

“The Circle Begin Again”: William Butler Yeats’s *The Resurrection*

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William Butler Yeats’s 1931 play *The Resurrection* has rarely been discussed by Yeatsian scholars. This play hardly gets a mention even in Katharine Worth’s splendid book about Yeats’s plays *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (1978). The main reason why *The Resurrection* has been ignored is, I believe, because of the intricate and sophistic conversation concerning Christ’s resurrection which takes place between three characters: the Hebrew, the Greek and the Syrian. As James McFarlane comments, most of Yeats’s later plays are seen as kinds of experimental “total theatre” composed “by ritual, stylization, the formalization of the dance, by abstractive transposition into music, by the de-personalizations of the mask”, but in *The Resurrection* Yeats gives priority to Platonic dialogue between the characters (565). The Hebrew states that Christ “was nothing more than a man, the best man who ever lived” (300), while the Greek opposes this idea by saying Christ “never had a human body” and “is a phantom” (304-305). In the last scene, Christ appears before the three and is proved to be a man-god.

Regarding the depiction of Christ as a phantom with a beating human

heart, Shotaro Oshima says that in this play Yeats argued that the human soul is immortal and that men and God, for Yeats, are equal in the sense that both are able to resurrect again and again (194). However, this is not the essence of the play. In order to discover the essence, there is a need to raise some questions: Why did Yeats write a Christ play in modern times?; What did Yeats try to say to his contemporaries by writing a Christ play?

Before going on to the main subject, it is necessary to mention how Yeats perceived the system of history. As Andrew Parkin has written, Yeats believed that there are two types of epochs in history and these two epochs make a circle. One is called “subjective” or “antithetical” and the other “objective” or “primary”. The eras of ancient Greece and Rome are included in the “subjective” epoch, in which Christ was not born yet. Parkin interprets the “subjective” epoch as the times when individualism and self-fulfillment are strong. On the other hand, after the coming of Christ, the “objective” epoch starts and subordination to god acquires strength (Parkin, 24). Richard Ellmann explains the difference between the “subjective” epoch and the “objective” one:

At the time of Christ objectivity was at its fullest expansion; the self was struggling to escape from personality, to be lost in ‘otherness’, while at the time of the Renaissance subjectivity was at its fullest expansion, and great personalities were everywhere realizing themselves to the utmost. In our time history is swinging back again towards objectivity, for the cycles continue in eternal recurrence. Mass movements, such as democracy, socialism, and especially communism are for Yeats evidences of the shift towards objectivity, when every man tries to look like his neighbor and repress individuality and personality. (232)

According to Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming”, it takes “twenty centuries”

to return to the “objective” epoch (91). What is thought-provoking is that this poem was composed in 1919, the very end of those “twenty centuries”. In this poem, Yeats prophesies the end of the epoch and, in Michael O’Neill’s words, evokes “the birth of a new era symbolized by the ‘rough beast’” (134):

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? (91-92)

Yeats had mixed feelings about the transformation of the epoch, because obedience to religion and impersonality are strong in the “objective” epoch. As Jon Stallworthy has shown in its early drafts the poem had a stronger relationship with the First World War than the published poem does. An early draft of “The Second Coming” begins:

intellectual gyre is ()
The gyres grow wider and more wide
falcon cannot hear
The hawk can no more hear the falconer
The germans to Russia to the place (Stallworthy, 18)

The poem was written when the anxiety about the coming of the “impersonal” epoch filled Yeats’s mind. According to Terence Brown, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory about the Great War “with a real sense of foreboding” (220):

I wonder if history will ever know at what man’s door to lay the crime of this inexplicable war. I suppose, like most wars it is at root a bagman’s war, a sacrifice of the best for the worst. I feel strangely enough most for the young Germans who are now being killed. (Brown, 220)

As David Holdeman states, in the poem “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” Yeats celebrates Robert Gregory, the son of Lady Gregory who served in the air force during the First World War. However, Yeats “also raises questions about the nature of a sacrifice made for ‘A lonely impulse of delight’” (Holdeman, 68):

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan’s poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,

The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death. (64)

In “On being Asked for a War Poem” Yeats asserted that “in times like these / A poet’s mouth [must] be silent” (72) and tried to remain politically neutral during the Great War, but Yeats put his “own ambivalence about the war into the mouth of a pilot” in “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” (Holdeman, 68).

To return to the 1931 play *The Resurrection*, this play was written when “the foreboding” mentioned above still haunted Yeats. Harold Bloom writes that Yeats started writing this play in 1925, six years after “The Second Coming” (334). What should not be ignored is that this play’s theme, as in the earlier poem, is the transformation of the epoch with the coming of a god. In this thesis, I will show that in *The Resurrection* Yeats expressed his anxiety about the coming of the new era by writing a play set at the moment of historical transformation initiated by Christ. In addition, I will show that Yeats’s Christ in the play is a pagan god and is not the Absolute Being, because Yeats’s purpose was to treat Christ as other deities, like Dionysus, who resurrect again and again when one era is over. *The Resurrection* is not a genuine Christ play and, to use Bloom’s words, “the play hesitates upon the threshold of becoming Christian drama” (337).

The play’s first lines are not about Christ. Interestingly enough, *The Resurrection* starts with a song about Dionysus, the god worshipped by ancient Greeks:

I saw a staring virgin stand
Where holy Dionysus died,
And tear the heart out of his side,

And lay the heart upon her hand
And bear the beating heart away;
And then did all the Muses sing
Of Magnus Annus at the spring,
As though God's death were but a play. (297)

According to Hiroshi Suzuki, the heart of Dionysus in this song is a symbol of god's resurrection. Although Dionysus was dismembered by Hera, he was resurrected because Zeus ate his heart and created him again (58-59). As Anthony Bradley remarks, "the parallels between Christ's death and resurrection and those of the pagan deity Dionysus" are clearly outlined by the playwright. Bradley also states that in *The Resurrection* Yeats "seeks to establish the primitive aspects of Christianity" (221), which means Christ is but one of the miscellaneous deities that resurrect when the new epoch begins. For Yeats, Christ's resurrection is nothing particular and is "but a play" because even other pagan gods like Dionysus must resurrect as Christ does. In addition, this song plays the role of implying the resurrection of not only Dionysus and Christ but also the "rough beast", as Yeats prophesied in "The Second Coming" (91). Also, it is necessary to notice that the birth of the new era, especially in the context of Irish history, is represented in "Easter 1916", published fifteen years before *The Resurrection*. As the title of the poem suggests, the death of the Irish nationalists and the revival of Ireland echo Christ's death and rebirth. The resurrection of a god is the coming of the new and the decline of the old civilization which ancient Greece experienced, therefore, "Another Troy must rise and set" not only in the ancient time when Christ revived, but also in the modern time:

Another Troy must rise and set,

Another lineage feed the crow,
Another Argo’s painted prow
Drive to a flashier bauble yet. (Yeats, 297-298)

Richard Allen Cave describes the relationship between this song and Virgil’s view on the historical cycle:

Muses sing to herald the start of a new era, ‘Magnus Annus’, at the time of the nativity, when a familiar cycle begins over again like the ritual re-enactment of some cosmic drama. Virgil wrote of this cyclic pattern in history in his fourth *Eclogue* (which has traditionally been interpreted as foretelling the birth of Christ), suggesting that ancient history would repeat itself in some new guise with new wars being fought as at Troy and new quests undertaken like Jason’s in his ship, the Argo, in search of the mystical Golden Fleece. (352)

The conversation between the Hebrew and the Greek begins in a house in Jerusalem. Outside the worshippers of Dionysus are “parading the streets with rattles and drums” (298). As Cave observes, both characters are “in a state of exceptional tension, because they fear at any moment that the house may be invaded by Temple guards, Roman soldiers or an angry mob” (350). However, this tension is caused by the two characters’ anxiety about not only the mob’s invasion but also the coming of something supernatural. Soon after the song about the god is sung, the god’s coming is also implied. This tension may have a relationship with the anxiety Yeats experienced when he contemplated the war he felt was imminent. In this scene the two characters in ancient Jerusalem are unconsciously afraid of the god’s coming, and Yeats is anxious about the new epoch’s coming as well:

The Hebrew: We can keep the mob off for some minutes, long enough for the Eleven to escape over the roofs. I shall defend the narrow stair between this and the street until I am killed, then you will take my place.
(298)

Suddenly the Greek points at the three crosses on Calvary and starts to laugh because the Roman soldiers “thought they were nailing the hands of a living man upon the Cross, and all the time there was nothing there but a phantom” (300). The Greek’s comments in this scene intimate his view that Christ was a pure spirit and was not a man:

The Greek: We Greeks understand these things. No god has ever been buried; no god has ever suffered. Christ only seemed to be born, only seemed to eat, seemed to sleep, seemed to walk, seemed to die...How could a man think himself the Messiah?
(300)

On the contrary, the Hebrew opposes the Greek’s idea saying that Christ was “nothing more than a man, the best man who ever lived” (300):

The Hebrew: Nobody before him had so pitied human misery. He preached the coming of the Messiah because he thought the Messiah would take it all upon himself. Then some day when he was very tired, after a long journey perhaps, he thought that he himself was the Messiah.
(300)

However, both opinions are the same in the sense that Christ is not the Absolute Being for both characters. Even if he were a pure god, as the Greek says, it would be possible to treat him as equal to other deities. Moreover, even

if he were a man, as the Hebrew says, it would be possible to treat him as equal to other men. In this scene Yeats deliberately lowers the authority of Christ as professed by Christians. In the next scene where the Hebrew and the Greek notice the parade of the worshippers of Dionysus, the juxtaposition of Christianity and Paganism is shown again. The figures of the two sophists and those of the pagans conflict, but they synchronize as well. Here Yeats likens Christ to pagan figures including the beast in “The Second Coming” which tells of the coming of the “objective” epoch. As Bradley mentions, “Yeats’s play revolts against the blandness of modern Christianity, powerfully asserting the violent, savage, and primitive aspects of Christ’s life and death” (223):

The Greek: It is the worshippers of Dionysus...There is a group of women who carry upon their shoulders a bier with an image of the dead god upon it. No they are not women. They are men dressed as women...They are all silent, as if something were going to happen. My God! What a spectacle! In Alexandria a few men paint their lips vermilion. They imitate women that they attain in worship a woman’s self-abandonment...I remember something of the kind in Alexandria. Three days after the full moon, a full moon in March, they sing the death of the god and pray for his resurrection. (301-302)

In this scene, Dionysian paganism’s wildness and roughness are described. Furthermore, God’s death is also implied when the Greek speaks of “a bier with an image of the dead god” (301). At the same time, the “full moon in March” mentioned by the Greek is a symbol of god’s resurrection. Cave explains that the “full moon in March” also embodies “the start of the new year” and “a time of potential cataclysmic change” (353).

After the song praising Astrea, daughter of Zeus and sister of Dionysus, is

sung by the worshippers, the Syrian enters the house and tells the Hebrew and the Greek that Christ has come back to life and left the tomb:

The Syrian: Mary the mother of James said that they had been to the tomb at daybreak and found that it was empty...At the door stood a man all shining, and cried out that Christ had arisen. [*Faint drum-taps and the faint sound of a rattle*] As they came down the mountain a man stood suddenly at their side; that man was Christ himself. They stooped down and kissed his feet. (304)

There is a need to pay attention to the beat of the drum, tapped perhaps by the worshippers, while the Syrian speaks about Christ's resurrection. By adding the sound of primitive drums to the Christ play, Yeats emphasizes Christianity's barbaric elements. Regarding the sound of the drums in this play, Bradley says "Yeats suggests to an alert audience that Christianity may retain some of the barbarism so obviously excluded from it by the humanist and rational conceptions of the play's two main characters" (224). At the same time, the sound of drums has a close relationship with the music of Japanese traditional plays, especially Noh. The influence of Noh on *The Resurrection* is apparent when Yeats in the stage directions says "*The figure of Christ wearing a recognizable but stylistic mask enters through the curtain*" (307). Furthermore, Balachandra Rajan points to the similarity between *The Resurrection* and Noh saying that this play reaches its climax when the supernatural figure, Christ, appears on stage (156). According to the Kojien dictionary of Japanese, "Netori" is a kind of Japanese traditional flute which is used when phantoms or supernatural figures appear on stage (Horii). Although this flute is mainly used in Kabuki, "Nohkan", the flute used in Noh, plays the same role as the "Netori". Christ appears to the living characters after the music is played.

Therefore, the music in this play also foretells the coming of the god and the new epoch.

The Syrian speaks about Christ’s resurrection, but the Hebrew “will not believe it” because he believes that Christ was just a man (304). However, the Syrian thinks Christ was neither a phantom nor a man (“He is no phantom. We put a great stone over the mouth of the tomb, and the women say that it has been rolled back” (305)). Hearing the Syrian’s statement, the Greek, who believes that Christ was a phantom, refuses to believe (“A hand without bones, without sinews, cannot move a stone” (305)). Suddenly, the Syrian speaks about the transformation of the epoch, as if he was living in the twentieth century and had seen the years after Christ passing by:

The Syrian: What matter if it contradicts all human knowledge?—another Argo seeks another fleece, another Troy is sacked... What is human knowledge?

The Greek: The knowledge that keeps the road from here to Persia free from robbers, that has built the beautiful humane cities, that has made the modern world, that stands between us and the barbarian.

The Syrian: But what if there is something it cannot explain, something more important than anything else?... What if the irrational return? What if the circle begin again? (305)

The Hebrew and the Greek, who have not experienced the coming of Christ and the change of epoch, do not understand what the Syrian says. In this scene, Yeats deliberately made the Syrian speak from a twentieth-century point of view because Yeats was eager to reflect his own ideas in *The Resurrection*. Bloom observes that “It is the Syrian who proclaims the Yeatsian dispensation” (337). The Syrian speaks of the beginning of the new civilization in which

“another Troy is sacked” because Yeats wanted to warn the contemporary audience that the end of the old epoch and the start of the new one are “at hand”. The reason the Syrian despises “human knowledge” is because he lives in the “objective” epoch in which God is stronger than human beings. Therefore, there is a conflict between the Syrian and the other two characters who scold the Syrian because what the Syrian says here sounds blasphemous (“Stop laughing” (305)). Moreover, the Hebrew and the Greek, who remain tied to a different epoch, feel that what the Syrian says is peculiar (“He too has lost control of himself” (305)).

The worshippers suddenly cry, “God has arisen”. Needless to say, the “God” mentioned here is not Christ but Dionysus:

The Greek: [looking out over heads of audience] The worshippers of Dionysus are coming this way again. They have hidden their image of the dead god, and have begun their lunatic cry, “God has arisen! God has arisen!” (306)

The worshippers’ cry concerns their god, Dionysus, but their cry also implies the resurrection of Christ. Again Yeats presented the parallel between Christ and other gods, not only because Yeats’s purpose is to show the parallel between Christ and other deities, but also because “the unseen, but mysteriously experienced arrival of Christ” should be the climax of the play and the climax should add the dramatic intensity to the play (Bradley, 224-225).

After the worshippers suddenly become motionless and turn their eyes on the house where the three characters are, the figure of Christ enters the house. He goes through the wall and the Greek, who regards Christ as a phantom, dares to touch him. Although Christ is bodiless, his heart is beating:

The Greek: It is the phantom of our master... There is nothing here but a phantom, it has no flesh and blood. Because I know the truth I am not afraid. Look, I will touch it... The heart of a phantom is beating! The heart of a phantom is beating!...O Athens, Alexandria, Rome, something has come to destroy you. The heart of a phantom is beating. Man has begun to die. Your words are clear at last, O Heraclitus. God and man die each other's life, live each other's death. (307)

Due to Christ's coming, the “subjective” epoch ends and the “objective” one begins. Although in the “subjective” epoch, human beings were at “fullest expansion” in Ellmann's words, in the “objective” one they have to obey the new god, Christ, and human beings have, from this moment, “begun to die” (Ellmann, 232). After the “objective” epoch in which Christ dominates finishes, the “subjective” one in which human beings are strong will begin again, and so on. Even if the ‘rough beast’ dies later, another Christ will replace him. Yeats's historical view asserts the continuity of the historical cycle.

What Yeats showed in *The Resurrection* is not the immortality of the human soul, but the anxiety and fear produced by the process of historical transformation. By writing the play, Yeats said to the audience that not only the three characters of the play but the audience themselves as well, are in the midst of transformation. Bradley writes “when the play was presented by the Abbey players a few months later in New York, at the Golden Theater, the potentially controversial ideas about Christianity Yeats was sure would be attacked by the Irish reviewers were not even mentioned by an American reviewer, who thought the play piously orthodox.” (226), which proves not all reviewers misread the play as a mere blasphemous Christ play. *The Resurrection* is not simply a Christ play. In the play Yeats warned his contemporaries, as in “The Second Coming”, that the beginning of a new and barbaric time was “at

hand”.

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「再び、^{サークル}歴史が始まる」
—W. B. イェイツ『復活』論

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20世紀にキリストの復活についての戯曲を書くことは、アイルランドの詩人・劇作家イェイツにとってどのような意味があったのだろうか？

イェイツは世界の歴史が「主観性 (subjective)」の時代と「客観性 (objective)」の時代の二つによって成り立つという独自の歴史観を持っていた。古代ギリシア時代やローマ時代を含む「主観性」の時代においては人間性、個人主義が重んじられるのに反し、キリスト教誕生以降の時代を含む「客観性」の時代では非人間性、ないしは神への従属といった全体性が重んじられるとイェイツは考えた。

1921年の詩集『マイケル・ロバーツと踊り子』に収録されている詩『再臨』において、イェイツは「客観性」の時代が再びやってきて、キリストを駆逐するような「ベツヘレムへと歩いてゆく野獣」の姿をした「野蛮な神」の降臨を予言している。これは第一次世界大戦によって、世界が暴力や荒廃に満ちた非人間的な時代へと向かっているのではないか、という彼自身の不安を表明した詩である。

さて『復活』という戯曲についていえば、これは古代エルサレムを舞台としてキリストが磔刑から蘇えり信者の元に再び現れる瞬間を劇化したものであるが、劇の最後で登場人物の一人であるギリシア人が言及しているように「人間が死に始め」、神や宗教が人間性を凌駕して「生き始めた」瞬間の劇化でもある。世界大戦やイェイツの母国であるアイルランドでの内戦が表しているように、人間性が失われつつあった風潮の中で新たな神が復活し「客観性」の時代が再び始まるというメッセージを、イェイツはキリストの復活の物語に託したのではあるまいか。イェイツはこの劇においてキリストをキリスト教徒が描くような唯一神、または「絶対的存在」として描いておらず、むしろディオニュソスをはじ

めとした「異教」の神々（キリスト教徒にとっての）の同類として描いている。先行研究が示しているように、キリスト教の「野蛮性」、ないしはキリスト教と「異教」との親密性がこの劇の至るところでイエイツによって表象されているのは大変示唆的である。その野蛮性、「異教」性は、『再臨』の中の「野蛮な神」が体現するような反文明的で非人間的な「客観性」の時代の到来を暗示している。

だが、その神が死んだとしても新たな「主観性」の時代が始まり、その後には再び「客観性」の時代が巡り来て、時代の循環は永遠に繰り返される——『復活』は絶え間なく持続する歴史の変貌についての戯曲である。

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