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Abstract- Yeats's Last Poems (1939), according to critics like F. R. Leavis, lacks the complexity and tension of his earlier works. Instead, most of the poems included in this collection are evocative of the mood of resignation and the decrepitude of old age. Amidst this physical decay, the poetic persona relentlessly strives to refashion the 'self' by transmuting his passion into creative energy. The realization of truth regarding the tragic gaiety of the mind heightens the psychological tension arising from the conflict between the body and the soul. The poetic refashioning is informed by the persistence of the creative impulse that contributes to the integrity of the 'self' and its symbolic defiance of the ineluctable physical process. Taking Yeats's poem, 'An Acre of Grass', as the case study, this paper would examine how the process of poetic composition corresponds to the cycle of human existence – birth, decay, and rebirth.

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"An Old Man's Eagle Mind": A Passionate Refashioning of the Poet's Self in W. B. Yeats's 'An Acre of Grass'

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Abstract- Yeats's *Last Poems* (1939), according to critics like F. R. Leavis, lacks the complexity and tension of his earlier works. Instead, most of the poems included in this collection are evocative of the mood of resignation and the decrepitude of old age. Amidst this physical decay, the poetic persona relentlessly strives to refashion the 'self' by transmuting his passion into creative energy. The realization of truth regarding the tragic gaiety of the mind heightens the psychological tension arising from the conflict between the body and the soul. The poetic refashioning is informed by the persistence of the creative impulse that contributes to the integrity of the 'self' and its symbolic defiance of the ineluctable physical process. Taking Yeats's poem, 'An Acre of Grass', as the case study, this paper would examine how the process of poetic composition corresponds to the cycle of human existence – birth, decay, and rebirth.

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I. Introduction

William Butler Yeats's posthumous collection, *Last Poems* (1939), is actually the poetic collation of two separate compositions – *New Poems* (1938) and *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939). The poems incorporated in this collection chart the relentless quest of the 'old' poetic persona in search of creative impetus that reinvigorates the 'self' with the flight of imagination. C. M. Bowra in *The Heritage of Symbolism* (1954) points out: "The struggle between Soul and Self, between mind and heart, which had long occupied Yeats, was solved in his old age. … In his *Last Poems* there is not even the stern majestic utterance of his mature work. He has flung the whole of himself into them and found at last a complete expression of his abundant complex nature" (214). These poems, albeit being often unabashedly assessed as lifeless due to the slackening of complex tension, are actually the re-articulation of the unity of the poet's self, which undergoes through a process of birth, decay, and rebirth.

The *Last poems* reflects the completeness of an already existing pattern that weaves together multiple threads around the divided self. The apparent unity only past with the present as Bhabatosh Chatterjee in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (2010) writes: "The last phase shows that the antinomy between the real and the ideal, between the body and the soul, between the self and the anti-self, between the recluse and the man of action, is not really resolved, but there is an attempt at transcendence with a cold, almost stoic detachment" (21). The same kind of unresolved conflict and stoic patience permeate the poetic texture of 'An Acre of Grass' which is about the repositioning of the self in the flow of time to sustain the creative passion beyond decay and desolation.

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II. Passion Re-Creates the 'OLD' Self

'An Acre of Grass', composed in November, 1936, draws impetus from Nietzsche, especially his *The Dawn of Day* (1881). The poem conveys a positive message for the decrepitude of old age by exploring the avenues to transcend the trammels of wrinkled flesh. The poetic persona yearns for a new lease of life and metaphorically transmutes his yearning into the creative energy that is quite equivalent to the 'grey spirit yearning in desire' (30) in Tennyson's dramatic monologue, 'Ulysses'. Ulysses wants to undertake a metaphoric journey driven by the unquenchable thirst for life beyond stasis: "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (70). His insatiable desire for vibrant life bears resemblance to the resilience of the poet's 'self' in 'An Acre of Grass'. 'An Acre of Grass' has co-textual and thematic connections with other poems of Yeats, for example, 'The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner,' 'Memory,' 'Broken Dreams,' 'Sailing to Byzantium,' and 'A Prayer for Old Age'. One can trace Yeats's preoccupation with the theme of decay and dullness of aging. Instead of succumbing to this decrepitude, the poetic persona desires for transcendence by reaffirming the persistence of his passion as in 'Broken Dreams':

> A young man when the old men are done talking
> Will say to an old man, 'Tell me of that lady
> The poet stubborn with his passion sang us
> When age might well have chilled his blood.' (16-19)

III. Correspondence between Creative Process and Human Existence

In 'An Acre of Grass,' Yeats weaves a particular pattern in a desperate bid to refashion his own 'self'.

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The first and the last two stanzas mark the consecutive stages i.e. the cyclic nature of human existence through the continuous process of birth, decay and rebirth. The first stanza is evocative of serenity, calmness, and quietude of old age. In the opening line, "Picture and book" (1) evoke a mood of calmness and peace, which is integrally related to the fulfilment of a happy conjugal life led by Yeats with George Hyde-Lees in an old farmhouse outside Rathfarnham. The familiar pictures on the walls of the house inject into his mind a wistful nostalgia for the books and portraits in the drawing-room of Lady Gregory at Coole Park. The family portraits not only intensify the sense of desolation and decay of the poetic persona while brooding over the present but also transmutes the unrestrained passion of the old artist into creative energy, which testifies the proposition of Vittorio Cigoli and Eugenia Scabini in their volume, *Family Identity: Ties, Symbols, and Transitions* (2006): "The turn of the 20th century saw a veritable upsurge in family painting in which the experiences of the artist – his feelings and emotions – were increasingly the center of attention" (11).

The personal imagery implies preservation as well as constriction of experience. The verb - 'remain' suggests the integrity of the 'self' through the continuity between the past and the present. The imagery used by Yeats is fresh and evocative of physical decrepitude as well as the incandescence of old age. The gaiety and cosiness of 'green grass' is juxtaposed with the sense of limitation implied by the word, 'acre.' The poet contemplates the loss of physical vitality: "Now strength of body goes; / Midnight, an old house / where nothing stirs but a mouse." (4-6) that echo the opening lines of the second stanza of 'Sailing to Byzantium': 'An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick' (9-10). Amidst the decay and loneliness, the poet yearns for the integration of his divided 'self' as his mind still vibrates with creative impulse symbolized by the "mouse" that stirs the "old house" of imagination.

The second stanza foregrounds the futility of the quietude of old age, which is unable to stir the creative impulse. Yeats focuses on the "calm resignation before the ineluctable physical process" (Chatterjee 132) that situates the 'self' in transition. Vivekananda Rai (1971) in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1971) observes:

> This 'quiet' at the end of life is certainly a strong temptation. The time warrants neither wild flights of imagination in the dream land, nor that philosophical activity of the mind which is busy organising and ordering the thoughts, impressions and impulses which constitute its raw material. Both these activities are futile to discover wisdom and truth. (176)

The poem becomes a form of psychological wrestling on the part of the poet with his own 'self'. He is struggling to regenerate the ecstasy through taking refuge in the memory of his robust 'self' as Janet Carsten traces subtle the link between the memory and the creative process of 'regeneration' in the "Introduction" to her edited volume, *Ghosts of Memory* (2007): "The intertwinings of memory and relatedness necessarily also involve creative processes of rearrangement of the past, and of regeneration" (16). The phrases - "loose imagination" and "mill of mind" (9-10) delve deep into his psychological intensity regarding the poet's passionate enterprise to create something sublime. A. Norman Jeffares (2001) reflects:

> Curiously enough, this was the fulfilment of a dream, for in an essay of 1917 (*Mythologies* p. 342) he envisaged a poet growing old discovering rhythms in the seasonal patterns like those of sleep, and so the poet would 'never awake out of vision'. But then he had remembered Wordsworth, 'withering into eighty years, honoured and empty witted, and thought of climbing to some waste room to 'find, forgotten by youth, some bitter crust.' (100)

IV. Acceptance of the Physical Process and its Transcendence

The third stanza negates all previous claims and implies a 'rebirth' of the 'self' that is akin to the Phoenix, which takes its flight from the ashes of 'rag and bone' (11). The realization of 'truth' rekindles the flame of imagination that brings mystical insight. The note of serenity prevalent in the first two stanzas gives way to frenzied ecstasy that initiates the process of refashioning of the 'self' beyond the shackles of space and time: "Grant me an old man's frenzy, / Myself must I remake" (13-14) which is "the final comment both on his life and on his poetry" (Chatterjee 23). The dynamic verbs in the last two stanzas, 'remake,' 'beat,' 'Obeyed,' 'pierce,' and 'shake' are mimetic of the relentless process of creativity stirred by imagination which in turn moulds the poet's self (Greek word *poiesis* means 'maker'). J. R. Mulryne in the essay entitled, "The *Last Poems*" reflects that "frenzy is known imaginatively in the poetic act; writing the poem involves a vicarious expenditure of imaginative energy …" (148). The composition of poetry follows the process – composition, decomposition, and re-composition which corresponds to the cycle of human existence - birth, decay, and rebirth. Northrop Frye in an essay entitled, "The Rising of the Moon: A Study of *A Vision*" (1965) points out that "the whole cycle of nature, of life and death and rebirth which man has dreamed, becomes a single gigantic image" (277) which is evocative of the sublime creation of the imagining poet, its 'maker.'

The poet desires to assume the persona of fierce old men who symbolize joy, gaiety, and passionate energy – Timon[1], Lear[2], and Blake[3]. Yeats craves for the same mystical insight that bridges the past with the present and extends the 'self' into the 'other'. This symbolic interconnection defies loneliness and situates the 'self' in a web of relationships. The intensity of passion and tragic gaiety rejuvenate the self through the creative process and continue the recurring cycle of birth, decay, and rebirth. The physical decay

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leads to heroic defiance of the inexorable fate by a subjective artist like the Italian painter - Michael Angelo[4], a recurrent persona in poems like 'Under Ben Bulben' and 'Long Legged Fly,' who reposes his faith in endless creativity and continuity. Vikramaditya Rai (1971) points out: "Things are doomed to pass away, but their death is not the final word, because it will be followed by a creative process which will bring them back into existence" (164). The self undergoes the process of refashioning through the epiphanic realization and the acceptance of the rhythm of the universal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

V. Transmutation of Passion and the Refashioning of the Self

What enthralls the poetic persona, is that unrestrained passion which supersedes reason. Blake is that colossal figure who assaults the citadel of truth with the sublimity of his mystic perception. Yeats's frenzied vision penetrates through the mysteries and unfolds the truth in the moment of intense contemplation as Bowra notes: "It was truth, uninhibited and unrestrained, that Yeats now desired" (215). His poetic enterprise is to carve the intensity of his passion into a series of creative symbols. By invoking Blake, the poetic persona desires to assume that subjective position from where he can summon truth at his own will: "Who beat upon the wall/ Till truth obeyed his call" (17-18).

For Yeats, the penetrating vision of the raging mind transmutes the tragic perception into a personal symbol of exhilaration. He finds solace in Blake's mystic perception as encapsulated in 'the most beautiful of all letters' addressed to his friend - George Cumberland, Junior:

> I have been very near the Gates of Death, & have returned a very weak, & an Old Man feeble & tottering, but not in Spirit & Life, not in The Real Man The Imagination which Liveth for Ever. In that I am stronger & stronger as this Foolish Body decays. (Malins 61)

The mystic consciousness of tragic gaiety transcends the decrepitude of old age and reinforces the rejuvenation of the self through creative re-composition. As a corollary to the processual transition, the 'eagle' of his psyche substitutes the 'mouse' of his consciousness as a creative stimulus: "An old man's eagle mind" (24). The steady and agile eagle is the creative symbol for the unrestrained flight of imagination that challenges the quietude and stability – the prevalent signs of senescence. The mystic perception ushers in consciousness about the potentialities of the creative 'will' that reinforces the continuous process of passionate refashioning of the poet's 'self.'

Notes

1. *Timon* is a misanthrope in *Timon of Athens* by William Shakespeare and the subject of Lucian's finest dialogue, *Timon, or The Misanthrope*. His unrestrained passion and frenzy turn him into a terrible figure who abhors mankind and dwells in solitude while taking recourse to diatribe against 'the rotten society'.
2. *King Lear* of Britain is the titular passionate hero of Shakespeare's tragedy, *King Lear*. The 'filial ingratitude' of his daughters ironically paves the way for his transformation. In a frenzied state, he defies the furious storm and all the might of the wicked world by his indomitable 'will'.
3. *William Blake* (1757-1827), often considered a Pre-Romantic poet, is known for his mysticism and picturesque engraving. Blake views poetry and the other forms of art not just as the 'mirror of life' but as the gateway to spiritual consciousness. Yeats traces in Blake's writings his idea of 'paired opposites'- soul and self, body and soul, and 'subjective' and 'objective'.
4. *Michael Angelo* (1474-1564), an Italian painter, sculptor, architect, and poet, was born in Tuscany. Like Yeats, he is a subjective artist whose penetrating vision unravels the spiritual truth beyond the trammels of flesh. His art is evocative of heroic grandeur and passionate gaiety.

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