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Hybrid rhythms, antithetical echoes, and *autopoiesis*:
Intersections between sound, self, and nation in the poetry of Yeats

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So many thanks to my advisor, DeSales Harrison, for his generosity and direction every step of the way.

Introduction

Between extremities
 Man runs his course;
 A brand, or flaming breath...

—“Vacillations”

Sounds

A poem, too, vacillates “between extremities”: between eye and ear, page and voice, “brand” and “flaming breath.” It lives itself liminally between writing and speech, reading and listening. While the *Odyssey* or the *Ramayana* represent the extreme of the oral tradition, and Eugen Gomringer’s *Silencio* or ee cumming’s [the(oo)is] suggest visual or graphic hyperbole, most poems exhale somewhere in the middle. Yet, despite this prevalent vacillation, current critical attention on poetry’s aural features and possibilities is scant. Marjorie Perloff, in her introduction to *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, remarks:

... however central the sound dimension to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected. Indeed, the discourse on poetry today, largely fixated as it is on what a given poem or set of poems ostensibly “says,” regards the sound structure in question ... as little more than a peripheral issue, a kind of sideline (1-2).

The collection of essays that follow in *The Sound of Poetry* all constitute their own intervention to this “neglected” area of study, and all privilege sound as its root of inquiry.

It is in the spirit of these essays that I make my own intervention. In particular, I will concentrate on William Butler Yeats’s own flaming breath. His poetry, while branded to the page, nevertheless exemplifies how sonic tools and sound structures perform or create meaning. I take this cue not just from Perloff but also from Yeats

himself, who, two years before his death at seventy-two, wrote: “I have spent my life in clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye, and bringing all back to syntax that is for ear alone” (*Essays*, 529). This preference for ear over eye was not some passing fancy for Yeats, but rather, as Mathew Spangler observes:

Yeats—somewhat at odds with received critical opinion—*repeatedly* positioned himself as a creator of oral, rather than written verse. We might, therefore, set him in a tradition not usually considered his: that of a writer who uses and even manipulates language largely for its potential as sound (141, my italics).

In parallel with Perloff, Spangler observes that Yeats’s insistent ‘oral’ positioning runs against how critics have historically considered him. And, while poets are often not their own best critics, I hope to demonstrate that we had best listen to Yeats, and listen to Yeats.

There is a specific acoustic feature of sound that best suggests its semantic possibilities in poetry, which Walter Ong discusses in his work *Orality and Literacy*: “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence” (32). A material object can remain, can be preserved indefinitely, and can be seen in some form even a million years later; a sound, however, only lives *as* dying. While writing brands itself onto its object—the page—speech or song exists temporally and as a passing flame. To experience a sound from the past, that sound’s *echo* or *re-utterance* is one’s only means of coming close.

Nationalisms

The question remains: exactly *what* meaning(s) does Yeats create and perform through sound? By the end, I hope to have shown that there exist boundless answers; for this project though, one particular set of meanings interest me: Yeats’s nationalisms.

Throughout his life, Yeats committed himself—in one form or another—to the creation,

imagination, and development of an Ireland (Adams, 310). At the same time, Yeats's politics have vexed scholars since he was alive.¹ Accordingly, scholars have frequently looked to his poetry for direction—from the more overt political poems like “Easter 1916” or “September 1913,” to the less obvious poems like “Leda and the Swan.” His prose, too, has been scoured, though it too confuses as often as it informs. For example, in another late essay “A General Introduction to My Work” Yeats elusively writes, “I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons” (*Essays*, 526).

Hazard Adams offers an explanation for this quotation in his essay “Yeats and Antithetical Nationalism,” arguing that Yeats emphasizes the necessary *material contingency* of a viable nationalism; any nationalism *in the abstract* is both counterproductive and specifically complicit in the post-Enlightenment modernity he wanted to resist (313). For example, an Irish nationalism that was potentially effective before the Free State became irrelevant after its creation, because the Free State created different material issues that had to be addressed with different discursive models. Thus, Yeats's “passing reasons” are the always-changing realities on the ground.

Adams's point here, though, does not claim that Yeats ever stopped being a nationalist—it is rather that his nationalism was a “‘progression’ of stances” (311). Specifically, as Adams's title indicates, each one of these stances was characterized by its ‘antitheticality’: rather than pick one of the sides of a particular nationalist binary, Yeats consistently took neither, and instead tried to “maintain continual active tension” between the two, believing that the “triumph” of any one of them “would merely create a new suppression” (310). Invoking Blake, Adams terms this impulse to pit oppositions against

¹ For a historiography of critical perspectives on Yeats's politics, see Jonathan Allison's introduction to *Yeats's Political Identities*.

each other from outside ‘contrariety’ (qtd. on 310). This characterization of Yeats’s nationalism accounts for the countless different and contradictory positions he assumed over his lifetime, and avoids being reductive. It is Yeats’s ‘antithetical nationalism’ that I will explore through his use of sound.

Intersections

The relationship between Yeats’s sounds and his nationalisms emerges from his consistent preoccupations with the oral quality of Irish literary traditions that—in Yeats’s mind—opposed the printed nature of the English tradition (O’Connor, 77):

Irish poetry and Irish stories were made to be spoken or sung, while English literature, alone of great literatures, because the newest of them all, has all but completely shaped itself in the printing press. In Ireland today *the old world that sang and listened is*, it may be for the last time in Europe, face to face with *the world that reads and writes*, and their antagonism is always present under some name or other in Irish imagination and intellect (*Explorations*, 206).

By accessing Irish literature’s oral roots in his own work, Yeats can ‘antagonize’ the imperial English tradition. This antagonism, however, is not a mere negation of England’s print culture, for Yeats consistently wrote for print throughout his life. Rather, as Laura O’Connor observes in her work *Haunted English*, he conceived himself as “a combative bard, in colloquy with ‘the people,’ whose ‘living speech’ is overheard by the (print) mainstream” (77). This ‘overheard’ quality to his work is a site of Adams’s antithetical nationalism, in which active tension persists between Irish orality and English print culture.

Sound intersects with his nationalisms at another, related site in his poetry: his choice to write in English over Gaelic. At the turn of the 20th century, two Irish literary-nationalist movements emerged as dominant: the Gaelic Revival, and the Irish Literary

Revival (O'Connor, 34). Yeats was a founding leader of the latter. While one of the Gaelic Revival's central tenets was that a true Irish literature needed to be in Gaelic—and not in the “colonial tongue” of English—the Irish Literary Revival insisted on using English (34). O'Connor characterizes the Gaelic Revival as a project to “re-Gaelicize” and the Irish Literary Revival as one to “re-Anglicize with a difference” (34). And this ‘difference’ is precisely their means of *de*-Anglicizing their national literature; it is apparent from the prefixes how this aspect of Yeats's project is “rooted in contraries” (O'Connor, 58).

Hybridities

Given Yeats's choices to write Irish-ness into English and privilege the oral within print, I argue that it is valuable to analyze his poetry through the lens of hybridity. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* primarily informs my use of the term for this project. Bhabha argues: “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects” (112). I will bracket most larger assumptions behind and nuances of the phrase ‘discriminatory identity effects,’ and simply say that, for this project, it refers to the privileged features of a society that were recognized as English: for example, the English language and print culture. It should become clear what Bhabha means by ‘discriminatory’ when we consider how both oral and Gaelic literature have little place in the Western canon. Yeats's poems, then, because they are written in English for print, are ‘repetitions’ of these ‘discriminatory’ features. Yet, because he privileged the oral within print, and used English for Irish concerns, Bhabha would argue that these repetitions—rather than merely reinforcing those two

features of English ‘colonial identity’—actually ‘revalue’ their position as monolithically English, disturbing them with hybridity. This ‘revaluation’ is analogous to O’Connor’s phrase ‘re-Anglicize with a difference.’

My project is focused particularly with the aural, and I hope to show that much of Yeats’s hybridity can be located in his use of rhythms and echoes. Yeats writes: “The contrapuntal structure of the verse, to employ a term adopted by Robert Bridges, combines the past and present” (Essays, 526). Yeats means here that there are two different rhythms that operate simultaneously—like two melodic lines in a piece of music—one of which may echo the past, the other the present. Michael Golston, in his work *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science*, specifies:

Yeats claims that any line of a great poem (his example is *Paradise Lost*) contains two meters, operating simultaneously—a traditional blank verse iambic pentameter, with the “ghostly voice” of the folk song hovering inaudibly behind it; and a variable tetrameter he identifies with modern spoken English or “passionate prose” (183).

In Yeats’s rhythms, then, “traditional blank verse,” “folk song,” and “modern spoken English” all intersect to generate a structure manifestly hybrid.

Furthermore, this combination of “past and present” also resounds at the level of an echo. I use the term echo broadly to denote any kind of *aural* repetition, whether it be the literal repetition of a word, a rhyme, or even certain poetic forms and tropes. Yeats’s use of echoes, I contend, can be heard as a strain of Bhabha’s articulation of “colonial mimicry”: repetitions from the past—sometimes Irish, sometimes English—that produce *ambivalent*, “ironic compromise[s]” that are “almost the same, but not quite” (86, 89). Finally, by considering the model of hybridity in *conjunction* with that of antithetical nationalism, a rich and nuanced composition of Yeats’s nationalisms emerges, and it is a composition that gives proper critical attention to his poetry’s aural forms.

Autopoiesis

There is one last dimension worth introducing here: Yeats's *autopoiesis*—or 'self-making' (O'Connor, 34). O'Connor explains that,

It is a constant theme of his poetics that the poet is first and foremost a maker, or *poietes*, whose "self" is forged in the recursive process of transfiguring the language and culture out of which he or she is formed (53).

For Yeats, the 'self' is the *site* of both the influences of language and culture as well as the influence *upon* that language and culture. O'Connor uses the epigraph to Yeats's 1909 *Collected Works* to begin her discussion of his *autopoiesis*:

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake. (qtd. on 53)

The last line is of course most essential to O'Connor's case, as it makes explicit how *each* poem is another moment of self-making. The second line, though, is equally indicative for me, because it is specifically "song"—distinct from 'poem'—that is involved in his *autopoiesis*. The *oral* is a privileged mode in this process. Voice, then, operates as a maker of the self, which is further constituted by that self's body and its negotiation with death. I hope to show that the aural structures of rhythm and echo both reflect *and* produce Yeatsian speakers who—through hybridity—signify various "progressions" of Yeats's antithetical nationalism.

The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water

‘Useful’ art and the *aisling*

To begin exploring how aurality intersects with Yeats’s antithetical nationalisms, let us consider the poem “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water,” which occurs toward the end of *In the Seven Woods*. Rob Doggett, in *Deep-Rooted Things*, argues that *In the Seven Woods* reflects a turning point for Yeats’s politics and his relationship to modernity (139). Specifically, this collection shifts its relationship with both the *aisling* and ‘useful’ art, both of which I explain below.

The *aisling* is an Irish genre of poetry that Yeats used himself, but existed orally throughout the 1700s and 1800s (O’Connor, 18). The importance of the *aisling* is twofold. First, its narrative always involves the “ravishing *spéirbhean*” (19)—a “Gaelic sovereignty goddess” (18)—who appears before a male subject in the middle of socio-political ruin, arouses him with promise and lust, disappears, and leaves only the idea that “a glorious national destiny ... remains to be fulfilled” (19). Second, this narrative doubled as a political narrative in which the erotic desire for the *spéirbhean* doubled as a political desire for a realized Ireland; moreover, O’Connor claims that, partly through its oral retellings, the *aisling* became “an accepted version of Irish national aspiration” (19).

My understanding of Yeats’s relationship with ‘useful’ art is informed primarily by Doggett’s Adornian² articulation of modernity. The two pertinent features of

² Doggett is careful, however, not to import wholesale Adorno’s theory—which specifically concerned the material reality of *European* modernity—onto either Irish modernity or Yeats’s engagement with Irish modernity (128). Because Yeats lives and writes at the “colonial periphery” (128), Yeats necessarily is aware of his language’s oppressive dominion, while, for Adorno in Europe, this role of language is ubiquitously masked (129).

modernity is first the “belief that all things, including art, have a use value” (127), and second the illusion that, even (or especially) as a ‘useful’ cog, the modern subject could be “autonomous” and “shape the world according to [their] ... desires” (142). The *aisling*, then, is “doomed to failure” (128), because to believe its political allegory could effect change is to believe it is ‘useful,’ which would be to already ascribe to a central premise of modernity. Thus, Yeats’s ‘antithetical nationalism’ by *In the Seven Woods* can be heard through his simultaneous rejection of English imperial modernity and of the Irish *aisling*.

Doggett begins with “Adam’s Curse” to reveal Yeats’s increasing skepticism this “conventional nationalism” through its challenge of ‘useful’ art and the *aisling*’s “romantic love,” as well as its formal transition to more “direct-speech” (139).

Specifically, Doggett observes:

... the poem is decidedly ironic, ... [emerging] out of the poem’s apparent endorsement of aesthetic use value.... ‘Adam’s Curse’ thus reminds the poem’s more general audience of Yeats’s own labor for the nationalist cause, linking that nationalist project specifically with his idealization of [Maud] Gonne as the embodiment of an imagined Ireland.... The poem does not, however, conclude with an escapist rejection of modernity, as if knowledge of nationalism and love’s false promises allows the artists to extricate himself from the real. Instead, ‘Adam’s Curse’ dialectically opposes the real by offering an image of useful art become what it truly is, useless (141).

Irony in “Adam’s Curse” thus exposes manifold, opposing futilities: the futility of love, in turn exposing the futility of the *aisling* nationalist project, and the futility of ‘useful’ art. And, because both conventional nationalism and ‘useful’ art are rejected, this irony is grounded antithetically.

“The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water” follows two poems after “Adam’s Curse,” and Doggett claims that it is a thematic extension to “Adam’s Curse” (143):

The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water

I heard the old, old men say,	A	4
'Everything alters	B	3
And one by one we drop away.'	A	4
They had hands like claws, and their knees	C	3
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees	C	4
By the waters.	B	1
I heard the old, old men say,	A	4
'All that's beautiful drifts away	A	4
Like the waters.'	B	1

(*Collected*, 85)

The speaker of this poem overhears some old men who resemble awful birds, old trees, and Narcissi, as they “admire” their reflections while talking about how everything changes and dies. That is the entirety of the poem’s narrative. Doggett writes that this poem

neatly extends [Adam Curse’s] ... irony, for adulation of practical art is adulation of modernity’s false promise of the autonomous self. The old men, gazing into a pool of water in the hope of perceiving their lost beauty, are revealed as static figures, bodies become rooted in place and withered like ‘old thorn trees’ (143)...

In this poem, the speaker witnesses the old men’s recognition of their own loss; their bodies are symbolic of the “continual defeat” of “Irish history” being “washed ... in the ... waters ... of oppression” (Doggett, 143). These old men, then, symbolize the male subject of the *aisling*, politically oppressed and disenfranchised. However, Doggett also observes that their persistent “adulation” concerns themselves, which he argues renders them “static figures.” I would add, furthermore, that it ironically figures *themselves* as *spéirbhean* as well, suggesting that such erotic beauty disappears within the political agent’s own aging and dying body, instead of as a Gaelic goddess. This ironic rendering of modernity’s “autonomous self” is furthermore a critique of a particular strain of *autopoiesis*. And, I argue that this irony emerges from the tension between loss and stasis, and this tension emerges and is deepened aurally.

“Old, old” echoes: symbols of loss and stasis

Sounds live *as* dying, which are how these old men live as well; they are inexorably conscious of their approaching death—“one by one we drop away.” Furthermore, the poem’s meter adumbrates death. It alternates between tetrameter and trimeter for the first five lines of the poem, which establishes a pattern that suggests the sixth line should be in trimeter, with three stresses. That sixth line—‘By the waters’—though, only has one stress—‘*w*aters’—and ‘drops’ two whole beats from what is expected. This alteration both surprises the listener and quickens sound’s inevitable move to silence, which sonically reinforces the old men’s loss.

‘Waters,’ moreover, is a trochee, ending the line as an unstressed-‘s’ into silence.³ The word ends the poem as well: “All that’s beautiful drifts away / Like the waters.” The old men, in this echo, move these ‘waters’ into rich connotations: the referenced-waters become symbolic of “all” that dies—like old bodies, like sound—at the same time that the sound of ‘waters’ “drifts away” from the poem’s metrical form, into trochaic silence. This last line, also, is doubly spoken to the listener: the old men speak, which is then spoken again by the poem’s speaker. Finally, these waters are already an echo in the collection *In the Seven Woods*. “Time’s waters” in “Adam’s Curse” “wash” the moon, and the “heavy flooded waters” resemble “our bodies and blood” in “Red Hanrahan’s

³ Perloff’s analysis of Yeats’s “After Long Silence” impressed upon me the semantic value of words that fade away because their last syllables are unstressed: “And the last word, “ignorant” is a dactyl, trailing off into silence. The rhyme “descánt”/ “ígnorant” contributes to this sense of diminution. From silence to silence: the eight-line poem has come full circle” (*marjorieperloff.com*).

Song About Ireland”—the two poems directly preceding “The Old Men admiring Themselves.”

This echo, though, suggests the other, opposing sense in which sound relates to age: although it exists to “drift away” as loss, the act of sound-ing and resounding represents a bodily insistence of life, albeit in the form of stasis. I have already mentioned the speaker’s echo of the old men, but the poem echoes at every level. Most locally, the men are described twice as “old, old.” At the level of rhyme, ‘say’ rhymes with ‘away’ once in the first three lines and again in the last, and ‘alters’ alters to ‘waters’ and ‘waters.’ At the level of line, “I heard the old, old men say” and “Like the waters” both echo into the last three lines. At the level of form, it echoes the ballad, as it employs many conventions Helen Vendler associates with the form: it uses conversation, it suggests a “collective voice,” it concerns the old, it is “impersonal,” and it begins metrically by alternating between tetrameter and trimeter (111-2). The ballad was for Yeats the “strongest modern link to oral literature (144).” At the level of the book, ‘waters’ in “Adam’s Curse” echoes into “Red Hanrahan’s” ‘waters,’ which echoes into this poem’s ‘waters.’ Finally, at the level of myth, it echoes Ovid’s “Echo and Narcissus” from his *Metamorphoses*, an allusion that I will explore more later.

These echoes suggest a symbolic function of sound, which is best explained through the poem’s use of rhyme. In her work *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats*, Marjorie Perloff details the myriad ways Yeats used rhyme for semantic ends in his poetry. For Perloff, rhyming two words generates a connection between them that can be exploited semantically (17). For example, the rhymes in “The Old Men admiring Themselves” all constitute what Perloff defines as ‘symbol-rhyme,’ which is when “the

meaning of a rhyme word is the symbolic equivalent of the meaning of the other rhyme word which is literal” (57). ‘Waters’ symbolize what ‘alters,’ as they are what “drift away”; ‘trees’ are directly symbolized to the old men’s ‘knees’ through simile; dropping and drifting ‘away’ symbolize the literal sonic fade of all that we ‘say.’ In this way, sound symbolizes ironic tension between loss and stasis, which is in turn symbolic of that same tension present in the poem’s old men, which is in turn symbolic of that same tension in the mode of the *aisling*.

‘Missing’ lines, ‘extra’ lines, and ‘antithetical nationalism’

This tension also occurs at another aural-level, which Helen Vendler’s formal analysis of the poem in her book *Our Secret Discipline* helps to reveal. Vendler claims that the poem is stanzaically organized in three different possible ways (100). Because the poem has three sentences that each occupies its own three lines, there is a syntactical temptation to perceive it as a three-*tercet* poem (100). But, because of the repetition of “I heard the old, old men say,” the poem also seems like a *reprise*, and so is perhaps a “deficient” two-*sestet* poem (101):

I heard the old, old men say,	I heard the old, old men say,
‘Everything alters,	‘All that’s beautiful drifts away
And one by one we drop away.’	Like the waters.’
They had hands like claws, and their knees	[__missing_____]
Were twisted like the old thorn trees	[_____three_____]
By the waters.	[_____lines_____]

Finally, however, Vendler asserts that *really* those three lines are not a reprise but rather an “addition” to what came before, and so the poem is not missing lines but rather has *extra* (101). She makes this claim because the old men semantically alter what they say the second time: first, the old men discuss general transience; then, they discuss

transience of the “beautiful.” It is not mere repetition, mere refrain, and so should be considered as something extra that is tacked on.

I think, however, the last two of these forms operate simultaneously. Although I think Vendler is correct in her argument for an ‘extra-line form,’ it seems that, underpinning the cogency of her case, the ‘extra-line form’ *subverts* our expectation of a reprise-form. The exact repetition of “I heard the old, old men say” work together with the parallel length of *what* they have said, alluding to a strict reprisal. This allusion is subverted with its subtle semantic shift. A subversion requires some *thing* that is subverted—in this case the reprisal-form—and so a successful subversion requires that something to be *anticipated*. So, I argue that the poem *sounds* like both of these forms at the same time, each competing for our ear’s sense of the end.

When the reprisal-form is winning, it sounds like a “deficient” two-sestet form (101). With missing lines, the poem then ends *too soon* for our ear, which also sonically reinforces the poem’s end: “All that’s beautiful drifts away / Like the waters.” When the ‘extra’-line form is winning, however, the poem sounds as if it is persisting past its scheduled end. Ultimately, as we consider this simultaneous but antithetical relationship between the poem’s missing lines and its extra lines, the poem persists *through* its transience, through its death. This persistence, however, should be heard as stasis. Furthermore, this stasis reflects both the stasis of the old men and that of the poem itself. Whereas its echoes reinforce the poem’s contrariety against both modernity’s ‘useful’ art and the *aisling*’s nationalist commitments, this more total aural-form suggests a self-reflexive recognition of the poem’s own static participation in the discourse. Thus, Yeats’s *autopoiesis* is at work aurally here: when ignoring for the poem’s sound, the

distance between the speaker and the *aisling* old men may appear absolute; but, when we listen to the poem's aural affinity with the old men, Yeats's own ambivalent affinity with the old men as the *maker* of the poem is audible.

Ovidian geezers and liminal tetrameters

In addition to that breed of 'antithetical nationalism,' 'hybridity' can be heard as well. Thematically, "The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water" is most overtly hybrid with regards to the use of Ovid's myth "Echo and Narcissus" in conjunction with its use of the *aisling*. As Jahan Ramazani notes in *The Hybrid Muse*, "Yeats's mythic bricolage is also based in Ireland but expands beyond it" (43), and this poem—with its invocation of the canonical Greek tradition—exemplifies such bricolage. This Greek infusion into the Irish nationalist project is one of Yeats's tools for ironizing such a project.

In this poem, moreover, hybridity is doubled.⁴ While Narcissus and Echo are typically separate characters, in this poem the old men are figured as both Narcissus and Echo. They gaze in admiration at their reflection in the water like Narcissus, but they repeat only what they have said, as Echo had been consigned to do. In the original myth, Echo has an unattainable lust for Narcissus; being bodiless voice, she is capable only of voicing the desire and the desire's lamentation. Narcissus, fixed to his own gaze, embodies self-involved stasis. By hybridizing the old men as both Echo and Narcissus, Yeats reveals the stasis and unattainability of *aisling* yearning. At the same time, he distances the poem from aspirations of Irish purity with its Grecian stain, as well as disturbing the canon with Irish concerns.

⁴ It is potentially even doubly doubled, because the old men double as both the *aisling* male subject and its *spéirbhean*, as well as the Ovidian doubling I am about to explore.

This hybridity manifests formally as well, which reveals not merely the above-mentioned opposition to a romantic nationalism—which by itself may suggest an ‘escapist’-position—but indeed suggests ‘antithetical nationalism.’ As I have noted earlier, the poem is a ballad whose form is disrupted in the sixth line. This disruption, I argue, constitutes a shift into pentameter. The sixth line, “By the waters,” is harshly enjambed from the fifth and contains only one stress. The poem wants to be heard as follows:

I heard the old, old men say,	4
‘Everything alters	3
And one by one we drop away.’	4
They had hands like claws, and their knees	3
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees <i>by the waters</i> .	5
I heard the old, old men say,	4
‘All that’s beautiful drifts away <i>like the waters</i> .’	5

Both the fifth and the last line here have five stresses, like a pentameter line would. The poem thus sounds like a ballad meter that lapses—like water’s waves—in and out of pentameter. As pentameter is the unit of the sonnet, *ottava rima*, and blank verse, it is a meter that represented for Yeats a Euro-centric sensibility, and so was at odds with Yeats’s Irish conception of the ballad. These lapses, however, primarily change the implications of with the poem’s tetrameter.

If we recall Golston’s observation that Yeats believed tetrameter represented “modern spoken English,” it is apparent, then, that tetrameter occupies a hybrid position, both as a principle meter of the ballad and of modernity’s “passionate prose.” Indeed, this poem has been noted for its modern syntax. Richard Ellman in his essay “Ez and Old Billyum” offers both his and Ezra Pound’s opinion of the poem:

Yeats offered further an example of ‘syntactical simplicity’; he had, for example, cut out inversions and written with what Pound called as late as 1914 considered ‘prose directness,’ in ‘The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water’ (114)...

Richard Holdeman, in his introduction to the compilation of the drafts of *In the Seven*

Woods and *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*, concurs:

The several rough drafts of the poem show Yeats working ... to balance the language of everyday speech with understated eloquence and with imagery that is at once realistically particular and suggestively evocative (xxxix).

The poem opts for the syntactical vernacular of modernity, which Yeats claims is always tetrameter's aspiration.

I argue, though, that tetrameter often performs the opposite function in Yeats's early, more traditional employments of the ballad. For example, consider these two lines from "The Ballad of the Foxhunter":

The sun upon all things that grow
Falls in sleepy streams.

(*Collected*, 16)

Here, the predicate—"Falls in sleepy streams"—is delayed immensely by the modifying clause "upon all things that grow." This inverted, "backward syntax" typified Yeats's early verse (Kenner, 96), and often his ballads, which more overtly sought refuge from the modern into a romanticized Ireland (Lloyd, 179).⁵

⁵ A few more examples from his early poetry:

Of old the world on dreaming fed...
—"The Song of the Happy Shepherd"

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made...
—"The Lake Isle of Innisfree"

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry.
—"The Sorrow of Love"

*Until the axle break
That keeps the stars in their round
And hands hurl in the deep
The banners of East and West,
And the girdle of light is unbound,
Your breast will not lie by the breast
Of your beloved in sleep.*
—"He Hears the Cry of the Sedge"

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island...
—"The Stolen Child"

For Yeats, then, the tetrameter at times sonically symbolized the desire for Ireland—when it leans into the ballad’s trimeter—and at other times sonically represented the “prose” style of modernity—when it leans into pentameter. The tetrameter, in “The Old Men admiring Themselves,” performs both of these roles simultaneously, which is realized through the poem’s interplay between its ballad beginnings, its pentameter lapses, and its “prose-directness.” This interplay is clearest in the return of the line “I heard the old, old men say”—a tetrameter line—which in its original utterance, leaned into a ballad trimeter. Its echo, however, is sandwiched between two pentameter lines, which now accentuate the meter’s modernity. In this echo, then, we hear the hybrid of the tetrameter-as-folk and the tetrameter-as-modern.

While it is clear that Yeats ironizes the old men to maintain contrariety between the *aisling* and ‘useful’ art, the poem’s own aural vacillation between loss and stasis self-reflexively suggests an affinity between the old men and the poem itself. The poem’s hybrid tetrameter further indicates an ambivalence between folk and modern speech. Thus, while it is apparent Yeats wants to remove himself from the binary between *aisling* nationalism and modernity’s ‘useful’ art, the aural-*autopoiesis* of the poem reveals ways in which Yeats may still be participatory, however ambivalently.

Sailing to Byzantium

I

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
 — Those dying generations — at their song,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

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

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing-masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

(Collected, 204)

Imagined exile and the performative: *autopoiesis* after the Free State

If “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water” establishes possibilities for sound’s intersection with nationalism(s), a similar analysis of the later poem “Sailing to Byzantium” will deepen and complicate our understanding. While this poem of Yeats has undergone both substantial historicist and formal analyses, nuanced postcolonial and exhaustive aural analyses have been sparse and mostly within the last ten years. Furthermore, a synthesis of the postcolonial and aurality has not been attempted with this poem to my knowledge. Since “Sailing to Byzantium” is one of Yeats’s most known and anthologized poems, a successful synthesis of these two frameworks will demonstrate my project’s more general potential for further exploration.

In “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker is an old man who—no longer hip to the “sensual music” of his country—contemplates his afterlife and what new form he may take after his death. For the speaker, Byzantium represents pagan heaven, to which he is “sailing.” His concerns about his post-mortem identity, though, specifically revolve around the kind of *song* he will sing after death. Lloyd’s “Nationalism and postcolonialism” and Doggett’s *Deep-Rooted Things* together provide the postcolonial framework through which I approach this poem. Lloyd argues that “Sailing to Byzantium” and the subsequent poems of *The Tower* mark another transitional moment for Yeats’s poetic-politics, in which he moves away from “organic symbolism ... to an inorganic ... and highly performative mode which poses antithesis rather than identity as its fundamental relation” (187).

By ‘organic symbolism,’ Lloyd means both Yeats’s use of ‘organic’ imagery—woods, suns, moons, etc.—and his use of the *aisling* genre, which posits an ‘organic’

consummation between the male subject and *spéirbhean*-as-Ireland. In the *aisling*, the realization of Ireland is framed as a natural, sexual union. “The Old Men admiring Themselves”—while deeply skeptical of the genre—still uses such ‘organic symbolism’. The poem symbolizes the old men’s loss of beauty, and so sexual potency, through grotesque but natural depiction: “The had hands like claws, and their knees were twisted like the old thorn trees...”

Now, however, in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker is one of those old men—sexually redundant to the *aisling* narrative—and consequently he is elsewhere in Yeats’s “progression of stances.” Lloyd argues that he shifts to the ‘performative mode,’ a mode of ‘will’ and ‘artifice’ (187). Instead of the natural *telos* of an *aisling*, these set of poems produces or *performs* the nation into being through sheer will, and so through artifice. Specifically, these poems perform neither their speaker’s nor their nation’s ‘identity,’ but rather their ‘contrariety’—that “continual active tension” between two oppositions. How does the speaker generate and sustain this contrariety? For an adequate answer to this question, we need to turn to Doggett’s treatment of the poem, which he argues constitutes the beginning of a book-long “journey ... of imagined exile” (98). Doggett explains that imagined exile, distinct from mere escape,

represents an epistemological stance ... of a metaphorically external vantage from which the artist might call into question the hegemonic drive of postcolonial nationalism without abandoning a commitment to the difficult process of nation-building (95).

Imagined exile, then, gives the speaker the distance to remove himself from the binary, and perform contrariety if he so chooses.⁶ In “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker

⁶ Doggett argues that, with the notable exceptions of Declan Kiberd and Hugh Kenner (167, n2), exile is a concept that has seldom been used to approach Yeats (94). See Kiberd’s “Yeats, Childhood and Exile,” and Kenner’s *A Colder Eye*.

is no longer a part of “that country” and its “sensual music,” nor yet a part of Byzantium, a place waiting for him “once [he is] out of nature.” This status positions the speaker in a liminal zone where antithesis can be his “fundamental relation.” Indeed, Lloyd argues—*contra* standard postcolonial readings—that, “the city of Byzantium has to be understood, not as a nostalgic projection of a past civilization that might have represented a better place for old men, but precisely as a defining antithesis to ‘young Ireland’” (184).

This distinction becomes clear when we also consider that Doggett reads the first section of the poem “as a metaphoric rather than a mimetic representation” (99). Doggett, along with Richard Finneran, notes that the “sensual music” of the first section is not an accurate depiction of Catholic Ireland at the time (qtd. on 99). Rather, it refers to the romantic nationalist imagining of a free Ireland, a project that, with the Free State, has reached “ironic fulfillment” (Doggett, 99). The sexual, youthful narrative of nation-building—now realized—reveals itself as static, analogous to the stasis depicted in “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water.” Now, however, “the young in one another’s arms” are “transfixed by change in the present ... and seemingly incapable of growth” (99). Because this culture is both an illusion for the youth and an exclusion to the old, Byzantium isn’t simply a respite for old men, but rather opposes the entire project of ‘young Ireland.’

The speaker’s imagined exile is also antithetical in relation to the temporal. Lloyd observes:

...it is the very condition of the old man’s being taken out of time that allows him to sing, not of dying generations, but of ‘what is past, or passing, or to come’. The continuity and immanent presence of historical time appears to him under the condition of his having become an object outside the flux of temporality (183-4).

Only as a bird made of changeless metal in a timeless realm can the speaker properly comprehend and sing about the temporal. This paradox underlies one of the central oppositions in the poem: the “monuments of unageing intellect” against the ephemeral “sensual music.” Doggett, in fact, comments that the speaker risks becoming a “monument of a ‘drowsy Emperor’” (100). So, this ‘imagined exile’ in Byzantium also holds a potential for stasis. It is only through the speaker’s attention to the temporal, even as imagines himself in exile outside it, that he can remain dynamic. That the speaker’s medium remains song, then, is essential, as it opposes writing’s monument-status as fixed and eternal:

The song of the golden bird differs from the ignorant sensual song of the young in that the bird has the historian’s knowledge of the past, the journalist’s detached view of the passing scene, and the prophet’s apprehensive speculative vision; but the golden bird’s song is nonetheless, like the song of the young, music of this temporal world, not of a timeless eternity (Vendler, 35).

I have established how the old man, the site of the poem’s nationalist perspective, is rooted in antithesis, which thus performs Yeats’s own antithetical nationalism. I have also have shown how the speaker in this poem imagines himself inorganic as a metal bird. Furthermore, I have mentioned how all of this is performative, but more elaboration on this subject is needed:

Yeats’s will is performative both in the sense that it marshals utterances that rather than seeking adequacy to the real intend to *produce* the real, and in the sense that ... the relation of will to image is dramatically agonistic (Lloyd, 187).

While the speaker in this poem indeed produces Byzantium in his mind, he also produces the poem itself for the listener’s ear. Furthermore, I contend that the aural production of the poem produces a *real* that both deepens and complicates Lloyd’s argument. Because songs are so central to the speaker’s figuration in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the poem’s

own aural performance enacts these songs. In this way, the poem's self-reflexive aurality, as in "The Old Men admiring Themselves," reveals a new *autopoetic* stance.

Performing 'sensual music', silencing *ottava rima*

"Sailing to Byzantium" is in *ottava rima*, which is an Italian stanza that for Yeats symbolized the Italian Renaissance. This symbol, while importantly distinct from the English Renaissance (Vendler, 262), is a European import analogous to the Ovidian import in "The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water." Vendler notes that, in 1907, Yeats took a trip to Italy that "gave him confidence to think of the Italian Renaissance as a potential cultural model for Ireland" (263). The form, then, is a specifically nationalist move—a move that should moreover be heard as hybridizing.

Structurally, *ottava rima* poems have eight-line stanzas in iambic pentameter, with an *abababcc* rhyme scheme. The ways in which Yeats manipulates the form's pentameter and rhyme scheme bear directly on his ideological stance(s) toward *ottava rima*, and thus on a particular nationalist posture. The interplay of rhythm between meters that we explored in "The Old Men admiring Themselves" is at work here, too. In particular, I contend that the extent to which Yeats either suppresses or conforms to the *ottava rima* meter bears a relationship on the extent Yeats attempts to negotiate his own hybrid status. How Irish and how English, how imperial and how anti-colonial is Byzantium?

Golston locates this metric interplay in a very specific way, of which I will first give an example, before applying it to "Sailing to Byzantium." He relies on Adelyn Dougherty's rhythmic reading of "Leda and the Swan" in his work *A Study of Rhythmic*

Structure in the Verse of William Butler Yeats. Dougherty distinguishes a ‘speech-unit’ from a ‘verse-line’ in poetry. A ‘speech-unit’ is “a stretch of speech (of whatever span) that is bounded by pause-punctuation graphically indicated in the text” (Dougherty, 38). On the other hand, a ‘verse-line,’ is, for example, the particular line of iambic pentameter, which is bounded by its graphic-but-not-punctuated separation from the other lines (21). Both the ‘speech-unit’ and the ‘verse-line’ have their own independent rhythms from one another, which creates tension if they do not line up (39).

Dougherty observes that, within the first four (verse)-lines of “Leda and the Swan,” there are five ‘speech-units’:

1	2...	
A sudden blow: the great wings beating still		1
	3...	
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed		2
	4	
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,		3
	5	
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.		4

(*Collected*, 220)

In the first three lines, Dougherty argues that the pentameter is hidden, or inaudible, because of the “textual pauses” and enjambments generated from the displaced speech-units (Golston, qtd. on 184). Golston notes that Dougherty finishes analyzing here and adds that, although this is true, it is importantly *not* true in the fourth line, where the ‘speech-unit’ lines up perfectly with the ‘verse-line’ (184-5). This syncing-up “*thematically significant*”:

... the presence of the god ... comes fully into vision as the two rhythms blend: the divine presence is revealed; god and mortal sexually united; the rhythms of archetypal, traditional Unity of Being and modern, mortal speech joined; and the result is the “engendering” of Great Literature (185) ...

The convergence of rhythms in “Leda and the Swan” is thus revelatory and indicates a *moment* of unity of language, nation, being.

In “Sailing to Byzantium,” the interplay between the rhythms of “passionate prose” and the *ottava rima*’s iambic pentameter operates in a similar, but more complex way than in “Leda and the Swan,” and both confirms and deepens Lloyd’s insistence on the performative production of the real. Section I of “Sailing to Byzantium,” which depicts the “country” of “sensual music,” employs its speech-units to *silence* its *ottava rima*’s iambic pentameter:

I

1 2...
 That is no country for old men. The young
 3
 In one another’s arms, birds in the trees,
 4 5
 – Those dying generations – at their song,
 6 7
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 8 9 10 11...
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 12 13
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 14...
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

There are a total of fourteen speech-units in the section’s eight verse-lines, *thirteen* of which occupy the first six. In these first six lines, the iambic pentameter is especially suppressed. Each line involves at least two different speech-units, and all disrupt the

pentameter in other ways: the first and fifth line are sharply enjambed, bleeding the pulse of their line into the pulse of the next, thus affecting the second and sixth. Three sentences make up this section: the first is not a full line, the second spans six lines, and the third fills the closing couplet of the section. The first sentence—“*That is no country for old men.*”—is also one speech-unit, and with the requisite five stresses, sounds like it could be an entire verse-line. These stresses are dense, however, resounding with an opening-trochee and two spondees. So, the second sentence—“The young ... born, and dies.”—sounds like it should begin the next verse-line, but actually is the final iamb of the first line, enjambed sharply. This second sentence—in extreme contrast to the first—is made up of twelve speech-units over six lines. The literal “crowding” of clauses in this sentence peaks in the fifth line—“*Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long*”—which jams four speech-units in one line, at least six stresses, and enjambs into the sixth line.

This rhythm—which sonically silences the textual rhythm of the pentameter—*performs* the very “sensual music” depicted in the section. The music is especially pronounced in the dense consonance of the *ef* and *sh*-sounds in “Fish, flesh, or fowl,” which is then syntactically and alliteratively echoed in the next line: “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.” It is clear that the speaker disdains this ‘young Ireland’, given his ironic depictions of they who “commend all summer long whatever” is “born and dies.” However, the section’s aural performance of that degenerate “sensual music” signals a degree of participation with it, albeit ironically. This first section represents a past self that he must now, in exile, remake. And this remaking reflects itself rhythmically.

Pentameter's 'holy fire'

As Vendler observes, sections III and IV are two mutually exclusive possibilities for the speaker's afterlife. As such, they constitute two mutually exclusive acts of *autopoiesis*. In the third, the speaker imagines himself above Byzantium, in the "holy fire," singing praises to the divine in what Vendler terms a "single-sex, choral group" (33). And in this section, there is a convergence of rhythms very similar to the one discussed earlier. This section is split down the middle into two four-line sentences. The first invokes the divine "sages" to purify him into only "soul," through which the sages will teach him/it how to sing. It describes a step-by-step, imperative narrative for the sages:

III	
\ \ 1... \ \ \	
O sages standing in God's holy fire	1
\ \ \ \ \	
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,	2
\ 2 \ \ \ 3 \	
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,	3
\ \ 4 \ \ \	
And be the singing-masters of my soul.	4

The first two verse-lines constitute only one speech-unit, the third contains two, and the fourth line has one. The pentameter approaches audibility in the first two lines, but the first line displaces a stress, which gives it one pyrrhic then one spondee—"God's ho-ly." This displacement, moreover, calls attention to God's presence. The second line does not obviously defy iambic pentameter, but three of its alleged stresses are weak: 'in,' 'of,' and the stress in 'mosaic.' In the third line, both verbs trochaically reverse the meter, begin their own speech unit, and enact a kind of sonic 'perning'. This perne

occurs through both rhythm and rhyme: the repetition of ‘holy fire’ in the third line internally rhymes with the end rhyme ‘gyre’. The third line trochees, furthermore, create a strange crunch of stress: “*Come* from the *hol-y fire, perne* in a *gyre*.” There are *two* unstressed syllables between the first and second stresses, *one* between the second and third, *none* between the third and fourth, and two again between the fourth and fifth. This rhythmic pattern, plus the added rhyme density, plus the appearance of the phrase “perne in a gyre” suggests something is rotating around here.

At any rate, it is an incredibly dynamic rhythm and rhyme, which builds anticipation for the section’s climax: “And be the singing-masters of my soul.” This line merges speech-unit and verse-line and has all its iambs straightened out. The culmination here makes sense semantically as well, for the line articulates this particular vision of the afterlife, and exactly how the speaker will be singing. The *ottava rima* pentameter becomes audible in this moment, indicating convergence and deference to this European form. This third section, then, attempts to perform a *non*-hybrid posture for the speaker, in which the Irish music of the first section is abandoned and a European form is donned wholesale. Ultimately, though, this way to spend eternity is likely both impossible and unappealing to the speaker, for he seems to settle (though ambivalently) for the scenario offered in the fourth and final section. This afterlife is more pagan, more sensual than in the third, but remains eternal and artificial.

‘Hammered’ alliterations

Section IV imagines the kind of afterlife the speaker most prefers: either singing sexy stuff as a metal bird to the emperor or singing observational stuff to 1% Byzantium dudes

and duettes. That this is preferable goes without saying. What also has gone without saying, but shouldn't, is the way that the rhythm in this section also performs that preference:

IV	
\ 1... \ \ \ \ \	
Once out of nature I shall never take	1
\ \ \ \ \ \	
My bodily form from any natural thing,	2
\ \ 2... \ \ \ \ \	
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make	3
\ \ \ \ \ \	
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling	4
\ \ \ \ \ \	
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;	5
\ \ \ 3... \ \ \	
Or set upon a golden bough to sing	6
\ \ \ \ \ \	
To lords and ladies of Byzantium	7
\ \ \ 4 \ 5 \	
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.	8

The first two lines rhythmically enact the nature the speaker is leaving: an immediate trochaic reversal, a sharp enjambment between verb and its object, and finally the only line in the poem with twelve syllables. Notably, the words that add these syllables are 'bodily' and 'natural.' This rhythmic disruption ends precisely at the semantic turn beginning the third line: "But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make..." This line and every line following after all submit to exact iambic pentameter; the rhythm and meter has actually been "hammered" out. This perfect conformity to the meter suggests at one level an acceptance of the artifice of the *ottava rima* form, and its enactment literally

wills it into being before the listener's very ears. Considered purely metrically, it may be difficult to hear the difference between the revelations of the third and fourth sections.

The sonic features of this fourth section's *final* line, though, aurally distinguish the section from the third. Just as Vendler observes that the speaker's song is "music of this temporal world" and that it is *concerned* with the immanent, the last line strongly *echoes* the temporal, immanent world of the first section. The alliterative and syntactical structure of "past, or passing, or to come" complete the trifecta of "Fish, flesh, or fowl" and "begotten, born, and dies." And, the latter of which is also semantically very similar to the line in the fourth section: both condense a history of *what-ever* into some version of birth and death, or past and present and future. The fourth section thus resounds hybrid *autopoiesis*, producing both the *ottava rima* pentameter and the alliterative "sensual music." Furthermore, Vendler observes:

The final rhyme—"Byzantium ... come" reverses, with intent, the orientation of the original (mistaken) desire, expressed at the second station, that 'soul clap its hands and sing,' aspiring to create a masterpiece of 'unageing intellect.' (35).

The final rhyme echoes the second section while the alliteration echoes the first, and so the poem closes with an echo in opposition with *itself*. While the "hammered" pentameter performs Doggett's 'imagined exile' into the *ottava rima* eternity of Byzantium, the last line echoes itself back to the beginning in a masterwork of aural contrariety.

Man and the Echo

‘Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?’

I will close with an analysis of one of Yeats’s last poems “Man and the Echo,” though the intersection between Yeats’s aurality and his nationalisms does not exhibit any chronological *telos* or dialectic. This poem is valuable to our discussion for a number of reasons: it is in overt dialogue with the trope of the echo; it enacts a particularly revealing use of tetrameter; it converses directly with the relationship between old men, voice, death, and identity; and, finally, it is frequently cited in postcolonial treatments of Yeats, but has never to my knowledge been analyzed in this way.

“Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?” is a question the speaker asks in “Man and the Echo,” a question that has become *de rigueur* to quote as a Yeatsian postcolonial scholar. Ramazani, in *The Hybrid Muse*, quotes it to illustrate Yeats’s worry over his status as a “nation-maker,” as the line references possible negative consequences of the rage his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* fomented (28-9).⁷ Similarly, Lloyd, in “Nationalism and postcolonialism,” uses the lines to suggest Yeats’s “meditation on the [political] bankruptcy of his early poetics” (185). On the first page of *W.B. Yeats in Context*’s introduction, David Holdeman and Ben Levitas quote it to demonstrate how Yeats asserted himself “as much the producer as the product of times” (1). The lines’ question, they admit, is “neither simple nor obvious” (1). O’Connor, too, in *Haunted English*, uses the quote to demonstrate how Yeats “inscribes the play

⁷ *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, debuting in 1902, was Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s *aisling* for the stage, and Yeats and others later believed the play may have a ‘rehearsal’ for the 1916 Easter Rising (O’Connor, 24).

[*Cathleen ni Houlihan*] as a typological event in the story of Ireland” (24). Yet, none of these critics have engaged with the question on the poem’s own terms. Only Doggett offers us more than a one-sentence-ponder:

He never did get the answers right to that question, nor did he ever settle on one final response to the larger questions of (gendered) identity, history, epistemology, and modernity.... I have endeavored to demonstrate how Yeatsian nationalism operates not as one position but as a series of fluid stances that manifest themselves throughout his life as he negotiates the turning gyres of history (152).

Doggett uses the question not just to explain its difficulty—like Holdeman and Levitas—nor just to prove that Yeats was invested in his “nation-maker” status—like Ramazani, Lloyd, and O’Connor—but rather to emphasize the centrality of restless *questioning* to his nationalisms. Doggett implies that “never get[ting] the answers right” is a requisite condition to being able to hold “a series of fluid stances” (152). While I agree with Doggett’s conclusion here, he also only uses the line in passing, and takes for granted the context offered by the rest of “Man and the Echo.”

At moments, “Man and the Echo” seems almost thematically the same to “Sailing to Byzantium”; at others, the same to “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water.” Ultimately though, it is neither a dialectical synthesis of the two nor a wholesale rejection, but rather a complex negotiation between each and every element constituting those two poems. I argue that “Man and the Echo” is a radical interrogation of *autopoiesis* itself, which further challenges the viability of contrariety and hybridity as nationalist *means*. The poem does not reject these means outright but insistently questions them, and paradoxically challenges their efficacy while depending upon them at the same time.

Imagined exile and private shouts

Let us first consider the ways in which “Man and the Echo” is similar to “Sailing to Byzantium.” The most immediate parallel are the speakers’ ‘imagined exile’:

Man and the Echo

Man

In a cleft that’s christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
That broad noon has never lit,
And shout a secret to the stone.

(*Collected*, 372)

In these first five lines, the speaker informs us that he is situated literally “at the bottom of a mountain gash” (*Death*, 194). ‘Alt’, which is Irish for ‘cliff’ (195), refers to a real cleft in Knocknarea, which is a hill near his mythological-home of Sligo (Fitzpatrick, 77). The speaker, then, is both in exile and deep within Ireland: “Nothing from society can touch him here” (Vendler, 242). Furthermore, like in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker requires this “external vantage” of solitude for his speech—“I ... shout a secret to the stone”:

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman’s reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

This speaker, “old and ill,” is also “but a paltry thing” (*Collected*, 204), in excess and forced to face forward into death. Vendler also observes that the speaker’s pressing

questions “all concern words: the words of a political play, words to an unstable woman, words unuttered in crisis” (240). Just as the speaker’s identity in “Sailing” revolved around his ‘song,’ so to does this speaker hinge his self upon his words. Oral language, in particular, is privileged: words that are spoken, words orally performed in a play, words shouted to a stone. The poem itself is structured like a play in its denotation that the character of ‘Man’ speaks here and the character of ‘Echo’ speaks there.⁸ As such, both poems regard an old-man-in-imagined-exile as he meditates on his identity *a la* voice. Echo’s first (half-)line, however, immediately demarcates “Man and the Echo” from “Sailing”:

And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

Echo
Lie down and die.

Death, or voice, or echoic instability

This startling move in the poem signals its kinship with the “centuries old genre of the echo poem” (Vendler, 239). Given that the echo poem was prominent in both European and English Renaissances (Hollander, 26), this appropriation signifies the poem’s broad formal-hybridity. The form draws explicitly on Ovid’s myth, and always is in the form of a pseudo-dialogue between the speaker and the Echo—who accordingly echoes back what the speaker has just said, often ironically twisting or punning on the speaker’s words (26-7). While Yeats’s Echo does not pun on the speaker, what was only just before

⁸ In Denis Donoghue’s discussion of the poem, he recalls how Seamus Heaney once recited “Man and the Echo,” and uttered *Man* and *Echo* as if the poem were a play (179).

the “poet’s subjunctive statement of a wish,” is now a “harrowing command” (*Death*, 196)—an imperative statement toward death.

This syntactical shift is revealing on a few different levels. That Echo issues a *command* to the speaker frames death in a particular way. For one, death is not immediately inevitable. One commands another to do something precisely because that thing has not been done yet. More importantly, death is all verb in this instance.⁹ Death is something done.¹⁰ Ong argues in *Orality and Literacy* that sound is “powered,” it is an act—not some immobile *thing* like writing (32). The imperative here figures death as a similarly powered action. This relation in fact parallels how death is conceived as a performative production in “Sailing to Byzantium.”

The twist into the imperative also removes Echo’s subjecthood from his or her voice. Echo does not say, “I command that you lie down and die,” but simply commands, “Lie down and die.” In a proper echoing of the Ovidian myth, Echo is a bodiless voicing.¹¹ As the poem continues, bodilessness becomes integral to how the speaker idealizes both life and afterlife:

Man

That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect’s great work,
And shirk it in vain. There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,
Nor can there be work so great
As that which cleans man’s dirty slate.
While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Waking he thanks the Lord that he

⁹ As opposed to some personification, some grim reaper figure.

¹⁰ For Yeats, death is not just done but constructed: “Man has created death” (*Collected*, 241).

¹¹ *Metamorphoses* concludes Echo’s part in the myth, *sonus est, qui vivit in illa*, which literally translates to “she/it is sound/noise, which lives in that(one)/her.” This telling line follows after Echo’s body atrophies and only *vox manet*, or “voice remains” (98).

Has body and its stupidity,
 But body gone he sleeps no more,
 And till his intellect grows sure
 That all's arranged in one clear view,
 Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
 Then stands in judgment on his soul,
 And, all work done, dismisses all
 Out of intellect and sight
 And sinks at last into the night.

Echo
 Into the night.

He privileges the “spiritual intellect’s great work”—which is necessarily bodiless—over immanent and corporeal concerns. He also “pursues the thoughts” that he thinks he will be able to properly pursue when his body is “gone.” Denis Donoghue observes that the spiritual intellect is “the mind as an eternal capacity, freed by death to a state without BC or AD” (184). This state, while similar to the state of being “outside the flux of temporality” at the end of “Sailing” (Lloyd 184), is distinct in its bodilessness. In “Sailing,” the speaker is still bodied—however inorganically—as a metal bird of “hammered gold and gold enamelling” (*Collected*, 204). Echo, in a way, symbolizes the speaker’s aspiration; Vendler concurs, arguing that Echo makes him “hear—by external repetition—what he was himself saying” (242).

However, the speaker’s immediate dismissal of Echo’s command—“That were to shirk the spiritual intellect’s great work”—signals that this aspiration really only reveals that there is a *distance* between the speaker and his voice. What Echo ultimately reveals are the “fantasies of phonocentrism” (Enterline, 13). Ramazani argues that, “its form ... demonstrates grammatically this frightening drift of the poet’s life and work into instability” (*Death*, 196). If we think back to the actual questions that made the speaker sleepless, we realize that they concern the unintended consequences of his words, once

they had become detached from his body. For example, did *Cathleen ni Houlihan* cause in part the Easter Rising? These concerns materialize—or rather *de*-materialize—with Echo’s instant appropriation of his own words. Even his private monologue is immediately distanced. By exposing the inherent distance between body and voice, between throat and speech, the echo now directly challenges the performative means through which the real—an Ireland—can be produced. In doing so, it questions the efficacy of hybridity, contrariety, and finally *autopoiesis*.

Hybrid stasis and aural self-reflexivity

At the very moment the poem departs from “Sailing to Byzantium,” however, it is perhaps closest to “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water.” The two times in which Echo speaks are the two moments when the speaker explicitly ponders death. He considers his corporeal death preceding “Lie down and die,” and his “spiritual intellect’s” death before “Into the night.” Like the sonic-death suggested by the sounds of “Like the waters” (*Collected*, 85), the sounds of ‘lie down’ encode the sound of ‘die’: the assonance of *e* in ‘lie’ and ‘die,’ and the consonance of *d* in ‘down’ and ‘die.’ The complete sonic structure of the word ‘die’ is set up and anticipated by ‘lie down.’

Echo’s second utterance, “into the night,” reinforces the notion of stasis that was central to “The Old Men admiring Themselves.” Whereas the first echo twisted the speaker’s words into an imperative, this one twists nothing, and repeats only a fragment of a sentence. John Hollander, in *The Figure of Echo*, notes that this echo’s “irony is that it is not expectedly ironic” (61, n13). We hear irony in the line’s sheer redundancy, into the night, into death.

Furthermore, just as the old men in “The Old Men admiring Themselves” were figured as hybrid Narcissi and Echoes, so too is this speaker. Near the end of the poem, the speaker asks:

O rocky voice
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place?

If this man is constituted by his language, and if Echo repeats only this man’s language, the fact that the speaker now *faces* this voice signifies a moment of mirror-vision only a Narcissus could summon. Indeed, Vendler observes that this

self-identification is made explicit in the back-and-forth repetition of a mutually owned phrase: “into the night” (the man), “Into the night” (the echo), followed by “in that great night” (the man) (243).

The six lines that follow, and end the poem, also enact a complex aural-subsuming of Echo, which occurs precisely at the moment Echo is “hushed.” Here are the first two:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;

The word ‘seem’ begs to be noticed: it trochaically disrupts the iambic tetrameter and rhymes internally with its couplet-end-rhymes: ‘theme’ and ‘dream.’ Beginning this poem’s aural self-reflexivity, these two features, allude—even as they disrupt—to the form as form. This is fitting semantically, because it occurs at the precise moment the speaker loses ‘the theme,’ the theme being perhaps the poem itself. Susan Stewart, in her essay “Rhyme and Freedom,”¹² observes that when rhymes occur extremely close together—like “seem but a dream”—they often accentuate the *arbitrariness* of the connection formed by the rhyme (43, 45). Yeats’s inclusion of ‘seem’ closes the sonic-

¹² This essay, in fact, appears in Perloff and Dworkin’s *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*.

gap between ‘theme’ and ‘dream,’ which draws attention to *and* suggests the arbitrariness of the rhyme scheme he has employed for the last 40 lines.

The beginning of the second line—“Its joy or night”—also echoes again the last utterance of Echo herself: ‘Into the night’ is only four lines prior. They both end with ‘night,’ they both begin similarly—with ‘Int-‘ and ‘It-‘—and they both occupy the same four-syllable, two-stress place in the meter. This couplet, then, is oversaturated with echoes even as it enacts the moment when the speaker hushes the character Echo herself. Donoghue agrees and argues that this “internal and external rhyming ... is a sign of displacement” (187), and observes that this couplet signals a larger formal shift:

One style of discourse yields to another. The first style has been discursive, and authoritative in that mode. Man has drawn the discourse to himself as its center, briefly impeded by two echoing and echoed phrases. But the poem ends... [with] an image, imagined and not claimed as having happened, a pure hypothesis.... What status can this have except as that of the otherwise silenced Echo, allowed now to intervene in the antithetical form of an image? The image is imperative in the sense that it... is merely itself, pure act....

The poem ends, then, when it has allowed the dominant form of itself to be deflected (187-8).

Whereas the preceding majority of the poem has been a monologue of the speaker’s self-centered “thought,” the end listens *outward* as the speaker describes a violent scene between bird and prey:

Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought.

From ‘struck’ to ‘stricken’: aural production of the real

Donoghue insists, though, that the speaker has “imagined” this scene; he has only heard some ‘cry’ and, as a man at the bottom of a “mountain gash” (*Death*, 194), is physically incapable of such a vision. In the manner of “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker has

willed this real into being. Donoghue also claims that Echo “intervenes” as an “an antithetical... image” of “pure act” (188), which to me is unconvincing until we consider the end’s aural character. In these last four lines, there is a density of assonance (*ah, ow, ay, a*), front-consonance (*str-, sk-*), and end-consonance (*-ck*):

Assonance	Front-consonance:	End-consonance
<i>ah</i>	<i>str-</i>	<i>-ck</i>
hawk Dropping rock thought	struck stricken distracts	hawk struck rock stricken distracts
<i>ow</i>	<i>Sk</i>	
owl out (2 nd) out (3 rd)	sky is crying its cry	
<i>ay</i>		
sky is crying its cry		
<i>a</i>		
rabbit distracts		

Of the fifteen stressed words in the last four lines, a total of *one* word does not have any strong sonic-relationships with any of the other words: *there*. This word, importantly, is the very first stress in this final section. Once the speaker has indicated

where the action is taking place, the sound moves *there* as well. The sounds, indeed, can mostly be derived from the next three stressed words of that first line: *hawk*, *owl*, and *struck*:

owl => out => out (ow)

hawk => struck => rock => stricken => distracts (ck)

hawk => Dropping => rock => thought (ah)

struck => stricken => is crying => its cry => distracts (str)

The other important word ‘sky’ comes in line two, which locates us both semantically and sonically.

sky => is crying => its cry (sk)

This sonic shift occurs to mimic the hawk or owl strike, and the subsequent cry of the rabbit, and so *produces* it. Vendler notes that, “although its animal source can in fact only be guessed at, Yeats’s imagination leaps to solicitude, creating by conjunction a verbal echo: the hawk that has struck, the rabbit that is stricken” (244). Echo, intervening, is subsumed into the speaker’s voice through this echoic-intensification.

Finally, though, both the speaker and Echo are silenced by this cry of death, which moves the speaker out of the bodiless-voice-realm into the bodied-voice-realm: “to hear the outside world, the man must quiet both his voice and that of the echo” (Vendler, 243). Accordingly, the form changes: first, this section is only ten lines, compared with the previous two sections of eighteen lines; second, the imperfect end rhymes—struck, rock; out, thought¹³—actually suggest more of a *quatrain*, rather than a pair of couplets, because of the assonance of ‘rock’ and ‘thought’; and third, the final line only has three

¹³ These four lines approach an *abcb* rhyme-scheme.

stresses, rather than the four stresses of every other line in this poem. Both the reduced line-length of the last section and stress-length of the last line *end* the poem much quicker than the listener anticipates, which suggests death in much the same way that the dropped stresses in ‘By the waters’ of “The Old Men admiring Themselves” did.

Furthermore, the three-stress final line and the pseudo-quatrain echo a ballad form. Vendler would agree, having observed that a tetrameter line with *abab*-rhyming quatrains brings “the stanza close in feeling to the ballad” (206).¹⁴ And, the rabbit cry in these final four lines echo the section “Death of the Hare” in Yeats’s poem “A Man Young and Old” (*Collected*, 227)—which is overtly in ballad form. At the end, then, the tetrameter line occupies a similar hybrid position as it did in “The Old Men admiring Themselves”: part folk ballad, part “passionate prose.”

Of ‘all’ echoes

However, along with all of these echoes, there is also a conspicuous loss of a particular kind of echo. Donoghue suggests that “Man and the Echo” is a “set of variations on the sound of ‘all’:¹⁵ *Alt, halt, all, till, all seems evil, spiritual intellect’s, While, still, till, intellect, all’s, soul, all work done, dismisses all, intellect, Shall* (189). In the poem’s first 38 lines, a variation on ‘all’ occurs, on average, almost every other line. However, in the poem’s final eight lines, this sound is completely absent. Donoghue speculates that the

¹⁴ Vendler gives these lines from “Lapis Lazuli” as her example (206):

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,
Are carved in lapis lazuli,
Over them flies a long-legged bird
A symbol of longevity[.]

¹⁵ Donoghue here allows “for its minor repetition as the middle syllables of ‘intellect’ and such words” (189).

word ‘all’ is a favorite of Yeats because of its association with argumentation and discourse, so it makes sense to him that, once the poem has shed its discursive mode, the discursive sound ‘all’ would shed as well (189). Furthermore, Donoghue quotes William Empson on Milton’s use of *all*: “The self-centred man, in his turn, is not much interested in the variety of the world, and readily lumps it together as ‘all’” (qtd. on 188). This assertion is plausible for Yeats too, at least locally in this poem, especially when we consider Vendler’s reading of the end:

Like the earlier questions about words, the two later ones are couplet-questions.... But unlike the earlier questions in the first person singular (“that play of *mine*, words of *mine*, *my* spoken words”), these questions are phrased in the collective “we,” and represent a turning of the man’s mind to others and his collective relation to them: “Shall *we* ... rejoice?” What do *we* know but that *we* face / *One another* in this place?” “This place” ... refer[s] ... to the social world which he shares with others (243, her italics).

The sonic shift, then, is not simply from the discursive to the imaged, but from the self-centered to the other-centered. *All* is problematic when looking outward, because it would gloss over the particularities and differences; but this is the *rabbit*’s cry, not animalia’s cry.

What is most pressing for me here are the implications of an echoic-shift itself. I contend that, by the end of ‘Man and the Echo,’ we hear yet another ‘antithetical stance.’ This stance, however, performs contrariety upon *autopoiesis* itself. The speaker finds himself in this poem an exile within his own country, facing his own voice that immediately destabilizes the Yeatsian poet’s main *autopoetic* tool: oral language. Furthermore, the poem ends by undermining the very tools used to undermine his *autopoetic* assuredness in the first place: questions and echoes. It ends “hushing” Echo and halting his questions. It ends, moreover, aurally and semantically opposed to all that came before. It ends, finally, by listening outward, by (re)making not his self or death,

but another's. Indeed, Vendler, in Perloffian fashion, notes the antithetical semantic import of the poem's final rhyme:

By rhyming “out” and “thought” in the last couplet, Yeats admits to the irreparable separation between external concern and interior meditation: they cannot coexist, but must yield alternately (244)...

This final couplet—“A stricken rabbit is crying out / And its cry distracts my thought”—strikingly echoes the oft-quoted question posed earlier in the poem: “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?” Both end their first line with ‘out,’ and both end the second line with *ah*-assonance—‘shot’ and ‘thought.’ In both these couplets, it is violence that resounds ‘out’ in the world. His thoughts concern violence and violence disrupts his thought. Violence disrupts the exile with its sound, because he is listening. And this exile, imagines and produces it into the real—re-echoing it—and, finally, in *his* rhymes, constitutes this animal violence as a sign of colonial violence.

Conclusion

In the above three poems, I have examined particular intersections between Yeats's aural forms and his nationalisms. I have considered how Yeats's *autopoiesis*—and its manifestation through the figuring of the speaker's body, voice, and their connection—positions himself in various postcolonial postures. These postures, furthermore, all revolve around the interactions between Yeats's antithetical nationalism and his Anglo-Irish hybridity.

In “The Old Men admiring Themselves in the Water,” the old men “are revealed as static figures” as they try to see “their lost beauty” (Doggett, 143). This tension between loss and stasis is ironic, which in turn generates antithetical tension between ‘useful’ art of modernity and romantic *aisling* nationalism. “Sailing to Byzantium” shifts

away from the “organic symbolism” of the *aisling* mode into “an inorganic ... and highly performative mode which poses antithesis rather than identity as its fundamental relation” (Lloyd, 187). The speaker’s imagined Byzantium in the poem’s final section is antithetical to the romantic projection of Ireland performed in the first. Such a mode is only possible through ‘imagined exile,’ an outside perspective where Yeats’s speakers could “question the hegemonic drive of postcolonial nationalism without abandoning ... nation-building” (Doggett, 95).

Moreover, while “The Old Men admiring Themselves” “dialectically opposes the real” (Doggett, 141), the performative aspect of “Sailing to Byzantium” indicates that Yeats “marshals utterances that ... intend to *produce* the real” (Lloyd, 187). Finally, “Man and the Echo,” insistently questions the efficacies of those utterances by exposing the instability of language that manifests from voice’s inherent distance from the body. This instability challenges Yeats’s *autopoietic* project to the core, which raises further questions: can and should he maintain such antithetical nationalism, and does hybridity prove politically potent in its radical ambivalence?

Ultimately, the oral and the aural deepen and complicate these questions provoked by “Man and the Echo”. Speech, song, and echoes govern these poem’s tropes as well as their thematic concerns. I, furthermore, have sought to demonstrate how each poem’s aural structures bear semantically on its content, and specifically on its nationalist and postcolonial stances. Each poem’s interplay of rhythms and manipulation of echo performs the ironies, antitheses, and/or hybridities at work. This attention to sound finally reveals each poem’s own self-reflexive negotiation with its nationalist posturings. The

aural structures suggest the poems' most direct *autopoetical* engagements—sounds literally *making* a great deal of each poem.

This attention to sound, moreover, reminds us of Yeats's ideological privileging of the oral word over the printed one. While his theoretical and biographical preoccupation with Irish oral traditions has been thoroughly documented, that preoccupation's *stylistic* implementation and exploration in his poetry has been noted only in passing, or treated isolated from his politics. This study has hoped to remedy that, and has hoped to suggest yet another way “the style of an oeuvre preserves many traces of how social reality was refracted through the mind of its maker” (O'Connor, 64).

Finally, and in alignment with Yeats, this essay argues that sound should have renewed centrality in the study of poetry in general and in postcolonial studies. By demonstrating how purely aural patterns bear on a poet's political stances, I have hoped to suggest just how much a poet can do with sound. I have attempted to approach a limit of sounds semantic potentialities, which should suggest a vast spectrum of other meanings aural patterns can create and perform.

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