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‘Chosen Comrades’: Yeats’s Romantic Rhymes

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Abstract

Yeats’s acute sense of the poet’s labour, a labour that makes rhyme one of those ‘befitting emblems of adversity’ (‘My House’, *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, 30) energises his poetry. Rather than constricting poetry, rhyme can engender, if paradoxically, a kind of freedom for the poet; Yeats’s choice of form reveals his Romantic influences while demonstrating his independence. Encompassing examples from Blake, Byron, Keats, and Shelley, this essay shows how Yeats learns from his chosen influences even as his mastery over their forms sponsors his ‘ghostly solitude’ (‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, 40). From his experimentation with trimeter to ottava rima and terza rima, Yeats’s formal dexterity places rhyme centre stage where he emerges as a resolutely individual poet.

Yeats, poetry, rhyme, Romanticism, influence, poetics

‘Rhyme has to be testing; it is an obstacle that makes virtuosity possible – the greater the obstacle, the greater the mastery’.¹ John Creaser’s emphasis upon the tests that rhyme poses speaks to Yeats’s acute sense of the poet’s labour, a labour that makes rhyme one of those ‘befitting emblems of adversity’ (‘My House’, *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, 30) that energise his poems.² Yeats’s insight that ‘works of art are always begotten by previous works of art, and every masterpiece becomes the Abraham of a chosen people’,³ led him to experiment with the rhymed forms and rhyming techniques of his Romantic predecessors. Rather than constricting poetry, rhyme can engender, if paradoxically, a kind of freedom for the poet;⁴ Yeats’s choice of form reveals his influences while demonstrating his independence.

William Blake, whose poetry and art had a powerful influence on Yeats from early on in his career, became vital to Yeats’s understanding of how rhyme’s relentlessness can drive a poem forward. Despite his remark that ‘Poetry Fetter’d, Fetters the Human Race’,⁵ Blake frequently had recourse to rhyme as an energizing impulse, especially in his Songs and the lyrics in his notebooks. He made pithy and perceptive use of the quatrain, and this offered Yeats an alternative to the mellifluous harmonies preferred by Blake’s contemporaries. ‘The Mental Traveller’, Blake’s disturbing visionary poem, uses sound to mirror sense as the violence of content (he is relating a nightmare vision of the phases of life)⁶ is matched by the thudding rhymes of the quatrains.

She binds iron thorns around his head

She pierces both his hands & feet

She cuts his heart out at his side

To make it feel both cold & heat

Her fingers number every Nerve
 Just as a Miser counts his gold
 She lives upon his shrieks & cries
 And she grows young as he grows old

(‘The Mental Traveller’, 13-21)

T. S. Eliot described Blake’s poetry as having ‘the unpleasantness of great poetry’.⁷ The ‘unpleasantness’ of these lines, borne in their imagery, is amplified by their rhymes. Rejecting the alternating tetrameters and trimeters of the standard ballad (a8b6c8b6), Blake chooses to keep each line in tetrameter, sounding out a grinding uniformity. The pounding feet of his tetrameter are met by emphatic masculine rhymes which propel the narrative forward; their strength points up by contrast the unsettling force of the unrhymed line endings, where the shared bodily focus of ‘head’ and ‘side’ refuses to crystallise into rhyme, just as ‘Nerve’ and ‘cries’ suggest disquieting similarities through meaning, not sound. Blake’s line-endings break from rote with the piercing force of ‘shrieks & cries’. Poetry creates a ‘transfigured experience’,⁸ and rhyme becomes the medium for laying bare cycles of despair. Alicia Ostriker’s excellent study of Blake’s metrics offers a helpful insight: ‘Finally, Blake provides an ideal—because extreme—test case of his own theory of art, a theory in which form is valuable only as a vehicle of expression, never for its own sake’.⁹ Yet ‘only’ seems rather an understatement. That form can be a vehicle for alchemising vision into language makes it central to poetry, where any poet must ensure, as Blake writes, that ‘Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place’.¹⁰

Blake’s formal artistry exploits the violent properties of language, and becomes a model for Yeats in his later refiguring of the quatrain. ‘Under Ben Bulben’, which mentions Blake by name, shows Yeats experimenting with the form with a terseness inherited from

poems like ‘The Mental Traveller’. His decision to open with a discrete four-line unit, and his setting out of the first ‘section’ of the poem in quatrains, embeds the form in our imagination and encourages us to search out ghostly patterns within the larger structures that follow. Where ‘The Mental Traveller’ shapes itself according to the ballad stanza, Yeats’s opening quatrain tightens the form still further, constructing itself around the couplet:

Swear by what the sages spoke
 Round the Mareotic Lake
 That the Witch of Atlas knew,
 Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.¹¹

(‘Under Ben Bulben’, I. 1-4)

Yeats’s dramatic self-address, combined with his allusion to Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas* gliding down the Nile ‘By Moeris and the Mareotid lakes’ (*The Witch of Atlas* 58: 505),¹² underlines the metapoetic quality of his own work. *The Witch of Atlas* is one of Shelley’s subtlest explorations of creativity, ‘a celebration of the poet’s imagination at play’ as William Keach puts it.¹³ Yeats’s allusion marks his similar instinct to celebrate and explore the poet’s imagination. But such an exploration in Yeats’s recasting would not be entirely pleasurable. His half-rhymes here suggest that words have a force that the poet cannot quite master, despite his willed virtuosity. They disturb the Blakean terseness of his couplets, suggesting the pressure on the ageing poet’s insistent will-making. We are made aware that Yeats works with and against language, as if refusing to be overpowered by either the sonic constrictions or the semantic arbitrariness of rhyme.

Throughout ‘Under Ben Bulben’, as Daniel Albright writes, ‘metric impulse, combined with the lack of couplet closure created by the frequent off-rhymes, produces

within the confines of the poem something of the effect of plenitude and tense structure that the poem advocates'.¹⁴ Its rhymes are a focus for this coupling of plenitude and tension, and enact the poem's Yeatsian 'quarrel' with itself.¹⁵ As the poem progresses, Yeats records an effort to re-assert command by embedding sections of powerful masculine couplets within half-rhymed lines.

Irish poets, learn your trade,
 Sing whatever is well made,
 Scorn the sort now growing up
 All out of shape from toe to top,
 Their unremembering hearts and heads
 Base-born products of base beds.

(‘Under Ben Bulben’, V. 1-6)

‘Yeats’s words are as unforgettable as any he wrote’, writes William Pratt, ‘but the sort of advice they offer would be the despair of any poet of lesser genius; his poem stands much more as a final piece of self-definition than as a creed for other poets’.¹⁶ The use of rhyme highlights the poet’s air of power as he becomes the self-proclaimed representative of Irish poets among his own generation. The assertive full rhymes and the sinuous metre of the section offer the lines a sense of considered judgement. Apparently conscious of the potential charge of arrogance, the half-rhyme of ‘top’ and ‘up’ shows Yeats deliberately refusing the perfection of full rhyme when he makes his most politically dangerous statement.¹⁷ Like the close of Blake’s *The Mental Traveller*, where the poet insists on the truth of his tale with the firm ‘And all is done as I have told’ (104), Yeats fashions the self as the centre and circumference of poetic authority within the rhythms of the quatrain while the half-rhyme at

the heart of his sentence refuses the complacency of assuming everything can be brought neatly into ‘shape’.

But Yeats could also use the quatrain to entirely different effect. In ‘Easter, 1916’, as Helen Vendler points out, ‘Yeats’s enjambed quatrains’ enter ‘the public arena, as he explores the appeal and psychic danger of heroic action’.¹⁸ Relinquishing the will-driven self-dramatisation of ‘Under Ben Bulbin’, ‘Easter, 1916’ shows Yeats exploiting rhyme to channel the tonal uncertainties of the poem, which undermine, question, and challenge his own poetic authority. The Easter Rising provided an example of the powerful heroism that Yeats feared had vanished from Ireland, yet he was unable to celebrate the event in wholly uncomplicated terms. Its spectre rather haunts Yeats, and forces him to question his heroic paradigm. Numb shock pervades the opening of the poem, as if the speaking voice is feeling its way towards poetic utterance:

I have met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
 From counter or desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
 I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words...

(‘Easter, 1916’, 1-8)

The whispered sense of discomfort in these lines owes a lot to their rhymes. The half-rhyme of ‘faces’ and ‘houses’ insinuates the incongruity of vivid faces among the grand eighteenth-

century houses, and the repetitive rhyme of ‘words’ with ‘words’ brings the poem momentarily in step with polite meaninglessness. The dulled rhymes reflect the difficulty of articulating a poetic response to the events; repetition serves to underline the numb shock while half-rhyme deliberately undermines implicit certainties. Unlike in ‘Under Ben Bulben’, the reader must wait for the rhymed partner rather than have it swiftly follow, suggesting the difficult line between fact and interpretation that the poem must tread. The poem’s rhymes help to keep its uncertainties in play right through to its closing paragraph:

We know their dream; enough
 To know they dreamed and are dead;
 And what if excess of love
 Bewildered them till they died?

(l. 70-73)

Borrowing the phrase ‘excess of love’ from Shelley’s *Alastor*, where the Poet’s ‘strong heart sunk and sickened with excess / Of love’, (*Alastor*, 181-82), Yeats’s allusion, with its faltering rhymes, underscores the dangerous possibilities of such worship of the ideal. Pitting ‘enough’ against ‘excess’, Yeats implies that there must be an appropriate amount of love for one’s country, with this suggestion reinforcing his approval of John O’Leary’s belief that ‘There are things I must not do to save a nation’ while withholding open censure from the lines.¹⁹ ‘Enough’ and ‘love’ chime together, but they offer a disquieting sense that love must be curbed to become a wholly positive force, and the final lines of the poem show Yeats straightening his back as he turns to his commemorative task: ‘I write it out in a verse—’. In Yeats’s hands, the workings of Blake’s quatrains have been ‘changed’, but not ‘changed utterly’; he retains their terse force as he magnifies doubt by reversing rhyming certainties.

Of all Romantic poets, Shelley remains the lodestar in the Yeatsian firmament.²⁰ Shelley's nuanced attention to rhyme offered Yeats a virtuosic example whose spirit he could capture even as he underscored his individuality. Terza rima offered Yeats a compelling opportunity. In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley strikingly transforms the form in a fleet of foot poem that moves, as he describes the sun in the opening line, 'Swift as a spirit hastening to his task' (*The Triumph of Life*, 1). The speed of successive images is one of the key virtues of the poem, as Shelley's terza rima seems at once self-propelled and self-generative:

'And underneath ethereal glory clad
The wilderness, and far before her flew
The tempest of the splendour which forbade

'Shadow to fall from leaf or stone;—the crew
Seemed in that light like atomies that dance
Within a sunbeam.—

(*The Triumph of Life*, 442-47)

Shelley's relentlessly enjambed lines resist easy comprehension as his 'sweet tune' seems 'to blot / The thoughts of him who gazed on them' (*The Triumph of Life*, 382, 383-84). Keeping the rhyme relatively unobtrusive, Shelley refuses to obstruct the poem's flow. His taut and tensed lines continue with no sense of an ending to come. The 'soft-pedal' effect of the rhyme allows him to implant subtle internal rhymes into unexpected moments,²¹ as 'Seemed' and 'sunbeam', like the alliterative 'far' and 'flew', harmonise without overwhelming. Such nuance speaks to Shelley's statement in *A Defence of Poetry* that 'the language of poets has

ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry' (A Defence of Poetry, 678).

When Yeats approached the same form, which he did only once in his career, in 'Cuchulain Comforted', he chose to deliberately deaden the swiftness that Shelley makes its signature effect. Where Shelley distracts attention from end rhymes, rushing past them through his glancing internal rhymes and assonance, Yeats, as in the case in his reworking of Bleakean quatrains, relies heavily upon half-rhyme to draw attention to his simple monosyllabic rhymes. But contrary to Marjorie Perloff's sense that Yeats's rhymes in this poem fade 'into the merest shades of rhyme',²² the effect is often dissonant, pointing up the absence of the certainties of full rhyme. At the start of the poem, where Cuchulain is shown in heroic and defiant posture, Yeats creates an air of eerie stillness:

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
 Violent and famous, strode among the dead;
 Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

(‘Cuchulain Comforted’, 1-3)

The heavy half-rhyme of 'man' and 'gone' cruelly emphasises Cuchulain's death, and seems prophetic of the narrative to be unveiled. Masculinity lost, Cuchulain will exchange his status as hero for a new identity as 'a small, terrified, anonymous "bird-like thing"',²³ and the opening half-rhyme foreshadows that change. The poem's dependence on approximate rhymes amplifies the strangeness of the narrative, as instead of enchanting or cushioning the reader, Yeats creates what Michael O'Neill calls 'Shifting patterns of sound [which] subtly mimic the neutralization of heroic energy'.²⁴

That ‘neutralization’ is apparent in the rhymes at the poem’s close, where Yeats shifts into something more akin to the ‘shades of rhyme’ that Perloff describes. The narrative has been taken over by the speech of the ‘Shroud that seemed to have authority’, and the poem reverses the individualism usually associated with the ‘Violent and famous’ Cuchulain, insisting instead on collective action:

‘Now must we sing and sing the best we can,

But first you must be told our character:

Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

‘Or driven from home and left to die in fear’.

They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,

Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

(‘Cuchulain Comforted’, 19-25)

Yeats’s ending eschews any achieved gravity for continued and deepening discomfort. ‘Character’ as a word and as an idea is interrogated by its rhymes with ‘fear’ and ‘before’, pointing up the horror of the transformation of Cuchulain from defiant hero to cringing coward. The unexpected approximate rhyme of the final syllable in ‘character’ with ‘words’ emphasises how Yeats shapes the self in language here and elsewhere in his oeuvre, adding a sense of uncomfortable identification between himself and Cuchulain’s newly diminished state. As Thomas Parkinson insightfully argues, with some provisos, ‘it is still possible to see Yeats’s off-rhymes as indices to his state of mind’, and Yeats’s poetic project of self-

fashioning continues in the figure of Cuchulain. Shelley's terza rima has been mutated by Yeats from glorying in capturing rapid transitions into a form which deals with transformation in a far slower way through off-rhyme's haunting dissonance.

Byron is generally judged to be the master of ottava rima amongst Romantic poets. Don Juan shows him using the form to house poetry that can run the emotional gamut from satire to elegy. Byron's rhymes form the centrepiece of each stanza, setting a sparkle on his most dazzling and daring lines:

All are not moralists, like Southey, when
 He prated to the world of 'Pantisocracy';
 Or Wordsworth unexcised, unhired, who then
 Season'd his pedlar poems with democracy;
 Or Coleridge, long before his flighty pen
 Lent to the Morning Post its aristocracy;
 When he and Southey, following the same path,
 Espoused two partners (milliners of Bath.)²⁵

(Don Juan III. 93: 833-40)

The jeering chain of rhymes set going by 'Pantisocracy' is brought into relief by the suave inconsequentiality of the stanza's rhymes, 'when', 'then', and 'pen' (though even these lay claim to a casual brilliance, hinting that Byron's thoughts are developing precisely in step with the poem's form). The descent from 'Pantisocracy' via 'democracy' into 'aristocracy' traces the falling away of youthful idealism. The form enacts the increasing conservatism of Southey's, Wordsworth's, and Coleridge's ideas as sonic congruence damningly enacts their political decline as inevitable yet risible. Wimsatt praised Byron for his yoking together of

semantically disparate words;²⁶ but here, Byron reverses the terms of his praise, as the subversive ‘rightness’ of the rhymes makes them appealing. The final couplet is brilliantly economic in its cruelty, the parenthesis containing only a description, but one so tartly delivered in the final couplet that the reader cannot help but perceive it as a punch line.

Auden paid witty tribute to Byron’s brilliance in the form by writing Letter to Lord Byron in rhyme-royal rather than ottava rima, in order to avoid ‘com[ing] a cropper’ (Letter to Lord Byron I. 143).²⁷ Yeats, however, was not similarly afflicted. His ottava rima poems, though they often avail themselves of Byron’s lordly hauteur, sidestep the comic legacy of Byron’s rhyming by mixing Byron’s influence with Shelley’s urbane yet visionary handling of the stanza in *The Witch of Atlas*. There, Shelley’s formal fluency is on show as he envisions his poetry as a living, if ephemeral, being:

To thy fair feet a wingèd Vision came,
 Whose date should have been longer than a day,
 And o'er thy head did beat its wings for fame,
 And in thy sight its fading plumes display;
 The watery bow burned in the evening flame,
 But the shower fell, the swift Sun went his way—
 And that is dead.—O, let me not believe
 That anything of mine is fit to live!

(*The Witch of Atlas* III. 17-24)

This image of transitory frailty is not only the courtly gesture of a Dantesque poet;²⁸ the stanza ripples, rather, with tension between Shelley’s assertive ‘should have been’, as his Vision struggles for its desired fame, and the wounded understanding that its ‘faded plumes’

must give way to death. Though Andelys Woods reads the final couplet as dripping with ‘heavy sarcasm and pretended innocence’,²⁹ the life of Shelley’s ‘silken-wingèd fly’ tips into a serious exclamation of the longed-for power to generate poetic life and a despairing plea to give up belief in any such hope. The ottava rima comes into its own as the couplet’s half-rhyme offers a daring counterpoint to the apparent appeal for modesty. A daring reversal of God’s question to Ezekiel (‘Son of man, can these bones live?’),³⁰ Shelley longs to take on the role of Creator even as he doubts his strength. The jarring rhyme suggests the difficulty of the endeavour, but it also sounds a note of struggle: belief and life must be bound together imaginatively if not by sound.

Shelley frequently slows his couplet down in *The Witch of Atlas* by contrast with Byron’s fondness for shutting his stanza with an epigrammatic snap. By rejecting Byron’s typically swift ending couplet, Shelley chooses to make his stanza unified and dreamlike, merging sound and sense to create a hypnotic sensuousness. Although he retains the importance of the Byronic final couplet, this hypnotic effect becomes crucial to Yeats’s handling of the stanza in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’.³¹ The mingling of desire with certainty in the poem’s second stanza imbues the form with an incantatory feel:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

(‘Sailing to Byzantium’, II. 1-8)

The declamatory first two lines are broken by the tantalising addition of ‘unless’ at the end of the second, which follows on to a description of a trance-like state where soul is definitively separated from body. But despite the affirmation, nature has not been transcended: the soul must ‘sing’ in a gesture separated from the song of the ‘dying generations’ (l. 3) by degree, not type. The power of the vision combines with frustration as the poet remains within nature. Despite the singing of the soul, the intellect performs a sterile appreciation of its own monuments. These monuments, referred to in the final line of stanza one, return as ‘Monuments of its own magnificence’, (II. 6) suggesting the increasing worth of them in comparison to their earlier incarnation as ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’ (I. 8).³² The increase of praise speaks of the longing to be consumed by all that is eternal. Yet even here such desire is not unqualified.

Yeats wrote in his September 22 1928 essay on ‘The Censorship and St. Thomas Aquinas’ that ‘Nobody can stray into that little Byzantium chapel at Palermo, which suggested the chapel of the Grail to Wagner, without for an instant renouncing the body and all its works’.³³ to surrender to Byzantium’s beauty is to lose one’s humanity, and Yeats does not fully disguise this danger. The studying, which replaces the singing he has previously posited as the potential saviour of his soul, seems glossed over, and does not appear preferable. The final two lines are almost too neat; using Byron’s concluding couplets as his model, the ottava rima makes Yeats’s journey toward Byzantium seem inevitable.³⁴ The imperative of rhyme has replaced the imperative of logic. The stately syllables of the penultimate line ease Yeats into Byzantium, and rhyme’s hegemony goes unchallenged. Despite Yeats’s longing, art has not provided an escape from nature. Art merely envisions an

alternative rendering of nature. Longing for escape without freedom is the poem's actual theme.

The sonnet, for Yeats, was a form steeped in 'Traditional sanctity and loveliness' ('Coole and Ballylee, 1931', 42) and he returned to it throughout his career. According to Helen Vendler, seeking to craft the form in his own image, Yeats 'made it Irish'.³⁵ However, Yeats found precursors for his own effort to stamp his individuality on the form's 'tradition' in English Romantic poets, and Keats is an example. Grant F. Scott's description of his originality in 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd' is germane: 'What emerges inside this sonnet is strictly controlled and arranged. Havoc is wreaked instead on its rhyme scheme, where the poet teases us with echoes of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms only to confound our expectations by jumbling the end rhymes into a slyly subversive nonpattern'.³⁶ Keats's 'jumbling' not only subverts, but also asserts the possibilities of rhyme, confidently proclaiming its author's ability with the tight restrictions.

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,
 And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
 Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;
 Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
 Sandals more interwoven and complete
 To fit the naked foot of poesy;
 Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd
 By ear industrious, and attention meet:
 Misers of sound and syllable, no less

Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;
 So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.³⁷

The tempting 'If' suggests a possibility immediately arrested by 'must', as Keats, like Blake before him, condemns the fetters that enclose language into traditional structures. Yet the patterning of the rhyme words, 'chained', 'constrained', and 'gained', seems less to reinforce 'pained loveliness' than to raise the potential 'gains' made by poetry that conforms to traditional structures while maintaining an individual agency which works to prevent repetition of hackneyed rhyming cliché. Riddled with half-rhymes, such as the witty pairing of 'Misers' and 'Midas', Keats revels in his formal inventiveness, dancing in its chains.³⁸ As Susan Wolfson, among others, has pointed out, only the word 'Poesy' seems to float free from rhyme until lines 11 and 13 where it sounds with 'be' and 'free', and this, combined with the brief allusion to Andromeda, suggests the scale of Keats's ambition: 'This allusion implicates a masculine poet's power to shape, clothe, bind, and unbind the form of "Poesy", to claim it as his own'.³⁹ Yet Keats does not claim that he can 'unbind' poetry. Rather, he suggests his ability to create more intricate and fitting forms than had been hitherto used. The challenge is to reshape form and to explore and exploit the possibilities of rhyme, and to that end, Keats releases the sonnet from Petrarchan and Shakespearean models by making the final four lines into a quatrain united through its muted rhyme.⁴⁰

Like Keats, Yeats experiments with the sonnet, reshaping it to enact his power over the raw material of form. His statement, 'I must choose a traditional stanza, even when what I alter must seem traditional',⁴¹ performs a double-edged operation, pledging allegiance to tradition while asserting his ability to create a stanza that departs from the past. Tradition

becomes innovation in the hands of the accomplished poet. The sonnet form, as for Keats, could only be interesting insofar as the poet moulds it in his own image. 'Leda and Swan' shows Yeats bringing together Petrarchan and Shakespearean structures, evading the strictures of either form as he teasingly suggests both (Shakespearean in the alternately rhymed quatrains of its octave (abab cdcd), Petrarchan in its sestet (efgefg)):

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

As he does in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', Yeats transports his reader into the poem, demanding our immersion in the scene related by the anonymous speaker.⁴² Whereas Keats retained a sense of his personality in the act of speaking for a contemporary company of poets, Yeats suppresses the lyric 'I' in favour of a prophetic immersion and subsequent questioning. The final question, which shivers on the edge of becoming rhetorical, challenges the closure often achieved by a sonnet. The half-rhyme of 'up' and 'drop' reinforces the sense that the poet 'sing[s] amid our uncertainty',⁴³ as this, the most fragile rhyme in the poem, closes the sonnet. The ambiguity of the rhyme is a microcosm of a larger ambivalence. The classical myth allows Yeats to incorporate a cunningly allegorical reading into the sonnet's structure, one that chimes dissonantly with the form's English heritage. Though Yeats disclaimed a larger meaning for the poem, despite his original intentions ('as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it')⁴⁴ the sonnet may allude to the fraught Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, which granted independence to the majority of Ireland while the six counties of Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. Declan Kiberd argues for 'the possibility of interpreting the swan as the invading English occupier and the girl as a ravished Ireland. The girl is more expert in "feeling", the swan in "knowledge". She is a mere mortal, whereas he comes from an imperial eternity... [Yeats's Irish side is] just plain angry'.⁴⁵ While this argument foregrounds significant preoccupations, the rhyme scheme suggests the way in which Yeats frustrates any attempt to impose a clear cut allegorical reading onto the sonnet. Yeats opts to follow a Shakespearean, rather than Petrarchan, pattern in his octave, cramming in four rhymes where the Petrarchan model only allows for two, and refusing the retarded momentum of the Petrarchan form's abba abba pattern. The Shakespearean octave furnishes more possibilities, fuelling the forward energy required of Yeats's vision. Similarly, the Shakespearean sestet, with its solving couplet, behaves antithetically to the increasing tension that Yeats embeds, and he chooses the

Petrarchan sestet to continue to evade any concluding certainties. Yeats makes the sonnet's interpretative possibilities breed and threaten one another; the blend of Classical myth with contemporary politics, the curiously detached vantage point of the unidentified speaker, and the closing, teasing question, allow the poet freedom from committing to any one perspective just as he refuses any one rhyme scheme.

'If technique is the way art thinks, and if self-absorption is, curiously, the way art notices others, then might this "virtuoso incantation" be, not simply a screen or a cocoon or an anaesthetic, but a medium—a medium for thinking, and for thinking about historical experience, just when in the very act of apparently retreating from it?'⁴⁶ For Yeats, the answer to Simon Jarvis's question would be an emphatic 'yes'; a 'yes' that fires his poetry into being. Rhyme becomes a marker of poetic exploration, not a thoughtless jingling to entertain the peanut-crunching crowd. No dull opiate administered by the enchanted and enchanting poet, rhyme allows Yeats to engage with difficult questions from a subtle angle as he engages with or distances himself from his 'chosen comrades' ('What Then?', 1). In Romantic poets, who prize individual expression, Yeats finds examples who discover through formal experimentation 'monuments of [their] own magnificence' ('Sailing to Byzantium', 14). Yet from amongst them Yeats emerges as a resolutely individual poet.

¹ John Creaser, 'Rhymes, Rhyme, and Rhyming', *Essays in Criticism*, 62. 4 (2012), 438-60, 453

² W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1992), 248. All further references to Yeats' poems are to this volume.

³ W. B. Yeats, 'Art and Ideas', *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), 346-55, 352.

⁴ 'The marking, bounding, limiting function of rhyme (and indeed, of all strict metrical commitments) can be seen, in the neatly paradoxical light first cast by Wordsworth's 'Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room' sonnet, to engender thereby a kind of freedom'. John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, 2nd ed. [1975] (New Haven, CT, 1985), 118.

⁵ William Blake, 'To the Public', Preface to *Jerusalem*, *Blake's Poetry and Designs: Illuminated Works, Other Writings, Criticism*, selected and edited Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, 2nd ed. (New York, NY, 2008), 313.

⁶ Morton D. Paley explains the symbolism of the poem in 'The Female Babe and 'The Mental Traveller'', *Studies in Romanticism* 1. 2 (1962): 97-104, but I sympathise with John H. Sutherland's view that 'There is violence and inaccuracy in the giving of abstract equivalents for these figures at any of the stages of their development'. John H. Sutherland, 'Blake's The Mental Traveller', *ELH*, 22. 2 (1955), 136-47, 145.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'William Blake', in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. ([1951] London, 1969), 317-322, 317.

- ⁸ Hollander, 10.
- ⁹ Alicia Ostriker, *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (Madison and Milwaukee, WI, 1965), 5.
- ¹⁰ Blake, 'To the Public', Preface to *Jerusalem*, 313.
- ¹¹ W. B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulbin', *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* (London, 1992), 373.
- ¹² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford, 2003), 502.
- ¹³ William Keach, 'Reflexive Imagery in Shelley', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 24 (1975), 49-69, 58.
- ¹⁴ Daniel Albright, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1992), 808-09.
- ¹⁵ William Butler Yeats, 'Anima Hominis', *Essays* (London, 1924), 492-93.
- ¹⁶ William Pratt, 'An Irish Symbolist: William Butler Yeats', *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry* (Columbia, MO, 1996), 99.
- ¹⁷ For David Bradshaw, the quoted lines 'contain a eugenicist decree'. See 'Eugenics: 'They Should All be Killed'', *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. David Bradshaw (Malden, 2003), 34-55, 49. However, I prefer Rosenthal's insight that 'A slightly suspect trace of propaganda for the eugenics movement lingers in that last quoted phrase, but it is sunken in the larger thought of the heaven-storming potentialities of artistic imagination'. See M. L. Rosenthal, *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art* (New York, 1994), 346.
- ¹⁸ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford, 2007), 192.
- ¹⁹ Yeats, 'Poetry and Tradition', *Essays and Introductions*, 247.
- ²⁰ See Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), 393.
- ²¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, Vol. VIII: *Fair-Copy Manuscripts of Shelley's Poems in European and American Libraries*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Michael O'Neill, *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics: Shelley*, gen. ed. Donald H. Reiman, 8 vols. (New York: Garland, 1997), VIII: p. xx.
- ²² 'In 'Cuchulain Comforted', the rhymes have become the merest shades of rhyme'. Marjorie Perloff, *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (The Hague & Paris: Mouton, 1970), 41.
- ²³ Rosenthal, 139.
- ²⁴ Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.
- ²⁵ Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed., introd. and notes by Jerome McGann, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).
- ²⁶ W. K. Wimsatt Jr., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, with two preliminary essays written in collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1954), 165.
- ²⁷ W.H Auden, Letter to Lord Byron, in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977), 169-199, 172.
- ²⁸ Bloom also notes this 'ironic courtliness' in Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, *Yale Studies in English: Volume 141* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959), 169.
- ²⁹ Andelys Wood, 'Shelley's Ironic Vision: The Witch of Atlas', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 29 (1980), 67-82, 68.
- ³⁰ Ezekiel 37.3 (quoted from the King James Version). Shelley also uses this verse in 'Ode to the Assertors of Liberty'.
- ³¹ O'Neill refers to *The Witch of Atlas* as a 'forbear of Yeats's Byzantium poems'. O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings*, 152.
- ³² Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New York, NY: Syracuse UP, 2003), 146.
- ³³ W. B. Yeats, 'The Censorship and St. Thomas Aquinas', *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, 2 vols., ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson I (London: Macmillan, 1975), 2: 478, quoted by Loizeaux, 153.
- ³⁴ Daniel Hoffman refers to Yeats's ottava rima poems as his 'aristocratic poems', but I argue that it seems Yeats is struggling for, not wielding, authority. See Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1967), 62.
- ³⁵ Vendler, 147.
- ³⁶ Grant F. Scott, 'The Muse in Chains: Keats, Dürer, and the Politics of Form', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 34. 4 (1994), 771-793, 772.
- ³⁷ John Keats, 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd', *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1988).
- ³⁸ Patrick J. Keane makes this observation of Yeats, but it is equally true of Keats in this sonnet: 'He sings bound and wound in the chains of tradition and necessity, but the voice is unmistakably his'. Patrick J. Keane, *Yeats's Interactions with Tradition* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987), 7.
- ³⁹ Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 172.
- ⁴⁰ Keats ends his sonnet not with a sestet or a couplet, but with a quatrain that conspicuously mutes its rhymes'. Wolfson, 171.
- ⁴¹ W. B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for My Work', *Essays and Introductions*, 522.

⁴² As Daniel Albright suggests, this rendering of place is one of Yeats's characteristic gestures, one of his 'conjurings of hyperrealities'. Albright, 'Introduction', *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, p. xxxviii.

⁴³ Yeats, 'Anima Hominis', *Essays*, 492-93.

⁴⁴ W. B. Yeats, quoted in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 828.

⁴⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 315.

⁴⁶ Simon Jarvis, 'Why Rhyme Pleases', *Thinking Verse I* (2011), 17-43, 25. Jarvis quotes from J. H. Prynne, 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry', *The Listener*, February 14, 1963, 290-91, p. 290.