiguous. In "The Hollow Men," it is not necessary to understand Eliot's numerous metaphors and allusions to absorb the poetic atmosphere or truth of the piece.

Another of the classic authors who appear to have influenced Eliot and his style and symbolism in "The Hollow Men" is, of course, the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare. In his book of essays, Eliot voices the opinion that many critics have created their own Shakespeare, and that therefore, the Shakespeare referenced by different authors may be interpreted in many unique ways (Selected 108-9). Interpreters of the Bard seem to prove Eliot's point; for instance, George Williamson asserts convincingly that Eliot's title comes from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar:

When love begins to sicken and decay  
It useth an enforced ceremony.  
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith;  
But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,  
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;  
But when they should endure the bloody spur

They fall their crests, and, like deceitful jades,  
Sink in the trial (IV.ii.20-27)

While Geoffrey Tillotson reports that Eliot has confirmed that the title originated from a fortuitous combination of "The Hollow Land" by William Morris and "The Broken Men" by Kipling (156n.), the possibility exists that even Eliot did not accurately recall from what fragments the title originated. As to the theme of Eliot's piece, while he borrows images from many sources his theme proves to be an explication of the desolation of the soul when bereft of the word of God.

*Explication of "The Hollow Men"*

Eliot published his poem in several pieces although the given date of publication is 1925.<sup>3</sup> True to his usual pattern of composition, Eliot, the ultimate synthesizer of fragments, composed "The Hollow Men" in that manner. Eliot begins his poem with an epigraph from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" (88), beginning his poems with an epigraph was not an unusual practice for the poet. As Jane Worthington reports, Eliot used some form of epigraph to frame many of his poems including, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Portrait of a Lady," and of course "The Waste Land" (1-17). Diverse reasons for the epigraph have been suggested; Eliot rarely has only a single reason for including material; his poems exhibit layers upon layers of meaning. I believe that the epigraph indicates that Mr. Kurtz, with his focus on materialism, is spiritually dead, a hollow man. The inference is that those for whom

Kurtz is a symbol, Eliot and the materialistic civilization of which he was a part, are actually hollow men.

Much has been made of Eliot's use of black dialect in the epigraph. However, in analyzing Eliot's choice, it must be remembered that Eliot, the Ol' Possum, and Ezra Pound, the Tarbaby, often used a similar dialect when addressing each other privately. Michael Tessin theorizes that Eliot is "making use of the bastardized Uncle Remus dialect, not in touch with any actual uses of African American language of the day" and attributes the epigraph to Eliot's desire to include the voice of the "other" in his worldview (13). However, it is also possible that by employing their shared intimate dialect, the epigraph indicates the inclusion of Eliot and his friend Pound in the group of spiritually hollow men.

Most critics agree that the opening lines of the poem refer to an emotional and spiritual "hollowness." Since the hollow men are also referred to as the "stuffed men" and have a "headpiece filled with straw" (I, l.4), I believe that they are associated with the legend of Guy Fawkes. Fawkes was a Catholic Englishman who was captured while attempting to carry out a plot to blow up the houses of parliament. Every year the children of England explode firecrackers in memory of that event. They commonly ask for coins to buy the fireworks in much the same way that American children ask for Halloween candy. The opening stanza is therefore connected to the little-used second half of the poem's title, "A penny for the Old Guy," the cry of the children asking for coins for fireworks. This equates the search for meaning by the hollow men with a children's game, an association repeated later in the poem with the circle dance. The

hollow men are those who do not take the search for spiritual meaning seriously. This is the reason that as they "whisper together" (I, l.6) their words are "meaningless" (I, l.7). The men are a "paralyzed force" (I, l.12) unable to move forward into the kingdom of God.

Several locations are inferred for the land of the hollow men. All of these places have a desolate quality with an air of broken things pervading them. The land of the hollow men is presented early in the poem as an unnamed cityscape with images of "rats feel over broken glass / In our dry cellar" (I, l.9, 10), perhaps a reflection of the influence of Baudelaire. The city could be any European or American city, but is unnamed to indicate its universality. Later in the poem, the "dead land" (III, l.1), the "cactus land" (III, l.2) of "stone images" (III, l.3) alludes to the spiritual barrenness of the world of those who do not or cannot accept the word of God. The agony of those hollow lives is indicated by the pathetic, fragmented images of "broken stone" (III, l.13), a reference to those hollow men who follow only the outward appearance of religion. Gillis agrees that the poem is "thoroughly devoted to the theme of religious impotency" (636). The desolation of these places locates the hollow men in a modern form of limbo. The hollow men fear "that final meeting" (II, l.19) in this place of judgment because they have no relationship with God; they wear "deliberate disguises" (II, l.14) because they fear the evaluation of their not/lives in the "twilight kingdom" (II, l.20).

That there are still glimmers of hope for the "empty men" (IV, l.16) is indicated by the symbol of the "multifoliate rose":

. . . the perpetual star

Multifoliate rose

Of death's twilight kingdom

The hope only

Of Empty men (IV, l.12-16)

Friedrich W. Strothmann and Lawrence V. Ryan's interpret the rose as an allusion to Dante: "In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante expresses the experience of union in the mystical body, by the symbol of the multifoliate rose" (427). The rose is the symbol of the hope of salvation; describing the men as "empty" (IV, l.16) is seen by Strothman and Ryan as a positive attribute. They believe that "The words "The hope only/ Of empty men" ought to be taken in a sense that makes emptiness a condition of hope" (Strothmann 426). The hollow men, perhaps in a reflection of St. John of the Cross, have become empty of all their worldly desires and are now ready to receive Christ into their hearts. However, Everett Gillis asserts that the emptiness of the hollow men is a spiritual emptiness (Gillis). He believes that "empty" in this case is merely a synonym for "hollow" (Gillis). I credit the former explanation because of the inclusion of the positive symbol "multifoliate rose" within the stanza.

The final section of the poem is devoted to broken images and disconnected thoughts. It begins with the familiar cadences of a child's rhyme: "*Here we go round the prickly pear / At five o'clock in the morning*" (V, l. 3,4). The children are attempting to create meaning and order by their chant. However, throughout the final part of the poem, the "shadow" (9) interferes and disrupts all attempts at communication, love or order. The shadow is the shadow of doubt that does not allow complete belief in the one true

God. The broken words of a Catholic prayer that are printed out of vertical alignment contribute to the impression of interruption and disorder: "*For Thine is the Kingdom*" (V, l.10). The hollow men are in such despair that they can no longer even pray, although the appearance of the prayer among the hopeless images does suggest some degree of hope.

The last stanza of the poem identifies it to many people; it is almost a tag line. It is certainly the most quoted part of the poem and one that I would guess Eliot became thoroughly sick of explaining. This stanza more than any other is probably responsible for the appellation "apocalyptic poetry" applied to the poem:

*This is the way the world ends*

*This is the way the world ends*

*This is the way the world ends*

*Not with a bang but a whimper.* (V, l.28-31)

The repetition of the first three lines echoes the quality of brokenness and disconnection found in the rest of Part V. The world that would end with a bang is the material world, full of the explosions and the chaos of war and also the explosive growth of progress that Eliot so disdained. However, the last line suggests that the significant world is that of the spirit or the soul. The hollow men whimper because of their lack of connection to the eternal.

### *Conclusion*

Elitist idea or not, many educated people living during the era of Yeats and Eliot believed that the end of their world was at hand. Yeats saw humanity as both the victim

and the beneficiary of a series of inescapable historical cycles. In Yeats' vision of the future, concrete changes manifested in the physical world would occur. Because of the force of an outside agency, the historical cycle of the gyres, Yeats believed that his civilization would end. Mankind could not affect this process. Yeats, although he deplored the misery and suffering that would occur because of the changes, embraced them because he, like Blake, felt that without the change there would be no progression. The author further documents these changes in A Vision: an Explanation of Life; with its charts, graphs, and mathematical formulas, the book is documentation of a physical as well as a philosophical system. Whether the system was, in fact, real is irrelevant; the author believed it to be so. Yeats, in "The Second Coming," documented and celebrated what he felt would be a necessary change in the physical world.

On the other hand, Eliot viewed the chaos as a direct result of humankind's lack of connection to God through the Anglican religion. Since this view implies freedom of choice, Eliot found that humanity held the ultimate responsibility for its own salvation or destruction. Eliot was a man in pain, confused about his national identity, his humanity, his masculinity and his relationship to the eternal. His poetry explores his internal conflicts, but it must be remembered that these conflicts were afflictions of the spirit. When Eliot speaks of the world whimpering or ending, he refers to what to him was most significant, his inner spiritual world. His cataclysms were emotional and spiritual.

The absolute need for accuracy in scholarship does not need to be re-established in this paper. William Butler Yeats and Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote poetry that defined the needs and desires of their era. They wrote of chaos and confusion and of a need for

order; however the very dissimilar underlying causes that they postulated for the problems of world make it clear that they described different issues with wholly different outcomes. Therefore, I believe that the two distinct types of poetry should be not be classified as the same literary genre. Humanity has recorded many different versions of apocalypse, from the antiquarian 'lifting of the veil' to the Catholic Jesus in judgment of all souls in the end times. The two diverse points of view in these poems provide evidence for my contention that it may be time to re-examine the definition and the broad application of the term "apocalyptic poetry."

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Yeats' politics and his nationalism were a factor in his original drafts of "The Second Coming." Most critics, including Richard Ellmann in The Identity of Yeats, and John Kelly in A W.B. Yeats Chronology, agree that Yeats actually started to write a somewhat different version of "The Second Coming" in January of 1919 (290; 202). According to Jon Stallworthy, who cites Ellmann as the origin of the date, "Manuscripts in Mrs. Yeats's possession show how large a part the world situation of 1918-19 played in its conception and growth" (17). However, in the later manuscript copies of "The Second Coming," Stallworthy suggests, "The poem's scope and focus have widened" (21). Stallworthy notes "In this first verse-draft Yeats follows a symbolic reference with a more topical and specific one" (18). Some critics, including both Stallworthy and Smith believe that Yeats, consciously or not, followed this pattern in many of his poems. Smith suggests, "Yeats universalizes each little catastrophe, transforming it into a larger image of apocalypse which transcends history, to offer a timeless tragic vision of the human condition. Certainly the movement from the particular to general is a regular procedure in Yeats's finished work" (Smith). Smith points out that changing his focus from the local to the general allows Yeats to inject his own particular brand of political philosophy into the poem to "make sweeping statements about the nature of historical change" (Smith). Although Yeats eventually changed his poem from a specific to a general statement about world affairs, it is obvious that his poetry was inspired by specific events and real people.

Mrs. Yeats rescued the original twelve lines, only six of which were legible, from a trashcan (Stallworthy 17). Stallworthy having actually seen the rough draft reports that the name "Burke" can be discerned in Yeats' first rough draft, while by the third draft the line reads: "And there's no Burke to cry aloud no Pitt" (20). The mention of Burke and Pitt is another example of Yeats use of contraries, since they were the leaders of two opposing political and ideological factions (Ritcheson 49). However, by the third draft, the line has changed; the names have disappeared. Stallworthy suggests: "The poem's scope and focus have widened" (21). While this is another example of Yeats' tendency to move from the specific to the general in his poetry, it is also significant for two reasons. First, the mention of Burke and Pitt in the original draft locates the poem within everyday, concrete reality; both men were famous politicians whose names would have been recognizable to most of the population of Great Britain, if not the rest of Europe. Second, Yeats removal of the specific names does not change his original thought; it merely gives it a different expression. Whether Yeats lines discuss the general or the specific, it is clear that he references

the political situation in the real world. Furthermore, although Yeats appears to lament the changes, he merely describes them rather than attributing them to any specific person or agency.

Yeats' first draft also includes the line "the Germans are ( ) now to Russia come" (Stallworthy 18). Referencing the German victory in July of 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution in October of the same year, Stallworthy theorizes: "The German's had indeed come to Russia" (18-19). This is yet another example of Yeats' technique of moving from the specific to the general; by the first full draft of the poem, the Germans and the Russians have been replaced by more general terms (Stallworthy 19-21); however, Yeats still locates the poem in the real world. Stallworthy extrapolates, "I think it not impossible that Yeats, with his reverence for the aristocratic virtues . . . had in mind the fate of the Russian Royal House, as he wrote: 'Though every day some innocent has died'" (18). Whether Yeats meant the royal house of Russia or intended to represent any of the innocent people who had died because of the political turmoil then enflaming the world, he used an inclusive metaphor, "some innocent" in his description.

<sup>2</sup>My discussion of the Great Chain of Being is informed by Arthur Lovejoy's The Great Chain of Being: a study of the history of an idea.

<sup>3</sup>Strothmann and Ryan report the somewhat jumbled publication history of the poem: The third section was the earliest to come forth, in the *Chapbook* (London, 1924), where it was accompanied by the minor poems, "Eyes that last I saw in tears" and "The wind sprang up at four o'clock." These fragments were called "Doris's Dream Songs." In the *Criterion* for January 1925, the second and fourth sections, along with "Eyes that last I saw in tears," were published under the noncommittal heading, "Three Poems." Then with the title "The Hollow Men," Sections ii and iv appeared again in the *Dial* for March 1925, along with the first section, which had already been published separately under the heading "Poeme," in *Commerce* III Winter, 1924/25). The third section, "This is the dead land," was restored and the fifth section added to form the final version of the poem, printed in November 1925 (430).

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