Yeats and the Rhymers' Club*

ERNEST RHYS

It was in my fourth winter that the Rhymers' Club was set going at the old Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street. The three first members were T. W. Rolleston, W. B. Yeats ('Willie' Yeats, which did not in any sense describe him), and myself. Each of us asked other Rhymers to come to the club suppers, and we soon reached the allotted number of ten. Our custom was to sup downstairs in the old coffee-house boxes, something like high double-seated pews with a table between. After supper at which we drank old ale and other time-honored liquors, we adjourned to a smoking-room at the top of the house, which we came to look upon as our sanctum. There long clays or churchwarden pipes were smoked, and the Rhymers were expected to bring rhymes in their pockets, to be read aloud to the club for criticism.

The best reader among the Rhymers, by far the best, was W. B. Yeats, who recited, or say intoned, his verse with a musical voice and very haunting cadence. Some of the other Rhymers, whether from shyness or because they had never learned to open their mouths, gave no sort of expression to their verse. Lionel Johnson had a demure, gentle voice, which one visitor to the Rhymers' Club said reminded him of a mouse's recitative. That was not a fair description, but compared with the incanting of Yeats or the plain military style of Rolleston, his melic mode was not in tune with churchwarden pipes and bowls of punch.

* *Everyman Remembers* (London: Dent; New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1931) pp. 220-1.