GROWING OLD

By GEORGE SCOTT-MONCRIEFF

ADOLESCENCE IS commonly a time of resentments. Looking back upon childhood newly left, experiencing a new freedom – and hardly aware of the new demands that the years must make – the young person often feels he has been deprived or wronged in some way during childhood. Perhaps most of us have been, one way or another. Yet it is of the utmost importance that we should quickly outgrow the period in which we are tempted to blame circumstance and, particularly, to blame other people for our own shortcomings and limitations. It is not of course circumstance, nor principally other people that we harm by our blame, but ourselves. We can never be mature persons until we have ceased excusing ourselves by this regime of blame. Becoming mature we begin to realize what a very imperfect place the world is: to appreciate that those whom we are tempted to blame are as much victims of the world's imperfections as are we, and that we have to accept all our limitations whether inherent or conditioned, our own fault or imposed from outside us. We have to learn to accept them in any effort we may make to mitigate worldly imperfection.

But in the spiral of our lives, the way in which problems that seemed solved recur again in new, or not so new, form, just as they do in world history, the time of blame and resentment readily repeats itself. Perhaps we experience it especially when we feel we really have left our youth behind finally and irrevocably, feel that there is to be no further renewal for us in this world: no worldly renewal.

There are at least as many pitfalls in growing old as in growing up. Some are obvious enough. There is the hardening of intellectual arteries, an entrenchment in old ideas in order to avoid the pain and disturbance of the new ones initiated by younger minds, minds whose very youth and urgency can be an affront to those lacking both. Nor is there any virtue in trying to avoid seeming old and shelved by playing at being young, determinedly contemporary: this is to jettison the judgment that age should bring in exchange for a youthfulness that can only be spurious.

It is in fact those older people who are most content to be their age who always seem to get on most happily with the young, since they can take part in a genuine, even an equal exchange, showing a wisdom that they must have acquired in reaching maturity and in exchange receiving the stimulus of the fresh society offered by the young. Certainly the tendency in modern society to isolate the old from the young, by, for example, the Sunset Cities established in California and elsewhere in the sunnier southern United States, seems to be born of a misconception of the very nature of society. Neither old nor young can benefit from such segregation. It may, in a manner, make life easier for both, but it inevitably makes it emptier, and while we may feel that we want and strive for things to be easy, what we have most to fear is emptiness, that is to say the absolute emptiness in which all worldly things disappear without replacement. For there is that other emptiness exhorted by St John of the Cross, when he wrote 'Seek to be empty of all things, and you will know that I am God'. But this is the true emptiness of renunciation, not the terrible false emptiness of *ennui* born only of inevitable disappointment in what the world can give us. This true emptiness does eventually become the principal condition for the better knowing of God. So many people find it hard ever to know him just because their awareness is cluttered with the world.

Time, which is only mechanically measured by the clock, does indeed gather momentum not only psychologically but physiologically as we grow older. We do not merely feel that the last ten years have gone quicker than the ten years before that; to all intents and purposes, in so far as we are concerned, they genuinely have gone more quickly because as we grow older we have fewer impulses of sensory perception within each passing second.

In one sense it is the old, not the young, who are in a hurry. Willy-nilly life speeds them towards death. Death now as a certainty, an inevitability, not as the almost delicious chance that it may seem to some brave and reckless young man enjoying to the full a dangerous sport – mountaineering, gliding, bobsleighing, racing cars or motorcycles. For these obviously death gives a zest to their activities. There is no physical zest about a natural death brought to us immediately or proximately by the decay of our bodies. In a way this wearying kind of death is a monstrosity, an affront to the whole sense of living, a contradiction to life, an insufferable obliteration. 'Do not go gentle into that good night', Dylan Thomas cried out over the death of his father, 'Rage, rage

against the dying of the light'. And yet, at the same time, death is like a resting-place. It seems to offer our only chance of sloughing off the grime that accumulates in our lives, to provide the only catharsis.

It would of course be nice to suppose that to grow old was inevitably to grow wise. Unfortunately it is all too evident that the one does not follow from the other. Indeed it is sometimes distressing to see the effects that age can take on good people. Declining health can prove bafflingly frustrating to an active man or woman, and make for a discontent painful to the victim and tiresome to his family and friends. Physical pain itself, which with age sometimes becomes an all too constant companion, makes for an irritability that even the best of intentions may never completely control. Of course these states of mind do not necessarily preclude wisdom, but they can mar its practice.

Then again, some of us find the idea of approaching death too perturbing to accept. Probably a great many people would endorse the words of the factor of a highland estate on which I once lived. He was telling the old crofter who lived next door to me of the sudden death, in his sleep, of a friend, and he said, 'That's the way I should like to go'. The old crofter told me this. Although he had been too courteous to say so to the factor, he expressed himself puzzled, for, he said, 'You would want to have time to prepare yourself'. When his own time came my neighbour did get his wish, and he had several weeks to prepare himself very happily for a death of an admirable serenity.

Even if one could say of this old man, as of others, that he had probably been preparing himself all his life, he was still glad to have an intensive period of preparation for a death he was then able to welcome as though it were no stranger.

A very old lady, her mind as clear as the dawn although she was in her nineties, whom I knew at that same time, was visited by the priest bringing her the last sacrament. He came back reflecting the radiance with which she anticipated her death. She, who we knew had a hard life of poverty and breavement, told him 'I've had a good life, and if ever I was unhappy it was because of my own bad nature'. I need hardly add that anything like bad nature had not been perceptible in the character of that old lady at least for a very long time, but she fully accepted responsibility for any time she had failed to rejoice in the love of God and his will for her. It seemed to make her supremely ready for death.

I remember reading the impressions of an irish nurse who had come over to work in an english hospital. She was filled with admiration for the stoicism with which patients there died, but their deaths made her terribly distressed. They were so unlike the deaths she had been used to in an irish hospital, deaths attended by the whole family, a sort of family party in which sorrow was balanced by a happy confidence in the divine will. I think I first experienced this attitude to death – so different from the one that almost suggests that there is something neither outrageous nor wonderful nor challenging but merely indecent about dying – when I first visited one of the Catholic Hebrides. As I came out of church on the Sunday with a new-made friend, the keeper of the boarding-house in which I was staying, he told me he was going up the hill to see an elderly man, the finest seaman on the island, who was dying, and suggested I come with him. I demurred, protesting that this was hardly the time to pay a first visit to a house of strangers. 'Why not?' was the answer. 'We all go the same way'. And so I was privileged to join a happy relaxed company surrounding the death-bed of an old sailor with a beautiful face, whose eyes when they opened were as blue as the sea on which he had spent much of his life, the sea that shone in the sunshine beyond his window. Death and life seemed then to be very close, mutually comprehensible.

More tragic than those who merely hide the fear of death from themselves are those who conceal it behind a bitterness with life. Perhaps they feel implicitly that to see life as miserable and contemptible takes the sting out of death. Nor is this mere immaturity, for it can sometimes go along with considerable maturity of judgment, in which case it tends, of course, to make for a cynicism which may itself simply serve to hide innate sympathy: most men being complex creatures.

Perhaps, though, it is more difficult than might be supposed to avoid all trace of cynicism, or even occasional bitterness, if only because maturity does involve a considerable loss of respect for worldly values that will remain abundant around us even when we have largely rejected them for ourselves. Again it would be nice if maturity automatically freed us from any sense of superiority or personal achievement that this might encourage, but it does not. In this life we are never 'out of the wood'; always we have to be ready to check ourselves humbly. It is as though this wood of our lives contained to its very end ravening wolves, subtle serpents, with vigilant vultures waiting in the tree tops. This is in no sense

to subscribe to what was once a favourite theme of revivalist religion – the story of the good man who falls from grace for one fatal hour (or minute) and is thereupon seized by a designing providence and swept away to eternal damnation. An alternative concept, that we are judged not so much on what we achieve as by what we truly aspire to, seems more reasonable. Doubtless everybody who aspires high is bound to experience some sense of failure, and even this has its inherent danger, for it carries with it the menace of despair, or at least of a despondency that can enervate our virtue. To avoid this we should not expect too much of ourselves, but accept that, in the words of St Bernadette, 'It takes a lot of humiliation to make a little humility'.

Maturity should be very valuable because of the width and depth of experience that have gone into it. Perhaps the mature are most helpful to the young when least aware of it: it is not in preaching, perhaps not even often in conscious counselling, but when making quite casual remarks, that we may exert most influence on others. That is why it seems particularly important that older people should put a guard upon their tongues, for, although they may not openly admit it, the immature do wait upon guidance from those who are more advanced in experience than they.

Yet maturity is not essential to wisdom. We know that. Christ never reached mature years himself. Saints who died very young might certainly sometimes have had a limited background of experience on which they could have drawn had their counsel been asked. What then did they have that made them so ready for heaven? Here one is asking a question that can almost only be answered experimentally, but mercifully for us there have been those who have been able sufficiently to interpret their experience to give us a hint – a clue – something to aspire to.

The knowledge of the mystics does not demand maturity. These are some lines written by a young girl, growing towards her death while still in her twenties. They are headed simply *Self, on looking into a mirror before going to bed.*

Here is the repetition
Of all flesh.
I know so that I know not
The broad cheeks, the round head happed with hair
And the bone-ridden nose
They are not of me.

Here is the repetition
Of all flesh
And knowing not, I know
Tissue and tidal blood, bones, marrow, the neat-built brain
They are not of me
Nor the mind either.

The cherished quicking mind
Is part of the convention
That is not me.

There is awareness in the eyes
They ask not and they answer not
Repudiating they respond
So that I may know
So that I may know
And be glad
The convention is the convention.

Here is the acceptance of human nothingness and of the eternal incomprehensible paradox of faith by which this nothingness is consonant with an identity possessed by each one of us: and yet even that identity, like a convention, is itself not the ultimate reality of our being.

There are those from whom maturity demands some illative sense of this paradox; there are those who never find the need to trouble with it; and there are certainly those to whom it comes clear, a revelation early in life. So it is that the young can often be the teachers of the old: again, hardly by preaching to them, and perhaps rarely by counselling, generally only more subtly. Frequently what they teach us are things we have once known, or half-known, and have forgotten in our scurry to cram ourselves with information, much of which may hardly have been necessary after all. Even the apparently quaint remarks made by very small children can on occasion bring us a breath of revelation or recollection, just because their minds are not yet cluttered up. And maturity itself demands of us an uncluttering process.

Moreover, this recognition of what we may be able to learn from immature persons plays an important part in our capacity to communicate with them. If we assume anything remotely like omniscience or any kind of superiority, we at once close the door on communication. If we consider that we can only give and have no need

to receive we humiliate the other person. There has to be an openness to receive as well as to give for a human relationship to be honourable and not demeaning to one party. It is the old people who appreciate this who have the reward of young friendships and the capacity to be of help to those of another generation.

After all, it has often been said that the essence of wisdom is the knowledge of how little we know. So long as we have some awareness of how little we do know we shall always be open and anxious to know more, and therefore receptive even on occasions that might seem unpropitious.

Probably many of us when younger have at times thought how nice it must be to retire with enough money to give us security and comfort without any longer having to work for or worry about such things. Some of us have cherished and detailed plans for our retirement. Sometimes these are realized. But we know how often, like the rich man in the parable who filled his barns and died that night, people do not long survive retirement from an active life. In any case, that time of rest and peace may very easily never come our way: responsibilities we had not anticipated may prevent it, as may impoverishment or ill-health. There is another element we may find in our maturing. We may find that instead of our 'best laid plans' being realized, we even, hardly aware of what we do, renounce them, giving our last days more fully to the service of other people. Sometimes awareness of what we have renounced in doing so may fill us with sudden exasperation and self-pity; yet through this renunciation we escape from, as someone has put it, 'the living each for self that becomes more apparent when glamour and middle-aged activity is stripped away'. We should be glad of having taken a step towards the renunciation needful to a happy death.

We simply have to learn to ride lightly to all our aspirations, to count on no security lying ahead of us in this world, even while we may have to strive to achieve some hope of security for our families.

Maturity therefore demands a considerable degree of detachment.

Detachment, or non-attachment as Aldous Huxley preferred to define it to distinguish it from simple indifference, is none the less a negative attitude. Mankind longs for deep attachment. Yet if he demands too much of any human attachment – asking more than mere humanity can possibly give – man is condemned to disappointment. Love, where it lacks wisdom and therefore falls short of true charity, can become unbearable to both lover and beloved.

An archetype of tragedy is the lover driven to a murderous frenzy by what he sees as a betrayal of his love. The Othello of fiction mirrors a million tragedies of fact. A man's passionate love can itself destroy the very object of his love on whom it makes impossible claims – demanding the attributes of God from a fellow-creature as fallible as himself. Yet the very fact that he does seek for the godhead, withal unwisely, does itself suggest that the godhead exists, while the fact that the quality of our wisdom derives from the purity of our love must seem itself to indicate the nature of the godhead.

With maturity we learn to temper human love: in no wise to reduce it, but to make it less a matter of demanding, more a matter of giving: a much more exacting affair. We cannot bear to be empty, verging towards lovelessness; we shall become cold and distant, heartless even towards ourselves if we have no object for the love that is our heart's desire.

Only God is vast enough to receive again the love that he created for himself. On the way to God we love his creatures, not the theoretic and ultimately faceless men of the do-gooder, the political idealist, the utopian dreamer, but the men and women and children we know as persons and whose failings along with our own, and whose very closeness, must often make love difficult for most of us. This is the love that is truly disinterested, not dependent on emotional or intellectual reward: this is charity.

Maturity shows us that faith is not merely an attribute of thought. It is more true to say that we think because we believe than to say we believe because we think. The distinction between man and beast, between the human and other creatures, lies not so much in man's capacity for reasoning as in his awareness of existence beyond his sensory demands – howsoever his reasoning may come to define this awareness. Man believes, howsoever obscurely, howsoever quickly involved in thought wise or foolish, that there exists an actuality beyond himself and his immediate environment. Faith is antecedent to thought. We cannot start thinking until we believe in something. The existence of faith must always seem unreasonable, just because it precedes reason, and the part cannot contain the whole. The validity of our thought depends first upon the acceptance of a basic belief that there is a polarity of truth and untruth, good and evil; only then can we rationalize usefully upon the infinite gradations between the two.

Faith, belief, is needful to us here. In purgatory we shall need it

no more, for we shall know: hope will fill its place, hope of heaven where hope itself is redundant and only charity remains to us. Perhaps before we die hope will begin to become clearer to us, just because there is so much less for it to fasten upon in this life. Many of us find hope difficult worldly-wise. It is so often disappointed that we begin to wonder whether we should even have hoped as we did. Perhaps all along we should and only could have hoped for the beatific vision? But there are so many people, besides ourselves, for whom, and so many indisputable good causes for which we have hoped and prayed, with prayers that seemed unanswered, even unheard, that we have begun to neglect hope in case it turned into despair. It may be that this struggle for hope becomes a precondition for purgatory.