

DE PROPRIETATIBUS LITTERARUM

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Indiana University

Series Practica, 38

A STUDY
OF RHYTHMIC STRUCTURE
IN THE VERSE
OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

by

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1973

MOUTON

THE HAGUE · PARIS

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Mouton & Co. N.V., Publishers, The Hague

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Printed in The Netherlands by Zuid Nederlandsche Drukkerij N.V., 's-Hertogenbosch

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INTRODUCTION

"Style is almost unconscious. I know what I have tried to do, little what I have done."

W. B. Yeats

Following the lead of Yeats himself, the critics of his poetry have regularly found it at least 'convenient', as Allt observed, to distinguish "the early style from the later style of Yeats, from the style, as it is called, of his maturity".¹ Indeed this tendency among Yeats' critics toward definition and division has been so marked that Eliot, speaking in 1940 to the Friends of the Irish Academy at the Abbey Theater in Dublin, could call it "almost a commonplace of criticism of his work".² Twenty-five years later the familiar distinction, no longer merely commonplace, had become in fact a critical cliché.

The existing commentaries suggest, nevertheless, that it is easier to divide than to define. Though some few critics, Eliot among them, have set the dividing line between 'early' and 'late' at 1919, as T. R. Henn has well remarked, "the turning point, or watershed ... of Yeats' poetry is usually considered to be the period that produced the poems in *Responsibilities*" (1914).³ Complete and careful definition of the differences

¹ G. D. P. Allt, "Yeats and the Revision of his Early Verse", *Hermathena*, LXIV (1944), 91.

² T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1957), 297.

³ T. R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower* (New York, 1952), 87. Thomas Parkinson, with Eliot, sets the dividing line between 'early' and 'late' at 1919: "There are in Yeats two complete careers. The first extends from his earliest work to the personalist and elegiac poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, which ... is certainly the ultimate expression of his early career." (*W. B. Yeats, the Later Poetry* [Berkeley, 1964], 58.) Some commentators — Edmund Wilson perhaps the first among them — have introduced as further critical refinement a 'middle' period to bridge the gap between 'early' and 'late'. Ellmann, for example, writes: "Where the earlier verse had for foundation the reverie or dream, the middle verse has the 'wild thought' as the later verse would have a subtler mixture of gay abandon, the considered view and the nightmare." (*The Identity of Yeats* [New York, 1964], 98.)

between the early and the later styles, however, has not yet been achieved.

Interestingly, almost all the commentators have noted clear evidence of stylistic transition as early as 1900. Yeats himself, in the early letters to Katherine Tynan, set down perceptive criticism of what he was calling even then — in 1888 — his ‘early’ work: “I have noticed some things about my poetry that I did not know before, in this process of correction; for instance, that it is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to flight.”⁴ And again: “I am not very hopeful about the book [*Oisín*]. Somewhat inarticulate have I been, I fear. Something I had to say. Don’t know that I have said it. All seems confused, incoherent, inarticulate.”⁵ “Nothing anywhere has clear outline. Everything is cloud and foam...”⁶ Looking back in 1914 to this period of his career, Yeats wrote: “... when I had finished *The Wanderings of Oisín*, dissatisfied with its yellow and dull green, with all the overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds.”⁷ Remarking with some distaste, in his own work as well as that of others of his generation, “the slight sentimental sensuality”, the lingering “between spirit and sense”,⁸ Yeats determined to abandon artifice and ornament, the tapestry-like quality that marked his verse;⁹ he would turn instead to “all that is simple, popular, traditional,

⁴ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), 63. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Yeats’ letters will be to this edition, hereafter cited as *Letters*.

⁵ *Letters*, 84.

⁶ *Letters*, 88.

⁷ *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1958), 48. The references will be to this edition, hereafter cited as *Autobiography*.

⁸ *Autobiography*, 218.

⁹ In the late book *Dramatis Personae*, Yeats “deprecatingly referred” — the phrase is Ellmann’s — to his early play *The Countess Cathleen* as a “piece of tapestry” (*Autobiography*, 297), and again in the same essay as “tapestry-like” (293). As Ellmann has pointed out, the word had earlier appeared “in a description of *The Shadowy Waters* (1899), where Yeats declared a few years after its publication, his ‘endeavour was to create for a few people who love symbol, a play that will be more ritual than a play, and leave upon the mind an impression like that of tapestry where the forms only half-reveal themselves amid the shadowy folds ...’” (*The Identity of Yeats*, 21). The word *tapestry* (or its equivalent) has often served as a convenient tag for critics of the early verse. Among others, see, for example, David Daiches: “Having abandoned incantatory poetry and tapestry verse ...” (*Poetry and the Modern World* [Chicago, 1940], 161); Ellmann: “Yet while Yeats’ early verse resembles the tapestry of the Pre-Raphaelites ...”; “Of the three major developments in his early verse, its Irish setting, its tapestry-like effects ...” (*The Identity of Yeats*, 23 and 38). Blackmur, perhaps adapting another of Yeats’ own descriptions (“I made my song a coat / covered with embroideries”) writes of “the embroidered brocade of his [Yeats’] early

emotional".¹⁰ He had discovered the power of "vivid speech", of words that expressed "the actual thoughts of a man at a passionate moment of life".¹¹ In the late essay which he intended as a general introduction to a final collected edition of his work, Yeats repeated for the last time what he had begun to learn in the 1890's: "I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech. I wanted to write in whatever language comes most naturally when we soliloquise, as we do all day long, upon the events of our own lives ..."¹² The insistent repetition in the late letters to Dorothy Wellesley — "natural words in the natural order", "spoken words and spoken syntax", "verse direct and natural as spoken words"¹³ — is, in effect, the final expression of what was clearly, as Ellmann points out, early advice: "In a letter to George Russell, probably written in 1898, he [Yeats] urges him to eliminate from his poem 'Carrowmare' the word 'ere', as being 'a conventional bit of poetic diction', and suggests changing two-lines because 'out of the natural order of the words'."¹⁴

Plainly, much of Yeats' poetry — whether 'early' or 'late' — reflects the qualities that he ascribes to it, and his critics have often been content to paraphrase or simply to repeat his observations, noting in the early verse "a dreamy sweetness", the "tapestry-like effects", the "wavering" rhythms, and in the later work the movement toward the real world in poems "spare, hard and sinewy",¹⁵ cast into the unmistakable accent of vivid, personal speech. Until the 1950's, however, the major critical studies were directed in general not to a more serious investigation of Yeats' poetic style, but rather to an exploration of the influences that

verse" (*Language as Gesture* [New York, 1953], 112), and Babette Deutsch observes that "his earliest lyrics ... embroider pre-Raphaelite flowers on the hem of Irish legendry ..." (*Poetry in Our Time* [New York, 1958], 254).

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, 247.

¹¹ *Autobiography*, 68.

¹² W. B. Yeats, *Essay and Introductions* (New York, 1961), 521. Hereafter cited as *Essays*.

¹³ *Letters*, 850, 845, and 870.

¹⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), 151.

¹⁵ This phrase, that of F. R. Leavis (*New Bearings in English Poetry* [London, 1932], 42), is typical. Ellmann writes: "The new verse [after 1916] is more spare, the images are exactly delimited by the words, every shadow is removed" (*Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, 212); John Unterecker: "... a poetry founded on the lean eloquence of speech" (*A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* [New York, 1959], 95); A. G. Stock: "Yeats began to write with a hard detachment which is exactly what was missing from the incense-clouded visions of *The Wind Among the Reeds*" (*W. B. Yeats, His Poetry and Thought* [Cambridge, 1961], 91).

shaped his verse: Pre-Raphaelitism, the French symbolist movement, his experience of the theater, (what he called) "a miserable love affair" with Maud Gonne, his discovery of the metaphysical poets, the intimate contact with Ezra Pound and through him with Oriental drama, his involvement in Irish politics; above all, perhaps, Yeats' interest in the occult, which found expression after his marriage in the pseudo-philosophic 'system' expounded at length in the successive editions of *A Vision*.¹⁶

More recently, the commentators have extended their critical attention to the inner structures of the poems as well; some among them, avoiding the temptation to describe, after the manner of Yeats himself, in metaphorical terms, have achieved suggestive beginnings toward a more complete stylistic definition of the differences between the early and the later poems — particularly in the areas of diction, imagery and symbol.¹⁷ The occasional studies of Yeats' rhythms, however, have remained on the whole superficial and intuitive in character.¹⁸ Perhaps because (again like Yeats) his critics sense that prosody is the most certain of their

¹⁶ Hall and Steinmann have included in their collection of critical essays *The Permanence of Yeats* (first published in 1950) a representative sample of such studies. The earlier of Ellmann's excellent book-length studies, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, a critical biography, is perhaps the best of these.

¹⁷ The first of Thomas Parkinson's two books on Yeats (*W. B. Yeats, Self Critic: A Study of his Early Verse*, 1951), Henn's *The Lonely Tower* (1952), and Ellmann's second study (*The Identity of Yeats*, 1954) concern themselves at length with questions of style and mark in this respect a new direction in Yeats scholarship. Josephine Miles has included a perceptive account of Yeats' diction in her study *Eras and Modes in English Poetry* (Berkeley, 1957), and among dissertations on Yeats three in particular — Laura M. Franklin's "The Development of Yeats' Poetic Diction" (Northwestern University, 1956), Marilyn Denton's "The Form of Yeats' Lyric Poetry" (University of Wisconsin, 1957), and Sarah Helen Youngblood's "William Butler Yeats: The Mature Style" (University of Oklahoma, 1958) — explore in some detail various aspects of Yeats' poetic technique.

¹⁸ With the exception of Miss Youngblood (who has devoted a chapter of her thesis to Yeats' versification) and Mr. Parkinson, whose recent study, *W. B. Yeats, the Later Poetry*, includes a consideration of Yeats' "prosodic idiom", no one has attempted a thorough study of Yeats' rhythmic practice. Miss Youngblood, observing that "versification is without question the least discussed aspect of Yeats' work" (88), acknowledges herself a pioneer and emphasizes the tentative character of her remarks. Mr. Parkinson, on the contrary, has attempted a more complete description of the rhythmic structure. The final account, however, in which he locates Yeats as prosodist within the dual metrical tradition of syllable counting and stress prosodies — at times within the limits of a single poem — suggests a certain weakness in Parkinson's theory somewhat akin to Yeats' own. (Yeats, it will be remembered, had written in 1897 to Robert Bridges: "I too would much like to discuss with you questions of rhythm, for though I work very hard at my rhythm, I have but little science on the matter and as a result probably offend often. Without a consistent science it is difficult to distinguish between license and freedom" [*Letters*, 287].)

instincts, it is still the subject of which we are most ignorant.¹⁹ To dispel this ignorance — at least in part — and to make possible a more complete and accurate stylistic definition, I propose to present in the following chapters a detailed description (based on a method of analysis defined in Chapter I) of the rhythmic structure of an extended sample of Yeats' verse. Such a study should provide an objective norm for the evaluation of existing descriptions of Yeats' versification and a clearer understanding of the nature of his stylistic development, an understanding that will assist, in turn, toward a more precise definition of 'periods' in Yeats' long career as poet.

¹⁹ In a letter to Edith Shackleton Head (August 10, 1937), Yeats wrote: "You will see how bothered I am when I get to prosody — because it is the most **certain of my** instincts, it is the subject of which I am most ignorant." (*Letters*, 896.)

I

PRELIMINARIES TO ANALYSIS

THE TEXT. In the definitive edition of his poems (London, 1949), Yeats retained a total of 11,345 lines of verse. The 3040 line sample — approximately 25% of the total — which forms the basis of this study has been determined proportionately, that is, I have selected for analysis approximately 25% of the total number of lines in each of the sixteen sections into which the final text is divided:

	Section Title	Total Lines	% of Total	No. of 11 Analyzed
A	"The Wanderings of Oisín"	901	7.9	238
B	"The Rose"	583	5.1	155
C	"Crossways"	568	5.0	152
D	"The Wind Among the Reeds"	528	4.6	139
E	"The Old Age of Queen Maeve"	154	1.3	40
F	"Baile and Aillinn"	207	1.8	55
G	"In the Seven Woods"	272	2.3	74
H	"The Shadowy Waters"	677	5.9	178
I	"From The Green Helmet"	261	2.3	71
J	"Responsibilities"	1003	8.8	267
K	"The Wild Swans at Coole"	1232	10.8	327
L	"Michael Robartes and the Dancer"	494	4.3	132
M	"The Tower"	1310	11.5	361
N	"The Winding Stair"	1201	10.5	324
O	"From A Full Moon in March"	343	3.0	97
P	"Last Poems"	1611	14.2	430
	Total:	11,345		3040

To insure analysis of what is in fact the 'early' style (rather than 'late' revision), I have based my readings of the earlier poems — those drawn from sections A through J¹ — on the texts of the earliest collected editions of Yeats' poems instead of on the definitive (London) edition.² Beginning with K, however, that is, with "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1919), I have based my readings on the definitive text of 1949.³

THE READINGS. With their publication of *An Outline of English Structure*,⁴ Trager and Smith provided a decisive impetus toward prosodic analysis based on the findings of modern linguists. In subsequent articles both men expanded and clarified — in areas of vital interest to the student of rhythmic structure — their initial condensed presentation.⁵ In my readings of Yeats' poems I have adopted what is basically the position of Trager and Smith with respect to stress and juncture. Still following Smith, I have at times incorporated into my markings (see n.8 below) some indication of the allophonic weight carried by the second of two successive syllables bearing the same stress phoneme by doubling the secondary stress mark to note a secondary stress in excess of an adjacent secondary stress (o ò ô ó; Hockett's term 'reduced primary' — in spite of Mr. Trager's objections to it — would seem of practical use in these instances⁶). I have not, however, attempted to follow Mr. Smith's specifications with respect to the fixed degrees of stress which he assigns to the various word-classes in English (in "Towards Redefining English

¹ Throughout this study I shall use the letter abbreviations (A, B, C, etc.) to refer to the larger sections or blocks of poems.

² For a complete listing of the texts analyzed and of the editions from which the texts are drawn, see Appendix A. Because the edition from which I have taken the texts of the "Rose" poems antedates that on which I have based my readings of the "Crossways" block, I have reversed in my chronological listing the order of these two sections as they appear in the definitive edition of 1949.

³ Since *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (ed. Peter Allt and Russell Alspach [New York, 1957]) reprints both the definitive text and the variations from this text as these occurred in earlier editions of Yeats' work, my references to the poems will be to this edition — against which I have checked the original texts — cited in the notes and running text as *Variorum* and *V.* respectively. I have indicated in Appendix A the bibliographical number which the editors of the *Variorum* have assigned to the editions of Yeats' work from which I have drawn the early texts, that is, through J (1914).

⁴ *SILOP*, 3 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1951).

⁵ See, for example, Trager's essay "Some Thoughts on Juncture", *SIL*, 16 (1962), 11-22, and Smith's earlier article "Towards Redefining English Prosody", *SIL*, 14 (1959), 68-76.

⁶ See *A Course In Modern Linguistics* (New York, 1958) and Trager's review of it in *SIL*, 14 (1959), 77-81.