

The Second Coming

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre¹
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, 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 Coming² is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi³
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
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
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries⁴ 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?

¹ Spiral, making the figure of a cone

² Second Coming refers to the promised return of Christ on Doomsday, the end of the world; but in Revelation 13 Doomsday is also marked by the appearance of a monstrous beast.

³ Spirit of the World

⁴ 2,000 years; the creature has been held back since the birth of Christ. Yeats imagines that the great heritage of Western European civilization is collapsing, and that the world will be swept by a tide of savagery from the "uncivilized" portions of the globe. As you read this novel, try to understand how Achebe's work is in part an answer to this poem.