

Two Different Apocalyptic Visions: Graeco-Roman and Christian World-view in Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Eliot's "Gerontion"*

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1. Two Different World-view

Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Eliot's "Gerontion," written in the same year, 1919,¹⁾ both articulate the sense of crisis pervading the European world, which had just witnessed the Russian Revolution and the First World War. Yeats's poem, in particular, calls our attention to the violent socio-political reality of those days: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (ll. 4-6).²⁾ And Eliot's poem brings into focus the gloomy inner reality of modern European mind through "a contemporary, postwar character,"³⁾ Gerontion: "Here I am, an old man in a dry month, / Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain" (ll. 1-2).⁴⁾ Most important of all, out of such a shared sense of crisis, both of these poems evoke the similar apocalyptic vision—along with the symbolic image of beast: in Yeats's poem, "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs" (ll. 14-16); in Eliot's, "The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours" (l. 49).

In spite of such similarities, however, there also exists stylistic difference between these two poems. Yeats's vision is presented in the first person: "a vast image out of *Spiritus*

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- 1) "The Second Coming," as A. Norman Jeffares says, was written in January 1919. Cf. A. N. Jeffares, *A Commentary on The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1968), 238. "Gerontion," according to Lyndall Gordon, was written in May or June 1919. Cf. L. Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 100, 159.
- 2) William B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt & Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 401-402.
- 3) Gordon, 101.
- 4) Thomas S. Eliot, "Gerontion," in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*, 24th pr. (San Diego: HBJ, 1971), 21-23.

Mundi / Troubles my sight" (ll. 12-13). On the other hand, Eliot's vision is that of the third person, Gerontion. We may safely assume that the "I" in Yeats's poem is the poet himself, but, as Wolf Mankowitz points out, Gerontion can hardly be considered "a projection of the poet's personality"; rather, he "is the means whereby the poet effects 'an escape from personality.'"⁵⁾ Indeed, the distance set by Eliot from Gerontion seems to alleviate the otherwise intenser and much more desperate tone of the poem, whereas the first person narration of Yeats's poem enhances "the tone of horror" and the image of "a poet dreading the inevitable."⁶⁾

Then, is the poetic technique only responsible to the generally not so intense—though gloomy—tone of Eliot's poem and the overall intense tone of Yeats's poem? Is there any reason that Eliot should control the intensity of poetic tone and set a distance from apocalyptic vision itself? Or should his third person narration be understood merely as a poetic technique to prevent the poet from falling into self-indulgent vision? These questions leads us to examine the two poets' seemingly similar apocalyptic visions and beast images. Needless to say, the two poems do not allow the same level of understanding: the Eliot's poem calls for, in rather specific ways, a reading that takes into account the Christian context, while Yeats's, in spite of some salient allusions to Christianity, steps out of the Christian context.

In the strict sense of words, *the Second Coming*, used as the title of Yeats's poem, refers to the advent of Christ on the Day of Judgment. Moreover, Bethlehem, towards which, in Yeats's poem, "rough beast . . . / Slouches . . . to be born" (ll. 21-22), has been associated with Christ's birth. For these reasons, it is indeed tempting to understand Yeats's beast image as Christ. There are, however, counterevidences, too: for one thing, *Spiritus Mundi*—out of which "a vast image . . . / Troubles my sight" (12-13)—cannot be readily related to Christianity, for, according to Yeats, it is "a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit."⁷⁾ In other words, Yeats's idea of *Spiritus Mundi* is too inclusive only to embrace Christianity. Thus, it is not desirable to confine Yeats's poem to the Christian context.

5) Wolf Mankowitz, "Notes on 'Gerontion,'" in *T. S. Eliot: A Study of His Writings by Several Hands*, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Haskell House, 1964), 129.

6) Denis Donoghue, *William Butler Yeats* (New York: Viking, 1971), 98-99.

7) W. B. Yeats, "Note" on "An Image from a Past Life," in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, in *The Variorum Edition*. 822.

In this connection, the following argument by Yeats is noteworthy:

When the old *primary* becomes the new *antithetical*, the old realisation of an objective moral law is changed into a subconscious turbulent instinct. The world of rigid custom and law is broken up by “the uncontrollable mystery upon the bestial floor.”⁸⁾

In short, if Christianity is “the old primary” which “becomes the new antithetical,” there must be the corresponding new primary which is not yet defined. Accordingly, if the birth of Christ was once “the uncontrollable mystery upon the bestial floor” which broke “the world of rigid custom and law,” there must also be another corresponding “uncontrollable mystery upon the bestial floor” which will obviously destroy Christianity itself. Thus, in the Yeatsian system, Christianity is only one of numerous “primaries” that become eventually “antitheticals” in the flux of time. There is no way of relating Yeats’s beast image to the symbolic “Second Coming” of Christ himself.

At this point, one might continue to propose that, even though it is difficult to relate Yeats’s beast image to Christ, it be quite possible to understand it as the Antichrist, which is believed by Christians to precede the advent of Christ. As evidence for such a reading, one might appeal to the Biblical passage in *Revelation*, where the Antichrist image, which is similar to Yeats’s beast image, is depicted: “Then out of the sea I saw a beast rising. . . . The beast I saw was like a leopard, but its feet were like a bear’s and its mouth like a lion’s mouth.”⁹⁾ If the Yeats’s beast image refers to such an Antichrist image, then the poem should be, strangely enough, thought to deal with “the Second Coming” of the Antichrist, not that of Christ. Thus, in spite of the similarity of Yeats’s beast image to the Antichrist image depicted in *Revelation*, it is still impossible to read this poem in the Christian context, for it becomes absurd to make “the Second Coming” the Antichrist’s, and not Christ’s. To sum up, the reading of “The Second Coming” in the Christian context makes little sense. “The Second Coming,” thus, is “Second” only in the sense that the poet lives in the Christian world, which has begun with the “Coming” of Christ.

But the problem still remains: why is Yeats appealing to such a particular image that reminds us of the masculine Egyptian sphinx image in the poem? Why not the feminine Greek sphinx? Or why not any other possible beast image that can be imagined? Indeed,

8) W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 105.

9) *Revelation*, 13: 1-2, in *The New English Bible*, Oxford Study ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1976). Further Biblical references are to this edition, and appear in the text.

Yeats's beast image is not easy for us to locate in any immediate European symbolic or mythological tradition. Thus, it seems desirable to examine first the sources which Yeats left us. In the "Introduction to 'The Resurrection,'" Yeats recalls that from about 1903 "I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction."¹⁰⁾ Through a footnote to the above statement, Yeats adds that the beast image is "afterwards described in my poem 'The Second Coming.'"¹¹⁾ But, as Richard Ellmann points out, "the image had to lose its wings . . . before it went into the poem."¹²⁾ The origin of such a unique vision, however, can be more directly traced to Yeats's memoir of "Four Years: 1887-1891" in his *Autobiography*, where he writes about his experience of a visionary image, which MacGregor Mathers evoked:

[Mathers] gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes. Sight came slowly, there was not that sudden miracle as if the darkness had been cut with a knife, for that miracle is mostly a woman's privilege, but there rose before me mental images that I could not control: a desert and black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins. Mathers explained that I had seen a being of the order of Salamanders because he had shown me their symbol. . . .¹³⁾

In his *Autobiography*, Yeats also writes that "it was through [Mathers] mainly that I began certain studies and experiences, that were to convince me that images well up before the mind's eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory."¹⁴⁾ Therefore, we can tentatively conclude that Yeats's beast image comes largely out of a personal, inner vision. That is why it does not seem to reward any attempt to identify it by alluding to other outer sources. But in Yeats's later discussion of Hegel, we find a possible clue to the identity of Yeats's Egyptian sphinx image:

Greece, [Hegel] explained, first delivered mankind from nature; the Egyptian Sphinx, for all its human face, was Asiatic and animal; but when Oedipus answered the riddle, that Sphinx was compelled to leap into the abyss; the riddle, 'What goes first on four legs, then upon two,

10) W. B. Yeats, "Introduction to 'The Resurrection'" (1934), in *Explorations*, sel. Mrs. W. B. Yeats (New York, Macmillan, 1962), 393.

11) W. B. Yeats, "Introduction to 'The Resurrection,'" 393 fn.

12) Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford UP, 1954), 258 fn.

13) W. B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, reissued ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 114.

14) Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, 112.

then upon three?" called up man. Nature is bondage, its virtue no more than the custom of clan or race, a plant rooted outside man, a law blindly obeyed.¹⁵⁾

Yeats says, in *A Vision*, while he is paying attention to the same Hegelian argument, "I accept [Hegel's] definition."¹⁶⁾ Thus, the antithetical relationship between Asia and Europe still makes sense in Yeats's symbolic system. Just as Hegel presupposes that the Asiatic and bestial Sphinx, which symbolizes Nature, is antithetical to Oedipus—the emblem of Europe's triumph over Asia—so Yeats assumes that "symbolic Asia" is antithetical to "symbolic Europe." Hence, Yeats explains the beginning of the European Christian era on the basis of the Hegelian dialectic: "A wheel of the Great Year must be thought of as the marriage of symbolic Europe and symbolic Asia, the one begetting upon the other. When it commenced at its symbolic full moon in March—Christ or Christendom was begotten by the West upon the East."¹⁷⁾ Yeats, however, differs from Hegel in the idea of historical development: the latter claims the ultimate triumph of European "Spirit" over Asiatic "Nature," for "every civilisation, no matter where its birth, began with Asia, but the play itself had been saved up for our patronage"¹⁸⁾; however, the former foresees the inevitable reversal of the relationship between Asia and Europe:

When our historical era approaches Phase 1, or the beginning of a new era, the *antithetical* East will beget upon the *primary* West and the child or era so born will be *antithetical*. The *primary* child or era is predominantly western, but because begotten upon the East, eastern in body, and . . . Asiatic.¹⁹⁾

Only in this context, does the Egyptian sphinx image of the poem make clear its symbolic meaning: fundamentally, it symbolizes the coming of an Asiatic era. It is interesting to note here that Yeats once "told Lady Gregory that the god of the new age would be a Buddha or Sphinx, both of them Asiatic symbols."²⁰⁾

In contrast to Yeats's, Eliot's vision of "the Second Coming" seems somewhat easier to define, since the context in which the tiger image is suggested is self-evident: it is

15) W. B. Yeats, "The Holy Mountain" (1934), in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 466-467.

16) Yeats, *A Vision*, 203.

17) Yeats, *A Vision*, 203.

18) Yeats, "The Holy Mountain," 467.

19) Yeats, *A Vision*, 257.

20) Ellmann, 187.

undeniably Christian. One may note that the fundamental Christian doctrine of divinity prevails at the center of this poem, as the following lines suggest:

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. ("Gerontion," ll. 17-19.)

According to Lyndall Gordon, "While most of the postwar generation liberated itself from faith, Eliot moved in the opposite direction. . . . Eliot held on to an older faith [in Christianity]—devouring, passionate, and mystical. From his earliest juvenilia Eliot consistently deplored contemporary life and secular history, not with the helpless voice of his generation, but with the authoritative voice of Old Testament prophet or New England divine."²¹ Indeed, in the above lines, we can hear the "authoritative" Christian voice that Eliot employs in some parts of this poem. In particular, these lines come directly from the Nativity Sermon by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes:

Signes are taken for wonders: (*Master we would faine see a Signe*, that is, a *miracle*). And, in this sense, [the Gospel] is a *Signe*, to wonder at. Indeed, every word (heer) is a wonder. . . . *Verbum infans*, the *Word* without a *word*; the *aeternall Word* not hable to speak a word; 1. A wonder sure. 2. And the . . . *Swaddled*; that a wonder too. *He*, that (as in the 38 of *Job* he saith) *taketh the vast body of the maine Sea . . . and rolls it about with the swadling bands of darknesse*. . . .²²

At least two points must be noted here: "Signe" as "a wonder," and Christ as "Verbum infans" (the infant Word). In the Christian sense, "the Word" implies the timeless and omnipotent existence of God, as the Gospel of John suggests: "When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was" (*John*, 1:1-2). Therefore, Christ as "Verbum infans" is himself the incarnation of the timeless and omnipotent God. To us "who would see a sign" or a "wonder," this "Verbum infans" is, thus, sure to be "a Signe" which must be taken for a wonder: "this is your sign: you will find a baby lying wrapped in his swaddling clothes" (*Luke*, 2:12).

In "Gerontion," Eliot, even though he centers his criticism of life and history on the contemporary scene, projects his vision of "the Second Coming," based on the above

21) Gordon, 103.

22) Lancelot Andrewes, *XCVI Sermons*, 1629, 112, as quoted in David Ward, *T. S. Eliot: Between Two Worlds* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 67.

Christian myth—the birth of “the infant Word”—and our repeated degradation of that “Word.” In his vision, however, “the Second Coming” of Christ assumes the “tiger” image, as we have noted earlier: “The tiger springs in the new year.” The “tiger” image, of course, reflects Eliot’s own vision, as does Yeats’s Egyptian sphinx image. Here, the same problem that we encountered in Yeats’s case may be raised: how can we convincingly understand the poet’s own personal vision? Even in Eliot’s case, where the basic assumption of Christianity secures our reading against wild misunderstandings, we must run the risk of letting our reading fall into trivialism if we cannot illuminate the inevitable meaning of the poet’s personal vision. Just as we established the inevitable meaning of Yeats’s personal vision in terms of his unique world-view, so we must also appeal to Eliot’s Christian world-view. But unlike Yeats’s case, the poem already provides us with the frame of reference, which is necessary for the elucidation of Eliot’s personal vision.

In Eliot’s poem, his “tiger” image first appears just after the above discussed Christ image as “the Word”: “In the juvencence of the year / Came Christ the tiger” (“Gerontion,” ll. 19-20). Why should Christ “the Word” undergo such transformation from “the Word” to “tiger”? Two reasons can be suggested: first, it implies power and glory which we usually associate with this large feline animal of Asia; second, it also implies terror and awe to those who have, as we have mentioned the above, degraded the divinity (according to another Christian myth, by crucifying “the Word”). All in all, we may assume that it implies the physical manifestation of God.

Here we may turn our attention to the sacramental ritual that God’s body is “To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk” (“Gerontion,” l. 22). Through this ritual, we can unite with God—or absorb the divinity—and thereby deliver us from our sin. In other words, as David Ward says, man “through the sacraments is able to become part of the mystical body of Christ while mysteriously remaining in his natural body.”²³⁾ As the third section of the poem suggests, however, the sacraments have become “depraved” “Among whispers” (“Gerontion,” l. 23), while man is forgetting the other side of “Christ the tiger”: terror and awe. The word, “whisper,” suggesting the degradation of “the Word,” reveals the inevitability of “the Second Coming” of Christ, who will pass the Last Judgment on man. It will surely be another experience of terror and awe to man. That is the reason why it is inevitable that Christ in his “Second Coming” assume again the image of “tiger.” But the

23) Ward, 33.

nance which the new image of “tiger” gives us has changed from the earlier one: Christ does not come to us “to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk”; “in the new year,” Christ the tiger “springs” “with great power and glory” (*Matthew*, 24:30, or *Mark*, 13:26) to “devour” “Us.” At this point, we must note that the new image of “Christ the tiger”—the devourer—is still capable of a double meaning: first of all, the new image can be understood as the very Judge and destroyer of evil; and yet Christ the devourer can still be interpreted as the central symbol of the sacrament ritual. But in this case, as the word “devours” suggests, God exerts actively his “power and glory” on man, while, in the traditional ritual, God remains passive, only “to be eaten” by man. In other words, through God’s active intervention, man can be absorbed into the divinity, and thus delivered from his sin on the Day of Judgment. Only in this context, does Eliot’s vision of “the Second Coming” construct its consistency and relevance to the Christian doctrine, where the Crucifixion is essentially understood as the self-sacrifice of Christ to save man from his sin.

2. Yeats’s Tragedy vs. Eliot’s Christianity

Yeats assumes that every phenomenon of human life can be explained in terms of “the mathematical movement” of “human mind,” which has eventually formed “the mathematical figure” of “a double cone.”²⁴⁾ According to Yeats, this “double cone” image, called by him as “Gyre” or “The Great Wheel,”²⁵⁾ is true also of history, for the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction (“Note” on “SC,” 824-825).

Using such a concept, Yeats diagnoses our time: “At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion” (“Note” on “SC,” 825). As a consequence, the disintegration of “our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization” (“Note” on “SC,” 825) is inevitable from Yeats’s view point. In the poem, the above idea is symbolically recapitulated as “the widening gyre” of “falcon”:

24) See W. B. Yeats, “Note” on “The Second Coming,” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 823-824. All further references appear in the text as “Note” on “SC.”

25) See Yeats, Book I of *A Vision*, 67-184.

Misled by human history, man cannot but put himself back to the point of departure—"the wrath-bearing tree," from "which" all he can do now is to "shake" "These tears" of repentance ("Gerontion," l. 48). Thus, in the course of human history man can never transcend the limit of "the tree of knowledge" or his sin, but only return again and again to his original folly.

But we must note that the very limit or finiteness of human history paradoxically makes it possible for man to be open to God's salvation. As the idea of *felix culpa* suggests, man gained the possibility of "forgiveness" by committing sin. Therefore, even though human history seems, in Christian's eyes, to make it difficult for man to be redeemed from his sin, Christianity can never be defined by such epithets as gloomy, desperate, or pessimistic. But, in reality, the sense of the ending of this human world, coming out of the recognition of the Final Day of God's Judgment, makes the Christian world view seemingly gloomy, desperate, and even pessimistic, as is suggested by Eliot through Gerontion's despair:

These with a thousand small deliberations
 Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
 Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
 With pungent sauces, multiply variety
 In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do,
 Suspend its operations, will the weevil
 Delay? ("Gerontion," ll. 62-68)

With the rhetorical question, Eliot implies that there is no way to "Protract" Gerontion's earthly life. Through Gerontion's reverie, Eliot even projects the vision of human life "whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms," as well as Gerontion's own image "driven by the Trade / To a sleepy corner" ("Gerontion," ll. 68-70, ll. 73-74).

One might argue that such an overwhelming tone of despair leaves no room for the idea of salvation to be introduced in "Gerontion." Indeed, Gerontion's situation seems too gloomy to spare him any hope of salvation. It is, however, also true that, the more hopeless one's situation is, the more intense one's hope of getting out of that situation becomes. One can see such an instance in Gerontion, who is pursuing answers to the following questions

the more consciously because of his hopeless situation:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? “Gerontion,” l. 34)

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it

Since what is kept must be adulterated?

I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:

how should I use them for your closer contact? (“Gerontion, ll. 58-61)

In a sense, Gerontion’s pursuit of answers to these questions comes from his sincere introspection, which itself might promise the possibility of salvation. Gerontion’s sincerity, however, cannot be the immediate evidence of God’s promise of salvation. Thus, Gerontion is also waiting for the immediate evidence: “Here I am . . . in a dry month, / . . . waiting for rain” (“Gerontion,” ll. 1-2). In Eliot’s poetic world, “rain” can be symbolically related to the Christian idea of baptism, according to which, water can be used as the medium by which man’s sin is purified. But the problem still remains unsolved, as far as there is no sign of “rain” in “Gerontion.” Indeed, Gerontion seems “left unrewarded” in spite of his “ parched body and his plea for rain.”²⁶⁾ For this reason, we are led to take a look at *The Waste Land*, where the further development of the “rain” theme of “Gerontion” can be traced. An objection might be raised here as to the attempt to connect the two poems on the ground that *The Waste Land* and “Gerontion” are different poems. But it is quite possible to do so, since “Gerontion” was once proposed by Eliot “as a prelude to *The Waste Land*.”²⁷⁾ In *The Waste Land*, “the nameless wanderer” finally realizes that “the healing waters break overhead”²⁸⁾

In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
Bringing rain²⁹⁾ (ll. 394-395)

In a sense, “the nameless wanderer” can be considered another facet of the Gerontion image: both share the same situation of dryness, waiting for rain. Thus, we can safely assume that Eliot is implicitly conscious of the ultimate solution in *The Waste Land* to the

26) Gordon, 113.

27) B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 43.

28) Gordon, 113.

29) T. S. Eliot, “V. What the Thunder Said,” in *The Waste Land*, in his *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1935*, 49.

problem he has posed since “Gerontion.” For this reason, the experience of barrenness and futility suggested in “Gerontion” as well as in *The Waste Land* does not seem to be the ultimatum which Eliot wants to communicate. It might be understood as another vision of “wilderness” or Temptation, which Christ had to go through (*Matthew*, 4:1). If God’s ultimate salvation is promised, how can the wilderness or temptation be gloomy and pessimistic?

“Therefore,” as Karl Jaspers aptly points out, “there is no genuinely Christian tragedy” (Daher gibt es keine eigentlich christliche Tragödie),³⁰⁾ because “the possibility of salvation destroys the tragic sense of being entrapped without any chance of escape” (Die eigene Erlösungsmöglichkeit vernichtet die tragische Ausweglosigkeit).³¹⁾ Indeed, as the idea of Christian salvation promises the ultimate “solution” to human life, there can be “nothing of tragedy”³²⁾; tragedy is only possible, as Yeats says, where there is “the heroic cry in the midst of despair.”³³⁾ Here may lie one of the reasons why Yeats, who thinks that “we begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy,”³⁴⁾ cannot accept Christianity *in toto*: to Yeats, “Life is no series of emanations from divine reason.”³⁵⁾ Yeats even contrasts the Greek tragic hero, Oedipus, with Christ in his conscious effort to counterbalance the predominant Christianity in the present European culture:

What if Christ and Oedipus . . . are the two scales of a balance, the two butt-ends of a seesaw? What if every two thousand and odd years something happens in the world to make one sacred, the other secular; one wise, the other foolish; one fair, the other foul; one divine, the other devilish? What if there is an arithmetic or geometry that can exactly measure the slope of a balance, the dip of a scale, and so date the coming of that something?³⁶⁾

Through the above statement, Yeats seems to suggest that the genuine origin of European mind be traced to the long misunderstood figure—i.e., Oedipus, who was doomed to suffer tragically in the face of an unraveling human dilemma. In this context, we can understand Yeats’s assertion that “It is [the Westerners] . . . that must raise the heroic cry.”³⁷⁾ At the center of Yeats’s world-view, thus, lies the idea of tragedy.

30) Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1947), 924.

31) Jaspers, 924.

32) W. B. Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: Oxford UP, 1964), 8.

33) Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, 8.

34) Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, 116.

35) Yeats, *A Vision*, 40.

36) Yeats, “To Ezra Pound,” in *A Vision*, 28-29.

37) Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, 8.

But what makes Yeatsian world view more fundamentally tragic comes from his concept of history earlier discussed: if human history is understood as unending and thus inescapable cyclical movements, man has only to repeat his own heroic cry, acutely perceiving the impossibility of coming out from the wearisome chain of human history. Indeed, the concept of history as the everlasting cyclical “gyrations” implies the impossibility of the ultimate solution of human life. Thus, as Yeats says, the philosophical thoughts of the never ending “rise and sink[ing]” of “civilisation” “have already deepened our sense of tragedy.”³⁸⁾ Here we may rightly assume that, following Denis Donoghue, “one of the purposes of *A Vision* is to declare the susceptibility of time and history to a tragic pattern, Nietzschean in tone.”³⁹⁾

At this point, one might argue that such an understanding of the Yeatsian world-view is unsupportable on the ground that, to use Jaspers’s words, “the eternal cycle of living and dying, death and resurrection” (den ewigen Kreislauf von Leben und Sterben, von Tod und Wiederaufleben) will destroy the very idea of tragedy, since “nothing is exceptionally important, but everything is equally important” (Nichts ist sonderlich wichtig, alles ist gleich wichtig).⁴⁰⁾ In this connection, it is necessary for us to note the Yeatsian perception of historical life: “Life is . . . an irrational bitterness, no orderly descent from level to level.”⁴¹⁾ As Yeats implies here, in his concept of human history, what is orderly and cyclical is only its basic pattern, not its concrete contents. Any historical moment is, therefore, still irrevocable and thus unique to an individual of a certain time in the Yeatsian system of history. Behind the Yeatsian idea of tragedy, as Edward Engelberg notes, lies “an [Indian philosophical] insistence that ‘everybody’s road is different, everybody awaits his moment.’”⁴²⁾ Based on this insight, Engelberg aptly illuminates the Yeatsian concept of “tragic hero”: “the uniqueness of each man’s struggle and death is an argument against” the “public spirit,”⁴³⁾ which is uniform and morally one-sided. In particular, Yeats thinks that such a socio-cultural trend of our time has its origin in

38) Yeats, “The Words upon the Window-pane” (1931), in *Explorations*, 354-355.

39) Denis Donoghue, *William Butler Yeats*, 86-87.

40) Jaspers, 920.

41) Yeats, *A Vision*, 40.

42) Edward Engelberg, *The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats’s Aesthetic* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1964), 171. Quotation inside Engelberg’s comment comes from W. B. Yeats, “An Indian Monk” (1932), in *Essays and Introductions*, 436.

43) Engelberg, 171-172.

Christianity: "Our moral indignation, our uniform law, perhaps even our public spirit, may come from the Christian conviction that the soul has but one life to find or lose salvation."⁴⁴ Yeats seems here conscious of the European values which have been blocked up by Christianity.

In *The Identity of Yeats*, Ellmann points out that "history, measurement, metaphor, flesh, concreteness, and aggressiveness" are the values Yeats stands for against such Asiatic or Christian attributes as "formlessness, vagueness, immensity, abstractness, asceticism, and submissiveness."⁴⁵ In particular, we can find a poetic version of such a contrast of Europe and Asia in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," where "Self," or Europe, "claim[s] as by a soldier's right / A charter to commit the crime once more"⁴⁶ (ll. 31-32), or desperately asserts "to live it all again / And yet again, if it be life to pitch / Into the frogspawn of a blind man's ditch" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul," ll. 57-59). At first glance, "Self[s]" claim of life seems to suggest his dread of death. But the will to live at any price can carry far more deeper meaning: it reflects one's sincere faith in this worldly life which cannot be substituted with "Heaven" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul," l. 38) or "ancestral night that can . . . / Deliver from the crime of death and birth" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul," ll. 20-24). The tragedy can be born only from such a "Dionysian feeling of life" (das dionysische Lebensgefühl).⁴⁷ If this world be considered only "a man's proving ground, through which he must win his eternal salvation" (eine Stätte der Bewährung des Menschen, durch die er sein ewiges Seelenheil gewinnt),⁴⁸ and thus "everything of this world is not ultimate existence" (Alles ist hier . . . nicht letztes Sein),⁴⁹ no tragic sense of life can evolve. That may constitute another reason why no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist.

Truly, as Vivienne Koch says, "Eliot discovers for himself a solution which is beyond time, having its locus in mystical experience," but "this is not so with Yeats."⁵⁰ The latter

44) W. B. Yeats, "An Indian Monk," 436.

45) Ellmann, 184.

46) Yeats, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 477-479. Further reference to this poem appear in the text with line numbers.

47) Jaspers, 947.

48) Jaspers, 949.

49) Jaspers, 949.

50) Vivienne Koch, *W. B. Yeats: The Tragic Phase* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 15.

always remains within the limit of time, suffering from the impossibility of the ultimate solution, since, unlike Eliot's, "His terror is not the terror of a Christian,"⁵¹⁾ whose time concept "will not go forward to anything other than Christ."⁵²⁾ Rather, Yeats's terror or suffering is essentially that of the tragic hero, Oedipus, or, to speak in another Greek mythological context, that of Sisyphus, who was fated to repeat rolling a heavy stone up a steep hill without any hope of being delivered from that punishment. Therefore, unlike the Eliotian image of man, whose history of "wandering" will be eventually replaced by the eternal time of God after the Apocalypse, the Yeatsian image of man shows the heroic suffering from the everlastingly repeating gyration of history, only "apocalyptic in its climax."⁵³⁾

3. Yeats's Intense vs. Eliot's Distanced Vision of Apocalypse

We seem to have moved somewhat far from the contexts of the poems. As a way of returning to the poems themselves, we will examine another point of departure that distinguishes Yeats's and Eliot's vision of apocalypse.

While we are examining the two different poetic vision of apocalypse, we have attempted to illuminate a delicate problem of how the two great ideas—the Christian and the Graeco-Roman tradition that have molded the mental world of the present Europe—can be possibly embodied through the different poetic utterance. Our final conclusion to such a work might be rightly subsumed under the following impressive remark by Stock: "And yet how different! Two minds looking at the same scene [of the postwar Europe] are worlds apart in themselves."⁵⁴⁾ Truly, between Yeats and Eliot there lies "worlds apart," as Yeats finds in the case of "Christ and Oedipus."

As we have examined earlier, the coming of "Christ the tiger" "in the new year" might give Gerontion the ultimate salvation, for which he should be prepared for. In this sense, the whole contents of the the poem can be considered man's own repentance of his sin as well as his conscious preparation for salvation. Therefore, even though "Christ the tiger" evokes terror and awe, the sense of ending itself is fundamentally the source of neither terror nor awe; it only foreshadows God's solemn and grave Judgment.

51) Koch, 15.

52) A. G. Stock, *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961), 189.

53) Donoghue, 87.

54) Stock, 189.

In Yeats's case, as we have discussed earlier, the vision of apocalypse is closely connected with his belief in the rise and fall of a two-thousand-year-old historical era. Therefore, as nearly two thousand years have already passed since the Christian era began, Yeats must have found no difficulty in assuming the role of prophet of his time, and in envisioning the imminent catastrophe. If the catastrophe is imminent, how can the prophet not be desperate and intense? But why, in Eliot's case, is the vision of apocalypse rendered somewhat distanced? Eliot, if he was a true Christian, dared not measure God's time. In fact, in the Christian world, every historical period has faced its own version of the sense of ending, as no Christian is supposed to fathom God's will and thus be able to pinpoint the exact time of God's Judgment. As a result, the Christian sense of ending has always remained a vague conjecture or rumor, so that it is liable to be accompanied by the sense of uncertainty because of the unreliability of man's sense of ending. In spite of his sense of crisis, how could Eliot assert positively that his time would surely face the end of this world? It is self-evident that even Eliot could not assume that he knew God's will. In such a context, how can Eliot's vision of apocalypse be intense and desperate? Eliot's "the new year," when "[Christ] the tiger springs" ("Gerontion," l. 49), can denote the imminent future only in a symbolical sense, while Yeats's sense of time is concrete and real: after "That twenty centuries of stony sleep," ("The Second Coming," l. 19), "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand" ("The Second Coming," ll. 9-10).

《요 약》

두 개의 종말론적 비전—에이츠의 회랍·로마적 세계관과 엘리어트의 기독교적 세계관

장 경 렬

본 연구는 윌리엄 버틀러 에이츠(William Butler Yeats)의 『재림』(“The Second Coming”)과 토머스 스테어즈 엘리어트(Thomas Stearns Eliot)의 『제련선』(“Gerontion”)을 대상으로 하여 두 시인의 시 세계를 비교 및 검토하기 위한 것이다. 이들 작품은 모두 러시아 혁명과 제 1 차 세계 대전이 끝난 무렵인 1919년에 쓰여진 것들로, 두 시인이 당대 유럽 사회를 재배하던 위기 의식을 어떤 각도에서 이해하고 있는가를 확인할 수 있다. 특히 에이츠가 당대 유럽 사회의 정치·사회적 현실에 주목하고 있다면, 엘리어트는 현대 유럽 문화의 정신적 황폐화라는 측면에 초점을 맞추고 있다고 할 수 있다. 또한 두 시를 공통적으로 지배하고 있는 것은 일종의 “종말 의식”(the sense of ending)인데, 양쪽에서 모두 “재림”에 대한 강한 암시를 확인할 수 있음에 유의하기 바란다.

그러나 두 시에 등장하는 유사한 문제 의식에도 불구하고, 또한 “종말 의식”이란 개념 그 자체가 기독교적인 의미를 함축하는 것임에도 불구하고, 우리는 결코 이들 두 시를 동일한 관점에서 이해할 수 없다. 엘리어트의 시가 문자 그대로 기독교적 맥락을 문제삼고 있다면, 에이츠의 시는 기독교에 대한 강한 암시에도 불구하고 결코 기독교적 맥락 안에서 이해될 수 없는 요소를 간직하고 있기 때문이다. 요컨대, 두 시를 검토해 보면, 비슷한 위기 의식과 종말 의식을 두 시인이 공유하고 있음에도 불구하고 그들이 전하고자 하는 내용은 전혀 다른 것임을 확인할 수 있다. 즉, 엘리어트가 전하고자 한 것이 기독교적 세계관에 바탕을 둔 위기 의식이라면, 에이츠가 전하고자 한 것은 보다 더 근원적인 유럽적 세계관, 또는 유럽 문화의 근원적 모태라고 할 수 있는 회랍·로마적 세계관에 바탕을 둔 위기 의식인 것이다.

결국 에이츠의 시와 엘리어트의 시에서 서로 다른 세계관이 문제되고 있음을 확인하는 가운데 우리는 두 시가 지니는 의미를 새롭게 조명할 수 있다. 아울러, 이러한 확인 작업을 통해 우리는 유럽인들의 의식 세계를 떠받치는 두 개의 기둥이라고 할 수 있는 회랍적 세계관과 기독교적 세계관이 유럽인들의 의식 세계에 어떤 영향을 미치고 있는가, 또한 각각의 세계관이 시 세계에 반영되는 경우 시 작품이 주제적으로든 문체적으로든 어떤 형태의 개별적 특성을 지니게 되는가를 새롭게 인식할 수 있다.

