

ABSTRACT

“Winter Words”: The Poetry of Old Age in Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin

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In this dissertation I examine the poetry of Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin in order to explore each poet’s response to later life in his work. Combining the insights of psychology and gerontology with close formal analysis of the poems, this dissertation aims to contribute to our understanding of how old age can be an enabling source of—rather than an obstacle to—creative work. Arguing that each poet considered imagines old age as a liminal or threshold period, I assert that each develops striking formal means for rendering and responding to this phase of life. Indeed, I argue that the poems find in old age a creative source rather than a barrier; they are creatively enabled by old age at the same time they may be fearful or resentful of it. I suggest that old age exerts an imaginative pressure on each poet, and each one’s work may be seen as a pushing-back of the imagination against the impinging realities of aging.

Challenged by fears of poetic sterility, death, decrepitude, and senility, these poets respond in forms answerable to the realities they face, and in so doing these poems are ultimately affirmative rather than despairing; they are assertions of form against the formlessness and entropy of time. Thus I hope to show that even the bleakest of these poems of old age are imaginatively vital, paradoxically vivified by a state they frequently imagine as moribund.

"Winter Words": The Poetry of Old Age in Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction and Overview

When he was 63 years old, Irish poet-playwright William Butler Yeats published what many critics consider his single finest collection of poetry, 1928's *The Tower*. While it is justly regarded for its poetic density, its range of feeling, and its organization as a coherent volume, *The Tower* is also remarkable for its sustained engagement with the subject of old age. Indeed, agedness is one of the central concerns of the collection and the first two poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower," announce its thematic weight for the volume. In the more oft-anthologized of these poems, "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats famously compares an elderly man to a "tattered coat upon a stick" (2.2) and rejects the world of "those dying generations" for the realm of permanence and imagination he called "Byzantium." In "The Tower," Yeats turns to his own old age as a persistent reality:

What shall I do with this absurdity —
O heart, O troubled heart — this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? (1. 1-4)

“The Tower” is a lengthy meditation, not only on the process of aging, but also on the dichotomy that exists for a poet who, observing the decline of his bodily powers, nevertheless feels himself imaginatively and spiritually vital. As he goes on to say,

Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible—
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin’s back
And had the livelong summer day to spend. (1. 5-11)

In this dissertation I explore a small cluster of related questions: How do the poets Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin imagine old age? What does it mean to be old in their poems? Most significantly for a work of literary criticism, how do these poets embody their perceptions of old age in answerable poetic forms? The chapters that follow attempt answers to these questions by exploring how Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin make poetry out of—as well as about—old age. Instead of developing a descriptive account of each poet’s ostensible attitudes to later life, I approach the subject by attending to the poems’ formal as well as semantic features in order to account for their total poetic response to old age. Following John Hollander’s observation that “poetry involves ‘form as content’” (5), I attend to these poets’ formal choices in such matters as syntax, trope, figure, and rhetoric as constituent components of their response to old age.

Indeed, I contend that these poets' formal choices in their poems of old age are significant features of their total poetic response to this state of life.

In this dissertation I argue that old age for each of these poets involves one in a condition of "persistent liminality" (Nicholson et al. 1429) that can take a variety of forms: between the past, present, and future, between the aging body and the seemingly-ageless self, and between diminishing physical capacity and ongoing creative ability, to name only a few more pressing dichotomies. For these writers old age catches up the subject in a web of competing impulses, realities, and desires that is never fully escaped, only provisionally navigated. I argue that these poets confront the indeterminate in-betweenness of old age simultaneously at the existential and aesthetic levels. Focusing in each chapter on a specific figurative, stylistic, or rhetorical strategy, I argue that Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin develop an answerable style to their perceptions of later life, embodying in their forms the dialectical tensions each perceived in old age. Indeed, I hope to show that lyric form itself is an inextricable part of each writer's response to old age and must be taken into account in any reckoning with their ideas about later life.

At the heart of this study is a seeming paradox: How is it that great artists can create work out of a period of life they themselves—as well as the cultures around them—routinely describe as barren, diminished, and deprived? In

answer to this question I suggest that the poems are as creatively enabled by old age as they are frightened or resentful of it. Old age exerts an imaginative pressure on each poet, and each one's work may be seen as a pushing-back of the imagination against the impinging realities of aging. Challenged by fears of poetic sterility, death, decrepitude, and senility, these poets respond in forms adequate to the realities they face, and in so doing the poems are ultimately affirmative rather than despairing; they are assertions of form against the formlessness and entropy of time. Thus I hope to show that even the bleakest of these poems of old age are imaginatively vital, paradoxically vivified by a state they frequently imagine as moribund.

In what follows I adumbrate the contours of this study. First, I offer definitions and develop a conceptual framework underlying the dissertation. Next, I offer an apologia for my selection of these authors and describe my method in selecting and reading the poems. Third, I situate this dissertation in the context of scholarly discussions about literature and old age, pointing out the gaps I hope it contributes to filling. Finally, I conclude by offering summaries of each body chapter of this dissertation.

Conceptual Framework and Definitions

To discuss the poetry of old age is to encounter immediately a vexed definitional problem that has bedeviled commentators from the classical period onward: what—and when—is old age? Writing of aging in classical Greece, M.I. Finley is right to say that there has always been a “vague biological boundary-line” (1) setting off old age from other periods of life. Finley immediately notes that this boundary has never been clear. Indeed, the border between old age and the prime of life is hazier than its nearest analogue, that between childhood and adolescence, itself a liminal temporal period between childhood and adulthood. Just as no two people reach maturity at exactly the period in biological time, they do not reach old age simply by arriving at their sixtieth birthdays.

The problems inherent in rigidly defining old age have been apparent to culture and individual commentator alike. We can observe this difficulty in the various schemes Western societies have adopted to demarcate the phases of life. Classical Greece affords a helpful starting point because many later concepts of the life-cycle derive from ancient precedent. Thomas Falkner and Judith de Luce observe that the ancient Greeks adopted a broad four-phase description of the life cycle whose stages are “those of the child (*pais*); the young adult (*neos* or *kouros*) who has achieved *hêbê*, or physical maturity; the mature man at *akmê*, or prime...and the elderly man (*gerôn* or *presbys*)” (5). In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle

modifies this scheme by reducing it to three stages: youth, prime, and old age (175-77). For him, old age begins at the decline of the body after 35 and that of the mind at 49 (177).

Commentators in the medieval and early modern periods adopted Greek models and refined them by elaborating on them. The seventh-century Isidore of Seville offers a synthesized scheme that adds two stages to the traditional four, associating old age with the last two:

The fifth age is that of riper years, that is to say, of mature judgment, *gravitas*, and is the gradual decline from youth into old age: the individual is no longer young, but he is not yet an old man...This age commences with the fiftieth year and ends with the seventieth. *Senectus* is the sixth stage and is bounded by no definite span of years, but whatever of life remains after those earlier five stages is marked up to old age. *Senium* is the final part of old age, so named because it is the terminus of the six age. (qtd. in Troyansky 41)

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* we find English literature's paradigmatic meditation on the stages of life as mediated through the melancholy Jacques. "All the world's a stage," he says, and a person's life is divided into seven acts (2.7. 138). Anticipating the bleaker visions of old age in Philip Larkin, Jacques describes the final stages of life as a diminishment toward death and eventual nothingness:

The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (2.7. 156-165)

The persistence of various schemes of the life-cycle—modern and contemporary theorists like Erik Erikson and Peter Laslett adopt modified versions of them—attests to a continuing desire to classify and understand the phases of life; at the same time, however the variety of proposed schemes also attests to the inherent difficulty in such a classification. One reason that defining old age has proven so difficult is the fact that it involves questions of social function, physical capacity, mental acuity, as well as biological age (Thane 17). Scholars and commentators have long recognized that a person's accumulated years are only a part of what constitutes old age. Falkner and de Luce point out that ancient Greek society placed old age at around sixty, but that this age corresponds primarily to an alteration in social function for men and sexual or maternal function for women (5-6). Anticipating the modern practice of retirement, Greek men at this age were no longer subject to compulsory military service and could be elected to the council of elders (5); women reached old age once child-bearing years passed and their last child left the house. In addition to such changes in social and familial function are the changes in physical capacity

and mental acuity that accompany old age. Pat Thane has recently pointed out that “it was always widely recognized that some people became decrepit at younger ages, in their 50s or even 40s, whereas others remained fit and active into their 80s” (17). In modern Western cultures the same assumption basically stands: old age is partly a matter of years, partly a matter of social function and physical capacity. One might be a “young” 80 year-old and an “old” 50 year-old.

Artists and thinkers have articulated a wide range of attitudes towards what it is like to be old, but they have generally been united in describing it as a period of decline, withering, or drying up, and this despite the various valuations they have placed on this period. One prominent example is Plato, who takes a positive view of old age even as he describes it in negative terms as the loss of powers and energy. At the beginning of the *Republic* Socrates encounters the aged Cephalus, who tells him that old age means liberty from carnal bondage: “old age brings peace and freedom from all such things [i.e. desire for sensual pleasure]. When the appetites relax and cease to importune us...we escape from many mad masters” (974). For Plato, old age entails the loss of physical capacity but it allows one to turn to the contemplative life as a compensatory—and ultimately higher—good. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle views the losses of old age in unrelentingly hostile terms; Falkner justly calls it “one of the most lengthy and unsympathetic characterizations of old age to be found in

Greek literature" (xvi). According to Aristotle, the elderly "have many opinions but no knowledge...they are sour-tempered...they are small-minded from their humiliations in life...and they are more self-loving than is right" (175). In this account the elderly have lost the vices of youth—over-confidence, impulsivity, and undisciplined passion—only to exchange them for another set of moral failings. Against Aristotle we might set Cicero, whose *On Old Age* (*De Senectute*) has more in common with Plato in *Republic*; nevertheless, Cicero also assumes that old age involves a decline from a previous state. Cicero reasons that since physical capacity and sensual desire have both diminished, the elderly have a chance to adopt a philosophical life away from public affairs and free from the carnal pursuits. Nevertheless, Cicero maintains that old age is not itself a good: "it is our duty...to resist old age; to compensate for its defects by a watchful care; to fight against it as we would fight against a disease" (31).

Less positive than Cicero, many Renaissance writers shared his insistence on a stoic endurance of the inevitable. Thus Henry Cuffe, in his 1633 *The Differences of the Ages of Man*, makes the conventional association between the life cycle and the seasons of the year.¹ If the prime of life is an Autumnal harvest of

¹ Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar* draws memorably on this association. In "December," the aged Colin Clout laments:

So now my yeare drawes to his latter terme,
My spring is spent, my sommer burnt up quite:
My harueste hasts to stirre up winter sterne,
And bids him clayme with rigorous rage hys right.

our life's fruit, old age "resembleth unto the colde and troublesome winter season, very fitly thereby expelling the cumbersome coldnesse of the latter end of our life" (116). Montaigne can accept old age as inevitable while seeing it as a mostly-inevitable wasting illness: "It is possible that in those who employ their time well, knowledge and experience grow with living; but vivacity, quickness, firmness, and other qualities much more our own, more important and essential, wither and languish" (289). For Robert Burton "natural melancholy "is almost inseparable" from the elderly (172). Later in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* he puts it this way: "Old age is a disease of itself, loathsome, full of suspicion and fear; when it is at best, unable, unfit for such matters" as love and sexual intercourse (267). However we may distinguish among these writers' respective responses to old age, they share the conviction that this period of life is marked by decline.

Recent accounts of old age—its boundaries and its psychological contours—are definitely more sympathetic. The most prominent of these is no doubt that of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, whose theory of the life-cycle has

So nowe he stormes with many a sturdy stoure,
So now his blustering Blast each Coast doth scoure.

The carefull cold hath nypt my rugged rynd,
And in my face deepe furrowes eld hath pight;
My head besprent with hoary frost I fynd,
And by mine eie the crow his claw doth wright:
Delight is layd abedde, and leasure past,
No sonne now shines, cloudes han all ouercast. (127-138)

engender vigorous debate for all subsequent commentators. Adopting a “stages of life” model, Erikson places old age at the eighth and final stage. According to him, the eighth stage presents an impasse: will the subject achieve “ego integrity” or will she succumb to “despair” (268)? Erikson posits that successful aging depends on achieving ego integrity, which he defines as “The ego’s accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning....It is the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions” (268). In this model the elderly can potentially achieve a kind of peace by accepting what their lives have been, seeing in the past a coherent and meaningful life-story. Old age for Erikson is a period of opportunity rather than being rigidly bound by the deterministic pull of time.

Rather than enumerate more modern accounts, I would like to draw attention to a recurring feature in the scholarship on old age: their suggestion that old age is fundamentally a threshold or liminal period.² In her magisterial *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir places the aged person in a temporally

² Shakespeare anticipates the insights of psychologists and philosophers. His greatest lyric of old age, sonnet 73, is structured around various images of liminality. The first places its speaker at a seasonal threshold — “When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang” (2) and the second in the liminal daily period of twilight: “In me thou see’st the twilight of such day/As after sunset fadeth in the west” (6-7). The poem’s climactic image is likewise liminal: “In me thou see’s the glowing of such fire / That on the ashes of his youth doth lie” (9-10).

liminal position between his past and his future: “The aged man may be defined as an individual with a long existence behind him, and before him a very limited expectation of life” (361). For de Beauvoir the elderly inhabit a period pulled between the weight of the past and an ever more imminent death in the future; they are always simultaneously aware of both a long past and short future.³

Temporal liminality in age is only one of its forms; another involves the individual person at the subjective level. Specifically, scholars have remarked the frequency with which elderly people experience a misalignment between their sense of themselves as subjects and their appearance to others or themselves in mirrors as aged. Beauvoir and others have remarked on the duality many aged persons perceive between their body and mind.⁴ From their clinical research Nicholson et. al have concluded that old age “is a state in which identity is continually negotiated through a prolonged dialectic between body and self” (1429).⁵ As in Hardy’s “I Look into My Glass,” the aged person often feels a discrepancy between her inner and outer self. One interviewee in Nicholson’s

³ Penelope Deutscher describes Beauvoir’s philosophical project in both *The Second Sex* and *The Coming of Old Age* as developing a view of both gender and age as liminal identities at “the nexus of ontological freedom and social marginalization” (289)

⁴ For de Beauvoir’s treatment, see *The Coming of Age* pp. 283-297.

⁵ For a thorough philosophical examination of this duality in old age, see Joseph Esposito’s *The Obsolete Self*.

study, 87 year-old Florence, describes her sudden realization that her body and sense of self are not aligned when she describes not being able to perform :

You think you're going to go on the same way, at least I think most people do, don't they? I never thought one day I should be sitting here, can't do anything—never even thought of it. Well, until I fell over that day. (1428)

Florence's surprise at her inability to remain physically active is characteristic of the reports of many older people of a frustrating misalignment between body and mind.⁶

The elderly are often socially liminal as well, no longer working and often retired from public life.⁷ More painfully, the very old sometimes feel themselves to be historically liminal, representatives of a vanished past inhabiting an increasingly unfamiliar present. Karen Chase discusses the Victorian sociologist Beatrice Webb, who alongside her husband Sidney lived well into the twentieth century, much like Thomas Hardy. Chase writes that in old age Webb and her husband

lost the self-will that had carried them into their final years; they saw themselves as "ghosts of our former selves haunting this mad

⁶ De Beauvoir provides voluminous anecdotes to support her conception of old age as involving a division between inner and outer selves. Memorably, she quotes Voltaire's formulation of this division: "The heart does not grow old, but it is sad to dwell among ruins" (303).

⁷ See also Bartholomeus and Tarrant's "Masculinities at the Margins of 'Middle Adulthood': What a Consideration of Young Age and Old Age Offers Masculinities Theorizing." Also relevant is Steven Marx's "Fortunate Senex': The Pastoral of Old Age."

century with its tragic happenings"; they remembered, without feeling, their former convictions. The "Religion of Humanity, the creed that had animated a lifetime's vocation, has "vanished from the public eye in my lifetime." (279)

Chase goes on to observe of her: "A Victorian outliving herself into a next century she endured a historical obsolescence, a comic/tragic belatedness, that converged with the most immediate experience of outliving will and purpose and joy" (280). This sense of historical belatedness, of being a relic, is well attested in both scholarly discussions and in the poetry of old age.⁸

For the purposes of this dissertation I adopt a flexible definition of old age because, as Janet Roebuck notes, "there is no...physiological basis for a sound, clear-cut definition of old age" (416). Recognizing that old age is partly biological, partly social, and partly psychological, I follow the gerontological consensus that old age is a fluid category. Thus I refer to old age as the difficult entity that it is, which involves chronological age, mental or physical signs associated with advanced age, subjective perceptions of oneself as aged, and social constructions of agedness that vary across time. Because of the term's inherent irresolvability, I follow the practice of Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Lenker:

⁸ We might point to Hardy's "An Ancient to Ancients" as paradigmatic, but also pertinent is Hardy's persistent characterization of himself in his poems as a ghost haunting the present. Also notable in this connection are Yeats's "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" and "Beautiful Lofty Things," both of which bear witness to a faded past.

Therefore, although throughout this study we apply to these imprecise, perhaps inaccurate words their conventional denotations, we ask the reader to imagine that each time these necessary but virtually meaningless terms—"aging," "elder," "old," and "old age"—are employed, we are placing them under erasure...(10)

As a pragmatic matter, I follow the poets themselves by focusing on poems written from the vantage of old age. For Hardy, this has been most difficult, since his career in poetry essentially began at the age of 58. Thus I offer readings of poems from 1917's *Moments of Vision*, written when he was 76, as exemplary poems of Hardy's old age. For Yeats, I study the poems written in the last ten years of his life, beginning with 1928's *The Tower* to his posthumous volume *Last Poems*, published in 1939. In the case of Larkin, who died at 63 and had largely—though not completely—fallen silent for six years by the time he passed, I argue that his poems warrant study as poems of old age because they are just as urgently concerned with it as the poems of a chronologically older man. By including Larkin in this study I follow the scholarly consensus that one's subjective perception ought to be taken into account in a discussion such as this; Larkin, feeling himself preternaturally aged before his time, writes convincingly and consistently out of a sense of agedness even if he did not live to what we might consider a ripe old age.

Before moving on it is necessary to define the phrase “the poetry of old age” in order to articulate my rationale for reading the poems that I have chosen. In the broadest sense I employ this phrase to refer to poems that meet at least one of two criteria: they must be written from the perspective of old age and they must address some subject commonly associated with this period of life. For my purposes “perspective” in this case refers either to the author’s biographical age of the poem’s writing—as in Hardy or Yeats—or to the point of view in relation to old age that the poem adopts, as in all three poets. In order to be considered a poem of old age it must also address some aspect that we normally associate with old age. I refer to poems then that address old age not simply as a theme or subject but as an imminent reality for the poem’s speaker.

At this point I should like to articulate the principles governing my selection of Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin for this dissertation. Most generally, I have chosen them not only because they are three major English-language poets of the twentieth century but also because they each engage questions of aging in their poems in interesting and aesthetically vital ways over a sustained period of their creative lives. For Hardy and Yeats, who died at 87 and 73, respectively, old age is a condition out of which they both wrote; for Larkin, who died at 63, old age was one of his most pressing concerns and he felt it acutely from a very early age.

While Yeats and Hardy are two of the most significant poets of the first half of the twentieth century, I have chosen to include them in this study because they represent two vastly different approaches to poetry. Hardy and Yeats are routinely contrasted in criticism as embodying distinct poetic visions; Richard Hoffpauir has gone so far as to suggest that Yeats and Hardy are antithetical to one another and cannot be simultaneously accepted as poetic models (29-30). I disagree with Hoffpauir: though they are at odds in many ways, I would suggest that their differences make them suitable for study together as mutually illuminating. Indeed, the visionary Yeats provides a sharp contrast to the “homelier” and more realistic Hardy. Furthermore, Yeats’s esoteric beliefs run counter to Hardy’s more empirically-oriented outlook. Other differences between them can be enumerated but the point would remain: studying Yeats and Hardy together in the context of aging should prove fruitful, in part because their differing aesthetics and personal philosophies will allow me to establish contrasting attitudes towards aging which the two poets represent. Thus Yeats and Hardy, because of their differences, allow me to explore two streams of twentieth century poetry as they both address the same human situation.

Although I avoid primarily studying influence—especially as that term is understood as the mere borrowing of images or themes—I believe it is nevertheless relevant to my project to point out that Philip Larkin was very well-

versed in both Yeats and Hardy's work. After Larkin's Yeatsian first volume *The North Ship*, he famously turned from Yeats to Hardy for poetic inspiration.

Hardy's plain-spoken poems were liberating for the younger Larkin, who writes in "The Poetry of Hardy":

[Hardy is] not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot... When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try to and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life—this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it. (*Required Writing* 175)

Thus Larkin was deeply engaged with the work of both Yeats and Hardy, attuned to the differences in their conception of poetry and in their modes of utterance. Their continued and sometimes conflicting presences in his poetry make Hardy and Yeats fascinating complements to Larkin.

Methodologically, this dissertation is eclectic if not interdisciplinary. Primarily this is because old age remains an under-studied phenomenon in imaginative literature. Since this is the case, I have attempted to develop a flexible framework that draws from a broad array of sources while remaining grounded in the techniques of close literary analysis. I have benefited greatly from work in psychology, gerontology, and other social sciences and I draw on these sources wherever they are applicable. Although this body of work is a pillar of this project it is not alone sufficient to inform a work of literary criticism

such as this. Clinical and psychological work is of limited utility because poems are ultimately not records of direct psychic experience but are provisional formal arrangements of language; as R.P. Blackmur puts it, "Poetry is life at the remove of form and meaning; not life lived but life framed and identified" (19). So while I have learned much from and sought to apply the work of gerontologists and social scientists wherever possible, I emphasize throughout the formal, rhetorical, and stylistic features by which these poets come to terms with old age.

Although it does not address old age, Stephen Burt's *The Forms of Youth* (2007) is a seminal study and is the work I am most indebted to methodologically. Burt reads twentieth century American and English poetry in order to discover how poets have constructed adolescence in their work. He points out that for many poets, like John Ashbery and Amy Clampitt, adolescence is a "liminal" period, a time of "becoming" between childhood and adulthood (2-3). In order to negotiate this period of life, Burt argues, modern British and American poets have to "search...for language and for forms adequate to the youth of their times" (7). Burt's study takes place at an intersection between the study of cultural ideas and that of poetic form and technique as it engages those ideas.

In his emphasis on their formal properties as well as the attitudes underpinning the poems, Burt provides a helpful exemplar and sanction for my

own approach. Specifically, I share with him a primary interest in how poets construct forms adequate to their perceptions of a period of life. Like Burt I prioritize the aesthetic dimensions of the poems I read while remaining sensitive to the ways in which they engage larger themes that emerge in the broader literature about old age.

Critical Review

Despite the ubiquity of old age as a literary theme, it is relatively under-theorized in literary criticism. This is truer of poetry than it is of prose fiction, but in both cases it remains true that old age—unlike other identity categories such as race, gender, or class—has not received the critical treatment its pervasiveness warrants. In what follow, I offer a brief outline of major critical studies that lay the foundation for the current project. Because I cannot hope to offer a comprehensive review, I offer only the most significant and relevant books on issues relating to old age and literature. I review scholarly work on each individual poet and old age in the body chapter pertaining to that poet.

Although there have always been critical observations on literature on old age, it was not until the early 1980s that scholars began to attempt more systematic and comprehensive studies of the subject. We might discern two distinct critical streams beginning in this decade. First, literary treatments of old

age invited psychoanalytic approaches, drawing on Freud and Lacan to illuminate the psychic experience of the elderly. The second stream situates old age as an identity category that should be studied for social, political, and cultural implications.

The exemplary volume of psychoanalytic criticism is 1986's *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature, Psychoanalysis*. Here, contributors confront the physical and psychological metamorphoses of aging in autobiographical essays, discussions of Freud and Lacan, and readings of individual literary works. The anthology brings together a diverse group of scholars, some literary critics and some psychoanalysts and theorists, in an effort to establish a theoretical underpinning for the discussion of old age and literature.

Among the notable contributions of this volume are Herbert Blau's "The Makeup of Memory in the Winter of our Discontent," Kathleen Woodward's "The Mirror Stage of Old Age," and William Kerrigan's "Life's Iamb: The Scansion of Creativity in Renaissance Culture." While each essayist is unique in focus and approach, they share with one another a sense that old age is the site of imaginative potentiality at least equal to any other in the period of a lifetime. For Blau, the failing memory we associate with age is not a failure but creates an opportunity for self-invention: "the voids of memory with age are an opening into imagination, so long as the aged are not made to feel that failing memory is

a felony of sorts" (25). Taking a starker view, Woodward adapts Lacan's notion of the mirror stage by linking it to de Beauvoir's conception of the aged as Other. She suggests that the elderly person encounters her mirror image with a "shock of recognition" that the "body is in opposition to the self" (104). In encountering the discrepancy between the semi-ageless self and the visibly aging body, the aged person realizes the latent tension she always inhabits. This encounter allows an opportunity for the aged self to respond, with or without imagination. Finally, Kerrigan links the madness of poetic inspiration with the fury at old age embodied by Lear or in some poems of W.B. Yeats. Thus the poet's wrath at being old can potentially be a source of creative power.

An anthology roughly contemporaneous with *Memory and Desire* entitled *Aging in Literature* explores literary representations of old age. This volume takes a more exclusively literary approach by consisting largely of close readings of texts from a wide range of sources. The aim of the volume is to offer "a study of aging, and of values concerning old age, senescence, and death as presented in literature" (1). Given their concern with social values, the contributors understandably focus their attention on prose narrative rather than lyric poetry. Their goal being to explore how agedness and its attendant concerns are represented, they focus on the socially mimetic genres in order to read old age in the context of a larger imagined social world. Henri Peyre's conclusion suggests

why the collection does not address poetic treatments of old age. Oddly suggesting that “Literature and the arts prefer to ignore senior citizens” in favor of younger people (151), Peyre arraigns lyric poets most particularly for the way they imagine later life. Specifically, he indicts Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Arnold, Yeats, and Eliot on charges of failing to sketch a positive picture of old age (153). He concludes more generally by suggesting that poetry is the province of the young because he believes that it celebrates youth and rejects age. Thus for Peyre, lyric poetry has not often been a rich vein for the representation of or reflections on old age, and it is for this reason perhaps that the volume’s contributors attend to drama and the novel rather than poetry.

In 1993, Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen brought out a volume entitled *Aging and Gender in Literature*, an anthology whose purpose is to add the study of age to that of other identity markers, such as race, class, and gender. Wyatt-Brown articulates the aims of the volume as being “to show how growing older affects literary creativity and psychological development and to examine how individual writing careers begin to change in middle age” (2). In terms of method, *Aging and Literature* is eclectic, though the essays share a concern with “post-Freudian psychoanalysis, literary gerontology, and biographical theory, as well as the insights of genetics and biology” (9). *Aging and Gender in Literature* shares with *Memory and Desire* a desire to illuminate aging and old age as

psychological and cultural phenomena. One result of this focus is that literary texts become a means to some other end, that of understanding a given culture's attitudes towards old age as these are expressed in novels, plays, and (to a limited extent) poems.⁹

1999 saw the publication of another major anthology, *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*. Methodologically the volume is diverse but each of its contributors examines aging as it is socially constructed within a given text or socio-cultural milieu. Literary texts comprise only one of the volume's focuses: film, folklore, and various cultural practices related to aging are parsed for what they can tell us about aging as a trans-historical/cultural category. When they do focus on literary texts, the contributors mostly attend to narrative or drama. Essays cover Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and others. Though there are scattered discussions of poems, the volume contains no chapter devoted to poetry either as a mode or as written by a single poet.

While this brief overview implies that most of the work done on old age in literature has been from the perspectives of social, psychoanalytic, or cultural

⁹ I concur with Klaus Peter Jochum's critique of this volume. In particular I share with Jochum a desire for critics to develop a "complex set of theoretical approaches" to aging in literature without sacrificing attention to the texts' formal and aesthetic features (19).

theory, there have been some notable instances of formally attentive criticism working at the intersection between age and poetry and these have informed my work. One exemplary book is Helen Vendler's *Last Looks, Last Books* (2010). Although Vendler is not exclusively focused on old age--she includes a chapter on Plath, for example—her work addresses many of the same concerns that preoccupy poets as they meditate on later life. Examining the final collections of Stevens, Plath, Bishop, Lowell, and Merrill, Vendler argues that these poets are working in their last volumes at the “strange intersection where death meets life” (1). Because of their situation at the threshold between life and death, these poets must develop what Vendler calls a “binocular style,” a mode of rendering with equal fidelity both life and an increasingly more imminent death (1). Vendler's insistence on these poets' rendering of the liminal space between life and death accords well with my own reading of Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin and their sense of old age's contradictory liminality.

This dissertation supplements the current scholarship in a number of ways. First, it contributes to the literature by making an attempt at a critically attentive reading of these poets while drawing on the insights of scholars outside of literary studies. Specifically this dissertation aims to contribute to filling gaps in the study of poetic form and old age, a subject that has received scant attention thus far. At the level of each chapter I hope to supplement current criticism of

each poet by attending to some facet of his treatment of old age that has been hitherto occluded or too little discussed. Ultimately, I offer this project in hopes that it will further our understanding of the ways old age itself is a generative source of poetic tension and that poetic form is inextricably bound up with these poets' response to this stage of life.

Chapter Summaries

In my second chapter, I develop an account of Thomas Hardy's poetic response to old age. Focusing on 1917's *Moments of Vision*, I claim that Hardy's poems work by maintaining a strict balance between reticence and self-expression. In order to substantiate this claim, I focus on a single governing trope, that of the pathetic fallacy. Because this figure involves describing an inanimate object in terms borrowed from and reflecting the perceiving mind, I argue that it allows Hardy a means of directly engaging his own experience of old age without dramatizing it more overtly. I suggest that Hardy's reliance on the pathetic fallacy in these poems bespeaks a rejection of solipsistic self-regard; indeed, by projecting his perceptions onto the natural or inanimate he refuses to foreground his own experience, meditating on it at a remove under the guise of figurative description.

My third chapter, on W.B. Yeats, considers the rhetorical and stylistic features of his poems of old age. Focusing on poems written between 1928 and the poet's death in 1939, I trace a trajectory in which Yeats moves from attempts to reach provisional resolutions of the dilemmas of old age towards imaginatively dwelling in them without seeking to escape or resolve them. In order to support this claim I attend to the poems' use of spatial figures. By tracing the spaces of Yeats's poems I suggest we can see their movement beginning with visionary spaces and ending in the earthly and desolate spaces of the last poems. This figurative movement corresponds with Yeats's gradual tendency to imagine old age as a liminal space without trying to evade it.

In my fourth chapter I explore Philip Larkin's poems. Focusing on representative poems, I argue that Larkin's mature poetry imagines old age as involving the subject in a liminal and dialectical relationship between a sense of inevitable constraint and constriction and a desire for expansive states of inner freedom that transcend such limitations. By constraint and constriction I mean that Larkin's poems consistently view old age as a period characterized by a diminished sense of possibility and an increased awareness of one's entrapment in the conditions of one's life as experienced over time. Although Larkin's poems consistently articulate a view of old age as entropic and tending towards constraint, they nevertheless imagine moments of expansive freedom in which

the self yearns toward a state of timelessness and transcendence. In this I build on Andrew Swarbrick's argument that the poems "aspire to things 'out of reach'" and desire "states of being imagined, as it were, beyond the reach of language" and, I would add, of time (211). To substantiate these claims I offer close readings of a small number of major poems, attending to the ways their figures and forms embody Larkin's dialectical sense of old age. Specifically, I focus on figures of constriction and constraint on one hand and expansiveness and openness on the other. I argue Larkin is careful in his poems to give form to his perceptions and he does so by making recourse to all the poetic resources available to him. I argue that in their very formal accomplishments Larkin's poems invite the reader to share their perceptions and thereby gesture towards community with him or her.

CHAPTER TWO

“So bare a bough as Nature makes of me”: Hardy's Reticent Poetics of Old Age and the Pathetic Fallacy in *Moments of Vision*

Introduction

In “Why Do I,” the poem that concludes Thomas Hardy’s penultimate volume *Human Shows* (1925), the poet interrogates his own motives for continuing to write into late old age: “Why do I go on doing these things? / Why not cease?” (1-2). By the time this poem was published in 1925, Hardy was 84 years old. His writing life had begun in the 1870s with prose fiction, a medium he famously abandoned in 1895 after the publication (and subsequent negative reception) of *Jude the Obscure*. Although Hardy had written many poems in his younger years, he wrote many more in what Tim Armstrong has aptly called his “ ‘after-life’ as a poet,” which began in 1898 with *Wessex Poems*, published when Hardy was already 58 years old (27). While writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Emily Bronte, and D.H. Lawrence composed both fiction and poetry, Hardy is unique in that his career was radically bifurcated: he entirely abandoned one medium in order to take up another, never again writing extended prose fiction after *Jude*. More remarkable still is the longevity—along with the fecundity—of his poetic career. After *Wessex Poems*, Hardy produced seven more volumes of

poetry until *Winter Words*, published in 1928 after his death at the age of 88. Hardy's prodigious productivity is amply demonstrated by James Gibson's edition of *The Complete Poems* which includes no fewer than 948 poems, a great many of which were written in the latter part of Hardy's life. A poet who had produced so much—and for so long—may very well ask, as Hardy does in “Why do I?” — “Why not cease?” The fine poems he continued to compose and which make up most of his next and last volume, *Winter Words*, are testimony that he neither did nor could silence his “dinning gear” (10) until the end of a long life.

For Hardy, old age is a significant condition for the writing of poems as well as their subject matter. Later life for him is the site of creatively productive though subjectively painful tensions. Indeed, old age often involves the subject in a liminal relationship to himself and others. In one such relationship, Hardy contrasts the physical diminishment of aging—as he does in “I Look into My Glass”—with a still-vigorous mind and heart that retain their capacity for deep feeling but that are nevertheless unable to recapture or recreate the powerful experiences of the past except in memory. In addition to this local liminality of self and body, in his poems Hardy often seems caught by an ever-lengthening past—available to the poet's characteristic “fond, sad, retrospective sight” (“Conjecture” 9)—and a future “forward [in which] little is to see” (“She Opened the Door” 16) but further diminishment and eventual death. Finally, Hardy

perceived in old age a condition that is equal parts subjectively painful and objectively inevitable. It is a private experience in that to be aged is to feel the weight of one's own distinct memories, but it has a larger existential dimension in that it acutely implicates the individual in the passage of time. To be old is thus to be subjectively set apart while simultaneously being a part of the objective process of time itself.

In this chapter I offer an account of Hardy's poetic response to old age by attending to his formal choices in matters such as style, rhetoric, trope, and voice in his later works. Focusing on a small group of poems from *Moments of Vision* (1917) that have received scant critical attention but that I would claim are exemplary, I argue that Hardy's characteristic response to old age is to adopt a dialectical style capable of navigating its liminalities and tensions. Specifically, I argue that his poems maintain a strict balance between a self-concealing reticence and a personally expressive articulation of his experience of old age. This equipoise is an effect of the poet's deployment of poetic form; indeed, I suggest that it is a formally realized, fully concrete expression of a distinctively Hardyan ethos by which the demands of personal meditation and modest self-effacement are simultaneously met.

In order to support this claim, I focus on poems whose governing trope is the pathetic fallacy, or the attribution of a speaker's own state of mind to

inanimate external objects.¹ While it is certainly true that Hardy's poetry is "saturated with anthropomorphism" (Bayley 371), I contend that Hardy puts the pathetic fallacy to striking and unique use in his poems of old age. It allows him to map his consciousness onto the empirical, observable world of inanimate things. I suggest that an important effect of Hardy's use of the pathetic fallacy is to render his impressions and perceptions external and therefore reify them. In so doing, the poet maintains a balance between the personal and the impersonal: By engaging in figurative description of often natural scenes in this way, Hardy is able to avoid foregrounding his experience without neglecting it.

Throughout this chapter I hope to link questions of rhetoric, form, and style with a broader description of Hardy's ethical approach to responding to old age in his poems. Specifically, I suggest that Hardy rejects self-absorption by consistently deflecting attention away from the poet himself, even when the poems draw on his own experiences and biography for material for his poems. Qualifying J. Hillis Miller's insight that in Hardy the mind is always outwardly focused (*Distance and Desire* 4-5), I argue that Hardy's outward focus in his poems of old age is matched by an oblique self-expression that aims to situate the self in a common and shared natural condition via the pathetic fallacy. Indeed, I

¹I use the term "pathetic fallacy" rather than more general terms such as "personification" or "prosopoeia" because those terms do not necessarily imply that the attributes given to the inanimate belong to the speaker or reflect his own state of mind or feeling.

claim that despite Hardy's popular reputation as a supremely personal poet (based reasonably enough on the elegiac masterpieces of "Poems of 1912-13," written after his first wife's death), Hardy's poems of old age refuse to foreground or self-dramatize the poet, and in this refusal Hardy's poems acknowledge the commonness and naturalness of aging. Furthermore, I argue Hardy's stylistic balancing of self-expression and reticence implies the poet's refusal to see his situation as an aged man as at all unique: on the contrary, Hardy's self-effacing distance allows him to situate his own experience within a larger framework of natural and human experience and thereby gestures towards community. While it seems accurate to claim of Hardy, as Kathleen Woodward has argued regarding other poets, that late poems often "are marked by a solitude of the self" (*At Last* 5-6), Hardy maintains his solitude without lapsing into solipsism. His response to old age, then, faces both outward and inward; his ethical orientation is towards the outside world and towards others even as he faces his own aging. Hardy thus finds a way to poetically address his own experience of old age while refusing to present it as at all singular or separate from the common lot of humanity.

Critical Review

My work on Hardy's balance of self-expression with reticence is informed by recent debates regarding the relationship between Hardy's personal, lived experience and his poetry. Susan Miller's "Thomas Hardy and the Impersonal Lyric" is an important contribution to these debates. According to Miller, Hardy is pre-eminently a philosophical poet engaged in a dispassionate search for an artistic mode that can best represent his convictions. She argues that the "lyric emotion" of Hardy's work is not to be found in a representation of intense, lived experience (96); on the contrary, Miller suggests that Hardy "discredits the lived moment" as unavailable to apprehension as that moment unfolds (96). Focusing on the "retrospective vantage" (98) of so many of Hardy's poems, Miller argues that Hardy privileges the epistemological divide that separates a speaker's experience—and his or her relative ignorance of its significance at the moment it occurs—from the speaker's attaining understanding of the same experience many years later. Lyric emotion, on this account, comes not from the experience itself but from the belatedness of the speaker's knowledge: all knowledge and self-knowledge is too late to make a difference. Miller therefore argues that Hardy "dissociates lyric emotion from the immediacy of personal experience" (96) and that Hardy "generates and gives lyric voice to a new order of affect: neither feeling nor philosophy, but the impersonal weight of an idea that has

been abstracted from the current of lived experience" (97). Miller's account of Hardy's distancing strategies and his nearly-obsessive retrospective gaze enables a clearer understanding of the complexity of Hardy's poetic voice. However, it insists perhaps too stridently on Hardy's drive to impersonality and neglects what I believe is a significant counterweight towards this tendency, namely, Hardy's desire to meditate on his own experience, even if such meditation occurs under the aegis of impersonality.

Tim Dolin's "Life Lyrics: Autobiography, Poetic Form, and Personal Loss in Hardy's *Moments of Vision*" offers a counterbalancing view that rejects the notion that Hardy wrote a strictly impersonal poetry. Responding to Miller, Dolin argues that Hardy writes an autobiographical poetry, yet with a difference. For Dolin, Hardy's autobiographical poems in *Moments of Vision* do not bear a strict relationship to a single, coherent autobiographical subject named Thomas Hardy; on the contrary, the "I" of these poems is a "self that is continually being constituted and reconstituted" by the poetic utterance and its inscription into a larger narrative of life and loss (4). Dolin therefore explicitly rejects a simplified account of autobiographical writing in which immediate experience translates directly into poems. Citing Sidonie Smith, Dolin argues that Hardy's autobiographical poems are "faithful to 'the fragmentary nature of subjectivity' (Smith, p. 109) and the mortality of human memory" while at the same time they

are “painfully conscious of what is lost in the compact between the lyric poem and the dead” to or for whom so many of the poems in *Moments of Vision* are written (4). Dolin concludes that “the generative paradox of Hardy’s life-lyrics” lies in the tension between the demands of “lyric poetry [which] measures its success by its capacity to abrogate its autobiographical origins” and Hardy’s desire to memorialize dead loved ones and thereby to commemorate his own personal losses as an aging man (16). In articulating the tension between Hardy’s autobiographical and elegiac impulses and the impersonal or monumental character of lyric poetry, Dolin provides a helpful lens for inquiring into Hardy’s strategies for negotiating these competing demands.

Recent scholarship on Hardy’s poetry of old age takes up some of these issues while striking off into different territory by asking ethical questions of the poet: what kind of man, some recent critics have asked, does Hardy become in old age and what are his attitudes towards this state of life? My work on Hardy’s poetry of old age builds on recent scholarship in this area, including that of Samuel Hynes, whose article “How to be an Old Poet” is a major contribution to the subject. Comparing W.B. Yeats to Hardy, Hynes argues that the two poets represent alternative responses to the same dilemma: following the Yeats of “An Acre of Grass,” Hynes argues that Yeats is akin to Shakespeare’s King Lear in his late-life fury (192). By contrast, Hardy resembles *The Tempest’s* Prospero in his

more benign and passive acceptance of old age (191).² As a Prospero, Hardy is "an old man who has accepted diminishment and given it dignity. [Hardy] is the old poet as sage, as truth-teller, no longer an agent in his life, but an observer" (191). While I agree with Hynes that Hardy's is generally a gentler, less protesting poetry than that of Yeats, I believe that his argument may overstate Hardy's acceptance of old age and death.³ Moreover, Hynes' claims need to be a supplemented by a wider-ranging account that provides a more narrowly focused description of the ways that Hardy deploys form as a means of articulating his response to (and ethical orientation towards) old age. Because his purpose is to establish large conceptual and theoretical categories, Hynes understandably does not engage in sustained close reading of many particular poems; thus, he pays little attention to the sophisticated (and pervasive) formal strategies by which Hardy secures his characteristic balance of reflection and reticence.

² For two accounts of Lear and Prospero as aged figures, see Sara Munson Deats' "The Dialectic of Aging in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*" and "Shakespeare Teaching Geriatrics: Lear and Prospero as Case Studies in Aged Heterogeneity" by Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader. These essays make up the first two chapters of *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*.

³ A poem such as "After the Death of a Friend" (*Winter Words*), for instance, represents an embittered strain of Hardyan resignation. The voice of that poem—exhausted, contemptuous—is hardly that of a stoic sage.

William H. Pritchard has also written well of Hardy's poetic old age; in particular, Pritchard's "Hardy's Winter Words" and "Hardy's Poetry of Old Age" offer compelling readings of Hardy's later lyrics by focusing on Hardy's disciplined distance in those poems. In "Hardy's Winter Words," Pritchard foregrounds "Hardy's presence" in his poems by focusing on his use of "*voice*," which Pritchard rightly acknowledges as of central importance in Hardy's poetics (49, italics in original). He argues that Hardy's later poems become increasingly distant and austere, gaining an "unearthly detachment" near the end of the poet's career (66). Although Pritchard acknowledges Hardy's increasing distance of voice and relates to the poet's growing into old age, he does not address how it serves as an index to Hardy's response to old age.

In "Hardy's Poetry of Old Age," Pritchard challenges Hynes' reading of the poet, arguing that "Hardy as Old Poet is a little odder—more remote, even perverse—than Hynes" suggests (79). Again, Pritchard rightly emphasizes the distance Hardy creates between himself and his subject in his later poems, paying particular attention to what he describes as Hardy's occasional indifference to suffering in the later poems. I assent to Pritchard's emphasis on Hardyan reticence in old age, but his account needs to be supplemented and qualified. For one thing, Pritchard's selection of poems—"Nobody Comes," "Henley Regatta," and "The Mongrel," to name three—does not include works

that directly address old age. This is no objection, of course, because Pritchard's purpose is to ask and answer ethical questions about the character of the poet in his later years, but in pursuing such questions Pritchard does not consider the ways in which Hardy responds to old age as a condition at the formal level. My work builds on Pritchard's by insisting on the centrality of reticence to Hardy's poetry, yet my account differs from his in two respects. First, I argue that reticence and distance are not the sole characteristics of his poetry of old age; on the contrary, I maintain that Hardy's distinctive achievement is to balance the personal and the impersonal in his poems. Second, I argue that attending to form—including trope and perspective as well as voice—is instrumental in reading the poems' formal embodiments of Hardy's response to aging.

In what follows, I attempt to synthesize the insights of these and other scholars while advancing my argument that Hardy's poetic response to old age is deeply involved with formal choices that have hitherto been insufficiently identified and described. I begin by considering Hardy's competing desires to reveal and hide himself in his work, arguing that while this dialectic may be a larger feature of his personality and poems, it is most particularly a feature of his poems written in response to his personal experience as an aged man. Drawing on a small selection of Hardy's poems, I demonstrate that the poet's conception of old age seems to demand of him a modest reticence that allows him to conceal

as well as reveal himself. Turning to the pathetic fallacy, I begin by examining several of Hardy's pertinent statements on the role of perception, particularly in reference to the art of old age. Then, focusing on a small but exemplary group of poems from the volume hailed by many critics as his best collection, *Moments of Vision* (1917), I offer sustained readings that demonstrate the centrality of reticence in Hardy's poetry of old age by recourse to the pathetic fallacy. I conclude by suggesting that the significance of this trope lies in its enabling Hardy to confront his own experience while simultaneously situating himself in the larger context of things as they exist in time.

Expression, Reticence, and Old Age

At the end of Hardy's last volume of poems, the posthumously published *Winter Words* (1928), there appears an enigmatic work entitled "He Resolves to Say No More." As the last poem in Hardy's last volume, it is difficult not to read the poem as a kind of a valediction to art and life.⁴ Hardy's speaker enjoins himself to keep silent and to hide the visionary insights he has achieved or will achieve in the near future:

⁴ We should note that Hardy did not live to complete the arrangement of poems in *Winter Words*. Nevertheless, the poem's placement at the end of the volume seems to be in keeping with Hardy's intention, since it continues his practice of concluding volumes with valedictions. See, for example, "A Poet," "Afterwards," "Survivor," and "Why Do I?"

And if my vision range beyond
The blinkered sight of souls in bond,
--By truth made free--
I'll let all be,
And show to no man what I see (16-20)

Although C.H. Sisson has derided Hardy's posture in this poem as one of "desperate vanity," (30) "He Resolves to Say No More" strikingly illustrates the way that Hardy often seems caught between contradictory impulses in his best and most characteristic poems of old age; specifically, the poem reflects a tension between speech and silence, or expression and reticence. In "He Resolves to Say No More," Hardy asserts his defiant intention to leave unsaid the vision he has achieved and in so doing he draws attention to all that he will not reveal. What Hillis Miller points out in his discussion of "Wessex Heights" is also true of "He Resolves to Say No More": "In poetry, as in dreams, there are no negations. To assert with appropriate strength what does not exist is to bring it into existence in the words" (Hillis Miller 343-4). Although the poem does not articulate specifically "what does not exist," the language of the poem calls forth Hardy's secret insights as a present absence in the mind of the reader, tantalizing her with the unspoken. "He Resolves to Say No More" thus hovers between saying and not saying by insisting so stridently on what its speaker will not tell. The poem thus effectively embodies Hardy's desire for disclosure even as it resists any revelation in its determination to keep silent.

The dialectic of expression and silence at work in "He Resolves to Say No More" is part of what Paul Zietlow has called an "extreme tension between the desire to conceal and the desire to reveal" that is characteristic of Hardy's personality and the work he produced (38). Similarly, Donald Davie has remarked that Hardy's "engaging modesty" is a core aspect of his appeal, especially when considered alongside the more ambitious high modernists whose work is contemporary with Hardy's own such as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound (40). In his poems, Hardy's "modesty" seems partly a result of the fact that, as John Bayley notes, Hardy seems to have "had no habit of fascination, or even concern, with himself" (368). Writing in the third person in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy asserts that generally "he took no interest in himself as a personage" (378). While Hardy could truthfully claim a lack of interest in himself, at the same time he could (and did) draw much of the inspiration for his poetry from his own life. Indeed, the poems almost obsessively tread and retread the same familiar ground, going over again and again many of the same events of his own life. There is equal truth, then, in Hardy's assertion—in a letter dictated to his wife Florence during an illness—that, "Speaking generally, there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr. Hardy's poetry than in all the novels" (*Life* 392).

There is a creative conflict, however, between Hardy's avowed lack of "interest" in himself and his continuous mining of his own experience for materials for poems. Although Hardy's persistent use of autobiography suggests a desire for self-revelation, the poems themselves often frustrate any attempt to read Hardy as a solipsistic confessional poet reveling in his own selfhood.⁵ Indeed, the autobiographical impulse in much of Hardy's poetry is complicated by what Susan Miller has termed Hardy's "impersonal form of lyric" in which biographical experience is reified and made into an object of belated contemplation; "lyric emotion," according to Miller, comes not from the experience itself but from a saddened and wiser retrospective gaze from a much-later vantage in time (96). For Hardy, then, even autobiographical poems are caught between stark self-disclosure and an impersonal distance. He is either the most personal of impersonal poets or the most severely reticent of the personal poets.

Hardy's *The Life of Thomas Hardy* offers further confirmation that personal reflection is often coexistent with the desire for a modest, concealing distance;

⁵ After all, this is the poet who praises Shakespeare for his elusiveness:
Bright baffling Soul, least capturable of themes,
Thou, who display'dst a life of commonplace,
Leaving no intimate word or personal trace
Of high design outside the artistry
Of thy penned dreams,
Still shalt remain at heart unread eternally. ("To Shakespeare" 1-6)

indeed, Tom Paulin has accurately described *The Life of Thomas Hardy* as "severely reticent" (13), in part because of the lengths to which Hardy goes to conceal as well as reveal himself in that text. Hardy's means of concealment involve both his attribution of authorship as well as his shaping of the content he includes in his *Life*. Begun in 1917 when the poet was nearly 80 years old, the work is an autobiography that masquerades as biography. As is well known, the *Life* was published under Florence Hardy's name but most of it was in fact written by Hardy himself (Millgate 3). Michael Millgate suggests that Hardy's strategy of writing an autobiography in the third-person and under his wife's name was a way for this "intensely private man" (476) to exert some control over his legacy and reputation without inviting the charge of self-absorption. In addition to misleadingly attributing authorship of the work to his wife, Hardy asserted control over it by tactfully concealing—through "mild distortions and outright omissions" (Millgate 3)—at least as much as it reveals about his personal life. The *Life* is a record of major life events, relationships, and the development of Hardy's artistic and philosophical positions, but it is not a diaristic exploration of Hardy's consciousness or the more difficult aspects of his private life, such as his increasingly vexed marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford. Thus there are many entries that detail a social event or mark the dates of significant publications but next to none that could be regarded as personally revealing. The Hardy that

emerges from the pages of the *Life* is therefore a public rather than a private man. Because Hardy's control over the material in the *Life* is so pervasive, Millgate is right to call the work "both an indispensable biographical source and a formidable and sometimes absolute barrier to further and deeper knowledge" of the man (4). Hardy's authorship of *Life and Work* under his wife's name and his shaping of the material presented therein imply his concern with revealing himself but only to a limited and tightly controlled extent.

Although Hardy often sought a balance between meditative self-reflection and a self-effacing distance, this balance is most frequently and strikingly achieved in his poems of old age, either those poems that take old age as a subject or are written from the vantage of later life. I would suggest one reason this is so is because the poet consistently perceived old age as a liminal period involving him in both a deeply private and very common situation. The aged poet is simultaneously a suffering individual and a representative for those who find themselves advanced in years.

An instructive example of the way that Hardy engages in limited self-reflection while maintaining a scrupulous reticence in the context of old age is the oft-anthologized "I Look into My Glass." The concluding poem of Hardy's first volume, *Wessex Poems* (1898), "I Look into My Glass" is rooted in personal experience; at the same time, however, the poem effaces its speaker's

singularity—his personality, as it were. The effect of this combination is to render “I Look into My Glass” a strikingly personal meditation on an emblematic experience. It is not iconic of a singular event in one man’s life; rather, the poem is rooted Hardy’s life but blossoms outward towards the social and communal world of a common experience of the aged for whom he speaks.

One way “I Look into My Glass” strikes a balance between the personal and the impersonal is in the way the poem transforms the biographical experience that lay behind it. Mary Jacobus has pointed out that the journal entry of 18 October 1892 provides the most likely source for the poem (271):

Hurt my tooth at breakfast-time. I look in the glass. Am conscious of the humiliating sorriness of my earthly tabernacle, and of the sad fact that the best of parents could do no better for me....Why should a man’s mind have been thrown into such close, sad, sensational, inexplicable relation with such a precarious object as his own body! (*Life* 251)

This passage clearly shares central features with “I Look into My Glass”: the mirror, the revelation of the body’s frailty, and Hardy’s sadness at seeing the shabbiness of his “earthly tabernacle.” Yet in spite of their similarities “I Look into My Glass” is no mere confessional transcription of the journal entry. To begin with, the poem places old age at the center of the experience; in this journal entry, however, it is nowhere mentioned. Indeed, Hardy records the consciousness of his “precarious” and fragile body without attributing a cause

for its condition, suggesting only the general “sorriness” of all bodies. “I Look into My Glass,” however, insists on old age as the source for the speaker’s body’s frailty. The juxtaposition in the poem is between the youthful, feeling heart and a body that is not simply precarious—as all bodies are—but withered by age. In “The Mirror Stage of Old Age,” Kathleen Woodward has advanced the strikingly relevant argument that

The image of the mirror dominates literary representations of the aged body. This is not surprising. The horror of the mirror image of the decrepit body can be understood as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the youthful Narcissus. As we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves--that is our youthful selves--are hidden inside our bodies. Our bodies are old, we are not. Old age can thus be described as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self, and we are alienated from our bodies. (104)

The tension articulated by Woodward and present in Hardy’s poem is nowhere to be found in the journal entry recording the experiential basis for “I Look into My Glass.” Thus the poem engages a paradigmatic moment in the recognition of one’s old age in a way his journal entry had not anticipated at all.

In addition to altering its source’s emphasis, “I Look into My Glass” achieves a degree of distance by purging itself of any particularity of reference.

Although Zietlow has argued that this poem “has every appearance of being a direct statement by Hardy himself, an aging man, lamenting his physical deterioration and saying a last word about his own condition” (16), the poem

actually eschews the specificity of Hardy's experience through a relentless de-particularizing impulse by which it is transformed into general terms.

One way Hardy de-particularizes his experience is by denying its uniqueness as a temporal event. For example, the poem's verbs are cast in the recurrent present tense rather than the singular past tense. Where "I looked into my glass" would freeze the experience in the uniqueness of a particular and unrepeatable event, "I look into my glass" (1) suggests that this experience is a common and somewhat recurring one that cannot be located at any one place in time. The de-temporalizing effect of the ongoing present is reinforced by the action of "Time" (9) which scourges the speaker through a repeated "shak[ing]" of "this fragile frame at eve / with throbbings of noon-tide" (11-12).

Another way Hardy de-emphasizes the singularity of his experience is by stripping the actors in his poem's drama of any specificity. For example, the poem's "I" is given very little dramatic depth or particularity; he does not speak only for Hardy himself. The poem scrupulously avoids particular reference to biographical specifics and the poet opts instead to employ a general "I" that speaks for all those who recognize his experience as their own. The other actor in this poem's drama is similarly de-particularized: "Time" (9). In personifying the abstraction of time, Hardy allegorizes it and in so doing he gestures towards the general experience of aging in which his own aging participates. "I Look into My

Glass" effectively transforms Hardy's personal experience as recorded in the journal entry of 18 October into an articulation of a much more general experience. He de-emphasizes his own uniqueness and in so doing gives formal life to his particular form of reticence in which he both reveals and hides himself in his poem by situating himself in the more broadly universal situation of old age.

In purging his poem of particularity while meditating on his own old age, Hardy reflects his persistent sense that the representation of old age—in poems and in life—demands a balance between subjective reflection and a form of modest reticence. Two poems written nearly twenty years after the publication of *Wessex Poems* (1898)—“I Travel as a Phantom Now” and “He Revisits His First School”—demonstrate at the level of trope the centrality of this balance to Hardy’s conception of a poetic response to old age.

In “I Travel as a Phantom Now” from *Moments of Vision* Hardy writes:

I travel as a phantom now,
For people do not wish to see
In flesh and blood so bare a bough
As Nature makes of me. (1-5)

Imaginative vision here substitutes for actual traveling because the speaker attaches a sense of impropriety to appearing too starkly in his own aged person. Having internalized a negative view of the aged body, Hardy’s speaker then

projects that view onto "people [who] do not wish to see" him in his physical decline. In describing himself as a "bare...bough" Hardy's speaker associates the effects of age on the body with nakedness in an image reminiscent of W.B. Yeats's vision of an "aged man" as "a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick" ("Sailing to Byzantium" 2.1). Because of his desire not to offend others by his appearance "in flesh and blood," the speaker goes abroad as an imaginary specter, yet fascinatingly the poem never suggests that this phantom is invisible. Hardy's speaker implies that he does not so much wish for invisibility as he does to appear insubstantial in a form not made bare by Time and nature.

Later in the same volume Hardy again takes up the relationship between decorum and self-exposure in "He Revisits His First School." In this poem Hardy describes a visit to his former school that, in hindsight, his speaker comes to regret for visiting it as an aged man. Indeed, he expresses his wish that he had gone to his school—which had seen him in his youthful prime—as a ghost after his death:

After waiting so many a year
To wait longer, and go as a sprite
 From the tomb at the mid of some night
 Was the right, radiant way to appear;
Not as one wanzing weak
From life's roar and reek,
His rest still to seek [...] (8-14)

Hardy's speaker regrets the "unseeml[iness]" (3) of his appearing so "solidly" (4) in his aged person in this place associated with his own youth. He appears as a kind of travesty of his former self, an offensive intrusion on this significant place that had hitherto known him as a young man. Again, Hardy's speaker does not wish for invisibility but for a less time-form than the one he has. When he imagines revisiting this school after death, for example, he envisions the schoolchildren seeing his ghost and crying "There sits his shade / In his olden haunt—just as he was" (17-18) as a student. It is not in appearing before others that constitutes the offense but in being seen by them too clearly "in the afternoon sun" as an aged man, which is to say as a man marked by time and suffering (22).

Both "I Travel as a Phantom Now" and "He Revisits His First School" offer vivid images for Hardy's sense of the balance he must maintain between self-expression and decorous restraint. Each poem implies that Hardy's poetry of old age requires a reticent indirection rather than self-exhibiting confessionality. At the level of metaphor these poems exemplify Hardy's concern for a properly modest form for addressing the dilemmas of his own old age in ways that do not "garish[ly]" ("He Revisits" 25) foreground the particularities of his own experience.

In what follows I offer an account of Hardy's poetry of old age by focusing on his use of the pathetic fallacy. I argue that this trope allows Hardy to write out of his experience and perception of old age while maintaining a degree of impersonal distance. I begin by adumbrating Ruskin's concept of the pathetic fallacy, connecting it to Hardy's aesthetic thought. Turning to *Moments of Vision*, I offer readings of exemplary poems in which I argue that their use of the pathetic fallacy enables them to inhabit the liminal space between subjective and impersonal reflection.

The Voice of Things: The Pathetic Fallacy⁶, Perception, and Old Age in Moments of Vision

In his chapter of *Modern Painters, III* (1856) entitled "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," John Ruskin divides poets into two classes—the "Creative" and the "Reflective or Perceptive" (71)—based on their relative ability to perceive objects as they are in themselves versus how those objects appear to them under the influence of powerful feelings. According to Ruskin, a poet of the first, creative class—a group whose members include Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare—is capable of feeling deeply while retaining mastery over strong emotions. This

⁶ Although the term is pejorative in Ruskin, I use it as a convenient short-hand for the particular Romantic variety of personification in which a speaker's consciousness is reflected in his or her descriptions of inanimate or natural objects. My use of the term in reference to Hardy seems sanctioned by the poet's own employment of it as the original title of an early poem (see footnote 9 below).

kind of poet is susceptible to feeling but subordinates feeling and emotion to reason; in so doing, he ensures the truthfulness of his observations. For Ruskin, the reasonable and accurate perception of reality conflicts with emotions that can potentially distort reality by coloring it. A poet of the first order is therefore one whose reason is triumphant in this conflict: this poet is one “who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself—a little flower apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it” (74). Poets of the second (reflective or perceptive) order, however, introduce the “error...which the mind admits when affected strongly by emotion,” that of falsely attributing consciousness to inanimate objects, natural or otherwise (74). Commenting a passage in Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* in which sea-foam is described as “The cruel, crawling foam,” Ruskin asserts that “The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief” (71). Because Ruskin’s chief criteria for the poet are truthfulness of observation and the primacy of reason over emotion, these lines fail to achieve poetry’s highest order because they evince the poet’s weakness of mind which allows emotion to color what is observed. He does admit that poets who employ the pathetic fallacy may write well insofar as they accurately treat the subjective, inner state under which they write (75); nevertheless, they are poets of the

second-order, weak and “subdued by the feelings under which they write,” unlike a poet of the first order who has an “entire command of himself” and his emotions (75).

Ruskin’s essay produced a profound effect on the young Thomas Hardy, for whom concerns with the character of human perception were deep and abiding. Tom Paulin argues that Hardy was familiar with Ruskin, noting that the poet refers to Ruskin’s work as early as 1862 (18). Paulin goes on plausibly to suggest that “Ruskin’s famous chapter on the pathetic fallacy must have also influenced his 1865 note” (18), referring to a journal entry dated 23 August 1865. This note is one of Hardy’s first important articulations of his version of the pathetic fallacy and reads: “The poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers. Indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all” (*Life* 50). For Hardy, the pathetic fallacy is no fallacy at all; in fact, he takes it for granted that human consciousness supplies “the poetry of a scene” to nature. The projection of consciousness involved in this trope is for him simply a condition of being a perceiving, living being among inanimate things. Paulin is right to point out that Hardy, unlike Ruskin, “is not concerned with the truth or falseness of the received impression: for him the emotional impact of a scene varies with, and therefore depends upon, its perceiver’s state of mind” (18-19).

In emphasizing the perceiving mind as a co-creator of what it perceives, Hardy inherits the legacy of the Romantics; indeed, he is a successor to the Wordsworth of "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" who writes of "all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create, / And what perceive" (106-107). In a note dated 3 June 1882, Hardy argues that the artist encounters the external world but does not reproduce neatly realistic copies of it. Rather, the poet records at once what is observed and the quality of perception observing it. Hardy muses:

As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer watches that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind (*Life* 153).

Key in this description is the conjunction of the "pattern among general things" and the artist as perceptive observer. Even descriptions of "Nature" necessarily take on the hue of the perceiving mind. Thus in Hardy's conception the artist is not one who faithfully records nature *qua* nature; on the contrary, Hardy would therefore agree with Coleridge when the latter writes that "We receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live" ("Dejection" 4.1-2).

While Bayley rightly notes that "anthropomorphism saturates [Hardy's] style" (371), critics have not yet noted the significance of the pathetic fallacy to

his conception of the aged and mature artist.⁷ One of the remarkable features of Hardy's theory that the artist records his impressions of external reality (rather than simply the reality itself) is his recurrent insistence that such a practice belongs most powerfully to the aged. Indeed, several revealing journal entries preserved in the *Life* reflect Hardy's conviction that the aged artist is particularly well-suited to unify his perceptions and impressions with his observations of the external world. In one such entry from January 1887, Hardy notes his dissatisfaction with a realistic or strictly empirical representation of the natural world: "After looking at the landscape ascribed to Bonington in our drawing-room I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery" (*Life* 185). Instead of perceiving the "original realities as optical effects", Hardy states his desire to "see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings" (*Life* 185). He develops this line of thinking by connecting an empirical realism to the style of youth, while the mature artist is one capable of holding his own idiosyncratic perceptions in tension with the perceived world. He posits,

The 'simply natural' is interesting no longer. The much decried, mad, late-Turner rendering is now necessary to create my interest.

⁷ For extended accounts of Hardy and personification as trope, see J. Hillis Miller's "Prosopopoeia in Hardy and Stevens" and S. Nishimura's "Thomas Hardy and the Language of the Inanimate," the latter of which begins with Ruskin's pathetic fallacy and links Hardy to the concept.

The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art—it is a student's style—the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragical mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there –half hidden it may be—and the two united are depicted as the All. (*Life* 185)

The mature artist is one who has been awakened “to the tragical mysteries of life” through experience and, Hardy implies, it is because of these mysteries that the artist's emotional life has been deepened sufficiently to perceive the “half hidden” qualities that awaken human association with nature.⁸

In conjunction with Hardy's notion that the mature artist has been trained by experience to see into nature is his argument that the aged artist reticently reveals his perceptions—as opposed to his soul—in his work. Indeed, the aged artist reveals a mode of seeing that is informed by experience, suffering, and loss without necessarily reflecting in a more solipsistic manner on himself. Hardy develops this argument in a note from 1906, when he was 66 years old himself and fully embarked on his career in poetry. After attending a concert of Wagner's music, he muses:

I prefer late Wagner, as I prefer late Turner, to early (which I suppose is all wrong in taste), the idiosyncrasies of each master

⁸ It is important to recognize that nature does not cease to exist *qua* nature for Hardy, as it might for a solipsist; on the contrary, in Hardy's conception art arises from the assigning of human meaning to an independently existing, though inherently meaningless, natural world. A tree in a Hardy poem is therefore always first a tree, yet it elicits associations and impressions from the poet. The pathetic fallacy in Hardy is thus metaphorical rather than symbolic; neither tenor nor vehicle subsumes the other.

being more strongly shown in these strains. When a man not contented with the grounds of his success goes on and on, and tries to achieve the impossible, then he gets profoundly interesting to me. To-day it was early Wagner for the most part: fine music, but not so particularly his—no spectacle of the inside of a brain at work like the inside of a hive. (*Life* 329)

Tim Armstrong notes of this passage that “Hardy is arguing that old authors are fascinating for the way in which the dynamics of their thought are rendered more visible, in an almost skeletal fashion” (25). Drawing on Derrida’s notion of supplementarity, Armstrong goes on to observe that poetry allows for the “extension and exteriorization of the mind and its ghostly dream-play” (25). Indeed, this passage is notable for Hardy’s insistence that the aged artist reveals his “brain” rather than his heart or inner self. More striking still is Hardy’s implication that the aged artist’s revelation of his mind—its “spectacle” to outside observers—is merely a by-product of an ongoing process of perception and creation rather than being an end in itself. Self-revelation is clearly not the aim of the poet, but in externalizing his perceptions something of the self is revealed almost as naturally as bees working in a hive; the artist appears as oblivious of his audience as the bees are of their keeper.

Hardy’s argument that the aged artist ought to unite his inner impressions with external reality and his suggestion that the artist reveals his mind—rather than his self or soul—allow us to see why the pathetic fallacy would be an

attractive organizing trope for poetically responding to aging and old age. Hardy had long been fond of it,⁹ but he employs it in old age in unique ways, extending its use and emotional resonances. Specifically, Hardy makes use of the pathetic fallacy to record his experience of old age as inevitable and desolating without resorting to bathos or self-indulgence. Indeed, in his most characteristic poems, this trope enables the poet to objectify his experience of old age by externalizing it, welding his perceptions to observable fact. Because of his sense that self-revelation ought to be discreet, sidling, and tactful, Hardy found in the pathetic fallacy an ideal vehicle for exploring his own experiences under the aegis of figurative descriptions of the external world. Thus the pathetic fallacy becomes for Hardy means of registering the shifts of consciousness brought about by aging and old age without succumbing to a solipsistic temptation to the confessional mode. In the poems of old age which employ the pathetic fallacy most successfully, Hardy finds a means of maintaining a strict balance between personal reflection and self-concealing reticence, in the process striking equipoise between the subjective and the communal.

A striking example of Hardy's characteristic use of the pathetic fallacy to confront old age is "The Voice of Things," the second poem in *Moments of Vision*.

⁹ Paulin reminds us that the early poem "The Seasons of Her Year" originally bore the title "The Pathetic Fallacy" (19). Another early poem, "Nature's Questioning," represents his concern with the trope and its implications for human perception.

Spoken from the vantage of late age, the poem describes three different visits to the same location at intervals over a long span of time, the first of which took place “Forty Augusts—aye, and several more—ago” (1). In each description of each visit to the same landscape, a sea-side cliff or promontory possibly in the Cornwall of his youthful courtship of Emma Lavinia Gifford, the poet sketches three portraits of himself as he gradually aged by describing his changing perceptions of the natural world.

By describing himself in terms of how he perceived the world, Hardy’s speaker adumbrates a brief spiritual autobiography and a capsule portrait of aging. Indeed, the figurative descriptions of the land and sea-scape substitute for an explicit description of the speaker’s younger self. In his first visits to the sea-side, “loosed from dull employ” (2), the poet experienced a harmony with nature and a cheery optimism about his own life. Unlike the mirror of “I Look into My Glass,” the sea reflects back to this speaker his inner condition:

The waves huzza’d like a multitude below
In the sway of an all-including joy
Without cloy. (3-5)

The “all-including” joy of the sea embraces the speaker’s younger self; tragically, this joy is ephemeral and illusory; the speaker’s youth seemingly blinds him to

the phantasmal character of his joy in an irony suggested by the stanza's cloying end rhyme.¹⁰

The poem's second stanza records a visit to the same location a "double-decade after" (6) and Hardy renders the changes wrought by time in part through the figurative description of the landscape. Trained by experience to see what Hardy had earlier called "the tragical mysteries of life" (*Life* 185), the speaker in the second stanza recalls his second encounter with the once-cheering waves. No longer does the sea "huzza"; instead, it reflects the poet's sense of the obstinacy and recalcitrance of life and its failure to fulfill its early promise. The waves' cheers have been transformed to "a long ironic laughter" at all of life (9-10). The distant and inhuman character of the sea marks a stark contrast with the cheering friends the younger poet had imagined before experience and age had enlightened him.

The third stanza of "The Voice of Things" introduces a startling difference into the pattern: whereas the first two stanzas depict a straightforward correspondence between the speaker's consciousness and the landscape, the final stanza implies a striking discordance in the speaker's self. Shifting to the present

¹⁰ The cloying character of this rhyme is highlighted when contrasted with the more sophisticated, less perfect rhymes and assonance that conclude the other stanzas: "vapoury" and "Things that be" (9-10) and "outside" and "denied" (14-15).

tense, Hardy records the waves' altered aspect once more, but this time the sea reflects an inner conflict between nostalgia and alienation:

But they supplicate now—like a congregation there
Who murmur the Confession—I outside,
Prayer denied. (14-15)

The double nature of the poem's ending suggests an experience of internal disintegration. On one side of this Janus-faced conclusion, Hardy's speaker projects a kind of religious nostalgia onto the sea, hearing the "supplicat[ion]" of the waves as an extension of his own yearning to believe, if not in the Confession, then in some form of spirituality or transcendence; on another side, the speaker feels himself excluded from any form of spiritual comfort. The poem thus ends in a tense stasis, pulled between nostalgia and an inability to believe in what Hardy would have argued were the chimeras of religion. Indeed, while the poem's conclusion does not suggest a wish to be reconciled to the Church of England of his youth, it does suggest that for Hardy old age involves an experience of alienation from nature, religious belief, and finally from the successive selves one inhabits over the course of a life.¹¹

In "The Voice of Things," the pathetic fallacy allows the poet to objectify his inner perceptions and in so doing enables him to reflect on his changing

¹¹ For an exemplary articulation of Hardy's view on the variety of selves in a given life, see the poem "So Various" in *Winter Words*.

consciousness in oblique rather than direct terms; indeed, the tendency to indirection is characteristic of the poem as a whole. For example, it begins by simultaneously revealing and withholding particulars in its first line: “Forty Augusts—aye, and several more—ago” (1). The phrase “aye, and several more” is coy in its obvious concealment both of the exact timeline of the poem’s events and its occlusion of the poet’s age. Hardy strengthens this effect of deliberate ambiguity throughout the poem. For example, the speaker’s change between the first and second stanzas is clearly the result of painful experience, but Hardy takes great care to eschew depth of description in favor of generalization. The shift in his speaker’s consciousness is brought about by highly unspecified forms of suffering: “thwarts” and “their toils” (7). By so indirectly and generally treating his speaker’s suffering, Hardy avoids lingering on his particular experience in a reticent gesture of limited self-revelation that implicates himself in a larger human situation.

One ethical consequence of Hardy’s indirect style is that it allows the poet to refuse to grant special status to his speaker as a sufferer. For example, it is telling that the waves’ “long ironic laughter” is not simply directed towards the speaker as an individual; they do not laugh solely at him. Instead, the waves’ mockery situates him first in the community of human sufferers when poet hears them laughing at “the lot of men” (9). The mocking waves go on immediately to

enfold the speaker not only in the human situation of decline and decay but also into the universal condition of finitude itself when they deride the “lot” of “all the vapoury / things that be” (10). The transient or “vapoury” things presumably include nature and all of physical reality, and by being included among them the speaker is shrunk in significance to a microscopic point. Indeed, rather than individuating him the speaker’s suffering enfolds him into the larger communities of human suffering and natural transience. Suffering is not a badge of identity but proof of his membership in the larger world of all things mortal. “The Voice of Things” rejects a romanticized view of suffering and old age because Hardy situates himself within a universal context of decline rather than elevating himself into an extraordinary or heroic figure ennobled by his painful experiences.

If “The Voice of Things” employs the pathetic fallacy to sketch key moments in the history of the speaker’s consciousness, “The Five Students” employs the same trope in a similarly autobiographical context in order to narrate the progress of a life. Although the poem is cast in the present tense, it is narrated from a vantage point much later in life than the events it describes; indeed, the effect given is of the aged speaker narrating—but not influencing—a succession of moving images from the past that play before him. Divided into five stanzas, one for each student of the title, “The Five Students” encapsulates

the course of a life through its central analogy between the seasons of the year and periods of life. The poem follows five figures whose names render them inscrutably anonymous --“dark He, fair He, dark She, fair She, I” (5)—as they make their way across a landscape while they remain obstinately oblivious to the passage of time as the natural scenes change. With each stanza, one of these figures falls off in death, leaving only the speaker in the present of old age by the poem’s end.

One of the central uses of the pathetic fallacy in “The Five Students” is to render in a manner approaching allegory the passage of life from its beginnings in youth to its end in late old age. In its first stanza, the poem likens youth to the early morning when “the sun grows passionate-eyed” (3). Youth gives way to adulthood as morning gives way to a noon in which the day itself “swoons” (8) and the formerly vivid colors of the foliage are “sobered” (9). Approaching the end of young adulthood, the speaker and his diminishing group of friends arrive at the poem’s a gently personified “Autumn...[that] moulds the hard fruit mellow,” an image of natural maturity that recalls Keats’s great ode (13). The pathetic fallacy returns more forcefully with the onset of winter and old age as “The fingers of birch and beech are skeleton-thin” (21). Likening the branches to aged fingers, Hardy meditates first on the body’s withering in age. He moves to a reflection on the inner life. When the speaker is all that remains of his

companions, he reaches his own old age and life's deep winter as "Icicles tag the church-aisle leads, / The flag-rope gibbers hoarse" (25-26). The "gibber[ing]" of the flag-rope evokes the incoherent speech of the senile. In its skillful deployment of the pathetic fallacy to render the stages of life, "The Five Students" adumbrates a characteristically Hardy narrative of decline from hopeful youth, fecund adulthood, and a desolate old age.

An additional dimension of "The Five Students'" use of the pathetic fallacy is the way that it enables Hardy to reflect on the epistemological divide separating the speaker in the present from himself and his friends in the past. Dennis Taylor touches on this divide when he observes that this "poem skillfully contrasts nature's progress and the human progress" (*Hardy's Poetry* 35), but he does not note the ways that Hardy employs the pathetic fallacy not only to embody this contrast but to highlight the discrepancy between his present and past knowledge. Throughout the poem, Hardy makes use of the pathetic fallacy to depict natural scenes which are analogous to stages of human life and to draw attention to the figures' obliviousness to the significance implicit in the things around them. "The Five Students" begins by noting the contrast between the students and the ease and peace of the morning scene:

The sparrow dips in his wheel-rut bath,
The sun grows passionate-eyed,

And boils the dew to smoke by the paddock-path;
As strenuously we stride. (1-4)

In their effortful, “strenuous” walking, the students are out of step with the peace of the scene and they are ignorant of what is outside themselves. The students remain preoccupied with their own progress and fail to note the changes in their surroundings, oblivious to the co. Indeed, their movements remain as strident and insistent as they were at first: they take their “urgent way,” (10), they continuously “press / Through moors, briar-meshed plantations, clay-pits yellow, / As in the spring hours” (14-16), and they still find themselves, even in winter, “on the beat” (22). “The Five Students” corroborates Susan Miller’s insight that Hardy’s poetry often repudiates the “lived moment” as a source for poetic emotion (96). Only by the poem’s end, when the present tense of the poem’s verbs has caught up to the speaker’s actual present, is there anything like an analogy between the speaker’s activity and his point in life. In late winter, “the flag-rope gibbers hoarse...Yet I still stalk the course” (28-29). The active, strenuous verbs of the previous stanzas give way to “stalk,” a fitting action for this stage of life.

Although the conclusion of the poem figures old age in typically Hardyan terms as a late winter, the structure of “The Five Students” implies that it is only at this stage of life that the meaning of the past discloses itself. The oblivious

students are incapable of apprehending their time of life and reading it in human terms, and they fail to see themselves in the flux of time. This capacity belongs only to the aged speaker in the present. In its retrospective perception of human meaning in the landscape, "The Five Students" implies that for Hardy there is a wisdom of old age, however desolate that wisdom may be. Having been taught by the painful experience of losing his group of friends, the poem's speaker is able to cast his eye back to perceive the shape of his life, a shape that is given human meanings only too late.

The balance between reticence and personal reflection that I argue is an essential characteristic of Hardy's poetry of old age is reinforced in "The Five Students" by the poem's strict anonymity and refusal of solipsism. One way the poem rejects solipsism is by eschewing specific identity markers for its characters. Although they are surely representations of specific individuals,¹² the poem nevertheless refuses to identify them and in so doing transfigures them into impersonal types. While Taylor argues that the poem's pronouns for its figures—"dark He, fair He, dark She, fair She, I" (5)—are "grotesque" and "puppet-like" (35), I would suggest that their effect is rather to elide their individuality in order to make them representative of common human

¹² Taylor speculates that the "dark She" of the poem may be identified with Hardy's "sister who died in November 1916" (*Hardy's Poetry* 35).

experiences and thereby incorporate them into a wider community of aging and decline. This incorporation is effected in part by the equal rhetorical and metrical emphasis given to each figure except, tellingly, "I." As each figure drops quietly out of the poem and into death, the poem foreshadows its speaker's own inevitable dissolution. In its closing lines, "The Five Students" proleptically anticipates its speaker's death: "I still stalk the course--/ One of us...Dark and fair He, dark and fair She, gone: / The rest—anon" (29-32). Although he has been isolated by his friends' and loved ones' deaths, the aged speaker imagines rejoining them in the most general of terms. Referring to himself as "the rest," Hardy avoids the bathos and self-centeredness he might risk by using the first person. His speaker awaits death without anger yet without willing acceptance in that single word "anon."

While "The Voice of Things" and "The Five Students" use the pathetic fallacy primarily to reflect on the past, "Where They Lived" employs the trope to reflect starkly on the aged condition in the present. As in the previous poem, "Where They Lived" returns to that most-Hardyan of thematic concerns: the "fatal split... between then and now" (Susan Miller 97). Possibly based on Hardy's return to his former home at Sturminster Newton after Emma's death (Taylor 43), the poem relates the speaker's present visit to his former

neighborhood and highlights his experience of the sharp disparity between the past and the present.

The success of "Where They Lived" as a poem is due to the sophistication and subtlety with which Hardy uses the pathetic fallacy to render the aged consciousness; indeed, under the guise of describing a changed landscape, Hardy describes his own altered inner state in old age. However, unlike "The Voice of Things," "Where They Lived" reserves the pathetic fallacy for the present moment; Hardy consistently describes the past in literal or only gently metaphorical terms but without the additional freight of personification. The effect of this difference is subtle yet significant because through it the poem does not attempt to create the impression of a temporally multi-layered self; on the contrary, "Where They Lived" represents a single consciousness in the present as it confronts the toll time takes. The poem accomplishes this through nuanced alternations between a literalized past and a painfully personified present. Thus the poem begins in the present with a description of leaves that appear in the aspect of beggars, "disheveled" and "creep[ing] down" from their tree limbs (1), but it presents the scene of a prior courtship in literal terms: "The once warm slippery turf is sodden / Where we laughingly sat or lay" (5-6). The second stanza highlights the disparity between past and present even further:

The summerhouse is gone,
Leaving a weedy space;
The bushes that veiled it once have grown
Gaunt trees that interlace,
Through whose lank limbs I see too clearly
The nakedness of the place. (9-12)

Recalling the bushes in the past, Hardy describes them in only mildly figurative terms as “veil[ing]” his former home. In sharp contrast, Hardy projects his aged consciousness onto the trees in the present, which are transformed by his imaginative eye and figured as an elderly body. They are “gaunt” and worn, their “lank limbs” analogous to the thinning bodily limbs of the elderly speaker himself.¹³ The third stanza continues this pattern of alternating between literal and figurative description: while the surrounding hills in the past were simply “hills of blue” (13), in their place now “Blind drifts of vapour blow” (14). The blindness of the “vapour” evokes not only their aimlessness but also the failing eyesight of old age.

By recording his consciousness via figurative description of the natural world, Hardy’s speaker is able to reflect indirectly on his experience of age and his pained relationship to the past in a way that satisfies his desire for a reticent and indirect poetry. As a trope, the pathetic fallacy enables the poet to hint at a

¹³ The imagery here recalls the speaker’s self-representation in “I Travel as a Phantom Now” and “He Revisits His First School.”

more complex state of inner affairs without exploring them directly. Thus “Where They Lived” adumbrates a distinctively Hardyan vision of old age as a period of irreparable loss while maintaining a similarly Hardyan reticence that is wary of revealing too much of himself. Hardy figures old age as desolating but ultimately natural: his images for it are dead leaves, weeds, and bare trees. In this poem Hardy hardly seems to have “accepted diminishment and given it dignity,” as Hynes argues (191); instead, Hardy may be resigned to the inexorable process of decline but he neither resists nor embraces it, and any “dignity” involved is of an unflinching and flinty kind. The poet implies as much through his deployment of the pathetic fallacy, which in Hardy’s hands allows the poem to be haunted by the ghostly outline of a deeper experience that is hinted at rather than explicitly faced.

As it is in “The Voice of Things” and “The Five Students,” the reticent quality of Hardy’s deployment of the pathetic fallacy is supported in “Where They Lived” by a larger tendency towards de-particularization and self-effacement that pervades the poem. Even in its title, “Where They Lived” establishes this tendency by referring to the third-person “They” rather than to the perfectly appropriate first-person “I” or “we.” The poem announces its refusal of the confessional and intimate mode by displacing focus from the first person onto the third. In fact, there are only two uses of first person pronouns in

the poem: “we” (6) and “I” (11). These pronouns are muted: “we” refers to the speaker and his beloved in the past, while “I” is merely an observer, not an actor in a current drama. By the third stanza, however, even the faint trace of the first person has been removed in favor of a de-particularizing third person. For example, when Hardy writes that “the names of former dwellers few, / If any, people know” (15-16) he omits the first person entirely. While the “I” of this poem could have lamented or cried out against his being forgotten, Hardy chooses instead to fold him into the larger community of the forgotten “former dwellers.” The poem concludes with a final movement away from the particular and towards the general and self-effacing: instead of a particular and human “voice that call[s] ‘Come in, Dears,’ the speaker now hears the abstraction “Time” crying out to his aged hearer to “Pass below!” into the grave (17-18). Although Trevor Johnson has argued that this conclusion is “rather too heavy-handed” (102), I suggest that it only appears so if the larger de-particularizing tendency of the poem is forgotten. The experience of the first person “I” — the recollection of a specific voice calling out a welcoming invitation — is subsumed finally by the abstract and general experience of approaching death, typified in the personification of Time and its call.

Perhaps the most striking and successful poem that employs the pathetic fallacy to reflect on old age is “An Anniversary.” Again, this poem engages the

discrepancy between the past and present, but unlike "The Voice of Things" or "Where they Lived," "An Anniversary" moves beyond meditation by acutely dramatizing the precise moment in which an aged consciousness encounters the irretrievability of the past and the effects of time on the self. "An Anniversary" also shares with "The Voice of Things" and "Where They Live" a scrupulously observed balance between the personal and impersonal. Finally, "An Anniversary" is exemplary among these poems for the even more generalized character of its discourse and its refusal of specificity even as it announces its rootedness in Hardy's own biography.¹⁴

Thematically and in the arrangement of the volume, "An Anniversary" is preceded and anticipated by an earlier poem entitled "Joys of Memory." In "Joys of Memory," Hardy's speaker celebrates nostalgia on a date of great personal importance:

When the spring comes round, and a certain day
Looks out from the brume by the eastern copsetrees
And says, Remember,
I begin again as if it were new,
A day of like date I once lived through [...] (1-5)

¹⁴ Beneath the poem, Hardy marks the location of the poem's setting as Kingston-Maurward Eweleaze. As Millgate points out, the Kingston-Maurward estate was the location of the family cottage, built by the poet's great grandfather and the house where Hardy himself grew up (Millgate 12-13).

Nostalgia, as Ann Colley reminds us, has etymological roots meaning “homesickness” (2), and in “Joys of Memory” Hardy’s speaker experiences this homesickness in turning away from the “dun life here about me” in old age towards the memory of the past (10). The poem plangently imagines memory as a means of preserving what remains of life in the face of nullifying death. Nostalgia is the home wherein the speaker’s youthful experiences of pleasure and joy are maintained—in however diminished a form—because such experiences cannot be repeated in the present; however, the shadow of death, an interminable “numbness,” (14) looms in the speaker’s mind and lends a quiet urgency to his acts of recollection. The old speaker of this poem is therefore caught between a past that cannot be accessed apart from memory and a future in which all feeling ceases. Nostalgia is thus the only means available to maintain the speaker’s feeling heart.¹⁵

Later in *Moments of Vision*, “An Anniversary” seems a kind of palinode to “Joys of Memory”; indeed, Hardy seems to encourage the comparison of the two poems through its formal structure and thematic concerns. Like “Joys of Memory,” “An Anniversary” is cast in two mirroring stanzas, a form Hardy

¹⁵ This poem bears comparison with “I Look into My Glass” as well as “An Anniversary.”

most often uses for embodying and reflecting on sharp contrasts.¹⁶ In terms of scenario, both poems take place on a significant anniversary on which commemoration is invited by the day itself.

Thematically, the two poems address memory and nostalgia in old age, though here they differ radically. In "Joys of Memory" Hardy's speaker celebrates nostalgia as a way of preserving feeling, while "An Anniversary" enacts a failed attempt at nostalgia; as Dennis Taylor notes, the poem "tries to recover the past only to show, pointedly, its real and linguistic irretrievability" (*Hardy's Literary Language* 269). In its careful staging of an encounter with the past on a date of importance and in a place of biographical significance, "An Anniversary" successfully dramatizes the failure of nostalgia to act as a countervailing pressure against the reality of the present in which the tolls of age are recognized through an outward projection of consciousness through the pathetic fallacy.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hardy's work is filled with poems of this sharply contrastive structure. To name a few later examples: "The Aging House," "The Singing Woman," "In a Former Resort After Many Years," "The Prospect," "Shortening Days at the Homestead," "Proud Songsters," and "The Lodging-House Fuchsias."

¹⁷ In *Figures of Memory: Poetry, Space, and the Past*, Charles Armstrong argues persuasively for the significance in Hardy's work of the intersection of "potentially revelatory acts of memory [and] particular, privileged places" (69). In this case, the "privileged place" of Kingston-Maurward Eweleaze is the ground which reveals to the speaker the changes time has wrought in him.

In the first of its two stanzas, "An Anniversary" describes the speaker's return to a place of personal significance and it stages the beginning of his attempt to revisit the past by insisting on the present's continuity with that past. The poem begins by evoking of a personally important day in a manner very similar to "Joys of Memory":

It was at the very date to which we have come
In the month of the matching name
When, at a like minute the sun had upswum,
Its couch-time at night being the same. (1-4)

This stanza goes on to carefully construct a fiction of seamless continuity between the present and the past in order to create a space in which the speaker can comfortably inhabit the present and recollect his former years in some tranquility, untroubled by the passage of time. Describing each part of the scene before him, Hardy's speaker takes pains to emphasize its sameness and continuity over time, employing the phrase "the same" no fewer than six times in the course of the stanza: It is "the same path" (5) and the "same stile that crossed [the crowd travelling the path's] way" (6); the natural scenery before him is identical, too, with the "same green hillock and hollow" and the "same horizon" unchanged from the past (7-8). The features of the landscape Hardy's speaker describes are notable for the way in which they are resistant to or unchangeable over time: a country path is likely to change little over the years, but the sun, hill,

and horizon go on identically as before. Even the crowd of walkers seems unchanged, since, considered at the level of the group rather than the individual, crowds too seem identical one to the other. Indeed, the crowd of pedestrians—like the path, stile, hill, and horizon—can comfortably be imagined as unchanged and unchanging, thereby lending comfort to the poetic speaker as he aims to relive the past.

If a fiction of continuity such as this is to be persuasive, it must not admit into its field of vision anything too palpably subject to time; however, in the stanza's final line this fiction both culminates and dissolves by introducing a single human agent: the speaker himself. After he has catalogued the sameness of the scene surrounding him, Hardy's speaker confidently asserts—referring to himself in the third person—that “the same man pilgrims now hereby who pilgrimed here that day” (9). Until this point, Hardy has either referred to the natural landscape or to other people in generalized and basically abstract terms; now, however, Hardy introduces a specific person and in so doing shatters the illusion of equality of past and present. Viewed at a distance, other objects and people confirm the false vision that the past continues on unchanged. This vision cannot be maintained when the speaker introduces himself into his own consideration. Indeed, the aged individual who cannot help bearing the marks of time in himself, shatters any comfortable alignment of past and present. In the

white space between the stanzas, the speaker's gaze turns inward and leads him to realize that he is not the same and neither, therefore, is the scene surrounding him. Almost as if he rejects his own assertion the moment he hears himself say it aloud, Hardy dismisses the illusions he has built up until this point, and this dismissal gives the first line of the second stanza—"Let so much be said of the date-day's sameness"—its crushing force (10).

The introduction of a human agent into "An Anniversary" both disrupts the serenity of the poem as well as forces it to adopt a humanized perspective in the mirroring second stanza, a perspective that requires Hardy yet once more to make recourse to the pathetic fallacy. While the poem's first stanza mostly considered inanimate objects and abstract groups, the second half of "An Anniversary" views the scene through human eyes and in human terms. Thus the human element introduced by the speaker's reference to himself shifts his focus to those parts of the landscape that bear closer resemblance—in their transience and decay—to humanity than do the sun or horizon of the first stanza. Thus the speaker's imaginative eye falls upon "the tree that neighbours the track / And stoops liked a pedlar afflicted with lameness" (11-12) that "knew of no sogged wound or wind-crack" as a younger tree in the past (13). This tree, as in so many of Hardy's later poems, bears a figurative relationship to the speaker's sense of himself as an aged man. Taking on the characteristics of a "stoop[ed]"

and old “pedlar,” the tree bears in its body the marks of time and the “sogged wound[s]” of experience, just as the speaker himself has in the years between the present and the past. A nearby wall, too, takes on similar (though less pronounced) human characteristics, as Hardy punningly focuses on the “joints of that wall” which are figured as nearly corpse-like and “enshrouded / with mosses of many tones” (14-15). The tomb-stones, too, are a “multitude” (17) that “overcrowd” (16) their enclosure.

If the pathetic fallacy allows Hardy to project his own sense of himself onto the observable world and thereby establish a kind of kinship with it, this relationship is reinforced by the poem’s cunning concluding rhymes. Mirroring the perspectival shift that takes place in the first stanza, the second half of the poem begins with the description of the speaker’s surroundings before finally drawing our attention to the speaker himself:

And the joints of that wall were not enshrouded
With mosses of many tones,
And the garth up afar was not overcrowded
With a multitude of white stones,
And the man’s eyes then were not so sunk that you saw the
Socket-bones. (14-18)

Here, Hardy adroitly exploits the semantic relationship of his rhyme words to point up the speaker’s kinship with the time-fraught landscape. There is a diminishing scale in the color palette of the stanza: it moves from the parti-

colored “mosses of many tones” to the stark “white” of the tombstones before culminating in the even deathlier white of the spectral speaker’s “socket bones.” After he has projected his own consciousness onto the landscape through the pathetic fallacy, Hardy’s rhymes shrewdly reverse the comparison: not only is the landscape a reflection of his own mind, but is a mirror to him, as well. If the “tree that neighbours the track” is humanized by the poet’s vision, the poet himself is petrified in the likeness of his bones to the stones that mark the graves beyond.

While “An Anniversary” is one of Hardy’s most harrowing confrontations with old age in *Moments of Vision*, it is also one of the most scrupulously reticent and outward-looking. Unlike “The Voice of Things” or the even less direct “Where they Lived,” “An Anniversary” nearly effaces the speaker by eschewing the first-person singular pronoun. Instead, the speaker refers to himself in the third person simply as “the man,” an almost archetypal locution that draws attention to the commonness of his experience. Moreover, the poem takes great care to limit its explicit reflection on this man directly: of its 18 lines, only two take “the man” as their overt subject. Granted, these lines are in emphatic, concluding positions at the end of stanzas; nevertheless, the great bulk of the poem consists of this speaker’s perceptions of his surroundings rather than ruminations directly upon himself.

As bleak as “An Anniversary” is, the poem still rejects a solipsistic self-absorption by recognizing that its speaker’s situation is neither unique nor to be protested. Indeed, in his kinship with nature—which is both colored by his perceptions and colors the way he sees himself--Hardy’s speaker links his own old age with the larger natural processes of growth and decay. If he does not accept his condition (if “acceptance” implies a willing, affirmative embrace of old age and all it entails), Hardy’s speaker is nevertheless resigned to it and will not make a show of resistance. Although it is the most forcefully dramatic and perhaps the most accomplished of the four poems I have considered, “An Anniversary” is entirely consistent with “The Voice of Things,” “The Five Students,” and “Where they Lived” in its refusal to see the aged speaker as singular in any way.

Of all the poems of aging in *Moments of Vision* none is perhaps so severely impersonal as “The Ageing House”; even so, this poem has an invisible center of gravity in the personal suffering and aging of its speaker. Like “An Anniversary” this poem is cast in the contrastive two-stanza form Hardy often favors to render sharp dichotomies and transformations. Here, the poem’s two stanzas mirror one another from two temporal perspectives: the first stanza belongs to the past and second to the present.

As its title implies, "The Ageing House" takes as its ostensible subject an old decrepit house, but it is only concerned with the house insofar as it reflects a human life. The house itself is what Adam Greener has called one of Hardy's "relics," of which he writes: "As fragmentary and contingent remnants of the past, relics generate an experience of layered temporality defined by a heightened recognition of the vicissitudes of time and change" (107).

Its opening lines create the effect of "layered temporality" Greener describes:

When the walls were red
That now are seen
To be overspread
With a mouldy green[...] (1-4)

As we might expect in a poem by this poet, the house is made significant by the human lives it has sheltered and whose aging it parallels. Thus the house's earlier days of fresh paint are analogous to its inhabitant's own youthfulness when "a fresh fair head" (5) would look through the window and "scan the scene, / While blithely spoke the wind to the little sycamore tree" (8-9). The second stanza moves us to a present when all has changed:

But storms have raged
Those walls about,
And the head has aged
That once looked out [...] (10-14).

The house's decrepitude parallels the aging of its inhabitant and gains its significance from it.

As in the other poems I have read here, "The Ageing House" takes as its central trope the pathetic fallacy; in fact, it is almost the only figure the poem employs. Much of the poem concerns itself with evocative description that does not aim for symbolic status, yet Hardy freights the final line of each stanza with the figurative weight of the pathetic fallacy. When the "fresh fair head" would "scan the scene" in youth, we are told that "blithely spoke the wind to the little sycamore tree" (9). In the freshness of youth this house's inhabitant perceives in a nature a friendly colloquy of wind and tree, but in age this friendship has broken down. Instead of "blithely" conversing between themselves, now "fiercely girds the wind at the long-limbed sycamore tree" (18). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "gird" as a verb is an archaism meaning "To strike, smite" ("Gird") and it is a suitably archaic word for Hardy's aged speaker. Having been changed by time, he sees in the natural scene an inhospitable and fractious relationship where once he had seen amity. The poet thus sketches two states of being, young and old, by relying on figurative description to evoke ways of seeing the world.

The pathetic fallacy allows Hardy in this poem to maintain a strict anonymity without sacrificing emotional immediacy or power, a balance he maintains throughout. One way he does so is by entirely eschewing the first-person and rendering the identity of his subject opaque. Although he also does

this in "An Anniversary," the poem invites us to read "the man" as the speaker himself, but the subject of "The Ageing House" is much less clear. Presented by synecdoche as only a "head," this person's identity, gender, and even name are elided by the poem. It is possible and even likely that the poem's subject is the speaker, yet it does not provide definitive proof that this is so and any identification we might make remains conjectural.

In its spare economy and disciplined distance, "The Ageing House" embodies the larger trends we have been following through these poems. As a group, they are exemplary of the manner in which Hardy poetically responds to old age. Because it externalizes consciousness through the medium of description, the pathetic fallacy allows Hardy in these poems to obliquely meditate on old age as a condition without indulging in a more self-focused mode; indeed, it enables him to maintain a strict balance between reticence and personal meditation. Moreover, Hardy's characteristic use of the pathetic fallacy in old age is a part of his ethical orientation: in order to confront his own experience of aging, Hardy looks outwards to observable nature. A trope that in the hands of a solipsist might obliterate nature as an independent reality, the pathetic fallacy in late Hardy enables the poet to find kinship with the natural order. Although it brings its own pains, old age is not ultimately an isolating

condition: through the pathetic fallacy, Hardy is able to situate himself in the larger universal patterns of growth, decline, and decay.

In these poems of old age, Hardy employs the pathetic fallacy in order to reflect on and respond to his state of life while scrupulously observing a reticent distance that eschews the personal and confessional. While it is by no means Hardy's sole strategy for obliquely reflecting on his experience as an aged man, the pathetic fallacy is characteristic of the ways he approaches representing and confronting old age in his poetry. In his descriptions of landscapes that are transfigured by his imaginative eye, Hardy eschews solipsism by linking his own progress through life with natural processes of growth and decline; hence, his attitude is neither of joyful acceptance nor bitter resistance. Instead, Hardy sees old age as the inevitable development of life and as such he is resigned to it. However, Hardy refuses to see himself or his experience in any singular terms; instead, his poems of old age reach constantly outward and away from a self which can only be understood in relation to that which is outside him.

CHAPTER THREE

From the Golden Bough to the Rag-and-Bone Shop: Antinomies and the Spaces of Yeats's Poetry of Old Age

Introduction

In a 1932 letter to his former lover and life-time friend Olivia Shakespear written while revising his poems, W.B. Yeats confesses his surprise at himself for having written so much about old age throughout his career. He writes:

I spend all my days correcting proofs. I have just finished the first volume, all my lyric poetry, and am greatly astonished at myself. As it is all speech rather than writing, I keep saying what is this who in the course of two or three weeks—the improvisation suggests the tune—says the same thing in so many different ways. My first denunciation of old age I made in *The Wanderings of Usheen* (end of part I) before I was twenty and the same denunciation comes in the last pages of the book. The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. (Wade 798)

As Yeats himself says, an abiding concern with old age is one of the central features of his work; as George Bornstein puts it, “[t]hroughout his life aging was more than a theme in the poetry of W.B. Yeats—it was an obsession” (46). From *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), “The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner” (1890), and the early story “Hanrahan’s Curse” (1897) to “The Tower” (1927) and the very late poem “Politics” (1939), Yeats’s works reflect the growth of a singularly

age-conscious poet from a young man imagining—often in romanticized terms—the state of old age to an old man confronting the vicissitudes of the lived experience of later life in powerful verse. To read Yeats's oeuvre from beginning to end is to encounter one of the most sustained and variegated meditations on old age in twentieth century literature.

Yeats's reputation as an old poet rests primarily on what he calls his "denunciation of old age" (Wade 798) and his wild fury at growing old; nevertheless, seeing the older Yeats through this single lens occludes the fact that there are other currents of thought and feeling about late life that run through the work. Although defiance against aging is certainly one of the cardinal features of Yeats's later poetry, it is misleading to reduce the complexity of his late poems to a single attitude or to systematize his poetic response in such terms, even if the poet himself occasionally made remarks such as the one above that seem to sanction this approach. Indeed, there is a prismatic character to Yeats's poetic response to agedness that renders generalizations about his attitudes difficult to maintain, especially when applied to the *Complete Poems*. He himself allows a glimpse of an alternative response to aging not characterized by anger or resentment when he writes in another, earlier letter to Shakespear. Writing from Rapallo, Italy during a period of convalescence, Yeats writes:

"Once out of Irish bitterness I can find some new measure of sweetness and of

light, as befits old age—already new poems are floating in my head, bird songs of an old man, joy in the passing moment, emotion without the bitterness of memory” (Wade 737). If old age can be denounced, it can also be creatively enabling, allowing the poet to sing the “bird songs” of joy that only old men can sing. For Yeats, old age is therefore a complex period of life that calls for responses adequate to its various dimensions.

In this chapter, I offer an account of Yeats's later poetry by arguing that despite his overt "denunciation[s] of old age," the poet paradoxically found this period imaginatively enabling because of—rather than despite—its contradictory character. For the poet, age seems to consist of intractable dialectical tensions between such oppositions as transience and intimations of permanence, the decline of physical well-being and the persistence of imaginative vitality, and the aging body and the survival of sexual desire, to identify several of the most persistent dichotomies. I claim that these conflicting opposites form the bedrock of Yeats's characteristic later poems, furnishing them with imaginative material and the kind of acute creative tension on which the poet thrived. I argue that one of the central features of his poetry of old age is Yeats's continued and evolving engagement with the dichotomous aspects of aging. Beginning with representative poems from *The Tower* (1928), I suggest that Yeats's later poetry is vitalized and animated by visionary attempts to transcend or at least obviate the

contradictory character of this period of life. However, I assert that as he neared the end of his life Yeats's poems increasingly and paradoxically begin to be grounded in the dilemmas of old age without trying to evade, curse, or transcend them. Indeed, I argue, Yeats's poetry moves from imaginatively resisting old age towards making its contradictions and difficulties the source of his art, dwelling in them rather than attempting to resolve them. By charting the development of the poems in this way, we can avoid narrow accounts of rejection or benign acceptance of old age in the poems; what we will have in their place is a description of what old age means *to*—rather than just *in*—the later poems. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate the significance of old age to Yeats and to move beyond the kind of limited (and limiting) accounts of a monolithic Yeatsian attitude towards old age that one encounters regularly in scholarship.

To support these larger arguments, I explore the formal and rhetorical features by which Yeats's later poems embody and respond to the contradictions of old age. I focus on exemplary poems written during the last eleven years of Yeats's life, from *The Tower* (1928) to *Last Poems* (1939), arguing that these poems are representative of important features of the later work. I offer readings of these poems in order to show the relationship between their formal properties and their thematic concerns. As the metaphor of dwelling I use above suggests, I argue that one way we can trace the development of Yeats's responses to old age

is by attending to his use of significant spatial figures.¹ Specifically, I argue that Yeats employs tropes of spatial ambiguity or separation to meditate on the dialectical character of old age, caught as that time is between life and death, a lengthening memory and shortening future, and so on. In addition to attending to Yeats's figuration of old age as liminal and divided, I suggest that in many of the later poems Yeats employs spatial figures as part of his coming to terms with this self-division. Specifically, I argue that in representative poems from *The Tower*, Yeats imaginatively resists and contests his experience of old age as self-fissuring in part by resolving the poems' spatial ambiguities in favor of a privileged, climactic space. Focusing on four poems written in the period of Yeats's remaining years, I contend that his gradual acceptance of age's dichotomies finds representation in his figures of space. I argue that these later poems present the ambiguities of old age by embracing its liminal status and making its indeterminacies the source of his art, and that one way Yeats figures this embrace is by resorting to homelier, more concrete and constricted spaces in which the speaker may momentarily dwell. This arc culminates in spaces such as the cleft rock in "Man and the Echo" and the figurative "foul rag and bone shop

¹ I use "space" rather than "place" because it is a more flexible term and better suited to the variety of Yeats's practice in the poems. Whereas "place" refers to specific significant geographical locales—Innisfree, Coole Park, Thoor Ballylee—I employ "space" to refer to the poems' placement of their speakers in either physical or mental locations; indeed, in the tradition of the Romantic meditative lyric the space of a poem by Yeats modulates and is modulated by the speaker's consciousness, rendering distinctions of inner and outer difficult to preserve.

of the heart” in “The Circus’ Animals Desertion” (III. 8). While these spaces are not allegorical—Yeats’s symbolism is often protean, and an attempt to correlate types of space with types of feeling would be tiresome—they provide a helpful approach to thinking about the larger trajectories of Yeats’s later work because the kind of space envisioned by a poem bears a relationship to the kind of response that poem makes to old age.²

In what follows, I begin by situating my argument within the larger context of scholarship, focusing on the representations of Yeats in gerontological studies as well as literary-critical work done on the poet and old age, suggesting that a more comprehensive account of Yeats’s engagement with old age is necessary to contest certain assumptions about this aspect of his work. Next, I reflect briefly on his preoccupation with conflicting opposites in his life and thought, connecting this interest with his theories of creative conflict to the imaginative potentialities—or failures—of old age. In what remains, I devote attention to reading a representative number of later poems, aiming to demonstrate the trajectory by which Yeats’s work moves from visionary attempts to resist or comprehend the dichotomies of late experience towards making those dichotomies—and their irresolvability—a subject and powerful source of his art.

² Although our purposes and subjects differ, my method here is analogous to Marjorie Howes’ in “Yeats’s Graves,” a study of Yeats’s images of graves in *Last Poems*. Whereas she studies grave imagery, I examine spatial figures in their various permutations. Nevertheless, my approach to reading images across the later part of Yeats’s career is indebted to Howes.

Critical Review

One goal of this chapter is to supplement existing scholarship by exploring the complexity of Yeats's poetry of old age, a poetry that has often been characterized in terms at once narrow and general, especially by scholars working at the intersection of literature, gerontology, and psychology. While many gerontologists do not address Yeats in extended accounts, they often employ him as an example of an artist who is absolute in his rejecting the privations of old age. Ringing lines from poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium," "The Tower," and "An Acre of Grass" regularly appear as exemplifying Yeats's anger at aging, as if these lines thoroughly sum up Yeats's attitude towards late life. In her landmark study of late life, *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir comes closest to acknowledging the complexity of old age's role in Yeats's later work, yet she nevertheless focuses primarily on "his anger against old age," citing the opening of "The Tower" as if it were a final statement of his views (298). More negatively and more recently, Henri Peyre has condemned Yeats for not providing a helpful model of aging in his work. Criticizing lyric poets for "prefer[ring] to ignore senior citizens" (151), Peyre specifically castigates Matthew Arnold, Yeats, and T.S. Eliot for perpetuating negative stereotypes of aging. He indicts Yeats in particular as having little of worth to say to the aged because he does not seem to gracefully accept his own aging process. According

to Peyre, Yeats “attempted strenuously to delay the onslaught of old age...He evinced no compassion for those who consent to turn into ‘paltry things’” (153). While it is true that Yeats wished to resist certain physical aspects of aging, most notably by undergoing the vasectomy-like Steinach rejuvenation operation in 1934,³ this description of Yeats’ engagement with old age is incomplete. Indeed, Peyre simplifies the fundamental complexity of the poet’s response to aging by focusing mainly on Yeats’s bitterness while neglecting the important role old age served as a source of poetic inspiration in his later years.

Other scholars working at the intersection of literature and aging may dissent from Peyre’s negative evaluation of Yeats’s engagement with old age, but they often share with him a perhaps too-narrow conception of the actual contours of this engagement. One representative example is Herbert Blau, who in his essay on the vicissitudes of memory in late life contends that “What is powerful in the later poems of Yeats is not only the spectacle of the intrepid old man, still horny, letting himself be shameless and mad, but that he never forgives the ignominy of age, its bodily decrepitude, which threatens the sexual drive”

³ For a detailed account of this procedure and Yeats’s experience undergoing it and its aftermath, see Diana Wyndham’s “Verse-making and Lovemaking”—W.B. Yeats’ ‘Strange Second Puberty’: Norman Haire and the Steinach Rejuvenation Operation.” Also see R.F. Foster, pp. 496-503.

(22). Although Blau reverses the polarity of Peyre's judgment by celebrating Yeats's defiance of old age, he nevertheless characterizes the poems and the poet in a similar way. Edward Said has remarked that according to our common notions, "the essential health of a human life has a great deal to do with its correspondence to its time," and Blau here commends what Said might call Yeats's untimeliness, his untoward and inappropriate (because it supposedly should be outgrown) sexuality (6).

The most fruitful insights of scholars interested in aging for reading Yeats involve the notion of old age as fundamentally dichotomous and necessarily liminal. For these writers, old age situates the aged subject always *between*: between his past and his future, between her body and her desire, between the old world of his youth and the new world into which he survives as a relic, and indeed between life and death. Thus Beauvoir writes that the aged person "may be defined as an individual with a long existence behind him, and before him a very limited expectation of life" (361), and he must learn to live between these poles. In an essay on Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, Gabriele Schwab suggests that old age might be best understood as an "intermediate area between life and death" (205), a period whose temporal liminality is in fact paradoxically enabling in allowing the self to develop a subjectivity capable of dwelling in the interstices

of old age.⁴ Likewise, in an essay on the aged in classical pastoral poetry, Steven Marx argues that pastoral often situates the elderly in a peculiarly intermediate state, arguing that “old age marks a pastoral stage of life because its world is situated on the periphery of socially defined reality, remote from the center of court or city. In Victor Turner's term, it is 'liminal' to the worldly world possessed and created by those in their prime” (22). In her formalist account of a selection of twentieth century American poets, *Last Looks, Last Books*, Helen Vendler has argued that poets approaching the end of life must “look at the interface at which death meets life,” that hazy region characterized by one’s dual awareness of approaching death while remaining vitally alive (*Last Looks* 1). Vendler suggests that these poets must develop what she calls a “binocular style,” a mode of engaging the realities of life and death which does “justice to both the looming presence of death and the unabated vitality of spirit” (*Last Looks* 1). The accounts of old age’s indeterminacy these and other scholars have developed comport well with Yeats’s theories of creative conflict and his own figuring of age in liminal terms in the poem.⁵

⁴ This notion of the creative intermediate area might prove especially helpful in reflecting on the proliferation of Yeats’s later poetic personae.

⁵ These accounts also comport well with Marjorie Howes’ and Joseph Valente’s assertion that Yeats’s thought and art are grounded in a profound sense of historical “belatedness,” which places Yeats at the center of “an intricate nexus of temporal vectors and demands a correspondingly flexible literary method” (4). Indeed, Yeats is keenly aware of his in-between status as an inheritor of the past and seer of the future, and he carried this awareness into his old age.

The problem of Yeats and old age has been addressed by literary critics, but not often with the goal of providing a detailed account of the figurative and formal strategies of the poems as they relate to life's twilight. While they attend more closely to the poems than do more gerontologically-oriented scholars, their aims are similar in that these critics develop larger positions on the poet's attitudes towards old age as evinced in a few poems. Comparing Yeats and Wallace Stevens, for example, Robert Buttel praises both poets for their "unaccommodated" facing-down of "mortality and the diminishment of power" (42). Buttel sees both poets embodying a kind of bravery in their stances towards age and death. A similar note—though with perhaps a more negative evaluation of Yeats—is struck by Samuel Hynes. In his article on Yeats and Thomas Hardy "How to be an Old Poet", Hynes sees Yeats as a foil to Hardy. Whereas Hardy is passive and accepting of the body's decline and life's end, Yeats is active and resistant; he presents himself, in Hynes's words, as the "old man as tragic hero" (192). Indeed, he casts Yeats as Lear-like figure, invoking the poet's own image of himself in "An Acre of Grass" to counterbalance Hardy's more benign Prospero (197). William H. Pritchard also sees in Yeats a contrast to Hardy as a poet of old age. Comparing Hardy's "Nobody Comes" and Yeats's "An Acre of Grass," Pritchard suggests that Yeats's poetic voice is too oracular—and perhaps bombastic—to reach the level of impersonality of Hardy's later poems (80-81).

Pritchard is congruous with Hynes in seeming to value Hardy's stance against Yeats's, which they both assume is constituted mainly by rage or defiance against the ignominies of aging.

More recent work on Yeats and old age has focused on how age and politics intersect in his later life. In " 'I am unbroken': Aging, Ireland, and Political Desire in W.B. Yeats," Rached Khalifa argues that for Yeats, "autobiography and history are inseparable in the Yeatsian imagination" and that such fusions gained in intensity and political urgency as he grew older (162). While Khalifa offers cogent discussions of certain features of Yeats's later thought, he is perhaps too disparaging of the elder poet; oddly enough, he seems to project negative valuations of old age onto Yeats, criticizing him for reflecting an image of what Khalifa considers the stereotypical elderly person. For example, he dismisses a passage in the late polemic *On the Boiler* (1938) as "ravings" and the "hyperbolic alarmism of a bitter old man" (170). However outrageous, *On the Boiler* is not a collection of "ravings"; it is a carefully orchestrated and deliberately shocking public intervention. In a similar vein, Barry Sheils claims in "Poetry in the Modern State: The Example of W.B. Yeats's 'Late Style' and 'New Fanaticism,'" that Yeats's "diagnosis of modern politics is dependent on the rancor of old age" (484). Borrowing the term "Late style" from Edward Said's book of that name, Sheils argues that Yeats's "late style" should

be connected to his late political fanaticism, both rooted in “the preposterous self-consciousness of the poet’s old age” (486). Sheils’s essay is more focused on Yeats’s political ideology than his poetic form and practice, so he does not engage in close reading. Both Khalifa’s and Sheils’s accounts are illuminating, but they shed less light on the poems than they do Yeats’s putative ideological commitments.

George Bornstein’s 2012 “W.B. Yeats’s Poetry of Aging” is a significant essay by a major Yeats scholar for studies of figure and form in Yeats’s poems of old age. In this essay, Bornstein offers superb readings of poems from across Yeats’s career, focusing on the way that Yeats’ “treatment of [old age] in both theme and technique changed over time, growing steadily deeper and more powerful” (46). Of particular interest for Bornstein is the roughened diction and rhythms of the later verse, and he offers compelling readings of the revisions Yeats made in later life to poems he had written as a young man as indicative of these major changes. My own work differs from Bornstein’s in that I focus on poems written after the poet’s fiftieth year and, although I hope to emulate Bornstein’s formal attentiveness, I nevertheless wish to provide an account of the way that form acts as a mode of response to the poet’s his own old age. Thus I will not offer an account of the later style as such; rather, I wish to explore the formal features of those poems written about and from the perspective of old age

to see how they embody Yeats's imagination's resistant pressure against the necessities of time and aging.

Drawing on these and other scholars, I hope to contribute to the critical discussion by wedding a concern with the formal behaviors of Yeats's poems to the larger features of his response to old age. Participating in what Derek Attridge has tentatively called "a return to form" in poetic study (30), this chapter aims to supplement existing scholarship on Yeats and old age by providing a more comprehensive view of Yeats's poetic engagement with late life. It is my contention that an approach to the poems that is attentive to their figurative and formal characteristics can clarify hitherto-occluded aspects of Yeats's artistic response to this period of life.

Contraries and Old Age in Yeats

Although Yeats is often read as the pre-eminent poet of indignation at old age, his poems often reveal a striking complexity of attitude in which anger plays only a part. Even in his most rhetorically provocative performances, there is often an undercurrent of contrary feeling to that which is more overt. One instance is the 1936 quatrain "The Spur." A paradigmatic celebration of aged wickedness, "The Spur" nevertheless does not reduce to its own rage. In a confrontational direct address to the reader, Yeats's persona declares:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attendance upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (*The Poems* 1-4)

Understandably, the forcefulness of the poem's rhetoric and its endorsement of "lust and rage" for the old poet have dominated critical discussion of the poem. According to Jahan Ramazani, "lust and rage" are "forces of inspiration unavailable to him in his youth" (141). While it is clearly true that the poem celebrates "lust and rage" as impetuses for late poetry, "The Spur" also contains within it a submerged elegy in which the impulse to commemorate what has been lost is occluded but not obliterated.⁶ Indeed, at the same time that it defies the reader's repugnance at the spectacle of this aged poet's wildness, "The Spur" the speaker's losses. "Lust and rage" were not animating inspirations for his earlier poems, the speaker suggests, not because he was then unable to access them as Ramazani suggests, but because he had other resources he could draw on and did not need them. Now, however, he has been shorn of those imaginative reserves, leaving only wildness and wickedness in old age. "Lust and rage" are creative spurs, he says, because nothing remains to inspire him: "What else have I to spur me into song?" By ending on such a question instead of

⁶ Intriguingly, the short poem that appears just before "The Spur" begins, "I sing what was lost and dread what was won" ("What Was Lost" 1). As usual in Yeats, the ordering of poems creates cumulative resonances.

a more defiant assertion, "The Spur" subtly undermines the confidence of its own rhetoric. Indeed, this poem embodies the aged person's sad recollection of lost vitality even as it celebrates new and "inappropriate" means of inspiration. Thus, even a poem as apparently straightforward as "The Spur" has at least two dimensions that, while not exactly contradictory, complicate the poem and render it multi-faceted in subtle and surprising ways.⁷

One way to account for Yeats's various attitudes towards old age is to see in them an embodiment of his perception of experience's fundamentally contradictory character. For the poet, dialectical opposites and the tensions they create are the ground both of self-invention and the making of art. As a man, Yeats was famously multiple—a fact that underlies the subtitle of Richard Ellmann's biography of the poet, *The Man and the Masks*. Indeed, at any given moment in his personal life Yeats tended to be several things at once, many of them seemingly antithetical to one another: poet and polemicist, senator and the occult system-maker of *A Vision* (1925; 1937), practicing magician and manager of the Abbey Theatre. Yeats's personae are refractions of the same personality when put under the pressure of complexly contradictory forces. As an artist, the competing impulses created by dialectical opposites stirred Yeats to imaginative

⁷ Stephen Regan suggests that "The Spur" evinces in its wildness a "poet who fears that his creative energies might be flagging" (82). An emphasis on fear seems a step in the right direction in that it acknowledges the multiple valences of the poem.

activity throughout his writing life. As a poet who endorsed the Blakean maxim that “Without contraries there is no progression,” (34) he saw conflict—internal and external—as sources of creative potentiality. “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” he writes in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, (*Later Essays* 8). Of course, the notion of conflicting opposites forms the basis for Yeats’s later theories of human personality and historical change set forth in *A Vision* (1925 / 1937).

Given the significance of antithetical forces for Yeats, it is not surprising that he would continue reflecting on them in old age; however, I would suggest that old age seems to have rendered certain antitheses more pressing for Yeats as he grew older. An exemplary but by no means isolated antithesis is that between the self or ego and the aging body, which appears in a great number of the later poems. Yeats’s engagement with this dichotomy reflects the larger phenomenon noted by many gerontologists that old age threatens the integrity of the self. For example, Beauvoir argues that one dimension of old age is its self-fissuring character, suggesting that the aged subject experiences alterity from the body and that to perceive one’s agedness is to perceive oneself from the outside since “elderly” is not an identity that the self can easily adopt. She writes:

Old age is something beyond my life, outside it something of which I cannot have any full inward experience. Speaking more broadly, my ego is a transcendent object that does not

dwelt in my consciousness and that can only be viewed from
a distance. This viewing is effected by means of an image:
we try to picture what we are through the vision that others
have us. (291)

In a serendipitous (but almost certainly unaware) echo of Hardy's "I Look into My Glass," Yeats writes in a 1936 letter to Dorothy Wellesley: "Over my dressing table is a mirror in a slanting light where every morning I discover how old I am." (Wade 866). Corroborating Beauvoir's insight, Yeats admits to needing an outside view—in this case, a reflection—to allow him to see (or "discover," as if always anew) that he is old. Old age renders perceptible—and pressingly so—a fissure between the aging body and the ageless self.

One reason antitheses are important to the later Yeats is that they seem to threaten Unity of Being, a condition of being entirely at one in with oneself. Old age threatens to unravel this unity; as in the letter above, the body and soul are misaligned and out of harmony with one another. The creative task of the aged artist is to imagine forms of harmony in the midst of a perceived disjunction between contrary experiences of self.

Although Yeats elaborated and refined his theory of creative antinomies throughout his life, it is in 1917's *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* that he first offers an extended treatment of it and connects it with creativity in old age. In this essay, he develops the concepts of self and anti-self, or self and Mask. According to Yeats,

the creative person completes himself by seeking out what the poet calls the “antithetical self” (*Later Essays* 8) represents the imaginative opposite of the poet’s self; because of this, the antithetical self is the fulfillment of “all that the daily self lacks” (Levine 2). The poet seeks to give form to this opposite in his work. To illustrate this concept, Yeats reflects on his former colleague at the Abbey Theatre, John Millington Synge, suggesting that the art of the infirm and constitutionally delicate Synge was “a compensation for [an] accident of health or circumstance” (5). As a quiet and sickly man, Yeats argues, Synge was temporarily completed by the “delight” he imaginatively took in his fictive creations like Christy Mahon from *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), “voluble dare-devils who ‘go romancing through a romping lifetime...the dawning of the Judgement Day’” (5). Synge found in his impassioned and “voluble” art what he lacked in life, Yeats argues, and he is presented as emblematic in this respect to all successful artists. In the poet’s conception, then, dialectical opposites are the foundation of accomplished art. The true poet seeks out his own opposite, and the search is difficult, success hard-won.

At the end of the first section, “Anima Hominis,” Yeats connects the artist’s struggle to give form to his anti-self to the possibility of creativity in old age, suggesting that imaginative failure is due to the old poet’s passive acceptance of the “bundle of accident that sits down to breakfast” and surrender

in the face of inner conflict (*Later Essays* 205).⁸ Envisioning a hypothetical poet approaching late life, Yeats sees him at a cross-roads: shall he, the poet asks, surrender the struggle to articulate the anti-self and yield to the temptation of imaginative ease? Yeats allows his imagined poet two exemplary figures of alternative responses to aging, Landor and Wordsworth. Landor is the representative old poet who remains creative because he is irascible, intransigent, and “ridiculous and unconquered” (*Later Essays* 16) until the end of a very productive life. Yet Landor’s example is not what tempts Yeats’s hypothetical poet, who, having accomplished much in his younger years, believes he is entitled to a creatively placid old age. With withering irony, Yeats describes this temptation to surrender in the creative struggle of opposites in the following way:

So, he may think, now that I have found vision and mask I
need not suffer any longer. He will buy perhaps some small
old house where like Ariosto he can dig his garden, and
think that in the return of birds and leaves, or moon and sun,
and in the evening flight of the rooks he may discover
rhythm and pattern like those in sleep and so never awake
out of vision. Then he will remember Wordsworth withering
into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted, and climb to
some waste room and find, forgotten there by youth, some
bitter crust. (16)

⁸ See Virginia Pruitt’s “Yeats, the Mask, and the Poetry of Old Age” for further discussion of Yeats’s thinking about the relationship between the mask and old age from a biographical perspective.

The poet realizes belatedly that Wordsworth, Landor's opposite, "wither[ed]" into the end of his by renouncing creative self-conflict, and he is left only the "bitter crust" of some past inspiration.

For Yeats, Landor and Wordsworth embody competing responses to old age, each of which is available to the aging poet. Yeats suggests that the successful poet will resemble Landor by continuing the struggle to articulate the anti-self, to re-make herself anew in art. On the other hand, the failed poet will follow Wordsworth's example, giving up the contest between opposites and resting in old age, ossifying into a remnant of his past self. In Yeats, then, creativity in old age is thus intimately connected to the artist's ongoing willingness to confront opposing principles and contradictions. The contest of dialectical opposites may be ultimately unresolvable but it is the generative ground for all creative endeavor in Yeats's thought. Indeed, in a late letter to Dorothy Wellesley the elder Yeats reveals the role of conflict in his own creation:

We have all something within ourselves to batter down and get our power from this fighting. I have never 'produced' a play in verse without showing the actors that the passion of the verse comes from the fact that speakers are holding down violence or madness--'down Hysterica passio'. All depends on the completeness of the holding down, on the stirring of the beast underneath. (qtd. Ellmann 8)

The poems are populated with aged figures who resemble either Landor or Wordsworth. In order to illustrate the persistence of this preoccupation, we

should look to two poems composed much later than *Per Amica*, “Crazy Jane and the Bishop” and “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop,” both from the sequence “Words for Music Perhaps” and included in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1929). While Nicholas Meihuizen is surely right to see Crazy Jane as allowing Yeats to explore extreme versions of ideas present in other poems (“Yeats and the Crazy Energy of Old Age” 22), I would contend that she is also a figure of imaginative and vital aging as opposed to the Bishop, whose sterility and desiccation are symptomatic of a corrosively rigid dogma that rejects the body in favor of the soul, thereby evading life’s fundamentally (and necessarily) contradictory character.

In “Crazy Jane and the Bishop” Yeats establishes these two figures as embodying antithetical responses to old age. As Terence Brown has eloquently pointed out, “Crazy Jane in this sequence is an explicit advocate of the body, who in an unrepentant old age transgressively affirms the power of her own sexual desire in youth and age” (333). In contrast to Jane’s “transgressive” celebration of sexual vitality, the Bishop appears as a withered remnant of a man; a sexual blank, the Bishop is like Browning’s grammarian: “dead from the waist down” (“A Grammarian’s Funeral” 132). Indeed, even as a young man “not so much as parish priest,” (10) the Bishop rejected the pleasures of the body and castigated Jane and her now-deceased lover Jack for immorality, “cry[ing] that we lived like

beast and beast" (12). In the present, however, old age has not brought Jane to repentance nor the Bishop to acceptance of the body. The volatile Jane continues to celebrate in memory her late lover and his sexual prowess ("a birch-tree stood my Jack" (19)) while scorning the Bishop's prurience, which manifests itself in his body. She scornfully adduces the Bishop's skin, "Wrinkled like the foot of a goose," (15) and the "heron's hunch upon his back" (18) as outward emblems of his spiritual and sexual sterility. In his poverty, the Bishop is merely negative; he is incapable of positively affirming life, much less of celebrating it. As antithetical points on a spectrum, Jane represents a vigorous and intransigent old age that refuses to allow itself to be reduced to "proper" behavior, and the Bishop embodies a Wordsworth-like withering into the end of life.

The sixth poem of this sequence, "Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop," locates the disparity between Crazy Jane and the Bishop in the fact that she embraces the paradoxical and contradictory character of experience while the Bishop cannot. Meeting Jane on the road, the Bishop admonishes her to renounce the world in favor of the spiritual life:

'Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
Those veins must soon be dry;
Live in a heavenly mansion,
Not in some foul sty' (3-6).

Here, the Bishop resembles the Wordsworth in *Per Amica* to the extent that he has refused the conflict between opposing principles. Taking the ascetic approach, the Bishop circumvents the harmony of contradictory tensions Jane (and Yeats himself) find necessary to life. Because he rejects the life of the body, the Bishop snuffs out the life of the spirit.

If the Bishop cannot accommodate the dichotomy of body and soul in old age, Jane thrives upon it. For her, the corporeal is necessary to the spiritual and vice versa; celebrating this paradox, she exclaims that "Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul" (6-7). She goes on to articulate a vision of intractable opposites cohabiting with one another in tense balance:

But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent. (15-19)

Jane's imaginative vitality finds its source in her endorsement of the contradictoriness of life and of the soul and body's interdependence on one another. In her affirmation of contraries, Jane is a kind of model figure for the later Yeats because she is imaginatively invigorated by tensions not abandoned in old age.

Insofar as Crazy Jane embodies an untroubled acceptance of fair and foul's interdependence she stands as an ideal of integration for the poet in old

age; however, it is well to remember that she is a persona—one of many—and that she does not speak authoritatively for Yeats. One necessary distinction to be made between the Crazy Jane poems and the late poems spoken in Yeats's first person is that the former are concerned with an image of life *after* the dichotomies have been integrated into a whole and Unity of Being has been achieved. With the possible exception of "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers", these poems do not themselves enact the process by which Jane arrives at her acceptance of all of life. In contrast with ballads such as these, Yeats's lyrics give form to the creative struggle of antinomies. They test antitheses against one another, probing for a way of addressing them in a satisfactory way. Thus although Jane stands as an imaginative model figure for Yeats, she nevertheless does not represent the aged person's struggle with and temporarily through the contradictions of old age.

The Tower: From the Golden Bough to the Great-Rooted Blossomer

Although he had written about old age throughout his career, it was not until *The Tower*, published in the poet's 63rd year, that Yeats devoted much of a volume to exploring this stage of life. Beginning with "Sailing to Byzantium" and ending with "All Souls' Night," the poems of *The Tower* find their creative ground in exploring the contradictory experience of the self in old age. In three of

the volume's central poems, "Sailing to Byzantium," "The Tower," and "Among School Children," Yeats approaches—but does not arrive at—resolutions of the conflicts of aging. This group of poems begins with a vision of transcendent escape in a space of perfected form, move to firm endurance in a space of inner reflection, and finally move to an affirmative vision of embodied transcendence in a space of imaginative vision. While the affirmation of "Among School Children" is in some ways the culmination of this triad of poems, I suggest that it too offers a provisional "answer" to the questions of old age. As unsettled a poet as Yeats could hardly satisfy himself with reaching final conclusions.

A quintessential poem of old age, "Sailing to Byzantium" is animated at every level by its perception of fundamental dialectical opposites; as Helen Vendler has observed in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, "symmetry and antithesis" are "governing tropes" of the poem (37). While she adumbrates a number of the poem's most salient antitheses, she does not reflect in detail on all the myriad contrasting images Yeats employs to highlight the antithetical character of life's last period. Indeed, the poem is like a series of concentric rings, with each ring representing more and more specific contraries.

At the most general level, the poem is founded on the contrast between transience and permanence, represented respectively by "that country" (1.1) and Byzantium. More specific is the division between the "old men" (1.1) and "the

young / in one another's arms," each representatives of different orders of life (1. 2). More specific still is the antithetical pairing of the temporal "sensual music" (1. 7) of the young as against the spatially static "monuments of unageing intellect" (1. 8) housed in Byzantium. Finally and most alarmingly for the aged speaker is the opposition, not only between the old and the young, but between the old and their own bodies. These antitheses form the figurative and structural foundation for the poem, and it is through them that the poet explores the essentially divided condition of old age.

One reason that these larger contrasts are significant is that they are analogous to the aged speaker's perception of his own self-division. Indeed, Yeats's old speaker finds himself separated from the country of the young only to discover that old men also divided from themselves, body against soul. Body belongs to the world of generation, to the webs of birth and death, while the soul aspires to a Byzantine state of perfected form. In one of the poem's most iconic images, Yeats compares an elderly person to a coat rack:

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 [...] (2.1-4)

These lines initially liken an old man's skin to a "tattered coat" and his bones to the "stick" on which it sits; it is a vivid description of the aged body. Yet after

that all-important enjambment that introduces the possibility of a different state of things Yeats alters the metaphor to evoke the soul's division from the body in old age.

The difference hinges on the grammatical shift between "tattered" and "tatter" in lines two and four. In its initial appearance, "tattered" is an adjective modifying "coat," taken together to refer to what Hardy calls the "wasting skin" of late life ("I Look into My Glass" 2). Its second appearance in line four sees the word employed as a noun: "Every tatter in its mortal dress." Ambiguity arises when we notice that the second "tatter" is not the clothing but the clothed: "every tatter" is "in its mortal dress." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "tatter" not only as a piece of rag but "a person wearing tattered or ragged clothes" ("Tatter"). In this latter instance, I would argue that "tatter" refers to the soul and "mortal dress" to the body. The ragged and tattered soul "claps its hands and sings" not for on behalf of the body but for itself; it sings for its own transformation while it remains in the "mortal dress" of the body.⁹

One significant feature of this figure is that it tropes the soul's relation to the body in spatial terms of separation: the tatter is in—rather than identical

⁹ This reading is corroborated by the stanza's consistent use of the pronoun "its" to refer to the soul: "Soul clap its hands," "every tatter in its mortal dress," and "studying / Monuments of its own significance." In the first and last instance "its" clearly points to "Soul." I would argue that the "tatter in its mortal dress" maintains this reference and that "tatter" is a figure for the soul as tatterdemalion, wrapped in the "tattered coat" of the body.

with—its clothes. In its third stanza the poem brings its image of radical self-division in old age to its climactic expression. Here, Yeats's elderly speaker invokes the sages, pleading for them to "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is" (3. 4-6). The speaker's heart is "fastened" to an external, alien body: a "dying animal."

Harold Bloom remarks that the speaker's "quest is away—not from the body so much as from the decrepitude of the body" (348), yet it seems that to this speaker such a distinction is without significant difference, since bodies belong to nature and therefore to the cycle of generation and inevitable decrepitude and death.

The old man's yearning to escape the "dying animal" of his body and to be taken up into "the artifice of eternity" (3. 8) finds an ultimate expression in his envisioning himself as possessing a final form, a golden bird on the boughs of the Emperor and finally free of the entangling "sensual music" of the young and singing his own songs of "what is past, passing, and to come" (4.8). Whatever else it may be in this poem, old age is a source of antitheses the poet must somehow transcend.

"Sailing to Byzantium" tropes the divided state it posits in its significant spatial configurations. Specifically, Yeats situates the speaker in spatially liminal positions throughout the poem in order to figure his perception of old age as an in-between period of life. Indeed, the poem's famous opening line establishes the

liminal placement of the speaker: "That is no country for old men" (1). Yeats places his speaker outside of this country by employing the demonstrative "that." Grene notes the ambiguity of the poem's first word, arguing that although it seems to "gestur[e]...so clearly and definitively, [it] creates for readers a sort of pseudospace in which we lose ourselves as soon as we try to occupy it" (51). Grene is right to suggest that we should not try to identify "that country" too doggedly with any specific place, and it is also significant that the old speaker begins by implying that he both does not belong to "that country" and that he has already left it, since "that" one is not "this" country. The spatial relationship of the speaker to "that country" bears an existential rather than literal significance. Apart from the burgeoning life of the young, the old man has repudiated their country and its "sensual music" in search of permanence. Presumably, the speaker spends the first two stanzas of the poem aboard the ship somewhere between "that country" and Byzantium. By placing the speaker in between these fictive countries, Yeats again emphasizes the liminality of old age, caught as it is between the sexually generative life of the young and the intimation of permanence in an imagined afterlife.

Although at times the poem seems to locate the speaker in specific places, "Sailing to Byzantium" is actually quite ambiguous about its spaces until its conclusion; the effect of this ambiguity is to reinforce the liminal existential

situation of old age. In this poem, old age is not a settled condition; it is fraught by self-division and characterized by a peripatetic search for permanence.

Because of its unsettled condition, Yeats significantly refuses to place his speaker too clearly or firmly in specific places, opting instead for representing him as indeterminately between places. After its initial placement of its speaker on the sea somewhere between “that country” and Byzantium, the poem presents its speaker’s arrival at the latter country at the end of stanza two. In what might be an opportunity to firmly emplace this speaker, Yeats renders his arrival in ambiguous terms; this arrival seems sufficiently ambiguous as not to feel an arrival at all. In fact, we are given no way of firmly situating the elderly wanderer. Where exactly, we might ask, is the speaker here? Has he arrived in the harbor of Byzantium, or is he approaching it? Is he in the city itself? Of course, there is no detail in the poem that will resolve these questions. They are significant because of their open-endedness, not for any answers we might suggest for them.

The same ambiguity persists in the third stanza, which, although it evokes a Byzantine mosaic in a church, actually belongs to no place we can visualize or identify. Vendler assumes that this stanza is set in the Hagia Sophia (32) but it seems more accurate to say that the third stanza of the poem take place in an ambiguous no-space in the imagined Byzantium. Responding to Vendler,

Meihuizen rightly points out that the speaker's address to the sages is a simile: they are not standing in a mosaic, but *as if* they were (245). While the Hagia Sophia might lie behind the image, it is not necessarily its referent.¹⁰ Thus, while it is tempting to supply a specific locale to the third stanza, it actually refuses to be firmly emplaced. The significance of this fact is that the speaker's ambiguous spatial placements highlights his continued negotiation of old age's antinomies.

When "Sailing to Byzantium" reaches its climax in the transcendent fourth stanza, the poet figures the resolution of old age's antinomies by recourse to an iconic image of himself in a specific place. In a moment of prophetic vision, Yeats's speaker imagines a future after death as an escape from the snares of generation and death that he fled from in "that country." Imagining himself absorbed into the "artifice of eternity" (15), the aged speaker envisions himself taking

Such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lord and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (18-24)

¹⁰ Although Vendler notes that the Yeats saw mosaics of martyrs in Ravenna, Italy in 1907, she does not assume that these are the source of the images. A. Norman Jeffares offers a contradictory account, citing a letter from Yeats on the impact of the Ravenna mosaics (124). Quite outside the texture of the poem itself, which I believe sufficiently complicates a reading of the third stanza as being set in the Hagia Sophia, extra-textual details such as Yeats's experience with the mosaic in Ravenna further problematize simple equations.

The image of the golden bird upon the golden bough accomplishes several things at once. First, it resolves the body / soul antinomy so acutely felt by the old man because it suggests that after death his outward shape is subject to volition; no longer will his heart be "fastened to a dying animal," it will instead dictate the shape of the body and therefore be in accord with it.¹¹ Second, this final image resolves the spatial ambiguities that have persisted throughout the poem. With the possible exception—because vague—of stanza two's final lines, this is the only place in the poem in which we can locate the speaker in a concrete space. No longer does he imagine himself as in exile or in a liminal state; here, he claims he will be firmly placed "upon a golden bough" in a visionary court of an emperor. He will, in effect, find his perfect place when he too is perfected after death. Thus we experience the poem's culmination as satisfactory in part because both the thematic tensions and spatial ambiguities the poem has developed thus far are resolved in a single image.

Interestingly, Yeats contrasts his speaker's spatial ambiguity with the formal assuredness of the *ottava rima* stanza, an assuredness that Yeats compounds with the emphatic numbering of each stanza as a discrete unit. Stanza, of course, means "room," and Yeats's rooms in this poem are steadfast,

¹¹ In a note on the poem, Daniel Albright draws our attention to *A Vision* (1937), according to which "the visible forms of dead souls are extremely plastic, susceptible to imaginative pressure" (631).

the *ottava rima* form being one Yeats associated with the Renaissance and the permanence of its art. As Vendler aptly notes, the poet privileged the *ottava rima* as a form closely allied to the authoritative utterances of “sacred song: ode, choral commentary,[and] public hymn” (263). The poet further emphasizes the sturdiness of the poem's form by numbering each of its stanzas. Vendler argues that the numbering here implies “stations” of movement in each stanza (36), and while one may dissent from the details of her argument, she is right to point out that the discreteness of the stanzas gives significant and equal weight to each. The *ottava rima* form and the numbered stanzas of “Sailing to Byzantium” suggest another space, the space of art envisioned at the end of the poem. The shape of the poem itself seems to cast the speaker in the realm of perfected form—especially in its last stanza, whose rhymes are the poem’s most perfect—even as it imagines him in a spatial limbo through much of the poem. By contrasting the poem’s settled form with the old man’s wandering, “Sailing to Byzantium” itself embodies significant tensions between the self’s knowledge of its own transience and its desire for an eternal and perfected form.

If “Sailing to Byzantium” ultimately represents the victory of permanence over transience and imagination over nature in old age, it does so only with such qualifications that its conclusion is rendered temporary and provisional. Yeats qualifies his own oracular authority in the poem’s final stanza by casting his

speaker's vision as one of a future possibility when he is "out of nature" (4.1).

Yeats's persona may desire transcendental escape, but he does not achieve it within the poem. Yeats's old man may envision a space in which the self-division of old age has been resolved, but because he does not actually achieve this transcendence he remains in a kind of limbo between what he is and what he desires. Second, as Ellmann argues, the image of the bird itself is perhaps self-undermining:

Yeats's desire to be turned into a beautiful but mechanical bird...is also a wish which qualifies itself by its very excess; half of the poet's mind rejects the escape from life for which the other half longs. (*Identity of Yeats* 10)

These qualifications are necessary to note because they indicate the unsettled character of questions the poem asks, questions that cannot be conveniently evaded with answers either pat or visionary. Instead, Yeats chooses to imaginatively negotiate them even if he desires to be rid of them.

Outside of "Sailing to Byzantium" itself, that poem's visionary triumph is called into further question by its placement before the title poem of the volume, "The Tower," which takes up an engagement with old age and its inherent contradictions with agonized directness. We are invited by the arrangement of

these texts to read them as forming part of a sequence that begins *The Tower*.¹² As has often been pointed out, “Sailing to Byzantium” was the last poem of the first four in *The Tower* to be completed, but Yeats reverses their compositional order and presents “Sailing to Byzantium” first and the earliest-written poem, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” last. This working-backwards sequence forms what Hazard Adams has called a “fictive chronological order,” (147), a movement beginning with transcendent vision that moves through the traumas of history. If we read the poems according to this fictive order, then, we move from one kind of attempt to answer old age to another, as critics have long recognized.¹³

Like “Sailing to Byzantium,” “The Tower” is grounded in its troubled perception of old age’s antinomies and derives its energy from the tensions they create, and like the earlier poem one of the ways in which it figures these antinomies in its formal contrast between its verse form and its dominant symbol of the tower at Thoor Ballylee. For Yeats, the tower that he purchased as “as a setting for old age” (Wade 651) appears in the poems as the image of permanence. The tower in the poem that bears its name stands in part for all that

¹² This sequence includes “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”; neither of those poems, however, address old age as a dominant concern and therefore are not considered here.

¹³ See David Young’s *Troubled Mirror: A Study of Yeats’s The Tower* (22-25) for a discussion of the transition between these poems.

remains after generations rise and decline; like Keats's urn, Yeats's tower endures. Instead of adopting a form that could embody a similar authoritative strength such as the *ottava rima*, "The Tower" is formally peripatetic. "The Tower" is firmly emplaced in a particular location, but its form is anything but fixed. Its first section consists of sixteen iambic lines with alternating end rhymes. This form gives way in the second to an eight line stanza that recalls the *ottava rima* of "Sailing to Byzantium" while eschewing the rhymes of that form, almost as if the poet is hesitant at this point to adopt anything approaching *ottava rima*'s spacious authority. In the third section the poem shifts yet again, this time to a firm trimeter with alternating rhymes, echoing the first section in its rhymes but in nothing else. In this contrast of form with the dominant symbol of the tower, this poem embodies Yeats's search for a stable vantage point from which to see the dialectical workings of old age and imagination.

While "Sailing to Byzantium" concerns itself with the antinomies of old age in a nearly allegorical vision-quest, "The Tower" focuses on them by turning inward to self-reflection and outward to meditation on the lives of others now dead. Of the two, "The Tower" is the more personally immediate poem by far. As if to highlight its own more specific focus, the poem begins not with a general reflection on the plight of old men but on the internal anguish of one old man, the speaker himself. Indeed, the speaker cries out,

What shall I do with this absurdity —
O heart, O troubled heart — this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? (1-4)

At the level of metaphor these lines introduce one of the poem's central dichotomies. Echoing the image of his body as "a dying animal" to which the heart was attached in the previous poem, Yeats's image again tropes old age as involving opposing realities yoked uneasily together; here, these are the body and the heart, which the poet conceives as separately-existing entities. Indeed, as Ramazani has accurately noted, this image involves a "splitting of the ego" (168), creating one of the fundamental pair of opposites with which "The Tower" is concerned; as Ramazani goes on to observe, "this rhetorical gesture...usefully implies that 'I' of the poet is separable from the dying 'absurdity'" (168). At the very outset of the poem, Unity of Being is threatened by the disruption that old age introduces between the body and the soul.

It is worth noting here that "The Tower's" opening vocative to the poet's heart and its image of age as "tied" to the poet involves a primarily spatial figure.¹⁴ In characteristic fashion, Yeats imagines the temporal situation of old

¹⁴ Employing a strikingly similar spatial metaphor, Beauvoir argues that "The aged person comes to feel that he is old by means of others, and without having experienced important changes; his inner being does not accept *the label that has been stuck* to him; he no longer knows who he is" (292, my emphasis)

age as existing in a spatial relationship to his real self; it is connected and “tied” to him rather than imagined in other terms. The spatial dimension of this trope renders at the figurative level the speaker’s liminal existential position: caught between imagination and body, Yeats’s persona experiences acute self-division, belonging wholly to neither soul nor body, since (at this point, at least) they are neither of them whole.

Formally, too, the poem’s first sentence renders aesthetically visible the existential condition it depicts. In its syntax, the poem’s beginning divides its main verb from its indirect object by way of interpolation. We do not identify what the “absurdity” and “caricature” is until line three, when we realize that these epithets apply to “decrepit age” (3). The splitting of the sentence through its somewhat knotty syntax represents spatially on the page the figurative separation experienced by Yeats’s speaker between his age and the feeling heart which seems not to have aged at all.

The poet develops the dichotomy between heart and “decrepit age” in the poem’s first section by making them the initial terms in a proliferating series of figurative dichotomies. First, the body / heart opposition develops into a more specific one, that between imaginative vitality and bodily vigor. Contrasted with his “decrepit age” is his “Excited, passionate, fantastical / imagination,” formally realized by a forceful enjambment on dividing “fantastical” and “imagination” (l.

5-6). From the opposition of imaginative vitality and bodily decline comes the further contrast between the Muse on one hand and Plato and Plotinus on the other (l. 10-11). Albright notes that “the assumption behind those alternatives is that poetry is somehow an act of the body and the body’s desires” (10). Indeed, the aged speaker stands caught between his (to himself) unseemly desire for the Muse and a bodily situation that seems to demand a turn to abstract, disembodied philosophy.¹⁵ Commenting on this passage, Bloom shrewdly notes that “With Blake, [the poet] continues to know that less than all cannot satisfy man yet his decrepit age threatens to make his desire merely grotesque” (350). It is the threat of this grotesquerie that prompts the poet’s return to a sharply dualistic metaphor, again spatial, of his soul on one hand and his body on the other: choosing the Muse, he fears he might court being “derided by / A sort of battered kettle at the heel” (l. 14-15). That “battered kettle,” we assume, is also tied somehow to the foot of the poet, making a derisive clatter behind him and rendering him ridiculous.

If the iconic golden bird of “Sailing to Byzantium” embodies one kind of temporary and incomplete response to old age, “The Tower” represents another but of a different kind; indeed, the latter poem substitutes the rooted and

¹⁵ In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats writes that “Old men must be content with philosophies” (Wade 781).

historical for the transcendent; even so, its response to old age is provisional. Instead of seeking out a holy city of imagination and thereby escaping the vicissitudes of time, the poet of "The Tower" attempts to find some measure of poise from within time by finding a tentative answer to them. Indeed, this is the import of the poem's second section, for in it the poet turns to local history and biography in his efforts to contend with old age. Rather than fleeing this country, he turns to it and interrogates its past inhabitants.

Although "The Tower's" second section is structurally puzzling, Daniel Albright rightly notes that "the organization of Part II is clearly spatial" (12), since one common feature guiding the selection of the summoned figures is that they are each connected with the region around Thoor Ballylee, the location of the speaker.¹⁶ The aristocratic Mrs. French, for example, lived nearby "beyond that ridge" (2. 9). The next figure Yeats conjures is Mary Hynes, the "peasant girl commended by a song"; she, too, is evoked in part because she "lived somewhere upon that rocky place" (2. 17-18). The poet summons also the blind old poet Raftery, the modern Homer who sung this peasant beauty of local lore. The last figure he calls up is one most closely associated with Thoor Ballylee, for he was "an ancient bankrupt master of this house" (2. 63). Yeats's use of "that"

¹⁶ Harold Brooks concurs, writing that the figures "are unified...by the Tower: the Tower as a local historical actuality, and the Tower as a symbol" (36).

and “this” as spatial indicators highlights the locality and nearness of these figures evoked by the poem’s space. Indeed, the poet makes clear that his summoned figures are bound by their shared relationship to Thoor Ballylee when he asks,

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,
Whether in public or in secret rage
As I do now against old age? (2. 81-84)

One reason it is significant that the poet and each of these figures are bound to the tower and its environs is that it highlights again the dichotomy between transience and permanence. The poet seems to see temporarily in the ghosts an image of his own future. They had been born, lived, and died, but the tower remains. Indeed, it is almost as if the poet is himself besieged by time, “pacing upon the battlement and staring” (2.1). As a besieged old man, the speaker is akin in spirit to those “rough men at arms, cross-gartered to the knees / Or shod in iron” who garrisoned the tower in centuries past (2. 65-6). The tower stands as a physical emblem of permanence to counter the poet’s reading of his own body as being subject, as those who came before him were, to time.

In “The Tower’s” final section, the poet opts for a human answer to the dilemmas of old age rather than a transcendental answer, and one way he does so is by turning from human history to a human future in which he and his

tradition are inherited by the coming generation. While in the second section Yeats's persona summons figures from the past, in the third he projects his imagination forward and envisions an embodied—rather than a Tower-like—permanence through the transference of his own characteristics. “It is time that I wrote my will,” he begins in the oracular trimeter of the final portion (3.1). This will, of course, is figurative, a doling of himself out to the future. Instead of locating permanence in the tower itself, Yeats chooses instead to see it in human continuity. He does not envision a Byzantium so much as a continuous chain of beings, enmeshed in the cycles of begetting, birth, and death, which nevertheless carries parts of himself forward; as Harold Brooks writes, the Yeatsian “will” amounts to a grand affirmation of life in its flux (39).

While “The Tower’s” complex negotiations and resolutions have been widely discussed by critics, the role of imagined space in the poem’s final section have not as often been noted. I would suggest that space—as much as rhetoric and rhythm—is significant in figuring the poem’s response to old age. In fact, the third section of the poem associates two complementary states by way of figures of space. In the first of these states, the poet identifies his imagined inheritors by imagining them in a specific space:

I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn

Drop their cast a the side
Of dripping stone[...] (3. 2-6)

Although Bloom dismisses the passage above as so much irritating and extraneous “dawn-fishery” (352), Brooks is right to point out that this image “harks back to the picture, in the first movement, of himself going fishing” (40). Beyond this structural affinity, both passages associate vitality with spaces of activity: the “fountain[s] leap” (3.4) and alight with the sunshine of “bursting dawn” (3. 55). Yeats praises the young men who will inherit his attributes by envisioning them in spaces of vitality and vigor. We know more about the places they are in than about the young men themselves, or rather the places tell us what we need to know of them: that they are vigorous and alive with energy, worthy inheritors of Yeats’s own imaginative vitality.

In its concluding passages, “The Tower” returns first to the space of the tower itself and then to an inner space in which to school himself to endure the deprivations of old age. Instead of adopting the prophetic mode of transcendent vision, “The Tower” opts for the rhetoric of endurance. Having written his will, the poet declares:

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school [...] (3. 61-3).

In "Sailing to Byzantium" the poet had pled God's sages to become "the singing-masters of my soul"; here, however, the poet turns not to a transcendent singing school but to a learned school where he will study to "make [his] soul." This learned school is homelier and more quotidian than that of the Byzantine masters. It will not transfigure him into an iconic bird of perfected artistic form; instead, his study in this school will (the poet hopes) enable him to endure what he calls the "evils" of old age. Among these evils are "the wreck of body" and "dull decrepitude" as age continues to wear away at his bodily vigor. In a saving swerve from self-regard, the final lines of the poem consider other, "worse evil[s]" that attend old age:

The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath[.] (3.67-70)

Intriguingly, the space of the learned school gives way in the poem's closing lines to a further space, an inward space that figures the resolve to endure in terms of a natural scene at twilight. Having committed himself to "make [his] soul," the poet imagines his equilibrium by imagining that the loss of vigor, friends, and beauty will to him be matters of indifference rather than felt as the "worse evils" they now appear to be. Yeats employs figures of recession to evoke how distantly he will feel future losses. They will

Seem but as the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades. (3. 72-5)

David Young is right to point out that these lines only look like "bitter resignation," and I agree with him when he asserts on the contrary that they are also "quietly triumphant" (28); unlike Young, however, I would suggest that the persona's triumph is dearly bought and that Yeats is aware of this. While he does not imagine he can evade the suffering entailed by living in time, he does suggest that studying in the "learned school" will steel himself against future losses. In the present of the poem the loss of friends and loved ones are "worse evils" than bodily decrepitude; in the imagined future, however, Yeats's speaker hopes that this suffering will be as distant from him as fading clouds or the dwindling, "sleepy cry" of a bird at night. The purpose of schooling his soul, he implies, is to steel it for the gradual deprivations of old age. While Grene argues that Yeats here "express[es] acceptance" of old age, I would contend that any acceptance here is ambiguous (221). In the present of the poem, he sees the decline and losses of age as "evils," and he anticipates a time when they will almost be matters of indifference. Such a trajectory hardly seems triumphant. Instead, it is both an acknowledgment of the inevitability of loss in old age and an admission that such losses are too much to be borne without hardening oneself in the

learned school of stoic resistance. Due to these ambiguities, I would suggest that the stance embodied by “The Tower’s” closing is yet another provisional response to old age, one that may be suitable to resolve the tensions raised in this poem but not enough to be Yeats’s “answer” to old age.

Before turning from “The Tower,” we might contrast the significant inner space of the poem’s conclusion with that of “Sailing to Byzantium,” thereby seeing clearly the earthward trajectory of the two poems when taken together. In the prior poem, spatial ambiguity signaled the liminal condition of old age that is resolved by the iconic image of the poet as golden bird; here, the spatial setting is simultaneously homelier and more ambiguous. Whereas “Sailing to Byzantium” presents a prophetically envisioned future perfection, “The Tower” envisions the future as an interior darkening wood. The singing of the golden bird is here replaced by the “sleepy cry” of birds at night as the poem fades to darkness. Vision gives way to nature and transcendence yields to an earthly endurance as we move from the first to the second poem of *The Tower*.

If “Sailing to Byzantium” represents a yearning for transcendence and “The Tower” an ambiguous acceptance of the losses of old age in the human world, “Among School Children” achieves a transcendent equilibrium between

the two positions.¹⁷ Although “Among School Children” is at some distance in the volume to the first two poems, we should read it as a culminating meditation on concerns introduced in them. Young concurs when he notes the significant similarities between it and “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Tower.” As he points out, “Among School Children” echoes those prior poems in centering on an aged figure and its setting within the schoolroom, suggesting both the “singing-school” of “Sailing to Byzantium” and the “learned school” of “The Tower” (85-6). We may also note additional formal and thematic continuities among the poems. Formally, “Among School Children” returns to the sculpted *ottava rima* stanzas Yeats uses in “Sailing to Byzantium.” Thematically, the latter poem is an extension of the earlier poems’ preoccupation with self-division and the reconciliation of imagination and body.

Like “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Tower,” “Among School Children” is animated by its perceptions of old age’s dichotomous character. Indeed, the poem is structured by a series of juxtapositions. First, the poem contrasts Yeats’s speaker with both the nun and the students in its opening section; he appears among them as not simply an outsider but as a “sixty-year-old smiling public

¹⁷ Young asks of this poem: “Is it a triumphant recasting of the problems treated early in the book, this time in a less equivocal fashion?” (86). I would suggest that the answer is a qualified yes.

man" (1.8). As a "public man" he contrasts with the nun and as an aged man with the students. He is an outsider and other in the world of this poem.

"Among School Children" goes on to found itself on ever more localized contraries. For instance, Yeats's persona is not only divided from the nun and her students, he is divided between his outer public self and in his inner, meditating self; the polite public man smiling and asking questions is not identical with the self that ruminates throughout the poem. The speaker is further inwardly divided as he recognizes the difference between himself as he is in the present-- "with sixty or more winters on [his] head" (5.5) and the image of himself as an infant on the lap of his "youthful mother" (5.1). Maud Gonne, the possessor of the "Ledaean body" (2.1) of the second section, is also divided between her youthful beauty and her "present image" in old age: "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat" (4. 3-4). The significance of such plentiful oppositions lies in the way it figures old age's demands to experience hitherto occluded contradictions. Indeed, age brings to the fore those latent divisions, making them perceptible and therefore susceptible to meditation and response.

Greene rightly observes that "Among School Children" is among "Yeats's most externally situated self-portraits," and indeed it does achieve a high degree of realism (66). As is well known, the poem takes for its occasion Yeats's visit in

1926 to St. Otteran's Montessori School in Waterford in his capacity as senator.

"Among School Children's" opening stanza situates the speaker within the world of the specific and concrete:

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way—the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man. (1.1-8)

In keeping with the stanza's concreteness of setting, Yeats registers the desultory character of his persona's activity by employing a basically regular iambic rhythm and mostly end-stopped lines. The stanza's rhythm and lineation contribute to the strictly regular carrying out both of the poet's function as "public man" and the daily operations of the school itself.

One significant aspect of the poem's realism is its setting in a distinctly human and social milieu. In this, "Among School Children" differs from both of *The Tower's* opening poems, neither of which features a speaker acting and moving among others. Indeed, "Sailing to Byzantium" is populated by more or less archetypal images of youth, age, and transcendence; the speaker's only interaction with others comes in his invocation of the sages, who of course do not reply. Likewise, in "The Tower," although Thoor Ballylee is an identifiable place,

that poem also presents us with an aged speaker cogitating on his own old age in isolation, with the exception of the uncommunicative ghosts he summons in the poem's second section. "Among School Children" is unique by being situated not simply in a particular space but among other people in a social environment. Indeed, the poem's title might well have been "At a Montessori School" or something similar; instead, the title situates the speaker in a world primarily characterized by the presence of others.

Strikingly, the poem's setting situates its speaker's meditation on old age in a social world in which obligations to others modulate how he responds to it. "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower" allow the speaker free rein to curse, excoriate, and rage because their speakers are alone.¹⁸ Although all three poems are preoccupied with self-division in old age, only "Among School Children" dramatizes this division rather than explicitly decrying it. On the one hand is the speaker / poet, the self-conscious "I" of the poem capable of moving between wry self-observation and reverie, while on the other hand is the speaker as a "smiling public man," a man as he appears before others: poised, amicable, and above all, old. Finding himself neither in the sphere of vision-quest nor in the lofty tower, Yeats's persona finds himself enjoined by his social situation to

¹⁸ Of an earlier draft Yeats called "Among School Children" yet another "curse upon old age." (Wade 719) This description would likely baffle readers, since the poem is among the most affirmative of *The Tower*.

accommodate those around him. This is part of the import of his self-admonition in the fourth section to leave off rumination for the time being: “enough of that, / Better to smile on all that smile, and show / There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (4. 6-8). Because he is smiled upon, Yeats’s speaker feels called on to smile in return, embodying at least in outward appearance an affable old age. His sense of responsibility to others constrains him from indulging in any more violent responses to old age and demonstrates his ability to see himself through others’ eyes and respond accordingly.

Of course, the social encounter of “Among School Children” takes place in a specific space, and again Yeats employs this space to figurative effect in dramatizing his speaker’s sense of the dichotomous character of old age. On one hand, the speaker appears as “a sixty-year-old smiling public man” in order to comfort—or at least not disturb—the children of the school. The schoolroom itself is a kind of theatrical space in which this speaker performs an outward image of himself. On the other hand, the poem takes place in a space of inward reverie and meditation, the space of memory and imagination largely inhabited by the poem’s speaking “I.” This “I” is distinct from the “public man,” or at least he feels he is: hence in the poem’s first stanza he begins by referring himself in the first person but gradually, as the concrete social details accrue, shifts to the third-person description. The “I” and his image as “public man” embody in a

gentler way the self-estrangement of old age he had more violently denounced in the opening of “The Tower,” and this self-estrangement is itself figured in the speaker’s dual representation of himself as existing in inner and outer spheres simultaneously.

In “Among School Children’s” triumphant conclusion, the poem transcends the dichotomy of inner and outer selves in old age by turning to an inward space of visionary insight. Whereas Yeats’s persona has inhabited two spheres throughout the poem—the public world of the school and the private one of reverie—in the poem’s climactic stanza he envisions a union of body and soul. In a striking enjambment across stanza sections, the end of section VII is punctuated by a semi-colon and the sturdy structure of the *ottava rima* opens as a portico onto the space of the final stanza:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (8. 1-8)

One reason this stanza is effective is that it represents an affirmative resolution to the self-estrangement of old age by envisioning what Adams describes as “a place or condition—a spiritual space, one might say—where

negations are successfully opposed" (172). Indeed, Yeats's speaker leaves his awareness of self-division behind in this vision of spiritual and bodily union. A striking feature of this vision is that Yeats tropes it spatially rather than temporally; it not a vision of a time to come as in "Sailing to Byzantium," but an emplaced a localizable mode of being. In the stanza's first line, Yeats surprises us when he describes the blossoming and dancing in a "where" rather than the more-expected "when." Indeed, union is troped spatially as envisioned in the tree and the dancer, both of whom embody themselves wholly and without fissure.

The visionary space of "Among School Children's" conclusion recalls to mind the climactic spaces of both "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower," blending them together in a space of what we might call the latter poem's embodied transcendence. Indeed, the inner vision of "Among School Children" echoes the transcendence of "Sailing to Byzantium," yet it repudiates the prophetic mode the earlier poem, turning instead to an inward vision of human reality rather than a proleptic sight of perfected, eternal form. The "great-rooted blossomer" echoes the golden bough of the Emperor and perhaps the trees that figure in "The Tower's" conclusion. Moreover, Yeats's rejection of a "blear-eyed wisdom [born] out of midnight oil" reminds us both of the singing-school of "Sailing to Byzantium" and the strident effort in the "learned school" in which

the poet will “make [his] soul” in “The Tower.” The significance of these allusions lies in the way they tie the three poems together in an arc that tends towards immanence and a provisional poise between the dichotomies of old age. “Sailing to Byzantium’s” symbolic quest and visionary prophecy of a bodiless future gives way to the embodied vision of “Among School Children.” Likewise, the stoicism of “The Tower” is rejected by the poem in favor of an ideal of an effortlessly embodied way of life. Taken together, we can see each of the poems is animated by its perception of old age’s contradictory character and an attempt to at least temporarily resolve them, each effort incrementally more rooted in the world of the human and ordinary, a world that is at once natural and luminous.

A final, further point of similarity among the three poems is the provisional character of their responses to old age. “Sailing to Byzantium” proffered a clearly unsatisfactory evasion of the tensions created by old age by imagining a world “out of nature” in a space and time belonging to the inaccessible future. In a contrasting manner, “The Tower” reaches its climax in an inward vision of “the learned school” in which the poet will not evade time’s revenges but steel himself against them until their force is blunted. “Among School Children” does not resolve the contraries of old age, but it does envision unity of being in a visionary space where wholeness is possible. While Yeats clearly endorses this vision as an ideal, Grene is right to point out that “the

troubled meditation of the poem as a whole must call in question whether such an integration is achievable in this life and this world" (215). This question is left open by the poem, which itself ends in a characteristically Yeatsian interrogative mode. At most, we may say that "Among School Children" provides the poet with a vision of a mode of being, not its actuality. While he has found such an image, he has not yet found a mode of imagining dwelling in the interstices of old age.

Interstitial Dwelling: Yeats's Final Spaces of Old Age

While the poems of *The Tower* attempt in various ways to envision modes of being beyond the dichotomies of aged experience, the tendency of the later poems is increasingly to imagine old age as belonging to irrevocably liminal spaces. Images of synthesis give way to spatially in-between figures that situate old age in various forms of indeterminacy. In many significant later poems, the poet abandons efforts to escape, to fortify himself against, or even to envision beyond, the effects of time in old age. Instead, the contradictory and liminal character of old age is taken as the very condition of the poem, a condition that is at once both its beginning and its end. This tendency is reflected as we might expect in Yeats's use of figurative space.

An exemplary poem that demonstrates this feature of Yeats's later poems is the brief "After Long Silence," one of the numbered poems belonging to the 1932 sequence "Words for Music Perhaps" and published in later editions of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. Written, as Ellmann reminds us, with Olivia Shakespeare in mind (279), the poem recounts what Vendler has called a "tryst...of minds" (10) in old age between former lovers. Although it is a shorter poem and not one of Yeats's iconic set-pieces, it is nevertheless representative of the way that his later spaces of old age tend away from the visionary or transcendent and towards the immanent, human, and liminal. With masterful economy, Yeats imagines this meeting as a moment of stability and poise achievable only by the aged and only together in the intimate space in which they find themselves for the time being.

At the level of stanza form "After Long Silence" creates a space that is simultaneously closed and intimate while maintaining openness in its rhyme scheme. Having read the poems of "Words for Music Perhaps" in their published order, the reader comes to "After Long Silence" and notes with surprise its brevity. Cast in his characteristic eight-line stanza, the poem recalls at once Yeats's *ottava rima* poems and, by its rhyme scheme, the Petrarchan sonnet (Vendler 13). Because it is printed as a single stanza of eight lines, the poem calls to mind the grand performances of "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Among School

Children.” Yet the poem also eschews the aural closure of the *ottava rima*’s concluding couplet, opting instead to maintain the embraced rhymes of a Petrarchan sonnet’s octave. In its compression and solidity, “After Long Silence” evokes a closed and protected space, while its rhymes open outward in a pattern that is more fitting for the intimate expansiveness of the former lovers’ conversation.

In its spatial arrangement, “After Long Silence” creates a poised in-between space of old age in which the former lovers temporarily find refuge. Vendler notes the contrasting pair of “unfriendly lamplight” at the beginning of line three and “unfriendly night” at the end of line four, and observes that this “graphic masterstroke...poses the reunited couple as isolated in space and time, endangered on the one hand by light and on the other by night” (13). To be aged in Yeats is always to be in between, and in “After Long Silence” this intermediacy is figured spatially by the lamplight and curtains shielding them from darkness. Although the lamplight is obscured and the night has been shut out, the realities they represent—the recognition of their own age and their approaching deaths—are held only momentarily out of consciousness as the poem’s two figures stand in a brief moment of poise as they speak together. The spatial and figurative opposition of the lamplight and the night creates not a problem to be solved but the very condition out of which the poem arises.

While Yeats employs figurative space as one way of troping the intermediacy of old age, another means is the poem's archaic diction, particularly in its second half. Although Vendler is right to point out that the diction is invited by the sonnet-like octave, it is further worth noting that their out-worn diction is a kind of relic, as they are, of the past on which they reminisce (13). The poem's opening lines figure the pair as survivals, having outlived prior lovers or relationships. As representatives of the past, it is right that they do not sing; instead, they archaically "descant and yet again descant / Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song" (4-5). Indeed, the archaism of their descanting reminds us that they have carried over from the past a wisdom that they embody, since old age brings its own compensation; as Yeats says, "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom" (6). In their high descant, the elderly pair reflect their temporal liminality as survivors of the past.

"After Long Silence" marks a departure from the poems I have discussed so far both in that it is staged entirely within an ordinary, human space and that it is spatially static. Although the actual setting of the poem remains unspecified, Yeats takes care to evoke the intimate space of interpersonal communion. The former lovers find themselves between "unfriendly lamplight" and "unfriendly night" and behind the lowered curtains. The space of the poem is domestic or least congenial to quiet conversations, and as such it may be in a café or

restaurant. Wherever its setting may be, the significant fact is that the pair do not move within this space, nor is the space itself altered. Unlike many earlier poems of old age, "After Long Silence" accepts its initial spatial configuration by remaining there in both body as well as spirit. When they descant, the pair do not conjure the space of inner vision of a space where they achieve Unity of Being. Instead, the poem remains where it is and the companions remain where they are. In refusing to substitute the liminal space of old age's conflicting realities for either a real or visionary space of harmony or completeness, "After Long Silence" evinces a larger tendency in later Yeats away from attempts to harmonize old age's antitheses and towards dwelling in them as the source of his art.

Although its main concern is not old age, 1938's "Lapis Lazuli" implies a way of being for the aged artist that is congruent with Yeats's later trajectory towards embodying and embracing the irresolute interstitial being he associates with late life. The poem is, of course, Yeats's central statement of his notion of tragic joy, a way of meeting with the traumas of history. In his discussion of the poem James Pethica describes Yeatsian tragic joy thus:

Here [the poet] acknowledges that even if art is unable to influence the real world directly by preventing political cataclysm or individual human tragedy, it offers the possibility of aesthetic and emotional compensation, by encouraging a gaiety — rooted in

acceptance of inevitability — that can transfigure ‘all that dread.
(210)

Indeed, the poem endorses a mode of distant vision in which the artist sets particular calamities in a context of eternal recurrence in which “all things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay” (35-6).

“Lapis Lazuli” takes up at the historical level the dichotomy between transience and permanence that haunts so many of Yeats’s poems of old age; instead of escaping or transcending this antithesis, the poem envisions a way to meet it squarely through tragic joy.¹⁹ Structurally, the poem is bracketed by competing responses to calamitous situations. In its opening lines we hear the voice of “hysterical women” reported indirectly by the speaker (1). They are “hysterical” because they fear annihilation; once “the town lie[s] beaten flat” (8), it and the civilization it synecdochally stands for will be obliterated, or so they believe. At the end of the poem, these women meet their counterparts in the Chinese sages carved in lapis lazuli for whom suffering, death, and civilizational collapse and upheaval are part of the cyclical nature of things. The knowledge that this is so allows them to attain the tragic joy that these others of the poem are unable to reach. In its competing perspectives, “Lapis Lazuli” imagines two

¹⁹ Jed Esty argues that Yeats “continually tries to conceptualize the problem of history in relation to the running drama of youth, maturity, senescence, mortality, and death” (316). Though he does not discuss “Lapis Lazuli,” the poem accords well with his claim. I would add that we would do well not to let its historical emphasis occlude its coexistent concern with old age.

modes of responding to change, one frantic and resistant, the other tragically joyful and accepting.

The poem implies that tragic joy is if not the sole possession of the aged, at least a more likely achievement in later life than in earlier. Although Yeats's persona does claim that all may play their tragic part and so reach this condition—"There struts Hamlet, there is Lear, / That's Ophelia, that Cordelia" (10-11)—he also implies that not all are "worthy their prominent part in the play" (14). Ordinary people may be transfigured into figures of grandeur by tragic joy, but this achievement is conditional; after all, they may not prove worthy by dying ignominiously or otherwise capitulating to despair. Tragic joy finds its unequivocal representation in the carved Chinese sages, whom Yeats takes great care to describe as very old. Attended by "a long-legged bird / A symbol of longevity" (38-39), the sages "stare" on "all the tragic scene" (51) without despair. While listening to the "mournful melodies," the sages seem able to acknowledge suffering without sacrificing tragic joy. Their eyes are "glittering," perhaps, because the beginnings of tears for the suffering they behold are forming, but their "eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes, / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay" (54-55). Yeats emphasizes the sages' age by drawing attention to it twice in the space of two lines, suggesting that their mode

of vision is not simply aesthetic but the product of long experience in time. They are well acquainted with the rise and fall of things.

As in many of Yeats's other poems of old age, "Lapis Lazuli" imagines its aged figures in significant intermediate spaces that bears figurative import. Here, Yeats employs in a remarkably compressed space a number of inter-related liminal positions in which his elderly sages find themselves. Starting with the largest (though not the first) level, they are located "There, on the mountain and the sky" (50). Yeats's idiosyncratic use of the preposition "on" in this line to refer to the sages' location both on earth and sky highlights the uncertainty of their spatial positioning. As climbers on a mountain, they find themselves partaking both of the earth and of the sky, belonging to both and neither at the same time. This placement sets them apart from the present scene they look upon, providing them with the necessary distance and detachment to achieve tragic joy. The second layer of the sages' intermediacy involves their destination, which is a "half-way house" which they've not yet reached (47). Yeats sets the sages in a palimpsest of intermediate spaces: between the earth and sky of the mountain, between their starting point and the half-way house, and (in an undescribed future) between the half-way house and their presumed final destination at the mountain's summit. These layered liminal spaces imply that the paradoxical

tragic joy is available to the aged because age itself is an intermediate condition between memory and desire, life and death, and energy and decline.

Although an apparently unlikely pairing, “Lapis Lazuli” and “After Long Silence” share the significant feature that neither work’s figures move through the spaces of the poem. Like the former lovers of the earlier poem, the Chinese sages are essentially static; unlike them, this is because the sages are parts of a “changeless work of art” (“My Table” 14). These figures are caught in arrested motion, like the images on Keats’s Grecian urn. They will be forever between earth and sky and will never arrive at the half-way house of their journey. Rather than being negative images of fixity of the kind that “trouble the living stream” in other poems (“Easter, 1916” 44), the sages in their stasis suggest a dynamic mode of dwelling within the ambiguities of old age rather than seeking resolution or transcendence. No voyage imagined to completion, no dancer inseparable from her dance; these images give way to that of the sages who are steadfast dwellers in the interstices.

“Lapis Lazuli” is only one significant waypoint in Yeats’s development of the poetry of old age, but it is notable among the later poems because it is a vivid example of their trajectory towards this-worldly images of aged space. Indeed, as the poet grew older, the spatial images he associated with his developing responses to old age follow a conspicuous path away from the opulent,

visionary, and transcendent and towards the worldly, homely, and even desolate. In the poems of *The Tower*, Yeats often envisions a provisional resolution to the ambiguities of old age as occurring in a given space of poetic vision: the bough of the emperor, the “learned school” of “The Tower,” and the inward transcendental inner space of “Among School Children’s” closing lines. These spaces contrast with the later settings that are characterized by concreteness, constriction, and even homeliness. The significance of this trajectory lies in the fact that it figures the way the poems move from imagining resolution to age’s antitheses towards dwelling in them a manner reminiscent of Keats’s negative capability.

The poems’ path towards dwelling among age’s dichotomies without evasion reaches one climax in the late “Man and the Echo.” Judged by Ramazani to be one of Yeats’s finest “death poems” (194), it stages an aged man’s confrontation with his past and his vexed meditation on his future death. It is a poem with closure but not resolution, achieving no answers to the pained questions it poses.

In common with his other late poems, “Man and the Echo” is grounded in antithesis and tropes of self-division. The poem’s most significant antithesis is announced in the poem’s title, which posits two speaking characters or figures.

As has often been noted,²⁰ the poem announces itself as a dialogue but it does not really fit that description. “Man and the Echo” involves an “old and ill” (6) speaker whose words are spoken back to him, having bounced off the face of the rock; there is, therefore, no second speaker for Yeats’s persona to communicate with, so the poem cannot be a dialogue. Although this is true, it would be inaccurate to say that the poem is a monologue. While the echo is not a distinct figure, its repetition of the speaker’s final phrases alters their meaning and are “given a sinister twist” (Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* 32) by the echo’s restatements. For example, after he has meditated on a series of questions, Yeats’s speaker suggests that only death will bring him peace when he says “All seems evil until I / Sleepless would lie down and die” (16-17). The echo, of course, picks up only “Lie down and die” (18), transforming a “subjunctive statement of wish...into a harrowing command” to allow his life to end (Ramazani 196). By so darkly modulating the speaker’s statement in this way, the echo dwells in an ambiguous terrain between identity with and alterity from the speaker. Because the echo is not a distinct interlocutor and at the same time does not merely repeat what the speaker says without altering it, its ontological status is somewhat uncertain. This ambiguity figures Yeats’s persona’s own inner self-

²⁰ For example, by Ramazani (193) and Grene (191), to name only two.

divisions in old age; the echo reveals the darker undertones of his aged speaker's pronouncements.

If one manifestation of the man's self-fissuring is his wayward echo, another is his engagement with a past whose contingency haunts him and from which he cannot extract any coherent meaning. The first station in his persona's journey is an interrogation of "all that I have said and done" (5) in his past life.

The questions he asks, of course, are unanswerable:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked? (10-15).

As people age, they often take stock of their pasts in order to make meaning from their experiences; in gerontology, this practice is called the "life review," and it is a helpful contrast to what Yeats does in "Man and the Echo."²¹ In the life review, the aged person looks back on his or her life to create a coherent "lifestory" (Randall and McKim 237) out of their experiences. In an essay on the aged Jonathan Swift, one of the later Yeats's iconic Irishmen, Brian Connery draws on Virginia Revere and Sheldon Tobin when he notes of the life review "that the narrative of life reminiscence by the elderly becomes mythicized

²¹ For two discussions of the life review, see Margery Hutter Silver's "The Significance of the Life Review in Old Age" and Barbara and Barrett Haight's *The Handbook of Structured Life Review*.

as the subject attempts to justify the life lived. As we retell our stories, we make heroes of ourselves and thus give our pasts significance which thereby justifies our lives" (156). An ideal result of the life review for many is what psychologist Erik Erikson calls "ego integrity" (268), which he defines as "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (268). We may see Yeats in "Man and the Echo" rejecting the consolation of both the life review and a sense of ego integrity. Looking to his past, Yeats's persona discovers not an Aristotelian plot but a series of questions. The poem forecloses on ego integrity as well because it focuses on the inscrutable contingency of the past rather than its inevitability: things might have been different than they were, the aged speaker implies, but how they might have been remains forever occluded.

The past haunts the poem by its contingency and the future vexes it by its unknowability. Placed in the intermediate position between a lengthening past and shortening future, Yeats's speaker addresses each in differing modes; while he questions his past in the poem's first movement, in its second he meditates on the future, employing a declarative syntax to describe man's fate:

But body gone he sleeps no more
And till his intellect grows sure
That all's arranged in one clear view
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
Then stands in judgment on his soul,

And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night. (30-36)

In juxtaposing Yeats the questioner with Yeats the declarer, "Man and the Echo" embodies the Yeatsian split between the bewilderedly human poet and the confident architect of *A Vision's* metaphysical system. While the former remains tentative and uncertain, the latter can pronounce with confidence on the fate of the soul. Yeats registers the contrast between the tentative and the assured through changes of perspective. In the poem's first movement, Yeats employs first person pronouns throughout, while in the second verse paragraph there is only one instance of the first person. Indeed, "Man and the Echo's" beginning section includes five instances of "I" and three uses of "my" or "mine." In sharp contrast, the second movement employs only one "I," and that referring to the poet's present meditating rather than his own future state after death. The significance of this disparity lies in the way it figures the incomprehensibility of one's own death. Because his own death is incomprehensible to him, the poet is paradoxically enabled to speak more freely of it in a declarative mode with an assuredness he cannot achieve in relation to his own past.

"Man and the Echo" ends with a double perspectival shift that undercuts its speaker's relatively untroubled assertions in the previous verse paragraph and places him again in uncertainty. When he comes to consider his own death,

for example, Yeats's speaker concedes that he knows rather less than all.

Addressing the rock,

O rocky voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place? (37-40)

Returning to the syntax of questions, the poem also returns to uncertainty and doubt. Bloom discerns in these lines an attractively humane poet: "Yeats, like us, *does not know*, knows that he does not know, and is willing to tell the truth" (461, original emphasis). Confronting his own fate, the poet implicitly acknowledges his inability to entertain grand assertions about death and the afterlife. When he exchanges the generalized "man" (24) of the second movement for the first-person "I" in the last verse paragraph, the poet can no longer entertain grand assertions about death and the afterlife. Indeed, the speaker's knowledge has contracted to only one certainty: "What do we know but that we face / One another in this place?"

The second perspectival shift occurs in the last six lines of the poem and turns the speaker's gaze outward, effectively abandoning his questioning in favor of empathetic attentiveness to another. In the midst of his unanswered vocative—"O rocky voice"—Yeats's persona is interrupted by the suffering of a wounded rabbit:

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,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought. (41-6)

The concrete actuality of the rabbit's cry dissipates the poet's reverie and cuts short any possibility of achieving a position of assured poise between his haunting past and looming future. Aurally, Yeats evokes the force of the cry's intrusion into the speaker's consciousness through a barrage of hard *c / k* sounds that render the line percussive rather than melodious: "hawk," "struck," "sky," "rock," "stricken," "crying," "cry," and "distracts." Because the suffering rabbit's cry pierces his thought, the poem ends in compassion rather than knowledge and implies, as Stephen Regan argues, the "poem's commitment to regeneration" (89). Such regeneration is ethical and social rather than interior and individual.

"Man and the Echo" employs one of the starkest spatial settings of the late poems to figure its speaker's experience of the dichotomies of old age. At the most general level, the cleft Alt functions as an intermediate space between life and death. Itself empty and desolate, it marks, as Grene observes, a "terminal site for facing death, entering the underworld" (100). As a symbolic gate, the cleft belongs neither to the land of the living or the dead. It is a purgatorial no-man's land and a space for the speaker to confront past as well as last things. The

speaker's placement in relation to the cleft introduces yet a further dimension of intermediacy. Yeats takes care to situate his speaker by a series of prepositions at the poem's start:

In the cleft that's christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit[.] (1-3)

"In," "under," and "at" place the speaker firmly in relation to the cleft and insist on the significance of his spatial situation. If Alt is both a threshold to the underworld as well as a split in the rock, the speaker is doubly liminal in that he stands in between two halves of a threshold between this life and the next. His spatial positioning mirrors his temporal condition, haunted as he is by both "all that I have said and done" (5) and by the looming reality of death, "that great night" (38), the two intractable rocks of human life. That this speaker does not move, as others in the later poems have not, bespeaks Yeats's predilection to imagining old age as an essentially dichotomous period of life whose contradictions should not be evaded.

"Man and the Echo" renders the constriction of its space and scenario aesthetically credible by its form; specifically, its couplet rhymes, short lines, and spare diction contribute overall to an effect of containment in a confined space. Although some of the couplet rhymes are near or imperfect rhymes, many are perfect, and the effect is to create a tightly constrained sonic frame for the poem.

Indeed, the couplet form seems appropriate to a cleft rock, its halves being equally balanced:

Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked? (13-16)

This frame is strengthened further by the shortened, tetrameter lines that keep the rhythm steadily marching as well as emphasizing the lines' end-rhymes by setting them in closer proximity to one another than they would be in the more usual pentameter line. In its diction, too, "Man and the Echo" opts for a sparse economy that embodies the poem's pared-down confrontation with last things. The poem largely consists of monosyllables and with some disyllables, as in the lines above. Indeed, there are only three trisyllables in the poem, and they are all found in the abstract meditation of the poem's second movement: "spiritual" (20), "intellect" (20, 30), "stupidity" (28), and "dismisses" (34). In its clipped diction, tight rhythms, and close rhymes, "Man and the Echo" creates a sonically equivalent constricted space as an analogous form to the cleft itself.

While "Man and the Echo" is the most dramatic embodiment of Yeats's late conception of old age as intractably antithetical, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is a fitting conclusion to the trajectory of Yeats's later poems, particularly those of old age. Thematically, it addresses a concern familiar since

at least “The Tower”: the dichotomy between the past and present and the attendant poetic inspiration (or lack thereof) associate with each. Formally, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is allied to “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Among School Children,” adopting as it does the *ottava rima* stanza forms and the numbered sequence of stanzas. In its theme and form, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” conspicuously stands as the concluding meditation on old age begun in many of Yeats’s most accomplished earlier poems.

If old age is constituted by antithetical realities, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” does not so much stage a confrontation between them as to meditate on what remains after one has given way to the other. Specifically, the dichotomy at the heart of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is that between the creative past and the putatively sterile present:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with my hear[t]. (1. 1-4)

As if evoking his continually abortive efforts to summon inspiration, the poet repeats exhaustively the verb “sought,” each time bringing with it a diminuendo of energy and hope of ever finding what this persona seeks. Moreover, this verbal repetition enacts the repetitive character of the poet’s ruminations. The second, longest section of the poem reflects on the poet’s past achievements—

though he dismisses them as merely “old themes” (2.1)—in works he composed in his younger years. In his old age the poet summons a series of imaginatively vital figures he created in his youth: the “sea-rider Oisín” (2.2) from *The Wanderings of Oisín*, the passionate Cathleen from *The Countess Cathleen* who “pity-crazed, had given her soul away” for the sake of the poor (2.10), the crafty Fool and Blind Man from *On Baile’s Strand*, and culminating in his iconic figure of imaginative Irish heroism, Cúchulain, who in the same play “fought the ungovernable sea” (2.16-17) in his rage at having unwittingly slain his own son. Each character stands as a figure of passion and vitality, both of which Yeats’s persona feels he lacks in old age. What remains for him now to do is not to create but to recount the imaginative triumphs of his past.

In its climactic third section, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” transmutes aged sterility by making it into the source of his art, paradoxically creating something out of nothing. The poem accomplishes this in part by its transfiguration of what begins as a weak metaphor into the clinching image. When the poem begins, the poet confesses that “being but a broken man / I must be satisfied with my heart” (1. 3-4) now that the “circus animals” (1. 6) of his imagination have deserted him. Here, the image of the heart is a simple figure, somewhat akin to the one Sidney employs in the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella* (Greene 192). It is an emblem for the elderly speaker’s homely and human

affections unaided by transports of vivid imagination. However, this emblem undergoes a dramatic shift in the poem's final stanza. Speaking of this poem's use of *ottava rima*, Vendler notes that the form is "self-contained enough to make a strong freestanding unit, but short enough so that an allusion to a previous stanza, by word or reference, is instantly grasped by the reader" (276). The accretion of images in a poem about "masterful images" (3. 1) culminates most powerfully in the poem's closing lines. Having meditated on his past accomplishments in the poem's second section, the poet turns to another set of images, the sources of his imaginative work:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. (3. 3-6)

The vividness of these squalid images seems to enchant the poet himself, who at the poem's conclusion returns to the heart that he had earlier said he "must be satisfied" with. The simple metaphor of the heart becomes in the last stanza an iconic image of one source of late poetry whose vividness belies the poet's protestations of sterility:

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. (3. 6-8)

In the image of the foul rag and bone shop, Yeats gives us his culminating spatial figure of dwelling the ambiguities of old age. The metaphor itself is ambivalent. On one hand, it is undeniably a powerful and arresting image of great imaginative vitality; on the other hand, the image “finds its sublime in the grotesque” (Bloom 457), and its very grotesqueness suggests the ambivalence with which the poet treats his heart. Because of its ambiguities, this figure also embodies the character of the aged poet’s imaginative posture. Still capable of producing masterful images, Yeats’s persona recognizes that nature of these images has changed because he himself has changed in old age. Seemingly unable to summon images of transcendence—his “ladder’s gone” (3.6)—he finds the “sublime in the grotesque” of his own heart. Having given up movement by abandoning his search for a theme, the poet finally adopts the static posture of “[lying] down...in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (3. 7-8). More important, we should note that Yeats’s persona chooses—although under some obligation, since he “must” (3.7)—to lie down. Unlike prior poems of old age that end in a tableau or stasis, the poet here makes explicit his own intent to dwell in the ambiguous space of the heart.

The conclusion of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” completes the trajectory of Yeats’s spatial imagination in responding to old age. By following his figurative spaces throughout his later poems, we can discern a pattern which

begins with the transcendent and ends in the earthly and homely. The golden bough becomes the rag and bone shop and in so doing registers Yeats's growing tendency to seek not answers or evasions to the liminal character of old age but to dwell in its interstices, however difficult that may be. His final spaces—the mountain of "Lapis Lazuli," the cleft of "Man and the Echo," and the rag and bone shop of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" attest in their very this-worldness to Yeats's commitment to experiencing and rendering old age in all its contradictory aspects.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Our element is time”: Philip Larkin, Old Age, and Poetic Form

Introduction

In 1980 Philip Larkin contributed a short poem entitled “The View” to commemorate the fiftieth birthday of his friend and future literary executor, Anthony Thwaite. Larkin had composed “The View” as a personal poem for his own fiftieth birthday a decade earlier, but with a typically Larkinesque grim humor he seems to have wanted to share it for his friend’s celebration. A poem by turns sardonic and contemplative, “The View” is, as Andrew Motion notes, a kind of “coda” to his more famous poem, “The Building” (421). Like its better-known counterpart, “The View” is preoccupied by apprehensions of looming mortality. In a metaphor anticipating “extinction’s alp” (41) in “The Old Fools,” the poem’s central conceit compares aging to ascending a mountain from which its speaker hopes to look back upon his life. The longed-for view of the poem’s title is therefore one that will hopefully provide a perspective, founded on the vantage of years, in which his life might appear coherent, orderly, and significant. As a younger man Larkin’s persona had heard from his elders that

time reveals the hitherto-occluded patterns of one's life, and now that he has reached his fiftieth year he tests their report by his experience:

The view is fine from fifty,
Experienced climbers say;
So, overweight and shifty,
I turn to face the way
That led me to this day. (1-4)

Here, Larkin's speaker determines to examine his life in the hopes that he can perceive at last its hidden order. As in so many Larkin poems, however, expectation is dashed against reality. Rather than opening on to "fields and snowcaps / And flowered lanes that twist" (8-9), the view at the top of age's mountain is opaque, affording only a vision of nothingness and its blank insubstantiality:

The track breaks away at my toe-caps
And drops away in mist.
The view does not exist. (10-12)

Baffled in his hopes of achieving clarity, Larkin's persona perceives no order or meaning in his past. Instead, he finds his years have disappeared into the nothing that spreads before him, and he asks, "Where has it gone, the lifetime?" (11). Because he knows the answer already, the poet turns to reflect on the future of which he knows all too much. Abandoning the lengthier sentences that largely coincide with stanza shape it employs in the first two stanzas, the poem's final

stanza conveys its speaker's desolation in a series of striking declarative short sentences:

What's left is drear.
Unchilded and unwifed, I'm
Able to view that clear:
So final. And so near. (12-15)

Although "The View" is neither well-known nor one of Larkin's major poems, it is nevertheless remarkable for the way that it figures formally the losses it limns. Among the more notable of its formal features is the way the poem enacts the temporal process of disappointment in age by transforming its speaking voice over the poem's course. James Booth notes the poem's tonal variation when he argues that it begins "with the zestful gusto of the stand-up comedian" before shifting into "plaintive self-elegy" in its final stanza. (*Philip Larkin* 378). While I disagree with the precise terms Booth employs to characterize the poem's beginning, he is nevertheless correct to point out the dramatic transition the speaking voice undergoes over the course of the poem. As the reader experiences "The View" in time, she is led from the humorous and self-deprecating first stanza to the sadly contemplative voice that is almost numb in its acknowledgment of annihilation. Larkin points up the sharpness of the contrast in the mirroring adjective pairs he employs in the third line of the first and last stanzas: initially the speaker mocks himself as "overweight and shifty,"

but the mirrored pair of these adjectives in the fourth stanza, “Unchilded and unwifed,” have nothing humorous about them; instead, indeed, they serve to emphasize the inner distance separating him from the jocular tone of the opening stanza. Just as the speaker himself undergoes a process of disenchantment, loss, and constriction of vision, so the speaking voice transforms to mirror this trajectory.

In order to formally articulate this transformation, Larkin employs syntactical variation to further articulate what he perceives as the deprivations wrought by time. Indeed, the poem’s dramatic shift of voice is in part an effect of the way Larkin plays sentence length against both stanza shape and line length, thereby managing the flow of sentence rhythm in the eye and ear. Larkin begins “The View” with a sentence whose length coincides with that of the stanza, which is self-contained by a full-stop in its last line. The sentence’s clauses are broken up evenly, with only one weakly enjambed line (“I turn to face the way / That led...”)(4-5) that causes the eye and ear to hesitate, but only momentarily. To heighten the effect of regularity, each line in the initial stanza is coincidental with clause length. The poem’s initial regularity produces a bemused but balanced voice, one that is artfully bland in its self-mockery.

This initial regularity gives way in the poem’s concluding lines to a much more complex and halting syntactical rhythm that evokes its speaker’s unease.

Larkin here abandons a neat coincidence between sentence and stanza shape or clause and line length. In its opening stanza the poem had used a single sentence across the length of its five lines, and its second stanza consists of two sentences. The third and final stanza, by contrast, consists of no fewer than five sentences in the same space. The relatively open balance achieved in the first stanza here gives way to an almost claustrophobic run of sentences, two of which divide their respective lines in a medial position, thereby dividing sentences into two clipped utterances.

Subtle metrical effects also contribute to the poem's development into a dark meditation. In a mirror to the simple sentences that give way to a more complex syntax over the course of its fifteen lines, the poem's rhythm begins regularly only to modulate into complexity by the end. Excepting the feminine endings of lines one and three, "The View's" first stanza follows the iambic pattern with diligent regularity. Its metrical regularity combines with its standard syntax to produce a kind of sing-song. However, "The View" moves from its initial regular rhythms into the plaintive rhythms of its final stanza, where stresses fall in unexpected places, as in its final line: "**So final. And so near**" (15). Larkin displaces the iambic rhythm throughout this stanza in favor of a heavier-footed line that tends to the trochaic with spondaic substitutions in

numerous key stress positions. In altering the poem's rhythm in this way, Larkin gives voice to his speaker's baffled and somber sense of the shape of his own life.

I have dwelt at such length on this poem because it seems to me to encapsulate key characteristics of Larkin's poetry about old age of which I wish to give an account. In its thematic concerns this poem is representative because it imagines old age as a condition of deprivation and constriction of possibility. For Larkin, to exist in time at all is to suffer disappointment, so old age represents an extreme end of life's spectrum in which disappointments have accumulated and one faces a shortening future with little hope. This poem is representative in that it finds a figurative correlative to its speaker's disappointment and disenchantment. Specifically, "The View" invokes a vision of old age in terms of a dialectic of expansive and constricted figures. Its persona had hoped to achieve a comprehensive, wide-ranging view in age, but instead is hemmed in on all sides by an impenetrable and stifling mist that limits his vision. Finally, "The View" is representative for the care it gives to find fitting formal emblems. These it finds in syntactical and metrical effects, which both move in the direction of constriction and constraint.

In this chapter I supplement current scholarship on Larkin and old age by offering an account of his poems that is alert to their rhetorical features and formal strategies as part of their response to this state of life. Focusing on

exemplary poems, I argue that Larkin's mature poetry imagines old age as involving the subject in a liminal and dialectical relationship between a sense of inevitable constraint and constriction and a desire for expansive states of inner freedom that transcend such limitations. By constraint and constriction I mean that Larkin's poems consistently view old age as a period characterized by a diminished sense of possibility and an increased awareness of one's entrapment in the conditions of one's life as experienced over time. Although Larkin's poems consistently articulate a view of old age as entropic and tending towards constraint, they nevertheless imagine moments of expansive freedom in which the self yearns toward a state of timelessness and transcendence. This argument builds on Andrew Swarbrick's argument that the poems "aspire to things 'out of reach'" and desire "states of being imagined, as it were, beyond the reach of language" and, I would add, of time (211). To substantiate these claims I offer close readings of a small number of major poems—"Wires," "At Grass," "Love Songs in Age," "High Windows," and "The Old Fools" attending to the ways their figures and forms embody Larkin's dialectical sense of old age. Specifically, I focus on figures of constriction and constraint on one hand and expansiveness

and openness on the other.¹ I argue Larkin carefully gives form to his perceptions and he does so by making recourse to all the poetic resources available to him.

In addition to making these thematic and formal arguments, I wish to advance a related claim about the poems' formal accomplishment in connection with their orientation towards the reader. Gillian Steinberg has recently argued that Larkin's rhetoric and style contribute to the poet's "multifaceted inclusion of audience" in which he "engages readers and positions them as active participants in the poems" (xx). Following Steinberg, I hope to demonstrate that Larkin's poems of old age invite the attentive reader to participate in and experience his perceptions of late life through their formal accomplishment. Larkin's is not an iconic art that separates the poem from life, and I suggest that his poems' formal enactments make them available and actual to his readers at an aesthetic level. I wish finally to show that the poems' formal achievements constitute one facet of an outward looking-tendency that aims to include the reader rather than declaim to or instruct her. In reaching out to the reader in this way, these poems are "bridge[s] for the living"; they are affirmative verbal acts that seek to articulate a common rather than singular circumstance. In so arguing

¹ I employ "figure" in its broadest sense to encompass both a poem's tropes—its metaphors, similes, and swerves from the literal—and its schemes—the arrangement of its words, most specifically attending to the poems' rhythmic, syntactical, and stanzaic features.

I hope to support Larkin's own assertion that to create poems is "never negative," even if they are bleak and disillusioned (qtd. in Palmer (110)).

In what follows, I begin with a brief review of relevant criticism on Larkin in order to highlight my work's continuity with that scholarship as well as suggest ways I hope to extend on it. Specifically, I suggest that this chapter bridges two recent critical discussions on Larkin's approach to old age and the development of his poetic technique. Next, I briefly consider Larkin's status as a poet of old age and argue that the unique circumstances of his life and the features of his poems make him a fitting subject for such a study even though he did not live to what we may consider advanced old age. In what remains, I offer close readings of a small selection of representative poems drawn from all periods of Larkin's creative career, focusing on the way these poems imaginatively respond to old age as a period of tension between constraint and expansion, limitation and freedom.

Critical Review

Scattered observations about Larkin and old age abound in the critical literature and are too numerous to discuss exhaustively but we may make some generalizations about their character. Most often discussions of Larkin's response to old age are biographical in orientation. Motion and Booth, for example, both

discuss Larkin's attitudes towards old age, yet neither offers extended commentary on how his poems aim to embody formally these attitudes. When critics do address old age's relationship to Larkin's poems, they usually do so in passing; old age is often ancillary to some larger thematic concern. Although this review can hardly be exhaustive, two examples of the kind of passing critical attention often paid to the subject might serve as representative instances. In his 2005 study *The Poet's Plight*, James Booth refers to aging twice, each time on the way to making a different point. In one instance, Booth argues that unfinished poem "The Dance," written in 1964, is the last poem before Larkin's later phase before observing that "From now on his major theme is the different, more universal plight of age and ageing" (101). Richard Palmer devotes more space to the subject in his *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin* (2008), yet he too is interested in other facets of the poet's work. In the chapter concerned with Larkin's "Fears, Antipathies and Aversions" Palmer discusses "Decrepitude, Madness and Age" along with the poet's other fears of "Death" and "Marriage" (118). Palmer's interest lies in revisionist readings of later poems such as "Vers de Soci  t  " and "Aubade," and he does not comment on what old age means either in or for the poems. I cite Booth and Palmer not to censure them but only to point out that Larkin's treatment of aging is most often passed over in critical

discussions; in doing so I hope to indicate the need for more substantial attention to this dimension of his work.

Of course, the scholarship on Larkin is not totally bereft of extended discussions of old age; however, in more focused discussions, recent critics who have discussed the importance of old age to Larkin's work often have done so by connecting it to the larger topic of aging. Under this umbrella scholars can treat aging, old age, and the passing of time more generally as belonging essentially to the same category. Among the most incisive readings in this vein is Raphael Ingelbien's "From Hardy to Yeats? Larkin's Poetry of Ageing." As his title implies, Ingelbien questions the narrative—sanctioned by Larkin himself in the revised introduction to *The North Ship* (1946 / 1966)—that the poet abandoned Yeats as an influence in his mature poems. Ingelbien argues that the older and wilder Yeats has more relevance to the poems of Larkin's last two decades than most critics have realized. Indeed, he argues that Larkin's "blunt and haunting statements about age" are indebted more to Yeats than to Larkin's avowed poetic forebear, Hardy (275). Ingelbien offers insightful readings of specific poems, and his argument that Yeats bears more relevance to Larkin's poems of aging is persuasive. In this chapter I hope to build on Ingelbien's work by drawing upon his insights about the character of Larkin's later poems while limiting my focus to those poems dealing more or less explicitly with old age rather than aging in

general. The latter focus allows the critic to discuss such poems on the passing of time, such as "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" or "Triple Time," neither of which deals with old age as a specific state in the human life. Moreover, my work is distinct from Ingelbien's in that it aims to show the relationship of poetic form to Larkin's perceptions of old age rather than demonstrating the influence of either Hardy or Yeats upon Larkin's attitudes or techniques.

In a similar mode, Hector Blanco Uria's "The Topic of Ageing in Philip Larkin's Poetry" offers an account of Larkin's developing feelings towards old age as they find voice in the poems. Like Ingelbien, Uria takes interest in the poet's relation to Hardy and Yeats, yet he accepts Larkin's official view that the poet's conversion to Hardy was as complete as was his repudiation of Yeats. Focusing on Larkin's attitudes towards aging, Uria argues that the poems move from "the sinister predictions of youth to the harsh frankness and sad meditations of his last years" (3). He argues that Yeats lies behind the former and that Hardy, a poet of homely sincerity, is the impetus for the latter "frankness and sad meditations." In reference to these influences, Uria observes that "aging is closely related to [Larkin's] own poetics" because each precursor is associated with a different period in his career (3). While he is right to insist on aging's centrality to Larkin's poetics, Uria does not fully develop this point's

implications with a view to poetic form. Instead, much of his analysis offers descriptive summaries of each poem's ostensible attitudes rather than how their form is a component of the poems' meaning. My own work aims to illuminate how the poems behave, not merely as statements, but as enactments of their own dramas that invite the reader to participate in them at the aesthetic level.

In attempting to develop a formal account of the poems, I am indebted to recent discussions such as Gillian Steinberg's *Philip Larkin and His Audiences* and John Osborne's *Philip Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*, each of which reminds us of the centrality of the poems' art to the critical enterprise and explore fruitful avenues of inquiry. Steinberg's *Philip Larkin and His Audiences* charts an illuminating course through the poems by way of their formal accomplishment rather than their biographical significance. In her book Steinberg focuses on the rhetorical dynamics of the poems, arguing that "Larkin engages readers and positions them as active participants in the poems, inviting them to take responsibility for their interpretive acts and to view the reading...of poems as a consciously synthetic act of artistic creation" (xx). Steinberg argues in favor of a text-based approach that eschews efforts to correlate the poems with specific biographical events or Larkin's expressed attitudes in interviews or letters. More recently, John Osborne's *Philip Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* endorses a poem-centric criticism in which Larkin's life, letters, and

essays take a secondary position relative to the poems. Osborne offers cogent close readings throughout his monograph, eschewing in the process an “autobiographical” approach (1). Instead, he argues for the radically subversive and deconstructive character of the poems’ formal structures, and in so doing he links Larkin to apparently less-than-likely allies, modernists and postmodernists (19).

In what follows I hope to unite two strands of Larkin criticism that deal with his attitudes towards aging and a formalist approach to his technique, respectively. On one hand I hope to deepen understanding of the complexities of Larkin’s response to old age while on the other to consider how the poems’ techniques, forms, and figures complicate and constitute that response. I hope to show that a formally attentive reading of Larkin’s poems of old age reveal a more complex, sensitive, and nuanced response than we might expect.

Larkin as Poet of Old Age

If most critics who have examined Larkin and old age have done so under the aegis of aging more generally, their reasons for doing so merit consideration and response. Although most do not articulate why they do not consider Larkin a poet of old age, Samuel Hynes in “How to Be an Old Poet” does, and I shall take Hynes (perhaps unfairly) as articulating a rationale silently held by others

who exclude him. In establishing his criterion for being an “Old Poet,” Hynes makes a point of excluding Larkin—along with T.S. Eliot—on the grounds that Larkin’s death at 63 precludes him from joining more venerable elder poets like Hardy and Yeats (190). On this account, Larkin was simply too young to be old. Hynes views Larkin’s relatively early biological death as compounded by his even earlier creative death. While Hardy and Yeats continued to write and revise poems on their deathbeds at 88 and 73, respectively, Larkin’s poetic output had been dwindling for the better part of a decade by the time his own end had come. Ingelbien points up this contrast when he writes that “by the time Larkin reached the age when Hardy concentrated on poetry, he had himself largely fallen silent” (263). Ultimately, Hynes does not see Larkin as an “Old Poet” because the details of his biography mean he simply could not achieve an authentic view of old age that more advanced years would have given him. He was neither old enough nor poetically active enough to achieve the status held by Hardy and Yeats.²

In answer to Hynes, I would point out that old age is a more fluid category than the term often suggests. Scholars working in gerontology and the humanities have long acknowledged just how elusive a conclusive definition of

² Coincidentally, Hynes’s criteria for excluding Larkin could also be used to exclude Shakespeare, who died at 56 after a period of creative retirement. Not only have gerontologists and critics drawn heavily on *King Lear* and *The Tempest* as seminal imaginative works on the subject, but Hynes himself uses *Lear* and *Prospero* as analogues to Yeats and Hardy, respectively, demonstrating the inescapability of this relatively younger man (even by early modern standards) to discussions of imaginative responses to old age.

“old” really is. Janet Roebuck’s “When Does Old Age Begin?: The Evolution of the English Definition” explores the origins of old age as a socio-political category and examines the urgency with which it needed to be defined in the late nineteenth century. Because, as Roebuck asserts, there is “no...physiological basis for a sound, clearcut definition of old age” (416), Roebuck analyzes the various ways the concept had been understood throughout English history. For example, she argues that prior to the late 19th century old age was largely defined by a person’s relative vigor and independence, noting that old age was considered “more a question of function, or lack of it, than a question of precise calendar years. The aged were those who were infirm, frail, and suffering incapacities of body or mind to the extent that they could no longer fully support or take care of themselves, and who also gave the appearance of being old” (417). Roebuck goes on to point out that the state’s setting of old age at retirement age is largely arbitrary and useful primarily for determining when citizens begin receiving a pension (420). Definitions of old age often rely more on pragmatic considerations than they do with establishing an essential description and delineation of its boundaries.

More recently, Karen Chase has argued that we should see old age as a flexible category constituted by a variety of factors psychological, biological, and social. Examining the myriad ways English culture in the Victorian period

imagined and addressed the end of life, Chase suggests as a first principle the notion that old age cannot be understood according to one definition. She persuasively argues that to conceptualize old age in rigid terms is to falsify it.

Chase argues:

Chronological...functional...and cultural...conceptions of age each capture some nuances while ignoring others. In addition...we must include the individual subject's estimate of its own condition. This does not make experience or maturity necessarily a synonym for old age, but neither can we dismiss individual report or the perception of 'agedness' in others. A person may call herself... aged though she is only 50, fit, and with no physical manifestations of decline. In some instances age may be a transient rather than a permanent condition. Is it fair to consider these instances in an experience of "senescence"? It seems right to do so when the periods between "feeling" old and "being old" are more or less continuous, when they are not broken by lengthy periods of interruption, and when the passage of time only results in a confirmation of old age as established by other standards as well.
(4)

Insofar as they articulate a consensus view that old age is difficult if not impossible to empirically determine, Roebuck and Chase provide implicit sanction for reading Larkin as a poet not just of aging but of old age because the fact that he did not live as long as Hardy or Yeats is immaterial.³ Indeed, the conditions of Larkin's life both external and internal invite us to place Larkin in the company of those whose biological age was more advanced.

³ For another discussion of the difficulty of defining old age, see Pat Thane's "Introduction" to *A History of Old Age* (11).

Additional sanction for this approach comes from the facts of the poet's life, perhaps the most obvious of which was that Larkin did in fact seem to have aged prematurely in both looks and in health. Even as a younger man, Larkin looked older than he was, his thick-rimmed glasses and premature baldness giving him the appearance of a more mature person. The discrepancy between his years and his looks only grew with time. For instance, Motion's description of the poet nearing his fiftieth year captures the way Larkin's body gave the impression of a much older man:

As his fiftieth birthday approached, colleagues in the university could have been forgiven for thinking he was lumbering towards his sixtieth: heavily jowled, bald, cut off from the world by thick black-framed glasses and one—sometimes two—hearing aids. (422)

Although he did indeed look older than his years suggested, Larkin's sense of himself as old is more significant. If, as Chase contends, "feeling old" is a significant feature of agedness then Larkin certainly met this criteria (4). In his biography of the poet Booth remarks that "Larkin's biological clock ticked more loudly than those of other people" (13), and from an early age the poet's ear was attuned to its ticking. Some of the letters written in the poet's thirties and forties attest to his acute sense of himself as old and as having missed the prime of life at a period when others might sense their lives were just beginning. For example, on 7 August 1962 Larkin wrote to Maeve Brennan with acerbic bleakness: "Well,

this is still my last letter in the thirties, and I can't say I welcome the prospect of going down life's sunless hill, as [Thomas Hardy] calls the latter half of life" (*L* 344). More darkly, the poet wrote on 30 October 196 to Monica Jones:

I feel rather scared these days, of time passing & us getting older. Our lives are so different from other people's, or have been—I feel I am landed on my 45th year as if washed up on a rock, not knowing how I got here or ever having had a chance of being anywhere else. (*L* 387)

These letters and other like them bear to witness to the sensibility amply demonstrated in the poems that feels itself old before its time.

While the historical and biographical facts provide a sound basis on which to read Larkin as a poet of old age, it is ultimately the poems themselves that invite us to do so. John Osborne has recently argued that Larkin studies needs to move beyond a "biographicalist" approach that seeks always to ground discussions of the work in the life (17-18). While I above suggest external corroborating reasons for reading Larkin as a poet of old age, I would follow Osborne by suggesting that primacy must above all be granted the poems, which involve their speakers and their readers in the dynamics of old age in such an immediate way that they fairly demand to be treated as serious interventions in the poetry of old age. I do not wish to correlate a given poem with a specific biographical event, nor to test the poems against Larkin's prose statements in letters and interviews about the aging process. Instead, I suggest we should

approach them as offering a vital vision of what it means to be old and what old age can mean to the poetic art.

In what follows I offer close readings of the poems, beginning with early poems and working towards his final collection, *High Windows*, arguing that Larkin's accomplished poems of old age consistently make recourse to figures of constriction and limitation on one hand and expansiveness, openness, and freedom on the other to embody his perception of age's contradictory character. For Larkin, the aged person is always caught between a limited consciousness aware of its own frailty and a persistent, insistent desire to achieve transcendent states of being. I argue that the poems' formal features trope constriction and expansiveness in order to involve the reader in their perceptions at the aesthetic level, thereby implicating the audience in a proleptic experience of aging as the poems imagine it.

Close Readings

"Deprivation," Larkin famously asserted in his interview with the *London Observer*, "is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth" (RW 47). Although Larkin meant this as a comment relevant in general to all his work, it is particularly true that one consistent feature Larkin's poems of old age from the beginning of his career to its end is a sense that old age is indeed characterized by deprivations of a wide variety. Larkin's poems often imagine old age as a

state—and not necessarily a period—marked by deprivation and a constriction of the self. While they are sometimes troubled by the aging body, these poems usually address themselves to losses of other, more existential kinds. Old age is the state in which hope, talent, opportunity, and freedom (or its illusion) are irrevocably lost. It is the state of experience and suffering, which is to say it is allied closely to the knowledge of one's own mortality. When Larkin was asked by an interviewer whether he feared old age, he answers that old age reminds one necessarily of death:

If you assume you're going to live to be seventy, seven decades,
and think of each decade as a day of the week, starting with
Sunday, then I'm on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock, isn't it?
If you ask why does it bother me, I can only say I dread endless
extinction. (RW 55)

Larkin's preoccupation with age's deprivations is a consistent feature of all his poems on the subject. Twenty-four years before he wrote "The View" Larkin wrote "On Being Twenty-Six," the poem that is "Larkin's first extended attempt" on the subject of aging (Ingelbien 264). A work of "self-analysis" in a "narcissistic" mode (Longley "Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem" 40), "On Being Twenty-Six" treats the speaker's "middle twenties" as a period of decline, deprivation, and existential constriction.⁴ In it Larkin's persona casts his eye over

⁴ Motion notes that this poem was written after a very long artistic dry spell; this might account for its earnestness (186). So serious is the poem that Booth is not wrong in his Larkin biography to say that its "glumness" is pervasive and unrelieved (136).

his past and present, mourning the loss of “talent” (15), “deftness” (3) and “felicity” (15). Age in the poem is a withering agent that dries up the poet’s inspiration and leaves “a dingier crop” (17) of gifts which are not gifts at all but cruel reminders of what he has lost. The poem’s conclusion leaves the speaker with nothing remaining to inspire him to create except “devaluing dichotomies: / Nothing and paradise” (53-54).

Although the poem shares a thematic concern with age as entropic and deprived, “On Being Twenty-Six” lacks the structural and tonal cohesion of the more mature poems. In terms of its structure the poem is inert and without dramatic tension. Motion observes that this is a poem about “stasis” (186), but it is also true that this thematic concern never gets formally embodied, which is to say that it is static in way that fails to produce meaning. The poem begins by establishing a potentially dramatic scenario:

I feared these present years,
The middle twenties,
When deftness disappears,
And each event is
Freighted with a source-encrusting doubt,
And turned to drought. (1-5)

What dramatic potential these lines possess is quickly dissipated by the remainder of the poem. For most of the next stanza Larkin’s persona reflects further on what he feared would be lost in “these present years,” but instead of

building towards a contrast or reversal the lines reach a climax in self-congratulation:

And now the slag
Of burnt-out childhood proves that I was right.
What caught alight

Quickly consumed in me,
As I foresaw. (9-13)

The rest of the poem remains almost frozen, too inert to move past reciting a litany of losses in age. Structurally, the poem remains a statement rather than a drama, ignoring as it does the key tensions of Larkin's more mature poems.

The poem's static slackness combines with an uncertainty of its own idiom to render its form and content even more disparate. Cast in stanzas reminiscent of Hardy,⁵ "On Being Twenty-Six" sounds at times like the elder English poet, yet at the same time other voices make their mark on the poem. For example, the poem swerves between its Hardy-esque tonality and an Eliotic one when its speaker refers to what remains after his gifts have been "consumed" as a "clawed / Crustacean hatred." An allusion to Eliot's lines "I should have been a pair / ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" 73-4), these lines sound discordant in the Hardy-esque architecture of the stanzas. Later a very different poet's mode emerges when

⁵ This poem's stanzas, with their trimeter penultimate line and dimeter final line that completes a couplet, call to mind the metrical pattern Hardy uses in "Old Furniture."

Larkin strikes a posture of almost parodic Shelleyan self-pity: "I kiss, I clutch" sounding to my ear like a more subdued "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" ("Ode to the West Wind" 54). The poem's tonal confusion renders the poem an ineffective piece of rhetoric that fails to meet the definition of a good poem Larkin developed later as "a verbal device that will reproduce [the poet's] emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, any time" (RW 80).⁶

Although I do not believe it is a successful poem, "On Being Twenty-Six" is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shows how early old age emerges in Larkin's poems as a dominant concern and immediate (rather than abstract) reality for him. It demonstrates, too, that old age has less to do with years than with one's inner condition and sense of the deprivations wrought by time. Second, the poem embodies the view of old age as existentially deprived that is a consistent hallmark of his more mature poems. As a contrast, "On Being Twenty-Six" foregrounds the features of the later poems by its failure to meet their standards. While this poem is self-involved and excludes the reader, the mature poems invite the reader to share the poet's perceptions by their formal accomplishment. Even when they seem to express an idiosyncratically Larkinesque attitude, his mature poems of old age always aim to represent that

⁶ That it did fail to meet his criteria is evidenced by its exclusion from any of the published volumes.

state in such a way that the reader perceives it as part of a common destiny which he or she is invited to contemplate. Ultimately, "On Being Twenty-Six" is a useful starting point in a study of Larkin and old age because it represents the paths he eventually does not take in his mature poems and thereby highlights more starkly the practices that he does adopt in his accomplished works.

Larkin's first major success in writing on old age is "Wires," included in his first mature collection of poems, *The Less Deceived* (1955). Although Terry Whalen has rightly said that it "exists close to the actual and also the moral centre" of the volume (34), this short poem has not attracted much extended commentary. When critics do discuss it they often do so without attending to it as a poem of old age, reading it instead through a variety of other lenses. Stephen Cooper, for example, reads "Wires" as a kind of philosophical protest poem that chafes against constraints that limit personal freedom (153). In Cooper's account, "Wires" rejects any restrictions placed externally on the self. In a very different mode, Booth discusses "Wires" from a formal standpoint. Arguing that Larkin's *oeuvre* contains one example of every major lyric genre, Booth attends to the poem's formal properties in order to demonstrate that it is Larkin's version of an "emblem" poem of the kind George Herbert wrote (*Poet's Plight* 14). Deborah Bowman offers a similarly insightful reading of the poem from a formal standpoint. Discussing its rhyme scheme, she notes the way "Wires" uses the

pattern of sounds to enact the process it describes: "What the poem's form gives us is...not simply a metaphor for, but also an example of, the way in which we experience the world" (172). While these critics illuminate the poem, none offers extensive commentary upon it, nor do they consider it as part of Larkin's poetry of old age. I suggest that it is within the context of this poetry that "Wires" can be most profitably read.

Despite its relatively modest reputation, "Wires" is an accomplished and significant poem in Larkin's ongoing engagement with the theme. Cast in the two-stanza mirroring form favored by Hardy,⁷ "Wires" presents youth and age as diametrical opposites each represented by a single quatrain. Rather than treating these two states as divided by a definite span of time, the poem treats old age primarily as a "psychological state" (Ingelbien 264); in this poem, to be old is to have suffered from painful experience and to have learned to acknowledge one's limitations. "Wires" adopts a quasi-allegorical mode and employs an indicative mood of continuous recurrence; the poem describes the process of how all "young steers" always become "old cattle" (7). Young steers, deceived by their senses of a personally expansive freedom, are drawn towards the smell of "purer water / Not here but anywhere" (3-4). Discontented with their

⁷ See Hardy's "An Anniversary," "In Her Precincts," and "Proud Songsters" for examples of the form in his work.

present lives, the young cattle follow the illusory scent, but instead of finding the “purer water” of their desires they meet only with the wire fences that have always circumscribed their reality without their knowledge. They “blunder up against the wires” (5) at the outer boundary of the pasture and are terribly wounded by them. Rather than the passage of time or the accumulation of wisdom, it is their encounter with the wires’ “muscle-shredding violence” (6)—and the limits these wires impose—that makes these young cattle old.

“Wires” allegorizes the passage from youth to age in terms of a dialectic of expansive and constricted perceptions. In their youth, the steers dwell in a mental world much larger than the one they actually inhabit. Always called to from “beyond the wires” (4), the young cattle are deceived into ignoring—or not even recognizing—the limitations under which they live. Of course, when they are torn to shreds by the wires on their way to “purer water,” the young steers are immediately disabused of their deception. In “Wires,” to be young is to have a falsely expansive view of the self and its freedom; to be old is to be less deceived and to recognize one’s “electric limits” by coming into painful contact with them (8). The old cattle of “Wires” have been deprived of the expansive deceptions of youth and receive in exchange a constricted—but true—knowledge of their limited reality.

"Wires" inventively enacts its brief drama at the formal level, and this is perhaps most strikingly evident in its use of a unique rhyme scheme to implicate the reader in the young steers' change from youth to age. Booth summarizes the rhyme scheme succinctly: "The cattle approach the electrified wires in the first four lines (*abcd*), and then rebound from them in the next four (*dcba*)" (*Poet's Plight* 14). What is remarkable about this sound pattern is that the first quatrain entices us by its openness into sharing the young steers' deception that we inhabit an unlimited poetic space just as they believe they have no limits themselves. We do not initially perceive the rhyme words we encounter in the first quatrain *as* rhyme words, so distant are they from their complementary rhymes in the second stanza. The exact rhyme of "wires" with "wires" across the two stanzas, however, jolts the reader into an awareness that "what's [beyond the wires] is a sting," and for us that sting comes in the form of realizing that the poem is in fact as bounded by rhymes as the prairies are by fences (Bowman 171). For the cattle this sting is quite literal, but for the reader it comes as the realization that a poem we thought was "free" has sharply defined boundaries. As we continue reading and hearing the reverse, or chiastic, rhyme pattern, we realize that we are only recognizing a pattern that was begun at the beginning; like the young steers, we could not see the "electric fences" of the rhymes but we encounter them aurally over the course of the poem.

Along with its rhyme scheme, “Wires” employs a metrical pattern that embodies the tension between youthful perceptions of expansive freedom and the knowledge of constraint and limitation in old age. Specifically, the poem maintains a balance between a regular metrical rhythm against striking rhythmic variations in such a way as to imply a norm against which the meter strains.

Although Whalen argues that it shows a strict “adherence to the iambic pentameter metrical norm,” it is difficult to agree that the poem is as metrically as well-behaved as Whalen implies (34). Actually, the poem eschews a metronomic regularity even as it invokes the iambic pentameter base. Its initial lines establish this pattern:

The widest prairies have electric fences,
For though old cattle know they must not stray
Young steers are always scenting purer water
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires[...] (1-4)

This quatrain establishes an iambic pentameter norm, yet despite its mostly regular rhythms we notice the feminine endings of lines one and three. These add an extra-metrical syllable to lines one, three, five, and eight and frustrate a reader’s expectation of ten neatly ordered syllables per line. Larkin puts these extra-metrical syllables to significant use throughout, but in the first and last lines of the poem we can see the tensions they create most clearly. Semantically, both the first and last line assert the primacy of “electric limits” over naively

boundless “senses”; rhythmically, however, the lines’ extra-metrical syllables chafe against the constraints of the regular iambic pentameter line.

In addition to extra-metrical syllables, “Wires” makes use of highly expressive metrical effects that deviate from the iambic norm in order to play freedom against constraint. Again, the first line establishes the normative rhythm: “The **widest prairies have electric fences**” (1). Leaving out the feminine ending, this is a perfectly regular iambic line whose very regularity embodies the calm knowingness of this poem’s voice. Additionally, this line’s steadiness creates the background against which we hear such lines as the second: “For **though old cattle know they must not stray**” (2). The spondaic substitution in the second foot combines with the repeated long *o* sounds to slow the reader’s voice, almost as if to represent the slow consideration of the knowing old cattle themselves. The poem’s climactic lines are also its most metrically inventive ones: “**Beyond the wires / Leads them to blunder up against the wires/ Whose muscle shredding violence gives no quarter**” (4-6). After the initial iambs of “beyond the wires” Larkin employs a striking trochaic substitution that reverses the expected rhythm. By placing two unstressed syllables near each other, the trochee/iamb pattern is bracketed by emphatic stresses and hurried along in the middle by an almost pyrrhic pair of unstressed syllables. The climactic line six (“whose muscle- shredding...”) employs a heavy-footed trochaic line with six

instead of five stresses in a burst of violent rhythmic energy commensurate with the cattle's traumatic experience. After these lines the poem settles back into something closer to a regular iambic pattern as the awareness of their limitation settles upon them. In this play of semantic and rhythmic properties Larkin dramatizes the irrepressibility of desire for freedom even as the poem endorses recognizing one's limits as a constituent part of growing older.

In its two short stanzas "Wires" enacts a quintessentially Larkinesque drama of old age. Presented as a transition from one state of mind to another, old age is a condition the steers reach only after suffering a painful encounter with their own limitations. Figuratively the steers originally inhabit an inner state of expansive freedom that comes into contact with the painful constraints of lived experience. "Wires" employs formal means such as rhyme and meter to reflect and even complement the steers' drama. Taken as statement, "Wires" is a dour little poem, yet in its formal accomplishment it reaches out to the reader and enables her to perceive in the rhymes and rhythms an aesthetic analogue to the steers' experience, creating a community of shared perception in the process.

Although it was written four years earlier than "Wires," 1949's "At Grass" is a fitting companion to the previous poem,⁸ yet most commentary does not

⁸ Larkin completed "At Grass" in 1949, four years prior to finishing "Wires," but "At Grass" concludes the volume they both appear in, *The Less Deceived*. For the sake of clarity, I refer

address it as a poem of old age.⁹ To single out only one major stream of criticism, many readings focus on the poem's social, political, and cultural contexts and resonances, usually considering these in the light of elegy. In his essay on Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Ted Hughes entitled "Englands of the Mind," Seamus Heaney sees "At Grass" as a quintessentially English elegy worthy of Thomas Gray: ' "At Grass" could well be subtitled, "An Elegy in a Country Paddock" (FK 98). Tom Paulin argues that "At Grass" is an elegy for a faded English empire and the horses themselves as "emblems of the heroic" no longer possible in decadent modern English society ("Into the Heart" 163). Offering a sharp critique of Paulin's "extreme historicism," Booth argues that "At Grass" is "highly resistant to [the] demystification" of political critics (121). Nevertheless, he shares Paulin's assumption that "At Grass" is an "extended elegy" for a faded past (118). Contrary to readings of the poem as elegy, Osborne has argued that the poem "steadfastly resists the elegiac mode despite the fact that its protagonist [the horse Brown Jack] had recently died" (93). Osborne goes on to assert that the poem is more "original" than these readings suggest; rather than being a poem about death it is a poem about "retirement," and this latter type of poetry is

to "Wires" as the earlier or previous poem because it precedes "At Grass" in the ordering of the volume.

⁹ Of course, there are exceptions. Whalen observes that "At Grass" is "a poem about old age" (6) and Osborne, cited above, calls it a poem of "retirement." These observations come in the context of broader discussions rather than extended treatments.

much less common (94). I agree with Osborne's contention and wish to expand upon it by offering a reading of "At Grass" that focuses on its treatment and formal response to old age.

To illuminate "At Grass" as a poem of old age it is useful to set it beside "Wires," a poem that superficially has no similarity to the better-known poem but is in fact closely related to it in significant ways. At the most basic level, both poems consider old age by reflecting on common animals, cattle and horses respectively. The poems are similar too in that they both eschew a first-person speaker in favor of a more detached third-person perspective that presents the animals more directly to us. Figuratively, both poems associate constriction and expansiveness with youth and old age, respectively, and both focus on deprivation and loss as key aspects of age. Finally, "Wires" and "At Grass" both advance a vision of a human old age as inextricably bound up with consciousness of sufferings present and past.

While the poems are similar in significant ways, "At Grass" proceeds by a method opposite to that of "Wires" and this movement is most striking in its reversed narrative trajectory. In "Wires" Larkin's young steers inevitably begin with a false sense of freedom of which they are disabused; their old age is spent in the knowledge of their limitations. "At Grass" presents an opposing narrative: The horses' past is one of constriction and constraint but their present old age is

free. This reading necessarily diverges from those critics who see in the horses' present a diminished existence. Paulin, for example, reads the horses as Larkin's image for a waning England in the 1950s, leading a "dull, pinched, banal and second-rate" existence (164). Likewise, Stan Smith sees the horses in terms of diminishment: they are "reduced to anonymity by retirement," with the implication that anonymity is something less than notoriety (178). Negative readings such as these seem more appropriate to "Wires," but it is difficult to see how they apply to the horses of "At Grass." Whereas the earlier poem's cattle are resigned to their diminished existence, the horses of "At Grass" are positively content with their lives in the present; they are freer than at any other time in their lives. "At Grass" thus re-figures loss and deprivation as positive for these horses. They have lost their prime racing days, but they have also lost the externally-imposed burden of having to race in the first place; they have lost the "starting gates, the crowds and cries" (23) of their past when they ran for the pleasure of others, not themselves. Now they have gained a life in "unmolested meadows" (24), free to graze or "gallop for what must be joy" of their own volition (26). In contrast to the cattle of "Wires," these horses gain their freedom rather than lose it in old age. They were constricted by the function they served in their youth but now live anonymously in an expansive and free present that is "post-identity" (Longley 40). "At Grass" thus figures age's loss in positive terms

for these horses: losing their past as racehorses has meant gaining their freedom as retirees.

At the figurative level "At Grass" embodies the horses' positive trajectory by shifting its dominant tropes in significant ways. Specifically, the poem moves from synecdoche to metonymy before abandoning both of these figures in favor of the whole image of the horses. In "At Grass" Larkin initially uses synecdoche to render the horses partially, suggesting his speaker's incomplete perception of them, as when he intuits the horses' forms from the "tail and mane" he sees "distresse[d]" by the wind (3). The figure's effect is to render the mysterious qualities of these horses who have "slipped their names" (25) and so are "anonymous" and cannot, at least at this point in the poem, be fully perceived (6). When the poem turns to the past it dispenses with synecdoche in favor of metonymy. In the second stanza the speaker evokes the races as abstract "distances" (8) and "Cups and Stakes and Handicaps" (10) before reaching a crescendo in a third stanza that is heavily reliant on metonymy :

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street. (13-18)¹⁰

¹⁰David Lodge cites this stanza as evidence that Larkin is a "metonymic poet," by which he means Larkin is a realistic rather than metaphorical writer (73). Lodge adduces this stanza as proof of the way Larkin uses metonymy "to evoke scene, character, culture and subculture" (75).

Metonymy always involves a greater distance between the signifier and the signified than synecdoche; the “tail and mane” have a nearer relationship to horses than “Numbers and parasols” do to crowds. The effect is complex, but one feature of this use of metonymy is how distant it renders the horses themselves from the reader. The poem no longer perceives them even in part, and what it does perceive in these stanzas is not essential to them at all. In other words, the figurative logic governing the passage starts with metonymies for the races, which in their turn are metonymic for the horses’ past successes and not the horses themselves. When we return to the present at the end of the poem, however, “At Grass” abandons both synecdoche and metonymy in favor of literal and whole images of the horses. Indeed, the poem resists either partial or associated perception and presents them in the end as only themselves. “At Grass” thus re-constructs the horses over the course of the poem.

At the level of form, “At Grass” tropes the horses’ constricted and limited past with their expansive present in its subtle deployment of syntax. Indeed, the poem’s syntax coincides with its movement through synecdoche and metonymy on the way to wholeness at the conclusion. In its initial description of the horses in the first stanza, “At Grass” employs two independent clauses separated by a

I believe, however, this stanza is proof that Larkin uses metonymy more than to evoke a particular setting with economy.

semi-colon over the course of six lines. The syntactical rhythm is fluid and even, embodying the calm of the horses' lives. When it imagines the horses' past, the poem abandons the fluidity of its initial syntax. Depicting the races requires Larkin to adopt a kinetically charged syntax over the course of stanzas two and three and he accomplishes this by playing openness against constriction at the level of syntax; a single sentence comprises both stanzas, yet the effect is rapid and abrupt because of Larkin's use of fragments and its punctuation with colons: "Silks at the start...outside / Squadrons of empty cars, and heat, and littered grass:..." (13-15). These lines are energetic though verbless, their strong medial caesurae both creating their tension and withholding it almost as the horses' own "starting-gates" do them (22).

Yet once more when the poem returns us to the present the syntax opens up like the horses' fields do. Indeed, Larkin makes the connection between syntax and situation very nearly explicit at the point his speaker describes the horses' contented freedom: "Almanacked, their names live; they / Have slipped their names, and stand at ease" (25-5). These lines recall in their striking enjambment from "they" to "Have" across stanzas the similarly dramatic yet affectively distinct enjambment between the two stanzas of "Wires." There the effect is to hurry us along into the wires, but here the syntax "slips" across the

stanzas as the horses have done “their names,” giving form to their freedom at the syntactical level.

While the poem presents the horses’ old age as one of freedom, it also refuses to make them emblematic. Unlike the presentation of the cattle in “Wires,” “At Grass” presents its horses to readers as horses rather than as symbols for something else. By contrast, the cattle of “Wires” are clearly archetypal and offered to readers as images for human processes. The cattle are quasi-allegorical and point beyond themselves to some human reality, rendering them hardly cattle at all in any meaningful sense. Since they serve an allegorical function, the poem presents them in the aggregate; Larkin does not need to depict a single young steer or old bull to make a larger claim about the process of aging. Instead, he describes them from a distance and always as part of a herd. “At Grass” reverses this method by focusing narrowly on two particular horses at a specific, unrepeatable time. Although “the eye can hardly pick them out / From the cold shade they shelter in” (1-2), they draw one’s eye nonetheless. In their particularity these horses suggest much but directly symbolize nothing definitive, as Petch has argued (60). They do not occupy an eternally recurrent present in which they stand allegorically for human realities. “At Grass” resists rendering the horses symbolically because it refuses to put them to human use by translating them into something other than what they are. Because of their

particularity and otherness, the horses of this poem are ultimately more equine than human, standing outside our world rather than for something in it.¹¹

One of the poem's strategies for insisting on the horses' otherness is to keep the natural world of the horses and the human, social world distinctly separated. The poem is governed by two settings: the pasture of the present and the horseraces of the past. Each of these settings the poem associates with a particular realm, the natural or the human. Although the horses are obviously involved in both, the poem only depicts them in the present. The horses' world is established in their initial appearance: "The eye can hardly pick them out / From the cold shade they shelter in, / Till wind distresses tail and mane" (1-3). The horses here appear as otherworldly representatives, belonging as they do to the world of "undifferentiated nature" (Longley 41) rather than the human world of the beholding poet.

After establishing their world's separateness the poem moves in the second and third stanzas to conjure their past careers. In doing so its focus shifts from the natural world to a social one governed by human desires. When the

¹¹ Political critics like Tom Paulin would disagree with this characterization, since their interpretive method is essentially allegorical. If the poem is an imperial elegy as Paulin and others contend, the horses must mean something beyond themselves; they must point to socio-historical realities. Yet the poem does not support the associational leaps required by an allegorizing approach. Paulin himself seems faintly aware of the poem's recalcitrance to his reading because he relies on inventing martial or political similes which he then reads back into the poem. Thus the poet's "eye" at the opening is almost "a sniper's," or, more insinuatingly, the horses are retired "heroic ancestors--famous generals, perhaps" (163).

poem recalls the races, however, the horses themselves are conspicuously absent. In fact, they effectively disappear in the middle of the poem just when the poet is recalling their past successes as racehorses. Indeed, there is only one reference to the horses directly (rather than their “names” (11)) in the second and third stanzas. In the second stanza the speaker’s mind in reverie returns to the horses’ youthful days as champion racers:

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them; faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps
Whereby their names were artified
To inlay faded, classic Junes [...] (7-12).

Where the horses appear at all in these lines they are cast as passive receivers rather than agents acting of their own volition. The horses are rendered fabulous *by* the distances, even their names were artified *by* someone else. Yet if they are passive in this stanza they are simply absent in the third, which adumbrates with striking economy the charged atmosphere of the races without any reference to the horses themselves.

The horses return as horses only in the fourth stanza when the speaker again sees them in the present world of the pasture and “unmolested meadow” (26) rather than the human world of the races. “At Grass” cannot imagine both worlds, the natural one of the horses and the human one of the races, at the same

time; they are presented to the reader as dialectical opposites to one another. The poem suggests that this is so because the horses and their reputations, their “names” that “inlay faded, classic Junes,” do not have anything essential to do with one another; in fact, “they / have slipped their names” and now enjoy pure being (24-5). In its beginning and end the poem honors them rather than their names by imagining them as set apart from the “fictions” imposed upon them by the human world (Petch 60).

Perhaps the most striking way the poem reflects on the horses’ otherness is its use of personification. This is a frequently noted feature, but it bears reflecting on in this context. At three points in the poem Larkin’s persona describes the animals as almost possessing a human-like consciousness, and each time the poet’s language pulls back before lapsing into anthropomorphism. When the first horse comes into view at the poem’s opening, for example, Larkin describes the second as “seeming to look on” (5). Booth observes that here “the poet is not even confident to attribute motives to them” because they are “no spectator[s] in the human sense” (*Philip Larkin* 140). Indeed, the second horse only “seems” to be an onlooker because horses lack the conscious intentionality the phrase “to look on” implies. After limning their past races, the poem comes closer to anthropomorphizing them, yet again its language is aware of the risk it runs. Returning to the present with the horses at pasture the poet asks, “Do

memories plague their ears like flies? / They shake their heads" (19-20).

Paradoxically, the fact that these horses are not consciously communicating to the speaker confirms their apparent answer to his question: they have neither the capacity to speak to a human being nor to be plagued by their own memories.

"At Grass" comes closest to humanizing the horses when it imagines the horses "gallop[ing] for what must be joy" (26). Here Larkin's speaker attributes a human emotion—joy—to creatures for whom the word is only a rough analogue to whatever they *do* gallop for. In each of these instances the poem comes near to ascribing the horses some kind of human consciousness but draws back before any identification becomes complete. By refusing to fully anthropomorphize the horses the poem also refuses to use them for the human purpose of meaning-making, thus subtly rejecting the objectification of them by the spectators of the past.

The major implication for our purposes of the horses' ineluctable otherness is that it renders their old age a mirror opposite to a human one. Indeed, the horses inhabit an ideal retirement that is ideal precisely because they lack human consciousness. "At Grass" thus presents a vision of old age that is painfully inaccessible to Larkin's persona and the poem's readers. Unlike human beings whose "element is time" ("Reference Back" 16), the horses of "At Grass" live in a present that is neither haunted by the past nor vexed by the future.

Because they possess an “enviable capacity for living in a continuous present” (Osborne 94), the horses escape the troubled liminality of old age, with its lengthening past and shortening future. By foregrounding the horses’ untroubled existence, the poem imagines by its opposite what it means for a human being to be old, almost as if by photo negative. Celebrating their serene old age here entails an implicit and submerged mourning for the late life of human beings who live with the accumulated weight of their memories, regrets, and apprehensions about the future. The horses of “At Grass” thus represent an ideal but unattainable existence the poem celebrates as a condition “forever out of reach” (“Here” CP 32).

In its narrative and formal properties “At Grass” reverses the usual Larkin trajectory from youth to age. Chronologically the poem moves from the constriction and confinement of the horses’ racing years to the relative freedom of their old age. It can make this reversal only by insisting on the otherness and non-humanity of the horses. As animals the subjects of “At Grass” embody an unattainable vision of old age because unlike human beings, the horses live outside of time and therefore do not experience the suffering of accumulated memory. By refusing to anthropomorphize the horses, “At Grass” imagines a kind of mirror-image to a human form of old age which it implicitly mourns.

If the horses of “At Grass” represent the opposite of a human old age because they lack memory, the nameless widow of “Love Songs in Age” from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) embodies a very human experience of late life. Like “At Grass,” the poem takes a tri-partite structure that suggests the past, present, and future. The poem is a “Hardyesque reflection” (Motion, “Philip Larkin and Symbolism” 48) on the disenchantments of old age and on the persistence of passionate feeling. In it a widow rediscovers song books she had played and sung from as a young woman in the first flush of love. Encountering the songs again after many years, she experiences a rapturous but temporary revival of youthful feelings of hope and promise. The poem concludes with the elderly widow’s acknowledgment that her experience has taught her that the promises of youth and love were not fulfilled and cannot be.

Critics have regularly observed that “Love Songs in Age” empathizes with its unnamed widow, though they differ in their accounts about why and how. For Longley the poem’s empathy is rooted in the complexities of “Larkin’s gender-identifications,” which is to say it enacts a kind of “androgyny” (“Larkin, Decadence, and the Lyric Poem” 35) or recognition that he is, or desires to be, the widow. In a similar discussion of Larkin and gender, M.W. Rowe disagrees, arguing that the poems after *The Less Deceived*—he cites “Love Songs in Age” as one example—sympathetically “focus on the plight of older women” without

expressing a desire to be them (81). Both Longley and Rowe read the poem as empathic, but I differ from them in my insistence that its empathy is a result of its form; altering Geoffrey Hill's revision of Wilfred Owen's famous maxim, I argue that the empathy is in the poetry rather than the poetry in the empathy ("Mine angry and defrauded young"). Instead of focusing on Larkin's own empathy with the elderly woman, I argue that the poem's language and form carry the readers along with the old woman's changing feelings. In so doing it enables us to perceive an aesthetic image of the widow's experience, allowing us to share it in a limited way.¹²

Perhaps the most notable feature of this poem is the way that Larkin modulates its voice over the course of three stanzas.¹³ For the first time in Larkin's poetry of old age, we are presented in this poem with a human being whose thoughts the poem can articulate. The cattle of "Wires" do not think or speak, and the horses of "At Grass" emphatically do not. Here, however, Larkin aims to represent an aged woman's experience in its subtle complexity and it does so primarily through control of its diction, tonal register, and syntax. We might describe the vocal trajectory thus: "Love Songs in Age" begins in the voice

¹² This reading diverges from that of Salem Hassan, who reads it simply as a failed attempt of the woman to find "something different" from her current life (56).

¹³ For a relevant discussion of voice in Larkin, see John Carey's "The Two Philip Larkins." *New Larkins for Old*, pp. 51-65. Carey argues that Larkin's poetry is characterized by at least two distinct voices and the poems vacillate between them.

of the old woman, a voice that conveys her diminished and emotionally constricted present. As she feels again the rush of youthful feeling, the poem adapts a more sophisticated and figurative language before culminating in the visually abstract, verbally Latinate constructions of its third stanza. I suggest that each shift of language represents the widow's being carried further away from the actualities of her life to which she returns in the flattened language of the poem's conclusion.

The poem begins by inviting us to empathize with this widow by initially adopting her voice. Larkin's use of her voice—with its simplicity, directness, and lack of figurative language—at the outset encourages us to share her perspective rather than observe her from a detached position. As in "Wires," Larkin here associates old age with deprivation and constriction, and to involve readers in the realities of the widow's experience he employs a flat diction and regular syntax to evoke boredom of her days. Indeed, its initial stanza correlates to her emotionally constricted present:

She kept her songs, they took so little space,
The covers pleased her:
One bleached from lying in a sunny place,
One marked in circles by a vase of water,
One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her,
And coloured, by her daughter—
So they had waited, till in widowhood
She found them, looking for something else, and stood[...] (1-8)

This flattened diction economically conveys the widow's diminished affective range in the present and the relative flatness of her daily life. Its verbal texture is studiously simple and reserved, consisting mostly of monosyllables and simple disyllables with one trisyllabic word—the quietly emphatic “widowhood” of line seven—over its entire length. The stanza's syntax and lineation is equally unassuming. Indeed, the first stanza is largely constituted by three independent clauses followed by three dependent clauses, all arranged by parataxis and basically coincident with line length. There is only one true enjambment, again emphasizing “widowhood” in line seven as it turns into eight. The effect of its heavy use of end-stopping is to imbue the lines with a poise and emotional evenness. In its simplicity the language employs nothing ornamental, nothing symbolic, and nothing overtly figurative; it is a plain language for a plain woman in a plain old age. Fascinatingly, the stanza's very literalness serves to figure in tangible form the widow's emotionally limited present.

The simplicity of the first stanza gives way to the complexity and figurative density of the second in a formal parallel of the woman's changing emotional state as she experiences reverie. As she stands re-visiting these songbooks of the past she is transported not to the past or specific memories but to a youthful attitude of spirit:

She found them, looking for something else, and stood

Relearning how each frank submissive chord
Had ushered in
Word after sprawling hyphenated word,
And the unfailing sense of being young
Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein
That hidden freshness sung,
That certainty of time laid up in store
As when she played them first. (8-16)

If the first stanza's language suggested the widow's drab and diminished old age, here its language expands to embody her enlarged emotional experience. As he had done in "Wires" and "At Grass," Larkin dramatizes this revelatory moment by employing a striking enjambment across stanzas, linking the widow's quotidian life seamlessly with this momentarily transcendent experience. Lineation remains open throughout, rejecting the first stanza's end-stopped lines in favor of dramatic enjambments that tend to separate subjects and verbs by line. For example, as the widow reads from her old songbooks she is "Relearning how each frank submissive chord / Had ushered in / Word..." (9-11). Unlike the lines of the initial stanza, many of the second are semantically incomplete in isolation. By dividing the sentence's principal grammatical elements across lines, the poem thrusts the reader forward in a burst of kinetic verbal energy that is the formal analogue to the widow's inner experience of youthful feeling's revival. Larkin's syntax is as expansively open as the widow's feelings.

Another way the language opens up in a way analogous to the widow's emotional state is by invoking the figurative level that the first stanza had so steadfastly rejected. In its opening lines, "Love Songs in Age" attentively recreates the widow's relatively diminished quotidian existence, yet as its focus shifts to recording her inner state the poem turns to the metaphorical and figurative. Remembering how the accompaniment "ushered in / Word after sprawling hyphenated word," the elderly widow herself is "ushered" by these expansive words into "the unfailing sense of being young." Like the "sprawling" words themselves, this "sense" is imagined in an expansive organic metaphor of renewal as "Spread[ing] out like a spring-woken tree, wherein / That hidden freshness sung[.]"¹⁴ The stanza's metaphoric logic leads the reader's attention first to the old songs' music, then their words; these "sprawling" words lead to the expansive "sense of being young" which locates the widow fleetingly in the natural order of the tree rather than the disappointing and painful world of social relationships.

Yet it is the disappointing social order—here in its romantic form—that reasserts itself in figures of heightened intensity that represent at the level of

¹⁴ Ingelbien suggests that Larkin's image of the tree is indebted partly to Yeats's "Among School Children" and "The Coming of Wisdom with Time" (270). Such a link would tie this poem to both Hardy and Yeats: to Hardy in its simplicity and emphasis on a poignant quotidian experience and to Yeats in its momentary visionary intensity.

language the distance she has imaginatively traveled from the ordinary life of the first stanza. As she experiences the intruding feelings of youth the widow inevitably recalls her early days as a young woman, lover and beloved. Whereas the second stanza's central figure—the "spring-woken tree"—is a visually concrete realization of the widow's sense of temporary rebirth into youthfulness, the third stanza abandons this visual clarity without sacrificing poetic precision. Evoking the hope that attends youthful affection, Larkin writes:

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,
Broke out, to show
Its bright incipience sailing above[...] (17-19)

Associating love with the sun, Larkin suggests both its intrusiveness in our field of vision and its ultimate unattainability as it perpetually sails above. Like the ship of "Next, Please" love moves ever onward, elusive and intractable. Since it cannot be looked on directly, like the sun, love is a "glare" to which the eye can give no solid shape. More intangibly, the poem displaces "love" as an object of perception when it says that it is love's "bright incipience" that "sail[s] above" rather than love itself. Incipience is an abstraction and impossible to visualize, yet the language is precise rather than concrete here. By employing visually uncertain images and abstractions Larkin insists on the unreachability of love and the impossibility of its promises "to solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order" (20-21).

Larkin records the widow's recognition that love's promises are chimerical and her subsequent return to her constricted present life by returning the poem to the flattened and literal language of its initial stanza. As we have seen, the diction of the poem gets gradually more sophisticated over its course, implying the way the widow's reverie carries her further and further from her actual life and into the realm of fantasy-tinted memory. Gillian Steinberg has helpfully drawn attention to the way this poem attends to words *as* words and deceptions. She writes: "the omniscient speaker considers the way that song lyrics mislead and, particularly, how the word 'love' is a kind of lie" (96). Indeed, language in this poem carries both the reader and the widow ever further away from the world of reality, enticing both by their beauty and transcendence. This tendency culminates in the third stanza's initial lines where the appearance of such Latinate words as "brilliance" (17) and "incipience" (19) is discordant with the doggedly concrete language of the poem's first lines.

When she recognizes love's promises as a siren song, the widow's reverie is broken and she returns to her constricted and diminished present. The poem registers this turn by its reversion to the monosyllabic, literal, and pointedly flat language with which it opened:

So,
To pile them back, to cry,

Was hard, without lamely admitting how
It had not done so then, and could not now. (21-25)

While “Love Songs in Age” does indeed present a bleak vision of old age as painfully undeceived, its formal accomplishment renders this vision accessible to readers at the aesthetic level. By doing so it not only involves the reader with the poem itself, but it also encourages an imaginative empathy by making us feel at the level of line, diction, and figure the vicissitudes of feeling in one elderly woman’s carefully observed experience. The poem’s formal features therefore create an empathetic bridge between the woman and readers that is finally affirmative despite all the poem’s bleakness.

If “Love Songs in Age” records an elderly woman’s momentary but illusory escape from the dullness of her old age, “High Windows” (1967) situates its aged speaker temporally among forms of freedom—moral, religious, and ultimately existential—that prove either false or unavailable. The first of these freedoms is the sexual freedom the speaker imagines the contemporary young possessing. The poem begins with the speaker’s crass observation about young men and women he sees together:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise[...] (1-4)

For Larkin's persona, these young people inhabit a morally expansive world in which sex comes without consequences and relationships no longer rely on constraining "bonds and gestures"(6) that are as obsolete as an "outdated combine harvester" (7). Larkin envisions the young people's moral freedom in a spatially expansive metaphor: they are go[ing]...down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly" (8-9). Thinking of himself as he thinks of the young, the speaker wonders whether he himself was envied by the elderly in his younger years for being relieved of religious dogma and its anxieties about death: "*No God any more, or sweating in the dark / About hell and that*" (12-13). In a famous swerve, "High Windows" implicitly rejects both these forms of freedom. The imagined sexual and religious freedom abandoned, "High Windows" concludes with a vision of an alternative kind of freedom that effects a mental escape from the constraints of morality, religion, and time itself, but for all of that remains nothing, intangible, and out of reach. "High Windows" ends in a state of suspended uncertainty, having rejected the superficial "happiness" of the youth while recognizing the inaccessibility of the "deep blue air" and the nothingness it holds.

If the poem is structured around unavailable or unrealizable freedoms, it begins by observing and then tacitly rejecting the liberties of the young as the illusory product of his own desire. For freedom to be meaningful it must be

recognized as freedom while one has it. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the young do not perceive their own freedom at the moment they enjoy it; as Stephen Burt argues, “if Larkin believes the counter-cultural, free-loving ‘kids’ are in Paradise, the young men and women themselves think no such thing” (67). To realize that the young are not as aware of their own liberties—having known no earlier or more repressed times—is to recognize that the significance of their freedom is primarily for the aged observer rather than for the young themselves. If one does not realize one is in a “Paradise” of sexual liberty, what reason would one have for exulting in a condition that has always been available?

If their joy is a projection of Larkin’s aged speaker, the poem becomes in part a meditation on the constricted possibilities available to both young and old. Cut off from knowledge and prior experience, the young do not realize what they possess; as Burt goes on to say, quoting Larkin’s feminine alter-ego Brunette Coleman, the young are “not yet old enough to savor the quintessence of youth” (67). The aged are constrained by the fact that they idealize the young, projecting onto them the freedoms they wish they could have enjoyed and could enjoy still. If this is the case, “High Windows” embodies a Hardy-esque acknowledgment of the belatedness of self-knowledge: by the time one can realize the significance of one’s state of being, that state has already passed into the distance and can be held up as an object of contemplation but not experienced again. Thus Larkin’s

persona and the aged of his own youth can see in others what they cannot themselves experience and what the young cannot perceive in themselves.

To ground this discussion in the texture of the poem, it is worth noting that Larkin undermines the objectivity of this speaker's observations in the poem's opening stanza through a strategic use of a telling sequence of active verbs. Indeed, its initial verb sequence suggests that Larkin's persona projects an idealized state onto the young man and woman rather than observing a state of affairs that actually exists between them. While Petch rightly remarks that "The poem's perceptions are carried initially by the verbs 'see', 'guess', and 'know,'" (97), he does not comment on the mental leaps these verbs imply. Indeed, these verbs suggest the speaker's rapidity of judgment and interpretation, neither of which seems to possess much justification. Larkin's persona begins with an initial perception, seeing a young man and woman together. Seeing them this speaker "guess[es] he's fucking her," though it seems tenuous at least to reach this conclusion at one glance (2). Larkin suggests the precarious logic on which this conclusion relies on in the second verb "guess." To guess is to make a possibly baseless conjecture; one needs less information to make a guess than if one were to (with equal metrical propriety in the context of the poem) "bet" or "think" that something is the case. In any case, Larkin further highlights the tenuousness of this persona's conclusions by inferring an extremely specific

condition of this hypothetical relationship. Not only does he “guess he’s fucking her,” the verb carries over to subsequent lines, such that he also guesses that she’s using contraceptives and that their sexual relationship is without consequence. To move from a guess such as this to “know[ing] this is paradise” (4) stretches credulity, and Larkin knows it. He records the speaker’s desires for a condition that he cannot attain, a freedom of which the young seem unaware of themselves.

Larkin’s speaker seems to realize his own wishful projection onto the young when he reflects on how he himself might have appeared to the elderly when he was young. Instead of being freed from sexual mores, Larkin’s generation was liberated by atheism from religion and its attendant anxieties:

That’ll be the life;

*No God any more, or sweating in the dark
About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. (12-15)*

Discussing the poem up to this point, Richard Hoffpauir observes that the youth’s “freedom is treated ironically” because it leads down to “artificial happiness” that the poem answers with its final upward vision of nothingness (275). This is true of both forms of youthful freedom the poem presents. Of the freedom from religion in his own youth leading to happiness Larkin writes with

wry irony; what the old of his day saw in him did not lead to happiness, only different anxieties. Within the poem Larkin ironizes these elders who projected upon his generation an inner freedom based on their rejection of Christianity, ventriloquizing them in an envious vernacular: "*That'll be the life....He / And his lot will go down the long slide / Like free bloody birds.*" That their assessment of Larkin's generation is ironic is highlighted by the fact that it is simply not true that disbelief in God leads to a care-free existence; rejecting the afterlife does not prevent Larkin from making poems out of a profound anxiety about death.

We need not consult biographical detail to confirm this point. This is the poet who in 1946 at the age of twenty-three had written "*Träumerei*," in which the poet recounts a recurring dream where he encounters in the world around him the letters "DEAT" but awakens before completing the word. This is the poet who had written in *The North Ship*:

This is the first thing
I have understood:
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood. (1-4)

More examples need not be marshalled to establish a fact so well-known as Larkin's preoccupation with death. I draw attention to these other poems in order to highlight attention to Larkin's conscious irony in his treatment of himself from the perspective of an elderly other in "*High Windows*." Without

God, it seems, there remained plenty for Larkin to “sweat...in the dark” about—as he will in “Aubade”—and much that keeps him from enjoying his long slide down to the end of life. In the wake of one freedom inevitably comes a different form of constraint.

If the freedom of the young is illusory and unavailable the poem suggests in its concluding lines another form of freedom that is itself highly ambiguous. In what Neil Forsyth has accurately described as an interpretive “puzzle” that has never yet been adequately solved (463), “High Windows” swerves abruptly from ironic reflection to rapt entrancement:

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (16-20)

Contrasting them with the first stanza, Nicholas Jenkins describes these lines as not involving “seeing or guessing or knowing but—in one of those Yeatsian swerves which are typical of Larkin’s work—moving into a state of receptive passivity” (39). This passiveness contrasts sharply with the first stanzas’ aggressive imposition of meaning onto the young couple. There the speaker sees and without basis comes to a conclusion that would have satisfied his own youthful desires, but here the “deep blue...shows nothing”; it resists human

meaning. The speaker disappears into this vision of absolute freedom, yet it too is vexing by its inaccessibility. If the freedoms of the young were unsatisfactory and illusory, this alternative freedom—in death, perhaps—is no less difficult because it involves the obliteration of the self; it is not a human freedom. To be without constraint and constriction is to cease to exist, because existence as a human being is to live within boundaries. The vision of ultimate boundlessness with which “High Windows” culminates is a vision of a freedom that is forever “out of reach” (“Here” 30), and the poem ends poised between unattainable freedoms.

At the level of form “High Windows” embodies an unresolved dilemma between freedom and constraint in its syntax. Whalen rightly observes that the poem is “an arabesque of syntactical forms,” referring particularly to the way Larkin plays line against sentence length (19). Indeed, the poem employs the most complex syntactical structure of any of the poems so far discussed, its five sentences drawn across five stanzas with striking enjambments across each stanza. As we have seen in “Wires,” “At Grass,” and “Love Songs in Age,” Larkin consistently reserves strong enjambments across stanzas for revelatory moments. In “High Windows” this is still the effect of its penultimate enjambment (“And immediately/ Rather than words...”), but it also employs this kind of enjambment throughout the rest of the poem. Each stanza opens onto the

next in a form of freedom that rejects the quatrain as constrainer of meaning. If stanzas are rooms the rooms of “High Windows” leave all their windows open.

Larkin combines the poem’s syntactical openness with a rhyme scheme that eventually closes in as the poem concludes, suggesting enclosure even as it visually evokes transcendental openness. Like “Wires,” “High Windows” employs no end rhymes in its first stanza. Larkin associates this rhymelessness with a form of artificial freedom analogous to that of the young couple. As the poem proceeds each stanza adopts a different sound pattern tending towards a paradigmatic *abab* quatrain. The second stanza rhymes *abcb* while the third and fourth largely employ half-rhymes: *if / life, back /dark, hide / slide, he/immediately*. As the poem leaps into the visionary it simultaneously finds the closest rhymes it employs: *windows / shows, glass / endless*. Although the rhymes of the poem seek the *abab* pattern, none achieves it; however, the fourth comes closest to doing so. At the level of rhythm the poems moves towards constraints even as its syntax remains open and its imagery opens up to the visionary. In the balance between the open and the closed, the free and the constrained, of its rhyme and syntax, “High Windows” gives poetic form to Larkin’s perception that old age is always poised between these conditions of self, never attaining either.

On the page facing “High Windows” in the *Complete Poems* is a work that Palmer calls Larkin’s “definitive fear-piece” (120), “The Old Fools,” and this poem meditates on a future senile old age rather than on the speaker’s current state as in “High Windows.” From the classical to early modern period age has been usually conceived as having six or seven stages with the last two ages corresponding to old age, but they are distinguished by degree: “gravitas” is an early old age in which mental and physical capacity remain, while “senectus” corresponds to late or advanced old age (Troyansky 41). We might say that “High Windows” is a poem of “gravitas” while “The Old Fools” is a poem of proleptic senectus. Cast in four stanzas of twelve lines each, “The Old Fools” is a meditation on old age as a state of “being-toward-death,” in Joseph Esposito’s Heideggerian formulation (65). The eponymous old fools are denizens of a nursing home whose condition horrifies Larkin’s persona into reflecting on personal extinction of which age’s decrepitude is the “first sign” (20). The poem concludes by linking the speaker and reader to the elderly whom it has focused on as sharing their fate: “We shall find out” in our own time what they experience (48).

While “The Old Fools” resonates with many of Larkin’s poems of old age, its treatment of memory loss in old age calls “At Grass” to mind almost as if the latter poem is a response to the earlier. The horses of “At Grass” achieve a

freedom in old age because they lack human consciousness and live in a perpetual present. The aged of "The Old Fools," by contrast, embody a very human old age in that their memories have not been erased, only fragmented enough to be a source of bewilderment, confusion, and pain. They "can't remember / who called this morning" (4-5) though presumably they know that someone did and see in pieces of the past "People you know, yet can't quite name" (27). These old people hover between knowing that someone called but not quite who, between recognizing a loved one and not remembering her name. In its depiction of senility "The Old Fools" presents a counter-vision to the ideal but impossible old age the horses of "At Grass" experience, providing in its place a picture of an inevitable condition that we all will attain in time.

The aged of "The Old Fools" suffer some of the most extreme constraint and diminishment of any figures in Larkin's poetry of old age. In its opening lines the poem assaults the reader with a barrage of questions whose purpose is less to invite answers than reflect on the elderly's entrapment within their condition, an entrapment that is at odds with the very metrical expansiveness of the lines :

Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,

They could alter things back to when they danced all night,
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September? (2-7)

The initial image of “the old fools” is one of extreme decline and powerless decrepitude. In its questions the poem highlights the elderly’s seeming constraint: they are obviously unable either to “suppose” any of the possibilities the speaker imagines nor can they realize those same possibilities. The poem develops their diminishment by placing it on an existential plane in the second stanza, which contemplates “the first signs” (20) of extinction: “Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power / of choosing gone” (20-22). Motion notes that in Larkin “The power to choose is repeatedly highlighted as the most fulfilling of all human capabilities,” so to be bereft of this power is to inhabit a limbo between life and death (“Philip Larkin and Symbolism” 42).

In addition to being bound by their bodies and minds the elderly of this poem are suspended temporally between a vanished past and a present they do not fully inhabit. In the poem’s third stanza Larkin’s persona imagines what it might be like to inhabit the aged person’s mind. He conjures an image of a ghostly pantomime: “Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms / Inside your head, and people in them, acting” (25-26). These rooms are the stages on which past scenes endlessly repeat themselves:

People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms
Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
A known book from the shelves[...] (27-30)

As the scenes replay themselves the aged long to remain in the past, re-experiencing their memories but they cannot. They strain for the freedom to "be" where they wish but they remain bound to the present: "This is why they give / An air of baffled absence, trying to be there / Yet being here" (36-38). On this account the aged live bound to the present but strive to escape it into the past.

Like the aged themselves the poem's language itself is caught up in a tension between constraint and transcendence, bondage and freedom. At an initial level "The Old Fools" employs a language bound to the bodily in its aggressively low demotic: the elderly's "mouth hangs open and drools," they "keep on pissing" themselves, and they look "crippled or tight." Against this language of the body the poem poses flashes of transcendent beauty. For example, in the exact center of the second stanza there is a burst of loveliness describing birth into life as the "bring[ing] to bloom the million-petalled flower / Of being here" (18). The alliterative *b*'s and liquid *l*'s of this line lend it an aural grace to complement its visual beauty. Yet almost as if it is wary of abandoning its dialectical tension the poem reverts in the next line to a pedestrian language of flat didacticism: "Next time you can't pretend / There'll be anything else" (19-

20). The open vowels and alliteration of the previous line here give way to consonantal clusters that literally constrain the voice: “Next **time...can’t pretend/**” “There’**ll be...**” At the level of diction “The Old Fools” stands pulled by opposing tensions.

If the “million-petalled flower” is a burst of beauty that counters the ugliness of some of the rest of the poem, that beauty is sustained in the third stanza’s quietly ceremonious language as it dramatizes the repeated rituals of aged memory. For the first time in the poem Larkin employs one sentence (the second) over the course of most of the stanza, rendering the sentence rhythm fluid. He heightens this effect by deftly altering his syntax, as here: “People you know, yet can’t quite name; each looms / Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning...” (28-29) Larkin abandons the simple past or present tense, adopting for the most part the present participle: “acting,” “turning,” “setting,” “smiling,” and “extracting.” The effect is to ritualize the elderly’s memories by imagining them as eternally recurring inner events, thereby lending them the dignity of repeated observances. Even so, the poem moves on from this language in the fourth stanza to return to a demotic language that reasserts the tension between constraint and freedom, bondage and transcendence.

If the aged are constrained by their circumstances the poem binds both its speaker and its reader to the elderly. Steinberg has offered a compelling account

of how pronouns work in this poem to implicate the reader, arguing that it begins by distancing the reader by using the third-person plural in its opening stanza; by the end of the poem, however, the speaker has adopted the first-person plural in order to bind us and him to a common situation (27-29). I would supplement Steinberg by suggesting that Larkin employs large perspectival shifts throughout the poem to reinforce the bond between ourselves and "the old fools."

In its perspective "The Old Fools" moves from an external, objectifying perspective on its course to adopting an empathetically interior perspective. The poem's opening lines situate the reader as well as the speaker as spectators watching the old people. As if on a grotesque tour Larkin's persona points out their bodily decrepitude at a contemptuous distance: "What do they think has happened, the old fools, / To make them like this?" (1-2). "Like this" initially involves mostly the empirically observable consequences of old age upon which this speaker brutally muses. He notes their incontinence, their behaving "crippled or tight" (9), and their absent boredom "through days of thin continuous dreaming" (10). Excepting a single reference to their failing memories in line four, this stanza takes an almost entirely exterior and objectifying perspective that examines the old people as in an exhibit from which we are excluded.

Beginning in the latter portion of the second stanza the poem's perspective opens outward (or inward), and as it does so it begins to imagine its subjects in more empathetic ways. After speculating on annihilation—"At death, you break up" (13)—Larkin's persona returns our gaze to the old people to reflect on how they bear "the first signs" (20) of death. At this moment Larkin surprises us by a sharp perspectival turn. Reading to the end of line twenty we come to a striking full-stop that marks the phrase "the first signs," and we might reasonably expect the poem to adumbrate further the bodily, outward "signs" of mortality the aged bear. Yet Larkin evades this expectation by turning to "signs" that we cannot actually see but only imagine because they are not bodily but perceptual: "Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power / Of choosing gone" (22). It is only after Larkin has surprised us by imagining the inner state of the elderly that he returns briefly to their growing bodily decrepitude in a line crammed with heavy stresses for emphasis: "Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines / How can they ignore it?" (23-4). Although it does conjure their bodily decline, this stanza invites the opportunity to empathetically and imaginatively engage with them not as objects but as other subjects with their own inner lives.

The perspectival shift tentatively explored above takes control of the poem in its third stanza. Moving from an outward consideration of their bodies the

poem imagines their states from their perspective in this stanza. A mark of the poem's growing identification with the elderly is its altered use of the second-person "you." In the second stanza "you" is employed to universalize the reader, to render her simply one of a race for whom death is all the same. The third stanza employs "you," however, to imagine a specific condition from a particular vantage point: that of the aged from the perspective of their minds. "You" becomes "you as aged person." When this shift takes place the poem rejects objectifying the elderly, seeing not their outward condition but their inner state in strikingly lovely images, as in these lines conjuring their former homes.

Sometimes they see in memory

The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
The blown bush at the window, or the sun's
Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
Rain-ceased midsummer evening. (31-34)

Having imagined their inner lives the poem cannot return to excoriating their outward appearance or castigating them for their behavior in the poem's concluding lines. Here, the poem restores to them a human dignity denied them in its opening stanza. Janice Rossen observes that "the plight of the aged men and women...is not their fault, yet in inverted logic the poet writes as though it were" (141). I would suggest that Rossen's insight only applies to the poem's opening; by the time "The Old Fools" concludes the elderly are victims of rather

than perpetrators of their condition. The disgust for the elderly that animates the first stanza is in its last nowhere to be found. An exception might be the description of old age as a “hideous inverted childhood,” but even here it is not the aged’s fault: this condition has been visited upon them by time rather than created by them. The distinction I am pointing out can be most readily observed in the altered resonance the phrase “the old fools.” When it had first appeared in the opening line, the phrase was bitterly contemptuous in its blaming the aged for things outside of their control. The phrase in its new context, however, “the old fools,” conjures the word “fool” not as simpleton but as pitiable victim, as in Lear’s “When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools” (4.5.188-189).¹⁵ We are invited to empathize with them as forerunners of what we will be.

Although its reputation largely rests on its bitterness, “The Old Fools” neither capitulates to despair nor remains contemptuous of its subjects. On the contrary, it attempts to articulate a vision of old age as characterized by constraint, deprivation, and diminishment while at the same time maintaining glimpses of beauty and transcendence within this context. By moving the reader from a subject-object relationship to the poem’s elderly in its beginning to a

¹⁵ See K. Naranyan Chandran, who has detected further Shakespearean echoes in “The Old Fools.”

subject-subject relationship by its close, “The Old Fools” involves us in its drama and invites us to contemplate our own futures.

Philip Larkin’s poetry of old age strives to articulate the tension between diminishment and constraint in old age on one hand and a continued desire for transcendence and freedom on the other. In so doing this poetry is neither solely despairing nor accepting of old age. Instead, these poems register Larkin’s sense that to be old is to be caught between conflicting dichotomies. The poems’ formal accomplishments—their careful deployment of image, line, and diction—create at an aesthetic level an answerable style to his perceptions that allow the poems to transcend the merely rhetorical. Instead, these poems invite the reader by the forms into their perceptual universes; however bleak these may be, the poems affirm life and repudiate despair by the sophistication of their art and by their invitation to the reader to participate in them along with the poet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In his late poem to an octogenarian George Santayana entitled "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," Wallace Stevens writes of old age as a liminal nexus between the world of the living and what the poet calls "that more merciful Rome / beyond" (6-7). It is at age's threshold that the hitherto occluded realities of that other world become palpable in the world of the senses:

Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. (12-18)

These dark things that become perceptible to the old philosopher do not threaten to overcome and veil over the human world he still inhabits. On the contrary, his intimations of mortality intensify his appreciation for this world, in which "The newsboys' muttering Becomes another murmuring; the smell / Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled..." (18-20). In his old age Santayana is depicted as therefore "living in two worlds" at once, "Impatient for the grandeur

that you need / in so much misery," a being in time yet yearning for that which is out of reach (45-46).

In this dissertation I have attempted to map some of the ways Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin navigate this threshold space of old age. I have argued that while each poet conceptualizes old age differently, they share with Stevens a sense that old age is a liminal space that requires a complex, dialectical response at the formal level. I have traced several of the formal and rhetorical strategies Hardy, Yeats, and Larkin develop to embody their vision of old age and thereby find answerable forms for the challenges posed by this period of life.

By making these larger arguments I have suggested that old age is for these poets creatively enabling. Although each of them treats it as a period of decline, diminishment, and loss, they nevertheless create out of old age rather than in spite of it. Rather like elegy, the poetry of old age takes loss as its subject; also like elegy, this poetry redresses that loss to some degree by mapping it in poetic form. Thus it has been one of my aims to show that old age is the very ground of these poems' accomplishments, their tensions and contradictions the source of charged, compressed poems that respond to the seeming formlessness of experience in the forms of art. If I have been successful in this goal, I hope to critique a view of artistic creation that privileges youthfulness.

One goal of this dissertation has been to redress certain critical imbalances, not least of which is the tendency to downplay lyric poetry in discussions of literature and old age. Helen Vendler has argued for a distinction between “normative lyric” and narrative modes; according to her, lyric directs its representation towards thought and perception while narrative modes aim to represent the social world of human interaction (*Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* 1-2). Vendler’s delineation helps clarify the reasons for critical neglect of lyric as it relates to old age. As I have pointed out, a great many studies of this subject deal with the attitudes a given text may articulate, and these attitudes are often as socio-culturally constructed as they are idiosyncratic to an individual author. If the goal of this criticism is to excavate attitudes, values, or assumptions, then narrative modes may be the most suitable.

Another critical imbalance I hope to correct is the relative neglect of poems’ formal properties in discussions of old age. As I have tried to show, many critics who do choose to discuss poetry in light of old age have done so by focusing on the poems’ paraphrasable content. While of course it is important to be able to articulate what a poem says, yet if this is all we do we leave half of the critical enterprise undone. Successful poems differ from philosophical treatises and position papers in that they are arrangements of language whose significance and resonance arise from their own patterning.

My dissertation has a different goal than either of these approaches. Instead of searching for values or attitudes towards old age to describe, unmask, or demystify, I have inquired into the relationship between these poems' construction and the way they imagine old age. I have conceived of old age as exerting an imaginative pressure on each poet that calls for a formal as well as a semantic response. This focus has led me away from asking such questions as "What did Larkin believe about old age?" and towards one like "How do Yeats's figures embody the tensions he perceives in later life?" The value of this approach lies in the way it enables us to appreciate old age as a creative source for these poets rather than merely a source of anxiety for them.

In the future, I will strengthen this project by adding chapters on three more recent poets: Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill. In the case of Walcott and Heaney, I will explore one volume of each of these poets—Walcott's *White Egrets* and Heaney's *Human Chain*—in light of old age. I aim to explore how these poets manage the twilight area between life and death and whether (and how) they create what Vendler calls a "binocular style" to accommodate this position (1). Regarding Hill, I hope to account for his later conception of old age and relate it to his late burst in creative productivity. I hope to show that the energy and experimentalism of his later volumes are intimately connected with Hill's conception of his own old age and sense of

encroaching death. He frames the relationship this way in his final volume: “*Ars moriendi, ars poetica*”: The art of dying, the art of poetry (*Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti* 65). I also plan on discussing female poets, possibly including as Stevie Smith and Eavan Boland, who have addressed old age in their own work. This will allow my purview to widen by considering the experience of aging from the perspective of sex, which will yield indispensable insight.

It is my hope that this dissertation will prove a fruitful beginning to further research. In pursuing this line of inquiry to contribute to our understandings of how old age serves as a significant impetus for twentieth-century poets. Moreover, I hope to refine our understanding of these poets’ techniques as they respond to later life, considering their formal practices as integral to their total response. I would like to finally achieve the humble but necessary goal of promoting the work of these poets as they map one of life’s most challenging periods.

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