

An Acre of Grass

Picture and book remain,
An acre of green grass
For air and exercise,
Now strength of body goes;
Midnight, an old house
Where nothing stirs but a mouse.

My temptation is quiet.
Here at life's end
Neither loose imagination,
Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make the truth known.

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;

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds;
Forgotten else by mankind,
An old man's eagle mind.

W B Yeats

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Nick Hume

The power and significance of this small poem are belied by its size and proportions. Written in 1936 and published towards the end of Yeats' life, in 1938, its primary concern is the problem of ageing and the ramifications this process has on the poetic inspiration and his capacity for creative activity. The external and superficial setting of the poem, within the grounds of his new residence, Riversdale, is paralleled with his internal state of melancholic dependency at the apparent failure of his search for *truth*. This is built upon, though, as the poem progresses and his despair is finally transmuted into the hope of the future through the invocation of a romantic *frenzy* and the guidance of the power of genius symbolised by *Michael Angelo*. Depression becomes a necessary step in the ladder to success, much as madness was the key to Lear's self-healing. Yeats reaches the end of the poem looking back respectfully upon the history of genius but also forward into the darkness of death, with a new resolve and a new confidence: the comfort of *an old man's eagle mind*.

The poem is constructed in two evenly balanced halves. The first concerns itself with the pain and dejection arising from the poet's ageing power, while the second, hinging on the word *frenzy* focuses on the transformation of this melancholy into the hope and inspiration of the future. There are three main image patterns within the poem that provide it with this thematic structure. Firstly and most importantly are those associated with the process of ageing and death. The serenity of the poem's opening and the apparent tranquility of his location:

*Picture and book remain,
An acre of green grass
For air and exercise..*

is vividly and dramatically cut short by the juxtaposed power of the next line: *now strength of body goes*. Yeats makes it clear from the beginning that this poem is not about the happy reminiscences of his halcyon days, but the bitter realisation of his fading power, both physical and poetic. The *picture and book* remain not so much as memories of better times but as remnants of a spirit now broken, a spirit once guided by dreams and ideals, now seemingly crushed by the power of advancing age, and supplanted by acerbic cynicism. The *old house* is not so much his residence as his own body, little more than a corpse within which *nothing stirs but a mouse*. He is fully aware of his own incapacity *at life's end to make the truth known* and in this state hankers for the *quiet* of mature repose. This, however, he comes to realise by the poem's conclusion, is merely an act of escapism from the inevitable realisation of one's failure.

From this, arises the second major strand of the poem's construction: its highly personal nature. Like many of Yeats' poems, even those ostensibly of a public or moral nature, his pre-occupation with his own self-importance, his

own mission as high-priest of a *Vision*, comes to dominate the poem. In “An Acre of Grass”, Yeats takes his self-absorption to a new level of poetic understanding. The self, comprising of the *loose imagination* and the *mill of the mind*, is poignantly pitched against the impossibility of its task: the resolution of truth. It is left wallowing in its failure, instinctively consuming its *rag and bone*. In an essay dated February 1917, Yeats wrote:

A poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment.

Here lies the crux of Yeats’ ailment, the paradox that arises from the seeming benefit of experience destroying the passion and fervour of youth. Out of this, Yeats fashions a response that manages to avoid the inevitable nihilism of disillusionment and one that becomes a most succinct affirmation of human vitality and its power to create. The experience of being human comprises the joy of life itself, and Yeats, as champion of the human spirit, can still capture this joy by infusing the *frenzy* within himself. He strives to make himself still more worthy of his own esteem by forging himself into a figure of abundant energy. This effort forms the foundation for the poem’s second half, as passion overcomes reason, and the creative spirit drowns the threat of realism. *Myself must I remake till I am Timon and Lear* he cries in abject despair, realising the necessity for change from his current state of *quiet* rest. This form of contemplation may provide the key to truth but provides no means for the transformation of that truth from the complete abstract into the artistry of a poem. This can only be achieved through mystical insight coupled with the strength of genius, a genius that is on the wane in the faculties of an old man.

The third facet of the poem’s imagery is the interpretation and final crystallization of the identity of this genius. Initially it is given the moniker of *an old man’s frenzy*, but this is speedily clarified by references to Shakespeare’s great characters Timon and Lear and that incomparable *William Blake who beat upon the wall* of understanding. The use of Timon and Lear as lynchpins of his exposition of the identity of this creative genius reinforces the sense that his feelings of depression and melancholy are necessities on the road to truth. In both these characters, the power of their passion overwhelmed that of their reason, and in Lear, madness becomes the crucial step in the purgation and purification of his spirit. Yeats calls upon his own spirit to refashion itself into the mould of the mad old prophet and throw off the yoke of age’s quiet contemplation. Perhaps he was inspired by Plato’s remark that “all the greatest benefits of Greece have sprung from madness”. It is here that we see the crucial distinction made between creative genius and rabid intellectualism. It is the genius only that *can pierce the clouds* or *shake the dead in their shrouds* for it is the only one of the two that contains a truly spiritual element. It is this element that is responsible for the greatness, power and indeed harmony of the *mind* *Michael Angelo knew*, while the other has little to offer the human condition apart from the ravages of science. Yeats is defining before us an harmonious, inspirational and prophetic madness, one that works toward the benefit of humankind through purgation of the soul and the loosening of intellectual

bonds. The *clouds* and the *wall* represent the bounds of human perception that only a sufficiently *released* mind can cross. The final line: *An old man's eagle mind* brilliantly illuminates the context of his final position. Yeats must avoid the temptations of easy content (*my temptation is quiet*) and soar above the mediocre attempts at understanding through his infused *frenzy*. The poem's conclusion recalls a line from Nietzsche's *The Dawn of Day* (which Yeats was rereading in 1936):

Plato, Spinoza, and Goethe - whose minds appear to be but loosely linked to their character and temperament, like winged beings which easily separate themselves from them, and then rise far above them.

The key to understanding lies in the adoption of the 'frenzy' and its use as an instrument of discovery and self-purgation in the bitter melancholy of old age.

The poem is extremely simple in its form, consisting of four stanzas of six lines each. The rhythm is a constant trimeter, reflecting the poem's pensive nature, while each stanza ends in rhyming couplet. The final two stanzas also have rhyme in their second and fourth line. All these devices have an important effect. Apart from reinforcing the poem's philosophical outlook, they provide an ironic counterbalance to the entire concept of *frenzy*. While the overtones of this word suggest a certain animalistic or atavistic response to the challenges of life, the poem at no point degenerates into the whirling, confused and chaotic structure we would expect of such an emotion. Perhaps, in an ironic twist, Yeats indicates the virtual impossibility of his task. Otherwise he may be underlining the very nature of the genius he attempts to define. It may be a *frenzy* but at no point is it chaotic and confused. It is a spiritualism that is crystalline in its clarity and final in its result. The very title of the poem "An Acre of Grass" suggests organisation and reason, on top of its connotations of tranquillity, and perhaps in its entirety it can be seen as being written in a mood of philosophical detachment.

In this poem, Yeats has attempted to reconcile his waning creative spirit with the processes of old age. He could take pleasure in the enclosed cultivated garden and still turn to works of visual and literary art for his inspiration. But the power of his own intellect to create has clearly decreased, paralleling the irreversible decay of the body. The poem's first half drives toward this subjective bodily decay and finally transfigures it in a renewed quest for truth. It reveals the tension between the habits of poetic activity and his desire to break free from the constraints of the bardic occupation. "An acre of Grass" successfully expresses these sentiments and from the depression at his own decay, Yeats constructs the hope of the future: the *frenzy* of an old man's mind, *forgotten else by mankind*.