"WE MAKE OUT OF THE QUARREL WITH OTHERS, RHETORIC, BUT OF THE QUARREL WITH OURSELVES, POETRY."
Stages of W. B. Yeats's Representations of the Self

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Abstract: *In his prose work, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, W. B. Yeats states that unlike the quarrel with the others, which becomes rhetoric, the quarrel with the self becomes poetry. It is well-known the fact that the Anglo-Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, has searched for a perfect poetic expression, throughout his entire life. Therefore, the volumes of poetry he conceived, the plays or the prose work bear his personal imprint and they are impregnated with the toil of a life time for reaching "a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/ Of hammered gold and gold enamelling/ To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; / Or set upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come."*

In other words, through the present paper, I intend to examine some of Yeats's poems with the aim to demonstrate that each of them, as stages of his poetic creation and quarrels of his self, reflects the inner quarrel with his self in order to accomplish his desideratum asserted in Sailing to Byzantium.

Keywords*: poetry, personality, perfect poetic expression.*

For William Butler Yeats, in the beginning of his writing career, poetry was a subjective subject matter. It represented the utterance of the creator's personality and temperament. The poetic self identifies itself with the voice of the poet, a quality that was also common to the Romantic and pre-Raphaelite poets. Nevertheless, Yeats realized that such poetry, despite being a reflection of his genius, could have failed to achieve the qualities of an artefact, for little stress on the poetic technique and much subjectivity could have only put him at risk to become too sentimental, and thus express in poetry an altered version of reality. And yet, he still could not embrace the theories subsequently laid down by Eliot in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", in which he argues that "the more perfect artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (Eliot, 1932: 18). As a young poet, Yeats stood against modernity and Modernism. He rejected the changes brought by modernity in people's lives and he discredited the qualities of Modernism in poetic creation. His stubbornness to write as men have always written, referring here to Romantic poets, produced however some of his best poetry.

In the first chapter of her book, Helen Vendler (Helen Vendler, 2007: 1) quotes W.B. Yeats with a 1926 letter "Whatever I do, poetry will remain a torture", thus explaining the "strain" of writing lyrics and of the "exhaustion", both mental and physical it caused. As early as 1908, Yeats wrote: "Creative work always ruins one's nerves for a time." Regarding the effort necessary for a poet to write, Yeats asserts that "getting a single line right can take hours" (ibidem). Referring to the

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same point of discussion, namely the strenuous effort of writing, it is worth being mentioned that in *Adam's Curse*, a conversation occurs among Yeats, Maud Gonne and her sister, Kathleen Pilcher (Daniel Albright[1], 1994: 487). The topic of the conversation is the struggle which the poet has in order to obtain perfection of the verse, while the woman's beauty is obtained effortless, naturally. Yet, Kathleen Pilcher contradicts Yeats in saying that a woman's beauty demands equal sweat.

In *The Circus Animals* (Vendler, ibidem), Yeats puts it that for six weeks he has sought in vain for a theme; he also reminds the reader that he has to wait until his mind fills up again, as if he, by struggling, had drained it dry. Then he explains that there were times when he could not write any verse because his mind was busy with something else; or other times, he felt themes running through his head which made him write them down in a notebook. The real issue here is not finding the themes, but transposing them into verses.

His lifelong belief was that serious thought and study and passionate inner life were necessary conditions for composition. As the title of this paper states, Yeats found a stark difference between rhetoric and poetry, between the quarrel with the others and the quarrel with ourselves which ultimately represents the essence of writing poetry. The verses represents the solution of the quarrel with oneself and it is the expression of the inner torments. Helen Vendler (ibidem) states that expression and adequacy of the technique are intertwined, more precisely, expression is closely related to the technique. In mature years, Yeats emphasized three qualities which are necessary for a poet's technique: the poet's utterances should be similar to speech, the words must be in their natural order and that an emotional unity should be the binder among the components of a work of art.

Therefore he, quoted by Helen Vendler (Vendler: 2007, 1) underlines:

"I always try for the most natural order possible, largely to make thought which being poetical always is difficult to modern people as plain as I can". On the other hand, not only was mastering technique the important attribute of the poem, but style must be derived from the traditional lifelong resources proceeding to it. In other words, as Yeats quoted by Vendler state (Vendler: 2007, 2) declared "the work of art" consists of a minor part of "real world" yet "technique" was the utmost ingredient that enabled the poem to become personal and timeless.

At this point, Vendler puts it that, at large, biographers, scholars and critics have neglected considering Yeats's labour to reach the techniques of "rhythm, balance, pattern" except for few remarks on the nature of Yeats's rhymes. To put it in other words, Vendler underlines that there is no book dealing with Yeats's choice of stanza for the subject of his poems, namely the sonnet, the ballad, the ottava rima or using certain rhythms or stanza form. All these devices, Vendler explains, represent vehicles of expressing his feelings; all the more for Yeats, more meaning is expressed by structured form, "architecture of a poem" (Vendler, ibidem). In another train of ideas, for Yeats, the way the poem begins or ends, the way of conveying meaning from the beginnings toward the end become of an utmost relevance. Vendler ends his divagation in saying that the evolution of

[1] Like *Easter 1916* and certain other fine poems, its theme is the process whereby random casual life attains, at a great cost, dignity and permanent form. Yeats's first assumption seems that expressed in his poem He tells of the *Perfect Beauty*: the poet labours endlessly while beauty is un-labouring, effortless (ibidem).

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form represents, in fact, Yeats's life as a writer. The wide variety of verse form determined the critic to study Yeats's lyric style, which by utilizing different stanzas, meters and genres makes each of the poem unique, each of them being a reflection of Yeats's complex system of beliefs. Moreover, the critic finds a close connection between Yeats's sketches in prose and his poems and transposing the ideas in poetics demanded physical and emotional hard work from Yeats. During his work on a poem, there were many aspects to be taken into consideration from words to stanza forms, line length, and rhythmic variants and this is to be seen from the drafts preserved in working on a poem, Vendler asserts (Vendler: 2007, 3).

Less has been written on the poet's decision on the forms of the poems: inner, outer, technical and generic. The scholars have been interested more in the poet's historical and personal drama that paralleled his work in the detriment of the choice of forms. The poet himself was not too generous in giving details upon his work. Fugitive remarks we have from Yeats, quoted by Vendler (Vendler: 2007, 4), "I have written a poem", "I have several poems in my head"; the poet's explanation is enlightening though, "I find it extraordinarily difficult to explain to any, my own system of sensations for I have very little but an instinct" (Vendler, ibidem). At this point, the intellectual effort necessary to forge his thought in poetry is merely a given fact.

Helen Vendler goes even further and finds a connection between the choice of forms and the "when" and "why" they were chosen at that time; the early forms of poems, the late forms of poems; or the forms that lasted his entire career; how could the poet deal with an old English form? Why the blank verse was so rarely utilized?

In short, Helen Vendler finds the form of a poem the most important clue in understanding the poet's poetic system. As the scholar herself asserts "the evolutionary and final inscapes of Yeats's poems are indispensable to a full understanding of the work" (ibidem). Yet the scholar puts it plainly that Yeats's poems are not to be read with the eyes, that is silently; they have to be read for the ears, that is to be heard (Vendler: 2007, 5).

In order to comply both with the topic of the paper and also to demonstrate that there is a close relation between the subject matter of the poem and Yeats's choice of form, I have chosen two poems from different periods of creation. These poems are: *Adam's Curse* and *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, which Vendler finds as pillars of the poet creation. Both poems are representative not only for Yeats's periods of creation, but also for his inner feeling corresponding to his personal life.

To begin with, *Adam's Curse* was published in the volume *In the Seven Woods* and was published in 1902. Chronologically speaking, 1902 is the year when *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was staged with Maud Gonne playing the title role. It is also the year when Yeats meets Joyce who said that the poet was too old "to be of any use to the young writers" (Albright: 1994, xxiii).

The reader finds out from Albright's notes (Albright: 1994, 487) that the poem emerged from a conversation among Yeats, Maud Gonne and her sister, Katherine Pilcher:

"We sat together at one summer's end
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, talked of poetry.

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I said, ‘A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergy men
The martyrs call the world.’

And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There’s many a one shall find out all the heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, ‘To be born woman is to know –
Although they do not talk of it at school –
That we must labour to be beautiful.’

I said, ‘It’s certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam’s fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.’

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had a shell
Washed by time’s waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we’d grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.”[1]

The poem encompasses five stanzas, each of them with a different number of lines. Speaking of the verse forms, the first stanza is sonnet of fourteen lines with a rhyme scheme *abab*, the last verse being free. The next sections consist of six lines’ stanza, seven lines’ stanza with the last one of five line stanza. The poet initiates his poem by introducing the moment in time when the discussion

[1] W.B. Yeats, *Adam’s Curse* in The Poems, Daniel Albright editor, Everyman, Orion Publishing Group, London, updated 1994, p. 106

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takes place “one summer’s end” and the characters taking part in the conversation “your close friend and you and I”. The topic of the conversation is poetry for the beginning, since writing poetry has been Yeats’s life time preoccupation. The poet explains to the ladies interlocutors that writing may take hours of “stitching and unstitching” and yet the poet is considered “an idler” by those whose profession is more visible “bankers, schoolmaster, clergymen”. The next topic in the friendly discussion is beauty. The poet draws a clear distinction between writing a poem that needs hard working and the beauty of a woman which is natural, a native gift. “That beautiful mild woman replies that, on the contrary, being and keeping beauty requires the same amount of labour. The last topic of friendly chat was love, living not any woman, but loving Maud Gonne, whom we know Yeats proposed marriage many times and was refused every time, until they became “weary-hearted as the hollow moon”.

To cut it short, the poem represents Yeats’s lifelong interests: forging the perfect poetic expression in a suitable form so that it may convey the poets’ inner thoughts and feelings, on the one hand; on the other hand, the other *matter* he “strove” for, was Maud Gonne, the woman whom he fell in love with, whom he desired all his life and thus representing the image of the unfulfilled love.

Speaking of the way in which Yeats succeeds in conveying the message of the poem by utilizing form as a vehicle, it is worth saying that the poem begins optimistically with the sonnet form and then the stanzas in point of line decrease, as if by demonstrating that one thing he could not gain, and that is Maud’s love.

My second example of Yeats’s choice of forms in order to express his inner thoughts and feelings is *The Animal Circus Desertion.* Reading Albright’s notes, (Albright: 1994, 840) the reader finds out that the poet rejected some titles until he found that one: *Tragic Toys, Despair, On the lack of a theme*. Also from Albright, the reader finds out that the poem reveals the poet tried lifelong to construct a self and this has something to do with masks Richard Ellmann speaks about in his Yeats: *The Man and the Masks*, London, Macmillan, 1949. Only in this poem the poet deconstructs the self (ibidem, Albright). The myth of his biography breaks into pieces, he once used to construct his self.

I
“I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being 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,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and Lord knows what.
II
What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisin 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;
But what cared I that set him on the ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

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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 though my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this bought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

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 my:
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.
III
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. 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."[1]

The poem was published in the volume Last Poems. The poem itself appear to be written between November 1937-September 1938, a long enough period of time, as we already know the hard work necessary for finding the perfect artistic formula.

The poem consists of three sections: the first section consisting of one stanza, the second section consisting of three stanzas, while the third section consists again of one stanza. The stanza itself is an example of *ottava rima*, eight iambic pentameters rhyming *abababee* (Pia Brînzeu: 1992, 64).

The poem renders the poet's torments towards finding another theme for a poem, which a not very easy task, as the poet exhausted all the themes. We find out about his search in the first stanza: "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain". The poet is disappointed that he has no theme at hand. Instead the other stanzas in the second section represent an overview of the themes he employed along his life and reminds the reader the most representative of them, namely "the sea-rider Oisin", *The Countess Cathleen* […] pity-crazed, had given her soul away" and, of course, "Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea". In the last section and stanza of the poem, the poet finds himself surrounded by the images that accompanied his life, yet wondering "where all began?" In response he finds examples which I find similar to Arghezi's *Testament:* "A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street, /

[1] W.B. Yeats, *The Circus Animals' Desertion* in The Poems, Daniel Albright editor, Everyman, Orion Publishing Group, London, updated 1994, pp. 394-395

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Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can, / Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut/ Who keeps the till"; while Arghezi puts it: "Din bube, mucegaiuri si noroi/ Iscat-am frumuseti si preturi noi"[1], thus leaving the inheritance of verses to the heirs. Yeats is on the verge of concluding his life and creation, he sees no option: "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."

In order to conclude my study, it is worth mentioning that, by reading the two poems, namely, *Adam's Curse* and *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, the reader witnesses two periods in the poets' life: manhood and old age. The two facets of the poet display different attitudes. Thus in the first poem, the readers finds an optimistic Yeats, chatting friendly to two ladies; while in the second poem, old Yeats, our interlocutor, is pessimistic, he has no expectations from life, his creativity has drained, old age brings illnesses in his body.

It is also worth mentioning that the forms of the poems help the reader to comprehend the poet's inner struggle; while the first poem begins with a sonnet, known as the love verses, in the second poem's ottava rima make us think of a ballad – the ballad of W. B. Yeats – the man and the poet.

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