

# “INDIAN SUMMER”: SERENITY OR SENILITY? AGEING AND OLD AGE IN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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*Rudolf HAAS*

## 1.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

When I asked an English friend of mine how I, as a non-medical amateur, might survive this ceremonial lecture addressed to an overwhelming majority of highly specialized authorities and professors, he said: “No problem. Find a good beginning and a good ending and keep both as close together as possible!”

Certainly – our theme “Indian Summer: Serenity or Senility – Ageing and Old Age in Literature” does not permit this highly desirable form of radical brevity; at the same time it would suffer considerably from a typical German approach like “Prolegomena to the medical and metaphysical perspectives of a philosophy of human longevity as reflected in literature from Homer to Kafka...”.

Let us rather profit from the clarity and economy of the English language as our medium of communication and try to present a selected if limited number of aspects and impressions, avoiding post-modern abstractions, focussing on real texts. Doing this, I shall try to follow three masters who have taught me much in my academic life: Montaigne, who said: “Je n’enseigne pas, je raconte...”, Bertrand Russell, who, asked by a German visitor: “What is the difference between mind and matter?”, offered the very British answer: “No problem. What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind!”, and, last not least, Einstein, who recommended for lectures like ours: “Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler!”

## 2.

“But not simpler...” Whoever talks about ageing from postadulthood to senescence must talk about time. Only Charon is ageless. We, his future

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passengers, are the slaves of time. As we wander through the landscape of our maturer years – halcyon as they may be – and as, again and again “milestones turn into headstones”, we feel how precious even minutes and hours become: “Sol descendens duplicat umbras...” (Vergil). As the sun sets the shadows get longer, and in the twilight of the evening we learn to appreciate the last rays. The clocks of everyday life may tick in their restless monotony; the clocks of our later years have their own metronome of leisure and meditation. The young, always busy, believe in Summer Time; the old in Indian Summer time. One of the great ladies in the field of literature and music, the „Marschallin“ in *Der Rosenkavalier*, being herself on the wrong side of thirty and in love with young Oktavian, finds adequate words for the secret and unconquerable tyranny of Time: “Time... what a strange thing: time...”

In the routine of life,

Time is nowhere...

But suddenly, you feel time everywhere...

Surrounding us, and deep in ourselves...

Eroding our faces,

Flowing in our temples,

And flowing between you and me

As sand flows in an hourglass...

Sometimes I get up in the middle of the night And stop the clocks, the clocks, I stop them al...”

Time is not – as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century put it ironically – the unknown “God that winds up our sundials”. Time can change our Golden October suddenly into a “Winter’s Tale” as Auden tells us in his poem *Time*:

“In headaches and in worry

Vaguely life leaks away,

And Time will have his fancy

To-morrow or to-day.

Into many a green valley

Drifts the appalling snow;

Time breaks the threaded dances

And the diver’s brilliant bow.

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,

The desert sighs in the bed,

And the crack in the tea-cup opens

A lane to the land of the dead.”

“...the land of the dead.”: Time brings forth the sudden explosion of cancer, finishing the life not of a Marschallin but a poor British spinster at the end of middleadulthood – as we hear Auden again in *Miss Gee*:

“Miss Gee knelt down in the side-aisle,

She knelt down on her knees;

‘Lead me not into temptation

But make a good girl, please.’  
 The days and nights went by her  
 Like waves round a Cornish wreck;  
 She bicycled down to the doctor  
 With her clothes buttoned up to the neck.  
 She bicycled down to the doctor,  
 And rang the surgery bell;  
 ‘O, doctor, I’ve a pain inside me,  
 And I don’t feel very well.’  
 Doctor Thomas looked her over,  
 And then he looked some more;  
 Walked over to his wash-basin,  
 Said, ‘Why didn’t you come before?’  
 Doctor Thomas sat over his dinner,  
 Though his wife was waiting to ring,  
 Rolling his bread into pellets;  
 Said, ‘Cancer’s a funny thing.’  
 Nobody knows what the cause is,  
 Though some pretend they do;  
 It’s like some hidden assassin  
 Waiting to strike at you.  
 Childless women get it,  
 And men when they retire;  
 It’s as if there had to be some outlet  
 For their foiled creative fire.’  
 His wife rang for the servant,  
 Said, ‘Don’t be so morbid, dear’;  
 He said: ‘I saw Miss Gee this evening  
 And she’s a goner, I fear.’”

3.

Trying to present and analyse a few reflections on time and ageing in “Belles letters”, we find again and again that literature is the memory of mankind, and that in great books we may “not only meet an author but a man...” (Pascal). “Experience is an excellent teacher but it sends terrific bills” (Minna Autrim). Books are more: they may become friends, and poets may go with us as guiding fellow-travellers through the transparent or foggy landscape of our advanced years. Will these years turn into an “Indian Summer”, a “golden October”, a period of serenity? Or is it the nightfall of senility that expects us?

In his *Hälfte des Lebens*, “Halfway House on Life’s Road”, Hölderlin anticipated this horror of winter as anxiety after a mild autumn – an anticipation of old age:

“Woe is me – where do I pluck  
 In hoarfrost and winter the flowers,  
 And where do I find sunshine  
 And the quiet shadow of the earth.  
 The walls stand frozen and speechless  
 And the icy winds shake the weathervanes.”

“Im Winde klirren die Fahnen...” – How can we – with “the stammering eloquence” (O’Neill) of our mortality ever “snatch the eternal out of the desperately fleeting” (Williams)? How can we verbalize our “hopeless hope” (O’Neill), longing in vain for the “ever” on the boundary to the “never”? How can we find verbal “ex-pression” for the “de-pressions”, the amnesia, the decay, the dementia of old age?

It is the poets indeed that have tried again and again to corroborate and at the same time to sublimate the old word by Seneca: “Senectus insanabilis morbus est...” May I offer a free translation? – “The only way to live long is to carry the burden of growing old.” And now let me begin with a few impressions and episodes on longevity and prolongevity into immortality!

4.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

In Shaw’s preface to *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1911) I read: “Do not try to live forever. You will not succeed.” Quite a few have tried, and I have selected three models of mythological and literary interpretation of man’s always frustrated ambition not only for longevity but for an ageless and eternal life – (Denn jede Lust will ... Ewigkeit...” [Nietzsche]), Tennyson’s *Tithonus*, T. S. Eliot’s “modern” Tiresias, Swift’s nightmare of the immortal Struldbrugs in *Gulliver’s Travels*.

Eos, the goddess of rosy dawn, falls in love with beautiful young Tithonus. Asking Zeus to grant him eternal life, she forgets to beg for his eternal youth. So his eternal life must turn into eternal ageing and decay, and in Tennyson’s poem he asks for the mercy of being allowed to return to mortality and to find peace in the quiet process of recycling before he wilts and wilts down to the very shape of a cicada on the cold outer fringe of the universe:

“The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
 The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
 Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
 And after many a summer dies the swan.  
 Me only cruel immortality  
 Consumes...”

Alas! For this grey shadow once a man –  
 So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,  
 Who madest him thy chosen, that he seemed  
 To his great heart none other than a God!...  
 But thy strong Hours indignant worked their wills,  
 And beat me down and marred and wasted me,  
 And though they could not end me, left me maimed  
 To dwell in presence of immortal youth,  
 Immortal age beside immortal youth,  
 And all I was, in ashes...”

Condemned to suffer the infirmities of age forever, Tithonus remains a living illustration of a recent problem – in a time where longevity turns into drawn out prolongevity, and where we may hear the inarticulate complaint of overaged patients and inmates of rest homes, suffering from “cruel immortality”, asking – unable to speak – as Tithonus asked Eos: “Release me, and restore me to the ground...” – Mythology and a geriatric dilemma!

In Eliot’s *Waste Land* (1922), Tiresias, the immortal blind seer, emerges from the deepest strata of our archetypal past and collective unconscious. Doomed to androgynous eternity, he combines “animus” and “anima”, suffering with both sexes in the eternal cycle of eros-thanatos and condemned to witness sex without love as it takes place between typist and clerk - I quote:

“At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine  
waits  
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two  
lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast,  
lights  
her stove, and lays out food in tins. ...  
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –  
I too awaited the expected guest.  
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. ...  
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on the same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead. ...)”

“Les mammelles de Tiresias” – old age as the incarnation of the androgynous suffering of mankind in all periods of history – a key figure of inclusive consciousness indeed!

In the nightmarish episode of the Struldbrugs, Swift – the greatest writer of satire in English literature – brings home to us the absurdity of eternal life as eternal ageing in nauseating details. Among the Struldbrugs, as you remember, there are people who neverdie. Of course: longing for longevity is a normal part of the human condition. Perpetual life, however, is absurd. Here a quotation from Gulliver’s clinical description of the Struldbrugs after 80:

“Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions. But those objects against which their envy seems principally directed are the vices of the younger sort, and the deaths of the old. By reflecting on the former, they find themselves cut off from all possibility of pleasure, and whenever they see a funeral, they lament and repine that others are gone to a harbour of rest to which they themselves never can hope to arrive. They have no remembrance of anything but what they learned and observed in their youth and middle age, and even that is very imperfect; and for the truth or particulars of any fact, it is safer to depend on common tradition than upon their best recollections. The least miserable among them appear to be those who turn to dotage, and entirely lose their memories. ... At ninety they lose their teeth and hair; they have at that age no distinction of taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to still continue, without increasing or diminishing. In talking, they forget the common appellation of things and the names of persons, even of those who are their nearest friends and relations. For the same reason, they never can amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end; and by this defect they are deprived of the only entertainment whereof they might otherwise be capable. ...

They were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld, and the women were more horrible than the men. Besides the usual deformities in extreme old age, they acquired an additional ghastliness, in proportion to their number of years, which is not to be described; and among half a dozen, I soon distinguished which was the eldest, although there was not above a century or two between them.

The reader will easily believe, that from what I had heard and seen my keen appetite for perpetuity of life was much abated.”

**5.**

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Perpetuity – no! Indian Summer and serenity – yes, hopefully!

Serenity does not mean the pathetic fallacy of ageing activists who keep thinking that all sunsets are new sunrises with challenges and projects... but to know with Bacon that age is best in four things:

- to burn old wood,
- to drink old wine,
- to talk to old friends,
- to read old books, –

and to repeat what the “Romantic” poet Landor could say “On his Seventy-fifth Birthday –



I strove with none, for none was worth my strife:

Nature I loved and next to Nature, Art:  
I warmed both hands before the fire of Life;  
It sinks and I am ready to depart.”

Indian Summer as a period of quiet detachment offers this serenity as peace of mind, showing us – in a famous poem by Storm – an old man sitting in front of his cottage at noon - the hour of Pan –, dreaming of his bees over brimming their clammy honeycombs... An image indeed of what we call “Urvertrauen” in German and translate rather poorly into English as “basic security” – a rare gift in old age! This serenity does not know the hedonistic extreme, as we hear it in Santayana’s suggestion: “The only way to cure birth and death is to enjoy the interval.” Serenity helps with the intergenerational competition: Young men *think* that old men are fools; but old men *know* that young man are fools. Chapman, the great translator of Homer, said it 1605.

And serenity suggests that in old age nature has to be obeyed in order to be commanded, and that the three best geriatric practitioners will always be: Doctor Quiet, Doctor Diet and Doctor Merryman! And when – eventually – the fire is dying in the grate, we may feel with Herakleitos that this is not annihilation but transition.

Tennyson, Poet Laureate of Queen Victoria, wanted one of his last lyrics to conclude all editions of his work. Here it is: a document of quiet serenity in senescence.

“Crossing the Bar  
Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,  
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.  
Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;  
For though from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.”

Tennyson never really identified the pilot, by the way.

And serenity in German writing? One of the rare

great figures in our fiction, Dubslav von Stechlin in Fontane’s *Der Stechlin* represents to me this resigned maturity of Indian Summer people when he, receiving a new and stronger prescription for his heart condition takes the prescribed number of drops in a spoonful of water, tastes them like a new vintage of old wine, then tells his old servant in a wonderful innuendo “Well, Engelke, here we are: Foxglove ... Digitalis.”

6.

Yes – digitalis purpurea: Old age, heart condition, multimorbidity, amnesia and senility and the arteries petrified, narrowing: “Slowly the poison the whole bloodstream fills: / The waste remains, the waste remains and kills...” (Empson). 130 years ago, Matthew Arnold, the great Victorian, in his poem *Growing Old* (1867) could say:

“What is it to grow old?  
Is it to lose the glory of the form,  
The lustre of the eye?  
Is it for beauty to forego her wreath?  
– Yes, but not this alone. ...  
It is to spend long days  
And not once feel that we were ever young;  
It is to add, immured  
In the hot prison of the present, month  
To month with weary pain.  
It is to suffer this,  
And feel but half, and feebly what we feel.  
Deep in our hidden heart  
Festers the dull remembrance of a change,  
But no emotion – none.”

And T. S. Eliot, drawing the portrait of *Gerontion* – that is: “a little old man” – identifies this prototype of senility with the decline of Europe after World War I:

“Here I am, an old man in a dry month, Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain. I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.  
My house is a decayed house,  
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.  
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;  
Rocks, moss, stoncrop, iron, merds.  
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,  
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.  
I an old man,  
A dull head among windy spaces.”

Senility: Nature turns from a kind parent into a merciless stepmother. Modern clinical poetry, changing from “sacrament” to “excrement”, exposes many facets of old age as debility. Here a little portrait from a modern rest home – an old woman eating – or, rather, being fed. What Swift so deeply felt – “Man is the slave of his metabolism” –, here we have it:

“And she, being old, fed from a mashed plate  
As an old mare might droop across a fence  
To the dull pastures of her ignorance...  
She munched, half dead, blindly searching the spoon.”

Handwriting turns spidery, the vision blurred. Nobody would expect a phoenix hour after 70, but the silent erosion of memory, developing into amnesia, changes many old people into Homeric “lotus eaters” who lose contact with everything: “We have had enough of action...” Weeds have grown among familiar tracks... – “Bonjour tristesse”! And here Arnold again on oblivion:

“Forgotten are the names of our visitors  
Ready to press my hand but yesterday;  
Forgotten are the names of earlier friends  
Whose genial converse and glad countenance  
Are fresh as ever to mine ear and eye;  
To these, when I have written and besought  
Remembrance of me, the word *Dear* alone  
Hangs on the upper verge, and waits in vain.  
A blessing wert thou, O oblivion,  
If thy stream carried only weeds away,  
But vernal and autumnal flowers alike  
It hurries down to wither on the strand.”

Frustrated hopes become fears, fears obsessions, obsessions fixations: In Ibsen's *Wildanten* we see old Ekdal chasing the wild ducks of his illusions in the attic: a victim of guilt and senility... Forgetfulness and garrulity, anecdote and aphasia form ever changing patterns of behaviour. And dementia, depression – are they not “lyres without strings”, “mirrors without glass”? But still: The latest, the strangely chaotic poems of aged Hölderlin confirm and sublimate in almost unbelievable beauty what the poet in his younger years foresaw as his own hopeless winter after an autumn of “mellow fruitfulness” (Keats): we have heard it!

Old age in literature? Yes, man is more than a human being “*as old as its arteries.*” The power of imagination can create symbols of the “hopeless hope” of old age that endure and survive the misery of senility. Poems may become timeless documents of humanity. In the Indian *Dhammapada* I find such a timeless image of the human condition, dating from the third century B. C: “Old men are long

legged herons standing sadly but a lake without fish...”

7.

Fascinating as this haiku-like metaphor may be, it is not quite true. Let me, therefore, open another, important perspective. Sartre, Faulkner, Jaspers, Heidegger: They describe again and again the misery and greatness of man on the verge of annihilation, confronted with boundary situations. And protagonists of “Old Age” too, “in extremis” and in these “Grenzsituationen” communicate shocks of recognition to us moderns: ageing Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

It is to Shakespeare – a poet who knew ageing but not old age – that we owe the greatest tragedy on the fall of an aged king into the abyss of senility and his temporary redemption by the power of love and patience: *King Lear*. The very incarnation of the deadly sin of wrath, “ira” –, the king divides his kingdom in a fit of dementia, blind to the criminal energy of Goneril and Regan, and blind to the natural love of his youngest daughter, Cordelia. The old king has to go through suffering and madness to find his way from autistic, uncontrolled wrath to quiet acceptance, from “ira” to “patientia”. The aged monarch – over 80 – turns into an old man, homeless and naked. Indeed, reduction to nakedness: the emblems of pomp and circumstance glide from his shoulders, as in his language the heavy ornament of baroque imagery is reduced to the diction of “nuda veritas”. Dying of an obvious cardio-vascular condition, he can say: “Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir...” – last words extremely human, modest, plain, signalling quiet reconciliation at the boundary to death. This is no longer the raging old man who, exposed on the stormy heath, could curse creation down to its very genes and chromosomes: “Blow, winds and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks! You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires, Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder, Strike flat the thick rotundity-o'th'world, Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once That make ingrateful man!”

*King Lear*: old age in literature, old age on the verge to annihilation: What Virgil calls “lacrimae rerum”, the speechless tears of existence in a fragile world – we recognize them in the very words of this tragedy of senescence, telling us that even the “nuda veritas” of an Aristotelian insight into human

existence remains enigmatic. We hear this message from Lear himself: "We must take upon us the mystery of things..."

There is no Cordelia in Turgenew's variation *A King Lear of the Steppes*. There is suffering, but no sublimation. There is radical, fairytale-like fury, eruption, aggression. Charlow, Turgenew's Lear, tortured by his evil daughters, turns into a beast when we see him, bearlike, on the roof of his house, in a horrible moment of regression, taking the building of his illusion to pieces: old age in despair, exploding in self-destruction.

In Ahab too, we witness obsession in age as we follow him and the crew of the *Pequod* across the oceans to kill Moby Dick, the metaphysical quarry. Confronted at last with the white whale, Ahab, the demonic hunter, can say: "Thus, I give up the spear!" And: "The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove; – ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone."

In a climax of irony, Ahab is drawn into the abyss of horror in the very moment when his darted harpoon strikes the whale. We may hit "the mystery of things" – but this last connection implies our own destruction.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, too, must be included when we look for relevant representations of old age in fiction. Santiago, an old man fishing alone on the Gulf Stream, turns into a prototype of human failure and courage in the everlasting fight with nature, represented by the deep blue sea, the beautiful rainbow-coloured marlin and the attacking sharks which, alarmed by the very first drop of blood come up from the depth of the ocean, from the secret strata of the elemental enigma. Indeed: Santiago is old, and he feels it. It is not his benevolent skin cancer that makes him aware of his declining age: it is the feeling of total isolation and defeat on the sea which – as "el mar" – can be a partner and – as "la mar" – a deadly unpredictable enemy.

"He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the

coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. But none of the scars on his hands were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert. Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated."

And as the old man, with the bare skeleton of his fish, ruined by the sharks, approaches the harbour, he thinks:

"The wind is our friend, anyway. Then he added, sometimes. And the great sea with our friends and our enemies. And bed, he thought. Bed is my friend. Just bed, he thought. Bed will be a great thing. It is easy when you are beaten, he thought. I never knew how easy it was. And what beat you, he thought. "Nothing," he said aloud. "I went out too far."

Indeed: an elemental parable of old age on the verge of defeat. But will the condition of old Santiago be strong enough to carry the poetic representation of the "condition humaine", the human condition as a whole, on its shoulders? Hemingway, an ageing multi-morbid man himself, does not convince us that the mannered reduction of his language is the hallmark of unverbilized abundance but the symptom of a silence which may be part of the erosion of creativity in the gloomy last part of his life.

## 8.

Let me come to a last perspective. Looking at research and literature at *one* comprehensive glance, one feels tempted to comment on the great *Massachusetts Male Ageing Study* of 1991 with Ovid's "Amor vincit omnia", Love conquers everything, even statistics. In spite of the evidence of a considerable decline in spermatogenetic efficiency and in the production of testosterone in advanced years, we discover – and admire – a considerable number of erotic realizations and sublimations in literature – after what I would rather not call "midlife crisis" but the unobtrusive arrival of Indian Summer. Talk as we may of a "climacterium virile", we ought to focus our attention on the great models of the eros-thanatos syndrome in old age, selecting only a few episodes. In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, the ageing protagonist, Herr von Aschenbach, is fascinated and doomed by the epiphany of the beautiful boy Tadzio. Spellbound by Dionysos, he falls at the same time victim to the far reaching arrows of Appollo, the god of epidemics. He dies

of the cholera. *Death in Venice* is a confirmation of Platen's lines:

"The vision of pure beauty is a deadly shock...".  
 "Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen / Ist dem Tode schon anheim gegeben." Venice indeed, the old and slowly eroding city of death, offers a "local habitation and a name" to eros / thanatos, not only representing the decay of beauty, but also the beauty of decay. Hemingway – we have heard of his paranoid and multimorbid condition before his suicide in July 1961 – Hemingway in his late novel *Across the River and into the Trees* shows us the ageing American colonel Cantwell in Venice. "Cant – well" – a telling name – finds no rebirth in the arms of young Renata, making desperately love to her in a "gondola" enjoying "la petite mort". But his real, his final "Death in Venice" expects him in his black car which looks so much like a stranded death barge...

And it is in Thomas Mann's novella *Die Betrogene*, where an ageing European beauty falls in love with a young American boy, only to discover, that a sudden haemorrhage is not a signal of an interruption of her menopause and the cyclic return of a new spring but the fatal symptom of cancer. The English title of the book – *The Black Swan* – indicates this in a nutshell: There is no white swan, no Ledaen bird as messenger of the returning libido in a divine miracle; it is Thanatos, who visits her as a black swan in the mask of Eros.

"Ageing and love" – I could add other erotic Indian Summer episodes: pointing to Leopold Bloom, for instance, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, an ageing voyeur on Sandymount Shore in Dublin, in Proustian fascination by young Gertie McDowell and doomed to ecstatic self-indulgence – a modern Ulysses meeting Nausikaa – while a Roman candle bursts in gushes of green and gold – the gathering twilight of life lit by fireworks .. "À l'ombrage des jeunes filles en fleur..."

But we do not need a Goethe anniversary to remember a classical instance: Goethe's *Elegy*, written after his falling in love with the 18 year old Ulrike von Levetzow in Marienbad. 1823 is indeed his "last summer in Marienbad". His passionate love – he was 74 – remains an unfulfilled episode of frustration, pain, illness. He sublimated the gloomy moment of parting into his famous *Elegy*. "Parting" was almost "death". The old poet returned to Weimar – a broken man... Here are the closing lines of the elegy.

„Verlaßt mich hier, getreue Weggenossen!  
 Laßt mich allein am Fels, an Moor und Moos;  
 Nur immer zu! Euch ist die Welt erschlossen,  
 Die Erde weit, der Himmel hehr und groß; ...  
 Mir ist das All, ich bin mir selbst verloren,

Der ich doch erst den Göttern Liebling war;  
 Sie prüften mich, verliehen mir Pandoren,  
 So reich an Gütern, reicher an Gefahr;  
 Sie drängten mich zum gabelseligen Munde,  
 Sie trennen mich, und richten mich zu Grunde."  
 Here my own (stammering) English version:  
 "Leave me, my friends, now to my solitude  
 Alone with rocks, and moors and trees;  
 The world is yours, in all its magnitude:  
 Go and possess it, as you please...  
 I've lost myself, and the whole universe:  
 I, once the darling of the Gods!  
 They gave Pandora's gift, they gave Pandora's curse  
 –  
 The cornucopia and the dangerous odds...  
 They offered me young lips, young love, salvation.  
 And their withdrawal is annihilation."

But Goethe's last word is not "annihilation." Faust, the great lover, "struck by the crutch of old age", is eventually saved. The heavenly light of Eros, now freed of the shadows of Thanatos, guides his entelechy to higher and higher forms of ageless activity: Gretchen, Helen and Mary melt into one epiphany of love which might be a source of light which inspires serenity in senescence. Goethe called it "das ewig Weibliche", and I do not hesitate to translate the untranslatable into "eternal womanhood" and call it the glory of spring and the golden luminosity of our Indian Summers...

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The secret of becoming a bore is to say everything. Our little meditations on 'Old Age' as "Indian Summer. Serenity or Senility..." are ended: "The rest is silence" But let me rather finish with another *Hamlet* quotation. When the prince realizes that he may have only a few days until the ships from England will be back and all the mines will spring at once, his answer to this deadline and to impending catastrophe is as short as it is clear:

"The interim is mine"...

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Ageing and old age: "Indian Summer" or "Winter's Tale", serenity or senility? Whatever *our* answer may be or must be, let us agree with Hamlet: "The interim is ours...", and let *me*, your speaker, add in the name of all your patients on their way from "grizzle to gray": we do thank you for accompanying and guiding us on our peregrination through the autumnal landscape of our later years and helping us to enjoy every day as a gift, and more: as a transparent and halcyon moment of a mild and friendly Indian Summer in a world which, after all, may be accepted with the German philosopher Leibniz as "the best of all possible ones."

