

A “Work of Life”: Jane Harrison on Older Age

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The article examines the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison’s (1850-1928) thoughts about aging both as a cultural phenomenon and as personal experience. It argues that her reflections are poised between two diverging ideas about life which I term bergsonism and olympianism. While the former, according to Harrison, points to life as wholeness and permanent process (and which she illustrates by the figures of snowball and wheel, by the imperfective verb in the Russian novel, by the importance of ritual, or by her embracement of imbecility), the latter indicates detachment, idiocy, the perfect tense, discontinuity, and tragic vision. Of particular interest to the article are Harrison’s three later essays “Crabbed Age and Youth,” “Aspects, Aorists, and the Classical Tripos,” and “Reminiscences of a Student’s Life.” The article shows the variety of perspectives—anthropological, mythical, linguist, aesthetic, and philosophical—which Harrison makes use of to explain the phenomenon of aging.

“A thing has little charm for me unless it has on it the patina of age.” (*Reminiscences* 344).

This article examines classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison’s (1850-1928) thoughts about aging, primarily her essay “Crabbed Age and Youth.” More than sixty years old when she first read the essay to the Trinity Essay Society in 1914, Harrison was at this time a lecturer at Newnham College in Cambridge, a

specialist in ancient Greek religion and ritual, and someone who had already written an extensive body of work which had helped, according to Shanyn Fiske, to “pioneer the integration of the archaeological, ethnological, and sociological theories into Hellenic studies at the turn of the twentieth century” (Fiske 131). She was, moreover, an academic celebrity and peculiarity – according to Mary Beard, “the first woman in England to become an academic, in the fully professional sense: an ambitious, full-time, salaried, university researcher and lecturer” (*Guardian*) – and a highly influential commentator on ancient rituals which in charismatic fashion she semi-staged during her lectures, once even drawing a crowd of more than six hundred people. She was a lively and often polemical researcher of an eclectic kind, and known as one of the Cambridge Ritualists, a group of Cambridge classicists who inspired by George Herbert Frazer had laid emphasis on ancient ritual as the foundation of myth and drama. A Nietzschean who subscribed to the German philosopher’s arguments about the birth of tragedy in the Dionysian cult, Harrison saw ancient rites as not only more primordial than art, but also more interesting and vitalistic. For where art tended towards representation and fixation and thus risked succumbing into a sterile Olympianism¹, rites involved, as she saw it, not “re-presenting” but “pre-presenting” an action², making palpable – staunch Bergsonian as she was at a time when Bergson was hardly universally accepted in the English academic world – the presence of “la durée” and “l’*élan vital*”, the ever ongoing process of the life forces.

My article will consider the various perspectives she brings to the topic of aging, both as a cultural phenomenon and as personal experience. Primarily concerned with her later texts, first and foremost “Crabbed Age and Youth”, I

¹ One of her most famous claims is that the Olympian gods are “essentially *objets d’art*” (*Themis* 462).

² In *Ancient Art and Ritual* she claims that rites are closely related to desire. A rite is not “re-presenting” an action, but “pre-presenting” it to discharge an emotion (43).

will also look at the autobiographical *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (1925) and her investigations into Russian language and literature in *Aspects, Aorists, and the Classical Tripos* (1919). As we will see, in all these texts Harrison argues that life needs to be seen in its *wholeness*, both as regards individual life *and* human life in general. Life, to Harrison, is not a heap of discontinuous moments, but a coherent and infinite process, an “indivisible movement”, a “cycle of life upon life ceaselessly revolving” (*Prolegomena* 534) which, with a metaphor I will return to, she likens to a permanently rotating snowball. In the following four subsections I will explore the ways Harrison’s claims about life as on-going process determine her views on old age. On the one hand, she is wary of isolating old age as a separate and autonomous life period, but on the other hand in *Alpha and Omega* (1915) she also seems to approve of the so-called “vision” and insight which are offered to those who in old age are, as she drastically puts it, “discharged from life” (16). As I will demonstrate, Harrison’s arguments are in this regard complex and full of tensions, something which derives from her tendency to view life as poised between opposing forces. The following subchapters will elucidate these tensions; first, by looking at her opposition of egotism versus altruism; second, by dealing with the differences between ritual and tragedy; and third, by her elucidations of Western and Russian mentalities. In the fourth and final subchapter, I go more into Harrison’s biography, looking especially at her intriguing relationship with the poet Hope Mirrlees during the last years of her life. Here I will also throw some light at the old Harrison’s relation to what she calls “imbecility”.

From “idiocy” to Bergsonian “durée”.

When Harrison published “Crabbed Age and Youth” in the essay collection *Alpha and Omega*, alongside other essays on as various topics as the suffragette movement, pacifism, heresy, Darwin, and the group of French poets calling

themselves Unanimists, she was hardly unfamiliar with the topic of age, which she had briefly considered in some of her many forays into Greek religion and mythology. In her famous *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), a learned and innovative study which together with her other main book *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1913) would influence authors such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot (Phillips), she had discussed the so-called “Ker of Old Age”, one of the evil spirits the Greeks called Keres which infest the living (170-175). Another mythological figure Harrison often returned to was Pandora, the so-called “first woman” who, in Hesiod’s depictions in *Works and Days*, had fatally opened the box containing all the ills that were to haunt humanity, including old age. Harrison’s approach in these studies was merely scientific. When turning to the same topic in “Crabbed Age and Youth”, she pursued a more personal viewpoint. The essay itself consists of personal anecdotes combined with critical discussion of stereotypes and age-typical behaviors. It is rather short and eclectic and with a generally positive take on old age as a period entailing increased insight and wisdom.

Crucial to Harrison’s essay is the relationship between youth and age. How can they live happily together? How to avoid mutual antipathy? The title comes from a well-known poem by Shakespeare in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, where this antipathy is indeed clearly manifested:

Crabbèd age and youth cannot live together,
 Youth is full of pleasance, Age is full of care;
 Youth like summer morn, Age like winter weather;
 Youth like summer brave, Age like winter bare.
 (...)

(353)

The poem also contains the lines, spoken by Youth: “Age, I do abhor thee” and “Age, I do defy thee” (353), thus it is clearly not an apology for a happy cross-generational relationship. In her essay, Harrison considers how these

deeply ingrained cultural notions might be challenged. She wants to show under what conditions the abhorrence and defiance which so often has alienated these age groups from each other can be overcome and eradicated, and the two generations can in fact live happily together.

For Harrison, a model for happy coexistence came with her discovery some years earlier of the so-called Unanimists, a French avantgarde group of poets led by Jules Romains who in the early 1900s had founded a short-lived community at l'Abbaye de Créteil and whose doctrine owed much to ideals of universal brotherhood and modern theories about group-emotion. In her essay "Unanimism and Conversion" (1912), included in *Alpha and Omega*, Harrison hails these poets and the collective and altruistic spirit they embodied, which to her mind represented nothing less than "the new religion for which the world waits" (70). This community had eschewed all kinds of bourgeois hierarchies and class distinctions, and lived, as Harrison saw it, in a way where each member was free "to love his own life, penetrate it, and see its beauty and value" (*Unanimism* 47). Especially important to her was their repudiation of egotism, the yoke of the human race. According to Harrison: "Mankind is turning in its long egotistic sleep and waking to – Unanimism" (*Unanimism* 47). Their community life attracted her immensely. Summing up their credo while referring to their most important members, she writes:

M. Arcos showed us the stream of life in ceaseless change, yet uninterrupted unity; M. Romains, the oneness of life lived together in groups, its strength and dominance. M. Vildrac has shown us the value of each individual manifestation of life, and the strange new joy, and even ecstasy, that comes of human sympathy (*Unanimism* 58).

When Harrison wrote "Crabbed Age and Youth" two years after her enthusiastic review of the Unanimists, she wanted to examine whether the kind of collective "sharing," "oneness of life," and "human sympathy" which she

had found exposed in the group of the French poets and their families, could be replicated for the relationship between youth and age. Could the “stream of life in ceaseless change” unite young and old, allowing for cross-generational bliss? Her setting, she claims in the essay, was university with its competitiveness and asymmetric power relations between students and dons: Were there any chances the Unanimist creeds could be instilled in such a milieu? A personal experience contributed to the urgency of this question. In 1908 she had been introduced to the poet Rupert Brooke, then a student at Cambridge, who died as a soldier in 1915 in the First World War, and whose posthumous fame was partly founded on the tragic loss of his young blood (Brooke only got to twenty-seven years old). Brooke had carelessly remarked in her presence that “no one over thirty is worth talking to.” According to Harrison’s biographer Annabel Robinson, “these words struck her at a sore point. She had always prided herself on her ability to relate to young people” (202). In “Crabbed Age and Youth” Harrison recalls Brooke’s remark without giving his name, presenting it as a “prejudice” and example of how “Gifted Youth” will sometimes believe itself to be fully autarchic, having all the necessary resources of life in its own hands, without the need of others.

A concern which frequently turns up in “Crabbed Age and Youth” is that of our “prejudice” and tendency to “generalize” about other age groups than our own. For Harrison, this power of generalization stands in the way of cross-generational happiness, and it also contrasts with the community philosophy of the Unanimists with their rejection of class distinctions. She remarks:

I think it was Blake who said, ‘The man who generalizes is an idiot’. This is rather a sweeping statement. The man who generalizes – if an idiot – is a most useful and necessary idiot in providing the tools for life. But it is quite true that life itself escapes him, slips through his clumsy, classifying fingers. The man who handles life by means of generalization – that is, who treats individuals merely or mainly as members of classes – is not exactly an idiot, but for social purposes a rather tiresome,

blundering savage (“Crabbed Age” 23).

It does not take much to see that Harrison’s generalizing “idiot” is the complete contrast to the Unanimists. Unlike the Unanimists who flow with what she had called the “stream of life in ceaseless change,” the “idiot” instead lets it slip clumsily through his fingers. Life “escapes him.”³ At the same time, Harrison holds that the “idiot” is both “useful” and “necessary,” perhaps an acknowledgement that one cannot fully dispense with generalizations in intellectual life. Indeed, her own essay contains its fair share of generalizations. However, Harrison’s point is that we should not let our lives be guided by these generalizations, but rather strive, to the best of our ability, to withstand the inborn tendency towards idiocy, a term which etymologically points to someone not involved in public life and thus connotes non-engagement. Opposed as she was to such privacy, what mattered according to Harrison was not, as Brooke had suggested, to *not* talk to people of different age groups, but to talk to them, for only thus can our prejudices be challenged and vanquished.⁴

Through her polemic with the generalizing “idiot” unable to flow with the “stream of life,” Harrison can then quite easily move to her favorite philosopher Henri Bergson whose concept of “la durée” manifested, as Harrison saw it, the exact opposite of the segmental and partitioned view of life championed by the young Brooke. Our inner experience, Bergson had argued, was ongoing continuity, a dynamic and indivisible whole consisting of past, present and future, and it was false to think of human existence in terms of scientific or

³ It might be noted that Harrison’s argument precedes Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s claims in the famous essay “Art as Technique” (1917) that our grasp of reality is made efficient but also impoverished by our everyday language with its tendencies towards what he called “automatization” and “algebraization.” For both Shklovsky and Harrison, the acts of generalization and abstraction tend to reify our sense of the world.

⁴ For instance, Harrison speaks approvingly of a friend of hers able to converse “with exactly the same slightly colorless courtesy to child, young man, great lady, Archbishop.” His mind, she adds, “does not work in classes; in his eyes, we are all – individuals” (1915, 26).

chronometric time. Rather, the duration is indivisible, with the past moving into the future, eating it up: “La durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l’avenir et qui gonfle en avançant” (Bergson 760).⁵ In another memorable statement Bergson had maintained that “consciousness is above all a hyphen, a tie between the past and future” (quoted in Harrison *Themis* 514). Trying to cut human life into separate and isolated spheres—young/old—such as Brooke had done, would thus be off the mark, and ‘idiotic’.

In her readings of Bergson, Harrison was especially drawn to one metaphor, namely his notion of human life as a *snowball*, where through a continually rotating process the self appears an accumulating force of duration. In “Crabbed Age and Youth” she asserts: “You cannot unroll that snowball which is you: there is no ‘you’ except your life – lived” (16). She also uses the metaphor in her essay “Unanimism and Conversion”:

Life is one – but you may think of oneness in two ways. There is the stream of life in *time*, or, rather, in what Professor Bergson calls *durée*; that is one. Each of us is a snowball growing bigger every moment, and in which all *our* past, and also the past out of which we sprang, all the generations behind us, is rolled up, involved. Or we may think of the oneness in another way, so to speak laterally or spatially, contemporaneously. All the life existing at one moment in the world, and at every successive moment, though individualized, is one.” (48)

The passage presents life as continuous and whole: not only is our own life whole in the sense that our past is “involved” in our present, but every individual is himself part of the wholeness (or “unity”) of life itself. This was what Harrison also saw as the important impetus of the Unanimists. They refused to see themselves merely in terms of their own ego, as Harrison writes in “Unanimism and Conversion”: “[t]heir focus of interest is all shifted from

⁵ “*Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.*” (My translation)

the ego, from the inside to the outside; therein is their salvation” (47). In writing “Crabbed Age and Youth.” Harrison’s attempt is to make this “salvation” applicable to the notoriously complex relationship between youth and age. The way these two ages can “live happily together” is not so much by insisting, each by their own, on their own isolated time frame, their own separated historical position, but in understanding that they are part of an overarching temporal structure (or stream⁶), namely “durée” or duration, which unites all human life. It is not by partitioning out a private “time-space” for ourselves, a *hortus conclusus* for each different age group, but by acknowledging the stream of time as something which flows through all life simultaneously and continuously, that the conditions for happy coexistence are laid, according to Harrison. For her, acknowledging “durée” offers a way out of the egotisms held by the separate age groups.

“Tragic Antinomy”

As the previous discussion has showed, Harrison thinks of life as movement and “durée.” Crucially, this snowballing movement also determines her approach to ritual. As Harrison put it in 1965’s *Reminiscences of a Student’s Life*: “A ritual dance, a ritual procession with vestments and lights and banners, move me as no sermon, no hymn, no picture, no poem has ever moved me; perhaps it is because a procession seems to me like life, like *durée* itself, caught and fixed before me” (343). For Harrison ritual was something more primordial, more essential and more attractive than art because while art meant a cutting off and a detachment which looked on life from a perspective of generalization and

⁶ For the stream-metaphor so crucial to modernist writers, see Fernihough 2007, who also refers to the snowball-metaphor. The stream of consciousness-style in modernism certainly also was influenced by Bergson’s statement that “Consciousness is a single sentence that was begun at the first awakening of consciousness, a sentence strewn with commas but in no place cut by a period” (Mowrer 1914, 7).

abstraction, ritual was much more embedded into the life processes itself: It was immediate action and what she calls “holopsychosis” where “subject and object have not yet got their heads above water but are submerged in a situation” (*Themis* 474).⁷ For Harrison, this holopsychotic immanence, in which we are “submerged in a situation” rather than mastering or defining it from the outside, determines much of our life and our aging, and takes existential and ontological precedence over art (and science). According to Harrison’s *Themis. A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, the distinction between a ritualistic and an aesthetic conception of life also manifests itself in ancient mythology. Influenced by the Swiss scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen’s theories of prehistoric matriarchy, she held that whereas the generation of the Olympian gods led by Zeus epitomized a “barren immortality” (*Themis* 469) and detachedness from life, the earlier generation of goddesses like Dike or Themis, tied to the earth rather than to the air, and much less individualized, rather exemplified movement and “durée,” the “indivisible movement of life” itself with its ceaseless change (*Themis* 534).⁸

The distinction between ritual and art is also manifest in “Crabbed Age and Youth.” Consider this grand allegory about the “wheel of life”:

Looking back on life I seem to see Youth as standing, a small, intensely-focused spot, outside a great globe or circle. So intense is the focus that the tiny spot believes itself the centre of the great circle. Then slowly that little burning, throbbing spot that is oneself is sucked in with thousands of others into the great globe. Humbled by life it learns that it is no centre of life at all; at most it is one of the myriads of spokes in the great wheel. In Old Age the speck, the individual life, passes out on the other side, no

⁷ For the difference between ritual and art, see the remark in *Ancient Art and Ritual* that ritual “makes, as it were, a bridge between real life and art” (Harrison 1913, 135).

⁸ Harrison’s fascinating article “The Pillar and the Maiden” separates between mystery gods and the Olympian gods on grounds of the image. To make a picture of a god, such as the Greeks did with the Olympians, was, according to Harrison, to replace genuine religious awe with artistic know-how: “The vague *something* becomes a particular *some-one*” (1908, 75). This so-called “eikonism” implies a lessening of the religious feeling generated by the “aneikonism,” the non-individualized “vague” spirit embodied by the mystery gods.

longer burning and yet not quite consumed. In Old Age we look back on the great wheel; we can see it a little because, at least partially, we are outside of it. But this looking back is strangely different from the looking forward of Youth. It is disillusioned, but so much the richer. Occasionally nowadays I get glimpses of what that vision might be. I get my head for a moment out of the blazing, blinding, torturing wheel; the vision of the thing behind me and without me obscurely breaks. It looks strange, almost portentous, yet comforting; but that vision is incommunicable. (*Crabbed Age* 16)

This passage looks at life from a perspective that seems eminently ritualistic. Harrison presents a view of life that starts with youth being “sucked in” into “the great globe” and ends with the old “passed out on the other side, no longer burning,” an imagery which chimes in with her studies of initiation rituals and ritual expulsion (*Epilegomena* 2). From the initial “intense” megalomania of youth, human beings are soon “humbled” by life and the various rituals of society (Harrison speaks of social rituals such as “Officialdom” and “Marriage”) when they learn that they form no center after all. In old age, the “individual speck” is expelled, “no longer burning and yet not quite consumed”. Dominating this allegory of life is the “great wheel,” a figure known from the many ritual ceremonies analyzed by Harrison in her anthropological studies, and of whose centrality to ancient mythology and philosophy she was of course aware.⁹ Evidently, her use of this metaphor recalls her bergsonian emphasis on life as snowballing rotation. However, it here takes on a more negative quality given that Harrison defines the wheel as “blazing, blinding, tortuous”.¹⁰ Life appears more fatalistic, more terrible here than in the other passages we have

⁹ In *Prolegomena* Harrison had for instance thematized the mystic Orphic religion with its “notion of existence as a Wheel, a cycle of life upon life ceaselessly revolving” (1991, 588). See also her reflections on the “Wheel of Dike” and the Swastika in *Themis* (2010, 523-526).

¹⁰ The description evokes Harrison’s discussions of burning circles and pyres used in initiation rites, for instance the “firewheel” mentioned in 1916, 218, but it might also give associations to the agony of Ixion, a Titan condemned by Zeus the Olympian ruler and tied to a fiery wheel endlessly spinning.

quoted.

To understand more of this passage, it is necessary to examine the distinction she makes between the “intensity” of youth, the “humility” of middle age, and the “vision” of old age. The first two are the most easily explained. Harrison was much influenced by Émile Durkheim’s *De la division du travail social* (1893) in which he had stated that although humans are inherently egoistical, societies are created and held together by a so-called “collective consciousness” which ensures that we are able to both cooperate and recognize each other as individuals. In her essay Harrison frames the difference between youth and middle age in accordance with Durkheim’s theory. While youth, according to Harrison, is characterized by “egotism” and a tendency to “masquerade,” that is practise a megalomaniac self-enhancement where they borrow other people’s clothes and personalities, the middle-aged know they only “play a part,” and instead follow the rhythms and rituals of cooperation. As Harrison concludes: in middle age “the *me* becomes *us*” (*Crabbed Age* 16). Aging, she further claims, brings on a more “altruist” mentality and more respect for traditions, emotions, and instincts. Moreover, Harrison agrees with Durkheim that cooperation is not an obstacle to personal development, but rather a boon: “Through co-operation the sense of personality is born and nourished” (*Crabbed Age* 13). Having laid behind their youthful “masquerade,” the middle-aged develop a true self.

While Durkheimian theory might account for the differences between youth and middle age, Harrison turns to another model to make sense of old age. Youth, she claims, consists in masquerade, parroting others, and middle age develops a true personality, but old age is something else: *vision*. However, what she calls “vision” is exactly opposite to ritual, which she defined as immanence

and the “submerging into a situation.”¹¹ This is, then, where Harrison’s ritualistic conception of life connects with another model that is both its correlate and its rejection, namely Greek tragedy. For tragedy is not, like ritual, consisting merely in participation and holopsychotic immediacy, but also implies detached spectatorship. This is made clear by Harrison in some crucial passages in “Crabbed Age and Youth”:

Greek drama, we have been told *ad nauseam*, arose out of the chorus, which then differentiated into chorus and spectators, and ultimately into actors and spectators. That is what happens, or should happen, in life. Youth is a chorus. Every single member of that chorus, by virtue of masquerade, feels himself to be the centre of the action. He *is* the centre of it to himself. (12)

After youth comes middle age, the period of specialization: “Once you specialize, once you become an actor with a *part* in life, then you need all the other actors; the play cannot go on without them. Even your part depends on them. The *me* becomes *us*.” (*Crabbed Age* 12). Finally, this process of life is rounded off by a third stage, the creation of the spectator:

To go back to and have done with my drama metaphor, the chorus of masquerading youth differentiates into actors, each specialized, in all humility, to a part. But there is a third stage. Some withdraw from the stage into the *theatre-place* and become spectators. This is real Old Age, and it should never be crabbed. These actors have first masqueraded, rehearsed life in imagination, then lived to the full, and last, discharged from life, they behold it. It is the time of the great Apocalypse. It is one of the tragic antinomies of life that you cannot at once live and have vision. (*Crabbed Age* 15)

As we see, Harrison patterns the life process on the historical development of tragedy. Her argument, perceiving life in terms of a tragico-ritualistic model, builds on the claim that tragedy originally developed out of Dionysian cult, a

¹¹ Harrison’s conceptions of ritual to some extent built on the theories of Frazer, Levy-Bruhl, and Durkheim. See Nina Enemark 2015, in particular 12-64.

topic Harrison deals with frequently in her other works. Now, she argues that while youth and middle age are immediately engaged in a communal practice, the former unconsciously, the latter consciously, the old—or better: “some” of them, namely those who have previously “lived to the full” —are instead cut off from the immediate action and retreating into the “theatre-place” as detached spectators. Their old age thus epitomizes a “leap from real life to the contemplation of life cut loose from action” (*Ancient Art and Ritual*, 136). This step implies moving away from ritual into art, and from holopsychotic immanence towards aestheticism and Olympianism.

In the passage quoted earlier, Harrison had said about old age that it engendered a vision: “I get my head for a moment out of the blazing, blinding, torturing wheel; the vision of the thing behind me and without me obscurely breaks” (*Crabbed Age* 16). We now can assume that what she means by this is *tragic vision*. The concept of tragic vision is often taken to imply an insight won by pain, a “recognition” or “anagnorisis,” as Aristotle calls it, where the tragic hero suddenly discovers something about his own life that was previously hidden. For Aristotle, this recognition brings “a change from ignorance to knowledge,” and this again involves pity or fear (64). Moreover, Aristotle famously saw the experience of fear and pity as conducive to tragic pleasure, or catharsis, on the side of the spectators (57). This notion of aesthetic pleasure might also be suggested by Harrison when she, somewhat mysteriously, claims that her “vision” is “strange, almost portentous, yet comforting; but that vision is incommunicable” (*Crabbed Age* 16). The point about portentousness, and the addition of “comforting,” might allude to what Aristotle defined as *katharsis*, namely that something fearful or pitiful might induce an elevating or purifying effect on the spectator. If so, human life, for Harrison, ends with an element of reconciliation. In fact, her idea of a peaceful, “comforting” end to life is also manifested in her *Reminiscences of a Student’s Life* written few years before her

death where she points out that her “old age is a good and pleasant thing” (345).

But what, exactly, is the insight won by Harrison in her old age? As she calls her vision “incommunicable” (*Crabbed Age* 16), it is hard to know. Nor is it easy to determine the meaning of her drastic statement about the old being “discharged from life” (*Crabbed Age* 15). Does it refer to a semi-mortal state, a kind of living death, where “life” is sacrificed for wisdom? As she puts it: “It is one of the tragic antinomies of life that you cannot at once live and have vision” (*Crabbed Age* 15). The old, spectators to tragedy, are thus, it seems, simultaneously *victims* of a tragedy, namely the tragedy of their own life where “vision” can only come at the cost of living. This might be the *real* tragedy so far as Harrison is concerned. For it is one thing to claim that “old age is a good and pleasant thing” (*Reminiscences*, 345), a comforting and peaceful period, but for a vitalist like Harrison, such peacefulness is really the problem because it unavoidably points to her notions of the boringness and sterility of Olympian detachment. From her vitalist and rather polarizing position, where “living” always holds precedence over knowing or thinking,¹² the loss of the former must inevitably appear “tragic.” Harrison, then, emplots old age as the quintessentially tragical age, the age that unlike youth and particularly middle age (which “lives to the full”) has won its “comfort” and “vision” only by losing life.

In “Crabbed Age and Youth” Harrison represents old age as an expulsion from the “durée,” the “circle” and the “dancing place” which the younger generations occupy. This severance tends to make old age, art and Olympianism into related phenomena: all imply a tendentially “barren”—or with a word which Lloyd-Jones suggests is more positively valued in Harrison: “ascetic” (59)

¹² Again, her view is inspired by Bergson. In the article “The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religions” she compiles his statements “la vie déborde l’intelligence, l’intelligence c’est un rétrécissement” (1909, 505).

—detachedness from life. It is interesting to compare this conception of old age with the more personal approach in her short autobiography *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* written about a decade later. At the end of this entertaining text Harrison points to the pleasantness of her own old age, noting its continuity with the past:

Life does not cease when you are old, it only suffers a rich change. You go on loving, only your love, instead of a burning, fiery furnace, is the mellow glow of an autumn sun. You even go on falling in love, and for the same foolish reasons – the tone of voice, the glint of a strangely set eye – only you fall so gently; and in old age you may even show a man that you like to be with him without him wanting to marry you or thinking you want to marry him. (*Reminiscences* 346)

It is evident that Harrison's position in this late text is different from the one she had presented in "Crabbed Age and Youth," primarily in the way she now unearths an explicitly feminine position (earlier she had always spoken of and as "man"). Allowing herself to refer to personal and sensual pleasures which she would not have done in her earlier scientific or essayistic texts, she highlights the freedom granted to old women, no longer bound by social norms and the institution of marriage.¹³ Less schematic in her arguments than in the earlier text, Harrison points out that life and love are not over, and the so-called "burning fiery furnace" (346), recalling her earlier image of the "blazing, blinding, torturing wheel" (*Crabbed Age* 16) has in old age turned into "the mellow glow of an autumn sun" (*Reminiscences* 346). Any tragic dimension of her own old age is here absent or repressed.¹⁴ In fact, Harrison presents herself as

¹³ She had also earlier been critical of the institution of marriage and of sex. See her essay on the suffragettes, "Homo Sum": "The instinct of sex is anti-social, exclusive, not only owing to its pugnacity; it is, we have now to note, anti-social, exclusive, owing to the intensity of its egotism" (1915, 91).

¹⁴ Harrison's biographer Annabel Robinson has kindly informed me that she thinks the *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* is Harrison's attempt at her own eulogy—how she would like to be remembered—and where she was papering over all her struggles. As Robinson sees it, the text does not mention any of the really important things in Harrison's life, and her portrait of her own old age is wishful

someone having *escaped* tragedy. For in the same text she notes: “By what miracle I escaped marriage I do not know, for all my life long I fell in love. (...) Marriage, for a woman at least, hampers the two things that made life to me glorious – friendship and learning. (...) Family life has never attracted me. At its best it seems to me rather narrow and selfish; at its worst, a private hell.” (*Reminiscences* 345)

At the very end of *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* Harrison points to her retiring from her position at Cambridge university in 1922: “I began to feel that I had lived too long the strait Academic life with my mind intently focused on the solution of a few problems. I wanted before the end came to see things more freely and more widely (...)” (346). About 70 years old at the time of her retirement, Harrison here takes up the thread of what earlier she had called her “vision”: she wants “to *see* things more freely and more widely”. As it turns out, this more open-minded vision consisted in Harrison’s discovery of Russia, of Russian language and culture, the topic of the next sub-section.

“Imperfectiveness” and “kaleidoscope phantasmagoria”

To Harrison, life in its primordial and authentic sense is Bergsonian “*durée*,” an indivisible movement which she had illustrated by the metaphor of the rotating snowball. This metaphor might give a good illustration of the life process in its more abstract sense, but what about our individual experiences, the way we all variously *feel* life? What can art or literature achieve when it comes to depicting or describing these experiences, both in their isolation and in their coherence with each other? In “Crabbed Age and Youth” Harrison maintains:

Crabbed Age is not always, I admit, a work of Art, but it is a work of Life. If we Crabbed Ones were artists, and could express our experiences *as a whole*, as a living thing it would be priceless. Most of us cannot, but there remains always, for better for worse, for precept for warning, that

thinking.

imago, that *paradeigma*, that is ourselves. (22)

The passage emphasizes “Life” as the real creator of human existence: we are all “works of Life.” However, the problem is that not many of us can adequately express our “experiences,” or as Harrison insists: “our experiences *as a whole*.” This problem is perhaps even larger for aged people as they are faced with the greater complexity of the many-layered snowball of their own old age. On the other hand, the old might have a better chance to express this wholeness than the younger generations, having seen and experienced more in life. Perhaps a sense of the wholeness of life is more accessible to the old than the young.

Harrison does not pursue this point further in “Crabbed Age and Youth,” but she takes it up in a later work dealing with something at first glance quite different, namely Russian language. In her extraordinary study *Aspects, Aorists and The Classical Tripos* (1919) she examines the specificities of Russian language and what she sees as its emotionally richer and more expressive character than for instance English or French. Teaching herself Russian language late in life and becoming, particularly after 1917, an enthusiastic admirer of what she saw as the Russian mentality, Harrison claimed that while Western societies had historically given the hegemony to science with its favoring of abstraction and cold analysis, the Russian world was still full of warm energies and espoused a more expressive and intimate relationship with life itself.¹⁵ Of specific importance to her was Russian language and its tendency to favor the imperfective over the perfective verb. While the perfective implies that the action is already finished and its relation to the present is not specified, the imperfective expresses the duration of an action which has relevance for the

¹⁵ On Harrison’s enthusiastic embracement of Russia and how it certainly did not avoid clichés, see Smith 2012, and Schwinn Smith 2011.

present. With Harrison's own words, the imperfective suggests "actual duration, or as I should prefer to call it actual, personal experience," something which goes on in time, while the perfective is "*out of time*, remote from *durée*, as Bergson would call it, free from the hot intimacy of personal experience" (*Aspects* 17). As we see, examining the Russian tendency to "imperfectiveness" allows Harrison to turn once again to her favorite philosophy of Bergson with its notion of life not as something discontinuous or fragmentary, but as one indivisible movement.

After having noted the preponderance of the imperfective over the perfective in Russian, Harrison proceeds to two dimensions equally particular to Russia. The first is a linguistic phenomenon for which Russian is known, namely *aspect*. Aspect has traditionally been understood as the mode of development of the process to which a verb refers. A notoriously tricky and often untranslatable phenomenon, the term covers a variety of elements, for instance how languages might have idiomatic expressions for distinguishing different phases of a process, whether the process is habitual or isolated, whether the process is atelic or telic (carrying its own end within itself), or its point of view, i.e. how it is envisaged. Aspect certainly also concerns the sense of aging. Consider for instance the utterances "I live," "I have lived," "I lived," "I have been living." These utterances give very different information as to the quality and duration of the action, and if the speaker is "submerged" in his "living," or only relates to it from a position of "perfective" abstraction. According to Harrison, to interpret aspectual utterances adequately, we must have a feeling for language, and indeed for the nuances of verbal utterance, yet very often we are left with mere conjecture, and especially so if faced with the enormously rich aspectual resources of the Russian verb system which a language like English lacks. For instance, what are the aspectual implications of "She has been growing old"? Does it mean that the process of aging goes on,

or that she has somehow stopped aging (perfective), having reached its endpoint? As Harrison notes, aspect concerns the “subjective” or relativist dimension of a specific language (*Aspects* 24), depending often on the point of view, i.e. how the process is envisaged or *viewed* (the term ‘aspect’ etymologically points to seeing, to vision). As we saw, in *Reminiscences of a Student’s life* Harrison had spoken of her discovery of Russia as her chance “to see things more freely and more widely” (346). We might now add, to see things *aspectually*.

Secondly, in *Aspects, Aorists and the Classical Tripos*, Harrison considers the Russian novel of the nineteenth century, arguing that it represents what in “Crabbed Age and Youth” she had termed “our experiences *as a whole*, a living thing” (22). To Harrison, “The Russian novel is written in the imperfective, written from within not without, lived not thought about” (*Aspects* 25). At first referring to Dostoevsky, she however quickly picks out Goncharov’s famous novel *Oblomov* from 1858, hailing it as the quintessential Russian novel. This is a novel about Oblomov, the “incurable ‘slacker’” and “non-accomplisher” who never gets up from bed in the morning, or if he does, remains in his dressing-gown all day: “Oblomov on the physical side is the incarnation of what the Russian calls Халатность, the quality of dressing-gownness” (*Aspects* 27). Oblomov lives his life “imperfectively,” or we might say, “dressing-gownly.”¹⁶ This quality of non-accomplishment is far from something negative, but to Harrison rather an example of the richer Russian understanding of living than the one we have allegedly become used to in Western countries, where emphasis is rather put, as Harrison stresses, on a “perfective” sense of abstraction and analysis rather than on “actual experience”. Where Western man analyzes an

¹⁶ The dressing-gown is important to the reader’s understanding of Oblomov, especially his complex relationship to age. From the start of the novel, we learn that he is only about 22 or 23 years old, and that he loves his dressing-gown “of Persian material,” soft and elegant, yet where “the garment had lost its first freshness.” Other characters in the novel will remark on the oldness of it. Oblomov himself seems from the start of the novel to lead a life in which everything has already fallen prey to dilapidation and inertia.

action from the outside, seeking to put it behind him, the Russian, according to Harrison, rather “lives into” the action itself: “because he sees or rather feels things living from the inside (imperfective), he sees or rather feels things *whole*. (...) The Russian stands for the complexity and concreteness of life felt whole, unanalysed, unjudged, lived into” (*Aspects* 32, 35). Harrison ends her study into the Russian language and literature by proposing that “it is this imperfectiveness that the modern world both needs and desires” (*Aspects* 33).

Written when she was almost 70, her energetic and speculative foray in *Aspects, Aorist, and the Classical Tripas* into Russian language, its literature and folklore, reaffirms Harrison’s indomitable vitalism but takes it away from her earlier studies of ancient ritual into another sphere, namely that of a culture that Harrison believed had something highly important to say to the modern world. Where Greece epitomized the “old,” Russia heralded the “new” (*Aspects* 35). As for herself, Harrison claimed that her discovery of Russian had given her “a new birth and a new life” (*Aspects* 7). But her embrace of Russia and the Russian also entailed some curious changes to her earlier positions, including her view on life as a rotating snowball. Summing up her understanding of Russian life, she proclaims: “Life to the Slav and especially the Russian is felt not as a forward march but as a ballet, not as an inevitable evolution but as a kaleidoscope phantasmagoria. Time is not a corridor leading to a judgment hall but like space an inextricable labyrinth” (*Aspects* 34). For the Russian, the distinctions between time and space break down. Particularly interesting in this regard is her metaphor of the “kaleidoscope phantasmagoria” (34).¹⁷ The kaleidoscope is an instrument that through its use of mirrors allows known objects to reappear in

¹⁷ Harrison also uses the metaphor of the kaleidoscope in 1991, 164. It is possible that she had originally come over this metaphor by her reading of Bergson’s famous *Matière et mémoire* from 1896 (see Bergson 2005, 357). The metaphor is later exploited, in interesting fashion, in the essay “Listening in to the Past” (1926) by Harrison’s very close friend Hope Mirrlees who was indubitably inspired by Harrison when she used it (Mirrlees 2011, 85-89).

fascinating new, colorful and ever-shifting constellations. In Harrison's text, particularly one object appears to have gone through this process: The snowball, the metaphor she repeatedly conjured in her earlier essays as illustrative of bergsonian "durée." Now, in *Aspects, Aorist, and the Classical Tripos*, this image has changed, for when at one point seeking to illustrate the difference between the perfective and the imperfective, she claims: "the imperfective is the snow-*field*, the perfective a snow-*ball*" (10). It is as if the meeting with Russia had made the earlier favorite metaphor of the snowball undergo a kaleidoscopic metamorphosis and re-vision: it has become the snowfield. The "durée" has become space. Might this peculiar phantasmagoria tell us something of Harrison's own aging?

In "Crabbed Age and Youth," Harrison had noted that the old "withdraw from the stage" (15), becoming spectators to life rather than actors. The old withdraw from the world's stage, making themselves invisible. This diminishing of visibility and appearance can perhaps be likened to a snowball which decelerates, finally merging with the snowfield. Stillness takes over where formerly there was movement and direction. This effacement can perhaps also signify a new purity: no longer "discovered" by the world, the old are, each alone, free to discover themselves—and death. Virginia Woolf writes in an essay, "On Being Ill," from 1926:

We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a *snowfield* where even the print of bird's feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. (104, my emphasis)

Being the "Old One:" Harrison and the Bear

When commenting on Harrison's old age, scholars such as Lloyd-Jones sometimes use the word "silly," noting that her "silliness and sentimentality (...)

became stronger as she grew older” (32).¹⁸ One testimony of this is found in Robinson’s *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison*, which recounts the older Harrison’s fondness for bears and teddy-bears, the latter having become a popular toy at the beginning of the century (239). Harrison had already in her anthropological studies examined ancient and modern rituals concerning bears, and she also had a specific liking for the Russian Bear, recording an especially memorable dream where she danced with bears in a Russian wood (*Reminiscences* 341). In 1926 she published, together with her close friend Hope Mirrlees, *The Book of the Bear*, a translation of numerous Russian folk stories about bears, which Harrison, quoted in Schwinn Smith’s study, described to a friend as “a small book for children or persons in their dotage” (333). Fascinated by the Russian mythos of the kinship between bears and human beings, Harrison together with Mirrlees wrote in the preface:

Now, the sign-manual of a genuine folktale in its primitive state is that it has no moral, and this, perhaps, is one of the causes of its imbecility. For instance, could anything be more lacking in a moral and, honesty compels us to add, more imbecile than the folktales included in this collection? (*Book of the Bear* x-xi).

At the time this was written, the term “imbecile” could mean both childish and being in one’s dotage. Commenting on the word, Marilyn Schwinn Smith points out that: “neither ‘childhood’, nor ‘dotage’, nor ‘imbecile’ was a pejorative term for Harrison. Rather, as Schwinn Smith notes, “they bore those qualities of mind she valued: qualities of non-differentiation, of emotion, of non-judgment” (333).

The aging Harrison’s embracement of imbecility is interesting and might be seen against the backdrop of a certain skepticism, on her part, towards the

¹⁸ See also Robinson: “There had always been a silly side to Harrison, which was beginning to grow more pronounced as she grew older, perhaps her way of disguising some of the physical and emotional pain she was suffering.” (2002 238).

ideology of the moral authority of the old. In “Crabbed Age and Youth” she had spoken disapprovingly of what she called the “pathetic fallacy” (18) of the old who, often for no other reason than vanity and pompousness, think they are called to lavish on the young their own experiences on the assumption that youth will go through the same:

It is useless, or almost useless, to offer to Youth the treasures of experiences gathered by Age. ‘When you are my age’, says Crabbed Age, ‘you will know what I know, see as I see’. Nothing could be more profoundly false. History does not repeat itself. Evolution forbids. When you are at my age, you will not know what I know, but something quite different. Experience is not a counter to be handed from age to age. (18)

And in another essay, “Heresy and Humanity,” she speaks of the belief in blind tradition and how the old generations often try to “get the upper hand over youth” by claiming themselves to be its guardians, something which ends in “that most dire and deadly of all tyrannies, an oligarchy of old men” (28). Harrison was also critical of any tendency in old age to moralize. In fact, one of the dimensions that drew her to Russian literature was its absence of moralizing. In *Aspects, Aorists and the Classical Tripos* she puts it succinctly: “Morality is I think the vice of the *perfective*; it is the judging of an act by its results” (34).

From this perspective, the phenomenon of silliness or “imbecility,” connoting how one is “submerged in a situation” rather than analyzing it from the outside, might have been somewhat of a lodestar to Harrison in her old age. Indeed, one might even suggest that favoring a dose of silliness was a way for her to preserve a certain mystery in her own life. We remember Harrison’s acknowledgement that the “vision” of old age was “incommunicable,” and in *Prolegomena* she had maintained that “Mysticism, in its attempt to utter the ineffable, often verges on imbecility” (594). A certain amount of “ineffability” is also manifest if we go to what has particularly fascinated the biographers of Harrison, namely her intimate relationship during the last years of her life with

the young poet Hope Mirrlees (1887-1978), a member of the Bloomsbury set. Mirrlees had enrolled at Newnham College as a student in 1910, and the two women, so different, and with such an age gap between them, struck up a romantic friendship (see *Invention of Jane Harrison* 134-38 et passim) which lasted all the way to Harrison's death in 1928. The library of Newnham College holds a collection of some of the notes, letters and postcards the two women sent each other during these years, all of them written in a strange argot, both childish-sounding and brusque, highly difficult to comprehend for strangers.¹⁹ In many of these texts Jane Harrison calls herself the "Old" bear, or "Old One" or "O.O.," while Mirrlees is the young one, and their letters are often signed with dots in the shape of the Great Bear (*Ursa maior* in Latin; Latin *ursa*, for bear, is feminine²⁰). Might these signatures be a nod to what Harrison had examined in *Themis*, namely that the Indians of America tended to address bears by means of "the reverential prefix 'Ostin', meaning 'old man', and equivalent to the Roman title 'Senator'," and that the "little Athenian girls who danced as Bears to Artemis of Brauronia, the Bear-Goddess" must think reverently to the end of their days about the great she-bear (450)? Perhaps Mirrlees was, to Harrison, the equivalent of the Athenian girl?

In short, through her close relationship with Mirrlees during the last years of her life Harrison clearly embodied what she had insisted in "Crabbed Age and Youth," namely that youth and old age might very "happily live together." In this regard, it is interesting to look at a photograph of the two of them taken during a trip to Paris in 1915²¹ and compare it with one of the vase paintings analyzed by Harrison in *Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Religion* published in 1903. The vase painting, in the Louvre museum, shows the manly Heracles

¹⁹ On these texts, and with some examples, see for instance Beard 2000, 134-138 et passim.

²⁰ Mirrlees' great poem *Paris. A Poem* (1919), a precursor and source of inspiration to Eliot's *Waste Land*, is signed with the same shape of dots (Mirrlees 2011, 17).

²¹ The photo is reproduced in Robinson 2002 and Beard 2000.

“lifting his club to slay a shriveled ugly little figure leaning on a stick” (*Prolegomena* 173). As Harrison explains, this “ugly little figure” is Geras, the personification of Old Age, whom Hesiod calls “hateful Geras” (224) in the *Theogony*. The painting is gerontophobic: Geras or Old Age is one of the demons, one of the dreaded “Ker” that must be killed by powerful heroic Heracles. Now compare the vase painting to the photo of the twenty-something Mirrlees and the aging Harrison. Both ladies look self-consciously amused, and with Mirrlees posing, rather ostentatiously, with a teddy-bear, their shared medium. Here there is no hostility between the ages, no dread or hideousness, but instead youth and age standing happily together. The stick, an emblematic symbol of old age, has been replaced by the teddy-bear, the symbol of childlike playfulness, affection, and serenity. This might indeed evoke the topic of imbecility, pseudo-etymologically meaning “being without a supporting stick” (Latin “baculum”).

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, Harrison’s discussions of age are varied (they comprise both linguist, philosophical, anthropological and mythical perspectives), and they also developed during the last years of her life, from the harsh emphasis on tragedy in “Crabbed Age and Youth” in 1914, to the serenity displayed by the septuagenarian in *Reminiscences of a Student’s Life* from 1925. Common to all her reflections, however, is that aging is poised between two diverging ideas or concepts, which we might term bergsonism and Olympianism. While the former points to life as wholeness and permanent process (illustrated by snowball, imperfectiveness, Unanimism, wheel, ritual, imbecility), the latter indicates detachment, idiocy, perfectiveness, discontinuity, tragic vision. Harrison clearly wants to see life from the bergsonist perspective, but she also, and particularly in “Crabbed Age and Youth,” highlights that the

old are “discharged from life” (15). Because of these contrary forces, the one vitalist, the other anti-vitalist, old age turns into a specifically complex period in life. On the one hand there is Olympian vision, on the other the imperfective kaleidoscope.

In “Crabbed Age and Youth” Harrison had maintained that old people are not so much a “work of Art” as a “work of Life” (22). What life makes out of us lies beyond our control; we are shaped as Life, superior artist, wants it. Interpreting this “work of Life” is difficult, because, like the rotating snowball, it contains so many accumulative strata. Ever new layers are added to this “work.” A multifaceted on-going phenomenon, any interpreter of the “work of Life” must therefore know how to read aspectually, namely with a view to the different phases of the life process. Is the work going on? Is it completed? Is it about to be completed, or paused? Is it about to continue, or start again? As we saw, the snowball of life, the snowball that Harrison says we are, might even turn into a snowfield. And it is perhaps so that, especially as regards the life of the old, it is difficult to ascertain whether it most resembles a moving snowball or a still snowfield.²²

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