

Old Age as a Motif In the Poetry of W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) العصر القديم كحافز في شعر (و.ب.ريتش)

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In 1908 , the American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) , the central figure in the modern movement who was the driving force behind several movements , notably Imagism and Vorticism , met the Irish poet W. B. Yeats in London . Pound was employed as his secretary and the two soon became close friends . He found Yeats a realist, symbolist and a metaphysical poet with an uncanny power over words and regarded him the greatest living poet .The poetical style and the occult beliefs of the Irish poet drew the attention of the American Imagist .During the war, Pound and Yeats lived together at Stone Cottage in Sussex studying Japanese literature .Speaking of Yeats , T. S. Eliot described him as "one of those few whose history is the history of their own time , who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them"¹.His poems have "passionate thought, consistent technique, controlled concentration , deliberate delight in the exercise of art "².

It is difficult, in fact , to understand the poetry of Yeats without knowing some of its important clues. His various symbols, visions and mysticism, allusions to people and events, interest in mythology and folklore require a reasonable knowledge of the poet's frame of mind. As a leading symbolist, Yeats used the symbols to convey to others (what he thought) what could not otherwise be communicated. For him the employment of symbols was not only a poetic device; it was a kind of discipline. He asserts that "A symbol is indeed the only expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame"³. He describes the work of a symbol saying that symbols have the ability to give "dumb things voices and bodiless things bodies"⁴. It is not surprising then to see him attracted to the poetry of William Blake. He "also found in Blake's writing his idea of paired opposites – soul and self, body and soul, love and death, chance and choice, 'subjective' and 'objective', conflicting yet establishing a unity in a man's life and in history"⁵. Most of Yeats' poetry is not quietly intelligible without a good reading of his book *A Vision* which contains his assumptions, visions and the elements of his symbolic system.

Yeats could not believe in orthodox Christianity and all his life he sought for a set of beliefs that would be his private religion. It was to Ireland, his native land, that he first turned ; to its myths and legends for the subject matter of his early poetry. He "has chosen his symbolism out of the Irish mythology, which gives him the advantage of an elaborate poetic background, new to modern poetry"⁶. He found inspiration in the tales of the Irish heroes and a comfortable world beyond reality. As he lacked a firm faith in a stable religion, Yeats created a religion for himself in the Irish myth and legend. He turned Ireland into a dreamland; a Celtic utopia. This search led Yeats to various kinds of mysticism, to folklore, theosophy, spiritualism and Neo- Platonism .When he finally found Irish myth no longer sufficient to sustain his poetic impulse, he turned to himself for inspiration. In middle life he elaborated a symbolic system of his own.

In his life, Yeats always opposed violence though admiring the courage of his people and when he met the beautiful actress and violent Irish nationalist Maud Gonne at the age of 23, he fell desperately in love with her for many years. In fact it is not as easy task to estimate fully the effect of the poet's love for this woman on his writing. In her character, Yeats found the fusion of romantic and patriotic love Gonne acted like a catalyst to his inspiration. The poet also met another important female figure who had also a lifelong impact on him. That woman was Lady Gregory, the Irish writer and prompter of Irish literature. It was under her influence that Yeats became involved in the founding of the Irish National Theatre in 1899.

Yeats' obsession with old age remained one of his main concerns throughout his literary career. He "prayed it so earnestly that it kept his mind active to the last days of his life and made him of all poets who have written of old age, the least tranquillizing and the most exhilarating"⁷. Age, among all things, irritated him "I am tired and in a rage at being old. I am all I ever was and much more, but an enemy has bound me and twisted me"⁸. For him "life was exciting, but there was the bother of old age...His remedy for age was a search for intellectual interests"⁹. In "When You Are Old", written in 1891 when the poet was still young, Yeats writes:

When you are old grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.¹⁰

This poem was suggested by a sonnet of the 16th century French poet Pierre de Ronsard. Yeats' poem owes its inception to that sonnet which Ronsard opens with

the words:

when you and old at evening candle lit
beside the fire bending to your wool
read out my verse and murmur , 'Ronsad writ
This praise for me when I was beautiful' .

The implication in both stanzas is that with the passage of time, the beauty of the beloved will fade and remains memorable only in the words of the poem. In the second stanza, however, Yeats adds a new dimension more significant than the mere physical attraction:

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you ,
And loved the sorrow of your changing face .

The superb focus comes here with the term 'pilgrim soul'. The implication is that only one man has loved the spiritual quality which lies behind her transient physical beauty. In the third stanza , the poet flees into a world of speculation and loses himself in mysticism ; imagining the beloved with a sad ironic look into the future consoling old age by the memories of beauty and love :

And bending down beside the glowing bars ,
Murmur , a little sadly , how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars .

The association of old age with death and physical decay is also the central idea of "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in Water" (1903). Old people are usually aware of the futility and changeability of life and of the inevitability of death :

I heard the old , old men say ,
" Everything alters ,
And one by one we drop away "

At old age , people turn into grotesque figures and with the passage of time their vigor and physical beauty begin declining :

They had hands like claws , and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn trees
By the waters
I heard the old , old men say ,
"All that's beautiful drifts away
Like the waters"

A more symbolic poem , typical of Yeats , " The Coming of Wisdom with Time "(1909) depicts old age as a time not only of loss but also of gain . The enigmatic association of nature and man is used as a symbol . The leaves stand for the past show , the root for the permanence which may yield up the truth :

Though leaves are many , the root is one
Though all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun ;
Now I may wither into the truth .

The poet associates "leaves" , "flowers" and "sun" (which are agreeable) with "lying" which is disagreeable ,old age is "truth" , "wisdom" and "oneness" which are agreeable but "winter" is disagreeable . Thus Yeats carefully balances youth and age as the favorable and unfavorable qualities .In this poem then , in the words of Kian Pishkar , " Yeats is neither exulting over a gain nor lamenting a loss ; but he is lamenting the fact that one can not have every thing at once".¹¹ Man cannot have beauty , vigor and enthusiasm along with wisdom at the same time . Life is never complete ; one gains some desirable qualities at the expense of many others .

"The Wild Swans at Coole"(1919) is a mournful lyrical poem on the passage of time, written in six – line verse climaxed by a couplet. Here, the poet considers the changes in his own life, since his visit to the place some nineteen years ago. Coole Park was Lady Gregory's country state where Yeats was a frequent guest. The poem is "a meditation on nature and on the passage of time which alters the human observer but leaves nature essentially unchanged"¹². The elegiac tone of the poem is established in the first stanza which is superbly descriptive of the tranquility of nature:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October – twilight the water

Mirrors a still sky.

The words "autumn", "dryness", "twilight", "stillness" refer symbolically to the progressive changes which man undergoes including decay and death, but also to pleasant memories of youth. The second stanza deals with the passage of time and the movement of the birds which parallels the flight of imagination:

All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings

The "mysterious, beautiful" swans represent to the poet at first "the continuity and permanence of the natural world, any awakening that discovers them gone will be an awakening out of nature, into death"¹³. The "bell – beat of their wings" above his head may indicate the passage of time. Those swans symbolize to him now the warmth of the feeling of love; the passion that he cannot feel:

Unwearied still, lover by lover
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air,
Their hearts have not grown old.

"Lover by lover" is expressive of the speaker's envy of the swans who have mated, compared with the poet who has not mated with his beloved. The word "companionable" is evocative of the love moment that he cannot share. They are "unwearied"; their hearts do not grow old and "passion or conquest" attend them. Consequently those swans stand now "for the life force; their hearts do not grow old... for the union of time and timeless...in a third sense they stand for inspiration"¹⁴. Seeing these qualities in the swans, the poet recognizes in himself the changes that lead him to a feeling of loss and uncertainty. In the last verse, this terrible sense of loss is mournfully communicated:

Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

The swans, then, are passing away from the poet's life to be enjoyed by others; there will be other men to fill his place. This also implies that the vigor of youth, the beauty of love and the power of imagination have passed away. "The Wild

"Swans at Coole", then, is basically a poem about expiration; about a man whose emotions are getting dry and a poet whose imaginative powers, because of the lack of inspiration, begin discouraging him.

As Yeats grew older, the theme of old age grew in importance in his late poetry as the poet began actually living the experience. The poet was constantly rediscovering himself; this is the secret of the interest which all his mature poetry holds for us. His late poems on old age are less romantic, less lyrical, more philosophical than his early poems. Yeats, the man of sixty gives more concern and attention to the question of age. "Among School Children"(1927) is a late poem that gives the theme of old age a philosophical dimension with a more tolerant rational tone than the early poems. The poet is sixty years old and is walking through a classroom full of children. He situates himself in time and space. The setting reminds him of scenes and images from the past, serving thus as a stimulus to his memory. The physical setting becomes gradually unimportant as memories give way to meditation and imagination. The contrast between the "sixty-year-old man" and the children stirs his imagination to a journey into the past:

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy.

The aging poet is reminded of himself as a child and of the Ledaean image of Maud Gonne, Yeats' ideal woman, in her youth whom he imagines to stand before him "as a living child". The gap between hope, freshness and the beauty of childhood and the harsh reality of old age leads the poet to a moment of perplexity:

Her present image floats into the mind –
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat ?

The poet seems to ask how can we reconcile the image of that "Ledaean body " with the reality of a hollow-cheeked woman of a 15th century Italian painting ?. He seems to imply that knowledge , wisdom and experience of old age are not worth the price paid for them . This notion , the discrepancy between promise and reality , is the heart of the poem .

In stanzas v, iv, and vii ,the poet considers various examples of the gap between promise and achievement and the distortion of the ideal image in a world of time and change. The images from parenthood, philosophy and religion lead eventually to disappointment and a tragic end ."What youthful mother ", the poet asks, would say when she sees her dear infant , old and lost :

Would think her son , did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head
A compensation for the pang of his birth ,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth ?

Philosophers – represented here by Plato , Aristotle and Pythagoras – were great figures who had vainly contemplated the elusive relationship between essence and existence or between paradigm and circumstance . They taught people and kings and tried to explain and bridge the gap between reality and imagination , but finally ended as " Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird ". This means that " even the profoundest wisdom is inadequate to compensate for that bodily perfection which is life's natural ideal . This , as Norman Jerffares believes , makes the poem a " curse upon old age ; it meant that the greatest men are old scarecrow by the time their fame has come".¹⁶

Nuns and mothers , in different ways ,have also been betrayed by their illusions . The icons worshipped by nuns and the images of childhood that mothers adore and produce at the end , images that " break hearts ". These "icons worshipped by nuns and the fond images of the child that mothers adore 'mock' humanity because the image cannot be reconciled with the reality that unfolds with time"¹⁷:

Both nuns and mothers worship images ,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries ,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose .
And yet they too break hearts .

The final stanza of the poem offers two images of unity in which there is no incongruity between the ideal and the real ; the promise and fulfillment :

O chestnut tree , great – rooted blossomer ,
Are the leaf ; the blossom , or the bole ?
O body swayed to music , O brightening glance ,

How can we know the dancer from the dance

The chestnut tree expresses a perfect harmony ; congruence between origin and end . It is the leaf , the blossom and the bole ; it is all parts making a harmonious picture . There is no ironic contrast between bole and blossom as there is between the childhood image and the smiling sixty –year–old man. To express better the wish of unity, the poet uses the human image of the dancer. The dancer is both a living body and a work of art, an aesthetic image. The dancer is an image of labor and pleasure, of body and spirit, reconciled and unified. Life according to Yeats is a cosmic dance in which every individual joins harmoniously; to be involved in the process as the dancer becomes part of the dance. Nevertheless, "The conflict between these beautiful images and of harmony and the rhetorical form in which they are presented , leaves us with uncertainty."¹⁸

In "Sailing to Byzantium"(1927), Yeats also deals with an old man facing the problem of old age, of death and of regeneration. He said that he chose that historical city because he believed "that in early Byzantium, and may be never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one".¹⁹ The title would seem to indicate that the poem is about a voyage but "as a mature poet, Yeats, like those others, is concerned with the interpretation of the spiritual and the material, and the study of the migration of the soul".²⁰ The journey, then, is metaphorical; an imaginary voyage from the sixteenth century to the sixth.

Yeats was sixty three when he published this poem; it deals naturally with the theme of aging and the suffering it brings. The situation of the poem, then, is the speaker's awareness of growing older. The poem "deals with the antitheses of the physical and sensual world versus the world of intellect and imagination, the mortal versus the eternal, nature versus art."²¹ The old speaker can no longer engage fully in the life of senses, and longs for something beyond it since it is mortal and bestial:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
-Those dying generations- at their song,
The salmon – falls, the mackerel – crowded seas.

The poet's cry is set against a world of sensuality and sexuality. The young are given over to physical delight in which old people can no longer participate. The sensuality of the young lovers, the singing of birds and the ascent of the salmon to

the headwaters and the descent of mackerel to the deep seas imply that Ireland, the country of the young, then is in its air, waters and earth is wholly given over to physicality. They "commend all summer long / whatever is begotten, born, and dies". They find great joy in their mortal and animal world. Those young are "caught"; really passive and incapable of free action. They neglect the "Monuments of unaging intellect" which are eternal.

Those images of sensuality set the stage for the new and contrasting image of the poet as a scarecrow; a straw man to scare away the birds. Old age, he tells us, excludes a man of the sensual joys of youth; the world appears to belong completely to the young, it is no place for the old:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

The old man is scarcely a man at all; he is rather a semblance of a man. He is an empty artifice; an inanimate rag upon a dry stick. Something positive must be added and "every tatter in its mortal dress" can be a cause for joy and achievement. The soul of the aged must be strong to seek that which youth neglects. The young who are rapt in their sensuality are ignorant of the world of the spirit. Hence if old age frees a man from sensual passion, he may rejoice in the liberation of the soul despite the decrepitude of the body. In this point, Edward Malins believes, Yeats is indebted to Plato's concept of the immortality of the soul. Plato "thought the soul had many lives; when born into this world it had returned from another to inhabit the body as a pilot does a boat. Or, to choose another image from Plato: 'the body is a garment with which the soul is invested'. But it is not always happy in its relationship with the body".²²

The soul can best learn its own greatness, not from the great works of art only but from those who created them. Hence, the poet "turns to those great works, but in turning to them, he finds that these are by no means mere effigies, or monuments".²³ As a result, the poet had to seek Byzantium as the country of the old; it is reached by sailing the seas, by breaking utterly with the country of the young because "it seemed that one had only to touch that shore to attain deliverance from passionate life"²⁴. All passion must be left behind, the soul must be free to study the emblems of 'unaging intellect'. The world he has left is teeming with natural, sensuous life but Byzantium is a place where the aging poet can concentrate on the exaltation of his spirit rather than on his decaying body and on

art rather than on the processes of human sensuality. Noble art lives in God's fire , free from all corruption . Hence , the poet prays for death , for release from his mortal body . He seeks an existence for his soul in some other matter than flesh . He wishes reincarnation , not in a mortal body but in the immortal and changeless embodiment of art :

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall ,
Come from the holy fire , perne in a gyre
And be the singing masters of my soul .

The old man prays to the sages who stand in 'God's holy fire' and have the semblance of images in gold mosaic to descend . They 'perne in a gyre' ; moving in the circular motion which alone is possible to eternal things . For Yeats , winding stairs , spinning tops , gyres and spirals of all kinds are important symbols . For him " life is a journey up a spiral staircase ; as we grow older we cover the ground we have covered before only higher up...the journey is both round and upward.²⁵Through symbols and images of this kind , Yeats explores the paradoxes of time and change , of growth and identity , of love and age , of life and art , of madness and wisdom . He asks the 'sages 'to consume his heart which is the centre of passion and ignorance . He asks them because the soul "cannot grow into likeness with these beings of immortal embodiment unless it casts off its mortal body utterly."²⁶His appeal takes the form of an incantation :

Consume my heart away : sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows what it is , and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

The old man's dilemma is that he is divided between his sensuality and abilities " for as he ages , the once vital poet feels a split within himself between his desires and abilities"²⁷. In other words , he is caught in the prison of his own decrepitude and must find some means of escape . The journey to Byzantium and the search for transcendence through art constitutes an attempt to sublimate his sensual desires . He begs the Byzantic sages to gather him 'into the artifice of eternity' , a request that may be interpreted as a plea for help to be a poet. In this sense, the poem may be looked on as a kind of prayer. He wants to leave the country of the young, the sensual and the mortal and sail to the city of imagination and unaging intellect. He wants his next incarnation to be an artificial gold—and—

enamel singing bird that cannot decay as his body but that which will exist eternally. He wants to be a work of art rather than a man. He feels that he can be freed of his agonizing state only if he can sing of time without being tyrannized by it. He wants the "sages" to instruct his soul and gather him into the artifice of eternity and make him like themselves:

One out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor a wake

As long as the flesh is present, any place will not be a country for old men. He wants his soul after death to be in such form of that the Greek goldsmiths used to make of gold; the symbol of beauty and eternity; the symbol of art. The poet hopes to be like the artificial birds in the Ophilius Garden of incorruptible passionless and therefore unaging gold:

Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

In his note to the poem, Yeats writes "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang"²⁸. F.A.C. Wilson, however, believes that Yeats's symbol of the golden tree and bird was also partly drawn from "a similar tree" which "was built from and silver in the courtyard of the Caliph of Baghdad"²⁹. Nevertheless, the image of the golden bird is meant to contrast with the natural birds of the opening stanza. It serves as an image of the speaker transformed from an old man into an artist. The old has become the ageless; impotency has been exchanged for a higher power; the soul is free of passion and free for its joy. It sings as youth once sang, but now of "what is past, or passing, or to come".

Byzantium for the poet then symbolizes a state in which religious, aesthetic and practical life were one. Unlike the real world of natural processes in which the old poet feels alien and misplaced, the ideal realm of Byzantium presents an image of unity and harmony. Thus "The two locations and the related motif of the journey between them, however symbolize the fundamental thematic opposition in the poem that between the natural, mortal world of process and aging and the unchanging eternal realm of art"³⁰.

At certain moments of despair, Yeats refuses the wisdom that comes with old age and its intellectual gain and defends passion. In "A Prayer for Old Age (1935)", he asks God to keep him from thinking in the mind alone, from all that makes a wise old man praised by everyone:

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.

He likes to think of himself as a "foolish, passionate man" because, as A.G. Stock rightly asserts, "of all things he dreaded settling down into the professional age, the patriarch who, having outlived his passions and found an answer for every question he has the brains to ask, grows year by year more serene, more benevolent, and less capable of fresh understanding"³¹.

Old age for an unorthodox skeptic Christian like Yeats, then, is a mysterious and dreadful experience and his attitude towards it is simultaneously ambivalent. At moments it is seen as an age of frustration and uncertainty, at others it is an age of wisdom leading to fame and immortality. Sometimes old age to the poet is neither an age of loss nor of gain; it seems to be an end in itself rather than a means for a further end. Consequently, Yeats' poems on old age are often contemplative to the state of mysticism and usually melancholic. In his last poem "Under Ben Bulbin", meticulously prepared in September 1938, he returns to the theme of decay and the sufficiency of his soul to meet whatever may come to it from eternity. In this poem there is a call to the Irish to manifest again their zest for life. It is fitting that this poem should also be his own elegy and ends with own epitaph:

Nor marble, nor conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his common these words are cut:
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!

NOTES

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31. A.C. Stock, p.212.