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Yeats's Innovations in the Ballad Form

by N. JEANNE ARGOFF

Yeats's innovations in his later ballads return the literary ballad to a form which is much closer to the traditional one, closing the gap between the literary ballad and its popular models without giving up the sophistication and complexity achieved by the professional poet. As he did with the Japanese Noh model in his plays and with other traditional forms he adapted, Yeats took directly from the folk ballad what is translatable into modern terms, combined these elements with what is most personal, complex, and philosophical, and wrote traditional ballads for modern times. In his 1937 essay, "A General Introduction for My Work," he discusses one way in which he merged the traditional and impersonal with the immediate and personal by describing his practice of making "the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate normal speech"—an effect achieved by combining the "emphasis . . . of passionate prose" with the "unconscious norm" of folk song meter. Another method he used to objectify and distance personal emotion while linking it to tradition was to speak through the persona of a wandering ballad singer or other poetic vagabond. Many of the ballads in Last Poems derive strength from the interplay between the expectations created by the impersonal, communal ballad form and the unique and vivid individual personality of the speaker. Others which are narrated by an impersonal, or nearly impersonal, speaker, focus on a character whose exuberant personality is thrown into relief by the spare form of the ballad vehicle.

Yeats's innovative use of the ballad form reaches its culmination in the ballads of Last Poems, and it is the primary object of this study to illustrate these innovations by examining Yeats's technique in those late poems. First, however, to facilitate a better understanding of his actual poetic procedure, it is useful to review the history of Yeats's involvement with the ballad form and the persona of the ballad singer. I will also examine the extent of his knowledge of the ballad tradition in its various forms—folk, broadside, and literary balladry—as each existed in both the Anglo-Irish and the Anglo-Scots traditions.

While it has become almost a critical commonplace to note the effect of Yeats's dramaturgy on his poetics, this must be done anew with specific reference to his innovative use of the ballad tradition. After almost fifty years as a professional dramatist, he claimed in 1937 that he had just come to an understanding of his true reasons for placing primary stress on the expression of personality through significant action and on living language written to be spoken or sung: “Browning said that he could not write a successful play because interested not in character in action but in action in character. I had begun to get rid of everything that is not, whether in lyric or dramatic poetry, in some sense character in action; a pause in the midst of action perhaps, but action always its end and theme. ‘Write for the ear,’ I thought, so that you may be instantly understood as when actor or folk singer stands before an audience” (“An Introduction for my Plays,” E&I, pp. 529-30).

Yeats’s early ideas on the drama are expressed in numerous essays and articles, the most important of which include the essays he published between 1901 and 1908 in Samhain, the organ of the Irish Literary Theatre and, later, of the Abbey Theatre Company. One particular Samhain article, “Literature and the Living Voice” (1906), focuses directly on the association of drama and balladry. In it, Yeats speaks of narrative poetry (which clearly includes the ballad) as the drama’s country-cousin: “The player arose into importance in the town, but the minstrel is of the country. We must have narrative as well as dramatic poetry.” He stresses the importance of a living language which can bind art to life and emphasizes the intimate association of words and music in old literatures, especially old Irish literature, which, he maintains, was made to be spoken or sung: “In Ireland to-day 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” (Exp, p. 206). Although Yeats certainly romanticized and exaggerated his case, a viable folk culture and a living oral literature did still exist in Ireland, and, it can be argued, exist to this day. The art produced by this culture was to serve as a basis and a model for the necessarily more sophisticated work of professional artists, who would “develop to a finer subtlety the singing of the cottage and the forecastle, and develop it more on the side of speech than that of music until it has become intellectual and nervous enough to be the vehicle of a Shelley or a Keats” (Exp, p. 218).

In a like manner, the minstrel and his folk audience were to serve as the models for the larger relationship between the Irish artist and his national audience. The “reciter,” whom Yeats would set up as the rural counterpart of the player, should differ from his audience “in nothing but the exaltation of his mood,” and yet must be “exciting and roman-

2. W. B. Yeats, Explorations (New York: Collier, 1973), pp. 213-4; hereafter cited as Exp. All further references will appear in the text.
tic in their eyes” (Exp, p. 217). This can only occur when the community itself is a culturally cohesive unit with a common fund of ideas and beliefs which are kept alive through constant use. The artist must participate fully in the culture and yet retain the unique individual personality which is necessary for the production of supreme art.

The figure of the folk artist and the idea of the folk community as the model for the ideal audience had fascinated Yeats ever since the later 1880's when he made his life-long commitment to a national, as opposed to a cosmopolitan, art. In an early essay, “Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland” (1889), he focuses not on the poetry, but on the personalities of the poets themselves and their relationships with their readers or hearers. His concern here with character and audience derives from his underlying desire to create a climate of opinion and a background of knowledge which would support a truly imaginative national literature; the artist-audience relationship is important because it presupposes both strong national traditions kept alive in the hearts of the people and a community of interest and feeling between the people and their poets. Yeats hoped to extend the unity of rural Irish culture throughout Ireland, but only by advancing both artist and audience to a more self-consciously realized order of artistry. Though poet and peasant must “think about the same thing,” the refinements of the artist’s voice and craft would give that “thing” its most powerful expression, and an audience which would be as responsive to the artist as the folk community is to its balladeers and story-tellers would necessarily be raised by his work to ever-higher levels of receptivity.

In 1906, Yeats is still focusing on the artist and his audience, but the theater experience of the intervening years has enabled him to recognize the dramatic potential of his material. To make it possible for the modern sophisticated poet to participate in the rapport which characterizes the relationship between the folk artist and his audience, Yeats has “invented” a reciter with a “definite fictitious personality,” who speaks “with his own peculiar animation”: “I imagine an old countryman upon the stage of the theatre or in some little country courthouse where a Gaelic society is meeting, and I can hear him say that he is Raftery or a brother, and that he has tramped through France and Spain and the whole world. He has seen everything and he has all country love-tales at his finger-tips. . . . He has been in the faery hills; perhaps he is the terrible Amadan-na-Breena himself; or he has been so long in the world that he can tell of ancient battles” (Exp, pp. 216-7). This “reciter” parallels the persona of the ballad-singer in the later poems. It is, in

4. “Gods and Fighting Men” (1904), Exp, p. 28: “If we would create a great community—and what other game is so worth the labour?—we must recreate the old foundations of life, not as they existed in that splendid misunderstanding of the eighteenth century, but as they must always exist when the finest minds and Ned the beggar and Sean the fool think about the same thing, although they may not think the same thought about it.”
fact, precisely this dramatic sense of a speaker with a distinct personality
who is conscious of his audience and of dramatizing himself for that
audience which paves the way for Yeats’s final mastery over the ballad
in *Last Poems*.

The ballad-singers of *Last Poems* have their roots in the peasant poets
and folk-singers who appear in Yeats’s work of the 1890’s and early
1900’s. In fact, while the ballad form itself makes only fitful appear­
ces in Yeats’s work, the figure of the vagabond peasant-poet (a gen­
eral type of which the ballad-singer is a sub-type) is a constant. The
wandering peasant—“natural man” and quester, part poet, part seer,
social outcast yet repository of tradition and culture, often “mad,”
drunk, or both together—becomes a stock Yeatsian character. This
peasant figure—sometimes used as mask, sometimes as dramatic char­
acter—becomes what can rightly be called an archetype.

Yeats knew in 1906 that “the artist . . . may compare his art . . .
with the arts that belonged to a whole people, and discover, not how to
imitate the external form of an epic or a folk-song but how to express in
some equivalent form whatever in the thoughts of his own age seems, as
it were, to press into the future” (*Exp*, p. 209). Looking back over his
essays, letters, and poems, we can see him feeling his way through the
various ballad traditions with which he—as an Irishman whose native
language is English—felt a personal relationship, searching for that
“equivalent form.” It was only at the end of his life that he was able to
articulate what he had sensed at earlier stages in his career. By the
1930’s, he had brought together the peasant archetype—which had
 gained wisdom, evocative power, and resonance through a lifetime of
use—and a renewed feeling for the ballad form itself, and entered a
period of sustained ballad production.

He had long been familiar with Gaelic folk-poetry (read in transla­
tion), with the newspaper ballads of Thomas Davis and the Young Ire­
land writers, and with the literary ballads and ballad-like poems of such
poets as Ferguson and Mangan. He had also been influenced early in life
by the English Pre-Raphaelites, who were well-known experimenters
with balladry. After meeting Lady Gregory in 1896, he gained some
experience of songs and ballads sung in a folk context, and the work he
did in association with the Cuala Press broadsides printed between 1908
and 1915 brought him into greater contact with the rough-hewn and
vigorous Anglo-Irish street ballads whose influence is so strongly seen in
his own later work.6

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6. Both Zimmermann and Michael Yeats provide useful commentaries on Yeats’s use of and com­
The early ballads he himself wrote are sentimental and contrived; they appear to be exactly what they are—an exercise engaged in to escape rhetoric and to simplify diction and thought. He returned at intervals to ballads and ballad-like songs, the most notable being his Beggarmen series in Responsibilities, where he brings together the wild, unaccommodated, free-speaking vagabond with ballad rhythms and techniques to create poems which give a foretaste of the later ballads. He broke into political balladry in response to the Easter Rising, producing, among other things, one nearly perfect impersonal ballad in “The Rose Tree.” For the most part, however, his use of the ballad form previous to the 1930’s is best seen in his incorporation of ballad elements into other types of poems.

In the 1930’s his involvement with balladry, previously a dalliance, became a passion. Like a magnet, it attracted ideas, images, and associations which he had long held and perhaps had used in other contexts. His late articles stress the special place of the ballad in relation to the drama and to his work as a whole and imply that, in some ways, the ballad is a culmination of some of his major artistic theories. The “Introduction for my Plays” stresses both the connection between drama and poetry and the importance of the folksinger and his peasant audience as models for the community of feeling which the theater should be able to generate. Most importantly, this introduction articulates Yeats’s conception of the drama as the embodiment of character in action expressed by the use of passionate syntax kept from appearing too personal by its confinement to traditional meters and forms (E&I, pp. 527-30). He ties his commitment to “character in action” to the ballad form in particular in “A General Introduction for my Work,” and speaks again of the necessity of using traditional forms to express subjective emotions and states of mind (E&I, pp. 521-3). “I can put my own thought,” he says, “despair perhaps from the study of present circumstances in the light of ancient philosophy, into the mouth of rambling poets of the seventeenth century, or even of some imagined ballad singer of to-day, and the deeper my thought, the more credible, the more peasant-like, are ballad singer and rambling poet” (E&I, p. 516). And, final-
ly, he discusses his technique of crossing the regular rhythms of folk
song with the rhythms of passionate prose in order to merge the lan­
guage of poetry with the language of life within the “contrapuntal struc­
ture” of the verse (E&I, pp. 521, 524).

His introductions to the 1935 and 1937 editions of the Cuala Press
broadsideries again stress the importance of uniting words and music
and of preserving the tradition of poetry intended for the ear. He cites
his Noh plays as an example of the attempt to mingle the arts of music,
poetry, and dance, and—mentioning the original association between
dance and balladry—suggests that the ballad form is a fertile field for
such experimentation.9 Focusing yet another time on his doctrine of per­
sonality, Yeats rightly finds a great deal of self-dramatization in the
personality of the singer in the Anglo-Irish street-ballad tradition, and
he even discovers in the highly impersonal Anglo-Scots tradition an
underlying stress on the personal: “every song is a narrative. So and so
is telling the story of his life. . . .”10 At the same time, Yeats is well
aware that the traditional narrative attitude in the Anglo-Scots ballads is
an impersonal one in which the story is all-important and the facts are
left to speak for themselves. Dorothy Wellesley presented him with The
Oxford Book of Ballads in 1936, from which he read daily,11 and the
ballads of his last years show the fruits of this reading in their “bitter
and gay” tone (DWL, p. 7), their compression, their mastery of action
and episodic movement, their acceptance of violence, and their harsh
and forceful diction.

His comments and poetry of the thirties make it clear that he was by
that point conscious of the distinctive features of the various ballad
traditions, not merely structural features but those qualities wherein lie
the essence of each tradition. The Anglo-Scots traditional ballad ex­
presses its core of feeling in dramatic action; this, together with its per­
sistent rhythm and an atmosphere which is deeply emotional yet almost
entirely impersonal, are its essential qualities. Emotions are expressed in
the older ballads of that tradition, but they go beyond the merely per­
sonal emotions of the “separated individual” to encompass the univer­
sal emotions of the entire ballad community and of all mankind. Yeats
was especially interested in the stress on personality in the Anglo-Irish
broadsider ballads, in their sharp sense of the presence of poet and/or
singer in the poem itself. He also found this sense of “personality . . .
delight in the whole man—blood, imagination, intellect, running to­
gether” (E&I, pp. 266–7) in Gaelic songs, along with the simplicity,
naturalness, and spontaneity which is a feature of folk art in general.

10. “Anglo-Irish Ballads.”
11. Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, ed. Dorothy Wellesley (London:
Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 73; hereafter cited as DWL. All further references to this work appear in
the text.
And when he looked back on the political balladry of the *Nation* poets\(^{12}\) from the vantage point of the thirties, he found but one quality left to praise: “they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people; behind them stretched the generations” (*E&I*, p. 510). This is, in fact, the chief quality held in common by all the strains of balladry Yeats drew upon; they all depend on feelings, assumptions, traditions, and experiences shared by singer, poet, and audience alike.

The assumption of a community of thought and feeling is also central to Yeats’s own later ballads. A major difference between Yeats and his models, however, is that Yeats is well aware of the actual gap between himself and his national audience. He is using his ballads as a means to bridge that gap and to create, if only for a moment, the consentaneity in emotion and perception which underlies the ballad form.

I have said that the ballads of *Last Poems* can be divided into two major categories: those narrated by a dramatically conceived speaker, and those which are impersonally presented but which focus on a character with a unique and striking personality. “The Curse of Cromwell” is an example of the first type of ballad. Like Red Hanrahan (the major embodiment of the peasant archetype in Yeats’s early work), this speaker is a poet, a visionary, a wanderer, and an outcast—a proud, if ragged, remnant of all the ancient Irish glory.\(^{13}\) Also like Hanrahan—who, in his old age, moves away from the world of men—the speaker shuns mankind and the fractured, mechanical modern world. The differences between the two peasant poets are also significant, and they illustrate the way in which Yeats’s peasant mask has matured and grown old along with him. Hanrahan, rebel though he is, has none of the bitterness, the Swiftian indignation, exhibited by the speaker in “The Curse of Cromwell.” Hanrahan and the young poet who created him both mourn the passing of romantic Ireland while at the same time affirming its permanence in the spiritual realm of the Anima Mundi.\(^{14}\)

12. *The Nation* was a weekly paper founded in 1842 by Thomas Davis, Charles Gavan Duffy, and other members of the Young Ireland Movement, whose purpose was to revive Irish nationality and the old Gaelic traditions. *The Nation* printed nationalistic songs and ballads for the express purpose of politically educating its readership and creating an idealistic conception of Ireland. Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs, 1780-1900* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967), pp. 78-82, gives a concise account of the *Nation* poets and their work.

13. Modeled after an actual peasant poet of the eighteenth century, Hanrahan is a wildly romantic figure not unlike the minstrel described by Yeats in “Literature and the Living Voice.” Yeats’s first serious attempt to use the peasant mask to explore his own racial and artistic identity, this character is made vital by the young poet’s desire to act at once the part of magician, lover, poet, rebel, spiritualist, and man of the people. Hanrahan was originally called O’Sullivan the Red and appeared in six separate stories published in periodicals over the years from 1892 to 1896. The stories appeared in revised form in *The Secret Rose* (1897) and were again revised and republished as *Stories of Red Hanrahan* in 1905.

14. Much of the change in the peasant mask is due to the change in Yeats himself over the years. If we realize that the countryman mask is especially important as the particular mask which must be sought by a man of Yeats’s own personality type (Phase Seventeen on the Great Wheel in *A Vision*), the reason for the change in the peasant figure becomes self-evident. The man of Phase Seventeen finds his mask in Phase Three. Although Yeats does not specifically assign Phase Three to the countryman, his description of a man of this phase tallies with what he has elsewhere said of the peasant. Seen as mask...
The sophistication of this very personal complex of thought and emotion is quite un-balladlike. The use of a peasant spokesman does, as I have said, help Yeats to objectify the emotion; also, by wearing the mask of a "man of the people," he can presume to speak to the people as one of their own. What he says to them, however, is not what one would expect from a country minstrel, and certainly not what "the people" would want to hear. "Kilcash," the seventeenth century poem Yeats used as a model for his own ballad, contains a lament for Ireland's past greatness spoken by a poet who feels personally and deeply its loss, but it is no more than a simple lament. It has neither Yeats's rage and disgust at present times, nor his assertion of the reality of the spirit-world and the doubt which this casts on the reality of the phenomenal world. Both "The Curse of Cromwell" and "Kilcash" are spoken by unique personalities, but Yeats's speaker expresses thoughts and emotions which are more sophisticated and philosophical, while no less deeply felt, than those of the old Gaelic rhymer.

It is not simply the use of a peasant mask which makes this poem a successful ballad, or, for that matter, a successful poem. It is the use of this persona in conjunction with the ballad form, which takes for granted a community of thought and feeling between audience and singer, and which counts on the hearers' complete acceptance of both singer and song. Willa Muir, in her sensitive and perceptive Living with Ballads, describes this "sympathetic rapport" which must exist between the singer and the audience of oral poetry: "This unanimity of feeling is something he (the ballad-singer) takes for granted. His listeners have the same background as himself; their likes and dislikes, fears and prejudices, come from experiences similar to his own, and out of an underworld of imagination common to all." Yeats's use of traditional

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15. Yeats said that "The Curse of Cromwell" echoes "old Gaelic ballads friends translated for me" (DWL, p. 123), and he himself helped O'Connor with some of the phrasing of the "Kilcash" translation.

16. Daniel Hoffman, in Barbarous Knowledge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), suggests that Yeats borrowed the character of the lamenting gleeman from the Gaelic poem along with certain images and phrases (pp. 56-7). While the connection with "Kilcash" is well-nigh indisputable (see note 15), it seems more likely that Yeats made the obvious association between the speaker in the old Irish lament and his own archetype of the peasant vagabond. Although I differ somewhat with Hoffmann on this particular point, his book is among the best available on Yeats and the ballad.

ballad devices—repetition of words and phrases, the six-beat line, the refrain—produces a multi-layered effect. Each of these devices is used in a much more sophisticated manner than in the traditional ballad. The refrain, for example, undergoes subtle shifts in meaning, whereas the traditional refrain is most often simply an echo of the dominant feeling of the verse; and the regular rhythm of Yeats’s ballad-line is counterpointed by his speech rhythms. The effect of their combined presence, however, is to induce the audience to respond to the poem as a ballad; we are to accept it completely—we are, to borrow a phrase from Willa Muir, to “swallow it whole.”

The drama in “The Curse of Cromwell” does not, as in an Anglo-Scots ballad, come from the use of dialogue or the episodic progression of swiftly flashing scenes building up to a moment of climax. It comes, instead, in the Anglo-Irish manner, as Yeats’s singer persistently dramatizes himself, calling attention to himself throughout the poem. His opening line, “You ask what I have found, and far and wide I go,” indicates an immediate relationship with his listening audience, an actively engaged audience which has requested a story. Like the historical ballad-singers, Yeats’s peasant poet speaks in a public voice and confidently assumes a spokesman’s stance.

The comparison to Hanrahan is again pertinent. In “Hanrahan and Cathleen, Daughter of Houlihan,” he sings a song (reprinted in Collected Poems as “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland”) intended to be the embodiment of a collective emotion combining “love of country” with “love of the Unseen Life.” Hanrahan’s song, however, is sung to an audience of “bocachs and beggars and blind men and fiddlers,” outcasts all, like the “national” bard who sings to them. This irony, that the man of the people expressing what should be a communal thought and emotion finds his true audience only among other outcasts like himself, still holds in “The Curse of Cromwell.” Here, the song is directed to a general Irish audience, but the singer specifically associates himself with the aristocratic few rather than the many (the growing numbers of social climbers belonging to the middle class). It is quite obvious that he feels a sense of community, not with his living audience,
but with the dead lovers, dancers, swordsmen, and horsemen; like Gulliver, he despises modern men, whom he sees as Yahoos.

A further irony resolves the seeming conflict: as a poet who is part seer and in contact with the soul of the race as it exists in the Anima Mundi, the singer is in fact speaking to and for Irishmen in general even though what he has to say is unpopular. He can see the truths within their souls which they themselves, being traditionless, dissociated products of contemporary society, cannot see. He knows them better than they themselves do and can show them, if they will listen, the racial and universal passions which they have buried under a mound of modern refuse. Carried by the rhythm of both the meter and the feeling, the audience accepts in this ballad what it might not accept if it were a pure lyric. It is only in retrospect, once the singer’s performance is over, that the previously engaged audience stops to analyse its intellectual (and political) response to the content of the performance.

This sense of an active, vigorous, self-dramatizing personality which is so apparent in “The Curse of Cromwell” is seen in other ballads which have speakers with a “definite fictitious personality.” John Kinsella and the Pilgrim must be included among Yeats’s most living and unique personages, while—partially because they are countrymen and not dissociated citymen, partially because they are visionaries in contact with the soul of the race—they can also speak “out of a people to a people” in the ballad language to which the people will, presumably, respond.

The impersonally narrated ballads—“The Three Bushes,” “The O’Rahilly,” “The Wild Old Wicked Man,” and “Colonel Martin”—are, of course, closer to the Anglo-Scots tradition, but the sense of personality is no less strong in them. Almost without exception, they focus on a character with a singular personality who expresses himself concretely through action. The O’Rahilly’s action—his heroic death and his writing of his own epitaph above his head in blood before he dies—is one of those actions which defines and embodies character. “The O’Rahilly” uses the traditional ballad devices of compression, episodic narration, and concentration on a single climactic action to accentuate its dramatic quality. As in the Anglo-Scots ballads, the focus is on the

22. Yeats himself said of the ballad, “The Three Bushes,” “regular rhyme is needed in this kind of work. The swing of the sentences makes the reader expect it. ’Said lover to the serving maid,’ ’Tis sweetly done, ’tis easy done and so on are ballad cadences, and then the six line stanzas suggest ballad stanzas. There is another reason. In narrative verse we want to concentrate the attention on the fact or the story, not on the form. The form must be present as something we all accept—the fundamental sing-song. I do not know a single example of good narrative where the rhyme scheme is varied” (DWL, p. 82). We can take this one step further and say that the ballad form itself predisposes the audience to accept the story, including the experience, thoughts, and emotions it carries with it.

23. David R. Clarke, “Yeats: ‘Out of a People to a People,’” Malahat Review, XXII (1972), 25–41, cites both “The Curse of Cromwell” and “John Kinsella’s Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore” as examples of a type of poem which is “the utterance in a dramatic context of a dramatic speaker at that moment of crisis when the ‘visibly moved’ individual begins to speak with the deeper voice of all, when he ceases to be himself and becomes some great type or pattern, when he speaks with the voice of ‘that ancient Self’” (p. 30).
action, but—whereas the action in the traditional ballad gives importance to the feeling, and its characters are important only in that they embody that action—Yeats’s action is important because it embodies character. This holds true in almost all of the ballads in Last Poems, whether the action is a visionary experience, as in “The Curse of Cromwell,” or a heroic death, as in “The O’Rahilly.”

The action in another objectively presented ballad, “The Wild Old Wicked Man,” also expresses the personality of the major character. This action, an attempt to seduce a nun-like maiden which ends in failure, is—for all the humor inherent in the situation itself—the occasion for another celebration of the personality who chooses raucous life over bloodless religiosity or over anything based on an abstraction. Like so many of the other wandering peasants in Yeats’s mature work, the Wild Old Wicked Man combines a mastery of words with a delight in man’s sensual nature and finds that sexuality is the natural form of spirituality when embodied on earth.

With the possible exception of “The Three Bushes,” “Colonel Martin” is the Yeatsian ballad with the strongest narrative line, but even here the story is told for the character’s sake rather than the other way around as in strict Anglo-Scots ballad tradition. Yeats is careful to confine himself to the pure, impersonal ballad style until the very last stanza. The action is perfectly episodic, reported with great economy of means in vivid, flashing scenes. The ballad rhythm is here, as is the slight jerkiness produced by the balladic habit of jumping from one episode to the next. Yeats uses a full armory of ballad devices, from dialogue to repetition to parallel syntax and parallel phrases in successive lines. The refrain, although it has a definite meaning in the first stanza, becomes detached from the action of the later stanzas. Like those of many traditional ballads, this refrain—“The Colonel went out sailing”—with its vague allusion to the voyage of life (Meir, p. 116), stresses the universal nature of the ballad material in contrast to the circumstantial nature of the action. The plot, involving cuckoldry and revenge, is common to both Anglo-Scots and Anglo-Irish ballads, and the stock situation of the exchange of clothes with a peddler is a typical ballad and epic motif.

Colonel Martin himself, however, is not a “token character”—one who is either present in the ballad as a function of the action or, like the title character in “The Wife of Usher’s Well,” as an embodiment of a natural force or an aspect of human nature (Muir, pp. 155, 179). Both Colonel Martin and the Wife of Usher’s Well are passionate types, but the Colonel, unlike the Wife, is highly individualized as well. Like the

24. Patrick Holland, in “Yeats and the Musician’s Art in ‘Last Poems,’” Eire, IV, no. 4 (Winter 1971), 49–64, says of traditional refrains that they “emphasized the universal and timeless nature of the ballad as opposed to its narrative, circumstantial line” and that they “brought the audience into the recitation at a moment given over to the inevitable summary of the narrative situation” (p. 61).
anonymous author of the traditional ballad, Yeats relies primarily on actions rather than on description to characterize his hero, but the action itself—or rather the implications of the action—is more complex, more the product of a uniquely individual nature. Yeats said in a letter to a friend that the Galway story on which he patterned the ballad has "a curious pathos which I cannot define. I have known from the start what I wanted to do, and yet the idea seemed to lie below the threshold of consciousness—and still lies."25 The "idea," in fact, is hardly an idea at all, but rather the embodiment of a personality in action. The Colonel is impetuous, energetic, passionate, capricious, unpredictable, yet a string of words cannot capture him. His character is inseparable from his actions; his story is his life. As if to emphasize the importance of this stress on personality, the narrator, who has remained perfectly impersonal throughout the poem, breaks into the last stanza with a comment which associates him personally with the story: "for my own grand-dad / Saw the story's end..."

This organic association of character and action are at the center of Yeats's fascination with the ballad form. Like the dancer and the dance, the ballad hero is inseparable from his action, and the ballad singer is one with his song. Although Yeats would not grant the singers of his songs the autonomy the traditional singer usually has over his material, he did repeatedly voice his wish that his songs and ballads would pass into the popular tradition. What he wanted, of course, was the best of both worlds: to maintain the integrity which a poem in the written tradition retains while also achieving the living, organic quality of the popular song which has its roots in the life of the communal mind and is constantly being adapted to the life of the people who sing it.

Yeats's ballads embody his desire, renewed in his last years, to get back to the people without compromising his passionately held and often outrageous thoughts and beliefs. He exulted in the vitality, the coarse vigor, and the sense of life and personality which energize these late ballads, and they are undoubtedly among the poems which gave him the most personal pleasure at the end of a long life.

George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia