

## 19. The Coming of a Dark Age in the Last Century, a Golden Age Almost 2000 years Ago: June 25-30

Here follow two poems of what we might call prophetic vision, one by the great Irish poet William Yeats and written in 1919, the other written composed almost two millennia earlier by the greatest of Roman poets, Vergil; Yeats's poem portending an age of universal chaos and ruin, Vergil's celebrating the beginning of a new golden age of universal blessing for all of humankind. Since I think the contrast between the two poems registers more strikingly this way, I'll start with Yeat's "The Second Coming."

William Yeats, "The Second Coming"

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed upon the world, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it*

*Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Yeats's poem does not need much commentary. *Spiritus Mundi*, "Spirit of the World," reminds me of the German *Zeitgeist*, "Spirit of the Age," which I used in my Preface. "Somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man," brings up the image of the Sphinx in Egypt, which may have been sculpted long before the pyramids. The details of its visage have been eroded over the millennia, which gives the line "A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" a very concrete aptness. I think it is up to each reader to use his or her imagination to infer the meaning of the dark imagined here is a kind of satanic re-enactment of a birth of Christ, the "rough beast" being perhaps the Sphinx awakened from "twenty centuries of stony sleep."

Yeats wrote this poem less than a year after the end of the First World War, which has been rightly called *the catastrophe* of the twentieth century ushering in an age of upheaval the far-reaching effects of which are still with us a century later, at a time, too, when Ireland was moving rapidly to its bloody war of independence from Britain and the equally brutal civil war between Catholic southern and Protestant northern Ireland.

Vergil's poem is the fourth of his *Eclogues*, a collection of ten pastoral poems which he composed in the early years of his creative career. Here he was following in the footsteps of the much earlier Greek poet Theocritus who is credited with creating this genre of poetry, of which John Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas" is the supreme example in English literature. Several of the *Eclogues* have distinctly Roman references and themes, of which our poem is most celebrated example. It is dedicated—the dedication is embedded within the poem—to Caius Asinius Pollio, Roman consul in 40 B.C. I'll come back to him in my later commentary. I have used T.A. Page's still very serviceable edition with text and commentary; it saw first publication in 1898, but went through numerous reprints for almost 60 years. The translation is my own.

Vergil, *Eclogues* 4

*Let us sing of somewhat greater subjects, O Sicilian Muses!  
Not everyone finds delight in tree clusters and lowly tamarisks;  
If we sing of trees, let them be worthy of a consul.  
The final age of Cumaean prophecy has now arrived;  
All anew a Mighty Succession of Ages is born;  
Now the Maiden returns and Saturn reigns again;  
Now a new lineage of man descends from high heaven.  
Only bestow your favour, O chaste Lucina, on the boy being born  
So that presently the Age of Iron may end and a golden race  
May fill the whole earth: now your Apollo holds sway.  
Already with you, O you, Pollio, as consul, this glory of the age  
Will make his entrance, and the Mighty Months will stride forwards;  
If any traces remain of our ancient iniquity, once effaced,  
With you as leader, they will free the world from constant fear.  
He will receive the life of the gods and will see heroes  
Mingling with the gods and himself be seen among them,  
And will rule a world brought to peace by his father's manhood's strengths.  
The earth, not tilled any longer, will lavish on you its first modest  
Gifts, ivy straying far and wide, foxglove,  
And Egyptian lilies bunched with with smiling acanthus.  
Goats, unshepherded, will bring home udders bursting  
With milk, with no fear of mighty lions' prides.  
Your very cradle will pour forth flowers to caress you.  
The serpent will perish, perish too will the treacherous herb*

*Rife with poison; Assyrian perfumes will spring up everywhere.  
And once you're able to read of heroes' fame  
And your father's great deeds and will know what manhood is,  
The fields will grow yellow with their tender-ripening grain  
And from the wild briar will hang the purpling grape,  
While sturdy oak-trees will let their honey-dew seep out.  
Even so, a few traces of our ancient wickedness will linger on,  
Driving us to take on the sea-god, to encircle cities  
With ramparts, and to cleave the soil with furrows.  
There will be another Tiphys, another Argo carrying  
Its specially picked heroes; there will even be other wars,  
And once again a mighty Achilles will be despatched to Troy.  
Then, when by now the strengthened years have made a man of you,  
The merchant will let the sea-waters be, nor will there be any pine-ship  
For trading wares; the whole earth will supply all that's needed.  
No longer will the soil suffer the mattock, nor the vine the pruning knife;  
The stalwart ploughman will take the yoke off his oxen;  
Wool no longer no longer will have to counterfeit all sorts of tints,  
But in the meadows the ram himself will change his fleece's colours,  
Now a purple dye pleasant to the eye, next a saffron yellow;  
Of its own accord scarlet will cover the feeding lambs.  
"Run, all you aeons, like this, " thus spoke the Fates to their spindles,  
Of one mind with destiny's unalterable will.  
Step up, for it is time, to your illustrious career,  
Dear offspring of the gods, as you rise to Jupiter's stature.  
Behold the world rocked by the weight of its overhanging dome,  
And the lands, the expanses of the sea, and the infinite sky;  
Behold how all things are rejoicing at the coming age.  
Ah, may the final part of my life be so prolonged, may such breath  
Remain to me as I need to recount all your great deeds,  
And also, may neither Thracian Orpheus nor Linus surpass me  
In song, no matter how much divine help is afforded them,  
From Calliopeia, mother to Orpheus, or from Apollo father to Linus.  
Pan, too, if he were to contend with me, with Arcadia as judge,  
even Pan, with Arcadia as judge, would admit defeat.  
Begin, then, little boy, to recognize your mother with a smile:  
Nine long months have brought her weariness.  
So do begin, little boy, for when parents have not smiled in return,  
A god thinks the boy not worthy to share his table, a goddess her bed.*

This poem is cloaked in mystery; the first seventeen lines in particular have an oracular ring to them. I suspect that even a reasonably knowledgeable Roman reader or listener 2000 years ago might have had some difficulty in picking up on all the references and allusions. In the first three lines the poet, invoking the "Sicilian Muses," ("Sicilian" because Theocritus, the creator of pastoral poetry in whose footsteps Vergil was following came from Sicily, which had been settled by Greeks many centuries ago),

says that he is suspending in this poem the customary settings and themes of pastoral poetry, and already introduces the consul Pollio without naming him. The next fourteen lines are packed with mythical, philosophical, religious, and contemporary-political allusions. “Cumaean prophecy” brings to mind the Sibyl of Cumae, the mythical prophetess who had guided Aeneas through the Underworld in book six of Vergil's *Aeneid*; her purported utterances had eventually been gathered and written down in the Sibylline books, a few of which were still in existence in Vergil's days and were consulted by a special panel of priests in times of crisis. In very distant times the reign of Saturn, who was eventually deposed by his son Jupiter, gave the world and humankind a nostalgically remembered Golden Age. “a Mighty Succession of Ages”: an allusion to the belief held in Stoic cosmology that a new aeonic cycle of time would start when the heavenly bodies were again in the same relative position as at the moment of Creation. The reference to “Mighty Months” in line twelve may echo a somewhat similar belief in the cyclical progression of time which goes back to the Etruscans, an ancient non-Indo-European Italian people who exerted a considerable influence on Roman customs and culture. “The Maiden”: the goddess of justice, Astraea, the last of the immortals to depart from the Earth—the Latin “Virgo” would call up powerful associations in the minds of later Christians. The idea of the Four Ages of Humankind, Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron, goes back in literature to the Greek poet Hesiod. “Lucina,” the goddess presiding over childbirth. “Apollo,” the culture-god par excellence for both the Greeks and the Romans who presided over the greatest achievements and institutions of civilization.

The phrase “taking on the sea-god” well illustrates the sentiment common in the Greek and Roman world that humankind would be better off if it did not have to take to the sea for travel and commerce. With small ships that were oar or wind-driven and without the benefit of a compass, sea-faring was regarded as a dangerous undertaking, and the sea as treacherous, not to be gazed upon in wonder for its azure beauty in fair weather. Therefore, it had been a blessing for mankind of the Golden Age and was to be a blessing again in the new Golden Age that venturing out on the sea would be completely unnecessary and unwanted. There is an echo of this feeling in the description of the new Heaven and Earth near the end the Book of Revelation (chapter 21, verse 1): “and there was no longer any sea.”

The question of who is the mysterious child who will usher in a new Golden Age must have risen already in the minds of Vergil's contemporaries. Keep in mind, though, that the entire poem, except for the historicity of Pollio, is a poetic fantasy through and through. I share the belief of T.A. Page that the child in question is almost certainly a son born to Pollio when he was consul in 40 B.C. The other, at least remotely, plausible answer is a child not yet born but expected from the marriage of Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) to his first wife Scribonia—the child born, though, was a daughter, Julia, and no other children followed in Octavian's two marriages. I say “remotely plausible” because in *Eclogues 2* Octavian is eulogized as almost god-like by the shepherd Tityrus. Pollio held the prestigious office of consul, which he shared with a fellow consul. This was the position of supreme executive and commander-in-chief power. However, since 43 B.C it had been overshadowed by the dictatorial powers

exercised by the three members of the so-called Second Triumvirate, namely the young Octavian (great-nephew, adopted son, and heir of the Julius Caesar who had been assassinated in 44 B.C.), Mark Antony (who had been Julius Caesar's second in command for many years), and the relatively insignificant Lepidus. However, Pollio remained an important political figure whose reputation was enhanced by his career as a seasoned military commander under Julius Caesar—alluded to in line 17 where the world is said to have been “brought to peace” (*pacatum*) by his “manhood's strengths” (*virtutibus*). Thanks to his independent and outspoken views during the early years of Augustus' rule, he was to remain a person of great substance in the public eye. It would be fitting, therefore, that Vergil should make his newborn son the harbinger of a new Golden Age for Rome and the world.

In the remainder of the poem, Vergil lets his fantasy roam as he envisions what life will be like in the Golden Age. As might be expected, mythological, and religious references are suitably brought in: the ship Argo and its crew, with Tiphys as the helmsman, in their quest for the golden fleece, the Trojan War, the three Fates spinning the threads of human lives, the Muse Calliopea, the patroness of epic poetry, and of the mythical poet Orpheus, Apollo as the patron of the similarly mythical poet Linus, and finally, the god Pan, the god of the countryside, the realm of Arcadia. The real poetic thrust, however, comes from the freedom with which the poet exercises his imagination on what life will like in the soon-to-be Golden Age, a life completely free of danger, toil, and hardship. I agree with Page that Vergil pushes his fantasy to the edge of the ridiculous when he pictures sheep growing woolly fleeces which already have the desired colorations so that the dyeing of wool will be no longer necessary. The fantasy has a childlike charm, though, and I wonder if Vergil is not purposefully injecting a note of humour here. The concluding four lines—on the baby who must smile at his parents so that his parents will smile back in order for him later to flourish and enjoy a godlike life—have a strong touch of folklorist wisdom and humour and as such make a pleasing contrast with the oracular solemnity of the poem's beginning.

In October 40 B.C., with the signing of a pact between Mark Antony and Octavian (in the negotiations for which Pollio had played a crucial role) the time seemed auspicious for an enduring peace after more than two generations of intermittent and brutal civil war. Julius Caesar, who had made himself dictator for life, had been assassinated on the Ides of March (the 15<sup>th</sup>) in 44 B.C. Mark Antony and Octavian had decisively defeated the anti-Caesarian forces in the battle of Philippi in 42 B.C., but this was followed by serious strife, even armed conflict, between their respective followers, and so another round of civil war was looming. With the so-called Pact of Brundisium, a great sigh of relief and a luminous hope for a better future must have gone up all across Rome, Italy, and the empire. The fourth poem of the *Eclogues* is a powerful, albeit fancifully embroidered expression of that hope.

It is most unlikely that Vergil was acquainted with Jewish-Messianic prophecy, but it is not at all surprising that for many centuries, in fact until the eighteenth century, many Christians read a prophecy of the birth of Christ into Vergil's poem, and so during the Middle Ages, Vergil came to be hailed as a sort of pre-Christian saint in western

Christendom, his supposed tomb near Naples a place of devoted pilgrimage, and he becomes Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*. We may smile now at such naiveness, but I like to think that at the spiritual level these Christians were absolutely right.

Although Yeats's and Vergil's poems are in sharp contrast to each other in that one is filled with ominous foreboding while the other is uplifted with joyous anticipation, both might be called apocalyptic in the sense that they speak of an imminent turn in world history which is of more than human making. The meaning of each, however, is conveyed in a way which is clearly meant to be understood as mostly figurative and symbolic, and, as I have suggested, the fourth Eclogue also has elements of sheer playful fantasy. Their apocalypticism is therefore utterly different from that of contemporary Christian—and I might also add, Islamic—fundamentalism which demands to be taken literally.