

# Kenneth Clark

## *The artist grows old*

“What is it to grow old?” asked Matthew Arnold, and gave a depressing answer:

... 'Tis not to have our life  
Mellowed and softened as with sunset-glow  
... 'Tis not to see the world  
As from a height, with rapt prophetic eyes,  
And heart profoundly stirred.  
... It is to spend long days  
And not once feel that we were ever young;  
... Deep in our hidden heart

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Festers the dull remembrance of a  
change,  
But no emotion – none!

Arnold was about forty when he wrote these melancholy lines, and his experience of old age was presumably drawn from his father's friends or his fellow civil servants. He wrote in a reaction against the conventional picture of a golden old age which had been current in antiquity from Sophocles to Cicero's *de Senectute*. Everyone remembers Cephalus, Plato's dear old man at the beginning of the *Republic*: 'Old age has a great sense of peace and freedom. When the passions have lost their hold, you have escaped, as Sophocles says, not only from one mad master, but from many!' Arnold was justified in refuting this classical myth of a golden sunset. But all the same, his diagnosis is not entirely correct. 'No emotion – none!' On the contrary, elderly people feel emotion, and tend to weep more than young ones. But is it the kind of emotion that can be expressed in memorable words? A few minutes' reflection shows that it is not. The number of poets who have written memorable verse over the age of seventy is very small indeed, and to write tolerably over the age of sixty-five is exceptional. This decline in the poetic faculty in old age must be distinguished from

the loss of inspiration that may afflict a poet at any age. But the two are obviously connected. However desirable it may be, in the conduct of life, to be free from passion, the mad masters have been responsible for at least three-quarters of the great poetry in the world. And old age, although it does not put an end to our emotions, dulls the intensity of all our responses. The romantic poets recognised that this was the cause of declining inspiration; and, as we know from Coleridge, it could happen quite early. He was only thirty-two when he wrote that long and moving letter in verse to Sarah Hutchinson from which he later extracted his 'Ode to Dejection':

I see them all, so excellently fair,  
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are.

And he went on to define more precisely the feeling that he had lost:

Joy is the strong voice, joy the luminous  
cloud.  
We in ourselves rejoice.

This is a much more accurate description of the loss that befalls us in old age than Arnold's 'no emotion – none!' Elderly people do not, and perhaps should not, rejoice in themselves. Coleridge read this letter to the Wordsworths on 21 April 1802. At that time William had not lost the faculty of joy: in fact he was at work on the 'Immortality' ode. He was so shocked by Coleridge's pessimism that he added one (or perhaps two) stanzas to the 'Ode' in order to refute it. Alas, a few years later he suffered the same fate. He continued to write poetry; he wrote on high themes, with conscientious skill. 'But emotion – none!' As most of you will know, there was an exception, and I will quote it to prove, if proof were needed, that our feelings do not die, but are buried so deeply in our memories that only some shock,

some unforeseeable Open Sesame, can bring them out of bondage. In 1835 Wordsworth heard of the death of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd. He went into the next room. He thought of Chatterton, that marvellous boy; he thought of his lost friends; and in less than an hour he returned with an extempore effusion:

Nor has the rolling year twice measured  
From sign to sign its stedfast course,  
Since every mortal power of Coleridge  
Had frozen at its marvellous source.  
The rapt one, of the Godlike forehead,  
The heaven eyed creature sleeps in earth.  
And Lamb, the frolic and the gentle,  
Has vanished from his lonely hearth.

A parallel instance can be quoted from Tennyson; he had long been deprived of poetic inspiration, and had just finished writing 'Romney's Remorse', which even the most fervent Tennysonians do not defend, when, crossing to the Isle of Wight in October 1889, he was struck by an exceptionally high tide, which seemed for some reason to symbolise his recent recovery from a serious illness. Open Sesame. When he returned to Faringford he went straight to his room and in twenty minutes emerged with a poem:

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the  
boundless deep  
Turns again home.

He knew what had happened, and knew that it wouldn't happen again. He gave instructions that 'Crossing the Bar' should always be placed last in any collection of his works. Of course, the trouble about these flashes from the depths of an elderly poet's buried life is that they cannot be sustained. To do so requires the kind of concentration that is a physical attribute. 'I can no longer

expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which I wrote my other book', said A. E. Housman in his preface to *Last Poems*, 'nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came.'

If, for obvious reasons, elderly writers cannot sing with the same fervour as young ones, are there not other branches of literature in which they can excel? One poet, who himself wrote movingly in old age, tried to put a case for his fellow ancients:

And yet, though ours be failing frames,  
Gentlemen,  
So were some others' history names  
Who trod their track light-limbed and fast  
As these youth, and not alien  
From enterprise, to their long last,  
Gentlemen.

Sophocles, Plato, Socrates,  
Gentlemen,  
Pythagoras, Thucydides,  
Herodotus and Homer – yea,  
Clement, Augustin, Origen,  
Burnt brightlier towards their setting day,  
Gentlemen.

It is a valiant effort, but I do not find Hardy's roll-call wholly convincing. Sophocles is the classic instance, and we must allow it. But we have no means of knowing whether the late works of Homer and Pythagoras were superior to their early ones. I am ashamed to say that I have not compared the late and early works of Clement and Origen; but I have compared St Augustine's *Confessions* with the *City of God*, and have no hesitation in saying that the *Confessions*, written twenty years earlier, is the more brightly burning of the two. I fear that after the age of seventy, or at most seventy-five, not only is the spring of lyric poetry sealed up in the depths which cannot be tapped, but the ordering, or architectonic faculty, which depends

on a vigorous use of memory, with its resulting confluence of ideas, is usually in decline. The most ironic instance is that of Bernard Shaw, who believed that man would become wise if he could live to be over 100 and to prove it wrote a diffuse and unreadable play that lacks all the intellectual vigour of his maturity.

Such are the facts that must be faced if we are to consider the old age of writers and artists. But they do not by any means exhaust the subject. I believe that old, even very old, artists, have added something of immense value to the sum of human experience. There is undoubtedly what I may call, translating from the German, an old-age style, a special character common to nearly all their work; and during the rest of the lecture I shall try to discover what it is.

For some reason which is rather hard to analyse, painters and sculptors do not suffer from the same loss of creative power that afflicts writers. Indeed the very greatest artists – Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Donatello, Turner and Cézanne – seem to *us* to have produced their most impressive work in the last ten or fifteen years of fairly long lives. I say seem to *us* because this was not formerly the accepted opinion. In the nineteenth century Turner's later paintings were considered the work of a madman, and Rembrandt's *Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* was called a grotesque masquerade. The lack of polish in Titian's later canvases was excused on the grounds that the painter was over ninety, and John Addington Symonds said of Michelangelo's Capella Paolina, 'the frigidity of old age had fallen on his imagination and faculties – one cannot help regretting that seven years... should have been devoted to a work so obviously indicative of decaying faculties.'

That we should now admire these late works so highly, often finding in them

some anticipation of the tastes and feelings of the present day, tells us two things about them – that they are pessimistic and that they are not concerned with the imitation of natural appearances. Contrary to the Sophoclean or Ciceronian myth, it is evident that those who have retained their creative powers into old age take a very poor view of human life, and develop as their only defence a kind of transcendental pessimism. We need only think of the eyes that look out on us from the late self-portraits of Rembrandt to realise how deeply this great lover of life became disenchanted by life. Michelangelo's head becomes, in Daniele da Volterra's portrait bust, an emblem of spiritual suffering as poignant as his own Jeremiah; and when he portrayed himself it was as the flayed skin of St Bartholomew in the *Last Judgement*. Mantegna, a name that can be added to the list of aged painters, looks in his bronze bust more indignantly pessimistic than Michelangelo, but he left in the corner of one of his last pictures, the *S. Sebastian* in the Ca' d'Oro, the emblem of his beliefs, a smoking candle, with a scroll on which are written the words *Nihil nisi divinum stabile est, coetera fumus*.

This at least suggests a belief in God, which has been denied to pessimists since the Enlightenment. 'He was without hope', said Ruskin of Turner, one can imagine how reluctantly. By the time that the author of *Modern Painters* had met his hero, Turner had grown almost completely monosyllabic in conversation, but he continued to pour his feelings about human life into the formless, ungrammatical verses of *The Fallacies of Hope*, and celebrated the salvation of mankind after the Flood with these lines (which, incidentally, are the best he ever wrote):

The Ark stood firm on Ararat; th' returning Sun  
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous of light,  
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic guise  
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer fly  
Which rises, flits, expands and dies.

Turner could express his sense of tragedy only through red clouds and a menacing vortex of sea and sky. His figures, although not insignificant, are ridiculous. But in the great period of figure painting the aged artists chose tragic themes, and treated them in such a way as to bring out their most disturbing possibilities. As far as I know the first artist to develop what I have called the old-age style was Donatello. Already in the St Anthony reliefs in Padua he had moved a long way from the Hadrianic beauty of the David or the Dionysiac rapture of the dancing putti. The scenes are vehemently dramatic, but the character of St Anthony prohibits tragedy. By the time he came to the pulpits of S. Lorenzo – he worked on them till his death at the age of eighty – he was no longer persuaded by the comforting beliefs of humanism, so beautifully expressed by the arcaded aisles beneath which the pulpits are placed. The rough, passionate, hirsute figures who surround Christ in the *Harrowing of Hell* and seem to menace him with their angular gestures, have no interest in reason and decorum. They are like a new race of Langobardi; and Christ himself, as he rises from the tomb in the next panel, is like a shipwrecked sailor, only just able to drag himself ashore. The means by which this fierce new world of the aged imagination is made visible are equally remote from the humanist tradition of decorum. The

scenes are crowded, a reckless perspective is used intermittently in order to heighten emotional effect, and the actual modelling (or rather the carving, for almost the whole surface has been cut in the bronze) is as free and expressive as the stroke of a pen in an impassioned drawing.

As with many works of the old-age style (Titian will provide another example) the S. Lorenzo reliefs are so far outside the humanist norm that an earlier generation of critics questioned their authenticity. And when they were done – in the light-footed youth of Lorenzo de' Medici – Donatello must have felt completely isolated from his contemporaries. Old artists are solitary; like all old people they are bored and irritated by the company of their fellow bipeds and yet find their isolation depressing. They are also suspicious of interference. Vasari describes how, late one night, he was sent by Pope Paul III to Michelangelo in order to obtain from him a certain drawing. Michelangelo, recognising his knock, came to the door carrying a lamp, and Vasari just had time to see that he was working on a marble pietà; but when Michelangelo noticed that his visitor was looking at it, he dropped his lantern, and they remained in the dark, till Michelangelo's servant, Urbino, a feeble candle in his hand, returned with the drawing. Then, as if to excuse himself, Michelangelo said, 'I am so old that often death tugs at my sleeve, and soon I shall fall like this lantern and my light will go out.' The reason, says Vasari, why Michelangelo *dilettassi della solitudine* was his great love of his art. But it would be a mistake to suppose that great artists escape the pains of old age through the joys of creative labour. On the contrary, all old artists who have left us a written record of their experiences, have described how the act of creation has be-

come for them a torture. Michelangelo is, perhaps, not a good example, because he grumbled about every job he undertook; but when he wrote beneath a late drawing of the Pietà 'Dio sa che sangue costa', he was surely thinking of himself as well as of his Redeemer.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of art, Claude Monet, whose skill in rendering a visual experience has never been surpassed, created his own marvellous and unforeseeable late manner, out of infinite pain. He wrote of his water-garden canvases, 'in the night I am constantly haunted by what I am trying to realise. I rise broken with fatigue each morning. The coming of dawn gives me courage, but my anxiety returns as soon as I set foot in my studio ... Painting is so difficult and torturing. Last autumn I burned six canvases along with the dead leaves in my garden.' Gone the same way as Christ's torso in the Rondanini Pietà. The aged Degas wrote in almost identical terms.

So the aged artist's pessimism extends from human life to his own creative powers. He can no longer enter sympathetically into what he sees, and he no longer has any confidence in human reason. This, as I have said, is something that we can understand more easily than could our grandfathers. They loved the art of the renaissance because it was based on naturalism, a love of physical beauty and rational order. Berenson, no less than John Addington Symonds, speaks with real hatred of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* and (as far as I know) never even mentions the frescoes in the Capella Paolina. Yet for those who have the good fortune to see them, these two extraordinary works provide an experience as moving as anything in art, as moving as the storm scenes of *King Lear*, and as rich in layer upon layer of meaning.

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As usual Michelangelo had undertaken them reluctantly. 'I cannot refuse anything to Pope Paul; but I am ill-pleased to do them and they will please nobody.' 'The art of fresco', he complained, 'was not work for old men.' But, as he said in the same year, 'one paints with the brain and not with the hands', and having once started on the work, his whole mind and spirit were engaged. The subjects selected for him were the Conversion of Saul and the Crucifixion of St Peter, episodes which had a particular theological and doctrinal importance to Paul III. The Conversion of Saul was the supreme example of grace, and in Rome of the 1540s the doctrine of justification by grace was a topic of heart-searching and earnest discussion. The most learned and devout of the Cardinals, Contarini, Morone and Pole, who had been the associates of Paul III before his elevation, were deeply impressed by the arguments of Luther, and at the centre of their discussions was Michelangelo's dearest friend, Vittoria Colonna. Thus the Conversion of Saul became for Michelangelo almost a personal experience, and he has made Saul's head an idealised self-portrait. There are many representations in art of ecstasy, of suffering, and of enlightenment; but none that equal this portrayal of the painful transition through blindness to spiritual sight. Saul lies on the ground protected by the encircling arms of one of his companions, an ordinary man. The rest of his troop breaks up in confusion. Their world seems to have exploded, as Christendom had just exploded, touched off by the doctrine of faith. The cause of this explosion, the figure of Christ, swoops down from the sky. With one hand he confirms Saul in his new belief; with the other he points to the world beyond Damascus, in which St Paul will preach His Gospel. Michelangelo has put into

this drama some of his greatest formal inventions, many of which would have had a special meaning for his contemporaries. For example, the pose of Saul extended on the ground is clearly reminiscent of Raphael's Heliodorus, the would-be despoiler of the Temple. Paul III would have instantly recognised his allusion. He would have thought of the contrast between the avengers of Heliodorus and the divine apparition that redirects Saul; and would also have noticed that Michelangelo's age-old enmity with Raphael had at last been reconciled. Another example: Saul's horse, whose panic leap away from us is, so to say, the most massive fragment of the exploded world, is one of the antique horses of the Quirinal, seen from below, as Michelangelo must have seen it almost every day when he made his way to Vittoria Colonna's apartment. Almost every figure has a resonance of this kind.

But marvellous as it is, the *Conversion of Saul* is a less moving work than the *Crucifixion of St Peter*, and I may add a less complete example of the old-age style. The *Conversion* is still full of energy and the intervention of the heavenly powers gives us reason for hope. The *Crucifixion of St Peter* portrays the human lot as hopelessly and monotonously tragic. Instead of an explosion, with its possibility of a new life, the *Crucifixion of St Peter* is a wheel of life, a *rond des prisonniers*, revolving round the central figure, in and out of the frame. On the left-hand side Roman legionaries, inspired by Trajan's column, move upwards; on the right, conquered and disinherited people move downwards. Their leader, a barbarian giant with head bowed and arms folded in resignation, is one of Michelangelo's noblest inventions, a piece of visionary art that was to inspire Blake's first dated engraving. Two groups are not part of the wheel.

One represents the forces of law and order, who have condemned St Peter to death, and have been ordered to see that the sentence is being carried out. They are led by a captain, who is the pitiless embodiment of action, and closely resembles one of those ideal heads which Michelangelo had drawn twenty-five years earlier for presentation to those handsome young men who so troubled his peace of mind. Balancing these active participants is a group of four women, two of them looking at the Martyrdom, one gazing wildly into space, one looking directly at us. They are like a Sophoclean chorus. Incidentally, technicians tell us that this was the last day's work on the wet plaster of the fresco, and so the last piece of painting ever executed by Michelangelo.

Within the circle of life is an inner circle formed by St Peter's arms, and the men who are raising his cross, and it, too, has an appendage – the young man who, with mindless concentration, digs the hole in which the cross will be placed. He is innocent, the air-force pilot who releases the bomb. The saint himself is one of Michelangelo's most formidable embodiments of faith and will. Unlike Saul, who receives his painful enlightenment with a kind of gratitude, St Peter is not at all resigned to his fate, and glares at us angrily. He will break through the circle of human bondage if he can. It is no accident that Michelangelo has given his body the same form that we find in his magnificent drawings of Prometheus.

Michelangelo's frescoes in the Pauline Chapel exhibit almost every characteristic of the old-age style: its pessimism, its *saeva indignatio*, its feeling of hermetic isolation; and on the formal side its anti-realism, and its accumulation of symbolic motives. In one respect, however, they do not entirely conform: in the actual

technique or facture. The aged artist usually employs a less circumscribed and rougher style. In fact parts of the frescoes are painted with considerable freedom; but as a whole Michelangelo has maintained the firm outlines of every form, either because the medium seemed to demand it, or because he felt that great truths must, in Blake's words, be bounded by the wiry line of rectitude. This clarity of enunciation (even when the statements are themselves obscure) the old-age style tends to reject. To illustrate this characteristic we must turn to the only artist of equal greatness whose lifespan probably equalled Michelangelo's eighty-nine years – Titian.

Nobody knows when Titian was born. Renaissance artists were in the habit of lying about their birthdays for financial reasons, and the tradition that Titian was born in 1477 is hardly credible. But when he painted the pictures in which he develops his old-age style, he was certainly over eighty. Three of them, the *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* in the Escorial, the *Crowning with Thorns* in Munich and the *Flaying of Marsyas* in Kromeresz, are reworkings of pictures that Titian had painted earlier, and it is remarkable that he chose to repeat three of the most violent and tragic subjects in the whole of his oeuvre. In the later versions of all three the sense of tragedy and its universal application to human life is enhanced by purely pictorial means. The earlier *Crowning with Thorns* is a superb academic exercise, but visitors to the Louvre do not look at it for long. We have all grown too suspicious of rhetoric, and Christ's anguished movement has a chilling effect. Translated into the old-age style it is subordinated to a single passionate cry made through the medium of colour and design. The central theme is no longer the expression of Christ's head, but the cruel geometry of the soldiers' sticks. A

powerful diagonal leads up to a basket full of flames, and we suddenly realise how great a part fire and flame play in Titian's later work. It became an obsession similar to the ageing Leonardo's obsession with destruction by water; and we find it again in the Escorial *St Lawrence*, where the fire that lights up the evil faces of his executioners is, for the saint, a source of ecstasy. I am reminded of some lines by one of the rare poets who continued to write great poetry in advanced age, W. B. Yeats:

*Saeva indignatio* and the labourer's hire  
The strength that gives our blood and  
state magnanimity of its own desire  
Everything that is not God consumed  
with intellectual fire.

Throughout his life, Titian had been the supreme master of fruitfulness. He had used his skill in the cuisine of painting to render the smooth, full pressure of flesh on skin, or pulp on rind. In the work of his old age these sensual and vegetable images are replaced by fire, flame and smoke. Titian, like Turner, did not put his thoughts into words, but even his earlier paintings leave us in no doubt that he had a powerful and well-stored mind; and in his last pictures he becomes a profound philosopher. The most complete expression of his philosophy is to be found, after considerable search, in the Moravian town of Kromeretz. It represents one of the cruellest myths of antiquity, the Flaying of Marsyas. As with the *St Lawrence*, we know that he had painted a version of the subject in his maturity, but the picture at Kromeretz is one of those left in his studio on his death, and sold by his great-nephew, Tizianello, to the Earl of Arundel. In case the story of Marsyas is not fresh in your minds, let me remind you that he was a satyr who excelled in playing the flute. The flute was out of fa-

bour on Olympus because the goddess Athena, having invented it, found that it distorted her features and threw it away. It was picked up by Marsyas, who learned to play the instrument so skilfully that he was emboldened to challenge Apollo to a musical contest. The judge was King Midas, who, as King of Phrygia, decided in favour of Marsyas; but the Muses reversed his decision, and ordered that as a punishment for his insolence, Marsyas should be flayed. It is one of those offsprings of the Greek imagination in which the forces of divine order assert themselves by an act of cruelty and we are left horrified by the price that it seemed worth paying for Olympian harmony and reason. The antique world does not seem to have questioned it, and two groups of statuary, one of them by Myron, were amongst the most frequently copied sculptures of the ancient world. The hanging Marsyas from one of these groups was, in fact, known to Michelangelo and provided a model for those late drawings of a Crucifixion which are amongst his most moving examples of the old-age style. Titian saw the myth in less simple terms. To begin with his Marsyas is hung up by the feet, like a dead animal in a butcher's shop – or like St Peter who would not be crucified in the same position as his Saviour. All the other protagonists crowd round him in a circle, giving the design that uninterrupted fullness which is a mark of the old-age style. Titian understands that this sacrifice is questionable. Midas sits beside the central figure, sunk in reverie, and behind him a satyr who has come to help his tortured sovereign, starts back with pity and astonishment. The flaying goes on as a ritual act, accompanied by the music of Apollo's cithara. He plays as if in ecstasy, and vibrations of sound seem to fill the whole canvas. We are ravished, and yet we feel



that beauty achieved at the expense of life is outrageous. This is a kind of crucifixion, a sacrifice of pure instinct to reason, and if all that reason can achieve is the hideous shedding of blood, why not leave the Dionysiac impulses to follow their own course? An answer is given by another masterpiece of the old-age style, the *Bacchae* of Euripides. The triumph of the irrational produces its own kind of catastrophe, as cruel as the triumph of reason.

This bare description of Titian's imagery suggests a wealth of visual metaphor almost as great as is to be found in Michelangelo's Pauline frescoes. But what I cannot convey in words is the extraordinary freedom with which it is painted. Every stroke of the brush is itself a metamorphosis, in its first dictionary sense, 'the action of changing in form or substance, especially by magic.' Paint is no longer a solid sticky substance, but precious, volatile and alive.

The transformation of paint into an endless series of direct messages from the painter's imagination appears in another great masterpiece of the old-age style, Rembrandt's *Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*. As with Titian, this is the reworking of an earlier invention, only in this instance Rembrandt has painted over a fragment of the original canvas which, for some unexplained reason, had been rejected by his patrons, the City Fathers of Amsterdam. He has felt free to please himself and in the Cyclopean hero and his grotesque attendants has produced a world so bizarre that one cannot but admire the courage of the seventeenth-century connoisseurs who saved the picture from destruction. But these strange figures have the inevitability of Macbeth's porter or Hamlet's gravedigger. And the freedom with which every form is translated in the colour holds us spellbound in a way that

the subject alone would not achieve. Titian's subject is horrifying, Rembrandt's grotesque, yet both arouse in me a similar emotion. For a second I feel that I have had a glimpse of some irrational and absolute truth, that could be revealed only by a great artist in his old age.

Clouds of affection from our younger eyes  
Conceal the emptiness which age describes.  
The soul's dark cottage, battered and  
decayed,  
Lets in new light through chinks that time  
hath made.

The Rembrantesque image of Edmund Waller is irresistible. But it is only partly accurate, because the light that entrances us in these old-age pictures is not the result of exhaustion or decay, but is communicated to us by the indestructible vitality of the painter's hand. Nearly all the painters who have grown greater in old age have retained an astonishing vitality of touch. As their handling has grown freer, so have strokes of the brush developed an independent life. Cézanne, who in middle life painted with the delicacy of a water-colourist, and was almost afraid, as he said, to sully the whiteness of a canvas, ended by attacking it with heavy and passionate strokes. The increased vitality of an aged hand is hard to explain. Does it mean that a long assimilation of life has so filled the painter with a sense of natural energy that it communicates itself involuntarily through his touch? Such would seem to be the implication of the famous words of Hokusai in the preface to his *Hundred Views of Fuji*:

All I have produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account. At seventy-three I learned a little about the real structure of nature, of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes and insects.

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In consequence when I am eighty, I shall have made still more progress. At ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at a hundred I shall certainly have reached a marvellous stage; and when I am a hundred and ten, everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive. I beg those who live as long as I to see if I do not keep my word. Written at the age of seventy-five by me, once Hokusai, to-day Gwakio Rojin, the old man mad about drawing.

‘Everything I do, be it but a dot or a line, will be alive.’ Rembrandt could have said the same, and so, before his loss of manual skill, could Leonardo. There is nothing more mysterious than the power of an aged artist to give life to a blot or a scribble; it is as inexplicable as the power of a young poet to give life to a word.

Another reason for the reckless freedom of facture in the old-age style is the feeling of imminent departure. ‘I haven’t long to wait. I shall say what I like, how I like, and as forcefully as possible.’ Maer Grafe put it more vividly in his description of Van Gogh’s style: ‘He paints as one whose house is beset by burglars, and pushes his furniture and everything he can lay his hands on against the door.’ Van Gogh was in his thirties. Cézanne and Monet did not arrive at this state of desperation till their last years. Then they began their furious battle with time, not staining, but scarring the white canvas of eternity. But in contrast to this grandiose impatience is an ultimate feeling of resignation and total understanding. In Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son* in the Hermitage we feel that the whole of humanity has been enfolded in an act of forgiveness, beyond good and evil.

Titian, the sensualist, courtier and libertine, reveals himself in his latest pictures, the master of resignation. In the first version of his *Crowning with Thorns*,

Christ’s head is twisted in agony, like Laocoon; in the later version he sits motionless with downcast eyes. His last great Pietà in the Venice Academy unites both the elements of the ‘old-age style’; Mary Magdalene steps forward from the platform, passionate, enraged, like an actress who can no longer endure her role, but must break out of the scene and appeal to the audience; but the Virgin and St Jerome are resigned.

Incidentally, we may suppose that this sublime work was originally in the same style as the Marsyas, and perhaps for that reason was refused by the monks of the Frari. Palma Giovane, who finished it with skill and understanding, added an inscription, saying that it had been *inchoatum*. We cannot blame him, but if it had come down to us as Titian left it, I think it would have been one of the greatest pictures in the world.

Writers on Titian have long accepted that St Jerome who kneels before the Virgin is an idealised self-portrait, and, as I have said, the Midas in the *Flaying of Marsyas* is almost identical. Twenty years earlier Michelangelo had included his idealised self-portrait, as Nicodemus, in the marble pietà now in the cathedral of Florence. It may have been the piece which Michelangelo was carving when Vasari paid his nocturnal call, and shortly afterwards Michelangelo broke it up; just as Rembrandt cut up his canvases, and Monet burned his. Later Michelangelo was persuaded to sell the pieces to a friend named Bandini, and it was restored by the sculptor Calcagni. It was really *inchoatum* and Calcagni was more ambitious and less sensitive than Palma Giovane. But fortunately he died before completing his work. The figure of Nicodemus remains unrestored, and as one looks at his noble head from different angles and in different lights one finds a whole range of human emotion be-

ginning with unutterable grief, passing through practical solicitude (specially praised by Vasari), and ending with calm and an almost beatific resignation. I do not think that Titian was inspired by this precedent, and indeed it is most unlikely that he had seen the group. Nor do I think that the desire of an aged artist to include himself in his last great work was a piece of egotism. Rather, I would suppose that he has come to think of the great tragic myths of the human imagination as almost his private property. He sees them with a mixture of heartfelt participation and detachment that requires his actual presence in the drama.

Now let me try to summarise the characteristics of the old-age style as they appear, with remarkable consistency, in the work of the greatest painters and sculptors. A sense of isolation, a feeling of holy rage, developing into what I have called transcendental pessimism; a mistrust of reason, a belief in instinct. And in a few rare instances the old-age myth of classical antiquity – the feeling that the crimes and follies of mankind must be accepted with resignation. All this is revealed by the imagery of old men's pictures, and to some extent by the treatment. If we consider old-age art from a more narrowly stylistic point of view, we find a retreat from realism, an impatience with established technique and a craving for complete unity of treatment, as if the picture were an organism in which every member shared in the life of the whole.

I have mentioned a few of the artists in whose late work these characteristics can be found. I could have extended it to almost every great painter who has lived beyond the age of 65 or 70. Indeed I can think of only one exception, Piero della Francesca; and there a physical cause, cataract or partial blindness, prevented him in his old age from painting at all.

Turning back to writers of equal stature, one cannot but be struck by the difference between the two arts.

One of the finest critical essays in English begins with the words, 'It is a mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music and painting – all the various products of art – as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities.' Pater's warning is always in my mind. Nevertheless the elderly great do seem to have a good deal in common, and it is worth speculating on the reasons why they can express themselves so much more movingly in painting and sculpture than in poetry. Perhaps a clue is given by Coleridge's words, 'we in ourselves rejoice' together with the word vitality. The painter is dealing with something outside himself, and is positively drawing strength from what he sees. The act of painting is a physical act, and retains some element of physical satisfaction. No writer enjoys the movement of his pen, still less the click of his typewriter. But in the actual laying on of a touch of colour, or in the stroke of a mallet on a chisel, there is a moment of self-forgetfulness. Harassed public servants – presidents, statesmen and generals – take up painting; they do not (with the exception of Lord Wavell) write poetry. It may seem ridiculous to compare the therapeutic activities of these amateurs to the struggles of Titian or Rembrandt; but I think that they do indicate a fundamental difference between the two arts. A visual experience is vitalising. Although it may almost immediately become a spiritual experience (with all the pain which that involves), it provides a kind of nourishment. Whereas to write great poetry, to draw continuously on one's inner life, is not merely exhausting, it is to keep alight a consum-

*The artist grows old*

ing fire. What in old age feeds this fire? Memories of past emotions; only very occasionally fresh experiences which, if they are strong enough to generate poetry, cannot as Housman said, be endured for any length of time.

Before trying to discover instances of the old-age style in literature and music, I ought perhaps to consider the question of what, in a creative artist, is meant by 'old.' Painters and sculptors tend to live much longer than writers or musicians, and their work shows no sign of old age till their last years. Mr Henry Moore is seventy-three, but neither in himself nor in his carving is there the slightest sign of old age. Matisse became bedridden, but his art remained as fresh as a daisy. Conversely, Beethoven was under fifty when he entered what critics agree to call his last period, and the quartets, written when he was fifty-five, are classic examples of the old-age style in their freedom from established forms and their mixture of remoteness and urgent personal appeal. Like the last works of Michelangelo and Titian, they seem to go beyond our reach, and yet there is an ultimate reconciliation. One should, I suppose, add that Beethoven's isolation may have been increased by his deafness.

But there are other examples of an old-age style in a great artist under fifty for which there is no such simple explanation. How do we explain Shakespeare's last four plays? Critics tend to write of them as if they were the work of an old man, although Shakespeare was in his middle forties when he wrote them. *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* do indeed show some of the negative characteristics of the old-age style – the impatience, the recklessness and the bitterness. But these seem to me symptoms of exhaustion rather than of a new direction. Lytton Strachey's notorious judgement that 'Shakespeare in his last years

was half enchanted by visions of beauty and half bored to death', although it has been rejected with horror by most scholars of Shakespeare, seems to me substantially true. No man has ever burnt himself up more gloriously. But *The Tempest* does seem to show some characteristics that only an artist who has lived his life could give. Far more than the earlier plays it creates a private world of the imagination. Shakespeare, who had in the past written so immediately for his actors and his audiences, now seems to be writing only for himself. And Prospero's last speech could surely not have been written by a young man, even the young Shakespeare.

I have hesitated to quote the example of Shakespeare in *The Artist Grows Old*; and I would definitely exclude Racine, for, in spite of the enormous change that took place in his life during the twelve years' silence between *Phèdre* and *Esther*, and the considerable difference of style of his last two plays, they do not seem to reflect the liberation of old age. But I have no such hesitation in including a third – I might say *the* third – great European dramatist: Ibsen. His last plays, from *The Master Builder* to *When We Dead Awaken*, are perhaps the most complete illustration in literature of the characteristics of the old-age style as we have seen them more consistently revealed in the visual arts.

First, isolation. In the 1890s Ibsen was the most famous writer in Europe, but after his return to Norway he lived in a solitude of his own making. He was as lonely as Michelangelo, and if anything rather grumpier. Then the flight from realism. Viewed as a realistic drama *The Master Builder* is unconvincing, and in *When We Dead Awaken* all pretence of naturalism is abandoned. Both plays are still based on marvellous and embarrassing psychological insights; but in form

they are allegories of guilt and redemption. They are full, perhaps too full, of symbols; and as usual with the old-age style, these symbols can be interpreted differently and leave us with an uneasy feeling that we can decipher only half the message. They are intensely personal; in fact it can be argued that the hero-villain of each play is Ibsen himself, the man who sacrificed life to art and came to believe that life is the more important. Michelangelo, when asked to design the reverse side of his portrait medal by Leone Leoni, chose as his emblem an old blind pilgrim, led by a mongrel dog, trotting along confidently with tail erect. Ibsen would have agreed. But solitude and physical inaction do not imply a lack of vitality, and during the years in which his last play was being written, Ibsen was constantly falling in love with young girls. Hilde Wangel and Irene were real experiences and few things gave him more satisfaction than to read about the aged Goethe's love affair with Mariana von Wilmer. Only instead of his young ladies inspiring him to write poems to the rising moon, as Goethe did, whether effectively or not it is hard to say, Ibsen saw them as a new kind of Eumenides, playing on his sense of guilt and driving him on to self-destruction.

On the name of Goethe, I must confess that the greatest and most prolific of septuagenarian poets does not illustrate the characteristics of an old-age style, which seems to me so evident in the work of painters and sculptors. It is true that the second part of *Faust* ends with symbolic utterances as mysterious as the last speeches in *When We Dead Awaken*. But Goethe's respect for conformity (what is usually referred to as his wisdom) led to a tone of vague optimism, which his fellow ancients have not usually shared. It is remarkable that Thomas Hardy does not include

Goethe in his list. Perhaps he could not bring himself to say (and we sympathise with him) that the second part of *Faust* burned brightlier than the first. The numerous lyrics that Goethe wrote in his last years at the drop of a hat may be better than Longfellow. I cannot tell. What is certain is that they might have been written by any middle-aged poet conscious of his powers, and of his responsibilities to a rather conventional notion of poetry.

In the present century, as opposed to the last, poets have tended to gain in power as they grew older, and a number of them have written movingly in the old-age style – Yeats, Rilke, Thomas Hardy himself. Yeats and Rilke used the freedom of address and the almost impenetrable symbolism of aged painters. Thomas Hardy in such a poem as *Aftermath* spoke more simply, but with a feeling of isolation and imminent departure. But with no disrespect to these fine poets, I think one must allow that they are in a different category to Michelangelo, Titian and Rembrandt. Can we name an aged poet of this stature? Although he arouses no enthusiasm among modern critics, I hope I may be allowed to pronounce the name of Milton. *Samson Agonistes* is, so to say, a double distilled example of old-age writing, because it is undisguisedly modelled on the *Oedipus at Colonus* which Sophocles is supposed to have written after the age of 87. Like the other examples I have quoted, it is deeply personal. Milton was himself blind; his hopes had been shattered, his cause betrayed, and although his relations with the opposite sex were certainly not as simple as those of Samson and Delilah, he felt that his love of women was in some way connected with his failure. *Samson Agonistes* is almost as autobiographical as the last plays by Ibsen. But it differs from them

in that Samson discovers a humility that Ibsen's guilt-ridden characters cannot achieve, and so unlike the questionable victories of Solness and Rubeck, he ends his career with an apotheosis which is also the highest victory of old age.

*Samson Agonistes*, like *Paradise Regained*, also ends on a note of resignation; and in its actual diction it introduces one more aspect of the old-age style – a stoic austerity which denies any appeal to the emotions made through the sensuous quality of the medium. Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Donatello, Cézanne, all continued to use their media with an added sense of its material possibilities. But at least two great artists of the seventeenth century voluntarily rejected that charm of colour, light and joy in the use of paint which captivates us in their early work. These are Poussin and Claude. Poussin had equalled the great Venetians in his richness of colour and had sought for subjects that might allow him such sensuous delights. But by the time he had come to paint his second series of the *Seven Sacraments*, he had come to feel, as did Milton in *Paradise Regained*, that to display any pleasure in sensation would be to deprive the subject of its high seriousness. Poussin by the intellectual power of his invention seems to me to have justified his puritanical renunciation. But a poem, which has to hold our attention and keep our faculties warm for a longer time than a picture, may suffer more severely from the exclusion of ornament and graphic invention. The old-age style of Claude was less calculated. In his latest landscapes he did not deliberately exclude the enchantments of light and distance; but he retreated into a remote world of his own creation, where colour is subdued to a near monochrome and events take place in a sort of trance. This gentle, dreamlike departure from reality is very different from the

fiery pessimism of Michelangelo and Titian, and is perhaps the least painful expression of growing old.

The fact is that Arnold was not far wrong. The outstanding poet of our own day, Mr T. S. Eliot, has amplified his statement with more subtlety and even greater bitterness:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age  
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.  
First, the cold friction of expiring sense  
Without enchantment, offering no promise  
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit  
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.  
Second, the conscious impotence of rage  
At human folly, and the laceration  
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.  
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment  
Of all that you have done, and been; the  
shame  
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
Of things ill done and done to others'  
harm  
Which once you took for exercise of  
virtue.

Any elderly person can vouch for the accuracy of those lines. They record the common lot of *homo sapiens*. And the miraculous fact, which I have tried to describe in this lecture, is that many artists and some writers have, with infinite pain, created great works of art out of these miserable conditions. Their rage at human folly has not been impotent, their re-enactment of things done has been a means of re-creating them as part of a life-preserving myth, and they have arrested the moment when the body and soul fall asunder, caught enough of the body to make the moment comprehensible, and seen how its disintegration reveals the soul.