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DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2024.48.4.83-93

Of Sphinx and Sparrows: The Apocalyptic Vision in Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Miłosz's "A Song on the End of the World"

ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the contrasting apocalyptic visions in Yeats's "The Second Coming" and Miłosz's "A Song on the End of the World". Taking Yeats's poem as the epitome of modern apocalyptic vision, we can dissect the differences between the mainstream view of the apocalypse in this era and the marginal one in Miłosz's poem, which are represented in the imagery each poet creates. Consequently, the juxtaposition of the two poems leads to a more profound understanding of the competing formulations of apocalypse in the early twentieth century, which is more heterogeneous in nature than the literature of the period may initially suggest.

KEYWORDS

apocalyptic vision; imagery; W. B. Yeats; Czesław Miłosz; twentieth-century poetry

1. Introduction: Writing against the backdrop of the early twentieth century

As Nobel Prize winners of different geographical, sociopolitical and literary backgrounds, W. B. Yeats and Czesław Miłosz are both deemed major contributors to the modernist poetic tradition. Being an Irishman living and writing poetry at the turn of the twentieth century, Yeats was equipped with the rich history of Ireland and its myths, added to the prolonged historical oppression that the nation had suffered at the hands of the English. Likewise, Miłosz had the experience of living in Warsaw (Poland), during World War II atrocities, which made a lasting impact on his worldview, in general, and his poetry, in particular. Whereas Yeats wrote his poetry in English, the Polish Miłosz mostly preferred to make use of his

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mother tongue, and only later were some of his works translated into English. The poets' position outside a strictly English canon of literature allows them a range of possibilities to incorporate in their works. Politically, they are somewhat similar in their nationalistic tendencies, despite their different approaches to such a nationalistic identity. Yeats was deeply affected by events such as the Easter Rising of 1916, and yet "although a convinced patriot, [he] deplored the hatred and the bigotry of the Nationalist movement, and his poetry is full of moving protests against it" (Frenz, 1969). Similar to Yeats, Miłosz became disillusioned with the Communist Party and became the cultural attaché for the newly formed People's Republic of Poland in Washington. The dreadful circumstances of the first half of the twentieth century and the position of these poets in a period of rapid and vast historical changes affected their poetic imagination and sensibility, so much so that it is only natural to expect their visions of the end of the world to be similar to each other. Such a similarity can be witnessed in their extensive use of imagery: Yeats views the world as entirely symbolic, as he explicates in detail in his 1900 "The Symbolism of Poetry":

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or [...] call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become [...] one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion.

If we agree with Abrams and Geoffrey (2015) that imagery can be generally defined as "all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in vehicles [...] of its similes and metaphors," then Yeats's concept of unified emotion could be counted as a specific form of imagery, or the way we feel these interconnections as a cohesive whole in our mind (2015, p. 172). This idea is consistent with Yeats's predisposition to view the world through a personal symbolic lens, meaning that he relates disparate images so intricately that they can be perceived only in one, ambiguous sense. The perception of images is the essence of what Yeats calls a symbol, so by examining the images he describes in "The Second Coming," it is not difficult to observe how the entire poem becomes symbolic of Yeats's apocalyptic vision. Yeats had the ability to ingeniously craft complex images that would adequately portray the spectrum of significations and "emotions" he intended to convey. Consequently, his poetry offers a range of images and symbols that are at once ambiguous and unified in their connotations. His ideas about the symbol and the image went so far as to claim that "a human being who embodied truth would also, presumably, take the form of an image or symbol." As Harper (2006) has observed, "Yeats's work

from start to finish suggests the pre-eminence of what can be envisioned over what can be rationally explained” (p. 144). Harper’s observation is particularly apt with regard to the symbol of the Sphinx in “The Second Coming.” Similar to Yeats, Miłosz tends to provide the reader with a constellation of images, although his writing is not usually deemed to fall neatly into the category of symbolist poetry proper. Instead, he prefers to turn to the physical nature and set the modern man at the center of all the forces that influence him. In Miłosz’s poetry, humans are often portrayed through what shapes and helps them in their process of becoming, to rise above and beyond what he terms “being”:

Reality calls for a name, for words, but it is unbearable and if it is touched, if it draws very close, the poet’s mouth cannot even utter a complaint of Job: all art proves to be nothing compared with action. Yet, to embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only thanks to a distance, only by soaring above it – but this in turn seems then a moral treason. (Miłosz, 1980)

The environment around Miłosz, then, becomes a way of making sense of and philosophizing the situation of the modern man. This environment is not merely restricted to physical nature as distinguished from the human, but, as Buell (2005) defines it, “more commonly . . . environment comprehends both ‘built’ and ‘natural’” (p. 140). The human condition is inevitably tied with one’s connection with the world around them, and the natural imagery Miłosz constructs in his poetry showcases this bond and explores various aspects of it. While the repertoire of images Miłosz employs may happen to be symbolic, they are not as integral to his poetic imagination as they are to Yeats’s.

The significance of the two poems under study¹ has to do with their subject material – the imagination and prophesizing of the end times. Yeats’s poem was written in 1919, after witnessing the horrors of the World War I and the upheaval of literary traditions that had begun with the *fin de siècle* movement. As one of the most important figures in the Irish Literary Revival, Yeats had a thorough knowledge of Irish history, myth, and mystical traditions. His profound knowledge enabled him to capitalize on images that would serve as the perfect symbol across history. With this substantial repository at his disposal, he wrote one of the most famous apocalyptic poems of all time in English, using symbols derived from this rich history and situating them in a meticulously woven net of significations. While Miłosz’s poem is not as symbolically rich as Yeats’s, it is nevertheless an important note on the metaphorical when and how

¹ The full text of the Yeats’s poem can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming> and the full text of Miłosz’s poem in Polish can be accessed here: <https://polska-poezja.pl/lista-wierszy/255-czeslaw-milosz-piosenka-o-koncu-swiatea> and the translation in English here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49451/a-song-on-the-end-of-the-world>

of the apocalypse. Having experienced the atrocities of World War II firsthand, Miłosz composed the poem in 1944 in Warsaw, shortly before the war came to an end. His unmediated experience of the war is expected to figure in this poem with its distinctive subject matter as, perhaps, the depictions of the horrors endured by the people, yet the tone of the poem is surprisingly at odds with the reader's preconceptions or expectations of his poetic concerns. Initially, it can be observed that his premonition of the apocalypse stands in marked contrast to what Yeats had pictured it to be a few decades ago. The universe Miłosz lives in does not seem threatening on the surface, but is rather ignorant of his existence. As Fiut (1978) has observed, Miłosz "stands alone in the face of an indifferent cosmos and cruel history, which move across human fate with a destructive force akin to that of nature" (p. 420). Although this place proves to be as destructive as Yeats's world, it does not lend any profound meaning to human existence above other forms of being. In other words, everything appears to be equally insignificant.

2. The symbolic apocalypse of "The Second Coming"

In the very first lines of "The Second Coming," one can detect the importance of the past in Yeats's vision of the future. The poem starts with Yeats's famous formulation of historical cycles, shown in the symbol of the "widening gyre". The expansion of one end of the gyre represents the speedy move toward the end of an era, followed by the narrow end of another, antithetical gyre in the form of interpenetrating cones. This process, which is continuously reversed, can signify "the ebb and flow of the subjective and objective principles," and now that one of these gyres is reaching its widest point, everything will be turned upside down in a short span of time, causing great historical turmoil, such as the ones witnessed during the beginning of the twentieth century (Holdeman, 2006, p. 78).

Yeats was influenced by diverse historical events, including the World War that killed many of the people from his home country who were not fighting for their own cause. Moreover, he was troubled by the Easter Rising, after which he declared in "Easter 1916" that "all changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born," and other extreme changes in the world brought about by the hands of the people searching for freedom, including the Russian Revolution. The coincidence and harrowing effects of these events caused him to feel that utter mayhem was descending upon Europe, and it is this state of havoc precipitated by abrupt historical changes that is represented in the symbolic image of the gyre. The contemporary significances of the poem were more specifically mentioned in the first draft of the poem, with the year 1919 being included in the text, yet as Dettmar (1986) has observed, "Yeats realized [...] that references to identifiable historico-political events [...] would by their very nature limit the moral statement he felt compelled to make" (p. 83).

In summary, Yeats is portraying a world that has fallen into chaos in vivid intensity:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned (lines 3–6)

Yeats's view of apocalypse is as foreboding as one would imagine. In a world that is disintegrating fast, there is no hope or innocence left to resist the "blood-dimmed tide" that threatens to drown the best of humanity. One might assume that the beginning of the new gyre might proffer some hope underlying the horror, but Yeats does not seem to envisage any kind of revelation by the end of the first stanza. In the second stanza, the tone abruptly changes. At the sight of these horrors, the poem now hopes for some sort of revelation – something that would restore the stability of the world as we know it, although this balance might be superficial:

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand. (lines 9–10)

Nevertheless, Yeats is in fact mocking the naïve certainty in such a vain hope by repeating the word "Surely" at the beginning of the two lines. In the first stanza, the poem looks at the general state of anarchy through the lens of philosophy – which is Yeats's own historico-philosophical vision in this case – and the mythological past, best exemplified in the symbol of the falcon and falconer, as falconry was a traditional sport of the kings in such stories and real-life. However, Yeats introduces another perspective into his poem, which is a Christian one: If there is no hope for redemption in either history or myth, then religion *must* have something to offer to undo the evil unleashed, as promised by the story of Christ's return. This certainty is broken as soon as it is voiced by the speaker, suggesting that religion does not provide any relief either. The poet is immediately pulled back into the realm of mythology, with the first-person speaker of the second stanza having a sudden vision:

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds. (lines 11–17)

The poem picks up the pace at once when the speaker takes over with his vivid imagination. Now the end of the world is not seen by an overarching presence

from above, but rather perceived through the consciousness of the singular, limited psyche of the speaker. This change of form is one of the ways in which Yeats resembles the modern poets more than the traditional ones, and the opening of the poem:

becomes the octave of a 'failed' impersonal blank-verse sonnet. The poem cannot continue in the impersonal mode; it cannot write its own sestet. Therefore Yeats re-begins the poem, in line 9, as a sonnet in the first person, which then, as one man's lyric perspective, can find its sestet. (Vendler, 2006, p. 80)

Yeats' speaker is the poet-prophet who ostensibly has access to a repertoire that others cannot easily reach: his own version of the collective unconscious, *Spiritus Mundi*. With the infinite resources of the past comes the ability to predict the future, but it is represented in symbolic imagery as well. The poet sees the Sphinx as soon as he thinks about the religious revelation, which is yet another way in which Yeats combines different discourses to add to the complexity and ambiguity that characterizes his symbols and the range of meanings they imply. The poet-prophet is raised above the general observer of the first stanza and the reader of the poem, for it is through his psychological vision that the reader can access the image of the beast. The reader is getting the news of how the world would end second hand. This could imply that the psyche of the reader is not as elevated as that of the poet and that they stand in an inferior position in their level of understanding – an idea that is somewhat consistent with Yeats's slightly elitist stance in his view of literature. The central symbol of the poem, the Sphinx, is situated in a nexus of other significations, which could be summarized in one word: evil. Yeats believes that "human evil" exists, and his idea opposes the early twentieth-century faith in science and rational reasoning. In fact, "The Second Coming" can be read as "a treatment of the nature of human evil" and not merely a terrorizing vision of the future (Dettmar, 1986, p. 79). Dettmar claims that the hollow gaze with which the Sphinx is described is parallel to the absence of specifications of the historical details of the chaos previously mentioned and becomes "emblematic of the evil personality" in Yeats's vision (p. 83). The image of the Sphinx, moving through the hot desert in full light, is used to connote the presence of such evil. It is hard not to notice such a vivid image put into motion, and to add to its intensity, the shadow of the birds is portrayed as a way of highlighting the impending sense of doom that follows such a creature (Wheeler, 1974, p. 240).

The poem comes to a climax at its last lines, finally delivering the dreadful prophecy the reader has anticipated from the beginning of the second stanza:

The darkness drops again; but now I know That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (lines 18–22)

The vision is as rapidly lost as it first appeared to the speaker. The symbolic image presented to the poet-prophet is interpreted by him, albeit using further symbols that make it even more ambiguous. The religious references find their way back when the speaker returns to reality, subtly implying that Christianity is not part of the *Spiritus Mundi* and merely belongs to the rational world, which the poet does not favor much. The two thousand years of the historical cycle associated with Christianity and the rationalistic mode of understanding are coming to an end, but not with the promised salvation of the Second Coming. Religion, therefore, is referenced only to be undermined again, with the image of the Sphinx in the position of the anti-Christ moving in a backward motion toward Bethlehem. This objectivity is replaced with the subjective view of the speaker of the second stanza, symbolizing the end of the former gyre and the beginning of the latter. Nevertheless, “The Second Coming” does not specify the nature or essence of the Sphinx that is about to be born, rendering the climax of the poem to take the form of a question. This formulation of Yeats’s apocalyptic vision suggests that the speaker’s subjective insight lacks knowledge of the extent of the predicted horror. Vendler’s (2006) observation in this regard is noteworthy:

‘I know *that* ...’ is followed by ‘And *what* rough beast ...?’ The non-parallel syntax shows that the poet’s knowledge is limited. He is convinced that a new force is imminent [...] yet what sort of beast it will be is as yet undetermined. Unlike the canonical Apocalypse, the Modernist apocalyptic utterance is not certain of its visions. (p. 80)

Contrary to Yeats’s catastrophic apocalyptic vision, Miłosz’s “A Song on the End of the World” (original Polish title: “Piosenka o końcu świata”) offers a more peaceful image of the apocalypse anticipated by many during the twentieth century. Unlike “The Second Coming,” none of the images he evokes are as visually captivating as Yeats’s images and yet, they still leave a deep impression on the reader. In stark contrast to Yeats’s poem, all the scenes Miłosz portrays are extracted out of everyday experiences, and the marked incongruity between their ordinariness and the magnitude of the apocalypse creates the greatest intrigue of this poem.

3. The apocalypse as commonplace in “A Song on the End of the World”

A line-by-line reading of the poem, as translated by Anthony Miłosz, would suggest that both the title and the first line of the poem are quite shocking and abrupt, causing a tension in the reader who now must deal with a terrifying premonition that is presented in a peaceful tone at the same time:

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.

Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
 By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
 And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be. (lines 1–6)

Much like the first stanza of “The Second Coming”, the poem’s first lines do not establish a first-person speaker, which implies that the events are being observed by a supposedly omniscient observer who has curiously taken the position of the poet-prophet. For Miłosz (1980), the vocation of the poet is “to be above and simultaneously to see the Earth in every detail,” creating a sense of equilibrium between these paradoxical aims. The tension caused by the startling line about the end of the world provokes a sense of anticipation in the readers who are already familiar with such prophetic visions: the poem’s title purports to present an image of the end of the world, perhaps including images recalling the horrors of World War II. Knowing that the poet is writing this from Warsaw surely reinforces such an expectation. However, the imagery that shapes the poem is all but expected. Surprisingly, in a poem about the apocalypse, the reader encounters images that are placid and beautifully envisioned, and that offer a picture of the world through some of its gentlest and most pleasing qualities. The world the poem describes is buzzing with life, with the clovers hinting at the possibility of hope and luck, and everything is just right with the “happy porpoises” and the “gold-skinned” snakes. Significantly, the images of animals and physical nature figure much more prominently than the single reference to human life in the first stanza. Miłosz’s vision of the end times does not blend as many discourses and traditions as Yeats’s does, but instead focuses on the immediate, the physical, and the non-human. This difference in the apocalyptic vision of the two poets can be accounted for by the difference between the ecocentric outlook and the anthropocentric one. Yeats’s anthropocentric worldview is best defined as “the assumption or view that the interests of humans are of higher priority than those of nonhumans,” while Miłosz’s ecocentric approach posits that “the interest of the ecosphere must override that of the interest of individual species”, as “ecocentrism points to the interlinkage of the organismal and the inanimate” (Buell, 2005, pp.134–137). In Miłosz’s poem, there seems to be essentially no difference between the human and the non-human in the environment. The fisherman is not separated from or above the other animals but is as much part of the backdrop as the rest of the environment. Furthermore, these two aspects of the environment are intermingled in the fisherman’s dependence on the fish for survival. In this light, while Yeats’s poem is complexly psychological, mythical, and symbolic, Miłosz’s poem offers a much more tangible, tactile, and objective perspective, which seems to defy a hierarchical conception of the world, and instead presents one in which the bee and the fisherman are accorded the same significance. From a rather different point of view, it could be argued that it is only in the encounter with the reality of the apocalypse that the reader begins to realize

that man is not necessarily nobler than bee and that they equally belong to the same nature. The second stanza follows the same principle, evoking images reminiscent of normal coexistence between the environment and humans, as well as the animate and the inanimate: everything is equal – the women carrying umbrellas (a signifier of their social status), the drunkard from the lower ranks of society, and the man-made boat and violin fading into their surroundings. The images hitherto are not derived from a mythic past or a possible future. Rather, they represent everyday life situations the poet sees as unvarying throughout history. The next stanza, however, brings the poet's intention to light:

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now. (lines 14–21)

In a series of images mostly extracted from nature, Miłosz's poem makes it clear that the apocalypse is no great undoing of the world, nor is there an enormous change underway. Miłosz is undermining the view held by "those who expected signs," bringing down not only Yeats's symbolic vision but also that of his readers – those who have taken "The Second Coming" as a symbol itself. Moreover, the poem hints that the classic vision of apocalypse is harmful in that it blinds people to the threat of the end times by creating such expectations in them. Unlike Yeats's poem, Miłosz's poem does not offer the reader a vivid and horrific image of the beast before it has been born. The poet is unable, or rather reluctant, to prophesize as confidently as Yeats does in "The Second Coming." In contrast to the reader's expectations, the center of the world is too intact and unwavering, for Miłosz does not entertain a cyclical conception of history like Yeats does. Miłosz (1980) elaborates on his view on the absence of such earth-shattering alteration in the state of the world in his Nobel speech:

A profound transformation, of which we are hardly aware, because we are a part of it, has been taking place, coming to the surface from time to time in phenomena that provoke general astonishment [...]. But transformation has been going on, defying short term predictions . . .

Miłosz realizes that it is impossible to recognize profound changes when they are happening slowly and one is very much part of their flow. The recognition of change happens only in retrospect. And as Fiut (1978) puts it, "the poet looks at history from a timeless perspective, an almost divine one" (p. 421). If history is repeating itself at every moment even in its changes, why would there be a need to go back in time when one can simply look around and understand how everything

is going to come to an end? The last stanza is the only part in which a hint of religious ideology can be found, but the prophet that Miłosz portrays is far from the image of the prophet the reader may expect:

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
 Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
 Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
 There will be no other end of the world,
 There will be no other end of the world. (lines 22–26)

The image of the old man is associated with wisdom, and has connotations of prophetic vision, but this modern man is simply busy doing his everyday work, without being elevated above anyone else. The anti-climax of the poem is presented in this very stanza: nothing special happens at the end of the world. This image is paradoxically indicating a different kind of horror: no one can tell when and how the end of the world will take place, and there are no prophets left in this modern world. In his egalitarian manner, Miłosz brings the poet-prophet down from the pedestal into the same realm of ignorance to which common people are prone. Moreover, as Fiut (1987) has observed, “attempts to grasp what is stable and unchangeable in human nature are marked in Miłosz’s poetry by uncertainty and indecision,” which indicates that humans are both ignorant of the way the world works and their own nature (p. 67). This is why the poet poses more questions than he answers: this ambiguity-inducing method is clear in the shared ignorance of the apocalypse in mankind. Miłosz’s poem portrays this double ambiguity in its focus on the lack of awareness as a general trait in humans. The attention shifts from picturing how the apocalypse will happen toward a partial, unhelpful commentary on human nature. Therefore, one can conclude that perhaps “the true subject of Miłosz’s poems is not the finished concept of human nature, but the process of attaining this concept”, and the impossibility of predicting the apocalypse through a singular consciousness, as in “The Second Coming” (pp. 68–69).

4. Conclusion: The human question of the apocalypse

In general, the similarities between the two poems arise out of the conditions of the first decades of the twentieth century. Both poets were apprehensive toward an idea of modernistic human progress, yet Yeats sided with the conventions of groundbreaking modernist work, which turned the perspective of objective, scientific inquiry into an overtly personal, subjective, and symbolic one. The Celtic Revival and Yeats’s understanding of his mythological past leads him to prophesize the apocalypse in terms and images familiar to him – both as a modernist and an Irishman who had witnessed the dismaying consequences of resisting against England’s imperial power. Miłosz had a similar experience of catastrophe, which may have been a shared reason for these poets’ attention to

the concept of apocalypse. His egalitarianism simply did not allow him to let the world be depicted through a singular, subjective psyche. This is partly the reason why his apocalyptic vision differs in its terrifying passivity and tranquility from that of Yeats. In the words of Fiut (1978), “tormented by the foreboding of the unavoidable catastrophe that threatens the world, Miłosz stands alone in the face of an indifferent cosmos,” (p. 420), and this is the essence of his view on the apocalypse that is charged by human ignorance.

Miłosz (1980) himself states that his poetry “remained sane and, in a dark age, expressed a longing for the Kingdom of Peace and Justice”. The terror of the end times figures differently for Yeats and Miłosz – the former anticipates an active unstoppable force of horror while the latter envisions the worst part of it to be the ignorance and inactivity of mankind in moving on with their lives despite even the literal apocalypse. Their experiences of horror led them to distinctive conclusions, yet they both share a loss of trust in humanity. Though none of the poets deny or offer any remedies for the apocalypse, they are both driven by the human ignorance to talk about the end times. These two approaches to the possibility of the apocalypse are rooted in highly unstable historical circumstances, but they remain different, nonetheless. The concluding question, then, is one left to the readers of the poems: Which view do we tend to agree with more? That the end of the world happens in the silent disintegration of our everyday lives when nothing is too out of the ordinary, or that we go out with a bang, and a reversal of all that history has had to offer?

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