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Development in Yeats's Use of the Refrain in Ballads and Folk Songs in "Beggar to Beggar Cried," "The Rose Tree," and "Three Things"

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Introduction

Yeats used the refrain throughout his lifetime and developed its functions at different stages in his career. Although the refrain was an important device for him in many senses, with some exceptions, he rarely referred to it in his prose. The following is one of these exceptions. Here, he explains how a simple repetitive phrase invites an audience to participate in a performance of poetry:

In a short poem he [the reciter] may interrupt the narrative with a burden, which the audience will soon learn to sing, and this burden, because it is repeated and need not tell a story to a first hearing, can have a more elaborate musical notation, can go nearer to ordinary song.... (*The Irish Dramatic Movement* p. 103)

The quotation refers to two important aspects of the refrain that would have occupied his mind at that time. First, the refrain in ballads and songs has been associated with establishing a cooperative relationship between a singer and his audience, as well as a sense of unity the singer may share with a singing audience. This cultural context for the refrain was significant to Yeats. Throughout his lifetime, but especially during the Irish Literary

Revival, he envisioned the Ireland of the future as a nation culturally unified by its oral tradition.¹ He strove to define Irish literature in contrast to English literature, claiming that Irish poetry and Irish stories were “made to be spoken or sung,” while English literature “has all but completely shaped itself in the printing-press” (*The Irish Dramatic Movement* p. 97). No wonder he identified the cooperative relationship between a singer and his audience as a metaphor for the ideal relationship between art and Irish society and that he considered a public place in which a singer sings to and with an audience as a model for Irish society.

Second, the quotation also suggests that Yeats values the aesthetic effect the refrain produced. Matthew Splanger rightly remarks, “Yeats believed that audiences were most significantly moved by the immediacy of live performance and the sensual qualities of spoken language” (p. 152). Born into the age of print culture, Yeats had to incorporate the “immediacy of live performance” and “sensual qualities of spoken language” into his “written” poems. The refrain served this purpose. When working with it earlier in his career, he seemed more interested in sound effects than meaning. In general, the refrain in ballads and folk songs does not necessarily have semantic significance in relation to the rest of the stanza; it can be simple and even nonsensical as long as it is singable and pleasant to the ear. The refrain, which invites the audience to recite the verse, could have easily been

¹ For example, in 1920 he looked back his devotion to the nationalist movement in his youth, saying, “We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work’s sake what I have called ‘the applied art of literature,’ the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance; and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day labourer would accept a common design?” (*Autobiographies* pp. 194-195)

associated with incantation in his mind; for he often regarded his ideal poetry as magic spells that “act on” readers or the poet himself.² The refrain was a useful method for activating the primitive power of spoken language in written text.

These cultural and artistic aspects of the refrain were important to Yeats throughout his lifetime. However, his use of the refrain in his later poems differs from that in his earlier ones. In his earlier poems, the role of the refrain is limited to making a whole poem rhythmical and imparting to it a folkloric character. Later in his life, the refrain filled a more strategic position for him; its interactions with the rest of the stanza came to produce various meanings. In his last collections of poetry, *New Poems* (1938) and *Last Poems* (1939), Yeats employed the refrain more frequently and adeptly than ever, and preceding studies have widely recognized his mature use of it.³ However, only a few studies have discussed how Yeats explored and experimented with the function of the refrain in the work leading up to these last collections, and fewer studies have attempted to explain how his use of it developed.⁴ In this essay, I will consider the refrain in “Beggar to Beggar Cried” (1914), “The Rose Tree” (written in 1917 and first published in 1920), and “Three Things” (1929). The refrains in these poems serve to

² This idea is probably most noticeable in his early essay, “Magic.” In this essay, Yeats states the following: “Have not poetry and music arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers-by? These very words, a chief part of all praises of music or poetry, still cry to us their origin. And just as the musician or the poet enchants and charms and binds with a spell his own mind when he would enchant the mind of others, so did the enchanter create or reveal for himself as well as for others the supernatural artist or genius, the seeming transitory mind made out of many minds...” (*Essays and Introductions* p. 43).

³ For example, Ellmann pp. 201-206, MacNeice pp. 140-162 and Henn pp. 328-330.

⁴ One of these few critics, Helen Vendler, keenly observes that the development of his usage of refrains accompanied his experiments with the balladic form in his middle period. See *Our Secret Discipline* pp. 114-117.

identify the speaker, as commonly seen in ballads and folk songs. In May 1913, Yeats adopted this approach for, as far as I know, the first time in “Beggar to Beggar Cried,” and this poem clearly exemplifies his exploration of the use of the refrain during his middle period. I will also refer to his use of the refrain in “The Rose Tree” to show how tactfully he used different types of refrains depending on the context. In the last part of this essay, I will discuss “Three Things.” Comparing these poems, written in his middle and later period, will illustrate how Yeats’s use of the refrain in ballads and folk songs developed in the periods leading up to his later career.

I

In his early period, Yeats was enthusiastic about popular literature and wrote several ballads, including “The Ballad of Moll Magee” (1889) and “The Ballad of Father O’Hart” (1888). He did not use refrains in these ballads, though he frequently did so in his lyric poetry. After the 1890s, he seldom used the ballad stanzas. Probably, at that stage in his life, the ballad meter seemed too simple to him and did not suit his poetic ambition. Yeats was not, after all, a simple folk poet in any real sense. However, for “Beggar to Beggar Cried,” he chose fourteener, a meter commonly used in street ballads and one he had adopted earlier in his poetic drama *The Green Helmet* (1910). This poem provides a good example of his exploration of the function of the refrain during his middle period.

In this ballad, Yeats places an unrhymed refrain in the third of the four-line stanza. Helen Vendler, Daniel Hoffman, and Louis MacNeice mention the effect of the refrain in this poem, emphasizing different aspects. Vendler notes the effect produced by this refrain as follows:

...Yeats begins to create his own form of ballad stanzas. In the 1914 “Beggar to Beggar Cried” (299-300), he incorporates the refrain into the stanza itself, ... in this beggar poem Yeats puts the refrain—in “low” diction, unrhymed and italicized—in the penultimate line-position. (*Our Secret Discipline* p. 116)

Thus, introducing the idea of “low” diction, Vendler regards this poem as “Yeats’s own form of ballad stanzas,” to which the unrhymed, and carefully positioned refrain contributes. Hoffman contrasts the function of the refrain in this poem with Yeats’s earlier poems: “until now [the time in which Yeats wrote “Beggar to Beggar Cried”] the refrains of his verses had always been merely a reiteration, sometimes in a longer or shorter line than the stanza itself, of the prevailing mood” (p. 42). He then emphasizes that Yeats struggled in exploring a new relationship between the refrain and the rest of the stanza:

...in the present ballad Yeats has reversed our expectations by *making the refrain line discordant and unsingable*. From this reversal comes *a tonal dialectic between refrain and stanza, between speech and song*, a contrast Yeats will develop further in later ballads. This contrast opens the way to a deepening of texture, a richness of meaning, a double movement embedded in sound and rhythm as well as in image. (p. 43, emphasis added)

Being “discordant” and “unsingable,” the refrain poses “a tonal dialectic” to the whole poem. Here, Hoffman highlights the contrast between the

refrain and the rest of the stanza, seeing it as an important quality that deepens and enriches the text. According to him, this contrast is not found in Yeats's earlier poems but more frequently seen later. MacNeice also observes the "discordant" and "unsingable" quality of the refrain, stating that the refrain is "not in the least glib in meaning or sound" in this poem (p. 148). He adds that the refrain, "by its position in the stanza as the third line of four (but unrhyming), is structural" (p. 148), though he does not fully explain in what sense this position makes the refrain "structural." Taking the points made by these critics into consideration, I will offer an interpretation of this ballad and discuss the refrain.

In this poem, the beggar begins by imagining that he will marry and settle down to a domestic life but ends up revealing that his previous imagining actually conflict with his own will. Let us consider the opening stanza:

"Time to put off the world and go somewhere
And find my health again in the sea air,"
Beggar to beggar cried, being frenzy-struck,
"And make my soul before my pate is bare." (1-4)⁵

In the first two lines, the speaker says that it is time to retreat from the world and live a life without strain. This sentence could syntactically be completed in these two lines. However, after the refrain, he adds that it is also time to prepare for death before he reaches old age.⁶ Indeed, at the end of the stanza, he reveals that settling down and raising a family merely

⁵ The edition used throughout is *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*. Ed. Daniel Albright. Hereafter, the line numbers will be cited parenthetically.

⁶ To "make my soul" is an Irish expression meaning to prepare for death. It also appears in "The Tower," part III.

represents early preparation for death; or, in other words, retreating from a wanderer's life makes finding real meaning inaccessible to him. The speaker's acceptance of marital life is thus negated at the end of the stanza. The same pattern recurs in the second stanza:

“And get a comfortable wife and house
To rid me of the devil in my shoes,”
Beggar to beggar cried, being frenzy-struck,
“And the worse devil that is between my thighs.” (5-8)

The exact meaning of the “devil” (6, 8) is uncertain here, but it may allude to the impulse that drives the beggar to take a certain action in his life. The “devil in my shoes” (6) indicates the beggar's impulse to wander around the world. The first two lines describe marital life as comfortable and restful. Then, after the refrain, comes the line revealing what married life means to him: getting rid of his sexual drive. He does not desire such a status. Thus, the first two lines in which he seemingly accepts the circumstances of married life, counterbalance the last line, in which he mocks the same circumstances. The same is true of the last stanza:

“And there I'll grow respected at my ease,
And hear amid the garden's nightly peace,”
Beggar to beggar cried, being frenzy-struck,
“The wind-blown clamour of the barnacle-geese.” (17-20)

In the first two lines, the beggar envisages his married life, in which he has achieved respect and a lifestyle of ease and peace. However, in the garden

full of peace, he hears the “wind-blown clamour of the barnacle-geese.” In folktales, the cackling of geese represents a bad omen.⁷ This suggests that the peace and ease of marriage mentioned in the first two lines will be followed by alarm and anticipation of danger in the last line; even if living a marriage life, the beggar will not be able to enjoy peace and rest. Syntactically, the refrain delays the appearance of the object corresponding to the verb “hear.” This interruption of the refrain works to suspend the readers’ expectations for the following object and eventually emphasizes the gap between peace and a warning. The rhymed words at the end of each line, “ease,” “peace,” and “geese,” also highlight the gap.

The refrain articulates the speaker’s identity as a frenzy-struck beggar. A beggar, or a wandering poet who pursues love, is a persona familiar to readers of Yeats’s works.⁸ He uses pursuit of love as a metaphor for exploring the real meaning of life, and to give up wandering and live in comfort would be fatal to the poet’s creativity. A biographical fact gives us a better understanding of the poem. In 1910, Yeats received a telegraph in Coole Park from Mabel Dickinson, saying that she was pregnant by him. Though this turned out to be a lie, the incident completely bewildered him. After this happened, Lady Gregory advised him to marry so that he could have peace of mind. She understood that he had been deeply hurt by his long, unrequited love for Maud Gonne. Yeats understood this as well. However, he was certain that married life would neither free him from his fruitless passion for Maud nor bring him peace of mind. In fact, we may posit that the beggar’s speech in this poem is

⁷ Leach pp.459-460.

⁸ For example, see “Stories of Red Hanrahan,” “The Curse of Cromwell,” and “The Wild Old Wicked Man.”

Yeats's witty response to Lady Gregory's advice: to be a poet, or a pursuer of the real meaning of life, he chooses to live a vagabond life not a respectable life.

In the first two lines of each stanza, the beggar takes the possibility of a domestic life into consideration, though he negates it at the end of each stanza. The unidentified voice of the refrain interposes these opposite feelings. Identifying the speaker as a frenzy-struck beggar in the first stanza and repeating this in later stanzas, the refrain interrupts the speaker's growing anticipation of a domestic life and even pulls his thoughts back to a vagabond existence. However, the following stanza begins with the beggar again considering the possibility of married life. This cyclical pattern imitates the wavering of his thoughts. This poem initially appears to be a simple broadside ballad. Commonly, in ballads, the refrain is less concerned with the development of a speaker's feelings than it is in lyric poetry.⁹ However, this fourteener expresses the speaker's feelings with a fluidity that befits lyric poetry, and the interaction between the voice of the refrain and the beggar's speech fully conveys the beggar's (and possibly Yeats's) dilemma. Developing a productive relationship between the refrain and the rest of the stanza becomes an important strategy for Yeats in his later period.

II

While Yeats in the middle period was experimenting with new types of refrains, he also benefited from the refrain's association with balladic tradition. In 1917, a few years after he wrote "Beggar to Beggar Cried,"

⁹ With this regard, the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that the function of the refrain in ballads is to "set off or divide narrative into segments," while the refrain in lyric poetry functions to "indicate shifts or developments of emotion" (p. 699).

Yeats wrote “The Rose Tree.” This is among the poems that point to his reaction to the Easter Rising in 1916.¹⁰ In this poem, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, the leaders of the Rising, mourn for a withered rose tree. This rose tree alludes to the Liberty Tree, a symbol of Ireland’s predicament commonly seen in Irish rebel ballads.¹¹

The poem reenacts a scene in which Pearse and Connolly have a discussion they might have had before the Easter Rising, when Irish nationalism had lost its momentum. Pearse wonders what is responsible for the setback to Irish nationalism; it could be those who embrace a compromising vision of Ireland and propagate this view in public using “politic words” (this probably refers to supporters of Home Rule) as well as Great Britain (“a wind that blows / Across the bitter sea”). Pearse and Connolly thus conclude that they should compensate for the withering nationalism by shedding their own blood, just as actual participants in the Rising believed that their bloodshed would redeem Ireland from its enslavement:¹²

¹⁰ The variety of the poems written after the Rising suggests that Yeats had inconsistent responses to the Rising. Jonathan Allison states “the poet’s [Yeats’s] viewpoint is not single and definitive; at the very least, it suggests that individual lyrics cannot be relied upon to reveal his opinions” (p. 193). Allison refers to “The Rose Tree” as an overtly patriotic poem: “‘The Rose Tree’ offers a stark celebration of the blood sacrifice associated with Pearse’s brand of political martyrology” (p. 193). Roy Foster also sees this poem as “his [Yeats’s] most unequivocal rebel ballad” among the poems related to the Rising (Foster p. 189).

¹¹ “The Liberty-Tree was a patriotic symbol deriving from the ‘arbres de la liberté’ which appeared in France in 1790, planted to celebrate Revolution and Liberty. They were planted earlier in America, from 1765-75, as symbols of opposition to England. In Ireland the United Irishmen took up the idea in 1792” (Jeffares p. 195). For more detail, see also Zimmermann pp. 41-43 and pp. 255-256.

¹² According to Jeffares, the Rising was “a gesture by dedicated men prepared to die for their beliefs, which were based on the idea that the nation needed to be redeemed by blood” (p. 194). In addition, the leaders of the Rising identified their actions with Christian redemption. The fact that the riot took place on Easter day further amplifies the religious implications.

“O words are lightly spoken,”
Said Pearse to Connolly,
“Maybe a breath of politic words
Has withered our Rose Tree;
Or maybe but a wind that blows
Across the bitter sea.”

“It needs to be but watered,”
James Connolly replied,
“To make the green come out again
And spread on every side,
And shake the blossom from the bud
To be the garden’s pride.”

“But where can we draw water,”
Said Pearse to Connolly,
“When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There’s nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.” (1-18)

The poem’s stanzas alternate, expressing Pearse’s words and then Connolly’s. The refrains identify their names: “Said Pearse to Connolly,” “James Connolly replied,” “Said Pearse to Connolly.” Compared with the refrain in the beggar poem, the refrain here is less discordant. Yeats structurally incorporates it into the rhyme scheme common to the ballad stanza: *abcbdb*. As the structural characteristic suggests, no tonal conflict

between the refrain and the rest of the stanza occurs, nor does any interaction between their meanings. Yeats uses traditional refrains partly because the subject matter of this poem is “mythologization.” The poem demonstrates how the leaders of the Easter Rising turned into legendary heroes for Irish people in short order. Immediately after the Rising, the people in Ireland generally felt indifferent about the incident. However, Britain’s overly urgent execution of the leaders ignited Irish people’s resentment and rekindled their nationalistic enthusiasm. Yeats himself had an ambivalent attitude toward the Rising. His letter sent to Lady Gregory, dated May 11, 1916, reveals that he is “despondent about the future” and feels that “all the works of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics” (*Letters* p. 613); however, he was also struck with the change the leaders of the Rising brought about in Ireland. These leaders, some of whom Yeats knew personally, abruptly turned into heroes during his lifetime. In emphasizing their mythologization, Yeats knew that following the balladic tradition, which people had historically used to sing about popular heroes, would be suitable. As Colin Meir correctly points out, by including Pearse’s and Connolly’s names in the refrain, the poem treats them like the kind of legendary figures often sung about in popular ballads.¹³

In contrast to “Beggar to Beggar Cried,” the refrain and the rest of the stanza have no interactive relationship. The refrain simply gives information about the speaker in a detached manner. However, its association with the balladic tradition is relevant to the poem’s subject matter. Thus, the comparison between “Beggar to Beggar Cried” and “The Rose Tree” indicates that Yeats properly used different types of refrains for different purposes.

¹³ See Meir p.94.

III

The “tonal dialectic” between the refrain and the rest of the stanza can be observed in Yeats’s later poem, “Three Things,” in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). In this poem, the bone asks “cruel Death” to give her back three numbered things:

“O cruel Death, give three things back,”	a
<i>Sang a bone upon the shore;</i>	<i>r1</i>
“A child found all a child can lack,	a
Whether of pleasure or of rest,	b
Upon the abundance of my breast”:	b
<i>A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.</i>	<i>r2</i>

“Three dear things that women know,”
Sang a bone upon the shore;
“A man if I but held him so
When my body was alive
Found all the pleasure that life gave”:
A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.

“The third thing that I think of yet,”
Sang a bone upon the shore;
“Is that morning when I met
Face to face my rightful man
And did after stretch and yawn”:
A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind (1-18)

The speaker describes the experience of giving pleasure and rest to her child (stanza 1), giving sexual pleasure to her lover (stanza 2), and “that morning when [she] met / Face to face [her] rightful man / And did after stretch and yawn” (stanza 3). In each stanza, the second line, “*Sang a bone upon the shore,*” identifies the speaker as a bone, and the last line, “*A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind,*” gives a detailed description of the speaker. As in “*Beggar to Beggar Cried,*” the structure of this poem demonstrates the “discordant” character of these two refrains. Although the rest of the stanza is composed of two couplets (*aabb*), the refrains do not rhyme with these other lines. Rather, they contrast the lines that envisage parts of the body. There are similarities in these stanzas. The three-line unit between the two refrains is full of images of body parts: “my breast,” “held him,” “my body,” “face to face,” and “stretch and yawn” conjure visual images of a breast, arms, a face, an upper body, and a mouth. Thus, the bone represents the three things she desires to retrieve by describing her body. By conveying the image of the white bone, the refrain at the end of the stanza stresses a loss of the bodily pleasure she previously enjoyed. The gap between the descriptions of body parts and the bone should evoke feelings of pain for the woman and invite reader’s sympathy for her. Nevertheless, the poet prevents the poem’s tone from becoming too sentimental; in fact, it is even comical.

The equivocal tone of the poem is, I believe, achieved through the refrain. Notably, the dead woman conveys in the first two stanzas that she is conscious of how much she has given. The repetition of the word “all” in “A child found all a child can lack” (3) and “[A man] found all the pleasure that life gave” (11) emphasizes how enormously she gave when she was alive. The image of the bone in the last line hints at the fact that she can no

longer give enormous pleasure; nevertheless, the sentiment of this keeps from becoming too painful. The repetition of “all” suggests the speaker’s boast; her speech reveals that she is proud of the enormous pleasure her body gave to her child and lover. The words “if I but held him so” (9) hint at the pride she finds in the memory of her body’s powerful influence, though such self-sufficient statements may sound innocent rather than vainglorious. The refrain, the last line in the stanza, then depicts how she looks at present: “*A bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind.*” This serves as a merciless comment on her boast, objectifying her sentiment in this poem. Especially in the first stanza, a detailed depiction of the dried bone immediately follows her words “the abundance of my breast” (5). Since the image of the bone immediately follows the woman’s proud words, providing an effective contrast, the refrain acts as a kind of acrid, but laughable, commentary on the woman’s song. In this way, the poem avoids over-sentimentality while successfully revealing the woman’s strong emotions. Thus, the reader can regard the last line as a lively reaction to the bone’s previous words. The set of refrains, situated in the middle and at the end of each stanza, collaboratively work on the rest of the stanza and imbue the whole poem with tonal conflict.

Conclusion

Progressing from his middle toward his later period, Yeats developed the function of the refrain in his work. In his later years, notably in *New Poems* and *Last Poems*, Yeats made use of the refrain more elaborately than he did in his previous career. However, it should be kept in mind that, until then, Yeats had been exploring and experimenting with the function of the refrain. Through the tonal dialectic it achieves between the refrain and the

rest of the stanza, “Beggar to Beggar Cried” signals the poet’s experimental approach to the refrain in his middle period. This developed into the technique he uses for the refrain in “Three Things.” On the other hand, he was fully aware of the effect of traditional uses of the refrain and took advantage of this in “The Rose Tree.”

At the beginning of this essay, I pointed out two qualities associated with the refrain, of which the early Yeats would have been aware: a sense of community grounded in oral tradition and acoustic effect. These qualities, easily associated with naïve popular poems, seem to contradict his desire to modernize his poetry; nevertheless, he thought highly of both of them throughout his lifetime. His late ballads, “The Ghost of Roger Casement” (1938) and “Come Gather round Me Parnellites” (1937), reflect his hope to reproduce the traditional, oral community in the Ireland of his time. The refrain also served as a weapon against his contemporary poems that, he believed, did not sing. It was thus a useful device that allowed Yeats to root his poem in the balladic tradition and enhance his text’s acoustic quality.

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