

## Simultaneous Disintegration: Inseparability of Form and Content in W.B. Yeats's "The Gyres"

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In W.B. Yeats's 1938 poem "The Gyres", poetic form and content reflect each other and co-create a feeling of devolution as the poem progresses. Yeats's manipulation of poetic form in "The Gyres"—particularly towards a breakdown of meter and rhyme—reflects the direction of his content, which also reflects a collapse of the world. Form and content notably coalesce in the last line of the poem, where meter and content complicate the poem's lack of resolution. While Declan Kiberd's description of "[a] twilit world of wavering rhythms and half-said things" appears to be characteristic of "The Gyres", his related observation that form seems to be elevated over subject is mistaken.



In his 1996 book, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*, Declan Kiberd writes that "A style, like a mood, goes fishing for a subject in the unconscious...The elevation of style over subject is possible only in that liminal, twilit world of wavering rhythms and half-said things" (307). In W.B. Yeats's 1938 poem "The Gyres", Kiberd's "elevation of style over subject" is not reflected; instead, the style—manifested in poetic form—and the subject—the content—of the poem reflect each other and co-create a feeling of devolution as the poem progresses. The focus on form as a defining element of style is partially informed by Robert Beum's 1961 essay "Yeats's Octaves", in which he notes that "[A] style, an idiom, is not achieved independently of a form. Yeats's transition from minor Irish romanticism to world poetry involved the discovery of a form that suited him magnificently...especially of

the ottava rima" (89). Yeats's manipulation of poetic form in "The Gyres"—particularly towards a breakdown of meter and rhyme—reflects the direction of his content, which also reflects a collapse of the world. Form and content notably coalesce in the last line of the poem, where meter and content complicate the poem's lack of resolution. While Kiberd's description of "[a] twilit world of wavering rhythms and half-said things" appears to be characteristic of "The Gyres", his observation that form seems to be elevated over subject is mistaken.

The inextricability of poetic form and poetic content is the theoretical backbone of this reading, and the formalist lens encompasses this methodology. In his 1978 essay, "Strict Form in Poetry: Would Jacob Wrestle with a Flabby Angel?", Peter Viereck provides a formalist definition of poetry: "Poetry is better left undefined...but if a definition

be demanded at pistolpoint, then let us define it as: expressive form" (Viereck 221). Viereck makes the case that poetic form is the inherent basis for all poetry, including free verse—"Form-rejectors like William Carlos Williams...are often excessive formalists deep down...[W]ithout it [poetic form], they would have nothing to be formless *against*" (210). Viereck bases his argument that all poetry is formal in biological elements: in particular, humans' bipedalism and our hearts' "metric ticktock" facilitate the creation of a poetry that is highly attentive to rhythm. Viereck's essay defends the merits of poetic formalism, and that very method is being used in this paper to describe how the meaning of Yeats's content is contingent upon the meaning instilled by his implementation of poetic form.

Yeats's disintegration of meter—particularly the dissolution of iambic pentameter—in "The Gyres" co-exists with his description of a crumbling world. Yeats, by most accounts, was a calculated formalist. Prosodic theorist Robert Beum, in a 1961 essay titled "Yeats's Octaves", discusses Yeats's dedication to the eight-line stanza, arguing that Yeats's "adoption of them [octaves] is clearly a striking example of the triumph of a poet's instinct and experience in finding the form, or one of the forms, that best suits his maturing genius" (Beum 89). Of Yeats's body of work, Beum observes that

"Yeats always held on to some element of prosodic form. Even at his most conversational or most savage[,]...he never once abandoned both meter and rhyme in the same poem. His mind was distinctly of the type that works in form and then away from it. When he grew tired of the form, he could roll up his sleeves and shatter it—ever so masterfully, the mastery having been

developed in working with the form"  
(91)

Beum acknowledges that both an adherence to form and a destruction of formal expectations and patterns are characteristic of Yeats's formalism. Both of these modes coexist in "The Gyres", where the iambic pentameter begins to derail at line 7—as early as the first stanza—and after a few metric deviations in the second stanza, the meter becomes particularly divergent in stanza three. Line 7 in stanza one contains the first of three trochees in the poem:

/ U U / U / U / U /  
Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy;

Two more trochees appear, both in stanza three:

/ U U / U / U /  
Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse  
U /  
the soul,  
...  
/ U U / U U / U /  
Lovers of horse and of women shall (lines  
17 and 19)

This integration of the trochee at the start of each of these lines introduces the formal flux that Yeats generates throughout this poem, and breaks up the predictable iambic pentameter that is characteristic of the ottava rima. Beum addresses Yeats's use of the trochee, and notes that "[H]e frequently substitutes trochaic meter...for the expected iambic... Here the trochaic contrast conveys the heightening of impulse" (95). Perhaps the "heightening of impulse" to which Beum refers manifests twofold. The conversational speech cadence of iambic pentameter is disrupted by a more vocally panicked trochee, heightening the tension in the speaker's voice; this "heightening of impulse" could also indicate a

heightening of destruction in “The Gyres”, as the speaker foretells the apocalyptic degradation of his world. This destruction is epitomized by stanza three, where the iambic pentameter breaks down and becomes more irregular. The meter seems to embody Yeats’s description in line 17: “Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul”. The meter here—and for the duration of stanza 3—takes on a coarseness, as it becomes more difficult to scan, and the meter becomes a reflection of the content. Kiberd’s “twilit world of wavering rhythms” is embodied in these devolutions of form—the intermittent trochees and the diversion from iambic pentameter; but, each formal deviation is paired with an instance of degradation in the poem’s content, and these two elements inform each other.

Just as Yeats’s metrical maneuvers interact with the content of “The Gyres”, the devolution of rhyme—particularly in stanza three—reflects the frenzy and incoherence of the final stanza. In stanza one, Yeats only features two slant rhymes: “forth” with “worth”, and “thought” with “out”. In stanza two, there are also two slant rhymes: “stain” with “gone” and “again”. The first stanza adopts an almost prophetic tone, as the speaker is foretelling the process whereby the earth breaks down (lines 1-8); the rhyme, featuring few slants, serves as an element of this tone, where the rhyme gives the speaker’s prophecy an air of familiarity. In the second stanza, the speaker employs the refrain of “What matter?” (lines 9, 11, and 15). None of the slant rhymes in stanza two are present in lines where the refrain is used, creating a song-like format of alternating sounds, where the speaker continues their prophecy about the gyres. Where the ABABABCC rhyme scheme would be in stanza three, irregular rhymes have taken its place; Yeats rhymes “soul”, “shall”, and “owl”; “dear”, “sepulchre”, and “disinter”; and “run” and “again”. In particular, the lack of a rhyming couplet, which the other two stanzas employ, resists a

sense of closure in the poem; this couplet embodies Kiberd’s concept of “half-said things” in the content of a poem. Yeats is using the incomplete feeling generated by the un-rhyme of the last two lines in order to withhold a neat ending, a sentiment that is also reflected in these lines: “The workman, noble and saint, and all things run/On that unfashionable gyre again”. Therefore; the poem’s form and the poem’s content are co-creating a feeling of non-ending in “The Gyres”.

The content of the poem predicts the destruction of the speaker’s world, but denies the closure of an ending; this arc begins in the first stanza, and particularly embody Kiberd’s description of “half-said things”, as the speaker makes an obscure prediction about the world’s destruction:

Things thought too long can be no  
longer thought,  
For beauty dies of beauty, worth of  
worth,  
And ancient lineaments are blotted  
out. (2-4)

The speaker is obfuscating the ramifications of the world’s collapse, both by complicating the prophecy with repetition, and by creating an image of obscurity: “blotting out” the past. This obscuring of the past complicates the temporality of this poem. T.P. MacGloin touches upon this complication of setting in his 1987 essay, “Yeats’s Faltering World”, which examines Yeats’s endeavor to create a poetic world that is more forgiving than his real one, and Yeats’s “attempts to construct a world that might have compensated for the real loss” (MacGloin 473). Of Yeats’s temporality, he argues that “[W]hat becomes increasingly clear [in his poetry] is the lack of anything that might be construed as “the present”; he [Yeats] does not face it, regard it; he does not recognize or accept it. If he happens to brush with the

present time en passant, it is to provide an unfavorable contrast, an unequivocal condemnation" (473). This offering of an unfavorable contrast is plausible, given that the first stanza—the speaker's prediction of destruction—is entirely in present tense and imperative mood. But the second stanza introduces "In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again;" (line 14)—the past tense—and the third stanza calls out to the future tense: "Lovers of horses and of women, shall . . . run/On that unfashionable gyre again" (lines 19-23). The speaker's present is condemned, at least in the narrative sense, because the speaker is predicting and attempting to explain just how the world will be destroyed. The speaker places the present as an unfavorable contrast against the future, where they predict that "all things [will] run/On that unfashionable gyre again". This content of the uncertain future, offered by a lack of closure, is supported by the lack of formal closure—there is no rhyming couplet to close the poem. The beginning of the narrative arc of the poem takes on the tone of a prophecy, a tone which is created in part by the rhymes that appear in the stanza. As the meter devolves in the poem, the temporality is complicated—tenses other than present tense are introduced, and complicate the speaker's narration. This progressive devolution and destruction in the narrative content of the poem is supported and created in part by the formal elements of the poem that also reflect a disintegration.

Declan Kiberd's claim that "The elevation of style over subject is possible only in that liminal,

twilit world of wavering rhythms and half-said things" seems only to be a half-truth in relation to Yeats's "The Gyres", where neither style nor subject are elevated over the other; instead, the formal and contextual elements mutually support each other in a formally and thematically complex poem. Despite the poem's joint formal and contextual effort to highlight the crumbling of the world, the last line of "The Gyres" offers a moment of complication. The penultimate line, 23, is one of the most irregular in the poem; the meter is irregular, and there are eleven syllables in the line, while all others have ten. However, the last line of the poem, line 24, returns to regular iambic pentameter:

U / U / U / U / U /  
On that unfashionable gyre again.

This line thematically suggests that the end of the speaker's world will be followed by the beginning of the next world, where destruction may be on the agenda, but not immediately. This final intertwining of regular meter and a prediction of another life cycle expresses how Yeats's style and subject cannot be separated or unequally prioritized in a close reading. While Kiberd's "wavering rhythms and half-said things" are elements that formally and thematically inform Yeats's body of work, they are not disparate entities; Yeats's manipulation of form and his complex subject matter are constantly informing each other, rendering them both as equally vital elements of his poetry.

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