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Rhetoric and Modernism: The Case of Poetry’s Banquet, 1914

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Unlike poets of previous eras, who allowed that rhetoric might serve the interests of poetry, modernist poets typically disparaged rhetoric as debased and corrupting—a source of overblown diction and of appeals to public taste that undermined serious art. Yet if rhetoric was a suspect means of addressing the public, how might poets procure an audience beyond the coterie—an audience of sufficient size to confer legitimacy and prestige? This problem vexed William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound, but their efforts to resolve it—implicated in the staging of a banquet to promote Poetry magazine—exposed the contradictions and costs inherent in their phobic conception of rhetoric.

I remember Yeats...: ‘I have spent the whole of my life trying to get rid of rhetoric.’ (This must have been along between 1912–1918.) ‘I have got rid of one kind of rhetoric and have merely set up another.’ Being a serious character, at least along certain lines, he set about getting rid of THAT.

—Ezra Pound, “French Poets,” 1918

But as for the escape from rhetoric—there is a great push at the door, and some cases of suffocation. But what is rhetoric? The test seems unsatisfactory. There is rhetoric even among the new poets.


To those assembled in his honor at Chicago’s Cliff Dwellers club the evening of March 1, 1914, William Butler Yeats recounted details of a problem he had contended with early in his career, a problem he confidently had thought was

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behind him. His concluding remarks, however, registered his awareness that his confidence was misplaced:

We [the Rhymers] rebelled against rhetoric, and now there is a group of younger poets who dare to call us rhetorical. When I returned to London from Ireland, I had a young man go over all my work with me to eliminate the abstract. This was an American poet, Ezra Pound . . . .

The whole movement of poetry is toward pictures, sensuous images, away from rhetoric, from the abstract, toward humility. But I fear I am now becoming rhetorical. I have been driven into Irish public life—how can I avoid rhetoric? (“Poetry’s Banquet” 1914, 27; Monroe 1938, 338)

The event was the first Poetry banquet, occasioned by the magazine’s having awarded to Yeats the previous November its prize for best poem published during its first year. Before he rose to speak, the poet was toasted and praised; still, he sat silent, “utterly unconscious of everything that went on” (Monroe 1938, 336). Expressing a mixture of awe and concern for her guest, Harriet Monroe, Poetry’s founding editor, speculated that he was “weary from numerous speaking engagements” but also “possessed [by] the valuable faculty of abstraction” (336). Still another circumstance may have wearied and possessed him, however, for as his speech shows, Yeats intensely felt the intractability of his dilemma. Despite all his efforts against it, rhetoric remained—its hold as firm as ever. Indeed, its threat seems to have increased, not diminished. Sounding a somewhat perplexed and plain- tive note, the speech bears witness as much to the extent and degree of Yeats’s labor as it does to his frustration at its apparent futility. Eleven times in the speech—always disparagingly—Yeats utters the words rhetoric and rhetorical. Twice he invokes it pronominally. “Ornament,” “the abstract,” “sentimentality,” “moral uplift,” “poetic diction,” the “artificial,” the propensity to “preach,” “teach,” and “instruct” he indicts as effects of rhetoric, symptoms of the general contagion—running the number of kindred references, including repetitions, to twenty-five.

Clearly, the rebellion against rhetoric obsessed Yeats, but why? Did he fear rhetoric would weaken his work, diminish its intensity? Did he resent that it would require him to take greater pains to consider his audience—that this would tempt him, in his own words, to “teach” rather than “express himself,” the poet’s true “business”? Or did he strive persistently against it for other reasons, of which he was perfectly conscious or, perhaps, given his phobic response to it, only vaguely aware?

In this incessant hand-wringing over rhetoric, Yeats was not alone, of course. It had not begun, nor would it end, with him. Yet Yeats occupies a crucial moment in the transmission of certain notions of rhetoric to poets of the generation that followed him, especially Ezra Pound. Born in 1865, Yeats began his career during the reign of the late Victorian mode, which
nearly all poets who fancied themselves modern—from Pound and his fellow Imagists, to Monroe, to the later Yeats himself—characterized as steeped in rhetoric. A pivotal event in the revolt against this mode was the publication in 1899 of Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. It imported into England and the United States not only French poetry of the nineteenth century but also its supporting poetics—a poetics defined, in large measure, by its opposition to rhetoric. “Take eloquence, and wring its neck,” Paul Verlaine had ordered (qtd. in Symons 1958, 46)—a rallying point not only for the French but also for those writing in English who came in contact with Symons’s book. What’s more, Verlaine’s injunction appeared with Symons’s endorsement—and, it was strongly implied, with Yeats’s. Dedicating the book to his friend, Symons identified Yeats as his one ideal, “perfectly sympathetic reader” (xix). With Yeats he had “discussed all these questions [regarding “the doctrine of Symbolism”], rarely arguing about them, for we rarely had an essential difference of opinion” (xix). Certainly, Yeats’s 1914 speech leaves little doubt that their agreement also encompassed Symons’s claim in his introduction that Symbolism was a “revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition” (5).

Yeats’s stature as a poet was well known to the members of his Chicago audience, and so, doubtless, his cautionary tale about rhetoric, especially his apparent concession to it, baffled or unsettled some of them. Yet despite this, despite his inscrutably “abstract[ed]” demeanor—whatever its causes—Monroe, in her memoirs (published posthumously in 1938), hurries to pronounce the occasion a rare and unqualified success: “the whole town rose to it in a manner unprecedented for an affair celebrating one of the arts” (334). It “has since become,” she proudly asserts some two decades later, “a milestone of literary history” (332). Yet in her effusive account of the banquet (which runs for ten pages), devoted chiefly to describing the pomp and circumstance of peripheries—the “excitement of the preparations”; the prominent, well-heeled crowd; the palpable aura of the honored guest (334–336)—Monroe expends but two adjectives on the speech itself: “memorable” and “oft-quoted” (336), both uncharacteristically tempered, if not conspicuously tepid. Had the speech not fulfilled expectations raised by the moment of the occasion? And if so, what precisely were the terms of the occasion’s success? What manner of “literary history” did this “milestone” impart—both to contemporary and to future audiences?

The speech has drawn comment from notable scholars (for example, Litz 1985; Longenbach 1988; Williams 1977) but almost solely to confirm Pound’s service to Yeats as “eliminat[or of] the abstract.” Little has been written about its most salient intrinsic feature: its anxious chronicling of the poet’s recurrent efforts to “escape from rhetoric,” punctuated by its shrewdly ambiguous “rhetorical” question: “how can I avoid rhetoric?” Nor has its compelling extrinsic features received sufficient attention: the occasion on which Yeats delivered the speech as well as the events and exchanges that
preceded and followed, controlled collectively, if not at all points cooperatively, by Yeats, Monroe, and especially Pound. Yet the speech possesses a significance that extends beyond debate about literary influence. Indeed, an expanded account of the speech can tell us something about the uneasy relation between rhetoric and poetry during modernism’s formation—a relation fraught with concerns about how to court an audience beyond the coterie, to garner the legitimacy that only a wider audience could confer, but without appearing to do so; without, that is, appearing “rhetorical,” without accommodating or even acknowledging except disparagingly the amorphous, anonymous assemblage of prospective readers known variously as the public, the mob, or in Pound’s tart and telling phrase, “the greasy vulgus” (1950, 16).

Spurning such readers was a requisite, one might even say, a reflexive gesture for those in the early vanguard of modernist letters, but it was also a gesture typically performed in public, via print, in ostentatious and strategic ways, as a means of piquing the interest of those it would spurn, of inducing them to purchase art that defined itself against them. At the very outset of his career, in 1908, Pound had already conceived of this tactic, which, in a letter to his father in mid-July, he articulates with characteristic panache and candor: “Sound trumpet. Let zip the drum & swatt the big bassoon. It pays to advertise... As you dont know whats in the book you are expected for the present to say anything that will stir up advance orders... You understand that what people think after they get the book is a secondary matter. What I want now is advanced orders, culled from general curiosity. The sale on pure & exalted literary merit will begin later” (2010, 121). On this occasion, Pound sought to gin up sales for *A Lume Spento* (*With Tapers Quenched*), his first collection of poems, but he did so with a particular purpose in mind, one he disclosed to his father in a letter sent several weeks later: “Edition was 150 copies but keep it dark as when I state when I hope to before long ‘First edition exhausted’ I wish to give the impression of a larger circulation” (2010, 125). While Pound was certainly eager to secure the income increased sales would provide, of greater value was the opportunity to suggest the book had bestirred some segment of the public to purchase it. Six years later, on the occasion of *Poetry’s* banquet, Pound will employ similar tactics: more sophisticated, more covert, but no less conflicted—and of greater consequence.

To provide this expanded account, we first shall turn to the history of the notions of rhetoric that prevailed among poets in late nineteenth-century France and into the early years of the twentieth century in England, filtered through Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. The text is crucial for, as David Perkins notes in *A History of Modern Poetry*, it was “the single most important work in transmitting the ideas and practices of the French poets to the younger writers in English” (1976, 51). We cannot hope to understand Yeats’s and Pound’s responses to rhetoric without first examining
this text. Second, we shall turn to the letters, recollections, contemporary reports, and subsequent critical accounts of the complex of circumstances that landed Yeats in the Cliff Dwellers club in the first place, that led him to deliver the speech he did, and that prompted him to invoke the name of Ezra Pound. After consulting these materials, we shall, perhaps, be better equipped to decipher Monroe’s milestone, to recover the meaning inscribed there.

THE SYMBOLIST LEGACY

I myself owe Mr. Symons a great debt; but for having read his book I should not, in the year 1908, have heard of Laforgue or Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbière. (Eliot, qtd. in Ellmann 1958, xv)

Thus T. S. Eliot, writing in 1930, both acknowledges an intellectual debt and dates the year he incurred it. His beneficent creditor was Symons, whose The Symbolist Movement in Literature was first published in 1899, then revised and expanded in 1908. As it turns out, 1908 was likely the same year that Pound read the book. Like Eliot, Pound would grant the book a major role in the development of his literary theories. It had not only transmitted the work of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and others into English, but also served to prompt Pound’s thinking about the image.

Yeats’s connection to the book was even more significant. He and Symons both had been members of the Rhymers’ Club and had developed a close friendship as well as shared aesthetic concerns. In 1895, Yeats took rooms near Symons’s, where in close company “they shared food, friends, and ideas” (Ellmann 1958, xi). So instrumental was this association to Symons’s work on his book, that, as noted previously, Symons dedicated the book to Yeats. So complete was their agreement, in fact, that Symons acknowledged his friend, in nearly mystical terms, as his ideal reader: “It is almost worth writing a book to have one perfectly sympathetic reader, who will understand everything that one has said, and more than one has said” (xix–xx). The Symbolist Movement in Literature primarily seeks to identify the techniques and forms that certain French writers of the nineteenth century adopted to reveal “unseen reality” (Symons 1958, 1), to make “the soul of things . . . visible” (5). To create their effects, however, these techniques had to oppose and overthrow others already established and implicated in a radically different aesthetic. Rhetoric, Symons ascertained, was its source.

The most vehement and, in Symons’s view, effective of rhetoric’s opponents was Verlaine. Before Verlaine, Symons tells us, French poetry was “under the dominion of rhetoric.” Against this tyranny, Verlaine fired his
famous salvo: “Take eloquence, and wring its neck!” Yet the poet proved himself capable not only of issuing orders but of following them. Verlaine, Symons observes admiringly, “showed, by writing it, that French verse could be written without rhetoric.” The source of this achievement was his ability “to be absolutely sincere, to express exactly what he saw, to give voice to his own temperament, in which intensity of feeling seemed to find its own expression, as if by accident” (1958, 46). “He knows that words are living things, which we have not created, and which go their way without demanding of us the right to live”; thus “[t]hey serve him with so absolute a self-negation that he can write romances sans paroles, songs almost without words, in which scarcely a sense of the interference of human speech remains” (48).

Writing poetry premised upon such attitudes, Verlaine, Symons asserts, set verse “free,” which “was itself mainly an attempt to be more and more sincere, a way of turning back poetic artifice to new account, by getting back to nature itself, hidden away under the eloquent rhetoric of Hugo, Baudelaire, and the Parnassians” (1958, 49). Symons’s praise of such qualities—sincerity, discovery “as if by accident,” and the mistrust of “artifice,” indeed of words themselves, conceived as “interference”—influenced both Yeats and Pound, as we shall see. Further, Symons sanctions a disparaging, suspicious attitude toward the audience; and most important, he makes clear that it follows logically and appropriately from a wariness toward rhetoric:

In the devotion in rhetoric to either beauty or truth, there is a certain consciousness of an audience, of an external judgment: rhetoric would convince, be admired. It is the very essence of poetry to be unconscious of anything between its own moment of flight and the supreme beauty which it will never attain. (1958, 49)

Rhetoric, thus, is meretricious: its effects are self-consciously and willfully pursued. Its dependence on admirers, on “external judgment,” compromises the purity of its “devotion” to “beauty or truth.” In contrast, poetry is “unconscious”; it petitions no outside admirers and dwells only upon itself and an unreachable but “supreme beauty.” The latter should look familiar to anyone acquainted with early modernist poetics, for it articulates an aesthetic in which the art object, the poem in this case, is autonomous and sacrosanct. It not only does not arise from or respond to any social context—as rhetoric does—but its existence, in theory, depends precisely upon its removal from such a context.

In a formulation of rhetoric that owes its allegiance to Verlaine’s, Symons states in his introduction that Symbolism is “an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority” (1958, 5). In the next paragraph, though, Symons wields a more threatening metaphor, assigning the Symbolist project a greater force, one that authorizes
a different tactic. No longer meekly evasive, Symbolism a mere four sentences later represents the “revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition” (5; emphasis added). This tradition issues from an isolable historical moment:

The great epoch in French literature which preceded this epoch [the Symbolist Movement] was that of the offshoot of Romanticism which produced Baudelaire, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Taine, Zola, Leconte de Lisle . . . . It was the age of Science, the age of material things; and words, with that facile elasticity which there is in them, did miracles in the exact representation of everything that visibly existed, exactly as it existed. . . . And with all these writers, form aimed above all things at being precise, at saying rather than suggesting, at saying what they had to say so completely that nothing remained over, which it might be the business of the reader to divine. (Symons 1958, 3–4)

This “age of Science,” this “age of material things”—in which words could represent things, precisely, without suggestion, but “exactly as [they] existed”—this was the age of “the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority.” It was this that the French Symbolists attempted to “evade,” this they marshaled their forces to “revolt” against. And so, too, following their lead, working out his theories with Symons, did Yeats.

For Symons and Yeats, circa 1899, rhetoric and science are closely aligned; they constitute the “materialist tradition,” are concerned with matters outside the private precincts of the poet’s consciousness. The mode of precise and exhaustive description this tradition sanctions seems to overdetermine the subjects it registers, leaving nothing for “the reader to divine.”

For Symons and Yeats, science would not serve the aims of poetry. Nor would rhetoric. Accepting the conventional pejorative associations of the word rhetoric, ratifying them with pronunciamentos issued by Verlaine and other French poets, they simply assigned the word to a style of writing they opposed—the “precise,” “exterior,” “materialist” idiom of the “age of Science”—hoping thereby to denounce and effectively depose it.

Though he had considered Symons nearly a “god,” though he had long admired Yeats’s Celtic Twilight period, had, in fact, been “drunk” on it (Perkins 1976, 454); though he too opposed rhetoric, viewed it as “the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being” (Pound 1970, 83)—had learned to do so, in part, from Symons and Yeats—Pound was soon to launch and promote Imagism, a movement that was, in part, a critique of the allusive Symbolist manner and, by extension, of Yeats. As he reported in January 1913, “Mr. Yeats has been subjective; believes in the glamour and associations which hang near the words . . . . He has much in common with the French symbolists” (1913, 125). Eight months
later Pound confided to Harriet Monroe that “Yeats is already a sort of great
dim figure with its associations set in the past” (1950, 21).

In part, we might account for Pound’s comments by understanding them
within the context of a literary historical commonplace: each new generation
both uses and casts aside those preceding it to clear space for its own artistic
endeavor. Richard Ellmann makes the point vigorously: “Writers move upon
other writers not as genial successors but as violent expropriators, knock-
ing down established boundaries to seize by the force of youth, or of age,
what they require. They do not borrow, they override” (1967, 3). Pound’s
predicament, however, was especially delicate. As James Longenbach chron-
icles in Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism, Pound had successfully
boosted his own career not only by insinuating himself into Yeats’s inner
circle but by appropriating Yeats exclusively for himself. Increasingly, the
young, impulsive Pound, not Yeats, would orchestrate the latter’s Monday
night salons at Woburn Buildings (1988, 12). And Pound did not refrain from
“boast[ing] to family and friends of his privileged position in Yeats’s coterie”
(37). However, once he had done this, a new problem arose: how to distance
himself not from Yeats but from Yeats’s reputation as a Symbolist.

One way by which Pound sought to do this shows in his comments in
a letter of June 30, 1910. Yeats’s work had evolved a new style, much like
the one Pound, it turns out, had discovered previously:

Yeats has been doing some new lyrics—he has come out of the shadows
and declared for life . . . for he and I are now as it were in one movement
with aims very nearly identical. That is to say the movement of the ’90’ies
(nineties) for drugs and the shadows has worn itself out. There has been
no ‘influence’—Yeats has found within himself spirit of the new air which
I by accident had touched before him. (qtd. in Litz 1985, 132–133)

Three years later, in “The Later Yeats,” a review of the elder poet’s
Responsibilities (which appeared in the May 1914 issue of Poetry, just one
month after the text of Yeats’s Chicago speech had appeared there), Pound
distinguishes between the modern “movement,” that is, the one Pound
sought to lead himself, and Symbolism, that to which Yeats still belonged. “Mr
Yeats is a symbolist,” Pound writes, “but he has written images (des Images)
as have many good poets before him; so that is nothing against him, and
he has nothing against the Imagists (les Imagistes), at least so far as I know”
(1968, 378). The two comments indicate fairly well how far Pound had trav-
elled. In 1910, before Imagism, Pound could speak of their “nearly identical”
goals; by 1914—even in a review of Responsibilities, largely regarded as
Yeats’s first book in his “modern” style—Pound labels his friend a Symbolist,
the epithet alone suggesting a bygone idiom. Common ground, as opposed
to the common “movement” that united them before, lies in Yeats’s ability,
like that of all good poets, to write images. Yet the term *image* itself signifies a proprietorial relationship. The ground may now be common, but Pound gently suggests that his was the prior claim.

What we see established here in Pound’s behavior and criticism is his curious but crafty husbanding of Yeats’s career. During their three winters together at Stone Cottage (1913–1916), Pound acted as the elder poet’s secretary (on one occasion he emended without Yeats’s approval several of Yeats’s poems that he had acquired for *Poetry* [Litz 1985, 138]), he presided over Yeats’s famous literary salon, and in print articulated Yeats’s career in a way that seemed to flatter himself somewhat at his elder’s expense. He also, on the other hand, would rush to Yeats’s defense whenever he was criticized in print, as he was for his aristocratic pretensions by George Moore (Longenbach 1988, 60). Generally approving of Pound’s opinions in such instances, Yeats nonetheless was concerned about the intensity of Pound’s “attacks on the ‘middle-classes.’” In particular, Yeats feared that “Pound’s poetry was slipping into the public rhetoric of politics” (69). (A prophetic insight if ever there was one: Pound’s pro-Mussolini broadcasts for Radio Rome during World War II would lead to his arrest and imprisonment for treason.) Yet these circumstances, and the intricacies, not to mention intimacies, of Pound and Yeats’s relationship—might I mention that their wives were cousins and close friends; that in the 1890s, Yeats had had an affair with Pound’s future mother-in-law?—will help us to understand why Yeats permitted the fledgling *Poetry* to honor him.

**POETRY’S BANQUET**

Launched but eighteen months prior to Yeats’s speech on a subsidy of $5,200 per annum that would run for five years (Monroe 1938, 243–248), *Poetry* had achieved a precarious security for the present, but already editors Harriet Monroe, Alice Corbin Henderson, and their foreign editor/self-appointed impresario, Ezra Pound, were anxious about the future. During the summer and autumn of 1913, the three had skirmished over how best to implement a scheme designed to publicize the magazine. An award for the best poem published during *Poetry*’s first year would be announced in the November 1913 issue. Pound insisted it go to Yeats’s “The Grey Rock,” a poem in which he found a “curious nobility” but which also struck him, he conceded, as “obscure” (1968, 379). Still, awarding the prize to the much-lauded Yeats could not help but confer prestige upon the magazine. On June 10, 1913, Pound wrote Monroe:

> If you give it to Yeats, you FIRST, make the giving of the particular prize serious, you establish a good tradition. The person who receives it after Yeats is considerably more honoured than if he receives it after Lindsay,
or after any other man who can not yet be taken quite seriously as an author. (qtd. in Longenbach 1988, 28)

Even as early as October 15, 1912, Pound urged Monroe to publish Yeats so that Poetry would be “taken seriously” by all the elect (28).

Monroe and Henderson (plus members of the advisory board, who also served as judges), however, favored Vachel Lindsay’s “General Booth Enters Into Heaven,” reasoning that it made little sense to award the prize to an artist who needed neither the acclaim nor the $250 honorarium. Besides, they simply preferred Lindsay’s poem (Monroe 1938, 329). Awarding the prize to a “poet already world-famous” struck them as “unadventurous” (329). Unmoved by their thirst for adventure, Pound was incensed at the editors’ recommendation: “It must be offered to Yeats,” he demanded (qtd. in Longenbach 1988, 27). In response to his intransigence, the two women and their fellow judges fashioned an artful compromise. Yeats—or rather Pound (both indirectly and, as we shall see, directly)—got his prize, but Monroe petitioned another of her guarantors to subsidize a prize (for $100) for the second-best poem, which she then awarded to Lindsay. She also added him to the after-dinner program, following Yeats. The decision would prove significant.

Into this setting (of which Yeats was at least partially apprised; from mid-November 1913 until the end of January 1914 he lived with Pound near the Ashdown Forest, south of London), shaped as much by the imperatives of a shrewd if conflicted publicity as by those of ceremonial decorum, entered the celebrated Irish poet to speak disparagingly but also apprehensively about, of all things, rhetoric. Indeed, he spoke of little else. “[T]he Irish poet,” Monroe prefaced the text that appeared in the April 1914 Poetry, “took occasion to warn his confreres in America against a number of besetting sins” (“Poetry’s Banquet” 1914, 25). The partial “transcript,” which is all that survives of the speech, bears reproducing at length:

Twenty-five years ago a celebrated writer from South Africa said she lived in the East End of London because only there could she see the faces of people without a mask. To this Oscar Wilde replied that he lived in the West End because nothing interested him but the mask. After a week of lecturing I am too tired to assume a mask, so I will address my remarks especially to a fellow craftsman. For since coming to Chicago I have read several times a poem by Mr. Lindsay, one which will be in the anthologies, ‘General Booth Enters Into Heaven.’ This poem is stripped bare of ornament; it has an earnest simplicity, a strange beauty . . .

. . . When I was younger than Mr. Lindsay, and was beginning to write in Ireland, there was all around me the rhetorical poetry of the Irish politicians. We young writers rebelled against that rhetoric; there was too much of it and to a great extent it was meaningless. When I went to
London I found a group of young lyric writers who were also against rhetoric. We formed the Rhymers’ Club; we used to meet and read our poems to one another, and we tried to rid them of rhetoric.

But now, when I open the ordinary American magazine, I find that all we rebelled against in those early days—the sentimentality, the rhetoric, the ‘moral uplift’—still exist here. Not because you are too far from England, but because you are too far from Paris.

The Victorians forgot this; also, they forgot the austerity of art and began to preach. When I saw Paul Verlaine in Paris, he told me that he could not translate Tennyson because he was ‘too Anglais, too noble—when he should be broken-hearted he has too many reminiscences.’

We, in England, our little group of rhymers, were weary of all this. We wanted to get rid not only of rhetoric but of poetic diction. We tried to strip away everything that was artificial, to get a style like speech, as simple as the simplest prose, like a cry of the heart.

Real enjoyment of a beautiful thing is not achieved when a poet tries to teach. It is not the business of a poet to instruct his age. He should be too humble to instruct his age. His business is merely to express himself, whatever that self may be.

We rebelled against rhetoric, and now there is a group of younger poets who dare to call us rhetorical. When I returned to London from Ireland, I had a young man go over all my work with me to eliminate the abstract. This was an American poet, Ezra Pound. Much of his work is experimental; his work will come slowly, he will make many an experiment before he comes into his own. I should like to read to you two poems of permanent value, ‘The Ballad of the Goodly Fere’ and ‘The Return.’ This last is, I think, the most beautiful poem that has been written in the free form, one of the few in which I find real organic rhythm. A great many poets use vers libre because they think it is easier to write than rhymed verse, but it is much more difficult.

The whole movement of poetry is toward pictures, sensuous images, away from rhetoric, from the abstract, toward humility. But I fear I am now becoming rhetorical. I have been driven into Irish public life—how can I avoid rhetoric? (25–27; Monroe 1938, 336–338)

As an example of that genre of writing that mistrusts rhetoric, Yeats’s speech is a tour de force. It is wary of rhetoric at every turn yet, as we shall see, deploys a shrewd rhetoric of its own. Let us turn to its most salient moments.

In the paragraph in which Lindsay receives his praise, Yeats begins by announcing that he is “too tired to assume a mask”—a patented tactic for simply hoping to make one’s mask less apparent, as Oscar Wilde (to whom Yeats also refers) would have understood. An overture of sincerity is still an overture—an artifice, a mask. But adopting the pretense that he is thus exposed and speaking, apparently, with unaccustomed sincerity (would he “assume a mask” if he were not tired?), Yeats makes a most curious decision. Rather than directing his remarks to all of the one hundred fifty people
who had packed the rooms of the Cliff Dwellers, he chooses to speak, in
effect, to one: a fellow poet, and further, one deserving of the epithet “fellow
craftsman.” Coming from Yeats, this was high praise indeed. It was not lost
upon Lindsay, certainly, nor upon the audience that appreciated having the
local poet so honored (Monroe 1938, 338); but more significantly, it was not
lost upon Monroe.

Arriving in Chicago a week before the banquet, Yeats stayed at Harriet
Monroe’s apartment (Strand 1978, 139). On a table in his room she left
for his perusal several issues of her magazine—making special note in her
memoir that one included Lindsay’s prize-winning poem, “General Booth
Enters Into Heaven” (Monroe 1938, 333). Her comment would seem to
suggest that she had brought the poem to Yeats’s attention. By the time
of Yeats’s arrival in Chicago, however, other events—squabbles between
Monroe and Pound—had transpired that conferred special meaning upon
Yeats’s “gracious compliment to Lindsay” (Monroe’s phrase, 338).

After successfully lobbying Monroe to award the prize to Yeats, Pound
had suggested to her that she apprise Yeats before announcing it publicly,
quipping “that Yeats would confer more honor in accepting the award than
the committee would confer in giving it” (qtd. in Williams 1977, 77). Monroe
followed his instructions, including within a letter to Pound a separate letter
to Yeats. The contents of the latter, however, had incensed Pound:

Either this rotten £50 [$250] is an honorable reward for the best poem, or
it is a local high school prize for the encouragement of mediocrity.

Either it must be respectfully offered to Mr. Yeats, or the americans
[sic] must admit that they are afraid of foreign competition . . .

You’ve got a second prize for the village choir [that is, Lindsay].

. . . I cannot assist in this insult and you unfortunately try to make
me party by leaving the letter open and asking me to read it. If you
will think what the magazine would have been without the foreign
contributions,!!!!!!! There is no american [sic] poem worth awarding,
anyhow . . .

I don’t see how Yeats could possibly go on contributing after your
letter. (qtd. in Williams 1977, 77–78)

“Apparently,” Ellen Williams infers, “Harriet Monroe’s note to Yeats betrayed
her regret that the prize had not gone to Lindsay” (1977, 78).

Monroe attempted to pacify Pound in her response to this letter, but
to no avail. Pound took umbrage at other of what he considered Monroe’s
editorial malfeasances and in November, the month of the issue bearing
the prize announcement, resigned as foreign correspondent (Williams 1977,
78–79). Pound’s pique ultimately came to naught, however, and he reinstated
himself in a letter to Monroe on December 8, 1913. The condition of his
return, Pound announced, was that if he were to “stay on the magazine it
has got to improve” (1950, 27). Yet there was another incentive, suddenly, and Pound acknowledges it with palpable discomfort: “I don’t mind the reward as it seems to be Yeats who makes it, or at least ‘suggests,’ and as you have my own contrary suggestion for the disposal of the money made before I knew Lindsay had been otherwise provided for” (27).

The “reward,” of course, is none other than that already granted Yeats. Yet once notified of his selection, Yeats had written Monroe a letter of appreciable kindness and tact:

When I first got the very unexpected letter with the prize of £50, my first emotion was how much it would have meant to me even ten years ago; and then I thought surely there must be some young American writer today to whom it would mean a great deal, not only in practical help, but in encouragement. I want you therefore not to think that I am in any way ungrateful to you, or in any way anxious to put myself into a different category to your other contributors because I send back to you £40. I will keep £10, and with that I will get Mr. Sturge Moore to make me a book-plate, and so shall have a permanent memory of your generous magazine. I vacillated a good deal until I thought of this solution, for it seemed to me so ungracious to refuse; but if I had accepted I should have been bothered by the image of some unknown needy young man in a garret. (qtd. in Monroe 1938, 330)

But Yeats was not finished. In a subsequent letter “he offered a hint which we were very glad to fulfill” (330):

I want to make a suggestion which you need not follow in any way. Why not give the £40 to Ezra Pound? I suggest him to you because, although I do not really like with my whole soul the metrical experiments he has made for you, I think those experiments show a vigorous creative mind. (“A Word from Mr. Yeats” 1914, 149–150; also qtd. in Monroe 1938, 330–331)

And so it was done. Both letters appeared in the January 1914 issue of Poetry with Monroe’s concluding remarks:

The prize having been awarded to Mr. Yeats, the editor of POETRY accepts as final his suggestion as to the disposition of the portion of it which he returns. And she does this with the more pleasure as it enables her to acknowledge her high appreciation not only of Pound’s poetry, but also of his disinterested and valuable service as Foreign Correspondent of the magazine. (“A Word from Mr. Yeats” 1914, 150)

Despite Pound’s real and well-documented “service” to Poetry, the word disinterested seems a rather disingenuous (or perhaps naive) choice given
the results of the controversies surrounding the prize. Let us review the highlights.

Pound conceives of the prize, chiefly, as a means of promoting *Poetry* magazine; he insists the prize go to Yeats, with whom he worked closely and lived during the winter of 1913–1914, even though the winning poem seems to Pound “obscure.” After a series of arguments with Monroe (of which the dispute over the prize is one), he resigns from the magazine. Yeats accepts the prize and graciously returns four-fifths of the money, suggesting it go to Pound, which it does at the same moment he agrees to rejoin the magazine. In short, the money and Monroe’s public acknowledgment of Pound’s service (Yeats, of course, in his open letter to the magazine, makes the more significant acknowledgment from Pound’s point of view) redounds to him who conceived of the prize as an instrument of publicity in the first place. Perhaps more than anyone or anything, it is Pound himself who benefits from the entire episode.

We might also consider that in the November 1913 issue Pound is listed as a judge; in the January 1914 issue, the homage paid him just discussed appears; and in his March speech (printed in the April issue), Yeats honors him yet again as the young man whom he entrusts to edit his own work. (As expurger of “the abstract,” a symptom of rhetoric, Pound’s efforts seem nearly heroic within the context of the story Yeats tells of his own inability to eliminate rhetoric.) Pound also is praised—after Yeats expresses a mild reservation about Pound’s “experiment[s]”—as the author of “the most beautiful poem that has been written in the free form,” a form which is “more difficult” than “rhymed verse” (the kind of verse Yeats himself writes). Pound’s experiments, in short, were yielding significant results.

Yet in orchestrating the event as he did, Pound undoubtedly caused Yeats some discomfort (certainly he had caused Monroe some, who admitted her “irritation” in a letter to Pound on October 13, 1913 [qtd. in Williams 1977, 79]). He felt obliged, after all, to partially decline in fact, though he permitted himself to accept in spirit, an award secured him by Pound in a rather preemptory way and at some emotional and professional expense to Monroe (the magazine, after all, was hers, not Pound’s, yet Pound had badgered her into dispensing the award differently than she had wished). Even being considered for the award at all must have pained Yeats, knowing, as he would have, that Monroe had at first entertained him as the competition’s judge (announced in the October 1913 issue, “Notes” 34).

We might now return to reconsider Yeats’s praising Lindsay at the outset of the speech. Rather than not “assum[ing] a mask” to “address” a “fellow craftsman,” Yeats, it would appear, had assumed a passel of them and in rather rapid succession. Feeling wearied by rhetoric already, as the repeated references to it in his speech make clear he was, Yeats must have wondered urgently indeed, “how can I avoid rhetoric?” For even an event whose modest, publicly avowed purpose was to “celebrat[e] one of the arts”
(Monroe’s phrase), an art that Yeats and Pound viewed as antithetical to rhetoric, was discovered to be suffused with rhetoric in the pejorative sense that the two had come to understand. Little Yeats said in the context in which he found himself, if he acknowledged this context to himself, could fathomably be construed as “maskless.”

In fact, it seems likely that his praise of Lindsay had ulterior motives: to appease Monroe, who had hoped to award to Lindsay the prize Yeats had partially declined in favor of Pound, who had prevented Monroe from awarding the prize to Lindsay in the first place. Nor could we reasonably consider Yeats’s praise of Pound—given all that had transpired—disinterested. Pound, after all, had conferred upon Yeats the honor of the prize, expending considerable energy to do so. Nor, we might speculate, would Yeats have bothered to praise Lindsay’s “General Booth Enters Into Heaven” had Monroe not left it conspicuously as his “assigned” bedtime reading. At every turn, Yeats would have encountered not an occasion celebrating the art of poetry but one celebrating Poetry magazine—a far different matter. Indeed, Pound had expressed some misgivings about Yeats’s prize-winning poem, and Monroe had not wished to honor it—or Yeats—at all.

These behind-the-scenes machinations sharply compromised Yeats’s desire to speak of the real “business” of the poet, which was “merely to express himself.” Rhetoric, if Yeats were fully to acknowledge its influence, might threaten this seemingly modest ambition, essential to the very poetics that sustained the career the one hundred fifty guests had come to honor. From a rhetorical point of view, the poet’s “business”—Yeats’s own metaphor, and a telling one—might very well dictate the terms (both the conditions and the very words) of that expression. The attempt to “get rid . . . of rhetoric” that Yeats chronicled in his speech turns out, we might argue, to be an operation not performed upon one’s poetry but upon one’s consciousness.

The discussion above hardly exhausts the event, of course. For instance, it says little about the reception of Yeats’s speech. Yet a record of its reception exists—and it is not especially flattering. Recall that also on the after-dinner program was Vachel Lindsay. When Yeats had finished—speaking in a “delightful Irish burr” that left at least one of those present, Carl Sandburg (who was attempting to transcribe the speech), “wondering what in the divil [sic] the Celtic playboy has just been saying” (Watson 1991, 373 n. 38)—he turned over to Lindsay an audience that was “weary” and “ready to go home” (199). The younger poet, however, proved adept at reviving them. As he launched into his poem “The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race,” especially its “first chorus, ‘Boomlay Boomlay Boomlay BOOM,’” his tired auditors “bolted upright.” Little wonder, for

Lindsay hit the ‘Boom’ so loudly that it shook the room, and as he continued, the audience began to sway with the syncopated chant, while
Lindsay rocked on the balls of his feet, his head thrown back, his arms pumping in time with the beat. The reading combined the passion of a gospel shouter with the rhythm of a vaudevillian. When Lindsay finished his seven-minute recitation, the black waiters applauded and the North Shore hostesses crowded around Lindsay, inviting him for dinners. (Watson 1991, 199)

In the audience sat the reinvigorated editors, guarantors, and contributors of Poetry magazine—hosts of the event—and their guests: Chicago’s social and cultural elite. They had been “quite carried away by his gusto,” Monroe recalled with satisfaction, for adding Lindsay to the program had been her idea. “The night . . . was a triumph for the young poet of Illinois” (1938, 339).

And we might cite other accounts that reveal, perhaps, why—as noted before—Monroe uses but two tepid adjectives to describe Yeats’s speech: “memorable” and “oft-quoted.” In the case of “oft-quoted,” we need not wander far in search of an answer for, as Monroe well knew, not all citations of the speech had appeared in favorable contexts. In fact, an editorial in her own magazine, written by her own assistant editor, took Yeats to task. In the June 1914 issue, Alice Corbin Henderson wondered rather acerbically whether Yeats hadn’t labored to slay a foe long vanquished and, further, whether his attack upon American magazines was not somewhat misplaced:

He belittled the Victorian rhetorical morality, which has already, so far as we are concerned, shrunk to the size of a pea, though evidences of its survival are still prevalent in the English Review and other English periodicals as they are in American magazines—and indeed a large proportion of those in American magazines come from English sources. But, and I do not believe that Mr. Yeats thought of it, all the poems that he read except his own, however simple and explicit in their diction, portrayed poetic fixities . . . . So it was naturally with something of a shock that Mr. Lindsay broke the spell with his newly quarried Congo. (110)

Precisely, then, which features of the banquet prompted Monroe’s glowing report? It would appear that however much Monroe admired Yeats’s work, his speech in and of itself was not sufficient to elicit the praise that pervades her account. Nor did she expect that it would be for, as she confessed in A Poet’s Life, she and Henderson “had neglected to provide a stenographer” to transcribe the speech Yeats was scheduled to deliver (1938, 336). The speech, in other words, was secondary in importance to Yeats’s sheer presence—for it was his presence, not the speech, that occasioned Monroe’s purpliest prose.

Ultimately, Pound and Yeats feared rhetoric not merely because of the annoying abstractions and the prolix and ornamented speech they felt derived from it. One could, after all, expunge these noisome qualities to
fashion verse that was laconic and imagistic. Far more vexing was the matter of procuring a wider audience—an endeavor over which rhetoric, that promiscuous and inclusive art, would have to preside. As Pound would make clear in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), that brilliant farewell to his career as an aesthete, one could not launch a movement “to resuscitate the dead art/Of poetry” (1926, 187; lines 2–3) wholly within the confines of the coterie. One would require a different tactic, and the occasion of the prize afforded Pound precisely that: he used Yeats to confer prestige upon the magazine, to legitimize it, insisting right from its inception that *Poetry* publish Yeats and, later, that it award him its prize for best poem of 1912–1913. And Monroe, for her part, used Yeats to confer prestige upon the banquet: to entice Chicago’s elite to attend and to create a clamor amid the wider public via reports in the press of Yeats’s comings and goings. By using Yeats in this fashion, Pound and Monroe, together, turned what was promoted as a celebration into a celebrated promotion. The difference between the two is the difference between an earnest Lindsay reciting “The Congo” and the eminent Yeats lending his stature to tout a magazine—all the while warning of the perils of rhetoric.

Such tactics, however successful in the short term, exacted a lasting cost, which may be the enduring, though unintended, meaning of Monroe’s milestone. For what becomes of literary value—the ostensible raison d’être of *Poetry*’s banquet—if that value is sacrificed in pursuit of prestige, a prestige predicated upon fame and publicity?

In one way, Yeats and Pound were right to fret over rhetoric, for what they understood was that rhetoric posed a real threat to the poetics they were trying to establish. A poem, they argued, should acquire admirers not because someone had made a case for it but because it was a thing of beauty that required no persuasion. (“You don’t argue about an April wind,” Pound wrote in October 1913, equating it with “[b]eauty in art,” “you feel bucked up when you meet it” [1968, 45].) Where they erred was in so conceiving of a poem in the first place, in thinking—despite the record of their own exhaustive labors on poetry’s behalf—that a poem somehow stood outside the broader rhetorical context created by those reviews, essays, manifestos, and lectures they and others issued forth to convince a wider public why they should attend to poetry at all. Of course, Yeats’s and Pound’s efforts to promote poetry—and *Poetry*—were every bit as social and suasive in nature as those tactics they assigned to rhetoric. Their failure to see or to acknowledge this, however, led them to pursue a course that may well have increased poetry’s prestige but that also made poetry appear an exclusive, recondite affair, the province of the privileged, something beyond the reach of the common reader. Indeed, in July of 1908, Pound had boasted to his father: “Came very nearly telling the first man that ordered a copy [of *A Lume Spento*] that he was too dumb to understand it. & that I did not wish him to have a copy. but my business sense intervened” (2010, 122). Quite possibly this rhetoric succeeded at poetry’s expense.
REFERENCES