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**Article:**

Callaghan, M. (2015) *Forms of conflict: Byron's influence on Yeats*. English, 64 (245). 81 - 98. ISSN 0013-8215

<https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efv008>

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## Forms of Conflict: Byron's Influence on Yeats

From Yeats's earliest to his latest poetry, Byron looms large in Yeats's imagination. It is Byron's poetry of conflict, formal dexterity, political outspokenness, and, most crucially, his poetry of personality that offered a compelling model for Yeats, the aristocratically public poet. This article argues for the significance of Byron's influence on Yeats's poetry. Edward Larrissy and Steven Matthews have suggested the influence of Byron on Yeats, and Yeats himself avows the same to H. J. C. Grierson in a letter.<sup>1</sup> Yet there has been a relative dearth of studies that focus on their poetic kinship. This article shows that the Yeats-Byron bond, present from Yeats's early to his later poetry, involves a shared double manner, celebratory and mournful, where both poets fuse sardonic urbanity with imaginative felicity.

Yeats's Romantic credentials have been long established. His elegy for lost time, 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' proclaimed '[w]e were the last romantics',<sup>2</sup> (41) defining himself, if somewhat inaccurately, against that 'filthy modern tide' denounced in 'The Statues' (29). Yet the nature of Yeats's Romanticism is largely explored in the light of his self-anointed 'strong ghost[s]' ('A Prayer for my Son', 1), Shelley and Blake. George Bornstein's study compellingly showed the lines of influence stretching from Shelley to Yeats, and Harold Bloom's Yeats announced his agreement with Yeats's assessment of his career in *Essays and Introductions*, where Yeats wrote: 'When in middle life I looked back I found that he [Shelley] and not Blake, whom I had studied more and with more approval, had shaped my life'.<sup>3</sup> Yet Byron looms in the background, the Romantic poet who offered Yeats a model of strength. Yeats could draw power from an alliance with the older poet who claimed himself 'born for opposition'.<sup>4</sup> After reading H. J. C. Grierson's collection of essays,<sup>5</sup> Yeats wrote to him: 'I am particularly indebted to you for your essay on Byron. My own verse has more and more adopted – seemingly without any will of mine – the syntax and vocabulary of common

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, letter to H. J. C. Grierson, 21 Feb. 1926, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 710.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1957), p. 490. All quotations from Yeats's poetry (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Prometheus Unbound', *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 424.

<sup>4</sup> Lord George Gordon Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: Murray, 1973-1994), 4, p. 82. Abbreviated hereafter as BLJ.

<sup>5</sup> H. J. C. Grierson, *The Background of English Literature and Other Collected Essays and Addresses* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1925).

personal speech'.<sup>6</sup> Grierson's essay, 'Lord Byron: Arnold & Swinburne' seems to have been of particular interest to Yeats as Grierson emphasises Byron's gift as an orator, praising him for the accents of passionate speech found in the poetry. Yet Yeats learned far more from Byron than this suggests, and his sense (expressed in the same letter) that Byron was hardly a great poet, conceals a powerful engagement with his poetry, and one that had been present in his work long before this letter. It is Byron's poetry of conflict, formal dexterity, political outspokenness, and, most crucially, his poetry of personality, that offered a compelling model for Yeats, the aristocratically public poet.

Edward Larrissy proposed Byron as a vital model for Yeats, identifying 'the Byronic "masculine" style' present in the younger poet's work.<sup>7</sup> Larrissy's *Yeats the Poet* offers suggestive readings of Yeats's poetry, revealing the interactions between Yeats's and Byron's work, particularly with reference to Yeats's later use of the ottava rima. Steven Matthews argues for the importance of the exchange between Yeats and Grierson to suggest that the latter's identification of Byron as a seminal poet of passionate personal speech opened out possibilities for the poet in his late work.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Carlos Baker briefly suggests the use of Byron for Yeats, writing, like Matthews, that Yeats saw 'Byron as a model' following Grierson's letter.<sup>9</sup> Yet this remains under explored in criticism, with a relative dearth of studies exploring Byron's influence on Yeats. In this article, I will draw from Yeats's poetry from 1913 to demonstrate the continuing presence of Byron in Yeats's poetry from his early

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<sup>6</sup> *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 710.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Larrissy, *Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> 'Up until reading Grierson on Byron, then, Yeats seems to have uninterestedly thought of him as an example of powerful personality in art, but not as significant in that respect as his old mentors Shelley and Blake. After reading Grierson on Byron, however, Byron comes to represent a different kind of possibility, and – perhaps even more importantly for the work of late Yeats – a different kind of formal expression, or valuing of particular ways of integrating the voice of personal experience into poetry'. Steven Matthews, 'Yeats's 'Passionate Improvisations': Grierson, Eliot, and the Byronic Intergations of Yeats's Later Poetry', *English* 49 (2000), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Carlos Baker, *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 152.

to his late work. Grierson's letter did not see Yeats begin to use Byron as a model, but it made him conscious of the connection between the poets, and the ways in which Byron had been, and would continue to be, significant. From 'September 1913' to 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', it is Byron's poetic authority that provides the most compelling model for Yeats to draw on as Byron, like Yeats, finds strength through the created and creative self.

Political engagement and conflict becomes a moral standard in the poetry of Byron and Yeats. Despite Yug Mohit Chaudry's sense that tracing the alignment between Romantic poetry and Yeats's poetry can cause 'a sanitised and "international" reading of Yeats as "the last Romantic"',<sup>10</sup> the relationship between Byron and Yeats suggests how Yeats would formulate his sense of alienation from Catholic Ireland in favour of the Protestant past. Like Byron, Yeats sought to create a figure of the poet who had, like Milton, 'fallen on evil days, / On evil days though fallen' (Paradise Lost VII. 24-25).<sup>11</sup> 'September 1913', in its passionate denunciations of the Irish Catholic middle class, shows Yeats setting up his enemies, aligning himself carefully with the dead even as the past seems beyond poetic reclamation. As Helen Vendler shows, 'instead of appending an impersonally voiced refrain to the completed ballad stanza (as is usual), Yeats incorporates the refrain (by means of its rhyme-words) into the body of the stanza as an inseparable part of the lyric speaker's own outburst'.<sup>12</sup>

What need you, being come to sense,  
 But fumble in a greasy till  
 And add the halfpence to the pence  
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until

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<sup>10</sup> Yug Mohit Chaudry, *Yeats, the Irish Literary Revival and the Politics of Print* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost VII. 24-25*, John Milton: *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 269.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 115.

You have dried the marrow from the bone?

For men were born to pray and save:

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,

It's with O'Leary in the grave.

(‘September 1913’, 1-8)<sup>13</sup>

Yeats uses the ballad form, but as a self-consciously literary production rather than as an inclusive street-ballad. Reaching back to his Romantic predecessors, Yeats has Wordsworth, Shelley, and Scott as exemplars of the form, yet it is Byron's firm sense of political selfhood rather than Shelley's protean and self-reflexive ballads to which Yeats cleaves. The eight line stanzas seem reminiscent of Byronic ottava rima translated from iambic pentameter into clipped tetrameter lines where the comic brio of his Romantic predecessor gives way to magisterial condemnation. Refusing the snapped shut comfort of the closing couplet of ottava rima, Yeats alters the rhyme scheme as well as the metre from Byron's abababcc to his own ababcdcd. Opening with an accusatory yet rhetorical question, Yeats offers an image of the cold, grey, and dry people that he had reviled in Eliot's poetry in his introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse.<sup>14</sup> Vendler's sense of the lyric speaker's outburst comes to the fore as the refrain growls its rebuke. Lacking the ottava rima couplet, Yeats brings it as close as possible by using the ‘g’ of ‘gone’ and ‘grave’ to offer a phonetic and semantic identification of the two words. These people, fumbling in their greasy tills, praying and saving without grander aim, become the antitheses of the heroic Cuchulain figures Yeats would celebrate elsewhere in his work, as ‘For men were born to pray and save’ drips with

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<sup>13</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973). All quotations from Yeats's poetry will be taken from this edition.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Eliot has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry’. W. B. Yeats, ‘Introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse’, quoted from *W. B. Yeats: Selected Criticism and Prose*, ed. with intro and notes A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan/Macmillan, 1980), p. 223.

sneering irony. The myriad 'You' figures addressed fade away in the face of the singular O'Leary, representative of the Romantic Ireland remembered by the poet.

This sense of the past as passed away while the poet laments its loss is common in Yeats's poetry. After addressing the idealised heroism characterised by aristocratic sprezzatura, Yeats begins his own rhetorical assault on the reader.

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
 The grey wing upon every tide;  
 For this that all that blood was shed,  
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
 And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
 All that delirium of the brave?  
 Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

('September 1913', 17-24)

Yeats deliberately makes the reader consider his Romantic heritage by his adoption of the phrase 'Was it for this', even as they consider the contemporary political situation. This is not a move to leaven or sidestep the combative overtones. Rather, these are magnified by Yeats's subtle gesture towards his literary ancestors. Simon Bainbridge observes that, of the Romantics, Wordsworth was probably the first to use the formula, beginning his first draft of *The Prelude* with the phrase in October 1798 in Goslar.<sup>15</sup> Despite Yeats's occasionally disparaging remarks about Wordsworth,<sup>16</sup> the older poet offered Yeats an example of a powerful political voice. Shelley described Wordsworth, in his early career, as a singer of

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Bainbridge, "'Was it for this [. . .]?'": The Poetic Histories of Southey and Wordsworth', *Romanticism on the Net* 32-33 (2003/2004), URL: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/009258ar>

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Yeats, 'Anima Hominis', *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 342.

‘Songs consecrate to truth and liberty’ (‘To Wordsworth’, 12).<sup>17</sup> Yeats’s compelling use of the phrase reappropriates the Romantic power of poetic protest as the rhetoric demands a response, setting up a conflict that sets the emotional power of the poem in motion. The ‘delirium of the brave’ gives way to the shivering venality of middle class living. Naming the key players of romantic patriotism, a tradition into which Wordsworth, O’Leary, and the poet himself fit, Yeats personalises history, remembering not their ideals,<sup>18</sup> but their passionate personalities as he marvels how ‘They weighed so lightly what they gave’. (30) Politics is always personal for Yeats as he insistently conflates both spheres in the poetry.

This sense that the political is the personal is one that Byron forwarded with satiric precision and menace in his dedication to Don Juan. As Jerome McGann writes, ‘Byron began Don Juan as a literary and political manifesto to his age’,<sup>19</sup> and this suggests the intimately bound quality of the personal and the poetic in the poem. Taking aim at the Lake School, Byron reduces Wordsworth from poetic authority to a basic and begrudged member of the pantheon alongside Southey and Coleridge. Milton becomes an emblem from the past that Byron gains strength by as he draws parallels between his predecessor and himself. Where Yeats leaves the reader with the sense that it is the Catholic middle class who are greasy fumlbers in the till where he is the heroic mourner of O’Leary, Byron makes himself a heroic inheritor of Milton with the Lake School cast as the mercantile class. Still more bombastic than Yeats at this stage in his career, Byron sets up his confrontational Dedication with a ‘you’, but the ‘you’ is the beleaguered Southey who has ‘turn’d out a Tory’ (‘Dedication’, I. 3) in another

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<sup>17</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Chaudry, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 57.

‘common case’.<sup>20</sup> (‘Dedication’, I. 4) Smirking and snarling in equal measure, Byron transforms ‘Poet-laureate’ into an insult. Archly mocking the newly minted status of the Lakers as establishment figures, he smoothly moves to an appraisal of their political and personal failings even as he accepts their status as poets with a shrug:

I would not imitate the petty thought,  
 Nor coin my self-love to so base a vice,  
 For all the glory your conversion brought,  
 Since gold alone should not have been its price.  
 You have your salary—was’t for that you wrought?  
 And Wordsworth has his place in the Excise.  
 You’re shabby fellows—true—but poets still,  
 And duly seated on the immortal hill.

(‘Dedication’, VI. 41-48)

The final couplet barely mitigates the excoriating judgement contained in the preceding six lines. Holding himself up against the Lakers, the second line stresses the words ‘coin’, ‘self-love’, ‘base,’ and ‘vice’ as Byron makes his antagonists squirm. Recalling Judas’ betrayal of Christ, Byron suggests that pecuniary concerns are the sole reason for their political decision to ‘turn Tory’. By seeking to destroy the ethical power of Wordsworth’s poetry, Byron strips him of the cultivated moral authority of his work, which must, as for Shelley in his complex poems to Wordsworth, undermine his poetic power. Modelling himself on the Miltonic embattled self, Byron praises Milton for a virtue he considers his own. Contemporary critics had figured Byron and Wordsworth as competitors: John Wilson writes of Byron and Wordsworth in such a way that implies that the two poets substituted pistols for pens: ‘He

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<sup>20</sup> Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed., introd. and notes by Jerome McGann, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). All quotations from Byron’s poetry will be taken from this edition.



[Byron] came into competition with Wordsworth upon his own ground, and with his own weapons; and in the first encounter he vanquished and overthrew him'.<sup>21</sup> The combative Byronic self overthrows the Lake School to gain an ungainsayable authority over his competitors. Byron wrote to Murray in 1813, 'I never was consistent in anything but my politics',<sup>22</sup> and this becomes the difference between self and other underscored in Byron's attack on the Lakers. There can be no plea to the version of posterity beloved by the Lakers. With apparent relish, Byron shows that the whole man will be judged, and Time, which exonerated Milton's wrongs, will condemn Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, who have, in Byron's mind, sold their souls to line their purses. Like Yeats's view of the Catholic middle class, the mercantile attitude of the Lake School, denotes the poverty of their enemies' notions. Gaining force from his attack on the Lakers, Byron turns his attention to Castlereagh, the 'tinkering slave-maker' and 'Erin's yet green wounds' ('Dedication', 12. 111 and 125). Ireland, which had been a key political issue for Byron in his brief foray into the House of Lords,<sup>23</sup> offers another connection between Byron the speech maker and Yeats the senator. Byron insists, misleadingly, on the 'honest simple verse' ('Dedication', 130) he dedicates to Robert Southey, his dark double as Jerome McGann convincingly writes.<sup>24</sup> For Byron, there is, as Ezra Pound puts it, 'no life save when the swords clash'.<sup>25</sup> Conflict based on authority, both political and personal, becomes the standard for both poets.

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<sup>21</sup> John Wilson, from his unsigned review, *Blackwood's Magazine* (June 1817), Byron: The Critical Heritage, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> BLJ 3. p. 204

<sup>23</sup> "I only addressed the House twice [in fact three times], and made little impression. They told me that my manner of speaking was not dignified enough for the Lords, but was more calculated for the Commons. I believe it was a Don Juan kind of speech. The two occasions were, the Catholic Question, and" (I believe he said) "some Manufacturing affair." Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Revised with a New Preface*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. ([1824] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 229. His most important speech on Irish Catholic Emancipation was given on April 21 1812.

<sup>24</sup> Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ezra Pound, 'Sestina: Altaforte', *Collected Shorter Poems* [1952] (London: Faber, 1984), p. 28.

But conflict and sword play are not the only places where Byron's and Yeats's poetry meet. Both poets play on belatedness as they explore the sense, with tragic, darkly comic and ironic tones, that they have outlived their own ages. Despite Byron's relative youthfulness at his death, his work in his mid-thirties reveals a similar preoccupation with the lost world of his youth that Yeats's late poetry so often laments. In Canto XI of *Don Juan*, Byron spends 11 stanzas remembering the Regency, the period when last he was in England. These English cantos show Byron's epic reaching its climax as he approaches home territory, as Peter W. Graham observes: 'Those readers who persevere, though, are rewarded with the great pleasure of watching Byron's talent exert itself in what John Bull rightly identified as its ultimate arena, on home ground where the poet's cosmopolitan intelligence makes fun, sense, and myth of that small world best known to him'.<sup>26</sup> Vacillating between comic and stricken tones, Byron runs through a large emotional range as memory comes to comfort and to torment the ageing poet.

'Where is the world,' cries Young, 'at eighty? Where  
 The world in which a man was born?' Alas!  
 Where is the world of eight years past? 'Twas there —  
 I look for it—'tis gone, a Globe of Glass!  
 Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere  
 A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.  
 Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,  
 And dandies, all are gone on the wind's wings.

(*Don Juan* XI. 76: 601-08)

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<sup>26</sup> Peter W. Graham, *'Don Juan' and Regency England* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 159.

The striking image of the globe of glass returns us to his earlier stanza in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

Even as a broken mirror, which the glass  
 In every fragment multiplies; and makes  
 A thousand images of one that was,  
 The same, and still the more, the more it breaks;  
 And thus the heart will do which not forsakes,

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 33: 289-93)

The broken mirror becomes in his later poem a globe of glass, 'cracked, shivered, vanished'. Where the image of the broken mirror revealed a broken and yet poetically generative self, and also recalls the lost loved one, the cracked globe of glass is scarcely gazed on, ignored for so long as to suddenly and silently change. Byron's list of 'Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings', underscores the ephemerality of the world which he had known so well, a world vanished from view forever. The final couplet refuses Byron's typical undercutting or mocking gesture. Here, it emphasises the transient nature of worldly power, almost against the will of the poet, who is shipwrecked away from all he once knew. Steadying itself as the stanzas progress, Byron finds relief in a flippant listing of all those passed from view, from Napoleon to Brummel, the Lady Carolines to Joanna Southcote, bearing witness to his survivor's sense that 'history is more than an awful potent and looming spectre pointing to the void. It is also an astonishing aggregate of criss-crossing particulars, names, individuals'.<sup>27</sup> Byron parades his Brummels and Lady Franceses through his poetry, appraising them and mocking their shades. This attempt to create levity makes him seem exiled not only from his country but from his proper age. Yet, with typical self-reflexivity,

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<sup>27</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'The Same Rehearsal of the Past: Byron and the Aesthetics of History and Culture', *Rethinking British Romantic History*, ed. Porscha Fermanis and John Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 212.

Byron recognises the affecting quality haunting even his most comic lines, and offers a sombre yet urbane close to the reminiscence.

But 'Carpe diem,' Juan, 'Carpe, carpe!'

To-morrow sees another race as gay

And transient, and devoured by the same harpy.

'Life's a poor player,'—then 'play out the play,

Ye villains!' and above all keep a sharp eye

Much less on what you do than what you say:

Be hypocritical, be cautious, be

Not what you seem, but always what you see.

(Don Juan XI. 86: 681-88)

Alluding to *Macbeth* and *Henry IV, Part One*, Byron draws attention to the metatheatricity of some of Shakespeare's finest plays. *Macbeth* represents the pinnacle of Shakespeare's tragic soliloquies where *Henry IV* acts as a more boisterous foil. As Anne Barton points out, in support of G. Wilson Knight, one must notice 'Byron's habit of appropriating for himself, whether in earnest or in jest, the feelings of various figures in the plays'.<sup>28</sup> Byron does not allude to so much as appropriate the voices and feelings of Shakespeare's heroes, and the combination of these contrapuntal modes allows Byron to create an ambiguous tone. The advice, though ironically offered, seems also apt. Juan must learn to fit into the scene if he is to succeed on this new stage. It is the narrator who will record a world not his own, as he wistfully and protectively recalls a past lost forever outside the tantalising but finally inadequate gift of memory. The advice he offers to Juan serves to place Juan's exploits centre-stage, suggesting that the narrator has subtly become less important to the poem than he had hitherto been. He becomes Polonius, not Hamlet, as he advises without taking centre

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Barton, 'Byron and Shakespeare', *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 231.

stage. Yet this reduction becomes the painful counter-current in the lines as the past is lost, and the future belongs to the young, to the newly heroic, to Juan.

This sense of being marooned away from one's own time is the troubled heart of 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited'. Yeats, as many critics have pointed out, was a master mythologiser.<sup>29</sup> Mythology, of self and world, had been created by Yeats, but now it seems that it revolved around an age that is almost past, with the continued whispered implication that when Yeats himself dies, then this golden period will be lost. Yeats constructs himself in his poetry, and creates a company to which he belongs.<sup>30</sup> By the time of his mature poetry he was established as Ireland's major poet. But Yeats complicates this status by being his own critic, questioning, critiquing and complicating his presentation of himself among his company. In doing so, Yeats found himself vacillating between two poles; the former his longing for a community of 'We Irish' and the latter the sense of a 'ghostly solitude' that haunts his work. The speaker refers to the gallery of portraits as 'an ambush' ('The Municipal Gallery Revisited', I. 2); the faces around the room are figures known to Yeats, their figures immortalised in postures that seem incongruous, or hauntingly reflective of his personal experience. Gazing at the portraits of the dead is affecting as Yeats becomes what Yvor Winters calls 'an old man looking at the portraits of his dead friends',<sup>31</sup> but, like in Don Juan, Yeats makes his pathos out of the painful consciousness that he is no longer living in the Ireland of his youth.

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<sup>29</sup> For an example, see Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Duckworth, 1961), p. 233.

<sup>30</sup> 'He liked to regard himself as a member of a tribe'. See Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery: Critical & Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English* (Chicago, IL: Alan Swallow, 1967), p. 227.

... 'This is not,' I say,  
 'The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland  
 The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.'

('The Municipal Gallery Revisited', II. 10-12)

This avowal contains a double-edged realisation. It celebrates the creativity and transfiguring nature of art, but it also mourns the passing of a reality that was palpable, a reality that cannot be retrieved wholly by the artist. Though poetry might create myth, it cannot preserve reality. This moment of loss, as the poet recognises the irrecuperable nature of memory and the impossibility of expressing his personal history, sparks the breakdown at the start of the following stanza.

Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,  
 My heart recovering with covered eyes;  
 Wherever I had looked I had looked upon  
 My permanent or impermanent images:

('The Municipal Gallery Revisited', III. 17-19)

Yeats struggles to recover himself before our eyes as the repetition of words and phrases suggests the difficulty of expressing strong emotion. Yeats sees not the real men and women, but images of the artist, images that sought to transfigure his friends into subjects, his time and life into his art. The speaker seems to forget, for one moment, the presence of his audience, but, typically, the apparent crisis shows Yeats at his most artistically controlling. The patterning is performed as Yeats's soft sibilance lulls the first line into a slow sinking down. The patterning of the second line where 'recovering' looks forward to 'covered', followed by the repetition of 'I had looked' in the third line, and the symmetry of 'permanent' and 'impermanent' in the fourth quoted line, show Yeats marshalling his words in service of embodying a grief distinguished by its stately quality. The silent pun with the

‘heart recovering with covered eyes’ suggests the heart as recovering memory; all is not lost. This is a brief defeat of the speaker at the hands of time, loss, and memory, and its brevity allows for the recovery which strengthens the poem’s resolve to centre the self. Despite an Oisín-like posture of exile from his own time, Yeats will fight towards an assertion of the significance of the lost world in which he lived. This exilic pose recalls Byron’s poetry of exile, where his speakers seem forever marooned away from home, for better and worse. Here, Yeats’s dignified crisis shows him earning the affirmation of the final stanza through the suffering experienced at this juncture in the poem.

Though exiled from his own time and fearing that there can be no more ‘approved patterns of women or of men’ (‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, IV. 31), Yeats mingles pride with pain as his poetry, like Shelley’s ‘dome of many-coloured glass’ (Adonais 53. 462),<sup>32</sup> offers a multi-hued perspective on the aged man’s glory and pain. Daniel Albright reflects on Yeats’s self-fashioning imagination as a tragic isolation: ‘He finds what he has painfully sought, what he has painstakingly constructed, is nothing but an image of his own simple perishing face’.<sup>33</sup> There is a splendour to the isolation of the position of the Yeatsian speaker which is not fully grasped by Albright’s analysis of Yeats’s poetic pattern. The Yeatsian speaker is not deceived as to the nature of his construction, making the solitary nature of his endeavour more ambiguous than Albright implies with his ‘nothing but’ summary. The penultimate stanza reveals Yeats’s ascent from seeming on his mediaeval knees at the start of the previous stanza, into a psychic union with his fellow ‘last romantics’:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang

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<sup>32</sup> Shelley, *Major Works*, p. 545.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Albright, ‘Introduction’, *W. B. Yeats, The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright, Everyman ([1990] London: J. M. Dent, 1994), p. lvii.

Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
 Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.

We three alone in modern times...

(‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, VI. 41-45)

Where the narrator of *Don Juan* ceaselessly asked ‘where are the figures of yesteryear?’ here, Yeats transforms his loss into a creed. He stands at the centre of his chosen trio, recording and controlling the transmission of their shared beliefs while affirming the Romantic distance between his own community and contemporary society with ‘we three alone’. It is what Synge and Lady Gregory represent in relation to Yeats that renders them powerful presences in the lines. ‘We three alone’ resembles Yeats’s oft-returned to lines from Berkeley ‘We Irish do not hold with this’,<sup>34</sup> and, as Stan Smith shows, the creation of the ‘we’ demonstrates Yeats’s need to create a select company to oppose the ever-growing Irish bourgeoisie.<sup>35</sup> Yet this elegy, written in 1938, leaves us with a harsh reality. Synge and Lady Gregory are dead, the former in 1909, and the latter in 1932. Lurking in the lines is a disquieting loss as the past tense marries pride in their achievements with a lonely vulnerability. Yeats is now alone in the centre, dreaming of this company that has already gone. But what is passed cannot be fully past as Yeats remains. He is the central figure of this glorious and quickly disappearing generation that stands aloof from the modern condition, insisting on being judged as ‘the last romantics’ (‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’, 41) as opposed to the degraded standards of modern criticism and art. The final stanza commands our assent as it insists on the poet’s right to demand how he is judged. Though isolated, he remains the standard bearer of the ‘Traditional sanctity and loveliness’ he asserted in ‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’ (42).

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<sup>34</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty’, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 300.

<sup>35</sup> As Stan Smith notes, Yeats uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ 2265 times in his oeuvre, and ‘we’, and ‘us’ 472 and 174 times respectively. Though ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’ does use ‘we’ several times, it serves to show their isolation from the rest of society (‘we three alone’). Stan Smith, *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* (Savage, MD.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1990), p. 146.



Appropriating Byron's ottava rima, 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' resists the comic Byronic mood in favour of its own stately music. Auden, Yeats's equivocal elegist, had half-teasingly paid tribute to its status as Byron's signature style:

Ottava Rima would, I know, be proper,  
 The proper instrument on which to pay  
 My compliments, but I should come a cropper;<sup>36</sup>

Yeats's lack of self-consciousness as he approaches his lordship's form without fear suggests his interest in aligning himself with his Romantic forbears, as opposed to attempting to emulate or battle against them as a 'strong ghost' ('A Prayer for my Son', 1) to vanquish. It is Auden who seems to recognise the likeness between Byron and Yeats, as his elegy for Yeats alludes to Byron's 'Stanzas to Augusta'.<sup>37</sup> Suggesting their affinity without forcing it on the reader, it is the lack of angst that Auden registers about their relationship that offers a suggestive parallel to the middle and late Yeats's use of Romantic allusion, as O'Neill notes: 'For the middle-aged Yeats, looking back in elegiac mode, it seemed like a form of spiritual nobility to claim to be a Romantic'.<sup>38</sup> In 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', Yeats takes this spiritual nobility to a self-reflexive and dramatic climax. In ottava rima, which had become the site of 'achieved artifice' in his later works,<sup>39</sup> Yeats creates a poem out of 'the fury and the mire of human veins' ('Byzantium', 8), a poem that insists on man writing the poetry as much as the poetry itself. Laced with allusions to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats as well

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<sup>36</sup> W. H. Auden, Letter to Lord Byron, Part One, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977), p. 172.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American and Irish Poetry Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Vendler, p. 66.

as Byron,<sup>40</sup> ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ is propelled by a pained inability to find a theme. The poem becomes what Jahan Ramazani characterises as ‘self-elegy’, poetry that announces rather than hiding its ‘literary self-mourning’.<sup>41</sup> Yet the covert self-conscious alignment with his Romantic predecessors suggests an unwaning confidence in his creative ability and an intimate appreciation of the tensions at play in their poetry. Yeats creates another great poem about the inability to create that places him firmly in the great tradition to which he cleaves.

Byron figures as a means for Yeats to create a monument to his place in the poetic arena as he marvels at even as he undermines his creations. Byron’s *Don Juan* turns its attentions outwards as ‘Byron never forgets, or lets us forget, that *Don Juan* is a text shaped within the literary market, subject to the pressures of opinion and the means of distribution’.<sup>42</sup> But it is the self-consciousness with which Byron dissects his career that resembles Yeatsian self-anatomising. ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ fashions an independent voice inflected with the Byronic ability to represent the poet’s career in poetry. O’Neill’s sense of Yeats’s poem could be applied with as much justice to this section of *Don Juan*: ‘The writing is full of cunning swerves that indicate that the poetic self and its past achievements are not easy to dismiss, analyse, or comprehend’.<sup>43</sup> Canto XI of *Don Juan* shows Byron performing this complex effect as the writing veers between apparent self-deprecation, irony, humour, and pride. Byron appraises his place in literary society but prevents the poetry from sliding into the ironic, pat tones of a sneering response to circumstances.

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<sup>40</sup> Jahan Ramazani points out the links between the poem and Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s ‘Intimations Ode’ and ‘Dejection’. See Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 187.

<sup>41</sup> Ramazani, p. 187.

<sup>42</sup> Peter J. Manning, ‘Don Juan and the Revisionary Self’, *Romantic Revisions*, edited by Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 221.

<sup>43</sup> Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 253.

In twice five years the 'greatest living poet,'  
 Like to the champion in the fisty ring,  
 Is called on to support his claim, or show it,  
 Although 'tis an imaginary thing.  
 Even I—albeit I'm sure I did not know it,  
 Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king,—  
 Was reckoned, a considerable time,  
 The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero  
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain:  
 'La Belle Alliance' of dunces down at zero,  
 Now that the Lion's fall'n, may rise again:  
 But I will fall at least as fell my hero;  
 Nor reign at all, or as a monarch reign;  
 Or to some lonely isle of Jailors go,  
 With turncoat Southey for my turnkey Lowe.

(Don Juan XI. 55-56: 433-48)

Paralleling himself with Napoleon, one of his favourite masks,<sup>44</sup> Byron refers to his reputation as a giant striding over the literary world, peacocking in the lines to affect a deliberate nonchalance. The poet must be pugilist, but Byron mocks the idea even as he admits to the hierarchy of poets. Yet Byron will not settle on mockery as the only response, as the final two lines in the first couplet force our assent to Byron's widely proclaimed status

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<sup>44</sup> 'Byronism, the chief by-product of the bloodless warfare between the major reviews, was from the outset imagined as a para-Napoleonic phenomenon, an empire based on the sale of books rather than the conquest of nations. "Byron" was designed to out-Bonaparte Bonaparte'. Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 147.

as the finest poet in the nation. Feigning yet feeling a saddened understanding of his own downfall, Byron recounts a version, a myth, of his literary downfall. Don Juan, which we, the readers of canto eleven, are still reading, becomes the major fall, which precipitates the losses of Marino Faliero and the final hammer blow of Cain. There is a touch of Yeatsian hauteur about this analysis as Byron's uniting of Don Juan with Marino Faliero and Cain suggests that it would be an undiscerning reader who would commit this kind of misreading. Despite the appearance of ease, Byron remained protective of his multi-tonal epic, and wrote to John Murray in defence of its quality that, 'it is poetry'.<sup>45</sup> We, the readers who have managed to hold on and carry on reading so far into Byron's epic, become a new coterie as he courts our scandalised laughter, our moral censures, our comradely smirks. 'This flirtation at the borders between art and life, this calculated provocation of his audience', observes Peter Manning, 'signals the continuous dialogue of Don Juan with its readers — (the author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* "a plain man"?) — and how thoroughly the Byronic self exists in exchange with the social world around it'.<sup>46</sup> The reader may choose to turn ally or enemy here, but Byron remains Napoleonic. He creates a complex alloy of jaunty irony and only barely concealed self-elegy to create the deliberately performative tones of a personal poetic voice.

'The Circus Animals' Desertion' is created out of a balance between affectingly personal avowal and celebration of poetic pride. Opening with the deliberately leaden lines: 'I sought a theme and sought for it in vain, / I sought it daily for six weeks or so'. (I. 1-2), Yeats eschews lyrical intensity so as to describe the deadening emptiness of the dearth of inspiration. Where Byron quasi-airily delineated the scene, Yeats plunges us into the Blakean Ulro of failed poetic composition. Balancing pain with an almost sardonic flicker of humour

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<sup>45</sup> BLJ 8, p. 192.

<sup>46</sup> Manning, p. 217.

in his ‘Lion and woman and the Lord knows what’, Yeats keeps in play an urbanity that is not defeated by his current despair. The second stanza, the first of section two, moves to a wider condemnation of what is left of the ageing poet’s imaginative facility.

What can I but enumerate old themes?  
 First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose  
 Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,  
 Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,  
 Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,  
 That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;  
 But what cared I that set him on to ride,  
 I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

(‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, II. 9-16)

Beginning with an angry sense of failed originality that seems somewhat at odds with the value he placed on tradition and its ‘old themes’,<sup>47</sup> Yeats sets up a dramatic statement that almost becomes a question. Yet it is a brand of rhetorical flourish that remains passionate in its earnestness. Though he seems to condemn his imagined ‘sea-rider Oisín’, even as he writes, he seems to be re-enchanted by his own poetry as the softer ‘seems’ that closes line 13 suggests the power of these ‘themes of the embittered heart’. The cry of the couplet declares the personal quality of *The Wanderings of Oisín* despite its self-definition as a national myth.

The importance of self-definition goes some way to explain the apparently odd choice to make *The Wanderings of Oisín*, *The Countess Cathleen*, and *On Baile’s Strand* the

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<sup>47</sup> Yeats writes in ‘A General Introduction to My Work’: ‘Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is the best packing’. See W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 522.

representation of Yeats's career in the poem. Yeats insistently personalises his achievements as he almost provides a gloss on his play:

I thought my dear must her own soul destroy  
 So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,  
 And this brought forth a dream and soon enough  
 This dream itself had all my thought and love.

(‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, II. 21-24)

Remembering Maud Gonne in the unnamed ‘my dear’, though recasting her as fanatic rather than heroine, Yeats’s memory of that period and his perception of her descent into fanaticism seems almost insubstantial in the face of the ‘dream itself’. Though Byron was quick to mock Keatsian dreaminess,<sup>48</sup> the self-awareness Yeats displays rescues him from being the butt of any Byronic joke. The disjunction of the rhymes of ‘play’ and ‘destroy’ suggest the gap between art and life even as a relationship is implied.<sup>49</sup> ‘The supreme theme of Art and Song’ as ‘After Long Silence’ has it (6), become the real centre and circumference of Yeats’s life. No palinode, there is more than a small frisson of triumph as these ‘themes of the embittered heart’ take on a life and importance beyond the man, and beyond ‘my dear’ who does not quite become a model of the Countess Cathleen. This recalls Byron’s insistence on the interdependence of poet and poetic creation in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, particularly in his electrifying stanza that begins ‘Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense, that we endow / With form our fancy, gaining as we give / The life we image, even as I do now’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III. 6: 46-49). In ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, the poem soars into an affirmation of poetic creation even as Yeats seems to condemn his creative impulses for their high personal cost.

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<sup>48</sup> Byron complained of Keats that ‘he is always frigging his imagination. - I don’t mean that he is indecent but viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam of vision produced by raw pork and opium’. BLJ 7. p. 225.

<sup>49</sup> O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-conscious Poem*, p. 254.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread  
 Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;  
 Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said  
 It was the dream itself enchanted me:  
 Character isolated by a deed  
 To engross the present and dominate memory.  
 Players and painted stage took all my love,  
 And not those things that they were emblems of.

(‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, II. 25-32)

Suggesting the link between life and art with ‘heart mysteries there’, as we await the gloss afforded to The Countess Cathleen, Yeats seems overwhelmed by these ‘masterful images’ (III. 33). ‘Heart mysteries there’ sounds a note of baffled but triumphant pride as Yeats recognises art as the strong enchanter that has ‘led him by the nose’ (‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, II. 10) throughout his life.

The final stanza closes with the dramatic flourish we expect from Yeats as he claims: ‘I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’. (‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, III. 39-40) This descent attains the grandeur of tragedy as Yeats regally becomes the hero of his poem. As he wrote in *Autobiographies*, the instinct to self-dramatise fired his imagination: ‘Every now and then, when something has stirred my imagination, I begin talking to myself. I speak in my own person and dramatize myself, very much as I have seen a mad old woman do upon the Dublin quays, and sometimes I detect myself speaking and moving as if I were still young, or walking perhaps like an old man with fumbling steps’.<sup>50</sup> Despite the tragic pose, there is no sense that creativity will never return. ‘Those

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<sup>50</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘The Bounty of Sweden, II’, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 532-33.

masterful images' grew from 'pure mind' ('The Circus Animals' Desertion', III. 33 and 34), but the sense that the root is always 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart' (III. 40) rescues the poem from total defeat. As with Don Juan, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' makes its mask out of defeat, but this tragic posture becomes the ultimate triumph of the poem.

Byron provides a vital model for Yeats as 'common personal speech' becomes one of the many hallmarks of the Byronic mode that feeds Yeatsian verse. Though Shelley, and to a lesser extent, Blake, are vital to his development, it is the Byronic tang of embodied speech that offers verve to Yeats's poetry. Don Juan, replete with the 'all complexities of mire or blood' ('Byzantium', 24) offered Yeats an example of the ottava rima that he adapted with perfect equanimity into a meditative mode for his own poetry. The Yeats-Byron bond involves a shared double manner, celebratory and mournful, where both poets fuse sardonic urbanity with imaginative felicity. It is Byron's authority, his conversational facility, and his poetic personality that gave Yeats the example of imaginative liberty that propels his poetry to its 'cold and rook-delighting heaven' ('The Cold Heaven', 1).