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Tennyson’s Wrinkled Feet: Ageing and the Poetics of Decay

Jacob Jewusiak

This article argues that Tennyson’s ‘Tithonus’ (1860) draws together ageing and decay through the poem’s formal wrinkling: moments where metrical disruption, folding, slackness, or concealment correspond to the insights derived from the perspective of great age — chiming the poet’s keynotes of disappointment, mourning, and loss. I turn to ‘Ulysses’ (1842) and ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832) — poems with a similar, though differently stressed, investment in age and decay — to demonstrate the political stakes of this thesis. While for Ulysses old age presents the triumphant opportunity to live ‘Life to the lees’, this arises from a sense of masculine anxiety about imminent decay. ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ positions ageing and decay against the imperative to work as a means of decentring the monolithic temporality of capitalist utility. These poems theorize the poetics of rot as a senescent challenge to the masculine and capitalist assumptions about the inherent value of mastery, productivity, and vigour.

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A ‘gray shadow, once a man’, the immortal Tithonus of Tennyson’s poem grows older — forever.[1] While the gods remain impervious to the depredations of time, the ‘strong Hours indignant work’d their wills’ into Tithonus’s ageing body, leaving him a ‘white-hair’d shadow’, ‘wither[ed]’, ‘maim’d’, ‘wasted’, and ‘marr’d’ (ll. 18, 8, 6, 20, 19). ‘Consume[d]’ by the years, Tithonus’s battered body shrinks into itself, drawing upon an ageist lexicon of decay that has long been used to describe old age (l. 6). The projection of decay onto the older human body usually has overwhelmingly negative connotations: putrefaction and abjection go hand in hand, as the process of decomposition takes on morally repulsive overtones. When decay is mapped onto old age, senescence takes on a similarly negative charge as a feared interval of the human lifespan. Martha Nussbaum posits that the stigma associated with the ageing of others — the view of the ‘aging body [...] as a site of decay and future death’ — arises from the fear of it happening to oneself.[2] ‘We reject’, Nussbaum writes, ‘all that is associated with decay and mortality: [...] decaying mortal animality’ (p. 110). For age critics such as Margaret Gullette, projecting the negative connotations of decay onto the human body is a structural prejudice that must be overcome. She writes that ‘instead of persistently yoking this fear to the end of life and bodily decay, we do better to conceive of aging at any age as an issue of consciousness and a relationship to personal change’.[3] In an analysis of three poems by Tennyson — ‘Tithonus’ (1860), ‘Ulysses’ (1842), and ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832) — I argue that, even as the poet retains the connection between decay and ageing, he recodes the process of putrefaction as ecologically and existentially valuable. The poems hold up the world of decay and renewal against that of immortality and sterile repetition: by valuing the former, Tennyson dissociates old age with disgust while avoiding the opposite pole of repressing physiological change. Doing so unsettles many of the entrenched biases against old age, which the poet affirms as a productive interval rather than a nightmarish inevitability.

The professional medical discourse of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries helped to shape the cultural narrative connecting ageing and decay. Some physicians theorized that each person was imbued with a limited amount of vital power that decreased over time. Charles Hufeland developed this view in his influential *Art of Prolonging Life* (1797), positing that ‘by the assistance of the vital power a body is transferred from the mechanical and chemical world to a new one, the organic or living

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1 ‘Tithonus’, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Harlow: Longman, 1987), II, 605–12, l. 11.

2 Martha C. Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations About Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 114.

3 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Ending Ageism, Or How Not to Shoot Old People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), p. 65.

world'.[4] Sparking matter into organic life, the finite reserves of vital power must be carefully preserved:

> The energy of life, therefore, will be in an inverse ratio with its duration; or the more intensively a being lives, the more will its life lose in extension. [...] If the intensive life of a plant be increased by heat, manure, and artificial means, it will expand itself to perfection more rapidly, but it will also soon decay. (p. 34)

In *A Dictionary of Practical Medicine* (1834) the Scottish physician James Copland deploys the vitalist metaphor of the burning flame to describe the lifespan: 'the oil with which the lamp of human, and indeed all animal, existence burns is filled at its commencement, and is never afterwards supplied; and that the more brilliant the flame, the shorter will be its duration.'[5] This popular belief about the expendability of one's life force cultivates the belief that 'age [...] may be considered as commencing when the vital energies of the different organs begin to decline, — when the maturity of life glides into decay' (Copland, I, 44). For the polymath P. M. Roget — physician, theologian, lexicographer — growing older constitutes a battle between the conservative and destructive forces of the human body: once the scales tip towards decline, one 'transition[s] from maturity to decay': 'living bodies perish from within, being consumed by the very fire which is itself the source of their animation.'[6] The propagation of vitalist theory in the medical writing of the era conjures an image of ageing — especially in the later years of life — as a process of relentless decay of an original source.[7]

The notion that decay is an inevitable and lamentable aspect of growing older continued to inform early studies of culture and age, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1970). For a philosopher so sensitive to the myriad ways patriarchal culture marginalizes women, her account of age remains surprisingly tethered to 'biological facts':

> For every individual age begins with it a dreaded decline. It is in complete conflict with the manly or womanly ideal cherished by the young and the fully-grown.

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[4] *Hufeland's Art of Prolonging Life*, ed. by Erasmus Wilson, 2nd edn (London: Churchill, 1859), p. 23.

[5] James Copland, *A Dictionary of Practical Medicine*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1834), I, 46.

[6] P. M. Roget, 'Age', in *The Cyclopædia of Practical Medicine*, ed. by John Forbes, Alexander Tweedie, and John Conolly, 4 vols (London: Sherwood, 1833), I, 34–46 (pp. 35, 43).

[7] Even Thomas Andrews's *Cyclopedia of Domestic Medicine and Surgery* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1842), which does not explicitly use the term decay, still deploys language that borrows heavily from the rhetoric of rot: 'from the first periods of old age, and sometimes sooner, the organs become deteriorated; [...] many of them entirely lose their action; others are absorbed, and disappear; [...] finally, at the age of decrepitude, life is reduced to some remains of the vital, and a few deteriorated nutritive functions' (pp. 137–38).

> The immediate, natural attitude is to reject it, in so far as it is summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health. Old age in others also causes an instant repulsion. This primitive reaction remains alive even when custom represses it.[8]

Age fundamentally shapes the epistemological contexts of daily life, and its ability to organize bodies draws a great deal of power from the fact that it often goes unquestioned: the decline narrative of ageing is naturalized by a sense of biological inevitability.[9] Thus, ageing's normative patterns: the young are beautiful, full of potential, and difficult to control; the aged are ugly, out of time, and predictable. According to pervasive stereotypes, the young are characterized by growth, the old by decay. Beauvoir's emphatic assertion that ageing is *like* decay draws upon rot's association with what Jamie Lorimer defines as 'stagnation, slowness, and disease [...] mortality, vulnerability, and the inevitability of death'.[10] The signification of decay in ecological and cultural discourse has been historically and semiotically linked to the abjection of ageing as a transformative process.

Recent scholarship provides new models for conceptualizing decay as a positive agent in ecological, economic, and aesthetic contexts. In a recent special issue on the subject in the journal *Configurations*, the editor asserts that 'rot and decay [...] are often met with irrational disgust through which their ecologically valuable functions become obscured, their role in a complex system overshadowed by what can be regarded only as an affective response'.[11] Joanna Radin writes, in her piece titled 'Rot', that 'processes of putrefaction are powerfully generative. They provide epistemologically rich opportunities to conjure multispecies worlds and with them alternative visions for what it means to be alive.'[12] In his reading of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, John MacNeill Miller attends to the decomposing body of Arthur Hallam that many critics have overlooked: by 'obscuring rot', he argues, 'we obscure ecological realities, turning our backs on a vital connection between individual human beings and the broader biotic community of which we are a part'.[13] However, the affective response to decay — which is often

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[8] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 40.

[9] The progression of a human life from infancy to old age follows a biological pattern that is heavily mediated by social and cultural assumptions about the ageing body. Predictions about how the body will react at a certain chronological age inform medical treatment (e.g. whether one will see a specialist in pediatrics or geriatrics) and social milestones (such as minimum drinking age or the threshold for retirement).

[10] Jamie Lorimer, 'Rot', *Environmental Humanities*, 8 (2016), 235–39 (p. 236).

[11] Lucinda Cole, 'Introduction: Putrefaction and the Ecologies of Life: Enter the Vulture', *Configurations*, 25 (2017), 137–43 (p. 138).

[12] Joanna Radin, 'Rot', in *The Multispecies Salon* <http://www.multispecies-salon.org/rot/> [accessed 28 February 2021].

[13] John MacNeill Miller, 'Composing Decomposition: *In Memoriam* and the Ecocritical Undertaking', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 39 (2017), 383–98 (p. 384).

sublimated into moral repugnance — lags behind this scholarly affirmation of decay's centrality in forming networks. Most can intellectually register decay's significance, but fewer can condition their response to a process long associated with threatening the integrity of organic matter and life itself.

The projection of decay onto a context like ageing requires a slippage between its literal and figurative modes. The application of the term has less to do with the physical signs of rot — such as necrosis — and more with conjuring a set of feelings produced in the observer of decay: fear of the flesh's disintegration, its mephitic odours and iridescent blooms of colour. Expanding the dominion of putrefaction beyond that of inorganic matter — so that it metaphorically seeps into the living flesh of the aged — attests to decay's nightmarish expansiveness: its messy ability to spill over into the realm of the figurative.[14] Such boundary crossing suggests an ontological difficulty in determining when decay begins and ends. In her reading of John Ruskin's *The Ethics of Dust*, Ella Mershon writes that decay is more than what 'happens to the body [...] after it dies. Decay is with us every step of the way. It is a "daily" process, as much an "operation" of life as of death.'[15] The theorist Reza Negarestani avers that 'it becomes increasingly difficult to say when the process of decay ceases to exist and is supplanted by complete ontological annulment or extinction'.[16] Decay is commonly understood to follow a strong teleology — where one type of privileged matter transforms into a lesser form. But decay rarely occurs within such a clearly marked trajectory. Instead of policing the boundaries of decay, a lexicon derived from intensity — the pace of putrefaction, the affective rhythm of rot — better captures the role of decay in stimulating metamorphosis, of generating new configurations and forms of matter rather than simply destroying them.

The intensity of decay resonates with the way Tennyson's poetry draws words into temporal and acoustic arrangements that provoke a confrontation with the quiddity of language — a way of bodying forth, through the poem's form, a new orientation towards rot. I argue that 'Tithonus' affectively registers a thematic focus on ageing and decay through its use of what I call formal wrinkling: moments where metrical

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[14] Christopher Hamlin writes of decay's tendency to messy metaphorical application, a slimy slippage between outside and inside: 'the essence of the concept of zymotic disease was that disease was a spreading internal rot, that it came from an external rot, and that it could be transferred to others.' See Christopher Hamlin, 'Providence and Putrefaction: Victorian Sanitarians and the Natural Theology of Health and Disease', *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 381–411 (p. 386).

[15] Ella Mershon, 'Ruskin's Dust', *Victorian Studies*, 58 (2016), 464–92 (p. 468).

[16] Reza Negarestani, 'Undercover Softness: An Introduction to the Architecture and Politics of Decay', *Collapse*, 6 (2010), 379–430 (p. 387).

disruption, folding, slackness, or concealment correspond to the insights derived from the perspective of great age — chiming the poet's keynotes of disappointment, mourning, and loss. I turn to 'Ulysses' and 'The Lotos-Eaters' — poems with a similar, though differently stressed, investment in age and decay — to demonstrate the political stakes of this thesis. While for Ulysses old age presents the triumphant opportunity to live 'Life to the lees', this arises from a sense of masculine anxiety about imminent decay.[17] 'The Lotos-Eaters' positions ageing and decay against the imperative to work as a means of decentring the monolithic temporality of capitalist utility. Through an analysis of these three poems, I suggest that Tennyson theorizes the poetics of rot as a senescent challenge to the masculine and capitalist assumptions about the inherent value of mastery, productivity, and vigour.

Forever old

Addressing the tenacity of the vitalist 'fallacy [...] that senescence arises from the depletion of some necessary reserve', George Williams uses the term 'Tithonus error' in his critique of modern gerontology's 'preoccupation with death, as if it were a programmed event in an organism's life history'.[18] Yet even before 'Tithonus', Tennyson's poetry displayed an interest in the tension between the terminal point of death and modes of lingering such as decay. Written when he was between fourteen and sixteen years old, *The Devil and the Lady* (1824) pivots on the January–May marriage between the young Amoret and her elderly husband, Magus. With almost sixty years intervening between them, Amoret imagines her husband's desiccated body stubbornly persisting across the years:

> He bears a charmed life and will outlast me
> In mustiness of dry longevity.
> Like some tough mummy wither'd, not decay'd —
> His years are countless as the dusty race
> That people an old Cheese and flourish only
> In the unsoundest parts on't.[19]

Anticipating the representation of Tithonus's body in Tennyson's mature poem, Magus remains painfully preserved through enchantment — a dry, rather than slimy, doom that conjures anger or sympathy rather than disgust. Amoret apostrophizes Magus as a

[17] 'Ulysses', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 613–20, l. 7.

[18] George C. Williams, 'The Tithonus Error in Modern Gerontology', *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 74 (1999), 405–15 (p. 405).

[19] 'The Devil and the Lady', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 13–72, ll. 133–38.

'crazy dotard, crusted o'er with age' and 'a shrunken, sapless, wizen Grasshopper' (ll. 5, 7). The reference to the grasshopper's husk recalls the conclusion of the Tithonus myth, where the long-suffering lover finally achieves respite through his metamorphosis into an insect.[20] The bodies of Tennyson's aged characters grow older but resist decay in ways that confound the expectation of deterioration projected upon them.

'Tithonus' begins with the speaker's weary recognition that nature's patterns of decay do not apply to his own persisting body, which remains exiled from the meaningful closure of natural rhythms:

> 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. (ll. 1–4)

Observing the earthy cycles that draw matter back into the ground — as trees, vapours, men, and swans wilt downward into the soil — Tithonus longs for the inevitable termination that attends organic matter: 'Release me, and restore me to the ground' (l. 72). While Tithonus's desire takes the form of a gravitational pull towards the quiet earth, the poem also contains upward vectors of movement. He associates this movement with his lover Aurora, bitterly recalling the days of courtship when he 'heard Apollo sing, | While Ilion like a mist rose into towers' (ll. 62–63). Every morning, 'when the steam | Floats up from those dim fields', memorializes the distance separating him from the days of his happy youth (ll. 68–69). This upward movement of steam and mist captures the Enlightenment's dissociation of the body from mind and rationality: to the accompaniment of Apollo, the towers of the city rise and give shape to the dawn of modernity. Yet the visual and auditory spectacle excludes Tithonus, who remains on the margins of this triumphant narrative begging for the decomposition into mute matter.

Tithonus does not merely desire death, but the transformative process of decay. This distinction is significant since scholars often mistakenly use the term 'decay' to describe the speaker's condition in the poem.[21] If Tithonus was already in a state of

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[20] The allusion to Ecclesiastes 12. 5 — which describes old age as a time when 'the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails' — connects the desiccation of the insect to the withering of desire, another major trope in 'Tithonus'.

[21] This can take the form of offhand remarks to more direct assertions about the nature of Tithonus's condition. Herbert Tucker references 'the endless decay of his own mythical monologist from the "Tithon" of 1833' (*Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 242). Owen Boynton writes that 'Tithonus does nothing, and has nothing to do, except to measure his rate of decay according to Aurora's regular departures and returns' ('Tennyson and the Weight of the Pause', *Victorian Poetry*, 53 (2015), 229–42 (p. 236)).

decay, he would not begin his monologue by yearning for decomposition — exemplified in the repetition of 'the woods decay' in the first line, the vapours of the second, and the fertilizing corpse of the third. This problematic logic informs Cornelia Pearsall's account of 'Tithonus', which begins by asserting that the speaker is 'in a material state of unending decay' and ends with the claim that 'Tithonus expresses his desire to become particulate. [...] [He] envisions an afterlife of compost.'[22] Michael Greene makes a similar claim that 'the repetition in line 1, "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall", suggests tired senility. Tithonus' impotence finds its correlative in the falling and decay of the wood.'[23] Yet surely Tithonus cannot desire to decay and be in a state of decay at the same time. The inconsistency arises from the pervasive use of decay as a synonym for the process of ageing. Doing so perpetuates an ageist equivalence that obscures Tennyson's rigorous separation of the two processes in the poem. Tithonus's ageing is pathological precisely because it lacks the temporal attributes that he jealously ascribes to the rotting matter of the poem's first lines.

Tithonus contrasts his desire for decay with his youthful infatuation for Aurora, who flames the sky into dawn every morning. As the dawn 'redden[s]', her 'sweet eyes brighten' and 'dim curls kindle', and she departs before answering Tithonus's plea for death, leaving behind only ambiguous 'tears' that he interprets as the mute confirmation of his doom: 'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts' (ll. 37, 38, 54, 49). Her association with light and air makes her both beautiful and capricious, like the wantonly blooming spring:

> Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
> With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
> Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd
> Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet. (ll. 58–61)

Aurora's fecundity takes on the characteristics of an erogenous and yet oppressively humid saturation, a 'wild and sweet' irresponsibility — of tears that can mean regret, sorrow, condescension, or condensation — that contrasts with the dry predictability of Tithonus's existence. Entrapped within his gloomy durability, Tithonus laments that the dawn's radiance leaves him 'cold':

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[22] Cornelia Pearsall, *Tennyson's Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 242, 259.

[23] Michael E. Greene, 'Tennyson's "Gray Shadow, Once a Man": Erotic Imagery and Dramatic Structure in "Tithonus"', *Victorian Poetry*, 18 (1980), 293–300 (p. 294).

> Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
> Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
> Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
> Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
> Of happy men that have the power to die. (ll. 66–70)

The brilliance of dawn's arrival does not touch the speaker, whose clammy flesh remains unaffected by the warming rhythms of renewal. The use of enjambment in these lines formalizes the speaker's asynchrony with the pulse that animates the world around him, emphasized by such arrhythmias as the trochaic substitutions that begin lines 66 and 69. The speaker only returns to the stability of the end-stopped line when he reflects on the 'happy' 'power to die'.

The 'cold [...] wrinkled feet' of Tithonus entwine the speaker's self-consciousness of his physical inadequacy with the senescent quality of Tennyson's poetics. This arises in part through the metrical diminution of the concept of immortality. Early in the poem Tithonus complains that 'Me only cruel immortality | Consumes', and he rues his misguided demand that Aurora 'Give me immortality' (ll. 5–6, 15). Later, he imagines the temporality of eternal life as a humiliating aggressor:

> And tho' they could not end me, left me maim'd
> To dwell in the presence of immortal youth,
> Immortal age besides immortal youth,
> And all I was in ashes. (ll. 20–23)

Tithonus's description of longevity changes modes. 'Immortality' suggests an abstract, external condition: a disease masquerading as a gift. Later, it takes on the quality of an identity: Tithonus is an 'immortal', albeit one who compares unfavourably with the gods. The shift in meaning corresponds to a shift in the stress of the word. Where 'immortality' glides over the deathly syllable 'mort', 'immortal' places emphasis directly upon it. This change reflects Tithonus's youthful ignorance of death's meaningful pause and his later confrontation with its painfully resounding absence.

Written in blank verse, the monologue nevertheless undermines the heartbeat that pulses in its use of iambic pentameter, conjuring the sense of wrinkling, withering, and diminishment through manipulation of the poem's form. Herbert Tucker describes 'Tithonus' as the 'most soundproof' of Tennyson's monologues, an effect produced through the hushed, oneiric atmosphere of the 'ever-silent spaces of the East' (pp. 256, 259). The seventh line — 'Here at the quiet limit of the world' — replaces the first

iamb with a trochee, adding emphasis to the first syllable of ‘quiet’ and creating an aural effect that contrasts with the hushed meaning of the word. The most metrically ambiguous lines correspond to the speaker’s apostrophe of Aurora, which pivots on the failure of communication:

> Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
> In silence, then before thine answer given
> Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek. (ll. 43–45)

While line 43 begins with a staggering spondee, the quiet that follows reflects the muted quality of Aurora’s visual beauty. The lines add the archaic suffix to ‘growest’ and ‘Departest’, which evoke the impermanence of dawn’s splendour, whose brief interval — like the single syllable of ‘given’ that ends line 44 — gains poignancy through an illuminating compression of time. The slack syllables place additional stress on what follows, an animating tension of expansion and contraction — rooted in the rhythms of growth and decay — that Tithonus’s immortal homogeneity lacks. The poem creates a sense of wrinkling through its use of metre, conjuring aural effects that link the poem’s representation of ageing to processes of temporal folding.

This wrinkling not only occurs at the level of prosody, but also of perspective. Great age enables a sense of temporal scale that Tennyson deploys in his earliest published poetry, experimenting with the perspective of a reflective old man in the poem ‘Memory’ in *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827):

> Days of youth, now shaded
> By twilight of long years,
> Flowers of youth, now faded,
> Though bathed in sorrow’s tears:
> Thoughts of youth, which waken
> Mournful feelings now
> Fruits which time hath shaken
> From off their parent bough.[24]

Tennyson creates a wrinkling effect in this lyrical triangulation of the poet’s youth through the prism of the elderly imagination, folding youth upon itself across the fulcrum point of old age: a perspectival shift that follows the weave of the poem’s

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[24] ‘Memory’, in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 94–96, ll. 9–16.

cross-rhyming quatrains.[25] Age also enables the bitter retrospect in 'Remorse', as the speaker claims, 'Oh! 'tis a fearful thing to glance | Back on the gloom of mis-spent years'.[26] Such melancholy strains of lost time are amplified through the backward glance of old age. Rather than provide a sense of fulfilment, this vantage point strikes the mournful note that resonates throughout much of Tennyson's oeuvre: a heightened consciousness of something irretrievably lost.

This wrinkled perspective — where the time folds upon itself — was central to the composition history of 'Tithonus', which the poet originally wrote as 'Tithon' in 1833 as one of his many responses to the death of his beloved friend, Hallam. Tennyson revised the poem twenty-seven years later for publication in Thackeray's *Cornhill Magazine*, extending and nuancing the speaker's reflections upon mortality and time. In her analysis of the discrepancy between the two poems, Linda Hughes writes that 'in 1860, [...] now distanced from his loss by more than a quarter of a century, he could simultaneously explore a longing for death (the germinal impulse supplied by "Tithon") *and* an acceptance of death'.[27] For Hughes, the healing power of time results in a more positive stance towards the finality of death. Yet it is more than just passing time that inspires Tennyson's revisions. The duration between 1833 and 1860 takes on the embodied form of ageing, which plays a fundamental role in the transformation of both the poet and the poem. The interval between the 24-year-old poet who wrote 'Tithon' and the 50-year-old who wrote 'Tithonus' forms another perspectival wrinkling that folds across the impossibly aged body of the mythological figure.

A significant wrinkle occurs in the way the two poems conjure the alienating effects of ageing through the speaker's reflections on his dim youth. As we see in 'Tithon':

> Ay me! ay me! with what another heart,
> By thy divine embraces circumfused,
> Thy black curls burning into sunny rings,
> With thy change changed, I felt this wonderous glow.[28]

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[25] Tennyson's later poems do not display the same inventiveness regarding the possibilities of old age. In 'By an Evolutionist' (in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, III, 201–02), the speaker cries out against age: 'What hast thou done for me, grim Old Age, save breaking my bones on the rack? | Would I had past in the morning that looks so bright from afar!' (ll. 9–10). And venerable age replies: 'Done for thee? Starved the wild beast that was linkt with thee eighty years back. | Less weight now for the ladder-of-heaven that hangs on a star' (ll. 11–12). This poem posits old age as designed to prepare the individual for imminent death and salvation by mitigating the passions and desires of youth.

[26] 'Remorse', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 98–100, ll. 1–2.

[27] Linda K. Hughes, 'From "Tithon" to "Tithonus": Tennyson as Mourner and Monologist', *Philological Quarterly*, 58 (1979), 82–89 (p. 88), emphasis in original.

[28] 'Tithon', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 620–22, ll. 41–44.

Tithon posits a gap between the narrating voice and the narrated — 'what another heart' — by contrasting it with the centripetal transformation of love: the closed circuit of 'curls', 'rings', and 'embraces'. Old age, however, distances and differentiates — Tithon exists alone, roaming the dusky hinterlands of the East. Tennyson's revision in 1860 extends Tithonus's loneliness into a radical self-division across time:

> Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
> In days far-off, and with what other eyes
> I used to watch — if I be he that watch'd —
> The lucid outline forming round thee. (ll. 50–53)

Here, the ancient speaker pushes harder on the discontinuity of his identity across time. His reference to 'eyes' that 'watch' projects the visual gap of perception — between a seeing eye and its object — onto the unfathomable distance between his older and younger selves, resulting in the existential uncertainty of 'if I be he that watch'd'.[29] Moreover, this is the only stanza in 'Tithonus' that retains the 'Ay me! ay me!' that appeared in three of the original's six stanzas, an expression of the speaker's self-pity that triangulates 'Ay' through the pun on 'I' and 'eye'. The revisions mark a studied intensification of the ability for old age to stretch time, wrinkle it, and defamiliarize it. Tithonus becomes a memory that no longer belongs to himself.

As the ancient speaker undergoes this process of depersonalization, he increasingly identifies with the brute materiality of the 'dark earth' and 'dark world where I was born' (ll. 48, 33). The poem concludes with a celebration of the 'grassy barrows of the happier dead' and the soil that contains them (l. 71):

> Release me, and restore me to the ground;
> Thou seëst all things, thou wilt see my grave:
> Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
> I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
> And thee returning on thy silver wheels. (ll. 72–76)

The speaker's insistence on transforming back into earth problematizes one of the most repeated claims about the poem — that its central theme is the tension between life and death, impermanence and immortality. Significantly absent from this

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[29] According to Gregory Tate, 'the bare simplicity of the phrase "if I be he" intensifies the impact of its claim that the physical and mental changes an individual undergoes over time might so alter identity that past and present selves become separate subjects requiring separate pronouns.' See Gregory Tate, 'Tennyson and the Embodied Mind', *Victorian Poetry*, 47 (2009), 61–80 (p. 75).

conversation is Tithonus's desire to decompose. Rather than flashing out of existence, his imagination lingers on the metamorphosis of his body into the particulate matter of soil: his restoration 'to the ground'. This view resonates with Charles Hufeland's vitalist account of organic matter, where death does not mark the end of life but its dissemination into a network of putrefactive possibilities:

> No sooner is a body thus decomposed than its fine particles begin to be again animated in a thousand small worms [...] and, by a few changes, become, a year after, component parts perhaps of as perfect a human being as that which they appeared to corrupt. Their apparent death was only a transition to a new life. (*Hufeland's Art*, p. 25)

The negative connotations associated with decay may obscure the fact that Tithonus also ascribes its qualities to Aurora, whose beauty — like the woods that repetitively decay and fall — requires the interval of darkness to draw forth the brilliance of her light. 'Thou wilt renew' he says in line 74, juxtaposing — with the pun on 'wilt' — the entwined themes of decay and rebirth. His question to Aurora — 'How can my nature longer mix with thine?' — not only refers to the unbridgeable gap between the two former lovers, but the impossibility for his immortal body to decay in the same way as the dawn changes into evening (l. 65). Only when Tithonus *becomes* nature — when he becomes 'earth in earth' — will he eradicate the agonizing distance from Aurora by decomposing into a restful memorial of dust she will pass every morning.

In selfishly desiring to lift himself above the vicissitudes of decay, the younger Tithonus asks for the immortality that he tragically receives. For scholars such as Geoffrey Ward and David Shaw this immortality results in paralysis: Tithonus's actions are 'in truth stasis' and 'locked in time'.[30] However, Tithonus does not lament the lack of time, but its surfeit. His immortality causes his body to change constantly, forever — subject to the ravages of the strong hours that relentlessly destroy his frame. His lust for decomposition throughout the poem, therefore, is not to recover his temporal nature, but to place himself within a teleological structure — out of the terrifying prospect of endlessness, and into the comforting knowledge of putrefaction's transformative possibilities:

> Why should a man desire in any way
> To vary from the kindly race of men
> Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
> Where all should pause, as is most meet for all? (ll. 28–31)

[30] Geoffrey Ward, 'Dying to Write: Maurice Blanchot and Tennyson's "Tithonus"', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1986), 672–87 (p. 681); and W. David Shaw, 'Tennyson and Zeno: Three Infinites', *Victorian Poetry*, 47 (2009), 81–99 (p. 92).

The visual impression created by lines 28–30 reflects the homogeneity longed for by the speaker, while line 31 contradicts this by spilling over the bounds set by the previous lines. The caesura in line 31, which arrives after three and a half lines of breathless exposition, forcefully enacts the pause recommended by Tithonus. As the line continues for another six syllables after this pause, it suggests that the end longed for by Tithonus is not static but dynamic, enmeshed in networks of decay that 'meet', a term that registers both a zone of conjunction and a pun on the flesh.

Ageing and the politics of decay

Like 'Tithonus', Tennyson's poem 'Ulysses' shares an investment in the aesthetics of age. It is well known that Tennyson intended 'Tithon' to serve as a pendant — in the sense of both 'reflection and reversal' — to 'Ulysses' (Boynton, p. 232). The two old speakers have radically different perspectives on ageing: where Tithonus desires the transformative pause, Ulysses scorns it: 'How dull it is to pause' (l. 22). Where Tithonus's gray shadow no longer identifies as human, the 'gray spirit' of Ulysses still 'yearn[s] in desire' (l. 30). Tithonus suffuses his lament with the imagery of decay, while Ulysses speaks his lines into the bracing sea air: 'There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail: | There gloom the dark, broad seas' (ll. 44–45). Like 'Tithonus', 'Ulysses' draws inspiration from the great age of its speaker — an aspect missing from the poem's epic source material. Eric Auerbach argues that the Greek epic's commitment to the representation of a completely externalized, 'uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present' excludes the multiple planes of existence implied by the process of ageing.[31] He writes that, for heroes like Achilles and Odysseus,

> their emotions are constantly displayed in their words and deeds — but they have no development, and their life-histories are clearly set forth once and for all. So little are the Homeric heroes presented as developing or having developed, that most of them [...] appear to be of an age fixed from the very first. Even Odysseus, in whose case the long lapse of time and the many events which occurred offer so much opportunity for biographical development, shows almost nothing of it. Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier. (p. 17)

The epic's exclusion of ageing marks its disposition to the real. In its profusion of details and context, but lack of inward development, the form does not aim to supplant reality but to escape it: to 'make us forget our own reality for a few hours' (Auerbach, p. 15).

[31] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 7.

'Ulysses' pivots on exactly the kind of development missing from its epic progenitor: where Auerbach claims that 'time can touch the latter [Odysseus] only outwardly', the weight of his accumulated years form the very pith of Tennyson's Ulysses (p. 18).

The prospect of decay confers urgency to Ulysses' monologue. Unlike the crippling lack of urgency that arises from Tithonus's immortal languor, Ulysses restlessly anticipates every future moment as precarious and precious:

> every hour is saved
> From that eternal silence, something more,
> A bringer of new things. (ll. 26–28)

Far from resulting in resignation and apathy, Ulysses' old age provokes a breathless rush to make the most of the time allotted to him: 'How dull it is to pause, to make an end, | To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!' (ll. 22–23). The force of decay, represented through the oxidation and dulling of the blade, forms the threat of emasculation that hovers over the poem — an anxiety about impotence that infuses Ulysses with a manic desire for more experience. While he does not desire decay like Tithonus, Ulysses does not fear it: it is a spur to action, the intimation of inevitability that calls upon him to live life immediately, intensely, ravenously: 'All times I have enjoy'd | Greatly, have suffer'd greatly' (ll. 7–8). That 'little remains' of his life does not serve as a provocation to melancholy but a call to arms (l. 26).

Ulysses' reaction against the forces of decay arises from a stereotypical feminization of old age. The poem begins with everything that the speaker wants to escape, crystallized through the adjectives that cluster around his 'aged wife' in the first three lines: 'idle', 'still', and 'barren' (ll. 1, 2, 3). He finds the unreflective pleasures of rest revolting: the hoarding, sleeping, and feeding of 'Life piled on life' (l. 24). He recognizes that even the expansive immortality of Tithonus is 'too little' if it passes smoothly, without incident (l. 25). Ulysses allots to Telemachus the 'common duties' of domestic governance — 'by slow prudence to make mild | A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees | Subdue them to the useful and the good' (ll. 40, 36–38) — for himself, the heaving seas of crisis and event. Andrea Charise identifies a strain of Romanticism arising from Thomas Malthus that privileges senescence over youth 'as a viable, therapeutic, even consummate state of embodiment'.[32] Ulysses' monologue similarly inverts the age ideology that views the lifespan as a parabola that peaks in vigorous adulthood and declines into quiet and non-productive senescence:

[32] Andrea Charise, 'Romanticism against Youth', *Essays in Romanticism*, 20 (2013), 83–100 (p. 85).

> My mariners,
> Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me —
> That ever with a frolic welcome took
> The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
> Free hearts, free foreheads — you and I are old;
> Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
> Death closes all: but something ere the end,
> Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
> Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. (ll. 45–53)

Addressing his fellow mariners with reflections on past adventures filled with bluff, masculine labour, the speaker abruptly transitions into the present after the dash in line 49: 'you and I are old'. The word 'Old' immediately follows at the beginning of the next line, registering Ulysses' obsessive circling back to this fact of his present condition. In contrast to the examples of heroic maturity, Ulysses' apologia for old age deploys conjunctions that suggest the persistent stereotypes of ageing: the use of 'yet' in lines 50 and 52 and 'but' in line 51 tacitly mark the speaker's recognition of his auditors' disbelief in the resilience of age. Line 53 would surely be written in the positive rather than negative mode for the young Ulysses — the 'Not unbecoming men' of the older sailors would be revised to something like 'And becoming of men' for the intrepid youth. As such, 'unbecoming' chimes the note of decomposition even as Ulysses argues defiantly against it.

What is often read as a fierce rebuttal of decline displays a great deal of repressed anxiety about ageing. The same urgency that propels Ulysses back into the fray of adventure often comes accompanied with violent rhetoric:

> Come, my friends,
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows. (ll. 56–59)

Resisting the belatedness of age results in an overcompensating smiting of the sea, an unconquerable antagonist that gives the speaker and his companions a stage to prove their virile masculinity.[33] This also occurs in Ulysses' choice of the martial metaphor

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[33] Lynne O'Brien argues that 'war functions metaphorically' in Tennyson's poems as 'the preserving agency for male autonomy by countering the intrusion of female domesticity into the male realm'. See Lynne B. O'Brien, 'Male Heroism: Tennyson's Divided View', *Victorian Poetry*, 32 (1994), 171–82 (p. 171).

— the rusting sword that needs to 'shine in use' — to describe his own view about the dignity in old age. The poem concludes by simultaneously acknowledging the depredations of time and shrugging them off:

> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (ll. 65–70)

The double insistence of 'Tho'' in line 65 suggests that Ulysses not only works against the cultural assumption that ageing is a process of decay, but also against his implicit internalization of the view. He convinces himself, through stubborn repetition of phrase and deed — 'that which we are, we are' — that much of the heroic 'abides' in the latter years of life. This view aligns with the vitalist tradition, which inspired numerous regimens designed to combat the decay associated with growing old. Sir Anthony Carlisle's *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age* (1818) devotes over one hundred pages to the proper diet for preserving vitality: 'frequent and abundant supplies of renovating juices are more requisite in a vitiated condition of the fluids, and where the maintenance of a due quantity of blood is precarious, both of which occur when the vital operations are enfeebled.'[34] While vitalist theory constructed the lifespan as one of decay and depletion, it also enabled the view that — with proper hygiene — one could conserve the energy that sustained life and make the most of what 'abides'. While 'Ulysses' is often read as a celebration of resilience against the ravages of time, its proud rhetoric belies a deeper recognition of the measures that must be taken to challenge encroaching decay.

Though similarly inspired by *The Odyssey*, 'The Lotos-Eaters' constructs an atmosphere of content at odds with the urgency espoused by Ulysses. Here, decay is not desired (as in 'Tithonus') or a provocation to action (as in 'Ulysses') but merely a natural process that has been shorn of its negative cultural connotations:

> All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
> In silence — ripen, fall, and cease:
> Give us long rest of death, dark death, or dreamful ease.[35]

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[34] Anthony Carlisle, *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1818), p. 63.

[35] 'The Lotos-Eaters', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 467–77, ll. 96–98.

The poem returns to the trope of decay to contrast with the weary work of toiling against fate:

> The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
> Drops in a silent autumn night.
> All its allotted length of days
> The flower ripens in its place,
> Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,
> Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil. (ll. 78–83)

The abjection of decay occurs within a utilitarian framework that values work over repose: humans devote immense amounts of energy to stave off decline, which could be better spent enjoying the pleasures of life. The rotting fruit represents matter's happy unconsciousness of its place within this inevitable teleology. Decay is not something to reject, but a process on the same ontological plane as ripening — both processes occur within non-hierarchical allotments of time.[36] In this ontologically neutral arrangement of time, the poem's repeated assertion of stasis — 'they came upon a land | In which it seemed always afternoon', a 'land where all things always seem'd the same!' — does not exist in tension with the temporality of decay, but as an egalitarian levelling of different rhythms to the same value (ll. 3–4, 24). The loose structure of the choric song, which alternates between metrically irregular lines of tetrameter and pentameter, serves as the formal challenge to the sailor's insistence that we find identity in difference.

'The Lotos-Eaters' asks the reader to cognitively detach decline from the normative values projected upon it by culture: in the realm of the poem decay and ripening exist on the same plane, different trajectories for equally necessary processes. This view of decay disentangles ageing from the fear of death and decline:

> There *is* confusion worse than death.
> Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,
> Long labor unto aged breath,
> Sore task to hearts worn out by many wars
> And eyes grown dim with gazing on the pilot stars. (ll. 128–32, emphasis in original)

Old age makes legible the tally sheet of the long life: an interval when the accounting of pleasure and pain becomes most deeply embodied through 'aged breath', 'hearts

[36] The seductions of this decadent view of decay are reproduced by the taunting voice in 'The Two Voices': 'Why, if man rot in dreamless ease, | Should that plain fact, as taught by these, | Not make him sure that he shall cease?' (*Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, I, 569–93, ll. 280–82).

worn out', and 'eyes grown dim'. These markers reveal the cumulative damage done to a body over time. The tragedy of age, the 'confusion worse than death', arises from the wear and tear of rough work — the completion of which eventually renders one unable to do it any longer. Old age draws out the self-destroying logic of toil, as the abjection of being old derives from the shame of no longer being able to carry out work that slowly destroys the body. The ableist expectation of 'Long labor' constructs senescence as a zone of necessary failure that the lotos-eaters combat through the recognition of impermanence and change:

> What is it that will last?
> All things are taken from us, and become
> Portions and parcels of the dreadful past. (ll. 90–92)

Read without irony, the poem's call to irresponsibility provides an alternative to the encompassing capitalist 'now' of work and productivity. Francis O'Gorman connects the poem's atmosphere of stasis with the political stultification leading up to the Reform Act of 1832: 'What binds these together for the poet is a common problem of paralysis, a matter of reversal — and from the perspective of those outside Parliament — the persistent stalling of action.'[37] It is in the interests of the dominant class to maintain the current milieu, to drag out the process of reform and make as few concessions as possible. In contrast to this eternally elaborated present of work, the lotos-eaters recognize that 'Time driveth onward fast'; that the bodies within this industrial 'now' transform, wear out, and fail (l. 88). They become unrecognizable:

> Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
> And dear the last embraces of our wives
> And their warm tears: but all hath suffer'd change:
> For surely now our household hearths are cold,
> Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
> And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy. (ll. 114–19)

The memory of the lotos-eaters becomes 'dear' in an economy of scarcity, where the sailors' isolation prevents the creation of new memories. The recollection of 'warm tears' signifies a state of heightened feeling and fragmentation — of being torn apart by time and suffering 'change'. The Oedipal anxiety about supplanting sons crystallizes

[37] Francis O'Gorman, 'Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" and the Politics of the 1830s', *Victorian Review*, 30.1 (2004), 1–20 (p. 5).

in the belief that ‘our looks are strange’ — that their exile from the present corresponds to the ageing of their bodies beyond the hegemony of usefulness. Imagining themselves as ‘ghosts to trouble joy’, the sailors internalize the capitalist othering of older bodies as revolting, resigning themselves to an unchanging past along the margins of an ever-churning modernity.

Conclusion

‘Tithonus’, ‘Ulysses’, and ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ find immense imaginative possibilities at the intersection of ageing and decay. For Tithonus, the horror of ageing into infinity has the effect of normalizing the experience of growing older. The poem provides a counterpoint to the desire to live ‘beyond the goal of ordinance’ — his youthful aversion towards decay and old age that leaves the ancient speaker unimaginably lonely at the end of the world. Ulysses’ rejection of the decline narrative belies the effects it has on the form of his monologue, provoking his urgency towards the ‘untravell’d world’ and the depredations of his anxious masculinity. While the lotos-eaters embrace the contentment that Ulysses rejects, they do so as a way of critiquing the capitalist system that grinds down the individuals it will marginalize once they are past prime working years. Each poem not only resists projecting stereotypes of physiological and social decline onto old age, but also makes the separation of these two systems — ageing and decay — central to the argument. They recuperate age from the overwhelmingly negative connotations associated with the processes of biological decay. Even when decay does not physically manifest itself in the human body, it serves as a figurative way of registering the abjectness of decline within patriarchal and capitalist frameworks of value. These institutions rely upon the stigma of decay as a way of constructing old age as the boundary of social inclusion, pathologizing traits that — though they are necessary and inevitable — do not reproduce the dominant milieu: vulnerability, dependence, idleness.

As his poems work to disable the connection between ageing and decay, they also imbue putrefaction with an ecological charge that goes against the grain of its cultural construction as revolting and abject. Tennyson wrote both ‘Ulysses’ and ‘Tithon’ in response to Hallam’s death, but both poems place decay in a more prominent position than mortality. Death implies a finality that the poet affectively and philosophically refuses to accept, preferring instead to imagine the transformation of the self into different forms. Early in *In Memoriam* the prospect of decay offers the poet some consolation of futurity as Hallam’s corpse mingles in the soil to create new matter:

'Tis well; 'tis something; we may stand
Where he in English earth is laid,
And from his ashes may be made
The violet of his native land.[38]

The concept of decay has a powerfully magnetic force in Tennyson's poetry: centripetally drawing Tithonus inward, while centrifugally ejecting Ulysses into the wider world; drawing Hallam into the earth and expelling him as vegetable matter. Tennyson registers this force most powerfully through the form of his poetry, which wrinkles and withers to the melancholy rhythm of decay: a poetics that captures the hum and heat of a world in constant flux.

[38] 'In Memoriam', in *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Ricks, II, 304–459, 18. 1–4.