Though Yeats felt the effect of the First World War, he paid little attention to it as it did not affect Ireland as an independent country and if a few Irish men fought for England it was not for the love of the British empire. Yeats's attitude towards the war was one of indifference.

"Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
"My country is KiltarGAN Cross,
My countrymen KiltarGAN's poor". 1

The events that followed the Easter Rebellion and the world war worsened the political situation of Ireland. Yeats, who had been working with his System, interpreted in *A Vision*, came to believe that the old civilization had reached its end, that a new era was to begin, and that the new era, by no means, would be a good one. In a letter to George Russell he wrote: "What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the influence of its lunatic faculty of going

against everything it believes England to affirm) to Marxian revolution or Marxian definitions of value in any form. I consider the Marxian criteria of values as in this age the spearhead of materialism and leading to inevitable murder".  

The first draft of *The Second Coming* refers to Lenin's surrender to the Germans:

"The Germans are ( ) now to Russia come Though everyday some innocent has died ( ) & murder".  

As Yeats's letter to George Russell and the first draft of *The Second Coming* show, the Russian revolution, the world war and the Irish situation, worsened by the growing deterioration in the relation between Ireland and England, confirmed his apprehension that the Christian civilization had reached its twenty-eighth phase and a new era was to begin. He widened his vision by using general terms in the final draft:

"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".

---

2. Quoted by J. Stallworthy in *Between the Lines*, p. 17.
The political situation of Ireland, when Yeats was completing *The Second Coming*, was on the verge of explosion. Though the leaders of the Easter Rebellion were killed the Sinn Fein party gathered a greater strength under the leadership of Eamon de Valera; it won seventy-three seats in the election but refused to attend the Parliament or to recognize in any way the authority of the British Parliament. In the meantime another problem arose. The Unionists of Ulster and the Sinn Feiners of the South quarrelled over certain political issues. Lloyd George tried to solve the problem by setting up two parliaments, one for the six Protestant counties of the north-eastern Ireland, the other for the rest of Ireland. There were provisions for common action and ultimate combination. Northern Ireland set up its parliament under the act, but the Sinn Fein party refused to have anything to do with the scheme, broke into open rebellion, declared Ireland independent and elected a president of the Irish republic and a representative body called Dáil Éirinn. Without considering the consequences, Lloyd George poured troops into Ireland, and when most of the Irish police resigned, he raised an auxiliary force (called Black and Tans as they wore black berets and khaki uniforms) that consisted of demobilized army officers. The Black and Tans launched a campaign of systematic reprisals which culminated in setting fire to the city of Cork.
The poem *Reprisals*, though written on the death of Robert Gregory, describes the brutalities of the Black and Tans:

"Half-drunk or whole mad soldiery
Are murdering your tenants there;
Where may new-married women sit
And suckle children now? Armed men
May murder them in passing by
Nor law nor parliament take heed".  

Misdeeds on both sides (Irish and British) pained Yeats greatly; he perceived that his dream to bring the unity of culture through heroic ideas would not come true. He wrote to Olivia Shakespear on April 9, 1921: "I am writing a series of poems (Thought Suggested by the Present State of the World or some such name). I have written two and there may be many more. They are not philosophical but simple and passionate, a lamentation over lost peace and lost hope". The poem referred to in the letter was published in the *Dial*, under the title *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* to show its link, I think, with *The Second Coming* that was composed in 1919.

Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen may he divided into three parts: the first part describes the sorrow for the decline of culture, the second the brutality of the Black and Tans and misdeeds of Irish volunteers and leaders and, the third the vision of the evil. The first two stanzas of section 1, by a comparison between the glorious period of Greece and the glorious period of Ireland, express Yeats's remorse for the loss of "lovely ingenious things" which "seemed sheer miracle to the multitude." Yeats had thought that the Irish culture - "We too had many pretty toys" - would continue uninhibited because the "worst rogues and rascals" seemed to have been extinct. But, as the Greek civilization died at the hands of the Persian intruders, the golden period of Ireland (which produced men like Wolfe Tone, Burke, Swift, Parnell and John O'Leary) has also come to its end.

"Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free". 1

The Irish men of letters had hoped to unite the world under the rule of a philosophy, so laboriously evolved, but, now, 

they find that they are "weasel fighting in a hole". The theme of chaos further develops in the loss of all the good things created by men in the past:

"No work can stand,
Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent
On master-work of intellect or hand,
No honour leave its mighty monument ( J’ >
Has but one comfort left: all triumph would
But break upon his ghostly solitude".  

In the next stanza, even this comfort that "all triumph would / But break upon his ghostly solitude" is doubted, and the attitude is at once stoic and romantic.

"But is there any comfort to be found?
Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say"?

The reference to the heroic Athens at war suggests to the death of the present age. The idea of the dying heroic age continues in the second section. Lois Fuller's Chinese dancers are whirled around by "a dragon of air" and this scene reminds Yeats of the Platonic year which "whirls out new right and wrong" and "whirls in the old instead". All men, the poet concludes, are helpless dancers in the cycle of history. The dragon of Lois Fuller's painting is linked with the "dragon-ridden days" of the first section to convey the idea that Irishmen, like the Chinese dancers, have created "a dragon of air, that has fallen among them and

"Whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path".

In the third section, the swan, the symbol of the soul, could have made Yeats hopeful if its breast were "thrust

---

1. "Even before Plato that collective image of man dear to Stoic and Epicurean alike, the moral double of bronze or marble athlete, had been invoked by Anaxagoras when he declared that thought and not the warring opposites created the world. At that sentence the heroic life, passionate fragmentary men, all that had been imagined by great poets and sculptors began to pass away, and instead of seeking noble antagonists, imagination moved towards divine man the ridiculous devil". A Vision, pp. 272-73.

out in pride" in defiance of the present crisis. But it is
not so. The swan "has leaped into the desolate heaven "and
the idea that the present state of Ireland is beyond
correction, is reiterated.

"O but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed".¹

The fourth section by reference to the "weasel's twist, the
weasel's tooth" is closely connected with the first section
and the repetition of the weasel imagery affirms the
dominance of people's animal life, and, therefore, Yeats
invites all the people to mock at the great, the wise, the
good and, at last, at the mockers themselves, as all the
values of life are at stake.

"Mock mockers after that
That would not lift a hand may be
To help good, wise or great
To bar that foul storm out, for we
Traffic in mockery".²

¹ Collected Poems, p. 235.
² Ibid., p. 236.
The poem ends with the vision of the evil. The images of violence accumulate and whirl together to dissolve. At first come the handsome riders who run round and round in their courses to vanish; then come Herodias' daughters with a sudden blast of dusty wind and by the time the dust of the wind settles there appears the evil.¹

"But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks".²

1. Yeats in the "Notes" writes: "The country people see at times certain apparitions whom they name now "fallen angels", now "ancient inhabitants of the country", and describe as riding at whiles "with flowers upon the heads of the horses". I have assumed in the sixth poem that these horsemen now that the times worsen, give way to worse. My last symbol, Robert Artisson, was an evil spirit much run after in Kilkenny at start of the fourteenth century. Are not those who travel in the whirling dust also in the Platonic year"? Collected Poems, pp. 534-35.

Professor A.G. Stock remarks that "taken as a continuous meditation the six parts all but lose coherence." But it is the imagery of the poem that unites it into a coherent whole. The first section is the statement of the loss of the Irish tradition and culture. There is not only violence and murder but also the degeneration of the people into something base. The second section is the progression of the first section; "the dragon-ridden days" of the first section has a close connection with "the dragon" of the second section. The third section is the search for a unity in the chaotic world. The fourth section again comes back to the Irish scene where the people have so much degenerated that what was a thing of shame for them in the past, has become a source of pleasure; they "shriek with pleasure" if they show "the weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth". Men who had earlier "traffic in the grasshoppers or bees" (section 1) degrade themselves by having "traffic in mockery" (section V). The sixth section recapitulates the first section with its imagery of "violence upon the roads: violence of horses". The poem, therefore, runs like a cycle with the central image of man's degeneration into something evil.

The war against the British rule continued till 1921, when the Prime Minister intervened and persuaded the Sinn Fein leaders to negotiate with him. Arthur Griffith led the delegation, but Eamon de Valera refused to be one of the party and privately directed the members not to sign any document without the approval of the cabinet of Dublin. Griffith and Collins had to come many times to Dublin for consultation and, at last, being desperate they signed the treaty which gave Ireland (excluding Ulster) a dominion status like that of Canada. The cabinet split over the decision to sign the treaty and, thereby, to recognize the separation of Ulster. The most objectionable provision in the treaty was the Oath of Allegiance to the king.* De Valera and his group refused to accept this solution. The enmity between the followers of the Pro-Treaty group and the Anti-Treaty group grew violent. To avoid a civil war a pact was made between De Valera and Collins that the parties should not oppose in the constituencies but before the pact could come into force,

* It ran as follows: "I will be faithful to H.M. King George V, his heirs and successors by law, in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain and her adherence to and membership of the group of nations forming the British Commonwealth of Nations". Quoted by Terence de Vere White, in his book Ireland, p. 81.
the Civil War broke out. Arthur Griffith died suddenly on
12, August and ten days later, Michael Collins was shot
through the head. The National Army, too, did not remain
silent and many Anti-Treaty leaders were executed.

Commenting on the Civil War Yeats wrote to Olivia
Shakespear.

Oct. 9, 1922
82, Merrion Square.

My dear Olivia,

I spent the summer correcting proofs and writing
a series of poems called Meditations in Time of Civil War
which I shall send to the Mercury. Now I am busy writing
out the System, ......

The situation here is very curious ... a revolt
against democracy by a small section. Under the direction
of an Erskine Childers they burn houses that they may force
the majority to say, "It is too expensive to remain Free
State, let us turn republican". At any rate that is believed
to be the policy. I have met some of the ministers who more
and more seem too sober to meet the wildness of these enemies;
and everywhere one notices a drift towards Conservatism,
perhaps towards Autocracy. I always knew that it would come,
but not that it would come in this tragic way. One wonders what prominent man will live through it. One meets a minister at dinner, passing his armed guard on the doorstep, and one feels no certainty that one will meet him again. We are entering on the final and most dreadful stage. Perhaps there is nothing so dangerous to a modern state, when politics take the place of theology, as a bunch of martyrs. A bunch of martyrs (1916) were the bomb and we are living in the explosion ......

Yours
W.B. Yeats".

As the letter shows Meditations in Time of Civil War is a meditation on the contemporary Irish scene. The dream of heroic Ireland and the unity of culture, Yeats realizes, has remained merely a dream and it cannot come into reality despite all his efforts. The poem consists of seven sections that express various moods of the poet.

The first section takes up, to quote Professor Stock, "the same theme of the ruined ancestral houses but by this time the ruin is no longer an impending horror,

but an accomplished fact".\textsuperscript{1} In these ancestral houses (of the eighteenth century, the period of the unity of culture in Ireland) there were noble and heroic men who lived in their own way and under whose patronage artists and poets continued to produce works of art.

"Some violent bitter man, some powerful man Called architect and artist, in that they, Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone The sweetness that all longed for night and day, The gentleness none there had ever known".\textsuperscript{2}

Now those men are no more and their inheritors are a contrast to them:

"But when the master's buried mice can play And may be the great-grandson of that house For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse".\textsuperscript{3}

The recurrence of "what" in the subsequent stanzas stresses the change that has taken place in Ireland; the glorious Irish tradition is meaningless for the men of present Ireland.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} A.G. Stock, \textit{W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought}, p. 183.
\item \textsuperscript{2} \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 225.
\item \textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 225-26.
\end{itemize}
"What if those things the greatest of mankind
Consider most magnify, or to bless
But take our greatness with our bitterness". ¹

Sections II, III and IV define the poet's place in the crisis of values. The tower with a chamber at the top, reached by a winding stair, is the place where "the symbolic rose can break in flower", the rose being the symbol of life and creation of art. The third section is a meditation upon the creation and nature of art, the means by which Yeats had aspired to bring the unity of culture in Ireland. Using Sato's sword as the symbol of "changeless work of art", he reiterates the viewpoint that only art and literature can survive the troubled period and give the poet the satisfaction

" that after me
My bodily heirs may find
To exalt a lonely mind,
Befitting emblems of adversity". ²

But in the fourth section he doubts if his descendants will have the vigorous mind in this tumult and, therefore, he accepts the worst that is to come.

2. Ibid., p. 229.
"May this laborious stair and this stark tower
Become a roofless ruin that the owl
May build in the cracked masonry and cry
Her desolation to the desolate sky".¹

The fourth section ends with the awareness that the present
gyre of history is going to complete its cycle and that the
tower will remain the monument of the poet and his colleagues,
the last flowers of the heroic Irish tradition.

"And I that count myself most prosperous
Seeing that love and friendship are enough
For an old neighbour's friendship chose the house
And decked and altered it for a girl's love,
And know whatever flourish and decline
These stones remain their monument and mine".²

In the subsequent sections Yeats meditates on the disintegration
of Ireland caused by the civil war. He is pleased with neither
the Republican nor the National Army; both to him are the
destroyers of all that is good in Ireland.

"I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain
A pear-tree broken by the storm

2. Ibid., p. 229.
I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
To silence the envy in my thought,
And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream". 1

Discord, uncertainty, disorder, apathy and disintegration impel the poet to seek for unity and harmony. The bees*, the symbols of sweetness and harmony, had previously given him the hope for a happy new era and, therefore, again, he invokes them to come and build in the empty house of the stare.

"We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart’s grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare". 2

The seventh section runs parallel to the later part of 'section V', What The Thunder Said, of The Waste Land. The protagonist of The Waste Land sits silently and looks at the falling London Bridge; and Yeats, too, sees the same nightmarish "phantoms of hatred and of the

* Cf. In the Seven Woods.
coming emotiness" as the bees, this time, do not come to bring sweetness and harmony.

And yet Yeats does not accept the defeatist attitude as he knows that such threats to the tradition can do no permanent harm and men, like him, who have faith in the ancient Irish way of life, may preserve it if they be content with tragic joy and "the half-read wisdom of daemonic images".

"I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
In something that all others understand or share;
But 0 ! ambitious heart, had such a prove drawn forth
A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images
Suffice the ageing man as once growing boy". 1