Awareness of Hunger in W. B. Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

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The poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion" was written in 1937 or 1938, one or two years before Yeats's death. Yeats had already suffered deteriorating health for years but was still trying to write poems. In "The Circus Animals' Desertion" he confesses his despair in finding no more poetic inspiration. Lamenting what he could do now is only to look back, he recollects and comments on his successful works of the past. The poem ends with the old poet's self-mocking remark that he should be content with old junk. Strangely though, one feels not only his poignant despair but also certain vitality in the way he laments this predicament. Such vitality seems to enable the old poet to make a new movement in his poem writing. In fact, critics such as Bloom had an impression that Yeats, after overcoming the difficulties he faced, "would have passed into yet another phase of his art" (Bloom 157). In spite of being "a broken man," he could gain such strength which rendered the poem curiously vivid. In this paper, I will discuss the poem with a main focus on the section "II" where the three examples are reviewed, and try to identify what he achieved through the act of looking back to his past works.

1

For exploration of his vitality, I would like to begin with the poem's title, since it symbolically represents peculiar unstableness as well as hidden energy. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is a noun phrase but contains a sentence, probably "The circus animals desert." Yeats used a sentence title for several of his past poems, such as "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" and "He wishes for Heaven's Cloth," which usually show vivid dynamism as well as allegorical atmosphere. Compared with such sentence titles, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is substantivized and therefore not so apparently active, but still holds the same features derived from the original sentence to some extent. What the title means is also dynamic. First of all, the motif of "circus," which is a popular entertainment and quite unusual in Yeats's writing, implies various active movements of players and animals.' With this motif, a rather serious and notional word "desertion" is combined, and the addition of a definite article makes the whole title even more dignified. "Desertion" generally means to leave or abandon something, but it also has a theological meaning of "dereliction of God," and thus the word can mean profound despair which might cause spiritual crisis for a person involved (OED 6b). The combination of secular entertainment and serious notion is quite odd and unbalanced, and this mixing of lightness and heaviness generates a dynamic "moment" which can break through the rigidity of the present world and bring forth a movement. The last thing I should point out about the title is that there is certain ambiguity in the syntax, for it is not really clear who does the act of desertion, the

animals or the poet, as it is not clear who abandons whom in the phrase of "dereliction of God." The title of this poem is thus ambiguous as well as dynamic, and perhaps for this reason the reader feels it appealing.

As for the question of the ambiguous agent in the title, however, it seems an answer is quickly given when we read the first stanza. At the beginning the poet laments that he cannot find a theme and recollects how cooperative and attractive his "circus animals" were in the past days. Now we see that they have deserted the poet, not the other way round. The members of his circus have packed up and gone, and the deserted poet is left alone where the circus tent used to be and misses their colorful, spectacular shows and big excitement, saying "Winter and summer till old age began / My circus animals were all on show" (5-6). "(T)hose stilted boys, that burnished chariot, / Lion and woman..." (7-8) attracted the audience and made the poet proud. Everything was under control in those days and the poet and his circus enjoyed a high reputation.

It must be a serious situation when the poet seeks a theme in vain, but why does he indicate the specific length of the time of "six weeks or so"? Is it to emphasize how long and hard his suffering was as Vendler claims? (Vendler, *Discipline* 272) But the addition of "or so" makes the phrase colloquial and casual and does not fit for seriousness. It seems to me Yeats inserted these explanatory words about duration on purpose in order to make the expression "bitter and gay."² The same heroic attitude can be found in "the Lord knows what," the way he names the circus members. Although the tone is light and gay, we should remember that "Lord" is associable with the serious word "desertion" in the title, which also means "dereliction of God." Here again we find the unbalanced combination of lightness and seriousness.

The next section with the Roman numeral "II" is made of three stanzas. Behaving as "a broken man" who can only "enumerate old themes," he picks up three works of his own and makes comments on each. These three works were written before the age of forty, one long poem and two plays, which may be perplexing when we consider the fact that Yeats was famous mainly for short poems. More than thirty years after their publication Yeats summarizes and reinterprets them. Reinterpretation of one's own work of the past can be called a kind of parody. Parody is the technique which "repeats with difference a text in the past often not at all under attack" according to Hutcheon (101, 103). In the case of Yeats's self-parody, the targeted text is his own works of the past, long accepted by his readers. By using a parody, the author presents both the past text and the present one with difference and makes the readers conscious of the time which has passed in between. With this "consciousness-raising device," Yeats, while gesturing as an old poet in despair, shows his three works with difference and encourages his readers to keep a distance from the past and be critical (Hutcheon 103). From this point of view we should ask ourselves why these three works were specifically chosen in Section II. "Critics of Yeats can learn from the poet's choice of his three crucial works" says Bloom, but are these really his "crucial works"? (Bloom 458) If so, in what sense?

The first is a long poem, *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), written when Yeats was twentyfour. Oisin is the hero and poet of the Fenian Cycle of Irish myth. He is invited by a beautiful girl, Niamh, from the fairy land, and leaves his fellow warriors. After wandering in the three islands, he comes home to find years have passed since his departure and all his comrades are dead. Yeats summarizes this poem in five lines and comments in two. (This proportion changes in the second and the third works.) Though he had written to one of his friends, when he was young, "There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking —infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose," the passionate phrase has been bitterly changed to "Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose" (12).³ Overall, his comment on this work is in an ironical self-mocking tone.

The second work, The Countess Cathleen (1892), a play written at the age of twenty-seven based on a local legend, was presented at the newly-founded Irish Literary Theater (later Abbey Theater) and Maud Gonne played the role of the eponymous heroine.⁴ The story is set in a famine period of Ireland in old times. The countess used up her private fortune to save poor peasants and finally decides to sell her own soul to demons for a large amount of money. The heroine's profile is based on Maud Gonne, and there appears a poet named Aleel who bears close resemblance to Yeats himself. Aleel loves the Countess and tries to save her in vain. Although having sold her soul to demons, the Countess does not fall to Hell but is warmly received by Heaven in the end. In this stanza, the Countess is depicted through Yeats's ironic eye as a selfdestructive woman who disregards her own precious life and takes a fanatic attitude, and his ironical and almost cruel tone is similar to the way he refers to another female activist, Con Markiewitz in "Easter 1916." Asserting that The Countess is "pity-crazed" (19) and handles her soul like a thing ("it") (20) as she does in the play, Yeats repeats dry feminine rhyme with simple words such as "play," "away," and "destroy" (17, 19, 21). The Countess Cathleen is not regarded as one of his most highly evaluated plays, and if Yeats wanted to list up his works crucial in an aesthetic sense or social significance, he could have chosen other works such as Cathleen ni Houlihan, for instance. The fact he selected The Countess Cathleen shows the reason of his choice; they are the key works for him personally to look back to his earlier life. Seeing his beloved Maud Gonne devoting herself to the Home Rule movement, Yeats also decided to cooperate with her and work through the Irish Revival movement. After setting up National Theater, he continued to spend much of his time on management at the expense of writing poetry. Soon the theater began to display its enigmatic power onto the poet. "And this brought forth a dream and soon enough / This dream itself had all my thought and love" (23-24). The "dream" represents his literary activities including the play writing and administration of the Abbey Theater. What we should bear in mind is the fact that he thought in images when writing poems and is much inclined to be absorbed in visual imagery. Bright colorful images represented by the theater caught his heart firmly. His aesthetic effort was to be devoted to Maud Gonne and Irish people in the beginning, but more and more the activity itself possessed him rather than his original motive.

The last one to review is *On Baile's Strand* (1903), a play written for the Abbey Theater at the age of thirty-eight. Yeats wrote several other verses and plays on the theme of Cuchulain, the main character of the play and the hero of Ulster Cycle of the Irish myth.⁵ Cuchulain killed his own son without knowing it and became mad when the Blind Man and the Fool told him the truth. The play is a double plot of Conchubar (High King) and Chuchulain combined with the

Blind Man and the Fool who are understood to be the two kings' shadows. At the end of the play, Cuchulain is bound to fight the sea believing the waves are his enemy, and the Blind Man and the Fool go to a vacant house in the neighborhood to steal bread. Though Oisin was too passive and was not employed in Yeats's works again, Cuchulain appears repeatedly. Yeats obviously linked the figure closely with himself. The plot of the play is summarized in only two lines and the rest is for long remarks:

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. (27-32)

The hero Cuchulain who fights the sea is linked to Yeats himself who fights for his literature, and furthermore, linked to Oisin who left his country for a new journey, and to the Countess who sold her life to save peasants. Each of them is a "Character isolated by a deed." Besides, the words such as "dream" and "enchanted" remind us of the rebels in "Easter 1916" who dreamed and sacrificed their lives for "excess of love" for their country. As the rebels were left in a river as a stone, being alienated from the society, and as Cuchulain and the other two characters were separated from others in the plot, Yeats himself is isolated from the rest of the world as a result of seeking for his ideal in art. Now he has found that he is also bound to his "dream" and deprived of free movement. The line, "It was the dream itself enchanted me" (28) is such an explicit confession. Though Yeats at times stopped to question his too passionate attitude toward Irish nationalism, it was never expressed so clearly before.

The last section of "III" is composed of one stanza, short as the first section. The animals disappear like illusion, and the "ladder" (38) which used to take him to the height suitable for what another poem-title is termed, "beautiful lofty things," cannot be found anywhere. Once the spell is unbound, the poet finds his graceful themes are just some pieces of junk and the admirable muse is a "raving slut" to whom he pays the price of writing verses:

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.... (33-38)

Counting up the "old" items rhythmically, he presents a sort of abundance, which corresponds with the parade of the leaving circus members in the first section. The brisk and dry items listed up in bitter humor are the things that existed in his heart before the circus shows and still exist after the illusion goes away. It is "not reality, as opposed to dreams," suggests Engelberg, "but the *ur*-root of life-experience, memory evacuated of the clutter of the living process" (236). The poet who used to adore spiritual loftiness spread above the top of the ladder, now decides to accept the junk and stand on the ground with his heart alone.

Regarding the determination of the last section, I want to point out that it was not the first time in his career to make up his mind to descend to the nakedness or the spiritual lowness. For instance, in "A Coat" in his forties when some contemporary poets began writing on Irish myth mimicking popular Yeatsian style, he claimed that the beautiful theme of Irish mythology was only "embroideries" and he would throw it away and walk with "naked" song (3, 10). He renounced the early style after that. In his early sixties he voiced his strong determination for descent in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" as follows:

I am content to live it all again And yet again, if it be life to pitch Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch, A blind man battering blind men; (57-60)

After this, he wrote the Crazy Jane poems as they were a propaganda exercise, and let this defiant woman assert "Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul" ("Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" 7-8) and "... Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement" (15-16). Although it is rather obscure whether the sordid realities like "a blind man's ditch" belong to himself or others in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" he clearly admits the junk is his own; the things out of which his beautiful themes grew up. Both in "A Coat" and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," however, the poet's creative power increased in the process of his career. In other words, when he says he will go lower, he is strong. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" thus is another example, even more powerful, of the poet's increased vitality, even though it is offered with the pretention of being a weak, broken old man.

2

We have seen so far that the poet who suffers from the writer's block has chosen the three works and tried to recollect his career and uncover the relationship of the poet and his art. Though many critics seem satisfied with this as a conclusion, one question still remains unanswered: Why did Yeats choose these specific works to look back to his life?

An over-review of them will indicate certain curious common features among them. First is that they all are made of Irish myth/legend as material, and secondly they are related to hunger. The story of *The Wanderings of Oisin* has nothing particular about hunger, but Yeats used the word "starved" to express his vague longing for romantic love and unsatisfied sexual desire in the early days. *The Countess Cathleen* is the story of a famine of Ireland in the middle age. Being occupied with worries about peasants' hunger and their spiritual crisis, the Countess does not care for food herself and eventually sells her soul in order to save others. *On Baile's Strand*, based on the Irish myth on the hero Cuchulain, devotes a substantial share of its script to the

Blind Man and the Fool. In the beginning, they cook the chicken they have stolen, but this is cunningly eaten by the Blind Man, and the Fool's hunger is never satisfied. In the end they are going to steal bread from a neighboring house, for everybody goes to the shore to watch Cuchulain fighting the sea. The Fool's hunger is a strong undertone throughout this play. He repeatedly says he is starving: "My teeth are growing long with the hunger" (75), "I wish [chicken] was bigger. I wish it was as big as a goose" (93-94). The early Yeats who had had the sense of exile since childhood tended to conflate himself with Ireland which had been under the oppression by Britain for a long time. It is shown in Section II of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" that Yeats and his Ireland were closely connected to each other in terms of hunger. The Irish had continued to suffer from constant starvation for many centuries, not to mention the Great Famine in the mid nineteenth century which caused as many as one million deaths, and such experience of hunger caused a spiritual sense of deep dissatisfaction. Ireland and hunger are thus inevitably linked.

Hunger is also a key factor for Maud Gonne in Yeats's view. He figuratively describes her as a woman who sacrifices herself for political ideals with the phrase, "It's certain fine women eat / A crazy salad with their meat" ("A Prayer for My Daughter" 30-31). Such an unhealthy diet keeps her hungry. In "Among School Children" he further criticizes her for not eating and loving; "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat?" (27-28) In Yeats's eyes, Maud Gonne starves herself and makes her lover starved as well, while trying to save the Irish from starvation. Her deed supposedly comes from great dissatisfaction in her mind and in order to fill it with something she commits herself to radical politics.

As for Yeats himself, we can imagine that he had a strong starving feeling in his mind from the Fool's painful hunger in *On Baile's Strand*. Throughout the play the Fool suffers hunger, but finds renewed hope for food. Cruelly, his hope is blighted every time. It quickly reminds us of Yeats's private predicament that he constantly sought for Gonne's love and was mostly rejected. However, we should consider that his sense of hunger comes from a deeper place in his mind, since it already existed in the very beginning of his career when he wrote "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" before he met Gonne. When he said writing songs was an act of dreaming and lamented the world dreamt no longer, he compared dreaming to food, as "Of old the world on dreaming fed" (3). Dreaming for art is to try to get food for his starving spirit. While criticizing Maud Gonne, Yeats gradually becomes aware that her hysterical deeds which have bruised her body derive from her strong sense of dissatisfaction deep down in her heart. As the famous phrase from "Among School Children," "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" indicates, Yeats recognizes a deed by a human being who holds a sense of hunger, which often appears irrational, cannot be separated from the person.

One's deed is an outcome of one's desire, and we generally understand that the two should be linked logically, but it is not always the case. Yeats considers there is a slight gap between them and somehow one's deed as the outcome is not a straightforward response to one's desire. At the end of *The Countess Cathleen*, Heaven "looks on the motive, not the deed" (50) and forgives her, and here "the motive" and "the deed" of one person are separately viewed by the author. In one of his early poems, he made a spirit utter as follows:

And if any gaze on our rushing band, We come between him and the deed of his hand, We come between him and the hope of his heart." (original italics, "The Hosting of the Sidhe" 10-12)

Yeats is conscious that the relation between one's hope (or desire) and deed is often strangely twisted. The deed becomes thus often contradictory, and we cannot see well someone's desire behind his/her deed. This is what happens when "character [becomes] isolated by a deed." Maud Gonne's and Yeats's deeds come from their starvation in mind, but it is not understood by others, or even by themselves.

Yeats's hunger always seeks for brilliant visual images. When the dream enchanted him, he confesses his mind was trapped by "Players and painted stage." This combination of painful spiritual hunger and colorful imagery can be also observed in the following part of "Ego Dominus Tuus":

... His [Keats's] art is happy, but who knows his mind? I see a schoolboy when I think of him, With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window, For certainly he sank into his grave His senses and his heart unsatisfied, And made – being poor, ailing and ignorant, Shut out from all the luxury of the world, The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper— Luxuriant song. (54-62)

Talking about John Keats in an intentionally dry tone with less emotion, Yeats is keenly aware of the similarity between Keats and himself. Indeed, it is Yeats who has an "Unsatisfied heart" and looks into the "sweet-shop" for "Luxuriant song."⁶ Such dreamy beauty in visual imagery took his "thought and love," and the sense of hunger behind it became a great driving force for his artistic creation.

Thus, we have explored the three works, where Ireland, Maud Gonne, and the poet himself are exhibited in a spiritual similarity. It seems Yeats knew it and tried to keep a distance from them at times, but the attracting force among them was so strong and irresistible that it brought about a sort of codependent relation. Such a relation can be understood in the terms of 'ruler' and 'subject.' In Section I, Yeats says he was some manager of his circus team and in a position of controlling the animals (themes). In Section II, the relation of the themes and the poet is reversed as in "And this brought forth a dream and soon enough / This dream itself had all my thought and love" (23-24) and "It was the dream itself enchanted me" (28). The words "engross" and "dominate" used in the phrases of "...a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory" (29-30) are quite interesting, for they are unusual type of diction in Yeats's

verses.⁷ It should be noted that both of them imply power to be exerted onto another. Another word which may interest us, "masterful" in "Those masterful images because complete / Grew in pure mind..." (33-34) is, among its various meanings, defined as "addicted to acting the part of master, accustomed to insist on having one's own way, imperious" (OED 1). This word not only signifies one party has greater power over the other, but can also imply there is a psychological dependence between the two parties. The same word is used in The Countess Cathleen stanza as "masterful Heaven had intervened to save it" (20) and here the one who made the happy ending is "Heaven," in other words the master is the author of the play. On the contrary in Section III, the images become "masterful" and the dominating power shifts from the poet to them. This shift is symbolically expressed in the Fool's three times repeated scream in the end of the Cuchulain's play, "the waves have mastered him" (795, 97, 99). This ruler-subject relation is finished, however, when the enchantment is finally unbound. Cuchulain fights the sea no longer, for now he can see the waves are waves, no enemy, and in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" Yeats finds his beautiful themes are merely "Old kettles" and so on. These junky things used to appear to him attractive "circus animals" in vivid spectacular shows, but the poet now realizes that the animals were also firmly bound, forbidden from natural movement. The same is true with the poet. He believes he is the master but also bound to his art and cannot move freely. Now they both are liberated.

For Yeats, all good verses were like stone monuments, as expressed in "Sailing to Byzantium," which were believed to survive in people's memory throughout the history. His "Easter 1916" was supposed to be one of the examples and there he tried to "write in" the event of the Easter Rising as if into a block of stone. But stone is not really eternal, though appears so. Stone wears, breaks, and becomes sand some day. Yeats once wished to be a golden bird proudly singing eternity of great works of poetry, but he holds a different view now. He has realized that his deed of writing Ireland, however beautifully and gracefully, had confined the nation in seemingly timeless stone. His Ireland is beautiful, and gracefully moving in monumental works but their movement is not natural, like that of circus animals. Besides, while confining his Ireland so, he himself becomes uncomfortably restricted by this mode of composition. It may be the time, the poet thinks, to let the stone decay and scatter as sand as it is destined, so that the animals inside can be set free from the duties of singing romantic Ireland. The following poem "Those Images" presents a similar relation between the poet and the old themes. Here the poet with affectionate intimacy asks the images to leave him:

What if I bade you leave The cavern of the mind? There's better exercise In the sunlight and wind.

I never bade you go To Moscow or to Rome. Renounce that drudgery, Call the Muses home. ("Those Images" 1-8)

The word "desertion" in the title is associable with a desert after stones and rocks are decayed. When the enchanting spell is unbound, the animals are set free and go out of the stone monument into the desert, and the agent who performs this releasing act is the poet. I pointed out at the beginning of this paper that the title of this poem was ambiguous since the agent of the act of deserting was not explicitly indicated. At first it was assumed the agent was the animals, but now we can conclude that it is the animals *and* the poet. The act of desertion can be certainly serious as dereliction of God, but to abandon the great power such as God/the poet or to let the great power abandon oneself will lead one to a new phase.

When stones are decayed into sand and the ladders to beautiful lofty images are gone, what remains with the poet is what he had from the beginning. He lies down where he only finds junks of his heart in the self-mocking mode. Through the reflection made in the second section he admits now he had spiritual hunger from the beginning and still has it. Then, lying down in the desert means to accept his own hunger as it is without trying to create illusion to fill in the scarce heart. The poet is facing his naked heart now.

Lying down alone on the ground is indeed the posture for fight, and it reminds us of hunger strikes of Ireland in the past. During the Great Famine of 19th century there were Irish who chose starvation against the British who forced their religious conversion in exchange for watery soup. Yeats himself wrote the play *The King's Threshold* where a protagonist poet chose to die through starvation when poetry was insulted by the King. The original happy end of the play was revised in 1922 during the Irish Independence War, when Yeats heard of the hunger strike by Lord Mayor of Cork, who died in the prison.⁸ In the final part of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" Yeats determines to accept his life-long hunger and lies down naked on the old shop's floor as a literary posture as if he encouraged himself and protested aging and death which threatened his life as an artist. This seeming-final remark in fact indicates the poet's desperate challenge and he thus waits patiently and eagerly for a coming new move for his art. Strength has been obtained through the recognition of his own spiritual hunger. Energy necessary to make a move will be produced from the unbalances we have confirmed in the various places of the whole poem. The poem, thus, appears an end, but it is not.

Notes

All references to Yeats's poems are to *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. (London: Macmillan, 1957) and those to Yeats's plays are to *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*. (London: Macmillan, 1966).

¹ Henn suggests one picture painted by Jack Yeats may have inspired the poet. It was an illustration "of a circus packing up to leave some Mayo town, with 'those stilted boys, that burnished chariot / Lion and woman and the Lord knows what." (7-8) 271.

- ² 6 July 1935, Yeats, *Letters on Poetry*.
- ³ 6 Feb., 1889, Yeats, Collected Letters.

⁴ Yeats's first play was dedicated to Maud Gonne. Like the Countess, Maud Gonne also committed herself in the activity for feeding poor Irish children. For details on this activity, see Cullingford, Chapter 10.

⁵ Cuchulain is a significant character not only in Yeats's poetry but also in Irish nationalism. Kiberd claims that the self-sacrificing image of Cuchulain linking to Christ's passion was loved by the nationalists including Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of the rebellion. As the result of this perception's spread after the Easter Rising, a statue of Cuchulain in the similar posture as *Pieta*'s was built in the General Post Office in Dublin. 212.

⁶ Webster points out (181) that there is also a similarity between Keats in this poem and the poet Aleel of *The Countess Cathleen* who is "of no more account / than flies upon a window-pane in the winter" (450-51).

⁷ Vendler notices that in this stanza there are several Latin origin words such as "engross" and "dominate" and make the stanza sound serious. (Thinking 113.)

⁸ As the note for the play Yeats wrote that *The King's Threshold* "was written when our Society was having a hard fight for the recognition of pure art in a community of which one half was buried in the practical affairs of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism." (315) In the ending of the original version the poet did not die, but in 1920 Yeats revised the ending so that the poet dies of starving. The revision was to praise the death of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who died in the Brixton Prison after seventy-four day starvation in protest. Yeats wrote, "[Lord Mayor] had intellect & lived & died for it. One feels that he died not because he would not disapoint [sic] friends (fine as that had been) but because he would not disapoint himself. I think the last pages would greatly move the audience who will see the Mayor in the plays [sic] hero." 29 Oct. 1920, Morris Library. Foster, (Vol. II) 702.

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