

## Yeats and Stevens: Poetry and Aging

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**Abstract:** The paper compares the attitudes to old age and impending mortality between W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens. The point of the comparison is twofold: first, to illustrate the range of strategies and involuntary mechanisms triggered in poets by the implications and intimations of aging; second, to demonstrate the resources drawn upon by the creative imagination in dealing with the complex of emotions and feelings associated with increasing age and apprehensions of mortality. The aim of the argument is to demonstrate the ways in which the poetry of old age has remarkable new insights to offer in respect of poetic technique. Cases such as Yeats and Stevens exemplify a rare phenomenon: as the body ages, the mind comes up with novel ways of dealing with age; as death approaches, the imagination responds with new forms of creativity, in which less is more, and age discovers modes of expression unknown to youth.

**Key words:** Yeats, Wallace Stevens, poetry and aging

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**제목:** 예이츠와 스티븐스: 시와 노화

**우리말 요약:** 이 글은 W. B. 예이츠와 월러스 스티븐스의 노년과 죽음에 대한 태도를 비교한다. 비교는 두 가지로, 먼저, 늙어감의 함축과 암시로 인해 시인 내부에 촉발된 무의식 작용과 대응의 범위를 보여주고, 죽음의 두려움뿐 아니라 노화와 연상되는 감정을 다루는 창조적 상상력에서 찾는 여러 수단들을 보여준다. 본 논지는 시 기법 면에서 놀라운 새로운 통찰을 보이는 시의 기법을 제시한다는 것이다. 예이츠와 스티븐스의 예는 드문 현상이다. 즉, 몸이 쇠퇴하면서, 마음은 나이를 극복하는 새 방법을 동원한다; 죽음이 다가오면, 상상력은 새로운 형태의 창조성으로 대응하는데, 이때 적음이 많음이 되며, 나이는 젊음에는 없는 새로운 표현법을 발견한다.

**주제어:** 예이츠, 월러스 스티븐스, 시와 노화

**저자:** 라지브 S. 패트키는 싱가포르의 싱가포르 국립대학교 예일대 분교의 인문학대학

의 학장이다. 저저는 『모더니스트 글과 포스트식민주의 연구』(에딘버러 2013)과 『포스트식민주의 영시』(옥스포드대 2006), 그리고 『왈러스 스티븐스의 장시』(캠브리지 1985) 등이 있다.

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In this essay I would like to compare the attitudes to old age and impending mortality between W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens. The point of the comparison is twofold: first, to illustrate the range of strategies and involuntary mechanisms triggered in these two poets by intimations of the aging process; second, to demonstrate the resources drawn upon by the creative imagination in dealing with the complex of emotions and feelings associated with apprehensions of mortality. The aim of the essay is to demonstrate the ways in which the poetry of old age has surprises to offer both in respect of poetic technique and human experience. Cases such as Yeats and Stevens exemplify a rare phenomenon: as the body ages, the mind comes up with novel ways of dealing with age; as death approaches, the imagination responds with new forms of creativity, in which less is more, and age discovers modes of expression unknown to youth.

Age is as much a state of mind as of bodily chronology. We are as old as we feel or think we are. Poets die the same as anybody else; it is how they deal with their perception of aging that is of interest, and how they treat their sense of impending mortality. In exceptional cases—and it is this that makes them exceptional and noteworthy—the creative spirit deals with aging with a new influx of resources; the approach of death becomes a motive for an upsurge of creativity that shows how, when body and mind give evidence of age, the spirit responds with a new intuitiveness concerning the correlation between means and ends. Bodily decline provokes a mental resurgence whose capacity for resistance is acknowledged as a product of the mind, what Robert Frost would have called our only and “momentary stay against

confusion.”

Yeats died in 1939, a few months short of what would have been his 74<sup>th</sup> birthday; Stevens in 1955, two months short of what would have been his 76<sup>th</sup> birthday. Each was fairly productive in his final years, while contending with frequent bouts of illness. Yeats’s response to bodily aging is well-known and can be summarized in terms of a familiar refrain from Dylan Thomas: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” At its mildest, age and impending death are dismissed by Yeats as irritants, since Death is merely one “who takes what man would keep” and “Leaves what man would lose.” At a more characteristically high-spirited pitch, as in “Lapis Lazuli,” Yeats celebrates life through his invocation of Chinese sages as depicted in the ancient carving, for their “eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes, / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.” In one of his last poems, “Under Ben Bulben,” he writes his own epitaph. It declares how he wished to be seen:

*Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!*

Such an attitude is splendid, both as a heroic stance, and as a genuine way of putting Death in its place: an implacable enemy whose approach provokes defiance, regardless of how vainglorious it sounds. The rhetoric Yeats summons to his cause is vital in dealing with, or uncovering, the underlying problem. It is not the impending approach of Death that is the primary issue. What bothers more insistently is decline of bodily—specifically sexual—vigor. In Yeats, linguistic vigor and libidinal depletion work out an inverse correlation. “The Spur,” for example, declares:

You think it horrible that lust and rage  
Should dance attention upon my old age;

They were not such a plague when I was young;  
 What else have I to spur me into song?

Another poem, “Those Images,” declares impatience with morbid thoughts in old age. The first stanza advises:

What if I bade you leave  
 The cavern of the mind?  
 There’s better exercise  
 In the sunlight and wind.

And the final two stanzas offer a prescription:

Seek those images  
 That constitute the wild,  
 The lion and the virgin,  
 The harlot and the child

Find in middle air  
 An eagle on the wing,  
 Recognise the five  
 That make the Muses sing.

In contrast, Stevens meets aging more temperately, though no less resourcefully. In his case, the resource is evident not as rhetoric or flamboyant gesture, but as something more suited to his personality and style: a meditative, contemplative dissociation of self from the world, a new dialogue between tempered soul and tired body. For example, the poem “Farewell Without a Guitar” concedes the need to say “Farewell, my days,” because it is now a time “In which the horse walks home without a rider, // Head down.” The self that reflects, which is also the self that ages, undergoes a kind of separation, almost like an out-of-body experience. The

poet had long upheld the conviction that to be alive in the world was to be part of the world of nature, animated by its seasons, weather and daily changes. But in a poem such as "The Course of a Particular," it is conceded that now 'There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved; / And being part is an exertion that declines'. The poem 'Americana' represents the split through the image of "A man that looks at himself in a glass and finds / It is the man in the glass that lives, not he."

The self is now solitary, and finds itself more often than not "in a bed in one room, alone," and reduced to feeling like "a listener" who "Waits for the unison of the music of the drifting bands / And the dissolving chorals." The poet broods on what "The Dove in Spring" evokes as "a thought / That howls in the mind" ... "This howling at one's ear, too far / For daylight and too near for sleep." In another poem, "Banjo Boomer," the poet pleads, "Mulberry, shade me, shade me awhile," knowing the bush to be a berry tree that is "A churchyard kind of bush as well." All this, we might say, is to be expected of an ill and dying man, expressed with a gentleness whose pain is not belied by the reflective mood in which it is addressed. We might all feel something similar, though we may put it differently, since, as Philip Larkin once remarked laconically, in "Ambulances," "every kerb in time is visited."

But that is precisely where Stevens comes up with a surprise. In poem after poem, the aging and ill poet returns to the idea that "The mind renews the world in verse." As the poem "Local Objects," puts it, "Little existed for him but the few things / For which a fresh name always occurred" (474). "It is he, anew, in a freshened youth," declares another poem. The poet is repeatedly drawn to rumination over the possibilities inherent to the idea of beginnings, of incipience, of an evanescence that has presentiments of being about to be born, a growing feeling from a realm of non-being in which the possibility of being born has only just dawned, which the poem "On the Way to the Bus" describes as "a perfection emerging from a new known." The

notion becomes a theme with many variations: “A revelation not yet intended” in “The Region November”; a presentiment which is “Part of the unpredictable sproutings, as of // The youngest, the still fuzz-eyed, odd fleurettes” in “Nuns Painting Water-Lilies.” In the somewhat extravagantly titled poem “The Desire to Make Love in a Pagoda,” this incipience is figured as “the morning’s prescience,” visible or felt at a distance from a mountain top as “An innocence approaching towards its peak.” In “Nuns Painting Water-Lilies,” it feels like “a clearness of the air,” assuring us that “We are part of a fraicheur, inaccessible / Or accessible only in the most furtive fiction.” In “A Discovery of Thought,” the motif is declared explicitly: “One is a child again,” a claim which entails recognition of “the effort to be born / Surviving being born” as indeed “the event of life.” One could compare these moments from Stevens with the Eurydice imagined by Rilke in his remarkable poem “Orpheus.Hermes.Eurydice”: a delicate evocation of what it might have felt like for a disembodied being reluctant to cohere again from non-being, uncertain of itself, and tremulously poised between two worlds, belonging fully to neither.

As the horizon of being constricted with age, illness, and sheer tiredness, the small poems that happen along the way, kept their continual surprise alive, aided (in the words used by Stevens in accepting the National Book Award, in the last year of his life) by their “experience of the greatness that lay beyond, the power over the mind that lies in the mind itself, the incalculable expanse of the imagination as it reflects itself in us and about us.”

Let us consider more closely a pair of Stevens poems that brood on sleep and consciousness, highlighting the thin partitions between these two states: “An Old Man Asleep” (the first poem from “The Rock” section), and “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (the final text in the *Collected Poems*). In each, a person—the poet or a person who could be said to stand

it for the poet—is contemplated as more or less asleep. The key feature is the interstitial state of “more or less,” because the state of sleep is not so complete as to preclude awareness of how this particular individual’s consciousness hovers between the involuntary aspect of sleep and the willed aspect of the desire to assert being through wakefulness.

We can of course acknowledge readily that sleep here—unlike the sleep in say Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* or the “one short sleep” from Donne’s “Holy Sonnets”—is *not* quite analogous to death, because while both represent a cessation of consciousness, the sleep Stevens has in mind is a state in-between awareness and its cessation. “An Old Man Asleep” announces that two worlds are asleep, and we are told that the “two” refers to “the self and the earth.” What the poem then enumerates over its brief length is what the pairing of the two entails. The last line of the poem provides a remarkable instance: “The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R.” The river as a flowing entity and the word “river” are thus conflated, reality and the idea of that reality, the being that is water and the sound of the word that refers to that being, the flowing water and the mind that keeps hold of that flowing through a word or the mere first letter of that word, an onomatopoeia for drowsiness. Perhaps it is nothing more ingenious than a mental operation of the kind we meet in transferred epithets. The river has become R, the sound that names it as an idea, and of course it is not the river that is drowsy but the mind that contemplates it, though the gentleness of the river flow might play a part in abetting the transference. A letting go, involuntary but inevitable is under way, and the poet enacts something that is both the performance of relinquishment and the final stay against that dissolution, a gentle and playful reminder of how mind and matter had been interpenetrated in that twosome of a self whose identity, which inhered in a particular relation to that world, now approaches the disembodiment that will blur the difference between mind and matter, the self

and the world that will absorb it.

Now consider how the same, or a similar, preoccupation animates the final work in the *Collected Poems*: “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself.” The speaking voice of the poem wonders if the bird-sound that he thinks he has heard was a mere dream or the sound of real birds outside his window. A large difference thus depends on a small clarification. If the sound was in his head, he is sleeping, and the world of reality is not where he is. It matters therefore, to this frame of mind, that he should have confirmation that what he heard was not a sound inside his head, but the sound of real birds, a real world out there.

Both poems are thus in a mundane sense about fear, the fear of being asleep, which is the fear of not being awake, of not being part of a real world, of not having the assurance that being is knowing (and knowing is being awake). Such poems are valedictions of this kind that they forbid both the small sleep and the big sleep which is betokened by simply lying in bed willingly. The philosophical allusion to Kant, in the first of these two poems, is clear enough, as part of the poet’s habit of drawing upon ideas from a realm of philosophical discourse that he was not comfortable with, but being able to turn them towards applications that show what happens when ideas and feelings come together as words in what we call poems rather than abstract arguments or essays in reasoning.

The philosophical incursion retrieves something of considerable poetic interest. In Kant, we are told, the notion of the *Ding an sich* functions as a limiting concept for a reality that is beyond the human capability for knowledge. Put another way, the objects of our experience are only representations, though they may also affirm the reality of things unknowable in themselves. In the world of Stevens’s poetry, we accept representations as the only reality we know, and in that sense he is Kantian. But what such poetry wants—stopping well short of any desire for any realm of noumena

beyond the world of phenomena—is validation of the being of mind-and-body in a world which the poet wants to be part of, wants always to be aware he is part of. The fear that he might be imagining sounds is a rehearsal of a larger fear—not the fear that he has been living in his head, or that life is an affair of the mind doodling to itself, or that poetry is a matter of doodling with words that refer to reality from a great distance, but—that he is losing touch with reality inch by inch, as sleep slopes towards death. This is a poetry of intimation. Apprehensiveness is close, but held at bay, because death is prefigured as sleep, and sleep has that about it which is natural and normal rather than something fearful and horrendous.

In contrast, it would appear self-evident that Yeats would have had no patience with any of this. The refrain of the short poem “What then?” expresses dissatisfaction at merely having achieved all that had man had set out to accomplish—“All his happier dreams came true- / A small old house, wife, daughter, son”; but the internal quizzing continues: “‘*What then?*’ sang *Plato’s ghost*. ‘*What then?*’” Another poem, “Imitated from the Japanese,” greets the arrival at seventy years of age with “Hurrah for the flowers of Spring.” However, “The Chambermaid’s Second Song,” admits bluntly that when libidinal energy is at an ebb, the mind may race to thoughts of love and sex, but the body cannot follow, “His rod and its butting head / Limp as a worm.” “The Lady’s First Song” is adamant that regardless of whether one feels shame about it or not, one is “Like a dumb beast in a show” and there is no choice but to accept being “No better than a beast / Upon all fours,” and “The Lady’s Second Song” declares that “He shall love your body / Untroubled by the soul.” One of the most complete articulations of this state of mind can be found in “An Acre of Grass.” The mind has to deal with a body all rag and bone, the self feels like an old building where nothing stirs but a mouse. Stevens too, in a poem titled “The Plain Sense of Things,” speaks of the self as a habitation in ruins, “The Great structure” now become

“a minor house.” When the idea of arriving at some final truth is reached, in this frame of mind, Stevens images it as the “silence of a rat come out to see.”

Yeats’s way is to invoke frenzy and to summon around him the presences that he found exemplary for the kind of insistence and defiance that would beat against a wall—Timon, Lear, Blake and Michelangelo: two figures from the literary imagination who rage madly until their unreasonableness itself makes “truth known,” and two figures from the history of the creative arts, who inscribed images for posterity that would defy time and mortality. “An Acre of Grass” ends with a self-representation of an old man as endowed with an eagle’s mind. The image evidently helps gather some dignity around the tatters of the self. But it is a pose; not necessarily based on poise, because, when all is said and done, rhetoric and self-dramatization are not easy things to bring off. Whether Yeats is found plausible or not in his pose of an aging man with an eagle mind depends on our willingness to suspend skepticism and to admire a pose precisely because it is a pose, when there is little else to proffer against time’s inroads other than the rather splendid bravado more than half self-parodied in “The Statesman’s Holiday”:

With an eye like a hawk,  
With a stiff straight back,  
With a strutting turkey walk.

Stevens tackled a more general version of a related predicament in memorable fashion when he affirmed that “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.” This applies to Yeats as much as it applies to Stevens. Yeats’s poem ‘The Wild Old Wicked Man’ demands to know “Why should not old

men be mad,” where we infer that “mad” has less to do with insanity than with a wry acceptance that our beginnings do not know our ends, though our ends do recognize the ironic discrepancies between what we started with and where and how we end:

No single story would they find  
Of an unbroken happy mind,  
A finish worthy of the start.  
Young men know nothing of this sort,  
Observant old men know it well;  
And when they know what old books tell  
And that no better can be had,  
Know why an old man should be mad.

One of Yeats’s final poems is particularly significant in bringing this short account of a long story to a close: “The Circus animals’ Desertion.” The poem pursues a self-reflexive trajectory in which the poet’s own makings of a lifetime of creativity are remembered and disbanded. The circus animal metaphor disinfects any likelihood of mere sentimentality. The adventure of spirit and mind, and what it meant, why it was attempted, once noted, leave the poet to reflect on the sense in which

Now that my ladder’s gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

Stevens comes to his own equation between effort and retrospection. His valediction for a life of poetry, “The Planet on the Table” is almost as memorable as Yeats, though with less aggression about the “Old kettles, old bottles,” “Old iron, old bones, old rags” that Yeats rattles at himself as a reminder of where all his “masterful images” began. Stevens begins his poem

with a quiet affirmation, rich in its utter and understated simplicity, the final self-summation of a man whose collected poems are on the table before him:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.  
 They were of a remembered time  
 Or of something seen that he liked.

Stevens ends the little poem with sentiments that Yeats would have shared, though he would have been less willing to have planet earth take so much of the credit for what his work had wrested from life:

It was not important that they survive  
 What mattered was that they should bear  
 Some lineaments or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
 In the poverty of their words,  
 Of the planet of which they were part.

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