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“THE CIRCUS ANIMALS’ DESERTION” OR THE POET’S PROGRESS

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As Helen Vendler observes, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is one of Yeats’s most popular poems because of “its immediately comprehensible images”¹ offering a relatively straightforward assessment of the poet’s work. Furthermore, the clarity of its tenor is strengthened by a particularly cogent and symmetrical structure: three stations, a prelude and coda bracketing the middle section; this middle station is itself composed of three stanzas, each presenting a particular paradigm of the artist’s work. However, this alleged simplicity might be deceptive: if “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” represents Yeats’s final assessment of his work, then this raises a few troubling questions. The works which Yeats offers as exemplars in the poem consist of his first success, the long narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, published in 1889, then one of his earliest plays *The Countess Cathleen*, first performed in 1892, and finally the later play *On Baile’s Strand*, published in 1903.

Yeats started composing “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” at the end of his career in November 1937, when he was well-established as the “Arch-Poet” of Ireland, to use Foster’s phrase, if not the “Arch-Poet” of his generation. By then, he had written unforgettable masterpieces such as “Sailing to Byzantium”, “All Souls’ Night”, and “The Tower” to name but a few. Yeats had also achieved certain fame as a playwright: as such, his work had been ground-breaking especially towards the end of his career, although recognition in that field had perhaps not been commensurate to his merit. The three early works which are supposed to sum up Yeats’s career, therefore, call the poet’s choice into question: why those three in particular and why two plays for the one poem?

Although the long narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, was Yeats’s first “hit” and the play, *The Countess Cathleen*, achieved another kind of fame by generating a bitter polemic, Yeats was fully aware of their shortcomings. As regards Oisín, he freely admitted and deplored the Pre-Raphaelite influence which he was to reject so decidedly in his later work and, as Daniel Albright underlines, Yeats found fault with the poem at the outset: “when I had finished *The Wanderings of Oisín*, dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green ... I deliberately reshaped my style ... I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm”.² *The Countess Cathleen*, also indebted to Yeats’s Pre-Raphaelite manner fares little better in his estimate as in *Autobiographies*, the play seems to him “not ... more than a piece of embroidery”.³ The third work, the play *On Baile’s Strand*, cannot be

¹ *Our Secret Discipline*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2007, p. 278-79.

² *The Poems*, Everyman, London, 1994, p. 841.

³ *Ibid.* P. 842.

dismissed so casually, since by then Yeats had indeed begun to reshape his style and the play was a success written in his best Shakespearean manner. Yet it is not his most challenging play in comparison with the distinctive style he was to acquire in 1917 under the influence of the Japanese Noh. Furthermore, in *Explorations* the poet deprecatingly rued the fact that he had: "given certain years to writing plays in Shakespearean blank verse about Irish kings for whom nobody cared a farthing".⁴

To what extent can we say those three works are paradigmatic of Yeats's creative skills and the best summary of his career? One obvious starting point for my enquiry has been to analyse what the three works have in common. This will be examined in three main parts: the first centres around the figures as illustrating famous Yeatsian themes, the second foregrounds the possible reference to three major Tarot Keys and the third focuses on the persistent heart motif found in the three stations of the poem.

One possible angle of approach to analyse the three works, is to concentrate on "theme" rather than artistic achievement, theme seeming after all the avowed aim of the poet's quest: "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain".⁵ It can be argued that all three works have transcended their particular literary merit and genre, and that the figures in the works, Oisín, the wandering bard and pagan hero, the Christian Cathleen/Maud and the Fool as opposed to the Blind Man have become, as so many characters in Yeats's work, emblematic of his philosophy, which means we must look at the figures themselves if we want to find the motive behind this apparently compromised choice.

Indeed, these characters can be considered key figures in Yeats's work insofar as they all relate to his obsession with opposites, truth and "counter-truth". The constant tension we find in Yeats's poetry has led some critics like Richard Ellmann to view his work as permanent warfare: "Every poem is a battleground and the sounds of gunfire are heard throughout".⁶

The most famous of Yeats's dichotomies is that between poet and/or hero on the one hand, saint or sage on the other, or, in simpler terms, the opposition between paganism and Christianity. This particular set of contraries directly applies to Oisín and Cathleen. Consequently, regardless of what Yeats thought of either the poem or the play in terms of literary achievement, both bore continuous relevance to his entire body of work: in a letter to Olivia Shakespeare in 1932, Yeats observes that the opposition between saint and hero constitutes the hallmark of his artistic production. As such, *The Wanderings of Oisín* already contains the whole of his later philosophy: "The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that perhaps the sole theme – Usheen and Patrick?"⁷ Obviously then Oisín, the inspired bard who goes to fairy land, represents paganism and Cathleen pity-crazed for her peasants stands for the Christian counter-truth. And, as the letter implies, each opus holds its own counter-

⁴ *Explorations*, Macmillan, London, 1962, p. 418.

⁵ *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 394.

⁶ *Yeats - The Man and the Masks*, (1948, rev.1979), Penguin Books, London, 1987, p. 298.

⁷ *Ibid.* P. 276.

truth within itself: Oisín in the poem is engaged in a sort of contest against St Patrick who wishes to reclaim him for Christianity; and Cathleen in the play has to contend with her bard, clearly under the sway of paganism. In both early works, the conflict seems to find some sort of resolution: Oisín resists Patrick and in the end chooses hell in order to be reunited with his former companions, the Fenians, just as Cathleen stands firm in her Christian faith.

Is it by chance that in the second play and third example of Yeats's work, *On Baile's Strand*, we are again confronted with a pair of contraries? But with a difference for in that last example, neither of these two figures has the upper hand over the other and both seem a necessary part of life. They also function as a refracted mirror to another (loftier) pair of opposites Cuchulain and Conchobar, i.e., hero and king. In that play, the Blind Man represents the King who wields the power but is unable to comprehend the simple heroism of his champion Cuchulain whose alter ego is the Fool. If we drop both the Blind Man and Cuchulain out of the picture, we are left with the well-known dichotomy between fools and kings which is a traditional folk-theme, already present in Shakespeare's *King Lear* but much more ancient: fools and kings are absolute opposites on the social scale but the Fool is often wiser than the King and presents us with a vision of the reversed reality dear to Yeats. In the play, the contraries represent two different orders: the mundane world is ruled by the king or the Blind man;⁸ while Cuchulain and the Fool are knowledgeable about gods and daemons only. In spite of the opposition between crafty wisdom and sublime folly, we note that both the Blind Man and the Fool are complementary and that Yeats is progressing towards a philosophy where contraries are not mutually exclusive but seem to co-exist and complete one another.

Thus, the unstated theme of the poem seems to concern the poet's progress and it appears that the three works do not merely embody vaguely emblematic themes but constitute an array of figures who point towards a definite direction.

In the first station, Yeats sums up his three figures in a rather cryptic manner: "Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot, / Lion and woman and the Lord knows what". This, however, goes unnoticed for two reasons. Firstly, if we merely view the picture pell-mell, the figures and their implements work as normal circus routines: stilted boys, a version of our modern clowns, a pretty woman, chariots and lions, all are well-known ingredients of the circus. Secondly, when the reader comes to identify them with the characters of the second station, he mostly relies on the woman who obviously refers to Cathleen/Maud, and finds out about the others merely by ruling out possibilities: the boys, being in the plural, can only represent The Blind Man and the Fool which leaves us with the Chariot for Oisín. However, that conjurer's trick deserves to be investigated further as each one of the figures is assorted with a correlative and we may wonder

⁸ The Blind Man in Yeats's plays often seems a debased version of the seer Tiresias, such as he is presented, not in Homer, but in Greek tragedies, where he cuts a rather ridiculous figure in *The Bacchae* or becomes malicious in *Oedipus the King*.

what the association means: the lion and woman; the sea-rider and his burnished chariot; and the rather strange appellation, "those stilted boys", which is stuck unto the Fool and Blind Man who, in the play, are mature men. It is, therefore, worthy of note that the first stanza describes three specific Tarot Keys which are easily recognizable: by order of appearance in the second section, these are The Chariot, Strength and The Sun. Since we know that Yeats frequently alluded to Tarot Keys such as the Fool or the Emperor in his work and that both he and his wife were enthusiastic tarot readers, the inference is easily drawn.⁹ The three Tarot Keys do not merely clarify a first station that would remain elliptic without them, but they also throw some light on the oppositions which are at play here.

The first card, The Chariot, adds a few subtle touches to the relatively simple image of the pagan bard, Oisín. On that card, the calm charioteer wears a crown and seems in perfect control of his team of horses. If the expression "led by the nose" connotes subservience, I suspect this submission does not apply to Niamh, the fairy who seduces him, but to the author as ringmaster, so that the key-note in the stanza remains self-mastery. In the poem, Oisín does manage to cross the sea twice since he goes to fairy land *and* returns, a feat which qualifies him as a "sea-rider". But, as the crowned charioteer, Oisín also asserts a similarity with Fergus: Fergus is apparently a wandering seer but in fact the true king of Ulster, just as Oisín, the poet, acts as a warrior in his own right. Furthermore, in the song "Who Goes with Fergus," Fergus is said to "rule(s) the brazen cars"¹⁰ and cars or chariots constituted the ancient equipment of Celtic warriors. That Oisín should wear a crown and Fergus rule "the brazen cars" make clear these two characters of Irish mythology are interchangeable in Yeats's mind.¹¹ Moreover, the opposition between paganism and Christianity is not so clear cut as appears at first sight. In a short story called "The Devil's Book" published in 1892,¹² Yeats completed the end of his poem about Oisín by inventing a special sort of after-life for him and his Fenians: "God Himself, because He admired the great blows they gave and the songs and the stories they made, put a circle a smooth green grass all around and about the place for them. They rush in their chariots on that green grass for ever and ever".¹³ The "place" in question here is Hell, transformed into a heathen's paradise by divine dispensation. The Chariot therefore seems to reconcile all the familiar Yeatsian oppositions: hero and king, pagan afterlife and Christian paradise and may illustrate Yeats's early ideal of absolute control and Platonic Unity of Being, as well as that fusion between Christianity and Irish paganism which he sought in his early work.

The second card, Strength, represents a young girl defeating a lion. For reasons too involved to elucidate here: Maud is repeatedly assimilated to a lion in Yeats's work. To give but one instance of this, Maud is "half lion,

⁹ George Yeats used a French pack, very similar to the ancient and traditional *Tarot de Marseilles*, whereas Yeats favoured a slightly more aesthetic Italian pack.

¹⁰ An observation which is made by René Fréchet in his translation of Yeats's poems, *W. B. Yeats, Choix de poèmes*, Aubier, Paris, 1975.

¹¹ Both exemplify the usual Yeatsian equation between hero and poet.

¹² Later rewritten as "The Book of the Great Dhoul and Hanrahan the Red", see Albright *The Poems*, op. cit. p. xxi.

¹³ As Daniel Albright points out in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 412. The story is found in *Short Fiction*, ed. George Watson, Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 140.

half child" in a poem called "Against Unworthy Praise".¹⁴ In her case, the opposition centres on her own nature which, for Yeats, was sweet and sour, gentle and violent, as the second stanza infers: Cathleen/Maud is both "pity-crazed" and full of "fanaticism and hate", she epitomizes Christianity but sells her soul to the devil and, in real life, Maud is in danger of destroying her own soul. If the outer conflict is resolved, the unyielding Maud/Cathleen never straying one inch from her chosen course, the inner one remains a painful dilemma for the poet.

The third card, The Sun, shows a large, benign sun beaming upon two boys. The boys are not stilted but they are exactly alike and very young. I have explained the philosophical meaning of this card elsewhere and shall not reproduce the argument here. Suffice it to say that many philosophers, including Empedocles, Heraclitus and Plato (to say nothing of Blake, Yeats's early master) have conceived of life in terms of two warring antinomies or contraries. F. A. C. Wilson gives us the most cogent definition of this view: "it was traditional to believe that the opposites ... must be manifested in everything that partakes of generation; they can only be reconciled in God. Thus hot and cold, moist and dry, 'subjective' and 'objective,' chance and choice are in the human sense irreducible dualities: male and female are opposites also, and their longing for union will come in the divine world".¹⁵ Traditionally, contraries are the law of life and, at the beginning of the *Thaetetus*, Plato refers to them as a pair of twins, which is exactly consonant with the Sun card.¹⁶ The third card, therefore, embraces and accepts its antinomy (as noted earlier) whereas the preceding oppositions had to be conquered and mastered by force of will (Oisín) or remain painful and strained (Cathleen). Each card represents a particular stage in the poet's art and life, as we shall presently demonstrate.

Viewing the figures as Tarot Keys highlights the emblematic dimension of the poem: etymologically speaking, the Greek *emblemata* means "inscription" and the original definition of the emblem consisted in a short statement illustrating a picture, which, if we identify the figures as Tarot Keys is exactly the role of each stanza in the second station. Those three stanzas function much as a medieval book of emblems and the three works can be identified as sign posts indicating the particular progression we find in the poem, which might explain why they all belong to Yeats's early phase. They characterize that creative period during which Yeats had not yet found his true voice and they could be considered as milestones on his way to liberation. The main point of the poem, therefore, seems to be progression, change and evolution. In that respect, it resembles another liberation poem called "The Coat" where Yeats also renounces mythologies and recovers a welcomed nakedness.

Furthermore, this interpretation of the figures as Tarot Keys can help meet another subsidiary difficulty regarding the importance of the theatre in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" where only one stanza is dedicated to poetry. Emblematic figures lend themselves to dramatization and indeed, in the first station, they are "all on show". Although the characters themselves

¹⁴ *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 368.

¹⁵ *Yeats's Iconography* (1960), Methuen and Co LTD, London, 1969, p. 146.

¹⁶ *Thaetetus*, 156, a.

seem fixed and rigid like hieratic puppets, they move since they are paraded before the reader's eyes. This gives the poem a kinetic force as well as a pictorial dimension as the "masterful images" are taken for a sort of farewell ride. This pageant of emblems, not unlike circus routines, points to the origin of the theatre, mystery plays, each enacted on a chariot, with the whole of these plays forming a pageant. Plays on wheels are as old as Thespis, the first Greek tragedian who is said to have rambled from town to town with a cart on which he performed his early tragedies. Thus, the emblematic nature of the Tarot Keys combines with the image of a primitive pageant and this would explain why the whole poem can itself be viewed as a pageant play using the chariot as its main prop. In the first stanza, the chariot is bracketed by the woman and the boys, which contradicts their chronological order of appearance in the second stanza and this turns the chariot into a sort of pivot for the figures. As we read the lines: "Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot, / Lion and woman", we feel that, at the end of the first station, each item of the parade is on wheels and about to set off. In the second station which deals with each work in succession, Cathleen marks a sort of pause in the movement but that pause is surrounded with the paraphernalia of the moving pageant: in the Oisín stanza the words "rider/ride" stress motion and in the third stanza, we have a reference to players and painted stage (the basic essentials of the theatre) until the detritus of the last station leaves us with what remains after a circus or a pageant has moved on.

Finally, since a pageant illustrated "mysteries" which for the most part were extracted from the Bible, this seems consonant with Yeats's poem, with an added poignant twist since here he is renouncing a mythology of his own making. Unlike "The Coat" in which Yeats gave up traditional material pertaining to the common mythical past of Ireland, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" bids farewell to the poet's own fabricated "heart mysteries". Even though figures like Oisín, Cúchulain and Conchobar were originally part of the traditional lore of Ireland, Yeats appropriated them and turned them into personal icons which now seem destined to leave him. The first section already anticipates this sacrifice, as all the ancient trappings of the poet's craft are casually dismissed with a colloquial abruptness, typical of Yeats who is prone to abandon his readers in mid sentence: "The lion and woman and the Lord knows what".¹⁷

Because these puppet figures represent pointers on the way to the last station, "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart", it is impossible to bypass another telling lead given by the poem which is the heart and dream motif.

In this quest for liberation, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" can be viewed as an exercise in redefining the poet's true heart which is in direct contradiction with the artificiality of the circus animals, a fact we are given in the very first stanza: "Maybe at last, being but a broken man / I must be satisfied with my heart, although / Winter and summer till old age

¹⁷ I am indebted to Colbert Kearney for that observation: another instance of Yeats's abrupt dismissal of his reading public can be found in the last refrain of "September 1913", *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 160.

began/My circus animals were all on show". At first, the poet sticks to his peddling art with circus animals: they worked once, why shouldn't they work again? And he seems to be shunning that heart which is finally found in the last stanza as if he dreaded the exposure: the sordid shop with the slut raving at the till. It is in order to avoid this indignity that the old animals are summoned but the word "heart" creeps in, despite the efforts of the ringmaster.

Analysing Yeats's semantic intricacies is always rewarding, and "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is no exception. In the words of Helen Vendler, "these three stanzas [of the middle section], in order to create a texture of fruitless introspection, juggle the words *theme*, *dream* and *heart* in deliberately entangled ways".¹⁸ However, "this juggling of words" may not just be "fruitless introspection" owing to the progress and kinetic drive we find in the poem.

In the first stanza of the second station, the reader is confronted with a process of sublimation: while trying to fashion his ideal bardic figure, Yeats was in fact, "starved for the bosom of his (Oisín's) fairy bride". This throws some light on the previous line "themes of the embittered heart or *so it seems*" (italics mine): like the false paradise of the three islands, the "allegorical dreams" are lacking in truth for they were not thought "in a marrow-bone".¹⁹ Poetry in *The Wanderings of Oisín* is mere escapism, the heart may lie at the root of artistic creation but the fusion between the artist's heart and his opus has not occurred yet.

In the second stanza, something has struck a deeper chord, a real life experience, presumably Yeats's encounter and constant struggle with Maud Gonne, has shaken the poet into some sort of awareness. But the stanza is entirely dominated by Maud's Christian soul and once again the poet's true heart seems absent. This is already hinted at in the first line: "Then a counter-truth filled out its play" with a pun on play, implying that the emotion of the poet has an element of show in it. The feeling for all of its alleged intensity has merely given birth to yet another dream: although it is no longer "allegorical" it is still divorced from the poet's real heart: "This dream *itself* had all my thought and love" (italics mine).

Although the third stanza continues the chronological enumeration: "First (Oisín) ... And then (Cathleen) ... And when (the Fool and Blind Man)",²⁰ it differs widely from the preceding ones: the first four lines are entirely taken up with action as well as the placing of the subject. The same assessment as that of the preceding stanzas is made but in half the amount of space: four lines which, thus, break the *ottava rima* into two quatrains, the second one being explicative of the first and introduced by a colon. In spite of the fact that this assessment is disappointingly similar: "It was the dream *itself* enchanted me" (italics mine), we have moved one step further for these antinomies were after all "heart mysteries" for the first time and not only dreams or mere "themes of the embittered heart". As if to reinforce the break from the two previous stanzas, the next quatrain consists in a

¹⁸ *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 274

¹⁹ "A Prayer for Old Age" in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 332.

²⁰ As Helen Vendler points out in *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 274.

digression about Aristotle's codification of character in Greek tragedy: characters in tragedy are not defined psychologically but through plot; they are nothing but the action they must accomplish. In other words it is not because they have such or such characteristics that they act as they do, but they act as they do because the story demands that they should.²¹ Thus, the phrase "character isolated by a deed" pointedly refers to the Aristotelian theory and Helen Vendler comments on the drastic change in tone from the rest of the poem: "Literary theory of the Aristotelian sort implies a distance from the writing moment, and it espouses judgement of *aesthetic* success or failure".²² In other words, there is a sharp contrast between the vague dreamy art of the first two stanzas and the terse summing up of the Aristotelian theory in the third stanza. Indeed, after this curt intellectual demonstration, we are, logically enough, left with a definition of art which is contrary to that given previously, i.e., in stanza 1 and 2 and even the first half of 3 in which the main motifs were "dreams" or "thoughts". Now, the poet tells us, he is under the spell of "Players and painted things" and his art is defined in terms of artefacts: painted scenery, artificial costumes, performing players, in short such stuff as reality is made on.²³ Once debased, those "things" can be retrieved among the detritus found in the last station. We have reached the true transitional part of the poem, that which will enable the poet to proceed with his quest. At the same time, he has not reached his innermost heart yet, as he remains in love with show, not the real "thing": "Players and painted things took all my love/ And not those things that they were emblems of". Thus, this last circus animal is still lacking in true heart and the poet's contraries remain "stilted boys": they lack artistic maturity and the playwright has not completely rid his style of its high-flown abstraction.²⁴

To a certain extent the dream motif in the second station works as a sort of dislodged refrain, repeated at different places in each stanza (line three in the first stanza, line eight in the second, and line four in the third). If the first dream resulting in the long narrative poem about Oisín came from physical starvation and the second dream was a piece of emotional autobiography, the third one could be a dream of pride in one's own artefacts, a dream of success at the time when Yeats thought of shaping the future and the identity of Ireland. In fact, the first two stanzas may refer to what Steven Helmling has called "Yeats's ninetyish poses of detachment towards the world",²⁵ whereas the third one corresponds to the poet's other mask, that of the man of action for at the turn of the century, Yeats "wished to appear not as an otherworldly dreamer but as an active public man,

²¹ Their character, therefore, is only subservient to action and in this way can be purified of all psychological intricacies and rejoin the universal. This is a point I stress as often as I can because it can be misunderstood so easily. Lacking character or being characterless is positive in Yeats's aesthetic theory (viz. "The Statues" p. 384).

²² *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 276.

²³ A misquote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act IV, scene 1, 157-58.

²⁴ High stilts being Yeats's usual metaphor for an elevated style, as we know from the poem "High Talk", *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 390-91.

²⁵ *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (Mass), 1988, p. 163.

dealing shrewdly and effectively with the irksome and mundane realities confronted by 'ordinary men'".²⁶

As stated earlier, all three works have been depreciated by the poet himself which creates another bond between them in addition to their being emblematic and relatively early works. This might explain why now they are dismissed as mere circus animals whilst the function of the poet is reduced to that of a vulgar ringmaster.²⁷ In that sense, as D. Albright contends, the poem is an exercise in deconstruction: deconstruction of art and deconstruction of the artist, as opposed to the more usual fabrication of the heroic Mask we have learned to associate with Yeats.²⁸ In the shop, instead of dreams or heroic action, we are given a picture of nakedness with the supreme image of absolute destitution which Yeats liked to use about himself at the end of his life, the scarecrow, hence the "rag and bone".²⁹ Again as in "The Coat", Yeats gives up his embroideries, having decided "there's more enterprise in walking naked".³⁰ As opposed to both the dreamer of the nineties and the active manager of worldly affairs of the early 20th century, Yeats in his last period "turn(ed) his back on all the public hopes that had animated his career through two decades and even rapproche(d) himself for having entertained them".³¹

Deconstruction, however, is not final and, as Helen Vendler notes,³² there is something organic in the detritus of the last stanza: here we find bones and rags repeated twice, heart, the poem's leitmotiv, and the raving slut who is very much alive. If we are to trust Yeats's early draft of the poem, the slut is in fact his own heart: "that raving slut/ Called heart and company".³³ In the last two ringing lines of the poem (what Helen Vendler refers to as the *ottava rima* "regain[ing] its composure")³⁴ Yeats has "heart" rhyme with "start", so that the end, we feel, is merely the prelude to a new beginning. The poet of dreams may have lost his ladder but the shop is the place where "all the ladders start" which seems to imply that there are various sorts of inspirations and that the right kind of ladder might yet be retrieved.

Here I feel I must open a parenthesis regarding the heart in Yeats's work: this notion carries philosophical as well as aesthetic implications. As the centre of being, the heart is the focal point where a human being becomes whole as opposed to a dreamy idealist or an unfeeling beast (one thinks of "The Second Coming"). This has two consequences: firstly, this vindication of the whole man draws Yeats away from "the soul" especially in his dialogue poems and inclines him towards Homer and his

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 273. In the poem "High Talk", the poet already recognizes his stilts are mere popular entertainment, and he compares himself to a sort of battler, popular at fairs in the old days: "Malachi Stilt-Jack am I". *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 391.

²⁸ *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 840.

²⁹ "Better to smile on all that smile and show/ There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow", "Among School Children" in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 262.

³⁰ *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 178.

³¹ Steven Helmling, *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats*, op. cit. p. 191.

³² *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 277.

³³ Given by Daniel Albright in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 843.

³⁴ *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 278.

“unchristened heart”,³⁵ secondly, the heart as a focal point seems a particularly mysterious place where “reality” is re-created both artistically and metaphysically, supposing Yeats ever drew a firm line between the two. As a follower of Bishop Berkeley who believed there was no “reality” outside the perceiver who created his own hell or his own heaven,³⁶ Yeats thought some human types were “self-delighting, / self-appeasing, self-affrighting”³⁷ and that their heart generated its own anguish or its own happiness. Even Death in the poem of that name is man’s invention: “Man has created death”.³⁸ Similarly, damnation or heaven is usually self-generated: in “All Souls’ Night”, the poet has reached a mysterious place where “the damned have howled away their hearts, / And where the blessed dance”.³⁹

These considerations all point to the heart as capable of endless regeneration or transformation and this explains the organic elements and the vitality of the last stanza in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”. Thus, at the beginning of the poem, the poet’s quest for a theme is misleading and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” can be viewed as an exercise in redefining the poet’s true heart, as the source of revelation as well as artistic creation. In so doing, the poet casts an appraising glance at his early works and finds them wanting.

To conclude, I would like to comment on Yeats’s use of the *ottava rima* in this poem. The *ottava rima*, as Helen Vendler reminds us, is the Renaissance stanza *par excellence* and it “bears ... strong overtones of art, cultural achievement and past civilization”.⁴⁰ In keeping with this definition, the *ottava rima* should normally tackle subjects such as elevated art or courtly nobility, as it does in a poem like “Sailing to Byzantium”. If we follow that lead, Yeats’s use of the form becomes ironical at the end of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” for, in the words of Helen Vendler, the poet demystifies “the most highly wrought art-surface” and shows us “the unruly and unprepossessing libidinal heart emotions” that lie underneath”.⁴¹ But perhaps, the association between the *ottava rima* and “courtly nobility” can be called into question here: on the one hand, this circus or pageant of emblematic figures does not really deserve to be designated as “the most highly wrought art-surface”; on the other, the *ottava rima* might not be restricted to subjects which accord with “cultural achievement” since, in the fourteenth century, it became “the dominant form of Italian narrative verse”

³⁵ “Vacillation” in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 303.

³⁶ As in the famous quatrain by Omar Khayyâm, “I myself am Heaven and Hell.”

³⁷ “A Prayer for my Daughter” in *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 237.

³⁸ *The Poems*, op. cit. p. 284

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 282. In many ways, this is also a characteristic of Modernism which tends to emphasize the role of the self as constitutive of reality, perhaps in opposition to the overwhelming sway of science. As Steven Helmling remarks: “The self that projects all other fictions is itself ... simultaneously creature and creator of the world it shapes and is shaped by: ‘self-born’ as Yeats has it, ‘self-begotten and self-delighting.’” *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats*, op. cit. p. 224.

⁴⁰ *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 279.

⁴¹ *Idem.*

and was “used for long poems of less than epic length”.⁴² The *ottava rima*, therefore, also fits the historical baggage of the epic and when poets of the Italian Renaissance like Boccaccio,⁴³ or, later, Ariosto or Tasso used the form, it was mostly to write war-like narratives, such as Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*.⁴⁴ In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, the choice of the *ottava rima* is consonant with this Italian tradition, although, as is usual with Yeats, the call to adventure is interiorized: the poet’s progress constitutes an epic struggle which is emblemized by the last ride of his animals. In spite of their garish gold, their rigidity and their gaudiness, they are invested with grandeur as they come out for a last theatrical salute, prior to their final deconstruction in the poet’s heart. Furthermore, all three figures are illustrative of love and war, the main themes of the epic, whilst the transfiguration of “things” (organic or inorganic), which lie at the bottom of the poet’s true heart, relates to another epic motif: metamorphosis.⁴⁵

Yeats’s frequent choice of the *ottava rima* with its ringing epigram at the end of each stanza attracted the attention of another great poet of Ireland, Seamus Heaney, who might have borne Yeats’s heart-searching quest in mind when he made the following statement: “the unshakable affirmative spirit music of the *ottava rima* stanza is the formal correlative of the poet’s indomitable spirit”.⁴⁶

⁴² *New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, p. 871.

⁴³ Boccaccio (1313-1375) is said to have invented the form for his *Teseida* and *Filostrato*, *The Princeton New Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, op. cit. 871.

⁴⁴ *Orlando Furioso*, which recounted the tale of the conflict between Christian and Moor, was a celebrated narrative epic written in 46 cantos. In this tale, the poet is presented as a travelling troubadour: “Of wives and ladies, knights and arms I sing/Of courtesies and many a daring feat”, these lines having probably informed the end of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.” *Orlando Furioso* had a strong influence on Tasso who wrote another epic on a similar theme, *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Ariosto (1474-1533) and Tasso (1544-1495) wrote during the *Cinquecento* or the late Italian Renaissance.

⁴⁵ According to Daniel Hoffmann, the three main themes of balladry and the epic are “transfiguration, heroism and love”, *Barbarous Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967.

⁴⁶ Given by Helen Vendler in *Our Secret Discipline*, op. cit. p. 263.

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