

Being Towards Death: Tragic Aesthetics and Stoicism in W. B. Yeats's *Men Improve With The Years*

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ABSTRACT

Men Improve With The Years was written by W. B. Yeats in 1916 by the time he had turned 50 years old. This paper argues that in this poem, Yeats presents his philosophical thoughts of the tragic life among human beings, highlighting that the joy in tragedy is “the way to survive” while the sorrow in tragedy is “being towards death”. Influenced by Nietzsche’s aesthetic notions of the Apollonian and Dionysian art, Yeats holds a kind of tragic aesthetic view towards death—“the unity of being” of individual life and nature, and aims to seek the joy of growing old and the freedom to create life out of life. As Apollonian dream covers the tragedy of life and Dionysian intoxication discloses it, the nameless old protagonist in the poem or Yeats himself attempts to bear the plight with stoicism and fortitude like a marble Triton so as to conquer and welcome all the sorrows in the process of aging and dying. Since men improve with the years, “being towards death” is the nature of living. Yeats hopes to achieve the aesthetic redemption from the tragic life in his early fifties, thus giving enlightenment to the predicament of human existence.

INTRODUCTION

W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), a prominent Irish poet in the 20th century, was appreciated as “the greatest poet of our age” by T.S. Eliot and honored as “the only poet worthy of serious study” by Ezra Pound (Stead, 1985: 15). In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for what the Nobel Committee described as “inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form that gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation” (Ellmann, 1964: 46). As a healer for Irish culture and for every member of modern society (Merritt, 2009), Yeats created a large number of beautiful poems during his life, unique for their mystery, romance, imagination and distinct aesthetics. Besides, being as one of the most influential poets with “strong sense of mission and responsibility” (Dong, 2015: 50), Yeats wrote for the national rejuvenation of Ireland, even for the existence and future of the whole human beings, since he lived in the period of social transformation in western world where people’s life was gradually changing from tradition to modernization (Bradley, 2011). Therefore, human and nature, life and death, ideal and reality, self and soul, past and future and so on are the core topics and common themes in his works.

Men Improve With The Years was a short but thought-provoking poem about aging and dying written by Yeats in July

1916, the year that his best-known *Easter, 1916* was also born. This poem “explores a strategy of romantic self-consolation” and has “proved a poor prophet of events”—Yeats proposed to Iseult Gonne in August 1916 and again in 1917; then he married George Hyde-Lees, aged 25, and before long fathered two children (Ross, 2009: 154-155). It was first published in *The Little Review* (periodical), June 1917, then included into *The Wild Swan at Coole*, a collection of twenty-nine poems and the play *At the Hawk’s Well* in November 1917 by the Cuala Press and republished in March 1919 by the Macmillan without the play but with an additional seventeen poems:

I AM worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady’s beauty
As though I had found in a book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years;
And yet, and yet,

Is this my dream, or the truth?
 O would that we had met
 When I had my burning youth!
 But I grow old among dreams,
 A weather-worn, marble triton
 Among the streams.

(Yeats, 1919: 14)

As the Master Confucius says, “At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I had no doubts; at fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven; at sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth, and at seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.” (Legge, 2007: 122) Yeats, in his early fifties, also puts forward his philosophical thoughts on life to explore its nature, trying to reveal the joy and satisfaction of “men improve with the years”, with a kind of tragic aesthetic attitude of “being towards death” and stoical acceptance of “growing”, “aging” and “dying”. He centers on how to live as men are worn out with dreams and grow old among dreams, emphasizing the freedom of individual’s detached life, so as to present his personal interpretation of the essence of life.

YEATS’S AESTHETIC VIEW ON TRAGEDY

Life is inevitably a tragedy as everyone will go through aging and travel towards death. “We can only begin to live when we conceive life as Tragedy”¹, and “only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling, unforeseen, wing-footed wanderer” (Yeats, 1959: 332). Yeats’s this kind of aesthetic view on tragedy, in fact, inherits Nietzsche’s aesthetic thoughts on tragedy, and his philosophical understanding of the “unity of being” of individual life and the universe or nature, since “Nietzsche’s perception of the pleasure in pain and his description of tragedy as a ‘draught of sweetest cruelty’ would have held much appeal for Yeats, who found such ‘astringent joy’ in reading the German” (Bohmann, 1982: 57).

In 1872, Nietzsche (1844-1900) proposes two terms—Apollonian and Dionysian (the opposed artistic worlds of dream and intoxication) in *The Birth of Tragedy*—to distinguish or display the different attitudes of human beings when facing tragedy, such as the life tragedy, human nature tragedy and existence tragedy. The Apollonian takes its name from Apollo, the god of all plastic energies and prophecy. He, the one who appears as shining, is the deity of light, dream and art, also “the master of the beautiful appearance of the inner world of the imagination” (Nietzsche, 2000: 21); while the Dionysian comes from Dionysus, the god of intoxication and music, suggesting the indulgence of emotion and paying no heed to the individual in intoxicated reality, even seeking “to annihilate the individual and to redeem him through a mystical feeling of unity” (Nietzsche, 2000: 23).

In other words, the subtext of Apollonian spirit is: “even if life is a dream, we should have this dream with a good taste, and never lose the passion and love in the dream”; while the subtext of Dionysian spirit is: “even if life is a tragedy, we should perform this tragedy with sound and color, and never lose the magnificence and joy of the tragedy” (Zhou,

1986: 7). Influenced by Nietzsche, Yeats believes that life was attributed to tragedy, but the spirit of tragedy should be as stoicism and sweetness, since “tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies” and it “must be lifted out of history with timeless pattern...and carried beyond feeling into the aboriginal ice” (Yeats, 1961: 523). This spirit of “joy in tragedy” transcends the worry and horror of the death and destruction of life, and replaces it with the pleasure and enjoyment of the insight of the essence of life.

In spite of the joy in tragedy, Yeats and Nietzsche at the same time argue and admit that the tragic aesthetics is based on the pain and destruction through living. Nietzsche emphasizes, Dionysian spirit is the representative of tragedy which convinces us of the eternal joy of existence, and “we should recognize how everything which comes into being must be prepared for a painful demise, we are forced to peer into the terrors of individual existence—without turning to stone: a metaphysical consolation tears us momentarily out of the bustle of changing shapes” (Nietzsche, 2000: 91). Yeats also claims frankly, “if I denied myself any of the pain, I could not believe in my own ecstasy” (Yeats, 1959: 332). According to Yeats, the heroes of Shakespeare also convey to us their ecstasy at the approach of death—“when the last darkness has gathered about them, speak out of an ecstasy that is one-half the self-surrender of sorrow, and one-half the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world” (Yeats, 1961: 254). It can be seen that the tragic aesthetics of Yeats aims not only to seek happiness and comfort from the pain and destruction of individual life, but also to challenge the authority, to fight against the setbacks and detach from the human life with a kind of domineering power to overcome all the sorrows and conquer the death.

As Yeats writes, “only when we are gay over a thing, and can play with it, do we show ourselves its master, and have minds clear enough for strength” and “that we may be free from all the rest, sullen anger, solemn virtue, calculating anxiety, gloomy suspicion, prevaricating hope, we should be reborn in gaiety” (Yeats, 1961: 252). In this regard, being in joy is a solid weapon to triumph over the frailty of human life and a force to survive in adversity and death. Just as Nietzsche points out, this is the result of the interweaving spirit of Apollonian and Dionysian, since Apollonian covers the tragic side of life with the veil of beauty, and Dionysian uncovers the veil and makes people confront the tragedy of life, which indicates “the former tells people not to give up the joy in life, while the latter teaches people not to avoid the pain of life; the former clings to life, while the latter transcends life; the former is infatuated with the moment, while the latter yearns for eternity” (Zhou, 1986: 5). Therefore, to admit and affirm the value and significance of life, as well as its pain and destruction, and to play and conspire with them and seek aesthetic pleasure from tragedy are what Yeats’s and Nietzsche’s focuses in their aesthetic views on tragedy.

Besides, Yeats puts forward that “tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and that it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house” (Yeats, 1961: 241). Here, Yeats uses the analogy of dyke to signify and form the basis of individual, and takes the rupture and submergence of dyke to describe the destruction and

integration of individual life, thus explaining that the tragedy in life shows the fusion of individual life and nature (Qu & Zhou, 2011: 46). This alludes to the dismemberment and rebirth of Dionysus, who once was torn into pieces by the Titans and revived by Demeter, the goddess of the harvest and agriculture. The dismemberment, the properly Dionysian suffering, is similar to “a transformation into earth, wind, fire, and water, while the rebirth brings the hope—a ray of joy comes across the face of the world which is torn asunder and broken into individuals” (Nietzsche, 2000: 59-60). That is to say, through the destruction of the individual, we can feel the richness and indestructibility of the will of time and life, and then have “a powerful and pleasant strength” (Zhou, 1986: 5), and for a few short moments, “we really are the original essence itself and feel its unbridled craving for existence and joy in existence” (Nietzsche, 2000: 91).

From this perspective, the destruction or collapse of individual life should be joyful and blissful. It is not redeemed from the vision of beauty in Apollonian spirit, but instead, it is saved by the intoxication—the metaphysical consolation of tragedy—in Dionysian spirit, which represents the unity of man and nature and another beginning of the eternity of life. Because of this, the individual can have the courage and power to fight against the pain, dread, nada and death in the world, as well as the stoicism or the unyielding pride to conquer the aging and dying. This is the greatest affirmation and the pursue of life, including its pain and destruction, and the tragedy is “the sublime and highly praised work of art” to illustrate it (Nietzsche, 2000: 33). Yeats, with this kind of spirit of “being towards death”, also integrates the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit of Nietzsche’s tragic aesthetics into his poetry creation, and attempts to convey the eulogy and praise for the immortality of life and soul in the form of art.

JOY IN TRAGEDY: THE WAY TO SURVIVE

Yeats is dedicated to the pursuit of beauty in his whole life as he believes “if beauty is not a gateway out of the net we were taken in at our birth, it will not long be beauty” (Yeats, 2003). In his poem, *Men Improve With The Years*, his pursuit of beauty and the joy in tragedy can be traced back to the illusion and vision of beauty forged by Apollonian spirit. There are 18 lines in the poem, and the speaker (the protagonist, or Yeats himself) begins with the first person, I, with the capitalized letters “AM” in the first line², which immediately creates a strange but familiar dreamlike beauty. After reading, it can be noticed that the protagonist in the poem is an old man/woman, who laments that he/she grows old among dreams. The prominence of “AM” firstly implies that the protagonist is now in a state of old age and lonely life; secondly it foreshadows the appearance of Apollonian illusion, echoing the line 13 of the poem—“Is this my dream, or the truth?”; thirdly, “AM” suggests the stillness of time and frozen state of space, which conveys the permanence of time and space, and complements the joy of aging and the eternity of life.

From the second line of *Men Improve With The Years*, the beauty of dreams created and woven by the Apollonian is sublimated gradually. The poet or the protagonist skillfully

uses the polysemy of the word to blur the meaning and cause a kind of hazy beauty unconsciously, and in the first and last three lines, he/she keeps repeating the same sentence—“A weather-worn, marble triton/Among the streams”, which visually presents the effect of beauty in both content and form. Among them, “weather-worn” means years of erosion and baptism, but the word “worn” shares the meanings of “(of a thing) damaged and shabby” and “(of a person) tired and old”. “Marble” is smooth and hard, usually white, which feels cold when you touch it and shines when it is cut and polished, showing a lustrous beauty and functioning as a powerful weapon or great strength against a worthy opponent, such as the lashing and etching of winds and rains. Triton is the messenger god of the sea and son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, a merman in Greek mythology. He carries a trident and has a unique and twisted conch shell which he uses as a trumpet to tame the waves to his volition. When he blows the conch, the sound made is like the roar of a ferocious beast, even the mighty giant will be overwhelmed by it. Therefore, “a weather-worn, marble triton” can be summed up as the transcendent side of all phenomena—the eternal life that has undergone through all hardships and sufferings, which possesses infinite power and can dominate the world.

In the tragic theme of aging and dying, Yeats lets us clearly see the power of life and covers its tragic side with the veil of beauty from Apollonian spirit, defeating the pain with beauty and presenting the joy in tragedy. Although the protagonist in the poem is worn out with dreams, he/she still stands as unswerving as a marble Triton, beautiful and charming among the streams, gorgeous and magnificent in the winds and rains, and full of confidence and strength in his/her heart. All day long, he/she looks upon a lady’s beauty, or the beauty of the protagonist herself. He/she is intrigued and immersed in the illusion as if the beauty he/she found has been pictured in a book. At this happy moment, the protagonist is pleased to have filled his/her eyes, or the discerning ears, or delighted to be wise for men improve with the years. Whether it in a dream or a reality, even though he/she grows old among dreams, he/she still thinks that he/she is a weather-worn, marble Triton among the streams, with the luster remained the same, brilliant and elegant, shining and dazzling. The protagonist, being in the beautiful dream woven by Apollonian, does not abandon the joy and hope of life, and enjoys the passion and delight of the dream, that is, he/she knows that he/she is growing old and dying, but never cares for the terror and the harm.

Yeats argues to face the tragedy with joy so as to conquer it. Being joyful and blissful is the way to survive in the tragedy of aging and dying. Hence, when confronted with these sorrows and sufferings, the protagonist is not sad to be old, not upset to have no dream, but instead, to be neither humble nor pushy via self-appreciation. The protagonist is constantly looking for happiness and comfort in the melting and vanishing of “individual life”. This is exactly the beautiful vision created by Apollonian. However, once the veil of beauty is broken, and the original face and terrible truth of the world and life are exposed, how should the protagonist respond to affirm the life? According to Nietzsche, “Apollonian tears us away from the Dionysian universality

and allows us to delight in individuals; it chains the arousal of our compassion to these individuals, and through them it satisfies the sense of beauty which craves great and sublime forms” (Nietzsche, 2000: 115). It is true that joy and happiness is based on the pain and destruction of individual life, but if we just indulge in the short-term dream woven by Apollonian, and don’t take up the weapon of joy to overcome the pain and conquer the tragic life, then after waking up from the dream, we will lose all the magnificence of the tragedy. Not to cover the veil of dream, not to escape from the pain, but to fight against the tragedy, and to reach the eternity of life are the problems that Dionysian spirit works to solve.

SORROW IN TRAGEDY: BEING TOWARDS DEATH

“Growing old” (or “aging”) means the fading away of life, and it cannot be selected and reversed like death. This slow destruction is most likely to bring about the sorrow of oneself and the compassion of others. For example, in the *Bible*, human beings have directly confessed their grievances of “growing old”—“My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass”³³. However, Yeats rejects this kind of moaning and groaning about imaginary illnesses, and says that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry”³⁴. Accordingly, in *Men Improve With The Years*, Yeats speaks bluntly—“I AM worn out with dreams”/“But I grow old among dreams”. The protagonist or Yeats himself chooses to take the courage to face the tragedy, and turns the passivity into initiative so as to dominate life. Starting from the title, Yeats has used the word “improve” to demonstrate that the passing of the years brings about the growth of wisdom, and the Dionysian spirit also has appeared at here.

Yeats’s skillful use of words and mastery of Dionysian spirit lie in the image of the messenger god of the sea—Triton in the first and the last three lines, which echoes each other with different images: one is worn out with dreams, and the other grows old among dreams. Whether the god Triton carved out of the marble changes before and after embodies the protagonist’s attitude towards life and tragedy. Dionysus, now, unveils Apollo’s covering of the tragic reality of life. The protagonist, worn-out by dreams, looks like the battered, tarnished, marble carved Triton, that is, the haggard, tired and aged protagonist himself/herself. For the old protagonist, the beautiful woman in a book he/she looks at all day can only be appreciated as a portrait. Here, Yeats’s seemingly moderate and mild writing actually hides the great loss and pain of the protagonist, because he does not “scant the sense of loss brought by age; otherwise he would have lost the dialectic that informs his best poetry” (Bornstein, 2012: 54). The beauty’s picturesque comparison shows the time is stopped and the space is frozen, indicating that the time is gone and the youth is gone, too. That is to say, the protagonist becomes old and has lost the practical capacity of passion and love, so he/she can only try to comfort himself/herself.

However, the poet changes the topic immediately and claims “delighted to be but wise”, covering up the sorrow

and loss with the satisfaction of eyes and ears—“Pleased to have filled the eyes/Or the discerning ears”. This kind of joy found in tragedy is “deeply moving” because it is based on the misery and loss, with remarkable courage to face up to and conquer (Qu & Zhou, 2011: 47). Then, the protagonist questions himself/herself from the soul: “And yet, and yet, /Is this my dream, or the truth?” Obviously, this is not a dream, but the protagonist is willing to believe “O would that we had met/When I had my burning youth!” Indeed, youth goes and never returns. Confronted with the awkward and helpless fact of gradual “aging”, the protagonist has grown old among his/her dreams. Yet, even though he/she was (or is, or will be) beaten by winds and rains, becoming worn-out and exhausted; or baptized by the years, experiencing the hardships of life, he is still a marble Triton in a stream, tough and gutsy. This sharp contrast between the former and the latter implies that the protagonist’s courage and determination towards “aging” and “dying” and shows his/her stoicism and fortitude in bearing the plight through the delight improved with wisdom and joy found in tragedy.

The Dionysus strips off the layers of the veil of tragedy, so that we can see the protagonist’s transcendent spirit or a detached attitude towards life since he/she has not evaded the sorrow in tragedy, even the true destiny of destruction and death. “Growing old” does not make the protagonist wallow in grief or self-pity. On the contrary, he/she despises and defeats the age-related decline of the body with his/her own wisdom and soul, and performs this tragedy of “aging” with sound and color, never losing its brilliance and beauty. Is this not what the aesthetic implications of the tragic spirit that Nietzsche and Yeats approve and appreciate? At the end lines of *Men Improve With The Years*, the appearance and resistance of the marble Triton, solid and glorious, or haggard and tarnished, exactly displays the great courage and strength of the protagonist. Perhaps, this kind of rebellion seems to be a little absurd, or like a moth into the fire, and at all events the body of the protagonist steps into death with this desperate resistance, but his/her soul or spirit will be reborn in the process, and finally integrates with the stream, nature, and universe to be oneness, towards the end and eternity of life, just like Dionysus.

Therefore, what Yeats believes (or the way to deal with) the sorrow in tragedy is actually “being towards death”. Nevertheless, the terror of tragedy is not death, but the lack of courage to face death. In other words, the real horror is not death, but that you never really live for yourself. The Dionysian spirit reveals the true meaning of life, so the beautiful illusion created by Apollonian art eventually shows its true side or face, proving that the Apollonian always hides the real Dionysian effect in the performance of tragedy. “When Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, and Apollo finally speaks the language of Dionysus, and so the highest goal of tragedy and of art itself is achieved” (Nietzsche, 2000: 117). So far, the poem on the one hand, has the Apollonian optimism, beauty and self-affirmation, but on the other it presents a tragic ending, in which the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit are intertwined. When Dionysus laments that “O would that we had met/When I had my burning youth”, the Apollonian

power breaks out, “directed towards the restoration of the almost shattered individual, with the curative balm of a blissful illusion (Nietzsche, 2000: 114), so that the protagonist can follow his/her original aspiration and stand as firm as the marble Triton that in Apollonian dream, full of faith and confidence. For him/her, “growing old” is no longer to continuously complain and silently suffer, but instead, to be brave, decisive, patient and strong. Ultimately, the joy in tragedy, and the sorrow in tragedy are all reduced to the satisfaction of the everlasting life.

CONCLUSION

Yeats in his early fifties, “the year of destiny”, sends out a message of hope for the eternal life in tragedy with the poem *Men Improve With The Years*. He persuades himself to “observe and abide by the boundary and conform to reality” (Zhou, 2017: 144), and believes that happiness and pain are interwoven, and all human beings can weave the threads of life into whatever garments of belief that please and warm them best (Yeats, 2003). Thus, Yeats prefers to gain the knowledge and wisdom improved with the years and ever-youthful power and joy by confronting the unpleasant and uncomfortable fact of “aging” and “dying”, at the same time to makes great effort to create a beautiful dream of Apollonian illusion, since life is full of misery, and the dream is the shelter of human suffering, a place to rest for the soul, to escape when in the depth of despair, to be relieved when shattered, and to be in stoicism when endured, thus men will never lose the courage to live.

Yeats and Nietzsche both lived in the “wasteland” era of Western civilization at the late 19th and early 20th century, witnessing war, disaster and death. The traditional value system of western world in that time was fragmented, and people were faced with the spiritual crisis of lack of belief (Bohlmann, 1982). The barrenness of mind and soul was “the ubiquitous imprint” of that era. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche highlights the two impulses of art, the Apollonian and Dionysian, for human beings to redeem from suffering. Influenced by Nietzsche’s thoughts of this art redemption in tragedy, Yeats thinks that the function of poetry, as a form of art, is also to make people get joy and pleasure, and earn their own salvation via reading, and the aesthetic redemption of tragic life is equal to the inner strength against the external pressure, which can help people overcome obstacles and difficulties in reality and build a kind of a protective mechanism (Ramazani, 1990). Therefore, Yeats perfectly combines Nietzsche’s Apollonian spirit and Dionysian spirit into his poetry creation with profound meditation and exquisite art, and attempts to interpret the survival predicament of human beings, so as to point out the direction for people to go to their future with dignity, thus completing his writing of the ultimate meaning of life—“being towards death”.

END NOTES

1. In 1920, when Yeats worked on the *Four Years: 1887-1891* section of *Autobiographies* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), he explains, “Among subjective men (in all those,

that is, who must spin a web out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away, and so that fate’s antithesis; while what I have called ‘the Mask’ is an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature. We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy.”

2. In some other versions published, the capitalized letters “AM” are edited as the lower-case letters “am”. This paper adopts the original and complete edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole* published in London and New York, The Macmillan, 1999. <https://www.bartleby.com/148/4.html> (accessed 5/4/2020)
3. See *The Holy Bible*, Psalm 102: 11, authorized King James Version. 2000. New York: Bartleby.com. <https://www.bartleby.com/108/19/102.html#S102> (accessed 10/4/2020)
4. In the Preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892- 1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), Yeats explains his distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the Great War and proposes that: “In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles* on Etna from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.”

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