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Rage Turns to Re-vision: A Pattern in Gerontological Concern in W.B. Yeats's Later Poetry

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Abstract

In the poetry of W.B. Yeats, one comes across the poet's pre-occupation almost with the totality of human concerns in life and it is notable that reality for an artist, as per the poet, lies in the tension between two ideal opposites of experience. A pattern of dialectics thus characterises the whole poetic world of Yeats and what he aspired for as an artist, was a 'Unity of Being' which would combine the ultimate forms of Realities such as life and art. In the complicated search of the poet, old age with its debilities also receives a due yet problematic treatment in Yeats' later poetry. The present paper seeks to establish how Yeats' initially angry and dismissive reaction to age as something deterrent to his search for an ideal vision of 'truth,' gradually develops first into a spirit of acceptance and then into a discovery of its sharpening effect on his passion and muse with which he feels to have realised his dream of achieving a unity in the sphere of realisation and artistic creation.

Keywords: Ideal, Dialectics, Unity, Being, Angry, Dismissive, Discovery.

> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; [...].
> (Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* V, III, L-24-26)

To a sensible reader, a keen gerontological concern, an obsession with the smothering impact of crippling old age and a subsequent foretaste of finitude on the creative self of a prolific artist and poet like Yeats, forms a major tissue in the later poetry of W. B. Yeats. It is a fact that a similar kind of concern may almost naturally please/plague the aesthetic self of an artist or writer of any age who being blessed or cursed with longevity, negotiates the crisis in his or her own way. In some cases like that of, say,

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a romantic and visionary bard such as Rabindranath Tagore, old age with its limiting effect on the body is nevertheless welcome to the poetic self or soul as an inevitability but with its natural attributes such as, a keener insight into the mystiques of life and death or a perception of ensuing rehabilitation of the soul into its true abode as designed by the almighty. On some other occasions, the otherwise crisis may urge philosopher poets like Tagore and Aurobindo of the East or Tennyson of the West, to adopt the mantle of a prophet to address humanity in general.

But for a poet like W.B. Yeats, such a concern delves deeper into the tangled bines of his consciousness which encompasses a diverse range of interest and vision such as, mystery, the occult, myth and magic, history, culture, mysticism- the imbroglio of 'realities' and themes that had occupied the poet all along his career, before and after his troubled love experience with Maud Gonne. This paper seeks to focus within its limited compass how the abiding concerns of decrepit old age and death monitor the poetic response in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats — from an initial mood of contempt to an arduous mode of creative contemplation edging by implication, to the poet's spiritual proximity to his coveted ideal – 'a Unity of Being.'

Interestingly, the problem relating to the clash between the dying flesh and the heart (which is the seat of emotion) visits the poetic self without any ostensible sign of synthesis at first and this becomes conspicuous right from the beginning of the fourth and the most prolific phase of Yeats' poetry. The crisis now poses a serious dimension more than ever, in connection with his poetic realisation. What is important is that, this problem of age and encumbrance is also treated in the matrix of the same dialectical pattern of logic which characterises the entire poetic oeuvre of Yeats. In the later poetry of Yeats, old age instead of providing any immediate solution, serves as a necessary contestant, a part of the anti-self countering his creative self as poet.

In the title poem of the section *The Tower* (1928), readers note a vituperative penchant that pleads for an outright dismissal of old age as an 'absurdity' attending his active imagination; as a loathsome mismatch that by implication can be compared to a petty thing such as a kettle tied to a dog's tail. The imagery of the dog (animal spirit) and the pejorative term 'absurdity' drives home the repugnant attitude of the old poet to decrepit old age. The most popular and representative poem of Yeats in this phase "Sailing to Byzantium" too, offers a derivative discourse on old age and its hindering spell in relation to the artistic search of a poet who aspires initiation into the eternal world of art renouncing once for all the world of nature which harbours this life comprising flesh and blood. Old age with its attending ills is as cadaverous or 'paltry' as a scarecrow and to the comic intelligence of the poet acquired in the self-distancing mode peculiar to artists, this incongruous old age is simply not more than a laughing stock- 'a tattered coat upon a stick' (Line 10). The very urge for the soul's deliverance from the coils of an imposed curse of age and senility generates the poetic journey which finds Byzantium as the spiritual haven of the soul for offering a semblance of reality for an artist in the unity of the social, aesthetic and religious life of people belonging to Byzantine civilisation.

Significantly, the scathingly dismissive attitude to old age in *Sailing to Byzantium* gradually subsides to a sort of reluctant acceptance in later poems and the rage arising out of age distils a keener power of perception (Never had I more/Excited, passionate, fantastical/ imagination, nor an ear or eye'- *The Tower,* Lines 5-7) though the poet any how fails to alter the inevitable feeling of mortality — 'know that what disturbs our blood/ Is the longing for the tomb', [...] ("The Wheel", Lines 7-8). In poems such as "A Man Young and Old", "Oedipus at Colonus", "All Souls' Night" in *The Tower*, and "At Algeciras" in *Last Poems* (1936-39), an obsession with the end of life emerges as the prime emotion for poetic motivation. This thought continues and takes a strikingly symbolic dimension in another seminal piece "Byzantium" (in *The Winding Stair,* 1933), concurrently with Yeats' poetic search for a system that can combine even the arch contraries such as life and art in the form of an image that embodies for an artist, a 'Unity of Being' which ideally seeks to encompassboth the warmth of life as well as the eternity of art. For the soul of the old poet imaginatively transported to the holy city after death, the confusion regarding the identity of art as to whether it is autonomous or dependent ('star-lit or moon-lit dome', Line 5) is counterbalanced by the unwary resurgence of life's vitality with conflict and turmoil ('dolphin torn [...] gong-tormented sea', Line 40) as the substrate of all art. Critic Georgio Melchiori traces a strong element of death awareness in the meditative and stylistic nature of the poem:

> "Byzantium" is a contemplation of death— or rather the ideal state of death. While the *Sailing* was in the eight-line stanza form common to many meditative poems of Yeats, "Byzantium" adopts the metre that Yeats used only in his most deeply felt poems of death and birth, [...]. (Rai 1991: 139)

The obsession with the thought of death as a sequel to crippling old age receives a philosophic quietude of reflection in poems like "Vacillation" (in *The Winding Stair),* "A Prayer for Old Age" (in *A Full Moon in March,* 1935), "An Acre of Grass" (in *Last Poems*) and obviously, "Meru" (in *A Full Moon in March*), a poem with a slight thematic variation. Though many of the poems coming under different anthologies published in later phase of Yeats' poetic career (as has been mentioned in brackets) reflect the old poet's zodiac range of interests including an unflinching celebration of the flesh and frank poetic exaltation of youthful passion familiar to the readers, yet the fleeting shadows of passion can hardly suppress the strong undercurrent of a compelling awareness of old age and finitude. For example, though the poet's vacillation between the polar antimonies such as a life of sense and that of the spirit concludes with his option for the former since the poet is committed in the way of Homer whose art rose out of the raw material of natural, mortal life, the poem "Vacillation" nevertheless opens with a reflective acceptance of physical death: "A brand of flaming breath,/ Comes to destroy/ All those antimonies/Of day and night;/ The body calls it death" (Lines 3-6).

This perceptive maturity of Yeats' complex relation with and attitude to the problem of ageing is strewn throughout the fabric of verses written in the far end of his career though interestingly again, this does not figure as the sole poetic concern except in such pieces as "All Souls' Night", "Meru" and "Black Tower" (*Last Poems*). In the

later section of the poem *The Tower*, the emerging vision of a poised existential stance accrued after a life-long devotion to philosophy can sneer at the decrepitude of body caused by old age. All warring antimonies fade like clouds in the dusky horizon or in the drowsy notes of birds fading into night. In another poem "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (from *The Tower*), the erstwhile troubled conscience welds itself into an abstract joy of realisation which spares room for neither 'self-delighting reverie /Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone, [...]' (VII, Lines 29-30).

The theme of a 'deeper insight' wrought by old age can further be traced in another poem "The New Faces" (from *The Tower*) where the new born light of realisation makes 'the night overbalance the day' (Line 6) and the 'living seem more shadowy' (Line 8) than the shadow roving 'the garden gravel' (Line 7) of the poet's tower. This trend of mystic revelation even amidst the evanescent phases of perception acquires a wider dimension in the poem "All Souls' Night" which serving as an epilogue to Yeats 'A vision', celebrates a ritual party at the end of Yeats' strenuous labour in building his 'System.' The poem opens with a summoning of the souls of all friends, mentors and persons placed in occult lore to take part in a conference. The soul of Florence Emery reveals to the poet the euphoric dance of the soul when liberated from carnal fetters in order to merge with the Imperishable Being and thus attains deliverance from the cycle of birth and death what in Indian mysticism is known as *moksha*.

... in some figurative speech
By some learned Indian
On the soul's journey. How it whirled about,
.....
.....
And there, free and yet fast
Being both Chance and Choice,
Forget its broken toys
And sink into its own delight at last. (Lines 52-60)

The poem concludes with the confirmation of a transcendental knowledge of both the torment of doomed souls in hell and the ecstasy of the blessed in heaven, wound round the poet's mind like the 'mummy cloth' round Egyptian corpses. Similar kind of spiritual complacency of realisation in the old poet also permeates some poems in *The Winding Stair* such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Death", though the question of the ironic stance central to Yeats, the poet, continues to be felt as before. In the former, the Platonic argument of soul for rejection of human life and contemplation of heavenly bliss is repudiated in Self's option for love and desires of the ageing body which paradoxically triumphs over the ultimate liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth as assured by Soul. The poem "Death" posits a higher grade of realization in the old poet which reveals the attitudinal difference with regard to death in animals and men. While death may occur as an accident to the intelligence of animals; men on the other hand, have the capacity to look before and after and thereby weave a tapestry of myth and fantasy around death such as those of

after-life and the mystic maze of death and re-birth etc. in which the Soul dances with ecstasy in the wheel of time or eternity which is earlier envisaged in "Sailing to Byzantium" as comprising 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come' (Line 32). Being wiser than animals, man, in the mature realisation of the poet of *Death*, 'casts derision upon/ supersession of breath' (Lines 9-10) known as death.

In the poem "At Algeciras— A Meditation upon Death" too, the old poet with his keener insight into reality, perceives 'a greater glory in the sun' (Line 13). "Meru", a memorable poem, further marks an advance on the spiritual maturity in Yeats. The 'meru' in the poem stands for The *Himalayas,* a traditional retreat of Indian mystics who have renounced the world in search of truth and who through their austere measures or *sadhana* ('snow and winter's dreadful blast/Beat down upon their naked bodies', Lines 11-12) gain the insight necessary to view under the facade of civilisations, only the fleeting show of illusions or *maya* wrought at the divine command of *Bramhan* or the Imperishable Being. The idea of the Absolute here may correspond either to the *Advaityan* philosophy or Buddhism, and in either case, to facets of Oriental mysticism which is beyond the reach of Western philosophy. The dark sort of wisdom in this poem ('caverned in night', Line 10) gestures to the destiny of physical reality as void and this seemingly corresponds more to the Sanskrit concept of '*-neti'* (or nihilism, meaning- not here) as propounded by the philosophy of *Advaitya*. The poem bears out not only the old poet's interest in Indian mysticism but also his close contact with Indian saints and philosophers such as Purohit Swamy and Mohini Chatterjee among others.

Yeats' *Last Poems* display poetic reflection upon a diverse range of issues such as a cyclical theory of history ("The Gyres"), the artistic worth of tragic gaiety ("Lapis Lazuli"), Greek statuary ("The Statues"), etc. etc. Yet the fact that his obsession with the problem of age constitutes one of the major strains of his poetic sensibility in spite of the encyclopedic range of his reflections, becomes obvious in "An Acre of Grass", one of the richest lyrical harvests of Yeats' poetry of and about old age. This poem dramatises the speaker's intense urge at 'life's end', to use the quietude of old age (symbolised by 'picture', 'book' and 'healthy exercise') as a vantage point in order to explore emotions of the kind of ideal opposites and thereby discover the 'truth' of experience lying in between two extremes: - 'loose imagination' (Line 9) and 'mill of the mind' (Line 10). The following extract from one of Yeats's letters tells the readers more of an old poet's revelation of some paradoxical source of inspiration than of his desperate attempt to defy the impositions of age/time upon his poetic self:

> A poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment. Could he, if he would, knowing how frail his vigour from youth up, copy Landor who lived loving and hating, ridiculous and unconquered, into supreme old age, all lost but the favour of his Muses? Surely he may think now I have found vision and mask, I need not suffer any longer. He will buy perhaps some small old house, where, like Ariosto, he can dig his garden [...]. Then he will remember Wordsworth withering into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted and

> climb to some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth, some bitter crust. (Rai 1991:176-77)

To counter the quiet and peaceful stalemate of old age, the poet as if finds his anti-self in adopting the mask of Lear or Blake or Michael Angelo like whom, he could also finally explore with a 'frenzy' peculiar to those old masters, the shroud of mystery to unveil the face of 'truth.'

Paradoxically, the 'old man's eagle mind' (Line 24) in "An Acre of Grass", the harvest of the poet's vision at old age, may serve as an apology (though in its own way) for the poet's frank and too bold a treatment of the body and sexual energy in his last poems, much to the aversion of a fair majority of critics. However, it is undeniable that poetry after all springs from the emotional recess of an artist and in this free literary world, there can never exist any fixed norm based on the so called propriety of choice according to one's age, as to decide the source of inspiration for a poet. Regarding his overt celebration of youthful vitality as a major constituent in his poetry of old age, Yeats clarifies his stand in his four-line poem "The Spur" (from *Last Poems*):

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attention upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into a song? (Lines 1-4)

Taking cue from the above quotation, it can be safely inferred that by now, it is for certain that the poet has come a long way from his earlier mood of outright rejection of and hatred for old age and as if in a bid to make the best of a bad bargain, he just slightly adjusts his angle of vision so as to discover an untapped resource or poetic potentiality in the sufferings of old age — in the bouts of illness, ebbing passions of the flesh and it is physical sufferings that paradoxically serve to sharpen Yeats' intellect and imagination to work as the subject for his 'song'.

The variegated spectrum of reflections on death, the ultimate destiny of self and soul, an astute awareness of the inevitable with its paraphernalia, flare into a beacon-light of farewell particularly in two of his *Last poems* — "The Black Tower" written just a week before the poet's death (Jan. 21, 1939) and "Under Ben Bulben", Yeats' self-chosen epitaph which being not chronologically the last poem though, brilliantly records Yeats' poetic testament. In "The Black Tower", the poetic vision is set in seeking to explore the mysteries shrouding death though with some 'haziness' as critic V. Rai has rightly observed in his book (1991:207). The expectant and anxious wait of the feudal guards of Black Tower (which is under the threat of capture by inimical forces) for their lord absent for some time ; the visionary account of Sidhe (the Irish God of Wind) blowing into the bones of the dead standing upright in graves; a strong implication of legendary associations of kings placed in similar predicaments (such as Cashel of Ireland or Arthur of Britain) as pointed out by critic Rai (1991:207); — all strongly suggest a theme of death and regeneration and the wind imagery evokes in the readers that of Shelley's West Wind which like spring, quickens the germ of life (in arid nature) in the form of bright blossoms with rosy hues.

The other poem "Under Ben Bulben", before it retrospectively slurs over Yeats' childhood extravaganza in Sligo and exhorts poets and sculptors to contribute to their respective culture and civilisation, opens with the poet's faith in the immortality of the soul and its power of resurrection after death. The sages of 'Mareotic Lake' in the opening lines refer to hermits of The baid (in "Demon and Beast" from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921) or Shelley's "Witch of Atlas" who like St. Anthony, were gifted with the insight into reality of things. The last line of the first stanza 'Spoke and set the cocks a-crow' (Line 4) usher in a new beginning after man's life-long journey between 'his two eternities/That of race and that of soul'(Lines 14-15). The poetic journey thus having been generated by a yawning sense of death, now skims over the gist of the poet's diverse reflections such as — the necessity of a dialectical nature of experience for a creative artist (a theory underlining Yeats' own poetic credo); his desire for the regeneration of European civilisation with exalted form and order of artistic creations; enrichment of Irish poetry by young poets in the trend set by Yeats etc.etc. Finally, the poem concludes with a grand epitaph addressed to visionary beings such as Sidhe (Rai 1991: 214) who in the image of 'Horse man,' will perhaps cast a 'cold' glance upon the extreme forms of reality - life and death (since he has taken both within his strides) — the thoughts of which were sought and explored life-long by the poet to be hammered into his chosen ideal— the 'Unity of Being.'

What has been spelt out in the epigraph taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has a sort of faint yet ironic relevance to Yeats' case. The qualities of experience as natural allies to old age which Macbeth has deliberately spurned for his unwarranted ambition as a matter of choice and now wistfully regrets for; as if fail as a matter of chance to offer content to the Muse in Yeats which grows younger with his ageing as the poet has categorically stated on different occasions.

Critic C.M. Bowra observes that in his last poems, Yeats "... is no longer torn by the conflict in himself between the man and the poet; he no longer wears what he calls himself 'Mask' to present himself to the world" (Chatterjee 1962: 135). Prof. Bhabatosh Chatterjee has rightly observed that Bowra's opinion is untenable since in poems of Yeats' later years, 'antimonies still exist' (1962: 135). The present paper has carefully sought to steer clear through the warring antimonies and trace how an initially violent reaction to age first lends a keener edge to poetic sensibility and leads it to a mood of retrospective exploration of the types of similar experiences of past artists and mentors like Blake, Timon or Michael Angelo where the poet can re-locate his stance within a wider spectrum of artistic experience so as to re-evaluate human experience. In a way, initial rage against age breeds a craze for creation in Yeats which in turn finds the crevice of 'truth' in the canvas of life where all the antimonies such as youth and age, beauty and the base, body and soul provide for the confused medley of emotions and passions of life that offers the matrix of all art. The theme is aptly summed up in the poet's artistic commitment made in the following excerpt from his "Circus Animas' Desertion" (in *Last Poems*): "I must lie down where all ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." (Lines 39-40)

One simply wonders to see how the 'eagle mind' of the old poet finally manages to detect in old age more a text for poetic paean than a pretext of personal pain.

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