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**Aging and Death in William butler Yeats's
Last poems**

by

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Abstract

Yeats was many things; theatre director, amateur philosopher, senator, amateur scholar, dramatist, essayist, even a literary critic – but above all a poet who told us more about the human condition than any other poet of his age. The fear of loss of all these roles has been recapitulated with the progress of time. Yet, in his last two years, Yeats dwelt on recreating himself in language. He wanted to make of himself a piece of linguistic creation by reviving every word he was to write so as not to show any sign of dwindling or deteriorating.

Could Yeats develop a new style when he felt close to the end of his life? Could he transcend his past loss; especially his controversial love with Maud Gonne? What about his consciousness of the end? Did he still have the ability to express his feelings and nearness to the death? This paper tries to investigate these questions in Yeats's six representative poems of the whole volume; that is, the poems he wrote months before his death in January 28, 1939. *Under Ben Bulbin* (Sep. 1938), *The Statues* (June 1938), *What then? The Man and The Echo* (October 1938), *The Black Tower* (Jan. 1939).

Keywords: aging... death... Yeats... last poems... poetry...

آخر العمر والموت في

القصائد الأخيرة لوليام بتلر بيتس

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مُلخَص

كان الشاعر الأيرلندي وليام بتلر بيتس (1865 – 1939) شاعرًا كبيرًا ومخرجًا مسرحيًا وفيلسوفًا هاويًا وعضو مجلس أمة وباحث كبير في العلوم الإنسانية وكاتب مسرحي وكاتب مقال وناقد أدبي. تلك كانت أوار كبيرة كان يؤديها وليام بتلر بيتس، وقرب النهاية، عندما وصل إلى سن الثالثة والسبعين كتب ما يُعرف بالقصائد الأخيرة، والنقاد يدرسون فيها آثار السن وانتظار الموت في هذه المرحلة من العمر. فهل خشي بيتس خسارة هذه الأدوار كلها وخسارة الحياة نفسها، والقصائد توحى بأنه استقبل النهايات بكثير

من الوقار والهدوء والرواقية التي لا تتوفر إلا عند الشعراء الأفاضل. هل استطاع بيتس الوصول إلى هوية جديدة في قصائده الأخيرة التي كتبها قبل الوفاة بأشهر قليلة ربما شهر أو شهرين؟ هل استطاع الوصول إلى أسلوب متميز عن أسلوبه القديم؟ هل كان واعياً جداً بالنهاية وكانت تشغله هذه المسألة حتى وفاته؟ هذا البحث يناقش كل هذه المسائل من خلال تسليط الضوء على قصائد بيتس الأخيرة التي كتبها ربما قبل الرحيل بأشهر قليلة، وهي: تحت صخرة بنبولين والتماثيل والرجل والصدى والبرج الأسود. لقد كان بيتس في الواقع يريد أن يجعل من نفسه لغة إبداعية خالصة دون أن يعبأ بما تجلبه الشيخوخة من حسرة وندم على ما فات. لم نصل في قصائده الأخيرة على درجة درجات الضعف البشري أمام الموت، وربما أحسنا بشيء كثير من التفاؤل، لأن بيتس حاول أن يجعل قصائده تماثيل فنية يهدف بها إلى الخلود.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمر - الموت - بيتس - القصائد الأخيرة - الشعر ..

Introduction:

Getting old is an occasion for writers to reveal more about themselves, and disclose more about their sufferings. Moreover, the experience of aging and getting closer to the end prompts some writers to develop a new style, and urges them to transcend their unfortunate losses. Writers think of death more than ordinary people, and write about it from time to time. When they get old they become more conscious of the end. Nevertheless, they possess the ability to express their feelings about the nearness of death more bravely, more amusingly, and more elegantly. Wyatt Brown writes:

In some cases, late life depression, bereavement, or worries about aging and death prompt the change, indicating that artists are more able than most of us to voice their deepest fears. No matter how dramatic the change may be, however, important continuities also remain (*Aging And Gender*, p. 7).

This paper tries to investigate how Yeats's *Last Poems* provide the reader with coherent information about his reaction to getting old, and demonstrate his response to the proximity of death and the effect of this proximity upon his productivity. Exploring this topic in Yeats's *Last Poems* improves our understanding of his poetry, and sharpens our awareness of his literature and of human experience in general.

Keywords: *aging... death... Yeats... last poems... poetry...*

Although, at least in quantity, Yeats's writings do not seem to pay any attention to life course issues, the reader can sense how death became the principal theme in his *Last Poems*, and how he tried to leap over the pains and delicacies of life's end. There is no proof that Yeats had shown a particular softness in the face of death. On the contrary, he showed special stillness even in the face of imminent extinction (at the age of seventy three). In his last year Yeats's mind remained passionate and zealous. Aging did not slow down his creative powers; it spurred him on. The composition of *Last Poems* offered him the chance to construct a new life to compensate him for losing love and health. In his *Last Poems* Yeats seems to have started anew, in a bold attempt to overcome death and recreate his identity.

Losing power to write did not haunt him during the last year of his life. Yeats wrote *Under Ben Bulbin* five weeks before his death, and wrote *The Statues* a week before he died. He has been given the ability to express his distress, and got the catharsis he wanted in the act of this expression. Frank Tuohy writes:

Until his death, Yeats's poetry was to depend equally on three elements which had been with him from the start of his career: his vision of time and eternity, his personal affections and his relationship to Ireland (p. 214).

The richness of Yeats's literary career in the last year of his life reveals the nature of his battle against death. He wrote more than thirty-seven poems and plays. He was determined to reconstruct his talent and modify his creativity. He did not suffer from mental decay, of the loss of power to write. What really haunted him was a fear of death. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's words are informative here: "He who pretends to look on death without fear lies. All men are afraid of dying, this is the great law of sentient beings, without which the entire human species would soon be destroyed" (*Enright*, 22). This fear of death and losing energy preoccupied Yeats when he reached sixty. His deep worries about aging and loss of virility is observable in his desire to renew his health through a dangerous operation. Frank Tuohy mentions that:

In the late spring of 1934, Yeats underwent the Steinach operation, a fashionable rejuvenation treatment through minor surgery intended to cause increased growth of the interstitial cells of the testicles (206-207).

"The operation promises to rejuvenate the whole body, restore health, and revive flagging mental energies. ...Yeats felt his poetic energies flagging; and he attributed this decline to aging" (*Aging and Gender*, 20-21). According to Yeats's critics and editors, the heading *Last Poems* is applied to the poems he wrote between 1936 and 1939. Curtis Bradford states that the year 1939 was "truly *annus mirabilis* for Yeats, for during it he not only composed or finished his *Last Poems*, he also wrote *On The Boiler*, *Purgatory*, and *The Death of Cuchulain*" (*Yeats At Work*, 76).

Yeats's attitude towards aging and death will be investigated in six representative poems of the whole volume; that is, the poems he wrote months before his death in January 28, 1939. *Under Ben Bulbin* (Sep. 1938), *The Statues* (June 1938), *What then? The Man and The Echo* (October 1938), *The Black Tower* (Jan. 1939). The reason is simple: these poems record more pertinently the last phase of the poet's life, and chronicles his scrupulous attempt to achieve his final victory over death and decrepitude, his struggle to "embody truth in action" as he says in a letter written a few weeks before his death:

It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to pull into a phrase, I say: "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life.

(*The Letters*, p. 922).

This last-text consciousness is explicit in *Last Poems*, in which he embodies his feeling that he is coming close to the end of his life. He reproduces his antipathy toward aging and decay. This antipathy is not a mere fear of death; rather, it is associated with a deep sense of the proximity of the end and the social mortification that ensues. It is his farewell to the world in which he played an important role. Yeats was many things; theatre director, amateur philosopher, senator, amateur scholar, dramatist, essayist, even a literary critic – but above all a poet who told us more about the human condition than any other poet of his age. The fear of loss of all these roles has been recapitulated with the progress of time. Yet, in his last two years, Yeats dwelt on recreating himself in language. He wanted to make of himself a piece of linguistic creation by reviving every word he was to write so as not to show any sign of dwindling or deteriorating.

Through using his full creative capacity, he made his last years endurable. He dedicated all his energies to an attempt to arrest age and mortality. It was obvious that he was making himself ready for the inevitable end. He decided to present to his readers a mythical Yeats, an old man who has learned a lot from experience. His personality is recreated in language and his identity is established through stylistic innovations unfamiliar in his earlier poetry. He believed that writing is the only constancy through which he reinvents himself after every uprooting. He assumed that language is representational and incarnative, and that it is a way of glorifying and idealizing grief.

The reader of *Last Poems* can perceive Yeats's concentration on the theme of death and all its overtones: decay, decline, disintegration, distress, dissatisfaction with the present, summoning of the past, wounds in a last battle, life in the underworld, and form versus formlessness. He knew that death is unavoidable; but the death he sought is the death of the tragic hero. His *Last Poems* are devoted to this theme. The book includes poems which stand as his strategies for finding a way to transcend death and get rid of the devastating preoccupation with. Stallworthy writes: "They represent the last identification of the poet with the heroic defeat of his hero, expressing the tragic exaltation of gaiety which I find to be the dominant theme of the whole collection" (*Last Poems*, 99).

The gaiety with which Yeats received his final life period is the gaiety of the tragic heroes in the face of imminent defeat. The present and the future give place to the past. Most of the themes in the *Last Poems* are revisiting themes; Yeats revisits the past, remembers his earlier symbols, reviews the history of the world, and also returns to the old themes and subjects. “He now creates a gravestone to commemorate his death in ‘Under Ben Bulben’, and writes his own epitaph for it. He is closer to his friends in the grave than to the inadequate living” (Ellman, 2006). He is now more aware than ever of his loss, and determined to make this awareness a means of transforming life and style. Even his choice of his tomb to be *Under Ben Bulben* is an attempt to stick to the permanent. Both the place and the epitaph in the poem offer immortality to Yeats and give him security from mortality.

In *Under Ben Bulben*, Yeats comes closer to the recognition of the reality of death. Now his journey has reached the top; the full extent of age and the apogee of creation. He is now among the rocks of the wasteland where no one came back delighted. The poem dramatizes the contrast between the poet of *The Wild Swans at Coole* which “*delight men’s eyes*” and the poet of *Under Ben Bulben* where “*stone and rock replace the water that dominated the poetic landscape of the early poems.*” Curtis Bradford also writes:

The discontented artist is now dead and is speaking to us from the tomb, and what he speaks is his poetic last will and testament. ... Yeats speaks *Under Ben Bulben* from the tomb; he speaks all his *Last Poems* from the tomb. Taken together they constitute his farewell to life and art. ‘*Under Ben Bulben*’ introduces the principal themes found in *Last Poems*: the need for a new faith, however esoteric; the decline of the West, which now involves even the bodies and minds of the various European stocks; the artist’s double duty in the face of this decline is to “Bring the soul of man to God / Make him fill the cradles right” (*Last Poems*, 16).

Under Ben Bulben is meant to be a piece of creation so as to undo the notion that old people lose their creative skills because of time, or that age inhibits their creative powers. One of the main themes in the poem, as well as in all the poems of the collection, is the progress of time and death, the rise and fall of civilizations which go in line with his history of historical cycles, and which works as the objective correlative or the equivalence of his own loss of health and physical power because of age. Richard Ellman writes:

His main preoccupation in the poetry of his last years was with death. Two attitudes towards it especially engrossed him. The first is that death is man-made and illusory: ‘The grave diggers’, *On The Boiler*

announce, 'have no place to bury us but in the human mind'. He puts this more spectacularly in *Under Ben Bulben*:

Whether man die in his bed
Or the rifle knock him dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst mean has to fear.
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again. (*212-213*).

The reader understands Yeats's constant efforts to claim virility and youth, to triumph over mortality and decay, and to remake himself into words. He decides to cast a cold eye on life and death because death is now changed into another form of life. It is the life in art that he glorifies in most of his later poetry. Being a great dreamer, Yeats has the ability to theorize his grief and make it an abstraction rather than a concretion. There is no proof, biographical or literary, that Yeats had fallen into melancholia in his last years. On the contrary, he possessed creative euphoria that accompanied him till his death in January 1939.

On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

The last line produces this obsession with age that was always accompanied with lack of power and inability. The exclamation at the end of the last line signals Yeats's outcry against time as a destructive agent. Perhaps it is an outcry against an assertion of horsemanship he himself doubts. "The horse for Yeats was a symbol of spirited and courageous nobility, and time and again he refers to the good horsemanship of those whom he admires – such as Robert Gregory, Con Markiewicz, and George Pollefen" (*Last Poems*, 230). Nevertheless, Yeats's decision in this poem is to transcend death and mortality, to fulfill a union with the immortals he mentions in the second stanza:

Measurement began our might:
Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
Forms that gather Phidias wrought.

Michael Anglo left a proof

On the Sistine Chapel roof,

The Egyptian artists, Phidias, and Michelangelo knew how to transcend death and achieve immortality. “As Michelangelo, though dead, continues to influence the living with heroic images ‘On the Sistine Chapel roof’, so Yeats speaks from ‘*Under Ben Bulben*’ ” (*Last Poems*, 242). His exhortations to the Irish poets in the fifth stanza warn them against time. He admonishes them to master their art so as to sing of the unchangeable, and not to sing of the time-bound:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.

Yeats’s advice reveals the pretension of knowledge and wisdom aged people usually assume in themselves in their last moments. The word ‘now’ discloses his resentment over the loss of youth and his own problem with a present that marginalizes him. “In old age we hover between integrity and despair; and wisdom must heed those tremors – the fear of death, the remnants of discordance – which threaten to disturb the integrity of the self ” (*Aging and Gender*, 218-219).

Harold Bloom calls *Under Ben Bulben*, *The Man and Echo*, *Cuchulain Comforted*, *The Black Tower* and *The Statues* the death poems because they “carry on from the poet’s desperate resolve to begin in the heart,” and because they “allow a last view both at Yeats’s characteristic achievements and his failures” (460). Yeats completed *The Man and The Echo* (July-October, 1938) after receiving the news of the death of Olivia Shakespeare. The letter he sent to Dorothy Wellesley reveals his stoic reception of the tragedy of death. The death of his ex-wife and best friend was sudden, but his surrender to mortality, though expected, is not accepted:

October 8th, Dear Dorothy,

Yesterday morning I had tragic news. Olivia Shakespeare had died suddenly. For more than forty years she has been the center of my life in London and during all that time we had never had a quarrel, sadness sometimes but never a difference (*The Letters*, p. 930).

Olivia Shakespeare was Yeats's wife for a year or so, but she became his best friend after their separation. Yeats suffered from so many deaths in the course of his life. He lost his mother in 1900, lost John Synge in 1909, George Pollefen in 1910, his father in 1922, Lady Gregory in 1932, then Olivia Shakespeare in 1938. He also suffered from emotional losses: Maud Gonne refused to marry him, and then her adopted daughter Iesult rejected him. Yeats wrote about these losses, fought to change them into theory. His poetry in general, and the *Last Poems* in particular, is subjective; in his introduction to his own work he wrote in 1938:

A poet writes always about his personal life; in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria (*Callan, 40*).

These losses put him face to face with death and drove him to an inevitable pessimism and change. "In his book *Griefs and Discontents: The Forces of Change*, Gregory Rochlin argues that our lives are shaped and reshaped by losses which are succeeded by restitution. As the subtitle of his book declares, loss can be a force of change (*Aging and gender, 82*). It is true that Yeats survived all these losses, and tried to dispense with any social privilege by art. He managed to survive his loss and live with it instead of trying to get rid of it. Kathleen Woodward writes:

In loss and at the upper limit in old age, we very well may not want to "free" ourselves from the emotional bonds, which have secured us to others we have loved so that we may "invest" our energy elsewhere. We may not detach ourselves from our losses. Instead, we may live with them. And then die with them. If grief is painful it is also absorbing. Further it may be sustaining. Even more, it may be transforming – of thought, of style (*Ibid., 94*).

The septuagenarian Yeats lived with his losses; he did not detach himself from them. Instead, his grief became sustaining and transforming of his thought and style. In *The Man and The Echo* Yeats's grief is changed into a heroic mood, mortality is changed into heroic ecstasy. He takes his seat on the top of a mountain as prophets do, looking for enlightenment, reviewing his past and meditating his future. It is obvious that *the Man* in the poem is Yeats himself:

In a cleft that's christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
The broad noon has never lit,

And shout a secret to the stone.
All that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that women's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked ?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

Echo

Lie down and die.

Jon Stallworthy who studied the poem's manuscripts writes, in his book *Yeats: Vision And Revision*, that "the alt is an Irish word for cliff, identified by Sheelah Kerby as 'a deep chasm one mile long and only thirty feet broad, bounded on each side by steep cliffs and overgrown with trees and shrubs', on the south-west of Knocknarea" (60). This means that the poet now reached the top of the mountain at the end of a long wearisome journey, old and ill and seeking answers for a few metaphysical questions he carried with him unanswered. Or this means that Yeats, in effect, is a dying man talking from the grave. Yeats's identification with the dead is a sign of his desire to merge life with death, to achieve this union between spirit and life that helps to transcend the pain of aging.

The death image is supported by the night image which sets forth Yeats's own dilemma with the final moment. The man '*at the bottom of a pit*' that '*has never been lit*' lies '*awake night after night,*' '*old and ill.*' His longing for more knowledge about his art is frustrated by the voice of the echo that advises him to "lie down and die." The night image mirrors the grave image, something he reiterates in all the poems of the collection.

Aging and loss of vigor are dealt with stoically; this is suggested by Yeats's intimacy with the chinamen with whom he is connected in his new mood. Stoicism in the face of death is not inherent in Yeats's nature; this is evident in his fervent outcry against ageing and illness that he tries to alleviate by making

radical changes in the poem. The first draft objected more to death and ageing. In its first plan, the poem runs, without punctuation, as follows:

I seem now that I am old & ill
Seems to have done but harm until
Lie awake night after night
And never get the answer right
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot
Or did my spoken words perplex
That man that women now a wreck
I say that I have done some good
As well as evil but in this mood
I see but evil until I lie
Sleepless would lie down & and lie

Echo

Lie down & die.

The last line in particular stresses Yeats's desperate mood and brings out his unsatisfied spirit. Images of death are dominant enough to be sure that the persona is actually speaking from the grave. "The christened alt", "At the bottom of a pit", "The broad moon had never lit." This is supported by the allusions to Hamlet in "... There is no relief / in a bodkin or disease," and to Macbeth in "But body gone he sleeps no more, / And still his intellect grows sure."

Yeats admired Hamlet's resoluteness and self-possession. "Hamlet must have been, for Yeats, a symbol of his own isolation in an increasingly hostile world" (*Yeats's Shakespeare*, 4). Both Hamlet and Macbeth were facing a death situation, and both of them received their tragic situations with resoluteness and self-possession: "to be or not to be," "She should have died hereafter." The rocky voice in the last stanza reminds us of the rocky voice of the ghost of Hamlet's father, and the voice that Macbeth hears after murdering his guest: "I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep." This voice echoes in Yeats's last stanza:

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face

One another in this place?
But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock,
And stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

Age is the rocky voice that murdered Yeats's sleep. It is the 'great night' in which he cannot rejoice. Being sure of departure, he does not know whether he will rejoice in his afterlife abode or he will find the consolation he seeks. "But even the consolation of this afterlife is denied him by the despairing echo: "Into the night'. Refusing to accept its grim conclusion he throws back in a beseeching question, the 'night' that the Echo had written at him " (Stallworthy, p. 66).

In *The Statues*, Yeats shows how he tried to remake himself into a perpetual artistic image so that he may escape the mortal decay of the flesh. His concern with ageing and death is perceived in the poem's connection to Maude Gonne, and in its lack of rhythmical exactness. F. A. C. Wilson writes that Yeats had this passage about Maude Gonne in the background when he wrote *The Statues*:

Her face, like the face of some Greek Statue, showed little thought, as though a Scopas had measured and long calculated consorted with Egyptian sages and mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might face even Artemisia's sepulchral image with a living norm. But in that ancient civilization abstract [sc. 'objective'] thought scarce existed, while she rose but partially and for a moment outraging abstraction (*Last Poems*, 171).

The ancient Egyptian sculptors put the theories of Pythagoras into action and became, more importantly, the theoreticians. The image that the poem describes is Maude Gonne's image. The poem frees it from the bad effects of time and changes it into an immortal picture to rescue it from mortality. This conception of survival through art is epitomized with considerable solemnity in this poem; the hope of living on usefully in the minds of later generations has been duly fulfilled. J.R. Mulryne writes:

To transform Maud's beauty to the condition of sculptor, and to pare away altogether the natural time-dominated woman is to gather that beauty into the appropriate imaginative idiom of last Poems. 'Body' by espousal of the sculpted image becomes 'soul'.

Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?
His numbers, though they moved or seemed to move
In marble or in bronze, lacked character.

(*Ibid.*, 144).

Yeats gave Maude Gonne's beauty its character and true value by immortalizing it in his well-written verses. What is obvious here is the tendency of an old man toward the idealization and glorification of those whom he loved and lost. This attitude towards his love constitutes, in fact, his final septuagenarian attitude toward love and art. According to Yeats, "art creates civilizations rather than the reverse" (*Vendler*, 112). The poem is written in *ottava rima* that links it with a long line of Yeatsian tradition that deals with aging and death (*A Prayer For My Daughter, Sailing to Byzantium, The Tower, Among School Children, A Dialogue of Self and Soul, Byzantium, The Circus Animals' Desertion, The Municipal Gallery Revisited.*)

In *The Statues* Yeats compares himself with the sculptors of the east and the west as well as the sculptors of Dublin. The artist is given the right to be immortal because it is he who gives 'character' to the abstractions made by scientists like Pythagoras. These abstractions cannot be alive today had it not been for the passion of the artists. Artists alone can triumph over death and attain immortality.

No! Greater than Pythagoras, for the men
That with a mallet or a chisel modeled these
Calculations that look but causal flesh, put down
All Asiatic vague immensities,
And not the banks of oars that swam upon
The many-headed foam at Salamis.

It can be suggested that retrospection became a more unmistakable characteristic in Yeats's *Last Poems*. He wrote *The Statues* with the image of Maude Gonne in the back of his mind. Maude Gonne has been transformed all through the *Last Poems* into a statue, a bronze head, a sculpted image, a lapis lazuli. "The book is peopled by a series of arrested figures, statue-like; but not inert; these are Yeats's personal archetypes' by imaginative knowledge of whom the poet becomes endowed with 'joy' (*Last Poems*, 143). These images have helped him to overcome the changing force of time and achieve the fixity of immortal art. The poem also puts forward Yeats's beliefs in immortality in which he is close to Goethe who says that:

Man should believe in immortality; he has a right to the
belief; it meets the wants of his nature, and he may also

believe in the promises of religion. But for a philosopher to attempt to deduce the immortality of the soul from a legend is very weak and ineffectual. For me, the eternal existence of my soul is proved from my ideas of activity. If I work on unceasingly till my death, nature is bound to give me another form of being when the present one can no longer sustain my spirit (*Quoted in Enright, 168*).

In *What Then?* Yeats strives to hide his restlessness with age and the nearness of death under the stoicism which nostalgic remembrance suggests. The early stages of his life are remembered together with his later ones. The title question “*What Then?*” reappears in the poem relentlessly to stress the poet’s frustration with life’s ambition. The allusion to Plato discloses the poet’s doubt that what he harvested at the end of a difficult life is immortal. Plato argues that ideas alone are real, and that sensible objects are mere images of ideas. True knowledge according to Plato is of the intelligible world. We know forms because they are eternal and unchanging. The intelligible world because it is eternal, unchanging, knowable, is the ultimate reality, the sensible world is merely an ephemeral image, sensible things merely inadequate copies of forms. The poem celebrates form and disregards the objects of matter, the worldly items: fame, toil, friendship, his happy dreams, his house and children. All these things are done and grow old, what really remains is the poetry he wrote. The answer to the recurrent question of the poem is that art lives because it is the source of ideas and not the origin of ephemeral objects. This is the recurrent theme in the last poems.

But the persistence of Plato’s question to the last line is an indication of the poet’s distress because of the barrenness of this life and because of the unfruitfulness of all that he has labored for, even if he had struggled to bring his life to the point of perfection.

The work is done, ’grown old he thought,
“According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought’;
{But louder sang that ghost, “What then?” }

What strengthens this reading is the use of the cabbage image in the third stanza.

All his happier dreams came true –
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
Poets and Wits about him drew;

{What then?' sang Plato's ghost. "What then?"} }

A cabbage has come to symbolize the most tightly furled and withdrawal member of that vegetable kingdom which the medieval placed lowest in the hierarchy of organic beings (*Blythe, p. 12*). Yeats has not displayed "cabbaginess," although he implied the horror that he one day might. In "What Then?", he is in a middle way between despair and gaiety. The repeated question keeps him in this middle area between life and death.

Yeats is also concerned with the theme of aging and the physical death it brings in *The Black Tower*. *The Black Tower* was his last poem; he wrote it just a week before his death. In it, he deals with aging from a political perspective. Yeats increasingly turned to political themes in his later poetry; "he is no longer", writes Ellman in his forward to Louis MacNeice's *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, "the utterly individualistic and egoistic poet he was in his early poems. Now we no longer see him living in the private world he was living in his early poems" (1). MacNeice acknowledged, however, that Yeats, after having in youth perpetrated 'luxury-writing', had now come closer to MacNeice's own ideal of a poetry which should be 'functional', which should convoke things, people and political events" (*Ibid., 1-2*) *The Black Tower* is a lonely old place in which old people live without any desire to acquaint themselves with other people, waiting for someone who died long ago. The reader can easily identify the place as well as the darkness in it with Yeats and his mind. Stallworthy mentions that the poem was inspired by a quotation from E.K. Chamber's book: *Arthur of Britain*:

Beneath the Castle of Swingshields, near the Roman wall in Northumberland, are vaults where Arthur sleeps with Guinevere and all his court and a pack of hounds. He waits until one blows the horn which lies ready on a table, and cuts a garter placed beside it with a sword of stone (*Ibid., 198*).

The symbolism of the poem concentrates on those men who wait and the old cock that catches small birds in the morning. The images of aging and senescence are sprinkled all through the poem. The men who live in this black tower are Yeats and all his fellow artists who reached senility. They are now stripped of everything the soldier needs. Although they are old, destitute and needy, they stand firm and obdurate.

Say that the men of this black Tower
Though they but feed as the goatherd feeds
Their money spent, their wine gone sour
Lack nothing that a soldier needs.

The cock that catches small birds predicts that their king will come and save his city. Ellman suggests:

The cock may be fairly safely presumed to be the poetic imagination, subsisting now (in old age) on small fare, and the men at arms the practical, logical part of the mind, which considers its comrade, the cock, 'a lying hound'. The king is the epitome of all dreams, and the enemy, who counsels expediency and 'realism', the epitome of dream shatters" (202).

Some critics notice that the men-at-arms stand for Yeats's refusal to surrender life. The image of tomb and death is constantly recurrent all through the poem. Like most of the poems in the collection *The Black Tower* reproduces Yeats's helplessness toward the end, trying to help himself with a defensive vision. "The dying poet is not only thinking of his heroic 'fathers', but of himself, as he writes: but there in the tomb it will be all dark" (*Last Poems*, 213).

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.
There in the tomb the black grows blacker,
But wind comes up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

This persistent repetition of the tomb image does not help us to comprehend self-possession or tranquility in Yeats's reception of death. The repetition is a sign of the poet's inner distress and fright. However, Yeats could control his fervor through unruffled and solemn images and rhythm. Aging and senescence prevail throughout the whole poem; the tower is an old black tower, the people who inhabit the tower are old, the cock who claims that he heard the king's horn is an old cook, the clown who appears with the cook is called *Old Tom*. The poet describes the cook as "*lying hound*," and describes *Old Tom* who claims that he has heard something upon the hill as "*crazy because of his old age*." One can presume that all these symbols stand for Yeats alternatively. He is the old king, the old fool, the old cook and the old tower. The poem begins and ends in the dark tomb which gets blacker while the poet finds his place inside:

There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,

Although the repetition of the line signifies Yeats's reconciliation to death, it echoes his deep fear of the grave, of being put into a coffin and buried under

earth. He did not think of himself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it. The composure he espouses is not true as this line sheds doubt on it. In the *Last Poems* Yeats pretends to be like Shakespeare's heroes in his resolution and composure. He is also, like them, on the verge of death. The *Last Poems* is a collection of elegies dedicated to mourn a love story that age brought to its end, to mourn Yeats's unsuccessful love for Maud Gonne, or to mourn the imminent extinction of Yeats's dream. Yeats's love of his dream and love of Maud merge into an integrated whole. Richard Adlington denies that Maude's rejection of Yeats's wooing was due to her political passion. He rightly suggests, "that she was quick to realize that Yeats was in love with his dream of the perfect woman rather than the woman herself" (p. 30).

Yeats's septuagenarian poetry is burdened with the symptoms of old age that daubed this later poetry with some minor limitations. Of these symptoms was his dissatisfaction with the young generation: Eliot, Louis MacNeice, W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and others. Yeats was at odds with modern poetry. "He once told James Stephens: "I am not interested in poetry, I'm only interested in what I'm trying to do myself. ... Out of any ten poets who are pushed on you by literary ladies, nine are not good, and the tenth isn't much good" (Tuohy, 209). He dismissed Owen saying: "*He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick*" (*Ibid.*) His rejection of the contemporary literary movement is evident in his exhortation to Irish poets, in *Under Ben Bulbin*, to learn their trade from the poets of earlier times because he belonged to the tradition of Milton, Shakespeare and Shelly (*Yeats's Shakespeare*, 23-24). On the other hand, the young poets showed narcissism when they called themselves the young generation and claimed superiority by the modernity they assumed. The relation between Yeats and those younger poets was analogous to Lear's Regan who admonishes him:

O, sir, you are old!
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine. You should be rul'd, and led
By some discretion that discerns your state
Better than you yourself.

[Act II, Scene IV.]

This younger generation attacked Yeats's *Purgatory* on its publication and staging in 1939; "W.H. Auden found the play "worthless" and Louis MacNeice thought it a flat failure" (Tuohy, 219).

Another sign of Yeats's problem with age in these poems is the retrospective and meditative mode that is particular to the last state of any writer's life cycle. Yeats became more reflective and confessional in the *Last Poems*, more nostalgic and remembering of old friends and concerns.

This meditative mode of writers is characterized by a quiet openness to the primal realities of human experience which allows them simply to be, to disclose themselves before the gaze of the whole mind. ... The meditative mode is especially pronounced in the aged for an obvious reason: the writer's task has always required the exercise of the tendency to augment that faculty or disposition in us all (Aging And Gender, pp. 205-206).

Yeats's frequent returns to old concerns in many of the last poems are due to a swell in the meditative mode which was also a characteristic of his earlier poems. However, the reader notices that this meditative mode undergoes a change from a dominant sense of panic and dread to stoicism and self-possession. In *The Second Coming*, *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, and *Meditation on Time of Civil War* he also deals with decay of civilizations and the anarchy of the present. In *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, for example, he says:

The night can sweat with terror as before
Who pieced our thousand into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

In *The Second Coming*, he is more pessimistic:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;
.....

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

In *Last Poems*, Yeats deals with the same subject with the 'gaiety' that he thinks will 'transfigure all that dread', and with the hope that the turning of the historical cycles will bring back the gyre he liked. This time he shows unexpected composure and self-possession in expressing his attitude toward the last cycle in his life. In *The Man and The Echo* Yeats's meditative mood is merged into the nostalgic mood that grew with the passage of time. In this

poem, his soul comes back from the underworld and meditates on the experience of life again:

While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Walking he thanks the Lord that he
Has body and its stupidity, ...
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

In *Under Ben Bulbin* Yeats grows more meditative:

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul
And ancient Ireland knew it all
Whether man die in bed
Or the rifle knock dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.

Another accompaniment of old age that is evident in *Yeats's Last Poems* is emotional mutability. In *The Statues*, *The Black Tower*, *The Man and The Echo*, and *Under Ben Bulbin* the reader notices his gay reception of death. He became more confessional and desperate although his despair is stoic and restrained. While he catches a last look at his deceased friends in the gallery, his description of his emotions comes solemn and unflustered. The reader of these poems notices the difference between Yeats's flaming emotions. While he asserts the discrepancy of the deadness of life and the vigor of art, he asserts at the end of each poem that art and life will be conjoined, even inseparable.

In *Last Poems*, the reader also notices certain unevenness of rhythmical consistency. It can be deduced that in his last period, the Steinach operation would give him new energy, but it could not bring back his first refinement of ear: the *ottava rima* is now characterized by rhythmical crudities of which is evident in the first stanza of *The Statues* where the distribution of rhythm is not as symmetrical as say in *A Prayer For My Daughter* or *Sailing To Byzantium*. The caesural distribution is unfair; the iambs are thwarted by anapests and pyrrhics to give the tone of unjustified sadness, the rhyme scheme is often incomplete. Yeats's use of incomplete rhyme in his *Last Poems* is frequent.

x / x x / x / x x / x /
 Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?
 x / x / x / x / x /
 His numbers, though they moved or seemed to move
 x / x x x / / / x x
 In marble or in bronze, lacked character.
 X / x / / x x x / x /
 But boys and girls, pale from the imagined love
 x / x x / / / x /
 Of solitary bed, knew what they were,
 X / x x / / x x x /
 That passion could bring character enough,
 X / x x / x / / x /
 And pressed at midnight in some public place
 / / x / x / / / x /
 Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

Some critics could not understand the third stanza. Bloom writes: “It is a bad, crabbed stanza, in a bad poem, and the learned ingenuities of criticism can not rescue it, or us from its ugliness” (*Bloom, p. 444*). Bloom also notices Yeats’s mutability in these lines:

We Irish, born into that ancient sect
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
 And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
 Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
 The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

“If these lines began with “We Germans” rather “We Irish,” perhaps the critics would see the stanza more clearly for what it is, a disfigured and disfiguring emanation from hatred” (*P. 444*). Louis MacNeice gives us a key to one of the characteristics of Yeats’s later style when he observes that, unlike many people who demand from poetry nothing but dreams and music; “the later Yeats, long tired of dreaming … raged his readers with judgments, rhetoric, critical or presumptuous statement” (*MacNeice, P. 122*). Yeats’s *Last Poems* do possess unsubstantial judgments on people, rhetoric and exhibitionism. This is evident in *Under Ben Bulbin* where he exhorts the younger generation of poets to take care of their trade because he did not like

modern poetry. He advises them in a tone of exhibitionism and overconfidence in his art:

Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.

His unfounded disbelief in modern poetry is accompanied, in this stanza, with an artistic blunder in the choice of diction; the words came too exhibitionist as the thought itself. Exhibitionism is evident also in his accompaniment of long lines with short one, polysyllabic words with monosyllabic ones. This is obvious especially in *The Man and The Echo* and *Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz*.

In addition to abandoning youthful themes and turning to the themes of death, one can figure out certain distinguishing changes in Yeats's late style in his *Last Poems*. The reader of *Last Poems* can sense a growing bitterness in his style, an increasing use of the dramatic technique. The reader also can feel a change in the diction he used in his old age, a giving away of a set of imagery and turning to another set. Also one notices a vacillation in the length of his lines, his turning to more intensified sentences and even omissions, sometimes blunder that leads him to near failure. "In the later Yeats his style became muscular and lean, he developed at times a satirical thought which has a salutary touch of bitterness after the over-sweetness of his youthful work" (*Adlington*, 34).

The *Last Poems* have some disappointments and letdowns that point out that the burst of creative energy to which he responded after the Steinach operation was at times illusory. J. R. Muleryne notices that in Yeats's *Last Poems* "rhythm is relaxed and diction plain, undemanding" (*Last Poems*, 154). Richard Ellman gives another key to Yeats's late style as, shown in his *Last Poems* when, he notices that: "once his definition of style had been 'high breeding in words and in argument', but he wanted now to achieve, within limits, occasional low breeding" (*P*. 190). This '*occasional low breeding*' is displayed in his diction. "*His earlier stylistic liberations had never gone so far as to permit the vocabulary he now developed, which included 'grand dad', 'belly', 'bum', 'swop', 'swish', 'punk', 'bowels', 'randy', 'beanfeast', 'codger', 'leching', and 'watry', (Ibid.)*. There are compounds he used to avoid in his early poetry. In *Under Ben Bulbin* we have 'long-visaged company, cocks a – crow', in *The Statues* we have 'plummet-measured', 'many-headed'.

Yeats's aging did not inhibit his creative power but spurred it on, and helped him to develop a late style. The *Last Poems* offered him the chance to construct and then affirm a new life. They stand as striking evidence that, unlike many

writers in their old age, his poetic inspection did not wither in later life, he did not experience creative restriction or poverty in his old age, on the contrary he experienced enhancement and wealth. Being on the verge of extinction inspired Yeats to new creativity, to recreate his identity for the remainder of his life.

Conclusion

Yeats's *Last Poems* dealt with in this study point out that he was not a relinquisher or an abdicator who dropped the reins of his harmony because of aging. For him old age was not an emancipation from the desire to write; the poems he wrote in the last year of his life were among the best poems. In his old age Yeats was one of those people who made themselves so entirely absorbed in an interest which unites the intellectual and the sensual. However, Yeats paid no negligible attention to aging. Thinking of aging and the weakness it brings on the body engaged much of his poetic career. In his *Last Poems* Yeats realizes that wisdom cannot be achieved with age, and that aged people should receive the goal of ordinance with the self-possession Hamlet had received it. The reading of the poems Yeats had written in the last year of his life discloses his lack of enthusiasm for romanticism, and his unwillingness to look for wisdom that he thought, in his earlier poetry, will come with age. Also Yeats's *Last Poems* reveals some of the symptoms which accompany agedness: his impatience with the younger generation, his use of coarse rhythms and long compounds of words unfamiliar in his earlier poems, his pretense of composure in the face of death.

Yeats's aging did not inhibit his creative power but spurred it on, changed his poetic style, and helped him to develop a late style. The composition of these poems offered him the chance to construct and then affirm a new life. The *Last Poems* also stand as striking evidence that, unlike many writers in their old age, Yeats's poetic inspiration did not wither in later life, and he did not experience creative restriction or poverty in old age. On the contrary he experienced enhancement and wealth. Being on the verge of extinction inspired Yeats to new creativity, to recreating his identity for the remainder of his life.

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