

HELEN VENDLER

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## OUR SECRET DISCIPLINE

*Yeats and Lyric Form*



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For Seamus Heaney and Marie Heaney,  
friends that have been friends indeed.

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

Yeats hoped that his own ballads and songs would actually be sung. Having finished the Parnell poem, he wrote, "I have lately written a song in defense of Parnell . . . a drinking song to a popular tune & will have it sung from the Abbey stage at Xmas" (#6717). Later, he added: "I shall not be happy until I hear that it is sung by Irish undergraduates at Oxford under Gilbert Murray's nose" (#6731).

The ballads are not, perhaps, the first poems by Yeats that an anthologist of modern poetry would choose to represent him by; and with few exceptions (notably "Easter 1916") they have not passed into folk-memory as Yeats wistfully hoped they might. But they are for Yeats the robust and earthy magnetic pole that opposes (and sometimes incorporates) the equally strong metaphysical pole representing the "complexities of mire and blood." The spindle of Yeatsian necessity needed both poles to keep it in motion.

## ~ TROUBLING THE TRADITION:

### YEATS AT SONNETS

It is no surprise that Yeats wrote sonnets; he was, after all, a poet intensely interested in all verse possibilities. However, the sonnet invites particular attention because it is one of the two formats (the ballad is the other) that stayed steadily with him all his life. (In Yeats's hands, each of these forms migrated, in its social character, toward the other; he was capable of giving, in "The Three Bushes," a metaphysical sophistication to the folk ballad, and in "High Talk," a spoken folk force to the courtly sonnet structure.) Yeats chose the sonnet form for some of his most famous poems—among them "At the Abbey Theatre," "While I, from that reed-throated whisperer," "Leda and the Swan," and "Meru," to name only those that are recognizably fourteen-line pentameter poems with a sonnet structure, if not always with conventional rhyme-patterns.

What the sonnet meant to Yeats, historically speaking, was verse consciously aware of itself as written, not oral; verse from a European court tradition; verse knowing itself to be artifice, and often speaking about its own art; verse (although of Italian origin) associated with the essential English lyric tradition, from Wyatt and Surrey through Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats. Precisely because of its centrality to English literature, the sonnet compelled from Yeats both his literary allegiance and his nationalist disobedience. When we wonder why Yeats wrote so few "proper" sonnets, we can find the answer, I think, in his distinctive mixture of that allegiance and that disobedience. My topic here is what Yeats did with the sonnet: why he took it up, how he modernized it, and how—although he was writing in English—he made it Irish. I believe that certain poems of his are better understood if we consider them as sonnets, even if they appear to be odd or "defective" ones. (I will be defining "sonnet" in a special way here, in order to include some poems of twelve or thirteen lines, for reasons I will give as I proceed.)

The sonnet came to Yeats in two basic versions: the two-part Petrarchan form (octave and sestet) and the four-part Shakespearean form. The Pe-

trarchan sonnet, because of its two-part verse structure, falls easily into such dialectical structures as question and answer, or one view versus another view. The Shakespearean sonnet, with its four parts—three alternately rhymed quatrains and a couplet—is capable of teasingly complex logical structures. Yeats, with his attachment to antinomies, was naturally drawn to the Petrarchan opposition of parts; yet with his at least equal attraction to multiple perspectives, he was interested by the possibilities of the fourfold structure. Unable to leave either alone, he ended up writing both.

Yeats composed a Petrarchan sonnet at nineteen, and published one at twenty-one, but it was not until he was forty-seven that he wrote his first full Shakespearean sonnet ("At the Abbey Theatre"). Yeats's long avoidance of the true Shakespearean sonnet—while suggesting his love for it by writing numerous poems in blocks of three Shakespearean quatrains—was, I suspect, sustained by his nationalist wish to seem independent of English forms, and especially of court-forms from the Elizabethan era, when the plantation of Ireland by English settlers was being accomplished, and the extirpation of indigenous Irish culture was begun.

### First and Last Sonnets

Yeats's first extant sonnet ("Behold the man") was never published,<sup>1</sup> but soon enough, in 1886, he put into print a sonnet called "Remembrance"—like his first, a Petrarchan one. His last sonnet, "High Talk," was published posthumously. In spite of the half-century presence of the sonnet form in his work, it was a structure he used sparingly. He never undertook a sonnet sequence; instead, in his sequences (such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" or "Supernatural Songs") he assembled verse-structures of many different types. It was not the sonnet's capacity for linkage that interested him; he saw it as a short free-standing form. It appealed to Yeats, with its two or more potentially contrastive parts, as formally embodying—as a more linear structure could not—that quarrel with ourselves out of which, he said, we make poetry.

I begin this chapter by exhibiting the startling contrast between Yeats's first published sonnet and his last. I do this to point out not only the extended life-span of the form in his work but also the conspicuous changes it underwent. The 1886 Petrarchan "Remembrance" is a meditative sonnet with almost no thought-content: summed up, it says, "Remembering thee [thrice repeated], during the hours of this night, I muse, while the light fades, and the evening star rises; just now, my soul rose up and touched it":

Remembering thee, I search out these faint flowers  
Of rhyme; remembering thee, this crescent night  
While o'er the buds, and o'er the grass-blades, bright  
And clinging with the dew of odorous showers,  
With purple sandals sweep the grave-eyed hours—  
Remembering thee, I muse, while fades in flight  
The honey-hearted leisure of the light,  
And hanging o'er the hush of willow bowers,

Of ceaseless loneliness and high regret  
Sings the young wistful spirit of a star  
Enfolden in the shadows of the East,  
And silence holding revelry and feast;  
Just now my soul rose up and touched it, far  
In space, made equal with a sigh, we met.

(704-705)

The young poet attempts to give a "Shakespearean" effect in the last two lines by separating them grammatically (as a past-tense clause) from the preceding twelve present-tense lines. This languorous sonnet tells us that although it observes the Italian form in sentiment and in rhyme, its internal structure comes closer to that of the Shakespearean sonnet, offering a closing thought-couplet preceded by three "remembering thee" clusters of thought—the first concerned with the "faint flowers" of rhyme, the second with the passage of "the grave-eyed hours" of time, and the third with the young star that sings "of ceaseless loneliness and high regret." It is as if a poet tempted by the four-part English sonnet were refusing visible homage to it by "concealing" a Shakespearean structure of thought under a veil of Petrarchan rhyme—just as Shakespeare himself had often "concealed" a two-part Petrarchan thought-structure within his four-part prosodic template.

After reading this dreamy early sonnet, what a shock it is (and not altogether a welcome one) to see what the sonnet has become in Yeats's hands by 1938. "High Talk," his last sonnet (spoken by a persona named Malachi), is a fourteen-line poem, yes; a white space separates it into octave and sestet, yes; but it is anomalously composed in rough hexameters. (Each hexameter line perhaps punningly attempts to make up, by its "extra" metrical foot, for some of the deficiency in height that Malachi reports of his modern fifteen-foot stilts compared with the twenty-foot stilts of his grandfather.) In one of Yeats's "magical" controls, the lines (except for 6, 7, and 14)

display fifteen syllables, because Malachi has fifteen-foot stilts. "High Talk" is made formally unconventional not only by its hexameters but also by its rhyming couplets (*aa, bb, etc.*), a verse-form that in late Yeats signifies a reductive and "primitive" moment.

This "wild" late sonnet is declaimed in tones very far from the muted ones of *fin-de-siècle* murmuring that arise from the 1886 "Remembrance." Yet "High Talk" belongs thematically to the conventional sonnet-tradition because its topic is its own aesthetic: it defends, in the despairing and exultant language of the Yeatsian end-days, a consciously elevated, "stilted" art. Yeats draws its ironic title from Shelley's "hopes of high talk with the departed dead" in "Ode to Intellectual Beauty"; Malachi has lost such hopes since, as he says, "whatever I learned has run wild."<sup>2</sup> Malachi Stilt-Jack is a populist avatar of the tenth-century high king Malachi (commemorated in Moore's "Let Erin remember") who "wore the collar of gold / That he won from the proud [Danish] invader." Yeats's Malachi speaks an apocalyptic demotic in his primitively rhyming couplets, their hexameter a retrospective echo of high, "stilted," epic style. (Yeats's first letter, to his sister, says, "I am getting stilts.")<sup>3</sup>

The octave of "High Talk" takes place indoors in a village. The last inheritor of tradition, the artisan Malachi, chisels and planes in solitude the wood for new stilts to replace the taller ones of his grandfather, which have been stolen. While working, Malachi imagines that when he has finished, he will replace the "poor shows" of circus parades (with their obedient and caged animals) by stalking freely through the village on his completed stilts to gratify—he says in self-derision—children and women looking for diversion. No adult male audience is mentioned:

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.  
What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,  
And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher,  
Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence or a fire.  
Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but poor shows,  
Because children demand daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes,  
Because women in the upper storeys demand a face at the pane,  
That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel and plane.

The sestet of the sonnet, surprisingly, moves not into the imagined parade down village streets but into wild nature. Announcing that his stilts and his persona have been metaphors, Malachi finds himself, in his sestet, outside

society altogether; he is beside the sea at the break of dawn, in the company of unloosed creatures—a barnacle goose and those sea-waves called in legend the horses of Mannanan:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,  
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.  
All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose  
Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks  
loose;  
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;  
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

(622-623)

"Wildness" had long attracted Yeats. As far back as 1901, he had written to William Sharp, "I have an advantage over you in having a very fierce nation to write for. . . . It is like riding a wild horse. If one's hands fumble or one's knees loosen one is thrown" (*CL*, III, 125). The "wild" style that would match that of a "fierce nation" was not yet invented by the Yeats of the 1886 "Remembrance," but "High Talk" exhibits that style "run wild," recalling the Irish Pegasus who was to be let loose at the end of "The Fascination of What's Difficult."

To take the measure of Yeats's evolution in this genre, we might compare Malachi's grotesque late aubade to the youthful trochaic tetrameter aubade called "A Dawn-Song," which follows the sonnet "Remembrance" in the *Variorum Poems*:

Wake, *ma cushla*, sleepy-headed;  
Trembles as a bell of glass  
All heaven's floor, with vapours bedded—  
And along the mountains pass,  
With their mushrooms lightly threaded  
On their swaying blades of grass,  
Lads and lasses, two and two,  
Gathering mushrooms in the dew.

(705)

The genre of this aubade is pastoral (it is in the line of Milton's tetrameter "L'Allegro"); the genre of Malachi's aubade is apocalyptic. There are no erotic lads and lasses in "High Talk," and by its end, "heaven's floor" is in-

habited by the vigorous barnacle goose while the horses of the sea bare their teeth. These savage inhabitants would burst open any normal English sonnet or aubade, while the extravagance of Malachi Stilt-Jack not only tolerates but invites them.

Yeats, with the example of Sidney and Shakespeare before him, feels himself within his rights in placing into the sonnet consideration of his aesthetic and his audience; but rhetorical elevation, "high talk," has in Malachi's populist translation become the elevation of great-granddad's stilts, and the audience for poetry (once the Shakespearean "eyes of all posterity") has been reconceived in trivial terms, as children desiring a giant father-image and frustrated women seeking titillation from a voyeur at their window. Yet tradition—from Malachi's collar of gold to Malachi's collar, from Astrophel's borrowed Italian stilts of language to Malachi's home-made ones, from Petrarch-father-of-the-sonnet to Yeats-child-of-the-genre—links this sonnet to its Renaissance predecessors. "High Talk," in its formal enactment of the etymology of "tradition"—"a handing across"—goes so far as almost to obliterate, through its bridged pairs of line 10, the hexameter's normal medial caesura: "From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child." The caesura "ought" to occur between "stilt" and "to"; the difficulty of placing one there makes the words group themselves semantically (in groups of two) rather than metrically, forcibly calling the reader's attention to the visible handing-over.

Yeats follows sonnet tradition in "baring the device," exposing the artificial nature of his construct: "All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all." Yet the metaphor cunningly survives its apparent repudiation; "I stalk on," says the speaker two lines later, and it is his internalized stilts that make him able to "stalk," one-two, one-two, the measure marked by the sound of the stilts, dividing the hexameter line into four parts (as we include a pause at the medial caesura and at the line-end): "Far up | in the stretches | of night | pause | night splits | and the dawn | breaks loose | pause." The exultation of the sea-horses—teeth bared, laughing—makes them kin to that "beast" (as Yeats wrote when introducing his play *The Resurrection*) "that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction." "High Talk," by means of its forms "run wild," voices Yeats's view that the "high" rhetoric of the sonnet tradition had collapsed with the rest of European culture in the interwar period. We understand Yeats's cultural commentary here only if we see Malachi's apocalyptic images, his primitive couplets, his aberrant prosody, and his exultant despair as the formal ruination of the courtly European sonnet by a new primitivism.

### Apprenticeship

During the half-century between the 1886 sentimental conventionality of "Remembrance" and the 1938 grotesque stylistic populism of "High Talk," Yeats engaged in a lengthy investigation of the formal possibilities of various aspects of the genre: the sonnet's constituent parts—octaves and sestets, quatrains, tercets, and couplets; monosyllabic versus polysyllabic rhymes; and construction in pentameter and hexameter. Some of this investigation may appear purely technical, but technique was never, for Yeats, without conceptual meaning. Thus, when we find him in his twenties (1892) truncating a Petrarchan sonnet by Ronsard ("Quand vous serez bien vieille") into an English pentameter douzain under the title "When You are Old," we immediately ask what he had in mind in writing this douzain, and later, many more. Did he not like sonnets? We know that he did. Did he think Ronsard untranslatable in sonnet form? We know he did not, because the later sonnet "At the Abbey Theatre," adapted from Ronsard's "Tyard, on me blasmoit," has the proper fourteen lines. Why, then, in "translating" "When You are Old," does Yeats prefer a douzain—three Petrarchan quatrains employing different embraced rhymes (with the inner rhymes indented in the first printing)—to a full sonnet; and why does he depart, in his version, from Ronsard's thematic material? Here is Yeats:<sup>4</sup>

When you are old and gray and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book  
And slowly read and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.  
  
How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.  
  
And bending down beside the glowing bars  
Murmur, a little sad, 'From us fled Love.  
He paced upon the mountains far above,  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.'

(120–121)

Yeats's model, "Quand vous serez bien vieille," exhibits a characteristic Petrarchan break at the beginning of the sestet, in this case, a break

in pronouns. The octave is a prophecy with “vous” in the subject-position; but the first two lines of the sestet, while still implicitly addressing the beloved “vous,” chillingly introduce a first-person grammatical subject—the speaker, when he will be dead and buried:

Je serai sous la terre, et, fantôme sans os,  
Sous les ombres myrteux je prendrai mon repos.

And though the poem returns to “vous” in its closing command (“Vivez, si m’en croyez,” etc.), the hollow first-person authorial *voix d’outretombe* has exercised a powerful interruptive effect. Yeats, reworking Ronsard, eliminates that first-person rupture and writes a small continuous exhortation in “You”: “When you are old, take down this book, and read, and dream, and murmur ‘From us fled Love.’” He thereby preserves homogeneity of mood and referent at the expense of the French poem’s tension between the narrative of the mistress’s living future and the poet’s somber vision of his own rest in the grave. Yeats’s “translation” offers a single mourning parabola of narration, climaxing in its central third-person description of the “one man” who “loved the pilgrim soul in you.”<sup>6</sup> The creation of a coherent emotional “atmosphere,” rising, climaxing, and falling, as in “Remembrance,” continues to be Yeats’s aim in the nineties. The true inner quarrel of the binary Petrarchan sonnet is too much for him, as are the conflicting perspectives of the four-part Shakespearean sonnet. He therefore continues with the more manageable unifiable pentameter douzain, a form to which he returns (with variable rhyming) all his life, down to the year before his death. (The last douzain in pentameter, as we shall see in Chapter XII, is the couplet-rhymed “Whence had they come” in the 1935 *Supernatural Songs*; but Yeats later, in 1938, composed a douzain in unrhymed hexameter, “Beautiful Lofty Things,” to be discussed when I take up Yeats’s rare forms in Chapter XIII.)

In the same month (October 1891) in which he wrote his Ronsardian embraced-rhyme douzain “When You are Old,” Yeats composed his first Shakespearean douzain, “The Sorrow of Love.” I reproduce it here as it first appeared in *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), where it was addressed to the beloved and consisted of three end-stopped Shakespearean quatrains in alternating rhyme, with alternate lines indented.<sup>7</sup> Like “When You are Old,” “The Sorrow of Love” is founded on a parabolic structure: we see a visually and aurally pleasing natural scene which conceals “earth’s old and weary cry”; then there occurs the troubling of the speaker’s boyish soul by a

girl with “red mournful lips”; after his acquaintance with erotic love, the speaker, no longer innocent, finds the elements of the natural scene transformed. They now reveal life’s underlying tragedy, and are “shaken with earth’s old and weary cry” as they metamorphose from natural facts into symbols of the wounded heart:

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,  
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,  
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves  
Had hid away earth’s old and weary cry.  
  
And then you came with those red mournful lips,  
And with you came the whole of the world’s tears,  
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,  
And all [the]<sup>8</sup> burden of her myriad years.  
  
And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,  
The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,  
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,  
Are shaken with earth’s old and weary cry.

(119–120)

Unity of movement is achieved in this douzain, as in “When You are Old,” by the elimination of any real psychological conflict; the writer (in contrast to the youthful speaker of whom he writes) knows from the beginning the tragedy which the young man, instructed by frustrated love, comes to discover permeating and transforming the formerly neutral, and sometimes even joyous, scenery. (The homogeneity of tone is conferred by Yeats-the-writer, obeying his “nineties” aesthetic of the unbroken note; if the changed feelings of the young man were governing the poem, there would have been a more painful break in tonality.)

In Yeats’s hands, the sonnet—whether Petrarchan or Shakespearean in its quatrain-rhyme—is for a long time compressed into twelve lines, three quatrains, of a continuously evolving parabolic arc, with a homogeneity of effect in which the end, though it may intellectually (as here) contradict the beginning, formally mirrors it. No couplet is allowed to add its concise mood-sharpening bite at the end. “I like,” said Yeats in a lost letter quoted by its recipient, Lafcadio Hearn, “to close so short a poem with a single unbroken mood” (*CL*, III, 101).

Although the binary structure of the Italian sonnet—a form which usu-

ally presents at least two perspectives on its subject—eventually begins to creep into Yeats's sonnet-work, it does so at first in the unthreatening form of a complementary reciprocity between two people. Yeats's first overtly Irish sonnet, "The Harp of Aengus" (an unrhymed sonnet, structurally Petrarchan in its two parts), splits into octave and sestet in order to accommodate the dual agency of Edain and Aengus as together they make a strung harp (their story is repeated in the 1903 "Baile and Aillinn"). First, Edain, using her lover's hair, weaves seven harp-strings; later, after she has been malevolently transformed (by Midhir's wife) into a fly, Aengus makes a harp-frame out of "Druid apple-wood" to awaken the strings:

Edain came out of Midhir's hill, and lay  
Beside young Aengus in his tower of glass,  
Where time is drowned in odour-laden winds  
And Druid moons, and murmuring of boughs,  
And sleepy boughs, and boughs where apples made  
Of opal and ruby and pale chrysolite  
Awake unsleeping fires; and wove seven strings,  
Sweet with all music, out of his long hair,  
Because her hands had been made wild by love.  
When Midhir's wife had changed her to a fly,  
He made a harp with Druid apple-wood  
That she among her winds might know he wept;  
And from that hour he has watched over none  
But faithful lovers.

Edain is the agent in the "octave" (lines 1–9); the (conventional) spillover of line 8 into line 9 enacts her being made "wild by love" as she weaves her harp-strings. Aengus is the agent in the "sestet" (lines 10–14), carving a harp-frame for the strings in order to communicate with Edain after he has lost her. Her metamorphosis out of the human realm separates in time the two actions within the sonnet—weaving by her, carving by him. Here, no prolonged connection can occur between lovers on earth; they must endure successivity, not interpenetration, of agency. Because the actions of Edain and Aengus remain complementary and not antagonistic, the true conflict-potential of the Petrarchan division into parts remains unused. Nonetheless, in this narrative sonnet<sup>9</sup> Yeats has at least moved away from meditative immobility, and has introduced an Irish myth of aesthetic creation into a

tradition which, in its continental and English manifestations, had been more hospitable to classical and Christian myth than to local folk material. Yeats marks his Irish sonnet as anomalous with respect to the European tradition not only by its abandonment of rhyme<sup>10</sup> and its use of folk material but also by its closing dimeter line, which leaves the rest of the fourteenth line open for Aengus to continue, into an indefinite expanding future, his ministry to "faithful lovers."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, at the age of thirty-seven, in "The Folly of Being Comforted" (reproduced here with its first, 1902, phrasing and punctuation), Yeats approaches, but does not reach, the conflict that he will find indispensable to the true sonnet. In this fourteen-line poem (written in rhymed couplets resembling those of "Adam's Curse," published later in the same year), Yeats constructs, to mimic conversation, an architectonic structure that is neither Petrarchan nor Shakespearean, dividing the poem into two sixains and a couplet. In the first six lines, a well-meaning friend assures the lover that his love-folly will surely wane (and he become wise) with the waning of his beloved's beauty; in the next six lines, the lover rebuts the friend by asserting the beloved's ever-increasing beauty; and in the closing couplet, the lover turns away from his interlocutor and instead addresses his own heart, crying out that the specious offered comfort cannot outlast his next glimpse of his beloved's face. Being comforted, ceasing to believe in the permanence of love, would be the true "folly":

One that is ever kind said yesterday:  
'Your well-beloved's hair has a thread of grey,  
And there are little creases about her eyes;  
Time can but make it easier to be wise,  
Though now it's hard, till trouble is at an end;  
And so be patient; be wise and patient friend.'  
But heart there is no comfort, not a grain;  
Time can but make her beauty over again  
Because of that great nobleness of hers;  
The fire that stirs about her when she stirs  
Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways  
When all the wild summer was in her gaze;  
O heart O heart if she would but turn her head,  
You would know the folly of being comforted.

(199–200)

The debate here does not take place within the lover himself, but rather between the persuading friend and the rebutting lover. The lover has never been persuaded at all: "But heart there is no comfort, not a grain." Given the absence of an internal quarrel, a division of the heart itself into warring factions, "The Folly of Being Comforted," for all its fourteen lines, lacks the antithetical perspectives of a true sonnet. At this point, although Yeats remains attracted to the brevity and concision of the quatorzain, he is not yet willing to face and reproduce the emotional contradictions within the speaker that the multiple parts of a sonnet exist to make formally evident.

### True Sonnets

The poems I have looked at so far represent Yeats's apprenticeship to the potential of the sonnet structure. We come now to his maturity. Yeats's first "real" sonnet—that is, one which follows the Petrarchan and Shakespearean principle of volatility of feeling and tone—is the title poem (dated August 1902) for his 1903 volume *In the Seven Woods*. Though unrhymed, it has the complexity of a persistent Yeatsian inner quarrel—his long-standing dispute between the pastoral and the apocalyptic—which we have already seen exemplified in the early versus the late aubade (and which is also lurking in the proposed division of poems into the categories "Arcadian" and "Irish" in his first volume, *The Wanderings of Oisin*). At first, the sonnet called "In the Seven Woods" seems to be setting up a homogeneous atmosphere resembling the ones found in Yeats's earlier "parabolic" douzains, "When You are Old" and "The Sorrow of Love": scene, interruption, tonal return. The first twelve lines of "In the Seven Woods" indeed trace an evolving parabola from pigeons and bees to pigeons and bees, but the homogeneity of that progress is interrupted in the middle by a bitter contrasting glance (here italicized). That glance is enclosed—as a negative climax berating English archaeological vandalism and the Irish celebrations of the coronation of Edward VII—within the two pastoral hums:

I have heard the pigeons of the Seven Woods  
Make their faint thunder, and the garden bees  
Hum in the lime tree flowers; *and put away*  
*The unavailing outcries and the old bitterness*  
That empty the heart. I have forgot awhile  
Tara uprooted, and new commonness  
Upon the throne and crying about the streets

*And hanging its paper flowers from post to post,*  
*Because it is alone of all things happy.*  
I am contented, for I know that Quiet  
Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart  
Among pigeons and bees . . .

If the poem ended there, at line 12, Yeats would be repeating the douzain-structure that he had already extracted from the sonnet form—a structure that answered his aesthetic needs for rise, climax, and fall, one that emphasized closure and reaffirmation. But because of the disturbance caused by "Tara uprooted, and new commonness / Upon the throne," he must press his art beyond a pastoral douzain. He therefore adds a disturbing sonnet-close, in which an apocalyptic personage supervenes upon pastoral allegory:

I am contented, for I know that Quiet  
Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart  
Among pigeons and bees, while the Great Archer,  
Who but awaits His hour to shoot, still hangs  
A cloudy quiver over Parc-na-Lee.

(198)

Besides the Marvellian garden-personification of Quiet (here Hibernicized via Dante's "Ego Dominus Tuus" into something wild and heart-consuming),<sup>12</sup> there is an additional mythological inhabitant of the Coole woods—a "Great Archer, / Who but awaits His hour to shoot." This unspecified executioner, who dominates this title poem of *In the Seven Woods* (a volume subtitled "Being Poems chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age"), belongs to that congeries of beings who inhabit Yeats's apocalyptic poems and await their "hour." As the Archer "awaits His hour," he owns the same words—deriving from the Messianic phrase of Jesus, "My hour is not yet come"—as the Rough Beast, whose "hour [has] come round at last" and the Secret Rose, of whom the poet says, "surely thine hour has come."

Yeats said of the sonnet "In the Seven Woods" that it was "much more likely to please Irish people than any [poem] I have done" (CL, III, 94). Its single-sentence five-line "sestet" is the first in Yeats to employ the declarative phrase "I know." "I am contented, for I know," begins the sestet, looking forward to two greater sestets—"The darkness drops again, but now I know" ("The Second Coming") and "Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest . . . / know" ("Meru"). These declarations recall an even more famous

sestet about knowledge, in which the acquisition of knowledge is put as a question: "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" ("Leda and the Swan," discussed below). We can see from these instances of sestets pursuing a final sort of knowledge that Yeats has by now fully internalized the need to present, in the octave of a sonnet, a genuine problem, to which (in these cases) a sestet will reply that something has (or may have) at last become intelligible or known. Embittered by the "uprooting" of Tara and Dublin's craven celebrations, the poet resolves his bitterness by lengthening his perspective: when the Great Archer at last looses an arrow from his cloudy quiver, Tara will be restored and Ireland will become independent.

Yeats's inner quarrel between his wish to preserve his aesthetic quiet among pigeons and bees and his reactive ideological bitterness—the disequilibrium that so disturbed his writing life—has been staged here as an inner sonnet-quarrel between pastoral and apocalypse. We think, as we first read "In the Seven Woods," that the poet has found aesthetic solace when he returns, in line 12, to the pigeons and bees; but that Arcadian climax leads to a further, more dangerous, "Irish" apocalyptic climax, that of the Great Archer. As an archetype of Apocalypse, living in a specific part of the seven woods of Coole Park, the Archer can be Irish even if unnamed as such. The Archer has a Miltonic function (to avenge those slaughtered heroes whose bones are being disturbed in the Tara excavation), but his allegorical being is esoteric, and peculiar to Yeats's form of occult nationalism. Wild Quiet and the Great Archer, taken together, represent Yeats's perennially divided Muse. But despite the architectonic satisfactions of "In the Seven Woods," the poem is still evading, in its abandon of rhyme, the issue of rhymed sonnet-structures, and what such rhymed units can be made to mean for Yeats as he inherits them from Petrarch and Shakespeare and bends them to his own uses.

When, six years later, Yeats writes "No Second Troy," he has become aware of the defect within his earlier Shakespearean douzain "The Sorrow of Love": that it did not reflect the actual inner momentum of the Shakespearean sonnet, which is a continually evolving meditation eventually reformulated or countered by a concise and often epigrammatic couplet. Yet he continues to avoid, in "No Second Troy," writing a full Shakespearean imitation. What will Yeats do to make "No Second Troy" exemplify, though it remains a douzain, the inner conflict of a Shakespearean sonnet? And how will he give its traditional matter—love, that staple of sonnets—some Yeatsian individuality?

The structure of "No Second Troy" is determined by its syntactic order-

ing into four questions reflecting on the congruence, or lack of congruence, between a person's outer deeds and that same person's inner being. The first five lines question Maud Gonne's *doing*; the next five lines question her *being*; a single line then asks whether her *doing* was a necessary consequence of her *being*; and a single closing question justifies her *doing* from the nature of her *being*. Although Yeats printed the douzain as a solid block, I separate it here (to clarify its four-part syntactic structure) into its four successive questions:

Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
With misery, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?

What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as a fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern?

Why, what could she have done being what she is?  
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

(256)

Even though there are only three *formal* units here—the three Shakespearean quatrains—the syntax refuses to obey that prosodic scheme and sets itself up as a counter-force, declaring that the poem, like a Shakespearean sonnet, actually consists of four logical units: its four questions. Question 1 is the first "quatraining," expressing the poet's discomfort with Maud Gonne's apparently petty actions; question 2, corresponding to the second quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet, opposes to her petty actions the nobility of her nature; question 3 (line 11) performs the function of the Shakespearean third quatrain, summing up the two previous ones that have sketched Gonne's *doing* against her *being*, revealing in its central clash of verbs the nugget of the poem's existential conflict between deeds and inward being—"Why, what could she have *done*, *being* what she was?"; and question 4 (line 12) performs the function of a countering Shakespearean couplet, saying that in a heroic age Gonne would have played a role like that of Helen, a

role in which her doing would be commensurate with her being; but in our unheroic context, deeds will be debased, since there is no second Troy to be placed *en jeu*. Dublin is no Troy; its quarrels are not epic ones. The gyre, in its historical spiral, has once again cast up the archetype of noble Beauty, but has not located it in a commensurate historical moment. The tension between worldly doing and Platonic being, existence and essence, was for Yeats another version of the conflict between the real and the ideal, and the felt intensity of the poem springs from these irreconcilable pulls in himself, as he strove to estimate Maud Gonne aright by holding within a single poem her reality and his justice. These three quatrains have a wiry Shakespearean strength in their overlapping formal and syntactic structures, but the poem's exclusively interrogative syntax and its (recognizable) Irish heroine prevent its being a mere imitation of Renaissance English form. Yeats is on his way, we can see, toward the four-part English sonnet, confident that he can adopt it (as he eventually will) without disloyalty to Ireland.

I want to spend a moment on another Yeatsian sonnet-experiment, a thirteen-line poem called "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1910). Yeats's prose draft in the *Memoirs* of September 1909 says:

Subject: To complain of the fascination of what's difficult. It spoils spontaneity and pleasure and it wastes time. Repeat the line ending 'difficult' three times, and rhyme on bolt, exult, colt, jolt. One could use the thought of the wild-winged and unbroken colt must drag a cart of stones out of pride because it's difficult, and end by denouncing drama, accounts, public contests—all that's merely difficult. (*Memoirs*, 229)

Because Yeats's rhyme-recipe outlined here, if followed, would produce seven individual lines ending in the sound "-olt," it seems that what Yeats first had in mind was a fourteen-line poem in which every other line would end in "-olt." The actual poem, however, uses *difficult* only once, not thrice, as a rhyme-word. Nonetheless, of the four words that rhyme with *difficult* in the actual poem—*colt*, *jolt*, *dolt*, and *bolt*—three come from Yeats's original list. In the event, the poem ends up with thirteen lines rather than its first-envisioned fourteen, and we must, to understand Yeats's intent, understand his choice of truncated length.

"The Fascination of What's Difficult" is a poem of frustration and conflict. The country's divine Pegasus, a winged colt (art is young in Ireland, not yet grown), is longing to fly, yet is made by day into a cart horse and is tethered by night in a stable, while the poet, his destined rider, struggling to

bring the Abbey Theatre into being, occupies himself with "theatre business, management of men":

The fascination of what's difficult  
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent  
Spontaneous joy and natural content  
Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt  
That must, as if it had not holy blood  
Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,  
Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt  
As though it dragged road-metal. My curse on plays  
That have to be set up in fifty ways,  
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,  
Theatre business, management of men.  
I swear before the dawn comes round again  
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.

(260)

Though it falls short by one line, "The Fascination of What's Difficult" feels like a sonnet, not least because it begins with a perfect Petrarchan *abba* embraced quatrain-rhyme—*difficult, rent, content, colt*. But Yeats "cheats" on the Petrarchan demand by letting the final *a* line of quatrain 1 do double duty, serving (notionally) also as the initial *a* line of "quatrains" 2: [*colt*] *blood, cloud, jolt*. He also eases the Petrarchan scheme by introducing a new inner rhyme in the second "quatrains" instead of repeating within it the "-ent" rhyme from quatrain 1. These two indulgences give us a seven-line narrative Petrarchan "octave" that reads like this: *difficult, rent, content, colt, [colt] blood, cloud, jolt*. The octave does a characteristically Yeatsian spill (this time an indignant one) into the next half-line, as it ends its account of the metamorphosis of Pegasus into a cart-horse. And though the sestet of "The Fascination of What's Difficult" rhymes in conventional Petrarchan fashion (*plays, ways, dolt, men, again, bolt*), Yeats disobeys traditional rules in maintaining the octave rhyme-sound "-olt" into the sestet, making it echo throughout the poem as it unites phonetically the two parts of the "sonnet." In spite of its Petrarchan rhyme-scheme, the sestet of "The Fascination of What's Difficult," which replaces narration with performative speech-acts ("My curse on . . . / I swear"), exhibits an intellectual structure resembling that of a Shakespearean "sestet"—a quatrain followed by a couplet. The first four lines of the sestet continue the sustained complaint of

the poem, but the syntactically free-standing last two, in a sudden reversal, swear to break free of all managerial constraints.

In a casual reading, one might overlook both the implied sonnet-structure of "The Fascination of What's Difficult" and its absent fourteenth line, and might think that its originality lies in its Irish theme, its sudden performative curse, and its insertion of words like "road-metal" and "theatre business" into a piece that also contains Pegasus. And of course these features—a quotidian subject-matter, a closing burst from narrative into performative speech, and mixed factual and mythological diction—do form part of its originality as lyric utterance. Yet it would be a pity to miss altogether its defiance of the continental sonnet tradition (where Pegasus had sometimes found a home) as it asserts that the European Pegasus, rejuvenated, is now stabled in Ireland. The poem can be seen as Yeats's analogue to Whitman's nationalist boast about the Muse, "She's here, installed amid the kitchenware!" ("Song of the Exposition"). Yeats's rhyming would not be seen as transgressive, either, if we did not bring the sonnet template to mind. By the "missing" fourteenth line (recognizable, too, only by applying the sonnet template) Yeats intends to represent, I think, the airborne escape out the unbolted stable door of poet and Pegasus together. If we do not recognize the poem as a sonnet *manqué*, we miss the fine wit of the close, the "whoosh" of non-verbal air after the thirteenth line. (We have already seen such "missing" lines elsewhere, notably in the last part of "The Tower" and in Yeats's self-epitaph.)

Although the famous 1910 Coole Park poem now called "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation"<sup>13</sup> is in fact a Shakespearean douzain like "No Second Troy" (and is placed next to the parabolic douzain "These Are the Clouds"), it, too, feels like a sonnet, in part because of its preoccupation with the "ruins of time," an immemorial sonnet-topic. Yeats's diary entry of August 7, 1910, comments: "I wrote this poem on hearing the result of reduction of rent made by the courts. . . . This house has enriched my soul out of measure because here life moves within restraint through gracious forms" (NC, 93). The poem is a protest against Irish willingness to starve out, by the new land law, the architectural, governmental, and literary legacy—the eagle-gaze and eagle-thoughts and eagle-wings—of the Protestant Ascendancy:

How should the world be luckier if this house,  
Where passion and precision have been one  
Time out of mind, became too ruinous

To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?  
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow  
Where wings have memory of wings and all  
That comes of the best knit to the best? Although  
Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall,  
How should their luck run high enough to reach  
The gifts that govern men, and after these  
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech  
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness, and ease?

(264)

The poem (as it stands in its 1912 final version) is composed of three questions. Because the first of these is coterminous with the initial quatrain, the poem exhibits a fully Shakespearean beginning: a pentameter *abab* quatrain, syntactically self-enclosed. Such an opening (together with the block-like appearance of the poem on the page) makes the reader expect that a sonnet has begun to unfold. The second question needs only three lines, and corresponds structurally to the second quatrain of a regular Shakespearean sonnet. The third question, like the first, has a Shakespearean quatrain (lines 9–12) all to itself, though it is prefaced by an important two-line concession (lines 7–8). The two especially resonant questions, then, the first and the last, occur as full alternating-rhyme quatrains, and one almost feels, finishing the poem with those quatrains in the ear, that one has read a four-part Shakespearean argument: Question, Question, Concession, Question.

There is far greater complexity in this douzain than in the comparably interrogative douzain "No Second Troy." Because a question has been put by the speaker—"How should the world be luckier if this house fell into ruin?"<sup>14</sup>—we are inclined to look for an answer. And the speaker's later concession, preceding quatrain 3, suggests that he has already heard a provocative statement from an unseen interlocutor, who has generated the poet's response by saying "The world *would* be luckier if this house fell, because mean roof-trees would be the sturdier for its fall." The speaker's closing quatrain, with its reservations about the future potential of the mean roof-trees, is best heard as a rebuttal to the full argument of his implied interlocutor, who has said (we deduce) not only that the mean roof-trees would become economically sturdier but also that their inhabitants would (given the ruin of the Anglo-Irish hegemony) become self-governing and educated, freed from dependency and backwardness. But (Yeats-the-speaker replies in rebuttal), will the people of the mean roof-trees ever be able to govern

themselves as well as they have been governed? And will their writing, once they become literate, ever attain the status of literature?

Yeats, it seems, composes his poem largely as a rebuttal to the implied words of his populist (Catholic) interlocutor, who has asserted, before the poem began, that it would be luckier for the world if the new rent legislation passed, whatever its effect on great houses. Provoked, Yeats opens with a peremptory demand for a justification of that opinion: "How should the world be luckier in that case?" We read "Upon a House" better when we hear in it the concessions the poet makes as he considers the populist argument. He admits the possibility of his invisible opponent's claims—yes, with the departure of the Anglo-Irish "big house" and its inhabitants, the poor might well be economically better-off, and might take the reins of government, and might even perhaps become literate. But Yeats cannot in honesty forbear to defend his own culture by means of Platonic comparatives. There is, after all, he feels, something more important to a culture than the abating of poverty, something more desirable in government than the civil strife that will follow the extinction of the Anglo-Irish, something more aesthetic than mass propaganda for the newly literate. Will the luck of those made sturdier by the fall of Coole run high enough to reach civilized negotiation instead of civil war, and will they master that art of intimacy with language and its ironies sufficiently to write something different from their current coarse propaganda? In the short run, Yeats's misgivings were not unfounded. There was a civil war; popular nationalist literature was aesthetically crude. This "sonnet" would be less intellectually tense if the speaker had not so evidently incorporated the position of his opponent within his own questions; that very incorporation was a symbol of his own inner quarrel between his Anglo-Irish culture and his nationalist hopes.

Yeats makes the last two lines of this douzain "read like" an epigrammatic Shakespearean couplet by starting up in them a new theme—that of fluent and self-observing literature as "gradual Time's last gift." Even the near-rhyme of "speech" with "ease" helps to create the illusion that the poem ends with a Shakespearean couplet. "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" sounds Shakespearean, too, because of its use of one of Shakespeare's most common figures of speech, the figure of reduplication, which, as so often in Shakespeare's sonnets, stands for plenitude. Yeats carries out reduplication here not only by repetition of words (*wings, wings; best, best; gifts, gift; laughing, laughing*) but also by alliteration and assonance (*passion and precision; laughter, loveliness; gifts, govern, gradual, gift; written, wrought*) and by all the words assonating on long "e": *breed, sweet, eagle, mean, trees, reach, these, speech, ease*.

The "wrought" nature of the language is Shakespearean in its deliberate evocation of courtly stateliness; as we conclude these lines, we almost have the impression of having read a Shakespearean sonnet, even if we have not. The principle of contradiction has been fully presented in the poem, since one part of Yeats's nationalism wanted Ireland free of England while another part, at this stage, hoped to find in the new state the perpetuation-by-incorporation of Anglo-Irish culture. The only way in which "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" is *not* a Shakespearean sonnet is by its remaining within the douzain-template. Yeats is still, we see, avoiding a full imitation of Shakespearean form. If he had written his Coole poem in true fourteen-line Shakespearean form, he might have been seen as sending—in this controversial poem—a sign of allegiance to English culture, and to be proposing questions more rhetorical than (as they actually were) genuine. Forgoing a formal "match" between Coole and English Renaissance form, Yeats will be an Irish douzain-writer, not an English sonneteer. It may also be that he, like Keats, disliked the effect of the terminal couplet.

When we do finally come, in Yeats's mature work, to a real sonnet in Shakespearean form, "At the Abbey Theatre" (264–265)—Yeats's pentamer adaptation, done in Paris in 1911, of Ronsard's Alexandrine Petrarchan sonnet "Tyard, on me blasmoit, à mon commencement"<sup>15</sup>—the poem, paradoxically, does not in fact feel Shakespearean, at least not in structure. Addressing Douglas Hyde of the Gaelic League under his Irish *nom de plume* meaning "Little Pleasant Branch," and sardonically calling him "most popular of men," Yeats complains of the fickleness of the Abbey audience. He exasperatedly asks "Dear Craoibhin Aobhin" (pronounced "Creeveen Eeveen") how to control the Abbey audiences, so irritating in their inconsistency, hating sublimity one day, hating commonness the next:

Dear Craoibhin Aobhin, look into our case.  
When we are high and airy hundreds say  
That if we hold that flight they'll leave the place,  
While those same hundreds mock another day  
Because we have made our art of common things,  
So bitterly, you'd dream they longed to look  
All their lives through into some drift of wings.  
You've dandled them and fed them from the book  
And know them to the bone; impart to us—  
We'll keep the secret—a new trick to please.

Is there a bridle for this Proteus  
 That turns and changes like his draughty seas?  
 Or is there none, most popular of men,  
 But when they mock us, that we mock again?

This poem is, externally speaking, a Shakespearean sonnet, with its length and its rhymes all in order. But its first and second quatrains are enjambled; and its thought-structure, reflected in the number of lines occupied by each sentence—1, 6, 3, 2, 2—is closer to the expostulatory rhythms of drama than to the measured “written speech” of the Shakespearean sonnet. Yeats’s poem, full of aplomb and satirical energy, is far more colloquial than the usual Shakespearean sonnet (not least because Yeats has in mind, as he had in “The Fascination of What’s Difficult,” Ben Jonson’s “Ode to Himself,” in which the poet advises himself, because of the audience’s “indicting and arraigning,” to quit the stage).<sup>16</sup> Still, Yeats has visibly turned Ronsard’s Petrarchan-rhymed hexameters into Shakespearean-rhymed pentameters in homage to Shakespeare the *Globe* playwright, ancestor to Yeats himself in the Irish playhouse. At last, by an end-run through France, Yeats has been able to bestow the external form of the Shakespearean sonnet on an Irish poem.

In 1914, at the age of forty-nine, Yeats hybridizes a sonnet,<sup>17</sup> appending a Petrarchan/Miltonic sestet to a Shakespearean octave in the “closing rhymes” (as he later named them)<sup>18</sup> for the volume *Responsibilities*. In this one-sentence poem Yeats cites his Syrinx-Muse, his friends, and Lady Gregory as consolations against the notoriety that now hounds his life and writings. “Notoriety” was in fact Yeats’s first title for this sonnet:<sup>19</sup>

While I, from that reed-throated whisperer  
 Who comes at need, although not now as once  
 A clear articulation in the air,  
 But inwardly, surmise companions  
 Beyond the fling of the dull ass’s hoof  
 —Ben Jonson’s phrase<sup>20</sup>—and find when June is come  
 At Kyle-na-no under that ancient roof  
 A sterner conscience and a friendlier home,  
 I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,  
 Those undreamt accidents that have made me  
 —Seeing that Fame has perished this long while,  
 Being but a part of ancient ceremony—

Notorious, till all my priceless things  
 Are but a post the passing dogs defile.

(320–321)

“While I, from that reed-throated whisperer,” though beginning with Shakespearean rhymes and invoking Jonson, has Milton as unseen presider over its public orientation, its enjambled quatrains, the complex nested syntax of its athletically sinewed single sentence, its irregular Petrarchan sestet, and its insertion into its lines of a third-person non-classical proper name (“Ben Jonson”) as well as a local name (“Kyle-na-no”).<sup>21</sup> As in Milton, too, there appear phrases alien to the Shakespearean sonnet, such as “the dull ass’s hoof” (borrowed from Jonson) and “a post the passing dogs defile.” This defiantly public poem aims its catapult of subordinate clauses and interpolated absolutes against the illiterate asses and dogs of publicity. As it climbs inexorably to its penultimate-line climax in the word “Notorious,” it uses language as a weapon, one unwieldable by those subhuman beings who can only bray and bark, kick and piss. The sheer derisive power of rhetoric, flaunted here by Yeats as by Milton in the face of enemies, reveals how Yeats has fortified the Shakespearean sonnet form by hybridizing it with the tone of its Miltonic cousin. And the poem’s lexical violence defines, by contrast, what the obverse of such scornful linguistic moments might be, when language would be reabsorbed into its proper use, defined here as that “ancient ceremony” rewarded by the goddess Fama, Yeats’s Latin divinity comparable to Milton’s Greek “all-judging Jove.” We need to register Yeats’s adoption of the mixed rhyme-scheme here before we can admire his muscular wrenching of the initially Shakespearean form to his denunciatory “Miltonic” intent.

Yeats extended the sonnet in one famous instance—“The Second Coming” (1919)—by writing two successive octaves before arriving at the sestet. Lest this be thought a capricious notion peculiar to me, this way of seeing the poem has also been proposed by Seamus Deane:

Yeats’s own presence comes into the poem at the strategic moment when the first eight lines of what could have been a sonnet like “Leda and the Swan” are resumed, not into a sestet, but into a full sonnet. We not only have a sonnet and a half, we have an aborted sonnet that is then reborn as a full one, as the poem itself comes for the second time, brought to its full formal strength by the sudden intervention of the poet who now reveals himself to be the speaker.<sup>22</sup>

Why does Yeats write "The Second Coming" in blank verse, and why does the first octave come to a halt, unable to proceed immediately to a sestet? Why must the poem start over, adding another octave to itself before it can reach its sestet-conclusion? These are complicated questions, and I can suggest only brief answers here. The short answer to the question of blank verse is that for Yeats in 1919, during the period of *A Vision*, blank verse (discussed below in Chapter IX) is the medium of instruction (as in "The Phases of the Moon" and "Ego Dominus Tuus"); by using it, he emphasizes the didactic nature of "The Second Coming." What is it that "saves" the poet from his halt at line 8 and enables him to write the rest of the poem (or—since "the rest" consists of an octave and a sestet—to write an alternate sonnet)? The poem was saved by the poet's decision to cease being an impersonal prophet and write as an individual, to speak in the first person. And why must this sonnet be an expanded one? Because it foretells a monstrous birth, for one thing, and is one of Yeats's several experiments, of which "High Talk" is another, in making the sonnet monstrous. "Leda and the Swan," to which I will turn after investigating "The Second Coming," is yet another "monstrous" form.

"The Second Coming," in the drafts as well as in the final version, tries to write itself first without an identified speaker or a first-person "I." It rehearses an impersonal symbolic narrative that employs successive unrelated metaphors of falcon, center, tide, and ceremony:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer." But no sooner is this visual metaphor conceived than it breaks down into helpless abstractions: "Things fall apart"; "The centre cannot hold"; "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"; "The best lack all conviction." Though metaphor attempts to reclaim its place as an explanatory strategy in the words "tide" and "ceremony," it is defeated once again by its slide from concreteness ("the blood-dimmed tide") to abstraction ("the cere-

*mony of innocence*"). The metaphors clash in their heterogeneous notation. In the drafts, we can see Yeats tending toward topical instances from the Russian revolution, the French revolution, and perhaps the Irish troubles as well;<sup>23</sup> then, desiring a diction that would cover many such examples, he decides not to be historically specific, a decision that led him to his opening generalizations. The octave comes to an end, and the poem itself has not found a center, a coherent point of vantage. Is there some mediating strategy which would be composed not of allegorical tropes (falcon or tide), nor of historical presences (Marie Antoinette in the drafts), nor of abstract propositions ("Things fall apart")? The poem reproduces this hiatus in composition by a blank space, after which it begins again.

Yeats finds that he must, in honesty, express his poem in the first person, rejecting prophetic philosophical universals in favor of an entirely different means of generalizing. To this end, he pursues a personal myth—his myth of supernaturally driven historical change producing an incarnate signal of the new (Helen in the classical era, Christ in the Christian one). The convulsion represented by the supernatural birth must be one applicable to France in 1789, Russia in 1917, or Ireland in 1919. When "The Second Coming" begins its second octave, it has dropped its former impersonal declamatory mode for a more naked one, that of first-person agitation:

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

No longer a remote Gibbonian analyst, the speaker is now a desperate witness, listening to his own over-protesting words: "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming!" Exclamation brings its own credulous phrase, "the Second Coming," into embodiment; and behold, in place of the transcendent *parousia* of Christ, a menacing mythological sphinx-shape appears, arises, and moves with dread intent, disturbing its indignant bird-beholders who spill over, in an equally indignant volta, through the ninth line. Belief has now not only been re-

warded by image, it has been infused with doctrine: "Now I know" says the first-person speaker of this "second" decisive sonnet as he begins his curtailed "sestet." He does know one thing—that he is not seeing the glorious Second Coming of Christ but a reprise, in grotesque form, of the birth of a new energy at Bethlehem. Some unspecified agency, the speaker says, has set a cradle rocking again in the East, vexing the Christian double millennium into nightmare; but the speaker does *not* know something else—the essential nature of the beast which he has seen only in its external shape as it rouses itself from the Egyptian sands:

The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

(401–402)

The fractured syntax of this supposedly "enlightened" five-line "sestet," which irregularly joins (as objects of "know") a noun clause of statement with a non-coordinate independent question, acts out the anxiety of the speaker: "I know / That twenty centuries . . . were vexed . . . , / And what rough beast . . . / Slouches?"

The gross structure of "The Second Coming," then, presents a first, impersonal, and metaphorically disturbed octave of abstract narration, followed by a second self-referential octave of alarmed but fascinated myth as the speaker listens to, and then illustrates, his own phrase "the Second Coming." He concludes with a first-person "sestet" of doctrinal enlightenment and existential menace. Within this three-part "Petrarchan" compositional structure—octave, octave, sestet—can we perhaps ascertain Petrarchan thought-structures to confirm our sense that the poem is an extended sonnet? The opening octave, though it at first appears to be organized in couplets (produced by the slant rhymes of *gyre* and *falconer*, *world* and *hold*), is at a more fundamental level constructed in a series of half-lines, separated by medial breaks, in which the "left" half represents the dissolution of form, and the "right" half represents the threatened world order:

**Chaos**  
 Turning and turning  
 The falcon cannot hear  
 Things fall apart

**Order**  
 in the widening gyre  
 the falconer  
 the centre cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned  
 lack all conviction, while  
 the worst are full of passionate intensity.

The reader, encountering these lines, is forced to "look" left and right, left and right, enacting the distracted gaze of the speaker. The opening octave sequesters itself from the rest of the poem by this syntactic half-line gesture of *conspicteus*.

The second octave, on the other hand, is phrased in full lines because the speaker's would-be worldwide prophecy has been replaced by the single image of first-person revelation:

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

And the full line continues to be the norm for the rest of the poem, which wants to resemble, in its concluding fourteen lines, a Petrarchan sonnet in which the mythological octave of the Rough Beast is able to generate a philosophical sestet opening with "I know." However, the historical conclusion which follows the introductory sestet-clause "now I know" cannot carry on serenely to the end, as we have already seen; it is disturbed by the speaker's mythological turn in the final two lines, where image blots out doctrine, and apprehension erases prophetic confidence. By showing us a poem in which normal sonnet convention (where a sestet immediately follows an octave) is upset by the poem's demanding the appearance of a second octave before the sestet can be written, Yeats gives us the impression that his poem has "free will," that it "cannot" follow its opening octave to an immediate sestet of confident philosophical conclusion. The poem rebels, in an almost "Irish" way, against English Enlightenment models of a progressive philosophy of history.

This "monstrous" sonnet, "The Second Coming," is followed by an equally interesting experiment in 1923, "Leda and the Swan." Once again (as he had in "While I, from that reed-throated wanderer") Yeats composes a hybrid Shakespearean-Petrarchan sonnet, its parts "mismatched" on this occasion to represent the engendering (by Zeus on Leda) of the half-divine, half-human Helen. Yeats emphasizes the several parts of the sonnet by separating them with white space:

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?

(441)

"Leda and the Swan" is Shakespearean in the alternately rhymed quatrains of its octave (*abab cdcd*), Petrarchan in its sestet (*esgesg*). Like "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan" structures itself at first in half-lines, then in whole lines. The half-lines represent the two participants in Helen's conception, and the speaker is uncertain whether he should ratify the absolute right of Zeus to set destiny going in a new direction or should sympathize with Leda's initial terror. Ascribing parts (italicized in the schema below) to the two participants, the speaker goes back and forth from the swan-god-lover to the hapless "girl," until the two protagonists join in a mutual single-line climax:<sup>24</sup>

**Leda**

A sudden blow:  
above the staggering girl.  
*her* thighs caressed  
*her* nape caught  
*her* helpless breast  
upon  
How can

**Zeus**

The great wings beating still  
by the dark webs  
in *his* bill,  
he holds  
*his* breast

those terrified vague fingers push  
from *her* loosening thighs?

And how can  
body, laid  
but feel  
where it lies?  
A shudder in the loins engenders there . . .

These two Shakespearean quatrains are respectively narrative and empathetic, and both project Leda's view of what is happening. The first quatrain sketches the elements of the scene, and the second poses two rhetorical questions, best seen as reflecting Leda's own thoughts, of which the first justifies her physical submission and the second justifies her acquiescence in pleasure. She has been not only held but (as only she could phrase it) "caressed," not only terrified but seduced; her thighs are not loosened, as in forcible rape, but are "loosening" (as only she could feel it) of their own free will, because she has now felt the heart of her strange lover beating (in contrast to the earlier shocking blow from the beating of his wings). (The sestet will sum up this distinction between resistance and consent by contrasting its phrase of rapture, "caught up," to the octave's phrase of assault, "caught.")

As the octave proceeds, we follow, in a series of nouns, Leda's gradual perceptions of her assailant: first, she experiences a blow from unattributed-to-a-person wings and webs, with both nouns prefaced by the definite article, "the great wings," "the dark webs"; next, she perceives her capturer as male ("his bill"). He and she, though still separated by the gendered pronominal adjectives "his" and "hers," are brought closer as they are made to share a single noun, when *her* (human) *breast* is held upon *his* (avian) *breast*. As Leda comes to understand that this is no ordinary swan, his noun-substance as she perceives it becomes newly identified as "glory" (and even though separated from her by the definite article, the sensually felt adjectival "feathered" makes "the glory" soft to Leda's perception); next he is pure penetrating motion, "rush" (separated from her by the distal deictic adjective "that," but seen through her eyes as "white"); and finally he is her lover, as she is excused from resistance by finding the beating heart within the white rush where she lies. Even before the moment of climax, Yeats suppresses Leda's former emphatic perception of separate gendered possessive adjectives, *his* and *her* (*his* bill, *her* breast, and so on); we hear of "the"

undifferentiated loins, of a single place, "there" (where male and female meet), where the engendering takes place. One cannot separate the shudder of orgasm from the engendering in the womb: during the moment of that "shudder that made them one" (as Yeats calls it in "Solomon and Sheba"), Zeus and Leda are indivisible.

The sonnet, having united Zeus and Leda, now has to enact their disjunction. We see, for a moment, the swan-lover-god in one three-part epithet, as Leda, knowing him in all three of his aspects for the first time, understands that she has been caught up and mastered by the "brute [animal] blood [human] of the air [divine]." Zeus has approached Leda in order to engender Helen, to enable (by having Leda "put on" his power) his next millennial plan—the Trojan War and its sequelae in the death of Agamemnon and others (or, to put it otherwise, the matter of Homer and the tragedies). Although he has had to let Leda assume his generative power, Zeus does not want Leda to descry his plan: if she does, he loses his uniqueness as sole knower of the future. Yet, was it possible, wonders the speaker (who has now entered the poem *in propria persona*, no longer "channeling" Leda's perceptions but introducing, from his own historical knowledge, the acts and consequences of the Trojan War), for Leda to enter into physical oneness with all three aspects—swan, lover, god—of Zeus and *not* gain some access to his mind? "Did nothing pass before her in the air?" asks a manuscript draft (in the Latin *nonne* form that presumes a positive answer).<sup>25</sup> It is certain that Leda, in conceiving Helen, put on Zeus's power; did she not put on his knowledge too, before the "indifferent beak"—as Zeus hastens to detach himself from swanhood and resume his normal invisible state—could let her drop? Putting on Zeus's knowledge would be for Leda the assumption of an intellectual power to match the biological power that she has certainly "put on"; and the question posed in the draft suggests that Zeus could not have it all his own way. Descending to the human, he gives the human access to the divine.

But is there any evidence in the poem as it stands to suggest that Leda put on Zeus's knowledge before he could let her drop? While the Shakespearean quatrains of the octave develop the story of the conception of Helen, the Petrarchan sestet is preoccupied with the historical after-effects of that conception. Conflict in this sonnet derives from Yeats's ambivalence with respect to the question of free will. Yes, we are helplessly caught by destiny; but we are also caught up by it and join ourselves to it. No, we cannot know the future; but cannot we sometimes attain, as Milton and Blake thought, to "something like prophetic strain"? Yeats breaks off the story of

Leda to interpolate, in lines 10–11, before he completes her story, what Leda would have seen *had* she put on Zeus's knowledge—"The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead." That is, Yeats makes us have the prophetic vision *before* our last glance at Leda (lines 11b–14, "Being so caught up," etc.). We cannot deny, as we finish reading the sonnet, our Yeats-given knowledge of the future catastrophe of Troy, and so we are forced—as we return in line 11 to Leda's story—to bring along that knowledge with us, unable to forget it as we finish the poem. This persuades us, I believe, that Leda had the vision too (just as Yeats, writing "A Bronze Head," thought that Maud Gonne, his Helen, had had a prophetic vision of her future life: "I saw the wildness in her and I thought / A vision of terror that it must live through / Had shattered her soul"). And because Yeats had long identified Helen and Maud, "Leda and the Swan" is for him and his readers an Irish poem, asking how cultural destruction-bearers like Helen and Maud arrive at their destiny. "Leda and the Swan," like "No Second Troy," allows Yeats to excuse in Maud a course of action different, in its violence, from any he would have found possible for himself.

If his myths of historical change engendered in Yeats the unnatural births and hybrid forms of the sonnets "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan," he could, when he decided to examine turbulence from a more distant vantage, return to the Shakespearean sonnet. Because we have already explored his last "outrageous" sonnet, "High Talk," I close with his penultimate use of the sonnet form in the great valediction "Meru," which is Shakespearean in rhyme, Petrarchan in internal structure. This triumphant example of having the best of both sonnet-worlds, written in 1933–1934 when Yeats was almost seventy, is not Irish in any visible sense. Yet its central line, "Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!" would be taken, by any Irish reader, as a farewell not only to the empires of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, but also to the British Empire. Yeats had defended the achievements of that Empire in "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation," and had wanted to see its glories and monuments, civic and literary, preserved. Now, having accepted the bitter fact that no civilization can sustain itself indefinitely, because human thought is always bent on demystifying the "manifold illusion" that sustains any organization of life, he is ready to say "a gay good-night" to all successive cultures, including his own. How, actually, he asks, is culture successively created and destroyed?

Civilization is hooped together, brought  
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace

By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,  
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease  
Ravening through century after century,  
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come  
Into the desolation of reality:  
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!

Against the almost artless sweep of that chiastic mid-sonnet farewell uttering two "goodbyes" with empires bracketing them, Yeats constructs, preceding the farewell and following it, two buttressing structures. The first, already cited, is the history of "man"; the second is the history of "hermits":<sup>26</sup>

Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,  
Cavered in night under the drifted snow,  
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast  
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know  
That day brings round the night, that before dawn  
His glory and his monuments are gone.

(563)

"Man" lives in society, and is ceaselessly, through his restless thought, building and destroying culture; "hermits" have forsaken society, and live in a naked and detached solitude where their sole activity is to "know." In "Lapis Lazuli" (1936), Yeats would write "All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay," but here he is concerned not with man as builder but with man in his function as destroyer, a function he had earlier condemned when Coole Park was threatened. By now, however, Yeats has come to realize that he himself is not only a builder but also a destroyer, that thinking itself always propels the dissolution of past cultural syntheses, his own Anglo-Irish synthesis included: "Things thought too long can be no longer thought," as he would write in "The Gyres" (1936). The only people able to remain aloof from participation in cultural creation and destruction are those who, like the Hindu hermits on Everest or its mythological counterpart, Mount Meru,<sup>27</sup> have the detachment to see that all cultural systems are equally illusory and transient. The hermits' perfect imperviousness—even under the worst assaults of nature on their naked bodies—is the reward of their esoteric knowledge.

How does Yeats's sonnet enact the restlessness of man and the immobility of the monks, each given a single sentence on either side of the grand

gesture of farewell? The "hooping together" processes of civilization are mimicked by Yeats's syntactically back-stitching picture of the progress of its illusions:

Civilization is hooped together  
brought  
under a rule  
under the semblance  
of peace  
by manifold illusion.

By a syllable-pun, man-ifold illusion seems man-made; but man is deceiving himself—he cannot live by the coerced and coercing semblances of any civilization. After the adversative "but," the rest of the octave is undeviatingly and fiercely linear; the life of thought has no time for the rules and constraints of "civilized" stasis. Man (despite his terror) cannot cease destroying illusion in his search for truth. He goes unstoppably and grimly forward:

Ravening  
through century  
after century,  
Ravening,  
raging,  
and uprooting  
that he may come  
into the desolation of reality.

Although the advance of the ravening destruction is linear, Yeats inserts one back-loop here (by means of the second "Ravening") in order, I think, to connect this passage to the back-loops of the "hooped" construction of "civilization" in the first quatrain. Milton's "hard r's" have been borrowed for man's headlong campaign of ravening, raging, and (up)rooting; in the pursuit of reality, grinding thought cannot be reined back from its devouring. The enjambment between the first two Shakespearean quatrains is an exhibitionistic one, splitting verb and complement over the line break: "[Man] cannot cease / Ravening." The Shakespearean shape of self-contained quatrains is arrantly violated, just as man's thought transgresses the rules of culture. The resulting Keatsian "desolation" means that the little towns of civilization have always had to be deserted by their folk, who will

follow yet another “mysterious priest” of thought to the next stage of cognitive “ravening.”

The hermits, on the other hand, live in a sentence which is entirely static. Its kernel-phrase, “Hermits know,” presents a verb of state, not a verb of action. The hermits know what the Shakespearean couplet says: “That day brings round the night, that before dawn / [Man’s] glory and his monuments are gone.” The dynastic word “monuments”—not only because it is conspicuously Shakespearean (and Horatian and Ovidian) but also because (in the atmosphere of “man” and “man-ifold”) it almost reads as “mon-u-men-ts”—is the right word for the cultural achievements known by the hermits to be ephemeral. Yeats now knows that there are no such perdurable things as “monuments of unageing intellect.” The philosophical equanimity of the hermits is twice tested: as Yeats first imagines them, they are somewhat protected from the weather as they shelter in a cavern; but he immediately revises that imagining and puts them outside, naked, at the full mercy of the Himalayan winter. The long chiastic arc “Hermits . . . snow . . . snow . . . bodies” mimics their prolonged exposure to the elements, and gives the postponed climactic predicate, “know,” its full ascetic value. The enjambment between the third Shakespearean quatrain and the final couplet—a mild one between verb and object, “know / That”—violates, like the earlier “destructive” enjambment “cease / Ravening,” the usual pre-couplet end-stop of the Shakespearean sonnet; but here in the ascetic sestet the constraints of culture are indifferently ignored rather than, as in the octave, disrupted by violent incessant thinking.

There is more to be said about all these “sonnets.” They could equally well (in a different book from this one) be considered under their several thematic concerns, their generic affiliations, the volumes where they appear, and so on (I will in fact be reconsidering “Meru” when I discuss in Chapter XII the sequence “Supernatural Songs,” of which it is the conclusion). Here I have merely wished to insert some of Yeats’s experiments into the history of the sonnet in English, and to show how Yeats renewed the form, not least by making his sonnets “Irish” through myth, allusion, and implication, and “hybrid” by structure and rhyme. How much of what I have said about these poems could be said without reference to the sonnet tradition? A good deal, of course—everything, for instance, that I have mentioned in summarizing general topics, attitudes, and tones. But what I have said about the inventive architectonics of these pieces rests, I think, on our

perceiving them as sonnets—or as sonnets *manqués*, sonnets tightened to douzains, monstrous sonnets, hybrid sonnets, transgressive sonnets, unrhymed sonnets, and so on. And what we perceive of their originality often depends on our knowing how Yeats arouses conventional sonnet expectations and then plays havoc with them by offering a sonnet in ranting hexameters, or a Shakespearean sonnet that is violently enjambed, or a centaur-like fusion of the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan forms, or a pastoral sonnet that turns apocalyptic.

Yeats would have wanted us to notice such things, because they are part of our intuited shock as we read these poems, even if we cannot at first say what it is that is shocking us. They are part of his way of saying, to his English readers, “I am not writing the English sonnet as you know it. Even though I know it more intimately than you, it is for me a site of experiment, whereas for you it is a site of cultural memory.” Since he deliberately introduced Irish themes into his sonnets—from the god Aengus to Malachi’s collar of gold, from the Abbey Theatre to Coole, from Maud Gonne to Douglas Hyde—it is clear that he wanted at least some of these poems to “feel” Irish, not English. That desire must have been one of Yeats’s motives for shaking up the form; other motives, chiefly expressive emotional ones, of course also sponsored his innovations.

Critics sometimes ask whether Yeats was the last of the Victorians or the first of the Modernists. In his sonnet practice, certainly, he left no aspect unscrutinized in his modernizing of the genre. Like all the best Modernists, he disturbed forms without entirely abandoning them. And since the principal historical function of poems is to enable the production of more poems, we have Yeats’s exhilarating experimentation to thank, in part, for the continuing survival of the sonnet in British, Irish, and American verse.

Where is Piano Mary, say,  
Who dwelt where Hell's Gates leave the street,  
And all the tunes she used to play  
Along your spine beneath the sheet?  
She was a morsel passing sweet  
And warmer than the gates of hell.  
Who tunes her now between the feet?  
Go ask them at the Hay Hotel.

(A. Norman Jeffares, *The Poems and Plays of Oliver S. John Gogarty* [Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2001], 302.)

It will be seen that Yeats (rhyming in couplets without white space) did not borrow Gogarty's rhymes (*ababcbc*) nor his stanzas. The resemblance is confined to Yeats's line, "And he plays tunes between your feet." Yeats knew such poems by Gogarty, writing to Olivia Shakespear (of "The Old Pianist") that it was "one of those many poems on which [Gogarty's] fame depends, poems that pass by word of mouth, & are only written down by some chance. Obscene & yet full of tragic poetry" (#5942).

20. For the drafts and the alternate titles of "Three Marching Songs" (which began life as "Three Songs to the Same Tune"), see *Last Poems: Manuscript Materials* by W. B. Yeats, ed. James Pethica (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 149–187. Remarks on intermingled drafts of "The Black Tower" can be found on pp. 175 and 181. The title "Three Revolutionary Songs" appears on p. 150.
21. See A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1996), 337 n. 4.
22. Foster, II, 648.
23. Foster, II, 648–649, quoting an "abandoned fragment" of a draft of "The Black Tower," says it "makes the approach of [Yeats's] own death manifest," but does not apply that interpretation to the finished poem.
24. "Easter 1916" is and is not a ballad. Its Half-Meter trimeters, its *abab* rhyme scheme, and its refrain pull it within the ballad sphere of influence, but its refusal to separate its quatrains, its departures from ballad diction, and its omission of the refrain after its third stanza (among other features) keep us from thinking of it purely as a ballad.
25. It should be noted, however, that the old cook—who swears the king is still living—adds another dimension to the poem. Seamus Heaney says of the poem and its men, "The ironist and questioner is their old cook, who represents a kind of unheroic life force, a scuttling principle of survival and self-preservation. . . . Yet the cook's thoroughly creditable skepticism is resisted by the *comitatus*; they persist at their post even as they are pestered by his rumours and heckling." See *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 34.
26. *The Book of Irish Ballads and The Songs of Ireland*, ed. D. F. McCarthy and Michael J. Barry (Dublin: James Duffy, 1848), 36–37.

## VI. Troubling the Tradition

1. It can be found in *The Early Poetry*, II, ed. George Bornstein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 361.
2. Warwick Gould called my attention to the allusion to Shelley.
3. *CL*, I, 3.
4. I have reprinted Yeats's first wording, from *The Countess Kathleen* (1892).
5. Here is the original Ronsard poem:

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,  
Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant,  
Direz, chantant mes vers, en vous émerveillant:  
Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j'étais belle.  
  
Lors vous n'aurez servante oyant telle nouvelle,  
Déjà sous le labeur à demi someillant,  
Qui au bruit de mon nom ne s'aille réveillant,  
Bénissant votre nom de louange immortelle.  
  
Je serai sous la terre et fantôme sans os,  
Par les ombres myrteux je prendrai mon repos:  
Vous serez au foyer une vieille accroupie,  
Regrettant mon amour et votre fier dédain.  
Vivez, si m'en croyez, n'attendez à demain:  
Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.  
  
(*Sonnets pour Hélène*, 1587)

In English translation, the Ronsard sonnet would read:

When you are very old, at evening, seated by the fire,  
Spinning and winding wool by the light of a candle,  
You will say, reciting my verses, in wonderment,  
"Ronsard celebrated me when I was beautiful."  
  
Then not one among your servants, hearing this word,  
Though already half-sleeping at her work,  
But will stir to waking at the sound of my name,  
Blessing your name with immortal praises.

I shall lie underground, a ghost lacking bones;  
By myrtle shades I shall take my rest:  
You will be an old woman hunched at the hearth  
Regretting my love and your disdainful pride.  
Live for now, believe me, don't wait till tomorrow,  
Pluck from this day onward the roses of life.

6. Although Ronsard does introduce the first person, in the possessive adjective "mes," early in the poem ("Direz, chantant mes vers," etc.), that form of minor mention has nothing of the spectral force of "Je serai sous la terre." Yeats takes

- care to suppress the first person, preserving impersonality in his third-person formulations, “this book” and “one man.”
7. In rewriting the poem in 1925, Yeats made the girl more Homeric and created enjambment between the second and third quatrains, attempting to give the poem classical loftiness and greater momentum; he also made the final symbols more explicit—“an empty sky,” “that lamentation of the leaves.”
  8. The article was omitted in the first printing in *The Countess Kathleen* (1892); it was inserted in the 1895 *Poems*.
  9. It was printed for the first time as a separate poem in the Dramatical Poems, volume II of the 1906 *Poetical Works*, where it serves as a second proem to *The Shadowy Waters*.
  10. He had been preceded in his abandoning of sonnet-rhyme by Keats, in “Oh thou whose face hath felt the Winter’s wind.”
  11. In the original dramatic version of *The Shadowy Waters*, from which Yeats extracted this sonnet, Forgael’s truncated blank-verse line is continued by a speech of Dectora’s:

*Forgael.* And from that hour he has watched over none  
But faithful lovers.  
*Dectora. (Half rising)* Something glitters there—  
There—there—by the oar. (762)

12. Quiet and her wild heart appear elsewhere in the same 1903 volume in the narrative poem “Baile and Aillinn,” in which the narrator, praising the translated lovers of the title, says: “What were our praise to them? They eat / Quiet’s wild heart, like daily meat[.]”
13. Yeats considered several different titles for the poem. In *McClure’s Magazine* (December 1910) it was entitled “To a Certain Country House in Time of Change,” suggesting that the poem should be read as addressed to the house itself. In *The Green Helmet*, it was called “Upon a Threatened House” (which, because it did not specify the threat, could suggest terrorism rather than the threat of new legislation). The final title keeps the meditative “Upon” rather than the *viva voce* “To.”
14. The drafts of the poem show that the word “luckier” (repeated in line 9 as “luck”) was arrived at after some deliberation. The earlier word was “better.” W. B. Yeats, “In the Seven Woods” and “The Green Helmet and Other Poems”: Manuscript Materials, ed. David Holdeman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 201.
15. NC, 94, gives the original French, but errs in saying that “the [Yeats] poem is very close to the original sonnet.” On the contrary, Yeats freely invents many of his lines. The original reads, in approximate translation:

Tyard, they blamed me, when I began to write,  
Saying I was obscure to the common people;  
But today they say that I have become the opposite,  
And that I contradict myself, speaking too vulgarly.  
You, whose labor learnedly gives birth

To immortal books, tell me, what should I do?  
Tell me, since you know everything, how I should please  
This headstrong monster, so contrary in its judgments?

When I thunder in my verses, it is afraid to read me;  
When my voice deflates itself, it slanders me for that.  
Tell me by what rope, power, pincers, or nails  
I can hold still this Proteus who changes constantly?  
Tyard, you’re right, we must let it have its say,  
And laugh at it just as it laughs at us.

16. The ode opens as follows:

Come leave the loathed Stage,  
And the more loathsome Age,  
Where pride and impudence in faction knit,  
Usurpe the Chair of wit:  
Inditing and arraigning every day,  
Something they call a Play.  
Let their fastidious, vain  
Commission of the braine,  
Runne on, and rage, sweat, censure, and condemn:  
They were not made for thee, lesse thou for them.

See *Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. George Burke Johnston (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 298.

17. Yeats’s first “hybrid” sonnet, “The Veiled Voices and the Questions of the Dark” (1883–1884), reprinted as a reading text in William Butler Yeats, *Under the Moon: The Unpublished Early Poetry*, ed. George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 1995), 61, is a somewhat incoherent poem, beginning “As me upon my ways the tram car whirled.” The octave presents two “veiled voices”—the first that of a lonely “Pharisee” within a Shakespearean quatrain (*abab*) followed by the second voice which releases laughter over tears in a Petrarchan quatrain (*cddc*); the sestet, presenting a third “veiled voice,” that of a fallen female, consists of a couplet (*ee*) followed by a Petrarchan quatrain whose inner rhymes echo the couplet (*feef*). This rhyme-scheme bestows on each of the “veiled voices” a different rhyme “enclosure.” Yeats would later have seen hybrid sonnets among the “Holy Sonnets” of John Donne; he could also have encountered hybrid sonnets earlier, among Keats’s poems (notably “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again”).

18. So named in the Table of Contents for *Responsibilities and Other Poems* (1916).
19. In its first publication in *The New Statesman* (February 7, 1914), it was entitled “Notoriety / (Suggested by a recent magazine article.)”
20. The phrase “the dull ass’s hoof” comes from the close of Jonson’s *The Poetaster*:

There’s something come into my thought,  
That must, and shall be sung, high and aloofe,  
Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull asses hoofe.

See Ben Jonson, *Poetaster* (Workes 1616), in *English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1997).

21. Cf. "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament":

Dare ye for this adjure the civil sword  
To force our consciences that Christ set free,  
And ride us with a classic hierarchy  
Taught ye by mere A. S. and Rutherford?

Milton frequently enjams one quatrain into another, and runs the octave over the *volta*. His sestets are on the whole regularly rhymed in alternating rhymes or quatrains plus couplets, but occasionally (see "Lawrence of virtuous father virtuous son" with its sestet rhyme *cdced*) he does not adhere to the more regular patterns. His use of proper names (including the location-name "Mile-End Green") can also be seen in "A book was writ of late called *Tetrachordon*." Yeats mentions in *Memoirs* (53), in connection with his early acquaintances with nationalists, J. F. Taylor, the barrister and orator, who "seemed to know by heart whole plays of Shakespeare and all the more famous passages in Milton," which the young Yeats must have heard him recite.

22. "'The Second Coming': Coming Second; Coming in a Second," *Irish University Review* (Spring 1992), 92–100. The citation is from pp. 94–95.

23. See W. B. Yeats, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*: Manuscript Materials, ed. Thomas Parkinson with Anne Brannen (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 151. As Curtis Bradford remarked long ago, "Though beginning a poem in the first person is a frequent practice with Yeats, it would have been more frequent still had he not in instance after instance removed his I-persona from the onset of a poem late in the process of composing it. . . . Many of Yeats's greatest poems begin with the setting of their symbolic scenes . . . ; then the persona arrives, so to speak, and when he does Yeats's meditative exploration of the scene begins. . . . The type of opening chosen involves the question whether Yeats wants the point of view to be controlling, or the view itself, or both equally." See Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 52–53.

24. The most lengthy reading of "Leda and the Swan" is that of Elizabeth Butler Cullingford in *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), which has undergone some historicizing revision in her recent essay "Yeats and Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 167–184. She finds ambiguities (e.g., in the mutuality of the sexual climax) where I do not. Yeats has taken such pains to distinguish the agents of actions by pronouns and pronominal adjectives ("he," "her") that when he drops such proprietorial forms (in "body," "that white rush," and "the strange heart") he is preparing for the unascribed phrasing, "A shudder in the loins." Cullingford is inclined to take the sonnet more literally, as a rape, than I find credible. Naturalistic commentary (treating the event as a "rape" in the human legal sense, and arguing that even if a rape victim experiences orgasm she is not "consenting" to the rape) seems to me off

the mark with respect to the situation of the poem. Zeus's right to inaugurate destiny by his chosen means is not disputed by the poem, or by Yeats's sources. And congress with the divine, as one is "caught up" into its "feathered glory" and "white rush," does not, presumably, resemble the "caught" experience of naturalistic rape. The bas-relief which was Yeats's inspiration, like most of the visual depictions of the scene, from Leonardo to Correggio, implies seduction rather than rape, as does Spenser's retelling of the story in *The Faerie Queene*, III, Canto XI, stanza 32 (called to my attention by Warwick Gould):

Then was he turnd into a snowy Swan,  
To win faire *Leda* to his louely trade:  
O wondrous skill, and sweet wit of the man,  
That her in daffadillies sleeping made,  
From scorching heat her dainty limbs to shade:  
Whiles the proud Bird ruffling his fethers wyde,  
And brushing his faire brest, did her invade;  
She slept, yet twixt her eyelids closely spyde  
How towards her he rusht, and smiled at his pryde.

25. See W. B. Yeats, *The Tower* (1928): Manuscript Materials, ed. Richard J. Finneran with Jared Curtis and Ann Saddlemeyer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 328–332. An interpretive account of some of the manuscript evidence for "Leda and the Swan" can be consulted in Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 136–142.

26. In its original magazine appearances, "Meru" was printed with white space separating octave from sestet, making the poem more obviously a sonnet. However, from its first appearance in a volume (the 1934 Cuala edition of *The King of the Great Clock Tower*), the poem was printed as a solid block, giving it a suitably "Shakespearean" appearance, in spite of its internally "Italian" structural division into octave and sestet.

27. See William O'Donnell's note: "Mount Kailās (elev. 22,030 feet), in the Himalayan range, Tibet; it is called Mount Meru in the epic *Māhābhārata* and in the Vedas." W. B. Yeats, *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Scribner's, 1994), 375 n. 22.

## VII. The Nationalist Measure

1. Yeats's "iambic" trimeters use so many trochaic substitutions that it would sometimes seem suitable, as in "The Dolls," to represent them as "iambic/trochaic" trimeters. The reader will notice a succession of emphatic downbeats, especially in the initial foot, in such poems.
2. There are almost no irregularities in this group of poems. However, "On Woman," "Upon a Dying Lady," and "The Tower" all have a single "defective" quatrain, in which a line is "missing."
3. When trimeter quatrains occur in song, they are usually cast into an anapestic measure, often entailing feminine rhymes: