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The Reverse Side of the Mask: William Butler Yeats' "Man and the Echo" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

"I know for certain that my time will not be long ... I am happy and I think full of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.'"

W. B. Yeats

Abstract

The major notions which contributed to and underlay the emergence of Modernism, generally seen as a challenge to the ideological status quo of nineteenth – century Victorianism, can be clearly outlined in the later works of Nobel Prize winner, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. The loss of objective representation in the text, the fracturing of its components into multiple fragments and speaking "I"-s (a strategy systematized in Yeats's own theory of masks), the subversion of temporal and spatial settings, are all stylistic and structural innovations which put an emphasis on the subconscious areas of the human mind à la Freud or Jung. This article focuses on Yeats's machinery of the "split personality", widely explored on various intra-textual and inter-textual levels of meaning in his "death poems", "Man and the Echo" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion". However, for all the fracturing dissonance and sporadic incoherence which characterized his fragmented later modernist texts, Yeats managed to achieve, through continual existential self-harmonisation and self-perfection, the long-coveted condition he repeatedly referred to and identified as Unity of Being.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, Modernism, last poems, "Man and the Echo", "The Circus Animals' Desertion", split personality

The Context: Historical and Social Background

The persistence with which we tend to use terms such as "romanticism" and "post-romanticism", "high-Victorianism" and "Modernism" to signify the various movements and currents in the "long" nineteenth and the "short" twentieth centuries,¹ does not do justice to the periods' exceptional complexity. We must never-

¹ The "long nineteenth century" is a phrase coined by the British historian and author Eric Hobsbawm. It refers to the period between the years 1789, when the French revolution broke out and established a non-monarchical republic in Europe, and 1914, the beginning of World War I, when, in turn, the "short twentieth century" began.

theless resort to such contextualization in the hope of grasping and representing at least some of their characteristic traits that embody what T. S. Eliot has termed “the historical sense”² in his well-known literary-critical essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”.

In a context of multiple literary trends, inscribed on the wide canvas of (late-) Victorian culture and the age of Modernism, the intellectual conditioning of Nobel Prize winner William Butler Yeats was interesting not only because it was, as Harold Bloom rightly observed, “self-contradictory” (Bloom 1970: 25), but because his personality was strong enough to “bear the burdens” of several epochs and to leave an indelible trace on each of them. The Irish poet, who started his literary development during the post-romantic upsurge (and, inevitably, shadow) of the “monolithic” and “organic” Romantic age, subsequently, in the period of Modernism, exchanged his earlier ideas and ideals with re-evaluations which deconstructed the myth of his own post-romantic identity. Yeats’s hyper-modernist attitude *par excellence* in his later, unromantic period, logically emerged as a controversial continuation of his former post-rom, but it further expressed itself as a formal deflation and subsequent rupture with all previous conceptions in his earlier work.

Yeats as a Modernist Writer

The major notions which contributed to and underlay the emergence of Modernism, generally seen as a challenge to the ideological status quo of nineteenth-century Victorianism, can be clearly outlined in W. B. Yeats’s later works. The loss of objective representation in the text, the fracturing of its components into multiple fragments and speaking “I”-s (a strategy systematized in Yeats’s own theory of masks), the subversion of temporal and spatial settings, are all stylistic and structural innovations which put an emphasis on associative thinking and the subconscious areas of the human mind à la Freud or Jung, at the expense of the logical sequence of expression. These typically modernistic defamiliarisation techniques demonstrated the lessening power of the authorial voice and the growing significance of the multiple speaking voices, a process which could be easily detected in Yeats’s machinery of the “split personality”. The resulting concomitant, and sometimes even self-contradictory existence of multiple points of view, neither of which could claim or sustain its right to “absolute truth” any longer, radically challenged the power supreme of all features which we generally associate with the “traditional” authorial psyche. The “culture of multiple humanism”, to introduce a new coinage to register the dominant mode of modernity, implied a complex of values and different perspectives in defining the human condition.

However, there is something peculiar about Yeats’s “modernism” and “modernity”. For all the fracturing dissonance and sporadic incoherence which charac-

² See T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, p. 49.

terize his fragmented later modernist texts, the figure of the self-devouring serpent³ seems to be the most fitting emblem for the Irish poet's entire life and work. Though his literary development was in a great extent self-contradictory, he managed to achieve, through continual existential self-harmonisation, that condition which he repeatedly refers to and identifies as **Unity of Being**. The outcome of Yeats's strenuous efforts to complete the self-image he desired and developed throughout his life, was indeed successful. Eventually, he managed to accomplish the long-coveted status of a "Solomonian" figure, a position which enabled him to assume a God's eye view on the surrounding world and, above all, on his own "inferior" self. This further helped him to make meaningful pronouncements on key moral and philosophical issues related to the human condition.

W. B. Yeats's "Man and the Echo"

"I'm telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains."

The Gospel according to St John (12:24).

The focus of my text is on two major modernist poems by William Butler Yeats, "Man and the Echo" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion", written in July 1938, only a year before the poet's "sailing" to that other realm of preternatural shadows, surrounded by the gentle shimmer of ghosts from his Celtic twilight. "Man and the Echo", which underwent some significant revisions, is one of the major works finalizing Yeats's life journey. Most critics suggest that a temper of self-parody and sarcastic disbelief dominates the works of those last years. However, I would rather agree with Harold Bloom's perspective that a mood of "profound and noble skepticism" (Bloom 1970: 461) pervades this poem as it reflects the complex introspective glance of the poet/speaker⁴ (in this case almost identical with the real persona of the author) standing on the verge of the unknown:

Man.

In a cleft that's christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt

³ The snake or serpent-dragon that forms a circle by consuming its own tail is an archaic symbol which signifies – historically, spiritually and metaphysically – eternity and the repetition of cycles in nature. It is a common belief that it has its origins in Egypt but can be also found in other mythologies, such as the Celtic mythology which deeply impressed the Irish author and left an indelible mark on his entire life and work.

⁴ Quite often in my discussion "poet" and "poetic speaker" are used interchangeably. This can be explained with the fact that in his last works Yeats's personality and his poetic voice were almost identical.

At the bottom of a pit
 That broad noon has never lit
 And shout a secret to the stone.
 All that I have said or done,
 Now that I am old and ill,
 Turns into a question till
 I lie awake night after night
 And never get the answers right.⁵ (Yeats 1997: 178)

In this section of “Man and the Echo”, the poetic speaker contemplates on the dying out of the old, while the “new”, which is envisaged as shadowy and intangible, brings only torture and uncertainty to him, and remains a “question”, a mystery he “shouts” “to the stone”. In an attempt to make a final balance of the “good” and the “evil” in his life, he speculates on the possible link between his own words and the terrible events which happened in Ireland during the well-known Easter Rising, on the one hand, and in the sphere of his personal experience, on the other:

Did that play of mine⁶ send out
 Certain men the English shot?
 Did words of mine put too great strain
 On that woman’s reeling brain?⁷
 Could my spoken words have checked
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?⁸ (179)

In Yeats’s view, the infinite yearning for knowledge beyond human capacity turns “all that [he] ha[s] said or done” into a question which “can never get the answers right”. The phrase indicates the poet’s striving to transcend his own self, equal in this particular case to a rebellion against the mystery concerning his own status. “The pit/That broad noon has never lit” is sealed as a sign of the existential impasse the poetic speaker finds himself in, the seemingly meaningless world of his existence, or, in other words, the state of absurdity *à la* Camus which freezes one’s blood with cold. The ontological clash between the mortality of human flesh, trapped in the inevitabilities of its own “age” and “illness”, and the “immortal” striving to transcend the physical confines of one’s earthly existence, is made explicit in the following dialogue between the man and the echo:

⁵ All quotations of Yeats’s poems are from the 1997 edition.

⁶ The play is “Cathleen-ni-Houlihan” whose performance deeply stirred a mood of patriotic upsurge in Ireland.

⁷ “Reeling brain” refers to Margot Ruddock who went mad in Barcelona. Yeats considers the possibility that his criticism of her poems might have “contributed” to the state of her mental instability.

⁸ The house is Coole Park, Lady Gregory’s estate.

And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.
Echo.
Lie down and die. (179)

The never-ending argument between the man and the echo (sometimes reminiscent of the verbal and mental tortures of William Blake's "Idiot Questioner who is always questioning/ But never capable of answering") (Blake quoted in Bloom 1970: 462), reveals the poetic speaker's imaginary act of self-crucifixion – in an attempt to see and know the truth about the horrific events which happened in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yeats could imaginatively understand the "absolute" meaning of the "secret" into which he had been initiated, but his compatriots, too weak to bear its burden, remained blind for the truth which ultimately led them to their deaths: "certain men the English shot". For, if for the poet this "initiation" had been concrete, for the rebels it appeared to be an abstract synthesis which turned them into victims of their own fanatic minds.⁹ Trying to lower higher truths to earthly understanding, Yeats condemns himself as guilty and responsible for the "evil" which he might have inflicted through "all that [he] ha[s] said or done". Due to the incompatibility between requirements and abilities, between reality and ideal, he is fated to put on the mask of the split persona: one part of it turned to the mysterious "truth" of the Echo, and the other, towards those people who needed a mediator to reveal the Echo's secretive meaning to them. And it seems acceptable that the division within the speaker's own consciousness is the relevant burden with which he had been justly punished.

The dichotomy of the poet's experience has never been revealed so powerfully as through his inner division which questioned the righteousness of his own deeds in a most merciless way. It is the psychomachia of the inner self, strongly reminiscent of Dostoevsky's story of the Grand Inquisitor,¹⁰ which is the perfect example of a man's surrender to his religious feeling with an intensity unequalled up to that moment. The ultimate paradox of this surrender is that it also emerges as a spiritual mutiny against the divine. Furthermore, it is the divine in human nature which challenges the foundations of its own absolute justice.

⁹ See Yeats's earlier poem "Easter, 1916", p.85.

¹⁰ In a long tirade addressed to Jesus Christ, who has returned to Earth at the height of the Inquisition, the Grand Inquisitor promotes the idea that only the principles of the Devil can lead to mankind's unification; give man bread, control his conscience, and rule the world; Jesus, he claims, limited himself to a small group of chosen ones, while the Catholic Church improved on his work and addressed all people as they were too weak to bear the burden of freedom of choice; the church rules the world in the name of God, but with the Devil's principles; Jesus was mistaken in holding man in high esteem. Curiously enough, Jesus remains silent throughout the Inquisitor's speech.

Overall, “Man and the Echo” demonstrates a final rejection of an entirely rational arrangement of experience while emphasizing instead the notion that each human consciousness is structured so as to comprehend its deepest meaning only through the idea of God (personified in this particular case by the “Echo”). The stony echo, in turn, unwilling to yield its “secret”, turns into a question mark (instead of an answer) to the question of “Man”, making him feel entrapped within his own confused thoughts about earthly deeds. The Echo’s resonating words “lie down and die” remain the only possible way for the Man to find out what is behind the impenetrable mask of the Echo. The insurmountable gap between the “absolute” truth about God’s possible “ontology”, on the one hand, and human suffering, whose relativity “Man” is constantly trying to re-affirm while circumventing pain’s intolerable effects on his own consciousness, on the other, is brought to the fore.

In the next section, the Echo’s “wise” advice “lie down and die” is challenged by Man’s attempt for self-justification:

That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect’s great work
And shirk it in vain. There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,
Nor can there be a work so great
As that which cleans man’s dirty slate. (179)

“A bodkin” (reminiscent of Hamlet’s suicidal inclination) is “no release” from the burden of the speaker’s human doubts, Yeats suggests. On the other hand, if “Man” confirms that “the spiritual intellect’s work” is “great”, he is simultaneously rejecting its absolutism (“nor can there be a work so great/As that which cleans man’s dirty slate”) by a deliberate retreat into the relativity mentioned above. Consequently, the priceless achievements of Man’s enterprise should be sharply weighed against his “dirty slate”, and this brilliant paradox is made explicit in the next few lines:

While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Waking he thanks the Lord that he
Has body and its stupidity. (179)

The meaning of this section is again locked somewhere within the borders/infinity of a vicious circle. While the human body is literally alive, it can be kept in this condition only through “wine or love”, that is, only through being “drugged to sleep”, Yeats argues. If “Man” wakes, the poetic speaker implies, he finds out that he still “has his body” and “thanks the Lord” for it. Yet he sees it as “stupid”, which

in turn means that the body longs either for its enchanted status through which it forgets its "stupidity", or the mere idea of the body's existence as substance reminds "Man" that he is still alive. The following lines offer a further paradox:

But body gone he sleeps no more
And till his intellect grows sure
That all's arranged in one clear view
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
Then stands in judgment on his soul,
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night. (179)

"Body gone he sleeps no more" comes to impress the notion that neither body's previous drugged calm, nor its "stupidity" in sober state are relevant any more. When it is gone (whatever that means) "Man" sleeps no more: wine or love cannot blunt the edge of sharpened intellect and "stupidity" cannot distort the arrangement of everything "in one clear view". Further on, the objective reasoning of "Man" seems to encompass the subjective interpolation of Yeats the philosopher who sees himself as "pursuing the thoughts that [man] pursue[s]", or rather, it is "Man" who invades the thoughts of the poet as the centripetal stress is placed on "*I pursue*". The deduction we are supposed to extract is that the continuous gradation starts from body, then passes on to "body's stupidity" as exemplified either by drunkenness or sobriety and reaches a last stage of body's ultimate rejection, seen as a necessary condition for the intellect to "arrange" its own certainty of view. The highest status of this superimposition of "values" is assigned to "soul", which can be judged only when, gradually, body is gone, and intellect is gone as well. Then, curiously and threateningly, emerges the Echo's respective echo: "Into the night", which comes to question the second arrangement of experience "Man" is willing to establish: the spiritual one. Thus, for a second time, the Echo appears to function in the role of Blake's "idiot Questioner" who challenges this time not the (in)significance of past activities but the scale of Yeats's own thinking and system of values. The final resistance of "Man" to the authority of the "Echo" is given in the last section, which combines previous uncertainty with a mood of tender lyricism in one last prayer before the stony face of the approaching night:

Man.
O rocky voice
Shall we in that great night rejoice? (180)

The thematic implication in this part is close to the one in “The Gyres”, where “Rocky Voice” was seen as “Rocky Face”, both suggestive of the mystery of death, the arbiter passing a last judgment on the human soul. Yet, what in “The Gyres” was an imperative (“Out of cavern comes a voice/And all it knows is that one word: ‘Re-joice!’” (Yeats 1997: 152)), is here transformed into a question, timid and filled with desire for condescension, as he has to know only what he is able to know: “What do we know but that we face/ One another in this place (180)?” Charles Armstrong offers a similar view:

Yeats seems to be intimating as much in his 1938 poem ‘Man and the Echo’ (*VP* 632–3; *CWI* 353–4), which can be read as a critique of the stoicism of ‘The Gyres’ and its affirmation of tragic joy. In ‘Man and the Echo’, the poet is situated at the Alt cleft at the foot of Knocknarea, in dialogue with his own echo. What was a clear statement of position in the earlier poem is now reduced to a tremulous question: ‘O rocky voice / Shall we in that great night rejoice?’ (ll. 37–8) The embrace of a superhuman wisdom is, at the end of the poem, lost”. (Armstrong 2013: 92)

The six closing lines constitute a slight shift from the compelling burden of mystery:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought. (180)

Here the joy of resurrection (life) and the night of uncertainty (death) merge in the never-ending oblivion of “a dream”, a state seen as free from suffering and earthly bondage. And it is this particular state which comes as a final resolution to the painful division within the poet’s mind in the last moments of his life. In *The Tragic Phase* Vivienne Koch further elaborates the point:

While it is true, as Mr. Ure has said of the last poems that ‘A divided mind is at the heart of this poetry,’ it is also true that at times the divisions fuse into the objective resolution of a given poem. ‘The Man and the Echo’ provides one of the most memorable of these occasions. (Koch 1969: 120)

However, in these final lines the gradation of anguish hints not at an objective resolution of doubts but, rather, it aims to establish a mood of “apocalyptic” despair, similar to the one revealed in “Meditations in Times of Civil War” (Yeats 1997:

101). However, this time it is the “apocalypse” of death, indicative of a most extreme experience, which makes “a stricken rabbit cry out”. The revelation brought by the death cry of the rabbit is ultimately disclosing a truth which, up to this moment, remained hidden from the speaker’s questioning reason. This revelation eventually emerged, to refer to the Bible, as an epiphany converging God and God’s own creation in a most intimate way. Incorporating the meanings of Annunciation, Incarnation, Passions and Resurrection, it emerges as an inevitable redemption for the speaker. The “thought” is lost, he suggests, but what is earned remains the secret for us as readers in the same way the “secret” which the “cleft that’s christened Alt” kept from the inquisitive “Man”. The deliberate juxtaposition of life as exemplified by “rabbit”, and death, which overwhelms it by way of “hawk” or “owl”, is intended to show the paradoxical convergence of two opposite concepts whose coterminous existence and subsequent loss of identities produces, as the Biblical John himself preaches in his Gospel, many grains.

In response, the Echo remains silent.

“The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

“The world is a stage and all men and women are merely players.”

As You Like It, William Shakespeare

Infinite wisdom and bitter self-irony pervade one of Yeats’s last poems, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”. When I first read this final “confession”, I pictured the poet as a clown with a mask on his face, standing at the centre of the “shop” named Life. Most probably, the closer a person finds himself to the gates of imminent death, the more he becomes his own self. All the characters he has created throughout his life journey start to seem but players in a dream, that is to say, circus animals. Those same ones which once upon a time arrived at the command of their master’s magic wand: the sea-rider Oisín “led by the nose” through “three enchanted islands”, Countess Cathleen, a fanatic “pity-crazed woman”, stilted boys, lions, Cuchulain – all these “actors” who conquered the stage of the clown’s imagination. Now, from the distance of years, “dream after dream” is seen to be dying out, image after image expiring until a “counter-truth” “fills out its play” and eventually, captives and supervisor mutually interchange their roles. The respective effect of this castling is relevantly viewed and interpreted by the speaker as a lack of theme:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show. (180)

The yearning for a meaningful future, implied through the deliberate emphasis on the thrice repeated word “sought”, and the fruitless outcome of this search (“sought for it in vain”) come to impress the mood of despair and weariness which the poet now finds himself in. In a previous draft Yeats offered the title “Despair”, but later on it was considered irrelevant. The most obvious explanation and reason for this existential impasse for the speaker (“despair”) must be sought in the very nature of Yeats’s own “ambivalent” way of thinking, which should automatically exclude a single interpretation of the themes/lack of themes in this poem. Indeed, the poet’s mind at that time was tense and strenuous, but Yeats’s conceptual design in the last version was slightly shifted from his initial intention to claim forthright nihilism and neglect regarding his present condition. The irony inherent in the double perspective on reality, and, respectively, on the masquerade of his own circus animals’ pompous strutting on stage, in fact turns out to be the irony of the grotesque through which “Yeats appears to be true”, as Bloom rightly points out, “both to his Gnosticism, and to his Romanticism”, or rather, to his “Gnostic Romanticism” (Bloom 1970: 457). The phrase “broken man” bears a further self-sarcastic attitude both toward his true self and to the “clownish” aspect of his personality. The word “broken” which connects explicitly with “heart” (although not referring directly to it), qualifies the poet’s own condition at the moment. However, it is not clear whether “broken heart” was the result of Yeats’s realisation that the “circus animals” were mere circus animals, that is, obedient performers in a show commanded by a wilful and taut master, or he felt himself “broken” long before he created that whole procession of artful players which were presently departing in a cinematographic haste his divided heart and mind. In the last four lines of the first section only one thing remains undisputable: these circus animals and their show were related to the poet’s distant past, and a devolved status is now assigned to these “actors”. The new attitude is demonstrated through the poet’s indifference to the motley and colourful multitude which fascinated and dazzled him in the past:

Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what. (180)

The second section unobtrusively introduces the humble activity of recollecting “old themes” – the result of the poet’s inability to invent new ones. However, though the mythical status of those “circus animals” is deflated through a merciless dissection of their true essence, this act, instead of showing some loss, rather re-asserts even more powerfully the impact they once had upon his youth:

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,

Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows; (180)

The reference in the second line of the stanza is to Yeats's early narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisín",¹¹ written in 1889. The romantic motifs in this work skillfully recreate a significant element from balladry, the ancient equivalent of the romantic "femme fatale – Oisín's "entrapment" by the fairy Niamh who was "lead[ing] [him] by the nose/Through three enchanted islands".¹² These islands, being "gaiety", "battle" and "repose" are now seen as "vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose". Human striving for infinite "gaiety" sought for in the dream realm of magic, eventually turned out to be a mere delusion. Happiness is experienced as an illusory hope for finding alleviation from the burdens of sorrow, or, as Yeats himself put it in the poem, from "the sadness of earth" (196). Forgetfulness, brought forth by the bosom of Niamh, instead of healing him, further enhanced the hero's loneliness and made him feel even older than he really was when he returned from the island of Lethe back to his previous condition. Consequently, "joy" is seen as "vain", the word itself denoting both "uselessness" and "vanity". The heroic quest for "gaiety", "battle" and "repose" ends in disappointment and the possible reason for this is the initial condition of bitterness, which brought Oisín onto the road of adventures. But it was the "embittered heart" of the poet himself which "set him [Oisín] on to ride", and the fictional character fell prey, like the knight in Keats's well-known ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", to the fateful "man-picker Niamh". Eventually, it turns out that it was Yeats himself who starved to "appropriate" the image of Oisín's own "fairy bride":

But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride (180).

Consequently, the exact relationship between the four main "participants" in these lines is the following: The "I" is evidently that of the poet/speaker, while

¹¹ Oisín (Ossian), was a Celtic bard, stories of whom were popular both in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland in the Middle Ages and later. The Scottish author James Macpherson had published his tales of Ossian in the 18th century.

¹² Yeats's own comments on "The Wanderings of Oisín" are the following: "The poem is founded upon the Middle Irish dialogues of St Patrick and Oisín and a certain Gaelic poem of the last century. The events it describes, like the events in most of the poems in this volume, are supposed to have taken place rather in the indefinite period, made up of many periods, described by the folk tales, than in any particular century; it therefore, like the later Fenian stories themselves, mixes much that is mediaeval with much that is ancient. The Gaelic poems do not make Oisín go to more than one island, but a story in *Silva Gadelica* describes 'four paradises,' an island to the north, an island to the west, an island to the south, and Adam's paradise in the east". (Yeats 1997: 485)

“him” who was “set...on to ride” is that of the fictionalized, invented alter ego of the speaker, namely, “that sea-rider Oisín”. The “I” repeated for a second time, is linked with the poet’s own soul now set in motion not by Oisín, but by the “bosom of his fairy bride”. And the chain ends with a hint about the real persona, Yeats’s femme fatale, his love and obsession for many years, Maud Gonne. The superimposition of meanings is fourfold:

I (poet/poetic speaker)→ Oisín→ fairy bride→ Maud Gonne

The alternation of phantasmagoria (Oisín – fairy bride) and reality (Yeats – Maud Gonne) eventually reflects the relationship between the poet and his muse. But while the authentic origin of the muse points to her insubstantiality (in Antiquity viewed as the imaginative product of Zeus and Mnemosine), the muse of post-romanticism/modernity is seen as an eclectic mixture of “fragmentation” and “infinity”. That is why the real woman, once “photographed” in the memory of her perceiver, prolongs her existence through his imaginative capacity to interpret her as a muse. And Yeats, a figure larger than both muse and perceiver, in a retrospective glance, was trying to strike a final balance of the realities and illusions in his life by tipping the scales to the one side or to the other. He who “set [Oisín] on to ride”, in the long run, not only recreated himself in an image which was a reflection of his own self, but he also “transcended” one stage – that of Oisín’s own invention of “his fairy bride” – in an attempt to reach her bosom without Oisín’s sanction. Consequently, Yeats had probably started his heroic quest for the fairy lands of forgetfulness long before he invented his wanderer Oisín. Dyson rightly observes that “The Wanderings of Oisín” “predated the days of Maud Gonne” (1981: 174) and the logical conclusion is that the poet had already been obsessed with the subtle presence of a mysterious “creature” not yet identified as Maud Gonne. This further proves that the muse was not and could not be identical with the real personage, but it only prefigured it as an already conceptualized and individuated version in the poet’s own imagination. When Yeats found himself in the role of Oisín (or rather viewed himself as such), he must have already been “enchanted”, which in itself means that, back then, he could not separate his self from those experiences Oisín went through while riding the boundless spaces of the sea. In other words, the poet’s biography from this period, and the creative process of the narrative poem at that time coincided, strengthening the relationship between the poet and the invented character Oisín.

Quite different is Yeats’s position in his work at the age of seventy, when he successfully distanced real-life experience from forthright phantasmagoria. He achieved this effect through the use of a conversational language while contemplating past events. The poet’s modernist attitude par excellence came to re-affirm the notion that there was a basic difference between what he termed “the bundle of accident and incoherence that s[at]t down to breakfast” (Yeats 1961: 509), and the

product of art itself. Their levelling appeared to be absurd, because each great work of art has its origin back in the history and in the past, as well as in the future, and is much more abundant than the linear life of the individual, which has only its present.

Roughly speaking, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" expounds the divergence between the author and the poem's protagonist in a most explicit way. However, the bitter note in the poet's voice, which resonates throughout his final confessions, springs from his doubts about art and life: is it art which survives life or vice versa. And the denigration of the circus animals is not a deflation of the status of art itself. It is beyond any contention that the phrase "Lord knows what" shifts the emphasis from the fascinating performance of his circus animals THEN to their impersonal and worthless status NOW. The poet, being "old and grey", considers his real or invented characters from the past as redundantly clownish. And the tragic irony springs not from the animals' shallow and fake performance, but from the "broken" condition of their own creator. The circus animals' desertion in fact marks the poet's acknowledgement of the bitter truth that it was his own self, and not the "actors", who had to desert this world. The show must go on, with or without him, on the marvellous stage named Life.

The intertextuality of this stanza (as well as the following) consequently designates two main relationships carried out on two different levels: that of the author to his previous work, and of the previous work to its author. And both refer to one another in the same way the two parts of Yeats's own fictively split poetic persona¹³ refer to each other. In other words, the ambivalence of the attitude "biography-artifact" has become an inbuilt structure in the speaker's own psyche and mind. In an attempt to confide to the Echo (and to the audience) his ultimate secret, Yeats had to give a simplified account of events, circumstances and characters, to "shout a secret to the stone", but in a simple, easeful and conversational way in order to make his story sound trustworthy: it was the curse, cross and blessing of his life, the "burden" and "gift" of his being, his second personality *a priori* which, willingly or not, he did now thoroughly expose. And the only way to "disarm" it was to acknowledge its inevitable existence. It possessed its own biography, which sometimes coincided with the life of the poet himself, but quite often diverged from it thus causing psychological complications in the author's own consciousness. After an exhaustive inner struggle in which neither his Self nor his Soul¹⁴ gained the upper hand, he was ultimately compelled to accept the outcome of this contest with impassive wisdom and humility, for he realised that this same "troublesome" personality had also been the power source which gave him insight into the mystery of existence. The moral accountancy of the speaker in fact appears to be a genuine confession about the fate of his invented characters off the pages, a fate which had been, after all, a reflection of the poet's own introspective glance registering their dynamic unfolding throughout the years.

¹³ See "The Three Bushes" and the related set of lyrics.

¹⁴ See Yeats's earlier poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Yeats 1997: 122).

The second significant character next to Oisín, picked up to be dwelled upon, is the Countess Cathleen from the eponymous play:

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
‘The Countess Cathleen’ was the name I gave it,
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love. (180–181)

That Yeats sees his own creative life as a perpetual development and interchange of themes becomes evident from the first line of the stanza. Oisín and Ni-amph from the previous stanza could no longer inhabit the newly invented space associated with the Countess, although the substantial substitute of both his fairy bride and the countess Cathleen was the real figure of Yeats’s own beloved Maud Gonne. The poetic speaker had to delve into different levels of his real and fictionalized experience in order to gain insight into the truth about his own self. However, in the play “Countess Cathleen”, written specifically for Maud Gonne, the image of the “fairy bride” seems to be falling apart, evidently coinciding with the falling apart of the poet’s own “coherent” self. Although the speaker accuses her of “fanaticism and hate” and indisputably affirms, as Bloom suggests, “the culpability of its heroine, crazed by the pity that Blake denounced as dividing the soul” (1970: 458), this accusation is rather directed to Maud Gonne, to her fanatic personality.

In this line of thought, the building of structures and characters was conditioned by the author’s own “ambivalent” thinking which ultimately constituted a concomitant acceptance and rejection of controversial concepts. The axiological balance he makes when “enumerati[ng] old themes” (180) may be seen as the joint work of both life and art. The relevant conclusion is that it was the art that prevailed, or, as Yeats himself rightly put it, it was “the dream itself” which “soon enough” “had all my thought and love” (1997: 81). This exchange of “counter-truths” is subsequent in time and, interestingly enough, it is also a concomitant one, for though the previous “dream” is obliterated, it is not abandoned but is rather pushed into, say, the subconscious areas of the poet’s mind. However (if we further employ Freudian terminology), the Censor/ Superego keeps the memory of these previous mental “wanderings” and thus allows the speaker to make comparisons, to strike balances and to evaluate experiences, past and present.

The third significant work the poet makes a reference to in the third stanza is the play “On Baile’s Strand”. This play, published in 1903, describes the fight of the mythological Cúchulainn with “the ungovernable sea”, in which Cúchulainn heroical-

ly finds his death. The “ungovernable sea” that well pre-dated the “gong-tormented sea” of “Byzantium”, is a metaphor which Yeats similarly employed in his early and in his later work. The “raging waters” of generation, which stand out as a powerful symbol of life, are commonly experienced by the author as contrary to art. However, the poet also recognises that the “source material” is the complementary “other”, the “fundamental substance” used by the master-artist to elaborate his perfect product of art. Doubts, however, still remain: is it art that triumphs, or is it the uncertainty concerning the eternal value of art that gains the upper hand. Yeats wrote in his “Lapis Lazuli”: “no work of Callimachus stands” (1997: 153). The speaker’s scepticism destroys dream after dream, tearing down illusory barriers one after another in his striving to realise the truth about his characters, as well as about his own self. Here is the stanza itself:

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of. (Yeats 1997: 181)

The dramatic monologue unfolded in this section (as well as in the last one) is strongly reminiscent of the dialogue scheme from the earlier poem “Dialogue of Self and Soul”. The argument in the first poem undisputedly showed the explicit ambivalent opposition of “Soul” to “Self”, while in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” this antinomy has become an integral part of the speaker’s silent contemplation and emotionally neutral account of their masterful contest. The former poem employed, as Unterecker rightly remarked, “masculine symbols for life, war, love and sex” (1975: 204), and the second work also posited the problem of power and dominance, but in a different way. Interestingly enough, more contestants compete on the battlefield of glory: the “actors” of the author’s “painted stage” of his previous years, on the one hand, and the “I” of the speaker, now incorporating both “self” and “soul”. Yeats, who once imaginatively performed his fascinating stunts with the help of his colourful characters, at this stage in his life he experienced something almost unmagical: “It was the dream itself enchanted me.” (181) “Character[s] isolated by a deed” (181) were the ones who usurped the place of the authentic figures in order to “dominate memory.” “What Yeats is really saying in this poem”, comments Unterecker, “is that for the artist the problem of construction often becomes more exciting than life itself” (1975: 289).

Interestingly, at this point, a famous passage from Pound's *Cantos* regarding Yeats's personality comes to my mind. In it the Irish poet's perception of reality and phantasmagoria is ironized, seen as almost grotesque. Albeit, later on in the *Cantos*, Pound rejects his criticism of Yeats, this Notre Dame passage is quite insightful and telling about Yeats the poet and his stylistic arrangement of experience:

Uncle William dawdling around Notre Dame
in search of whatever
 paused to admire the symbol
with Notre Dame standing inside it
Whereas in St Etienne
 or why not Dei Miracoli:
mermaids, that carving... (1970: 528)

Irrespective of how we perceive Yeats's symbolism, we must nevertheless acknowledge that he belongs to the category of poets/authors who possessed an alpine imagination which overpowered his life and biography and employed them as a source material for his creativity. The poet's life appeared to be the "captive" of his own visions and words and the price he had to pay for this reverse interdependence was the loss of inspiration, subsequently seen as a lack of theme. That there is an ironic strand at the end of part II of "The Circus Animals' Desertion"¹⁵ is undisputed. But downgrading the role of the imagination by assigning it the status of a "dream"¹⁶ is a sheer oversimplification which denigrates a great mind and an exceptional talent: Yeats was not a person who would succumb to old age, he would rather put an end to the race of the spirit's journey, at this stage stoically encountering the other rival, his own "Self". The final reconciliation is disclosed through a genuine confession about the speaker's "disenchanted" status, articulated through his own voice: a voice humbly recounting how this journey started and dispassionately presaging how it would end. Speaking in terms of gender, the relationship "spirit-self" may be seen as constituting a scale of influences and interactions between the feminine and the masculine, both inhabiting the same territory, preaching mutual acceptance of their respective roles.

The third (and last) section is quite intriguing. Its interpretations include qualifications such as "a famous end", statements such as Unterecker's that "Yeats turns once more to an examination of the "masterful images" that he had made" (1975: 289), or Bloom's claim that "the poet's phantasmagoria, complete and masterful images grown in pure mind, rises above all genesis" (1970: 458). In my view, it unequivocally demonstrates the poet's reluctant and resigned acceptance of his own

¹⁵ See Dyson, p.172.

¹⁶ See Dyson, p.171.

“self”, now distanced from Countess Cathleen, Oisín or Cúchulain who “fought the ungovernable sea”. For the first time in his whole work William Butler Yeats conceives his alter ego as a reflection of his own self. The poetic speaker now finds himself at the final borderline which merges the inevitable significance of time’s relativity with the “absolute” meaning of eternity. “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it”¹⁷ – is Yeats’s own final judgment passed on his soul and his self, and, to my mind, it is this very paradox which is brilliantly re-enacted in the final third section:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. (181)

The last section only re-affirms what the other two have skilfully exposed. However, the “completeness” of “those masterful images” is explicitly claimed. And, in my view, this “perfection” is the most probable reason for the poet to assert the vanity of a search for a theme in the initial lines of “The Circus Animals”. For the first time in his life Yeats’s personality has won its “completeness”, for both poet and speaker, to use Yeats’s own phrasing, have “embodied truth”. But they cannot know it and this compels them to go through “a mound of refuse”, “the sweepings of a street”, “old kettles”, “old bottles” in order to encounter “that raving slut”, familiar from previous poems. Dyson assumes that “she is no doubt someone glimpsed in a shop, or personally encountered” (1981: 174), Henn considers her to be “the imagination, arbitrary, untidy, that opens the coin-drawer when the whim takes her” (1956: 127). Other critics draw parallels to the heroine of “The Crazy Jane” poems. To my mind, all these attitudes hold true, for she appears to be, after all, the collective image of the poet’s wandering spirit which circles back to find its final refuge from the tiresome journey through the labyrinths of art and life, now in possession of only its “rag and bone shop of the heart”.

Another level of meaning, which this final section explores, is the relationship “human-divine”, but this time, in a discourse defined by the idea of Christ himself. Having in mind Yeats’s explicit rejection of doctrinal and institutional Christiani-

¹⁷ Yeats, letter to Elizabeth Pelham, January 4, 1939 (quoted in Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, p. 285).

ty, i. e. in “Vacillation”¹⁸ or in “Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient”,¹⁹ we should support the idea, that in this last part, may be unconsciously and in a personal way, Yeats is referring to the famous passage from the Bible, which describes the temptations of Jesus:

Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the Temple, and said to Him, ‘if you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here.’¹⁰ For the scripture says, ‘God will order his angels to take good care of you.’¹¹ It also says, ‘They will hold you up with their hands so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.’¹² But Jesus answered. ‘The scripture says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’. (Matthew 4.1–11; Mark 1.12–13; Luke 4.1–13)

Similarly, for Yeats temptations at this point seem irrelevant. “Heart mysteries”, “allegorical dreams”, “enchanted islands” – all those obsessions which had once been a sheer miracle in the past are wisely rejected: the lyrical hero has to prove his worth and identity not through performing miraculous spectacles, but through a humble acceptance of his human status:

Now that my ladder’s gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. (181)

Critics generally agree that this is the poet’s last word denoting a willing commitment to life,²⁰ but the compulsive effort (“I *must*”) evidently excludes this angle. Consequently, this “commitment” reveals the poet/speaker’s final reconciliation

¹⁸ The lines I am referring to are the following:

Must we part, Von Hugel, though much alike, for we
Accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity?
The body of Saint Teresa lies undecayed in tomb,
Bathed in miraculous oil, sweet odours from it come,
Healing from its lettered slab. Those self-same hands perchance
Eternalised the body of a modern saint that once
Had scooped out Pharaoh’s mummy. I – though heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb – play a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has Scripture said?
So get you gone, Von Hugel, though with blessings on your head. (“Vacillation”
134–135)

¹⁹ See W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, p. 150.

²⁰ See Donoghue, p.113.

with the desolate territory of his heart, presently seen as peopled only by rags and bones. The only possible way of attaining the realm of "masterful heaven" is to drink the cup of bitterness to the dregs. As for the "ladder", I suggest that the speaker invokes "Jacob's Ladder"²¹ rather than Platonic and otherwise²². Its bottommost rung starts "where all the ladders start" – "in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart". In this last section the "Heart", although desolate, bears the tremendous weight of the speaker's whole complicated philosophical and emotional human being, as though "crucified" between earth and heaven. And this time it is Yeats who invites Him to descend down the rungs, to peep into the repository of all ladders, his heart, in order to confirm the absolute authority and infinite love with which it unrestingly shines.

The Fulfilment of Jacob's Dream

The conflicting co-existence of contemporaneity and antiquity, of tradition and individuality, of history and mythology which emerged as a stylistic emblem of Modernism, acquired general circulation as a defamiliarisation technique in most modernist writings, including the later works of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. They came to challenge established truths and brought to the fore multiple perspectives and relative values regarding the human condition. The alternatives of "either" and "or", "self" and "other", "multiplicity" and "fragmentation", gained the status of interchangeable, equally significant constructs neither of which could exercise its absolute authority over the other. The falling apart of the authoritative self is especially characteristic of Yeats's last works (the focus of this article), in which the device of the split personality was widely explored on various intra-textual and inter-textual levels of meaning. However, despite his self-contradictory literary development, Yeats managed to achieve, through continual existential self-harmonisation, the condition he sought throughout his life and identified as Unity of Being.

In conclusion, I would like to add that W. B. Yeats's significant contribution to "world literature", to use Goethe's well-known term, has undisputedly earned him the right to shout out the long-coveted word, spoken by his Rocky Face, "Rejoice!", and, hopefully, each new generation will re-discover and re-affirm the significance of the poet's literary texts, whose unforgettable words have been and will remain inscribed on the golden plate of literary fame and immortality.

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²¹ The Biblical story is the following: one night when Jacob laid himself down to sleep in the wilderness, in his dream he saw a ladder set up between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending on the rungs. God himself, standing on top, spoke to Jacob. He said that he came to persuade him to restore the broken communion between Heaven and Earth

²² See Bloom, p.458; Dyson, p.174; Donoghue, p.113.

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