

# CHAPTER IV

**“GRANT ME AN OLD MAN’S FRENZY,  
MYSELF MUST I REMAKE”**

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### "GRANT ME AN OLD MAN'S FRENZY, MYSELF MUST I REMAKE"

#### -- "An Acre of Grass"

In this pen-ultimate chapter we will discuss the theme of self-alienation as voiced in the poems from W.B. Yeats's last three volumes of poems - A Woman Young and Old, A Full Moon in March and the Last Poems.

With the volume of poems entitled A Woman Young and Old Yeats came to deal with sexual themes more explicitly once again. A casual look at Yeats's poetry from first to last reveals that Yeats has been a poet of love throughout his poetic career. As a young man it was but natural that he was attracted towards young beautiful girls, but even in later life his interest in women did not lessen. From the biographical details that are available to us we can infer that he was always happy in the company of women Love, through the various stages of his life, had been whole and sole succour and support to him, and the woman who provided it to him was the object of his poetic search and research. It is not surprising then that Yeats comes again and again to the theme of love, to women, young, crazy and old and to sexual unions that help man participate in eternity. So love or woman was looked upon by him more in philosophical terms

than in practical ones. The volume, Woman Young and Old, is a collection of poems which balance those in "A Man Young and Old" in The Tower. The place of this volume in the entire corpus of Yeats's poetry is significant on various grounds: it shows the poet with decripit body but with burning passions, it indicates his interest in sexual matters, it shows love in a woman as evolutionary from her childhood to her old age. The poems in this volume reveal various aspects of love in a woman, its early fire and mire and betrayals, its flirtations, its hellish and heavenly consummation, and it quarrels in old age. The following poems are selected from this volume for detailed discussion : "Before the World Was Made", "A First Confession", "Consolation", "Her Vision in the Wood"and "A Last Confession."

The speaker of "Before the World Was Made"<sup>1</sup> justifies her ways of making herself look more beautiful by making "the lashes dark", the "eyes more bright" and the "lips more scarlet" and asserts that "No vanity's displayed" when looked into "mirror after mirror." All that she did was intended to look "for the face I had/Before the world was made", meaning thereby the innocent, simple, natural, ideal and archetypal face. Yet her making up her face for good looks does alienate her from her actual physical personality : the artificiality of the behaviour is indicative of her severance from her true

self. In this poem, Richard Ellmann says, "Platonic theory is converted into a delightful defence of a woman's make-up... This poem moves from the particular towards archetypal, but even the archetypal has particularity. Yeats humanizes the de-humanized essences of philosophy."<sup>2</sup>

The woman in "A First Confession"<sup>3</sup> admits that the briar entangled in her hair did not injure her in any way and that her shrinking back and trembling (perhaps in sexual acts) is nothing but hiding her emotions, "Nothing but her coquetry." All her superficial, outward behaviour is indicative of her severance from her true self. Though she intensely longs for truth, she cannot stop that sort of light attitude towards love which her "better self disowns." Her dilemma, suggestive of self-alienation, is expressed in these lines :

"I long for truth, and yet  
I cannot stay from that  
My better self disowns,  
For a man's attention  
Brings such satisfaction  
To the craving in my bones."

Her self-alienation is further highlighted in her questions :  
"Why those questioning eyes/ That are fixed upon me? What can they do but shun me? If empty night replies.?"

In "Consolation"<sup>4</sup> the poet admits that there have been sages and philosophers in the world asserting that man's

birth on this earth is a crime; some others have put forth the view that it is an accident, an agony. This is a pessimistic view of life. The poet rejects this dark view of life and yet admits that "O but there is wisdom/In what the sages said," meaning that this attitude has intellectual attractions. This dark, negative attitude towards life does speak for man's self-alienation in general. The following concluding lines of the poem are worth consideration in respect of self-alienation :

"How could passion run so deep  
Had I never thought  
That the crime of being born  
Blackens all our lot?  
But where the crime's committed  
The crime can be forgot."

The last lines are indeed a consolation to the readers.

"Her Vision in the Wood"<sup>5</sup> deals with the idea that love gives us transitory happiness. The speaker, an old woman, was perhaps the centre of men's love and attention when she was young, but now she sees that people are nonchalant to her aged, faded body. She feels alienated from her old loved and lovable self. As a flash-back she sees "At wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood" a vision of the wounded hero carried by the crowd in whom she recognizes her own lover, the source of her torture and the victim of her love, too. This is the moment of revelation, of vision, of the realization of her

self-alienation. Her sense of being neglected by the people in her old age and her indignation against them are expressed at the opening of the poem. She says :

"Dry timber under that rich foliage,  
At wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood,  
Too old for a man's love I stood in rage  
Imagining men. Imagining that I could  
A greater with a lesser pang assuage  
Or but to find it withered vein ran blood,  
I tore my body that its wine might cover  
Whatever could recall the lip of lover."

The woman in "A Last Concession,"<sup>6</sup> contrary to Platonic Love, experiences misery in a soul-to-soul union of the lovers. She finds the utmost pleasure in love when there is a body-to-body union. She admits that in bodily love there is a pleasure which a beast gives to a beast. What is suggested is that a physical love seeking pleasure reduces the lovers to the sub-human or bestial level and therein they experience the loss of their self. Love can ennoble as well as dehumanize the lovers : She asks, "What lively lad most pleased me / Of all that with me lay?" and further says,

"I answer that I gave my soul  
And loved in misery,  
But had great pleasure with a lad  
That I loved bodily."

A Full Moon in March (1935) is a short collection of poems, some of which only Yeats liked and that for reasons more personal than general. It begins with a series of

political poems which are followed by a short personal poem, "A Prayer for Old Age." This volume also contains a series of "Supernatural Songs."

By 1935 Yeats realized that the poetic spirit in him was all used up. He knew that nothing else than the miracle could restore to him the original spark of imagination and vigour. After undergoing the Steinach operation in which the monkey glands brought about the miracle, he felt vivacious, enthusiastic and energetic. There was an outburst of creative energy which he channelized for the writing of lyrics and ballads until his death in 1939. The following poems are selected from this volume for their discussion in depth and detail: "Parnell's Funeral," "A Prayer for Old Age.", "Four Ages of Man", and "Meru."

The theme of "Parnell's Funeral"<sup>7</sup> (1933) is political. Parnell, the Irish patriot, was charged with immoral relations with a married woman, and very soon the Irish public opinion went against him and the Irish nationalists were divided. Yeats looked upon Parnell as a norm, an ideal, or a model of political wisdom, but unfortunately his death in October 1891 left the country without a proper leader and Ireland was to move onwards, taking Parnell's memory as "a tall pillar, burning/Before us in the gloom."<sup>8</sup> In this poem, "the death of Parnell," says Richard Ellmann, "is described

as if it were the death of some pagan god, and the ancient rite of eating the hero's heart to obtain his qualities is introduced metaphorically to explain the course of Irish history after Parnell."<sup>9</sup>

The poet says that in the case of the great Irish patriots like Emmet, Fitzgerald, and Wolfe Tone it was the foreigners who brought about their deaths, but in Parnell's case it was his own people who did so. The misunderstanding, the gap of communication between Parnell and the Irish people throws ample light on the latter's wrong assessment of Parnell's life and work. There had been many righteous, good and considerate people who may have felt the sense of guilt over Parnell's death. The poet was one of such sensitive people who shared the general guilt, a sign of self-alienation. Previously the patriot's services to the cause of freedom had been recognized and properly evaluated but around 1891 the values were reversed. The poet says :

"An age is the reversal of an age :  
When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone,  
We lived like men that watch a painted stage.  
What matter for the scene, the scene once gone:  
It had not touched our lives. But popular rage,  
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.  
None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part  
Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart."

The poet in his eagerness for accusation further bursts out thus in the following lines which express the individual's self-alienation caused by the loss of discretion and discrimination :

".... All that was sung,  
All that was said in Ireland is a lie  
Bred out of the contagion of the throng."

In "A Prayer for Old Age"<sup>10</sup> Yeats denies the conventional image of an old man as grave, calm and mature in order to be able to create great poetry which comes only out of a conflict. He knows that he may seem odd, strange and foolish to the others and yet is prepared to pay this little price "for the song's sake." He says :

"I pray - for fashion's word is out  
And prayer comes round again -  
That I may, seem, though I die old,  
A foolish, passionate man."

"Supernatural Songs" are the religious and philosophical songs sung by the old hermit Ribh, representative of the early Irish Christianity. Two songs - "The Four Ages of Man" and "Meru" are selected here for discussion. About "The Four Ages of Man"<sup>11</sup>, Yeats wrote, in 1934 to Mrs. Shakespear that "They are the four ages of individual man, but they are also the four ages of civilization. You will find them in that book you have been reading. First age, earth, vegetative functions. Second age,

Water blood, sex. Third age, Air, breath intellect. Fourth age Fire, Soul etc. In the first two the moon comes to the full - resurrection of Christ & Dionysus. Man becomes rational, no longer driven from below or above."<sup>12</sup> Apart from the elemental symbolism of the poem, it may be interpreted on a plain, simple level. The poet says that man first had a fight with his Body in which the Body won; then he had a struggle with the Heart as a result of which he lost his innocence and peace; still then he struggled with his mind and as a consequence his proud Heart was left behind. Finally, man's "wars on God begin;/At stroke of midnight God shall win." At each stage man had to lose something of his personality though something else came to compensate the loss. In his wars against God, God's victory is certain. This fact, suggestive of man's powerlessness and subordination to all-powerful God, speaks for the disintegration of his self. The words like 'fight', 'struggle' and 'wars' in this poem intensify man's self-alienation.

"Meru"<sup>13</sup>, which is named after India's Holy Mountain, stands as the symbol of spiritual discipline. Yeats had come into contact with Shri Purohit Swami and had written an introduction to Swami's translation of Bhagwan Shri Hamsh's The Holy Mountain, the description of an initiate mystic's or hermits ascent on Mount Kailash in Tibet. This fact clearly

points out that Yeats has embodied in this poem the Asiatic view-point.

The poem presents the contrast between the world of apparent, superficial Reality and the world of Absolute Reality. Man in his daily life is guided by illusions; he thinks that he knows the Reality of things but it is not so. As the Absolute Reality lies far beneath the upper layers of man's feeling, thinking and knowing, he has to dig deep, or dive deep into the spiritual waters. The poet asserts that the Western civilization has made rapid material progress, it has nourished the body at the expense of the soul. In contrast to this the Eastern civilization has concentrated on man's self, the inner darkness where the Absolute Reality resides. Hence the moments of peaceful meditation, which can be had on the mountains like Meru, are required. The poet perhaps wants to communicate the idea that both the Western and Eastern Man suffer the pangs of self-alienation, as one nourishes the body and neglects the soul, and the other feeds the self or soul but starves the body.

The volume of poems brought together under the caption "Last Poems" (1935-1939) is made up of The New Poems (1938) published in the poet's life-time and the Last Poems and Two Plays (1939). In 1940 the poems of the two volumes were published as the Last Poems. Most of the poems in this volume are not only retrospective but also introspective. The echoes

of the earlier themes and ideas are found almost everywhere; the political events and characters dealt with earlier are rehandled; the old symbols like the 'gyre', 'tower', 'rose' are again used. The earlier women loved or just respected and the great historical and literary characters dominate the scene once again in the poet's mind. His meditations in time of civil war in Ireland now assume a larger form in the face of the approaching Second World War. Many critics found Yeats's concern with sexuality in his old age unnatural and repulsive; but his answer was that he was true to himself. The shadow of death hangs over these last poems, but the poet asserts everywhere that death is not all, it is not an end of life but a new beginning. As civilizations rise and fall, the individual life also rises and falls and again rises. The poet, now sure of his success and place in history and of eventual immortality now writes his own epitaph in "Under Ben Bulben." Richard Ellmann comments on the last poems thus :

A refusal to surrender anything is a common theme in Yeats's last poems; their tenor is not schopenhauerian even if the tower is black. Whenever they question whether life has any meaning or purpose, their own vitality and vehemence argue against their doubts. Through the poems run the stalwart and daring horseman, the eagle (and Yeats was himself called 'the eagle' en famille), tall dames, Malachi Stiltjack, and the great human figures carved by Phidias and carved and painted by Michelangelo, all little more than life size. The old men in these poems sometimes lament their loss of virility; they do not impugn virility's value."<sup>14</sup>

The theme of self-alienation is fairly expressed in the following poems from this last volume : "The Gyres", "Lapis Lazuli", " An Acre of Grass", "Are You Content" and "The Man and the Echo."

In "The Gyres"<sup>15</sup> the poet-spectator meditates on the ruins and reconstruction of the world over the ages. Our knowledge of history tells us that civilizations were built, attacked and destroyed; brave and beautiful men and women were born and died and were born again. The condition of the world today is not much different from that of the past. The present chaos adumbrates future order; present horror, future harmony. The entire humanity today is facing the process of disintegration not only of civilization but also of its own self. The poet's inner mind tells him that humanity need not worry because joy is a future alternative to the present sadness. Yet the poet cannot overlook mans degradation and bestial behaviour : "Conduct and work grow coarse, and coarse the soul."

"Lapis Lazuli"<sup>16</sup> was written shortly after Yeats received a lapis lazuli medallion, with a carving on it, from Harry Clifton. The mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain, carved on it by the Chinese sculptor, became very significant and meaningful to the poet.

In this poem, consisting of five stanzas, the poet speaks of three types of tragic gaiety relating to the artist, those who do the work of construction and the saint. At the very opening of the poem the poet speaks of some hysterical women (presumably women like Maud Gonne and Constance Markiewicz) who have no taste for and interest in such arts as poetry, painting and music. They are afraid of the possibility of the Second World War and the destruction that would be caused by it. Their fear of the war has perhaps made them 'hysterical' and 'sick' and hence they are severed from their own selves : " I have heard that hysterical women say / They are sick of palette and fiddle-bow, / Of poets that are always gay." In the second stanza the poet points out that the tragic heroes never get upset by their sufferings, rather they face them heroically and take them as an inevitable part of human life. They teach us a lesson that death is not a defeat but a triumph of life lived heroically. Though beset by darkness they believe in the light that is in the heart of darkness. Yet it must be conceded that in the process of living their lives of trials, conflicts and struggles, they do feel the disintegration of their selves. We just cannot close our eyes and ears to their secret groanings, their madness, actual or pretended, their fury, their death-wishes and actual suicides. We cannot forget Hamlet's "to be or not to be," Lear's wrath and Ophelia's

death by drowning consequent upon her failure in love. They are certainly the fictitious examples of the self-alienated humanity of all times and place. The poet says :

"All perform their tragic play,  
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,  
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia."

In the following stanzas the poet speaks of the rise and fall of civilizations, and considers the whole scene of destruction and chaos from the Asiatic point of view represented by the three Chinese on the lapis lazuli, engaged in their struggle to climb the mountain for the attainment of spiritual gain and gaiety.

As in "A Prayer for Old Age", the poet in "An Acre of Grass"<sup>17</sup> rejects the conventional image of the quiet and complacent old age and prays for " the old man's frenzy" quoting the frenzy of the old men like Blake, Lear, Timon and Michael Angelo, drawn from the world of literature. After the loss of his physical strength in his old age the poet feels that his mind is empty, the fact symbolized by " an old house / where nothing stirs but a mouse." The poet, dissatisfied only with an acre of green grass, prays :

"Grant me an old man's frenzy,  
Myself must I remake  
Till I am Timon and Lear  
Or that William Blake  
Who beat upon the wall  
Till Truth obeyed his call."

The poet's desire to assume the roles of Timon, Lear and Blake in order to remake himself speaks for his self-alienation.

"Are You Content ?"<sup>18</sup> voices man's eternal craving to do something more significant and more lasting. However high his achievements, man has always felt dissatisfied with them. The sense of what is not with him always makes him restless. He cannot judge his own work and achievements as his subjectivity obstructs the true and impartial judgment. The poet also finds it difficult to judge his own work and so he calls on his ancestors to judge it, for only the "Eyes spiritualized by death can judge" properly. The disintegration of his self caused by his age, and infirmity and his dissatisfaction are embodied here in this concluding stanza of the poem :

"Infirm and aged I might stay  
In some good company,  
I who have always hated work,  
Smiling at the sea  
Or demonstrate in my own life  
What Robert Browning meant  
By an old hunter talking with Gods;  
But I a not content."

The formal dialogue "The Man and the Echo"<sup>19</sup>, as the title indicates, is about the disintegration of man's self. The Echo here may be the poet's inner voice or his alter ego, whereas the Man is the poet himself. The old poet reconsiders

his works and achievements in order to know their significance and their ultimate message to humanity. The poet in his self-examination announces :

"All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turn into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right."

Though he is not cowardly to act on the Echo's advice to commit suicide, his restlessness, anxiety and fear are expressed in the image of " A stricken rabbit" which distracts his thought.

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19. W.B.Yeats, "The Man and the Echo", Selected Poetry, pp.203-205.