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W. B. YEATS AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Justin Quinn

I

It's hard to find good rhymes for "world." For instance, "furled" is an older usage that conjures officer parades and imperial trumpets. Both "swirled" and "whirled" seem too decorative, as though they are trying hard to be poetic; one thinks of the bleached curlicues of Jugendstil art and architecture. And good luck trying to get a word like "pearled" or "skirled" into a twenty-first century poem. "Hurled" is not bad, but because it describes such a specific kind of movement the rhymer is immediately locked into a particular kind of scene, and possibly tone, if they choose to employ it. In this respect "curled" is similar: acceptable, but a difficulty arises if it is constantly combined with such a useful, all-purpose word as "world." It becomes awkward as, for instance, the combination of "child" and "mild." Can you call an infant "mild?" I don't think you can, but bludgeoned by annual repetition we've become inured to the infant Jesus referred to as "tender and mild" in "Silent Night." This is a problem, as "world" is simply so useful. It denotes a fundamental concept of human conversation and culture. It can briefly imply vastness. For most poets, it's a dangerous word to use in a poem (like "history" or "geography"). Possibly it should be banned from poetry for a few decades (along with history and geography). In these two respects it's a bit like the word "sky" or "sea," though these two are easy to rhyme.

W. B. Yeats liked using the word. Here are some examples from his work:

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the World!
The tall thought-woven sails, that flap unfurled [...]
—"The Rose Of Battle" (*CW1* 34, ll 1-2)

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the World!
You, too, have come where the dim tides are hurled [...]
—"The Rose Of Battle" (*CW1* 34, ll 25-26)

But O, sick children of the world,
Of all the many changing things
In dreary dancing past us whirled,
To the cracked tune that Chronos sings [...]
—"The Song Of The Happy Shepherd" (*CW1* 19, ll 6-9)

That has long faded from the world;
 The jewelled crowns that kings have hurled [...]
 —“He Remembers Forgotten Beauty” (*CW1* 46, l 4)

Yeats doesn't do particularly well with the rhymes, but there are two mitigating factors here: first, as I said, it's hard; and second, all of these examples are from early in his career. Just as he is entranced to the point of ridiculousness with the word “dim” up to the end of the 1890s, so too is he overly enamored of the force of the word “world.” Why?

In this period, Yeats is interested in Irish material, whether from mythology or folk tradition. For instance, you have a man who's standing in Dromahaire, who dreams of a “world-forgotten isle” (*CW1* 37, l 8). Here he means what we might call “the Great World”—the zone of worldly things and worldly wiles; fairyland is represented in contrast to it. This is an important binary in his early work. Another binary we find clustered around “world” is that of the local and the universal. Often, his poems are involved with small-town stuff, i.e., what's going on in Dromahaire, Peter Gilligan's parish, Innisfree, Knocknarea, Knocknashee, Tiraragh, Ballinacorney, Glencar, etc. It may seem obvious to say that Yeats is not a local or regional poet, but it bears repeating that he immersed himself in local detail in order to re-present it for readers beyond these rural Irish communities. This takes a particular form in the poems themselves, as he frequently invokes the distant horizon of the “world” by way, again, of contrast. Observe the opening of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd:”

The woods of Arcady are dead,
 And over is their antique joy;
 Of old the world on dreaming fed;
 Grey Truth is now her painted toy;
 Yet still she turns her restless head:
 But O, sick children of the world,
 Of all the many changing things
 In dreary dancing past us whirled,
 To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,
 Words alone are certain good.
 Where are now the warring kings,
 Word be-mockers?—By the Rood
 Where are now the warring kings?
 An idle word is now their glory,
 By the stammering schoolboy said,
 Reading some entangled story:
 The kings of the old time are dead;
 The wandering earth herself may be
 Only a sudden flaming word

In clanging space a moment heard,
 Troubling the endless reverie. (CW1 19, ll 1–21)

With a curt gesture, Yeats stretches the horizon of the world behind the speaker of the poem by referencing the “sick children of the world.” Clearly, this is not the limited world of the Shepherd’s community (more on that in a moment), nor is it the world of getting and doing—the Great World—mentioned above. Rather it would seem to be the globe. We are, I think, to imagine all of the children throughout the world who are sick.

But where is this Shepherd from? Not Dromahaire or Knocknarea, nor, it would seem, any particular Irish village. He knows about Arcady, yet he doesn’t speak ancient Greek. He is a generic shepherd dreamed up out of translations of Greek and Roman pastorals, as mediated through anglophone poetry in the preceding centuries, thus giving him an English shading as well. Yet the poem rubs shoulders with others that have particularly Irish settings. It is a cosmopolitan imagination of an earlier age, one that’s more regionally and linguistically restricted. Shepherds, by nature of their occupation, are very unglobalized, so the footloose nature of this one is noteworthy. One of the things he imagines is the word—that near-rhyme for world—wandering over the earth. “World” requires a rhyme, and throughout his early work Yeats searches for this work. This global vision also encourages the young poet to produce a poetry that can range over the world’s expanses, as prefigured in this poem. And to do so, in the first place, requires a new type of mobile language.

II

In his recent book, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature: The Subject of Poetry* (2016), Barry Shiels examines Yeats’s work and “the effects of money, trade and globalisation.”¹ He attends especially to what he refers to as the “international mobility of reference” in Yeats’s poetry, some of which we see in the poem above, and more generally in his wide-ranging cultural references, especially in the late poetry.² He examines how this relates both to his ideas of the Irish nation and to the inchoate issue of “global assimilation associated with accelerated means of cultural exchange and the extended dominion of English language literature.”³ We have become accustomed to discussions of culture and globalization, but literary studies for the most part attend to the contemporary period, considering, say, how the novels of Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, or Mohammed Hanif attempt—as they flit between time-zones, languages, cultures—to represent the phenomenon of globalism. But Shiels shows that globalized literature and its idiom did not emerge in just the last twenty years or so, but has a major antecedent in Yeats. For instance, he argues

that Yeats's dealings with Irish antiquarian material and (since he could neither speak nor read Irish) his distance from Irish-language material allowed him "to invent a 'common' English applicable to no particular locale—and spoken by no particular person."⁴ Of course, certain clear markers of Irishness—both thematic and linguistic—are laid down in the poems, but these are small in number and strategically placed so as not to disturb (in the first places) British and US readers. This "common English," Shiels argues, has more generally served to found a global literary lingua franca. He remarks that:

For a monoglot Yeats notched-up a surprising number of important translation credits. As well as the Irish folklore considered in the last chapter, and two late translations (of translations) of the Oedipus plays, he worked to improve Rabindranath Tagore's translation of *Gitanjali* (1912), offered advice to Ezra Pound on the Ernest Fenollosa manuscript for the twin 1916 publications *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* and *Noh or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan*, and "[p]ut into English" a new abridged version of the *Upanishads* with Shri Purohit Swāmi (1937).⁵

In relation to the last-mentioned text he continues:

What distinguishes the Yeats and Shri Purohit version [...] is its presumptuousness. Showing no need for parenthetical explanation and with a clear emphasis on brevity and simplicity, their edition compresses the scholarly apparatus which we might expect to accompany such a technical feat of translation. Theirs is not a translation into English from another language, but an original production of world English.⁶

This "world English" would seem to have the great advantage of begetting a global literary traffic (as Shiels says, "foreign Genius transmitted over great distances").⁷ Such an emphasis moves us beyond not only the national context for studying Yeats's work, but also the postcolonial (despite India's status at the time). Two good examples of this are his readings of "Lapis Lazuli" and "The Statues," when Shiels refers to the ways that Yeats's "poems allude to and associate between multiple and diverse materials without providing much or any explanation of their provenance or historical context." In relation to the latter he remarks that it "reduces historical particulars to the single movement of modernity which, in disaffected mood, the poet calls 'the filthy modern tide.'"⁹

Shiels illuminates a fundamental aspect of Yeats's poetry that has not been addressed by nationalist, revisionist, or postcolonial readings. It especially illuminates the work of the 1920s and 1930s, which has always exceeded those theoretical frameworks, and by default has fallen into an amorphous idea of great works of the European tradition. Shiels also helps us read an early poem

like “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” as we observe how its production of a generic pastoral mode slots easily into this idea of a “world English” poetry, especially when such a poem is contiguous with “Anashuya and Vijaya,” set as it is in an Indian temple in the Golden Age, or the ones which follow, “The Indian Upon God” and “The Indian to His Love.”

Critics have shown how British imperialism, and its later US incarnation, informs a world literature that is transported by “this ‘common’ English applicable to no particular locale.” Aamir R. Mufti says that “the history of world literature is inseparable from the rise of English as global literary vernacular and is in fact to some extent *predicated* on the latter.”¹⁰ The idea of world literature might originally been Goethe’s—at least that’s the anecdote that is routinely deployed in World Literature theory—but German was left behind a long time ago, along with French:

If English is now incontestably the lingua franca of neoliberal capitalism, the language, for instance, in which individuals in a wide range of professions and in various sectors of industry and finance can most reliably expect to be able to communicate with their counterparts from across the world, then we might say that this book is concerned with the subset of that global linguistic reality, namely, the situation of English as a *global literary vernacular*—English not merely as a language of literary expression but as a cultural system with global reach, not simply a transparent medium but an assemblage and apparatus for the assimilation and domestication of diverse practices of writing (and life-worlds) on a world scale.¹¹

Mufti’s book, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (2016), is concerned with those moments when other languages/cultures impinge on the edge of English, whether it’s Agha Shahid Ali’s use of Urdu poetry in English or the recent rise of Pakistani novelists writing in English. He examines the distortions, omissions, and gains that occur along the border between anglophone culture and smaller, less globally prestigious cultures. But he is on the critical *qui vive* when it comes to anglophone culture, suspicious of the stealthy and insidious ways imperialism can reimpose itself in culture.

This is a debate which is now only beginning: Emily Apter harmonizes with Mufti, criticizing the desolation of a world literature that is mediated predominantly through English. Gayatri Spivak and Tim Parks agree.¹² Alexander Beecroft is more sanguine:

[G]lobal literature represents a rupture not only with the identification of the literature with its nation of origin but also with postcolonial literatures as such. By this argument, a “postcolonial literature” such as Indian literature in English represents an attempt to create a narrative for a national literature in

English out of the colonial experience, where a Global English literature (if such a thing yet exists) instead constructs a community of English speakers (or English readers) through a myth of origin that foregrounds interconnection rather than subjugation.¹³

Beecroft ends his *Ecology of World Literature* (2015) with a chapter on global literature, but again for the most part he sees this as a feature of the contemporary period; Shiels allows us to understand that global literature has longer antecedents, one of which is Yeats. Viewed in this manner, the past begins to stretch back further from the present. The future, however, is possibly very brief, as the world may soon end.

III

So far, then, we have Yeats standing at the beginning of an incipient world literature in English, as one of its co-creators. As he reaches over a great distance to, say, Tagore, and brings him into English, problems arise with this new poetic idiom that Yeats didn't take into consideration: although he is the poet of a nation that is trying to establish itself in opposition to Empire, he's using a medium that is, in Mufti's phrase, *predicated* on Empire. This was the mainspring of a lot of postcolonial criticism, but here I want to consider a different issue. For while Yeats's practice did indeed open this new idiom in anglophone poetry, the one that Shiels describes so thoroughly while also providing an excellent rebuttal to Tim Parks's view that global literature in English is monotonous and dull, Yeats himself for the most part is thinking about the *end* of the world.¹⁴ While, say, social democrats were working out how to transform Europe and the world in the 1920s and 1930s, Yeats scorned all such attempts at amelioration, viewing them as a betrayal of aristocratic value and probably a perversion of human nature. For the "world," as it appears in his poetry and plays, has the attributes I mentioned above (the place of business, wiles, etc., a zone that's exceeded by spiritual vision, or which contrasts with the local by virtue of its vastness; a place to wander homeless), but the other repeated associations convey that the world is something that can end, and also something that can be destroyed—indeed, that seems to bring forth the desire in humans to destroy it. In other words, "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed" (*CW1* 107, l 5).

The end of the world has forever been nigh. As Frank Kermode reminds us, there have always been excellent reasons for thinking that it's all going to end:

[i]t is commonplace to talk about our historical situation as uniquely terrible and in a way privileged, a cardinal point of time. But can it really be so? It

seems doubtful that our crisis, our relation to the future and the past, is one of the important differences between us and predecessors. Many of them felt as we do. If the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them.¹⁵

Kermode and his readers' "crisis," when he gave these lectures in 1965, is not straightforwardly "ours" anymore—though we still face nuclear annihilation. Here I'm interested in Yeats facing the prospect of the end of the world, and what this can tell us about his practice as a poet. What's the connection—is there a connection?—between this desire for, his relish and his anticipation of, the end of the world, and the formal choices of rhyme in his poetry? What are the implications of this for our own culture?

First, though, what is the nature of our present ideas of apocalypse, and how do they affect culture? In his work, the Romantic critic and philosopher Timothy Morton attempts to make the connection between Last Things and culture. He arrives with an original description of our particular apocalypse, and he argues that it enables a particular new type of art, which might be called *unmodernist*, though decidedly not *postmodernist*. For him, the end of the world is ecological disaster, especially global warming. He calls this a *hyperobject*. That is, it is not an object in the sense in which a table or a continent or a cloud is an object, rather it is a set of relations between objects, or phenomena. In Morton's descriptions, it has several features. First, it is viscous. The means that it cannot be studied at arm's length or beneath a microscope (that would mean it was merely an object):

The mirror of science melts and sticks to our hand. The very tools we were using to objectify things, to cover Earth's surface with shrink wrap, become a blowtorch that burns away the glass screen separating humans from Earth, since every measurement is now known as an alteration, as quantum-scale measurements make clear.¹⁶

This no doubt comes, at least in part, from a Latourian idea of science, but the speculative fiction writer Jeff VanderMeer is more helpful in illustrating this. In *Annihilation* (2014), a group of scientists enter a zone where strange things occur. Toward the end of the book, the narrator is trying to make sense of the bizarre events that have occurred, and she pulls out her microscope, the instrument that above all others signifies scientific precision:

I set up my microscope on the rickety table, which I suppose the surveyor had found already so damaged it did not require her further attention. The cells of the psychologist, both from her unaffected shoulder and her wound, appeared to be normal human cells. So did the cells I examined from my own sample. This was impossible. I checked the samples over and over, even

childishly pretending I had no interest in looking at them before swooping down with an eagle eye.

I was convinced that when I wasn't looking at them, these cells became something else, that the very act of observation changed everything.¹⁷

The narrator's suspicion that the cells have agency eventually leads her to conclude that the entire zone is a "complex, unique, intricate, awe-inspiring, dangerous organism. It might be inexplicable. It might be beyond the limits of my senses to capture—or my science or my intellect—but I still believed I was in the presence of some kind of living creature, one that practiced mimicry using my own thoughts" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 119). Viscosity is no longer only feature of the examined phenomena, but of the instruments and indeed the examiners themselves.

A second quality of Morton's hyperobject is that it is nonlocal, or massively distributed in space. We only see bits of it here and there, and have to learn to see the connections. From disparate phenomena we have to infer a larger whole. Another aspect is phasing. If the hyperobject's nonlocality refers mainly to geographical dispersion, then phasing is about distribution over time: "Hyperobjects seem to phase in and out of the human world. [...] they occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis. We can only see pieces of hyperobjects at a time."¹⁸

The final characteristic I'll mention here is interobjectivity, which means that we can only intuit the presence of hyperobjects by the marks that they leave on objects. This is connected with the idea of nonlocality, and also with viscosity, insofar as it decentralizes human agency and consciousness, locating it instead along a spectrum of consciousness, conceivably stretching even as far as mycorrhizal webs of communication in old forests (though Morton doesn't mention these). Humans have realized "that they are not running the show," even though now they find themselves "at the very moment of their most powerful technical mastery on a planetary scale."¹⁹ Rather than living in a world that we can control and direct, "we have discovered that we are already falling inside the abyss, which is not pure empty space, but instead the fiery interior of a hyperobject."²⁰

Morton's global warming hyperobject is useful for us here as it throws into relief Yeats's apocalypse. Yeats is not as analytic, sufficing himself with images of tides of global bloodshed and anarchy being loosed upon the world. Morton's idea of what awaits us is more detailed:

What exists outside the charmed circles of Nature and life is a charnel ground, a place of life and death, of death-in-life and life-in-death, an undead place

of zombies, viroids, junk DNA, ghosts, silicates, cyanide, radiation, demonic forces, and pollution. My resistance to ecological awareness is a resistance to the charnel ground. It is the calling of the shaman to enter the charnel ground and to try to stay there, to pitch a tent there and live there, for as long as possible. Since there are no charnel grounds to speak of in the West, the best analogy, used by some Tibetan Buddhists (from whom the image derives), is the emergency room of a busy hospital. People are dying everywhere. There is blood and noise, equipment rushing around, screams. When the charm of *world* is dispelled, we find ourselves in the emergency room of ecological coexistence.²¹

This is an image of a place where infrastructure has broken down, without even the alternative structure of a war-zone. It is a generalized image of panic, emergency, chaos.

Morton's image of the charnel ground riffs off ubiquitous imagery of ecological disaster brought on by global warming. And while his idea of the hyperobject is suggestive, his analysis itself—that is, the way he breaks down its features—is not well defined. Routinely, theorists in this mode respond that sharp definitions are the purview of modernist control of materials, and those days are gone. Yes, of course—but then why the travesty of analysis (the numbered breakdown of characteristics)?

IV

What comes next in Morton's book *Hyperobjects* is clear: a new aesthetic. After describing the hyperobject of global warming, he then considers what kind of art is appropriate for the era. He requires what he calls an "attunement to the non-human" that entails the forswearing of aesthetics that claim mastery over their materials.²² We must abandon the Prospero model of the artist whose "complex machines [...] upgrade the subject."²³ Actual landscape was not previously admissible as art, but having been processed in, say, Wordsworth's "complex machines" of poetic technique, suddenly they are. Once the older model of art is abandoned, we supposedly can open ourselves to things, materials, and ultimately to hyperobjects. Here is Morton's description of one work:

Consider Robert Ashley's *She Was a Visitor*. Ashley intones the phrase "She was a visitor" into a microphone. The audience begins to pronounce whatever phoneme of the phrase an individual chooses. The piece becomes a massively distributed pronunciation of "She was a visitor," split into sonic chunks. It spine chillingly captures the alien presence of the strange stranger, the notion of entities as irreducibly uncanny. There is an echo of the Greek tragic chorus and the protagonist, as Ashley's voice speaks over the hissing, clicking ocean

of syllables. “She was a visitor” becomes strange. Perhaps she was a visitor to my house. Perhaps she was a visitor to the concert hall. Perhaps she was a visitor from another planet. She gives us a glimpse of the futural essence of a thing. Likewise, the phrase itself becomes a “visitor,” an alien being that rustles like a rainforest around Ashley. In the mouths of the audience, the phrase becomes a hyperobject—distributed, yet there [...]”²⁴

This is the same effect as achieved by mantras in, say, meditation. Zen Buddhism also wishes to decenter the human ego and bring a similar “attunement to the non-human.” More importantly, Morton’s assumes that the time of hyperobjects requires artworks that are themselves hyperobjects.

This seems to be a repetition of the Modernist aesthetic fallacy. In 1915, Ezra Pound wrote: “One discards rhyme, not because one is incapable of rhyming neat, fleet, sweet, meet, treat, eat, feet but because there are certain emotions or energies which are not represented by the over-familiar devices or patterns.”²⁵ Thus artists, faced with what Eliot called “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,” must find a way to embody that panorama in their works.²⁶ The artwork in its content and method must resemble its object. Artists themselves must be weak and lame. Of a poem by Brenda Hillman, Morton remarks that “[f]ar from foregrounding the human subject’s supposed priority to things, this inversion of normal lineation truly makes the poem a response, in the deep sense of *tuning*.”²⁷ This is, in Morton’s view, different from Modernism, which wished to construct objects that embodied these forces; artworks now, on the other hand, must rather resemble manuals of disintegration, must themselves be disintegrating.

Morton is committing the same error of many critical theorists when they descend to look for examples of art that fit their ideas. Are we talking about hyperobjects? Then artworks that respond to these must have the same features as hyperobjects. It repeats the implication of Pound’s remark above that old poetic techniques cannot adequately deal with new phenomena. Those older conventional techniques (rhyme, meter, stanza), as used in Romantic lyrics, are “complex machines that upgrade the subject.” This characterization is slick: because these techniques are machine-like that makes them somehow non-organic; because they are complex, they are almost like computers; “upgrade” embeds them in a consumer economy. By implication, it attributes a greater organicity, authenticity, and nonconsumerism to, say, works by Hillman and Young. Now, Morton would hate this implication; but he’s in denial: like many other critical theorists, he cannot accept that there can be a *variety* of aesthetic strategies in response to what his theory describes.

Which returns us to Yeats, who, when faced with apocalypse, chose *sprezzatura*: “such men as come / Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb” (*CWI*

139, part III, ll 15–16). Within that laughter we find an allegiance to the traditional forms of poetry as a stance, a gait, a set of moves in the face of chaos. This may seem distinctly unZen, as it implies a maintenance of mastery, a strengthening of the ego rather than its dissolution in the waves of the nonhuman.

But this old connection between traditional poetic form and domination is a reduction. First, because it fails to see the ways in which mantra-like repetition (of the kind that is present in the type of art that Morton values) is already built into traditional form. The repetition of rhyme words has the effect of strategically dulling our rationality in order to let in more oneiric elements. Mutlu Konuk Blasing says it better:

The lyric works with the material experience of the somatic production and reproduction of words as sounds and sounds as words, whether spoken, written, or read. Formal schemes that abstract and stylize the distinctive sonic and grammatical shape of a language serve to foreground its material reality and put up an organized resistance to meaning, both as sense and as intention.²⁸

Second, Peter McDonald, commenting on rhyme, indicates how it can never unambiguously be a sign of mastery:

[R]hyme is one of the loudest announcements of authorial control, a daring of the reader to join the poet in welcoming the victory over mere accident in the working of poetic form; at the same time, it brings that control into the most profound doubt, by sounding out the impersonality of language's relations.²⁹

Pound, Morton, and Antony Easthope, among many others, can only see the phonemes studding the poem's column of text on the page and immediately think that the text, or the author, is trying to control or mitigate the chaos of existence. They cannot see how rhyme is also, on the material level of the language of the poem, an illumination of that very chaos.

Third, in Yeats more particularly, we see especially in the late work an obsession with copies, mirrors, repetitions, family generations, all of which subordinate the ego to larger continuums. After reading Balzac he remarks: "For a long time after closing the last novel one finds it hard to admire deeply any individual strength that has not family strength behind it" (*CW5* 56). And that feeling pervades the late work beyond the Balzacian afterglow.

[...] all must copy copies, all increase their kind;
When the conflagration of their passion sinks, damped by the body or the
mind,
That juggling nature mounts, her coil in their embraces twined [...] (*CW1*
154, ll 7–9)

The Romantic movement valorized individual originality in art—an aesthetic ideology which is still firmly entrenched in creative-writing pedagogy—yet we may do better to listen to Yeats when he says: “Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage” (CW5 238). Sato’s sword may well be a symbol of adversity maintained against encroaching chaos, but such a stance cannot be held by one person, it must have “family strength” behind it. W. J. McCormack details at length Yeats’s strategic erasures of the commercial aspects of his family in the nineteenth century in favor of its eighteenth-century aristocratic associations;³⁰ the great gazebo that he built with other quasi-aristocratic figures turns out to be just “a gimcrack Victorian fabrication.”³¹ Nevertheless, Yeats’s comical maneuverings in his family history do not invalidate the idea of “family strength” that is integral to his intellectual and aesthetic outlook in this period.

But even that “family strength” cannot withstand the release of anarchy upon the world. Neither can it withstand the “charnel house” in Morton’s description. For Morton’s idea of attunement to the non-human is really just a fiction, as much a complex machine as that of traditional poetic devices. We can never be fully attuned to the non-human without being dead, as Wallace Stevens’s snowman will tell you. Morton’s chosen artworks merely *figure* that ground zero, just as artworks have always *figured* such states, though in radically different ways. Morton thinks that art should approximate these states—that they should be a kind of spiritual preparation, a kind of lulling of the ego toward its death. Yeats agrees, but would prefer to go “open-eyed” to that charnel house, and he calls upon centuries-old poetry machines in order to do so, or as he says: “I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional” (CW5 238). Such complex machines do not seek to *upgrade* the charnel house; they are used to dramatize its awfulness more clearly. And the agency of dramatization, Yeats reminds us, is not the sovereign intelligence of poets, but of larger forces—of the community, local or national; of the natural world—as those forces go *through* the poems.

V

On the one hand, as Shiels shows, Yeats is one of the founding figures of a global anglophone poetic idiom; but on the other, it is as though the English language itself wants to prevent poets from rhyming with “world.” Indeed, it is as though Yeats has heard the language’s instructions, and his later work does not try to find a rhyme for the word at all (though he still frequently uses the word). But, of course, he does stick with rhyme even as he comes ever nearer an apprehension of the erasure of civilization and its culture. Morton wants art to be a simulation of that disintegration; Yeats wants to face that disintegration

riding upon tradition. Perhaps it is because he thinks it will make a bigger explosion on impact; perhaps he has not fully absorbed the idea of the erasure of humanity (who, really, can?); perhaps his ideas are merely an adumbration of the simple biological fact that living beings wish to replicate themselves, whether through children or likenesses of themselves and their lives.

Whatever the explanation, I have tried here to show how Yeats's poetic practice when facing what would later be called a hyperobject is exemplary. I think it's important to register this idea, as it significantly renews the repertoire of ways in which our culture can conceive of its own end—indeed, can conceive of the end of all cultures and possibly planetary death. His rhymes more than their rhyming tell.

NOTES

This article was first presented as a lecture at the Yeats International Summer School, Sligo, in 2018.

1. Barry Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature: The Subject of Poetry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 3.
2. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 10.
3. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 10.
4. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 129.
5. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 101.
6. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 129.
7. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 56.
8. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 117.
9. Shiels, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature*, 117.
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