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Tennyson’s “Merlin and Vivien” and Yeats’s “The Second Coming”

by WILLIAM A. DAVIS, JR.

Readers of Yeats have posited a number of possible sources for “The Second Coming,” suggesting that the poet may well have mixed hindsight with prophecy in writing his most celebrated apocalyptic poem. Indeed, critics have noted more than a few convincing parallels between Yeats’s vision and those of his predecessors, including Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley, to name just a few. In a related study of Yeats’s debt to Tennyson in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” Gary Sloan argues that reading the early works of both poets evokes in the attentive reader a “déjà vu experience.” That Yeats was well versed in Tennyson is documented in his letters and in Joseph Hone’s account of an interview with Yeats, in which the poet was asked, “Whom did you venerate as a young man, Mr. Yeats?” His answer came without hesitation, ‘Tennyson.’ My purpose in the present study is to point out one instance of Yeats’s poetic expression of veneration for Tennyson and to add the latter’s “Merlin and Vivien” to the list of possible sources for Yeats’s poem.

Both “Merlin and Vivien” and “The Second Coming” are apocalyptic poems, the former prophesying the fall of Camelot and its uncertain future, and the latter announcing the decline of one age and the ascendency of its successor. John D. Rosenberg has commented that in Tennyson’s poem, Merlin’s “fall is both a cause and prophecy of the larger fall of the kingdom,” while James Kincaid

notes that Vivien is "the representative of the new and increasingly threatening natural world," and that her "crude, self-assured vulgarity . . . is about to inherit the earth." Yeats's comments on "The Second Coming" convey similar apocalyptic overtones. In a letter written in 1936, Yeats observed that the poem "was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening . . . I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe, 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned.' " Both poems, then, recount a cataclysmic shift from one epoch to the next, but what is most striking about the two poems when read together is that they recount this shift in remarkably similar ways.

Both poems open with images of falconry to suggest the decline of both traditional order and the relationship shared by sovereign and subject. In Tennyson's poem, Guinevere forestalls her interview with the wily Vivien, saying, "We ride a-hawking with Sir Lancelot. / He hath given us a fair falcon which he trained; / We go to prove it" (ll. 93–95). There is every possibility that, given the fact that Guinevere is not the falcon's trainer, the falcon/falconer relationship will undergo some rigorous testing of its own. Indeed, the evidence of Guinevere's success as a falconer remains rather inconclusive, for we witness only the falcon's flight, not its return to earth. But the implications of the hawking episode transcend the realm of mere sport, for the scene anticipates the testing of Lancelot's allegiance to Arthur: Indeed, the relationship of the knight to his king is essentially that of the falcon to the falconer. And it is interesting to note that Lancelot's actions outside of the Round Table ("round" suggesting the path of the falcon in flight) are often as mysterious as the whereabouts of Guinevere's falcon.

Yeats's use of falconry in the opening lines of "The Second Coming" conveys the same sense of an impending dissolution of established order:

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.

While Tennyson's poem opens with the possibility of dissolution, Yeats's opening lines assert that there is every probability that order will give way to "Mere anarchy." Yeats's assertion thus carries more force, but it is important to note that both poets imagine the potential for disorder in the flight of a falcon.

Yet behind each falcon there stands a falconer; and while it would be a mistake to place too much blame on either one for the loss of a falcon, we can locate the cause of the larger collapse of order in those who are supposed to be in control. In "Merlin and Vivien," the blame for Camelot's fall rests solely in the hands of those powers obliged to protect Camelot from the evil that

threatens from within. When Guinevere inquires of Lancelot, “Know ye the stranger woman?” (meaning Vivien), Lancelot’s response is merely, “Let her be” (l. 127). Lancelot’s seeming indifference is symptomatic of the languor that marks all of Camelot. Tennyson continues:

But Vivien half-forgotten of the Queen
Among her damsel brodering sat, heard, watched
And whispered: through the peaceful court she crept
And whispered: then as Arthur in the highest
Leavened the world, so Vivien in the lowest,
Arriving at a time of golden rest,
And sowing one ill hint from ear to ear,
While all the heathen lay at Arthur’s feet,
And no quest came. but all was joust and play,
Leavened his hall. They heard and let her be.
(ll. 135-44, emphasis added)

When Vivien turns her attention to Merlin, Tennyson summarizes the latter’s musings:

Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy:
He walked with dreams and darkness, and he found
A doom that ever poised itself to fall,
An ever-moaning battle in the mist,
World-war of dying flesh against the life,
Death in all life and lying in all love,
The meanest having power upon the highest,
And the high purpose broken by the worm. (ll. 187-94)

In “The Second Coming,” a similar “Let her be” attitude appears in lines that echo the concluding lines of Merlin’s dark imaginings. Yeats asserts:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Just as Arthur and his knights “joust and play” and wait for a quest to come knocking at the door, and just as Merlin muses on “The meanest having power upon the highest” and does nothing, so do “The best lack all conviction” in Yeats. Similarly, Yeats empowers “the worst” with “passionate intensity” (a phrase that could well describe Vivien’s state of mind), while Tennyson places “power” in the hands of the “meanest.” Thus, both poets envision change fashioned by the “meanest” and the “worst,” while the “highest” and the “best” do nothing to stop the destructive force that is ever gaining momentum.

This destructive force requires some further comment, for in both poems the inevitable dissolution of the present order is neatly imagined through the metaphor of the flood. In Tennyson, Merlin fears throughout

“that wave about to break upon me
And sweep me from my hold upon the world.” (ll. 300-01)

Merlin is describing Vivien (the “meanest,” above), who is compared in an earlier passage to “an enemy that has left / Death in the living waters, and
withdrawn” (ll. 145–46). Yeats’s description of the same force sounds remarkably similar:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

In addition to the obvious echo (“upon the world”), several other parallels surface in this passage. For example, Tennyson’s “Death in the living waters” is here “The blood-dimmed tide,” and Merlin’s fear of the deadly tide is echoed here in the ceremony of innocence being “drowned.” The “living waters” and the “ceremony of innocence” further suggest the sacrament of baptism; in each case, however, the sacrament is rendered ineffectual by the introduction of death, the very thing that baptism is meant to overcome.

A question central to both poems concerns the future after the impending destruction is complete and the old order collapses. Each poem addresses the question in similar, though still rather uncertain, terms. In “Merlin and Vivien,” the drama deals primarily with Vivien’s quest for and eventual acquisition of “power upon the highest.” More specifically, Vivien desires Merlin’s secret knowledge, knowledge that would give her power over Camelot itself or, if employed to its fullest potential, power over the future. What Vivien eventually acquires is the power of words, a charm so mysterious that, as Merlin says, “none can read the text” (l. 679). She wastes no time in using her new power on Merlin himself; whatever subsequent uses she may make of it remain unclear, and the future of Camelot is for the moment undecided.

Yeats’s own prophecy for the future seems equally ambiguous, but there nevertheless exist several parallels to Tennyson’s poem. Yeats’s vision begins with the troubling “vast image out of Spiritus Mundi”:

...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 “shape,” of course, is a sphinx, a mythological entity whose power, like Vivien’s, lies in the mystery of the spoken word. For Yeats, the sphinx represents the new “centre,” the new “falconer”; already the desert birds circle it with more success than their counterparts enjoy in stanza one. While Tennyson’s Vivien does not present as ominous a spectacle as that which Yeats has chosen for his center, the two do hold precisely the same power: Vivien, ostensibly headed for Camelot, now has the ability to realize Merlin’s worst fears by using the charm for evil purposes against members of the Round Table; and Yeats’s sphinx, as it “Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born,” promises death to those who fail to answer its riddles. Both poems conclude, then, with glimpses of an uncertain and unsettling future. What is certain is that, in both cases, whatever hope remains for the future lies in the deciphering of the mysterious spoken word.
Yet the glimpse of the future that each poem affords reveals the same consequence should the riddle go unanswered. To be sure, both poems deal with past war and the likelihood of war. In "Merlin and Vivien," Vivien recalls that she was "born from death" on a battlefield where her father died in battle against the king (l. 44). The threat of war is prophesied in Merlin's thoughts on "World-war of dying flesh against the life" (l. 191). Later, Merlin recalls the Trojan War and its cause in the very charm that Vivien would make her own. Yeats, too, frames his vision by past and future war. Written shortly after World War I, "The Second Coming" (according to Yeats in the letter quoted earlier), "foretold what is happening . . . in Europe" and no doubt "told" what had already happened. The history and prophecy of war are thus central to both poems, and the "present" in each is powerless (it is either "ebb-ing" or lacking "all conviction") to control both past and future.

Finally, another parallel may be found in the setting of "The Second Coming" and in Merlin's allusion to the East in his account of the Trojan War. At the beginning of his story, Merlin tells Vivien, "There lived a king in the most Eastern East"; Merlin then goes on to recount the destruction brought about by Helen's captivity (l. 553). Yeats, too, places his center for impending war in the East, specifically, "somewhere in sands of the desert," and later, "towards Bethlehem." Given Yeats's familiarity with Eastern philosophy, it is not surprising that he includes the East in his "vast image out of Spiritus Mundi"; given his familiarity with Tennyson, it becomes intriguing that he places in the East the rumblings of future war.

Shortly after Tennyson's death in 1892, Yeats was invited to comment on the laureateship in the Bookman. His statement was characteristically brief and sincerely set forth, and he added to it his estimation of Tennyson's Idylls, citing the work as "the greatest romantic poem of the century."10 Twenty-seven or so years later, Yeats wrote "The Second Coming," and there is every reason to believe that he still had Tennyson's masterpiece in mind at the time. Indeed, the parallels between the two poems cannot easily be assigned to coincidence, for their number and arrangement are too close to suggest the wholly independent imaginings of separate minds. To be sure, the two poems do contain differences, and each must therefore remain "original." But the similarities invite a comparison that suggests more than a likelihood of Tennyson's influence on Yeats's apocalyptic poem.

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10. See note 4, above.