LIFE IS FOR LIVING:
ARTISTRY IN OLD AGE

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Three Great Human Episodes
Towards the end of his own life, the critic and philosopher Edward Said became very interested in the last work of artists, for which he coined the phrase ‘Late Style’. He saw human beings as engaged in a ‘self-making process’ that was defined by ‘three great human episodes common to all human cultures and traditions’. The first of these is experienced in childhood and youth. It focuses on origin, the starting point in time and space that defines both the possibilities and the limits that will shape a life. The middle concerns the unfolding of that potential, how adult actions fulfil or fail to fulfil the promise of youth, how a character is made by its history. The third, final episode is the story’s end, the descent of the dramatic arc in which resolution is achieved or denied, meaning found, lost or perhaps both. Sense is made, in the end. Sometimes, it is also true. ¹

A beginning, a middle and an end
There are several reasons why this idea appeals to me, including its link with Aristotle’s ideas about dramatic structure, which he described as

the representation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain amplitude— for a thing may be whole and yet lack amplitude. A whole is that thing which has a beginning, middle, and an end. ²

Like many truths, it seems obvious, but only because a philosopher has pointed it out. And the reason a drama must have a beginning, a middle and an end is because it is a story.

Stories, like human beings, exist in time: so they must begin, go on and stop. Like human beings. And it is our imperative need to tell stories about ourselves and each other that makes us human in the first place. We are walking stories.
A story without a happy ending
Henning Mankell, who was an atheist sometimes described as a secular Lutheran, observed in his last book that

    Nowadays people in our part of the world no longer believe in God. They believe in scratch cards and other games of chance. ³

As a result, our story of old age is not that good. When Europeans lost faith in God and Paradise, they seem also to have lost faith in happy endings. Without a shared way of making sense of death, we struggle to bring the story to a fitting close.

For the Benedictine monk, Christopher Jamison,

    A happy death as part of a life informed by contemplation and virtue describes the overall picture of our journey. ⁴

But those who do not have his faith must find another sense in the end of life – and, what concerns me more here – in the years before it, which Christian theology has seen as a time of letting go and reconciliation.

The story of losing
We may no longer find that story convincing but, it seems to me, we’ve struggled to create a good alternative. In its absence, the idea of letting go has been replaced with one of losing.

The first episodes of the TV comedy, One Foot in the Grave, are memorable for the way that Richard Wilson plays the bewilderment of someone unexpectedly facing retirement. The loss of a job, and the social and financial status that comes with it, can be very hard to accept.

It is not surprising therefore – and greatly to the benefit of the rest of us – that half of those aged over 65 are active volunteers. ⁵ Getting older does not make us less inclined to give or to believe that we have something to offer, even if it is no longer in paid work.

Loss is loss
The story of loss is powerful because it is real. Old age brings a succession of losses: though their nature and how they affect are as individual as we are.

I’ve already mentioned the social structure of work, paid and voluntary, and some of us are forced to give it up long before we are ready. The people with whom we have worked for years pass out of our orbit when the professional ties that held us are undone. At home, as age marches on, we lose friends and attend more funerals.

Our own strength and health will decline; our memory may fray. Such losses make us afraid of losing what matters most – our dignity and our capacity to decide for ourselves.

Shakespeare puts what may be the shortest, bleakest picture of old age into the mouth of the world-weary Jacques, whose seven ages of man end with:

    ‘...second childishness and mere oblivion,
        Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’ ⁶
The loss of teeth suggests the loss of power – the ability to bite.

**Loss of Power**

And that’s the nub of it. All those losses, whenever and however we face them, represent a slow erosion of our power – not just in respect of others or the world around us, but even over our own bodies and minds.

That loss of power matters because we fought so hard for it as children. The great prize of adulthood is the freedom to make our decisions, to choose and to take the consequences. Autonomy is something most of us cherish above all else.

**Agency**

The ability to make choices, to act on our own behalf in the world, is called agency. Our agency is constrained in many ways – by physical reality, by the agency of others and by the structures that shape the society in which we live. But we struggle for it because it brings us closer to self-actualisation. It is how we write our stories, how we become our selves.

Another way of seeing the stages of Edward Said’s ‘self-making process’ is the progress of our degree of agency in the world, an arc with a beginning, a middle and an end.

As babies, we have almost none: our power goes no further than crying and being able to inspire love. Agency increases during youth as we acquire skill, knowledge and experience. The transition to adulthood is not a process but a moment, symbolised as a door to which we gain the key. There is no comparable transition out of adulthood, though the moment of retirement is industrial society’s way of showing us the door.

**The beginning and the end**

This feels like an arc, rising and falling, and indeed, culture offers many symbolic and mythic representations of human life that trace that pattern. As T. S. Eliot famously wrote:

> In my beginning is my end

But in the final poem of the *Four Quartets*, he writes

> We shall not cease from exploration  
> And the end of all our exploring  
> Will be to arrive where we started  
> And know the place for the first time

Why should we know the place for the first time? Because we bring a lifetime’s knowledge and understanding to it, because even if we are as weak and dependent as when we were children, we still have agency – creative agency.
Creative agency
Agency takes many forms. Holding office, money or property all confer agency, as do physical strength and intellectual speed. Rhetoric itself, the ability hold a listener’s attention and influence their thinking, is a source of agency.

Art, the creative act of self-expression through which we bring new images, ideas and feelings into shareable existence, is one of our most precious and universal sources of agency. Why? Because its individual power does not depend on structural forms of power. Yes, social structures like class, ethnicity and gender can amplify a person’s artistic voice, but they cannot smother it because art is always personal – one mind connecting with another.

Art allows us to glimpse what it feels like to be someone else, what the world looks like from their perspective, and how differently it might be if... we thought or felt or acted differently. But it equally allows us to tell our own stories, and say what it feels like to be us, how things look from where we stand, and how things might be if we tried another way of being.

Labour, Work and Action
In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between labour, work and action as dimensions of human life. All three are necessary to an active life, but only human beings are capable of the third because it is rooted in their freedom to choose. Unlike labour and work, action does not have to follow necessity – indeed human beings often do what is not in their interest, most notably when they give their lives to save others.9

Art is pure action so when labour takes an increasing amount of our day – for instance in personal care – its countering value is never greater.

Winter Fires
A few years ago, I wrote a short book called Winter Fires. It set out to show that creative agency, the ability to act as an artist, could be as important in old age as in any other time of life. It was partly inspired by a reaction to the increasingly accepted idea that participating in art is good for elderly people because it contributed to their wellbeing. It is and it does, but that is just part of the story.

Art is not just something that the young can provide for the old. It is something that the old can provide for themselves and for everyone else, including the young. Old people are artists too – professional and amateur artists with fifty or sixty years of creative knowledge to draw on as well as young artists who have only found the time and the means for creative work in retirement. In the book, I tell the story of all these kinds of artists, with portraits made by my friend, Mik Godley.

Artists thriving in old age
There were those, like Sally Cottis, who were simply continuing a lifelong professional practice as musicians, painters or writers, relieved by a pension from the burden of having to work in teaching or in response to commissioner’s wishes.
There were artists, like Colin MacLean, for whom retirement had been the opportunity, at last, to do what they had always loved but had put aside to earn a living and provide for others.

There were artists, like Gwen Sewell and Rosie Wheatland, who had discovered theatre, dance or writing as way to talk about being old and challenge the assumptions of those who thought of old age as a problem.

**Old people are just people who are older**

Old people do have problems but so does everyone else. They are not, and shouldn’t be, defined by those problems, any more than people should be defined by disability, motherhood, gender or skin colour.

To do so is to disempower people, and the biggest problem of old age is already a loss of power. Instead we could see old people as skilled, knowledgeable and experienced, as having the time and will to contribute their gifts, as being resources for themselves, each other and society as a whole.

**Independent Creative Living**

The vision of establishing living spaces in which people who need support can also be active and creative in everyday life seems to me deeply inspiring. Where the young are concerned, we have little difficulty in recognising the place of creativity within a package of care but why should it be so different for the old? Is it because we see potential only in the young?

We need to rewrite the story of life, no to give it an easy, upbeat Disney-fied ending, or pretend that it’s easy to live with loss, but to recognise that we don’t stop being involved in that self-making process because we have reached a certain age. We always have thing to learn and things to share, if it is only what the view looks like from where we stand.

Some of our powers may decline with age, but our potential for creative agency need not. The Baring Foundation, which has focused on the arts in old age since 2010, recently offered a series of commissions to artists aged over 65. The work produced by Ron Haselden and Bisakha Sarker, Robert Race and Hilary Painter, among others, has been exceptional.

In Robert Race’s automaton, a merry-go-round turns with the the words ‘you don’t stop playing because you grow old: you grow old because you stop playing.’ It’s all we need to know. Life is for living.

**References**

6 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VII
7 Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*, ‘East Coker’
8 Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*, ‘Little Gidding’