The Meaning of Impermanence in Wang Wei’s Poetry

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This paper discusses the theme of life’s impermanence as expressed in two of Wang Wei’s poems: “Farewell to Spring” (“Songchun ci” 送春辞) and “An Autumn Night, Sitting Alone” (“Qiuye duzuò” 秋夜獨坐). It argues that Wang Wei conceives the passage of time as a norm of human existence, and thus uses his poems as a way to instruct the attitudes and ways to face man’s inevitable mortality.

The Passage of Time

For Wang Wei, the passage of time is the only true constant. All other things, including life, are impermanent. In time, a man grows from a child, full of vitality and potential, to an elderly man who can do little more than ruminate on times gone by. Much like sand in an hourglass, our life force is constantly draining from the moment we’re born until the day we die. Life’s impermanence, though, is precisely what gives it meaning. Our mortality makes our time precious and creates a lens through which we can quantify our emotions and experiences. The impermanence of life is the foundation of the meaning we find in it, but it comes at the cost of inner turmoil: an inevitable fear of and resistance to mortality that must be overcome.

In Wang’s near four hundred extant poems, two stand out for their reflection on the meaning of life’s impermanence: “Farewell to Spring” (“Songchun ci” 送春辞) and “An Autumn Night, Sitting Alone” (“Qiuye duzuò” 秋夜獨坐), alternately titled “Expressing My Mind on a Winter Night (“Dongye shuhai” 冬夜書懷). Both poems describe the
cycle of quick seasonal changes, which in turn are a metaphor for the unstoppable passage of time. The first poem reads:

Each day drains man, but
Each year returns the spring.
Happiness resides in a wine cup,
Mourn not the blossoms’ passing.1

日日人空老，
Day day men empty/vain old
年年春更歸。
Year year spring again return
相歡在尊酒，
Mutual happiness at cup win
不用惜花飛。
Don’t cherish flower fly (Wang 1992, 191)

Its title “Farewell to Spring” calls to mind the imminent seasonal change from spring to summer, while its second line describes the inevitable return of spring after winter. In the last line, the “flying” of the flower further references the autumnal falling of a flower’s petals. Thus, all four seasons form a repeated cycle as the poem progresses. The choice of the poetic genre Jueju 絶句 (Stopped Short), the shortest form of Chinese poetry, reinforces the impression of quick passage of time.

The titles and the content of the second poem likewise reference the quick passage of time. The poem reads:

Sitting alone, I lament my hair whitening,
In the empty hall, it is almost nine.2

1 The editors of The Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry (Quan Tangshi 全唐詩) list this poem under the name of an obscure poet Wang Ya 王涯 (?–835) (Peng et al, 346.3874). However, the editor of the complete anthology of Wang Wei’s works reassigns all of Wang Ya’s poems as Wang Wei’s in the last chapter “Waibian” 外編 or “Additional List” (Wang 1962, 208–19). Tony and Will Barnstone translated this poem as Wang Wei’s:

With each empty day I am older
Yet spring comes back each year.
A bowl of wine is the only happiness.
Why grieve over falling blossom? (Wang 1989, 133)
The mountain fruits fall in the rain,
Grasshoppers cry under the lamp.
White hair is hard to change after all,
Just like gold can’t be made.
Ridding off aging and sickness,
One must learn the way of no-rebirth.

獨坐悲雙鬢,
Alone sit grief two sideburns
空堂欲二更。
Empty hall almost second watch
雨中山果落,
Rain in mountain fruit fall
燈下草蟲鳴。
Lamp under grass insect cry
白髮終難變,
White hair eventually difficult change
黃金不可成。
Yellow gold not able to form
欲知除老病,
Desire know rid old ill
唯有學無生。
Only learn no birth (Peng et al, 126.1280)

The “second watch” (erjing 二更) indicated in the poem is the period between 9–11 pm.

This poem is listed under Wang Wei in The Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry. Various translators have translated the poem. Robinson: “Sitting alone on an autumn night”

I sit alone sad at my whitening hair
Waiting for ten o’clock in my empty house
In the rain the hill fruits fall
Under my lamp grasshoppers sound
White hairs will never be transformed
That elixir is beyond creation
To eliminate decrepitude
Study the absolute. (Wang 1973, 121)

Pauline Yu: “An Autumn Night, Sitting Alone”

Sitting alone I lament my two temples,
In the empty hall, close to the second watch.
Mountain fruits are falling in the rain;
Beneath the lamp insects chirp in the grass.
White hairs in the end are hard to alter,
The first title speaks of an autumn night while its alternate title tells of a winter night. The fall of the mountain fruits described in the third line brings an image of autumn’s arrival. This line, along with the first and the alternate titles, reinforces the notion of the all-to-quick passage of time. This notion is also referenced in the temporal leaps between the title and the third line. However, both the titles and the content of the poem repeatedly emphasize the time of night. The second line fixes the time as being near nine o’clock (“second watch,” or erjing 二更). While the season passes quickly through the progression of the poem, the night seems to be almost painfully long. This contrast between quick seasonal changes and nighttime stillness is deliberate. Within this forever darkness, the seasons pass quickly and white hair grows. Even in that seemingly frozen moment, time still marches on.

Rather than being depressed by the inevitable passage of time, Wang provides two solutions for individuals to triumph over time’s tyranny. He suggests a Taoist solution in the first poem and a Buddhist one in the second poem. From his solutions, we are allowed a glimpse into his conception of the meanings of our inescapable mortality and the clutch of tyrannical time.

Seeing Off the Spring

If man lived forever, time would be worthless. Similarly, if peach blossoms were constantly in bloom, they would become commonplace—no one would stop to enjoy their beauty. Wang Wei touches on the relationship between impermanence and its significance in “Farewell to Spring.” In this poem, Wang considers the impermanence and cyclicality of the seasons as he is enjoying a cup of wine. As each day passes, he grows older (lao 老) and emptier (kong 空). He has already lost And yellow god cannot be produced.
If you wish to know how to shed the illness of age—
There is only the study of nonrebirth. (Yu 1980, 148)

Barnstone: “Sitting Alone on an Autumn Night”

Sitting alone I lament my graying temples
in an empty hall before the night’s second drum.
Mountain fruit drop in the rain
and grass insects sing under my oil lamp.
White hair, after all, can never change
as yellow gold cannot be created.
If you want to know how to get rid
of age, its sickness, study nonbeing. (Wang 1989, 149)
the vitality of his youth and now is helpless to reverse the further effects of aging. Each passing year brings a new springtime, the annual rejuvenation of the previously cold and barren landscape. Unlike the trees and flowers of the forest, however, Wang experiences no such rejuvenation. Rather, he is simply left another year older and closer to death. It is almost as if time itself is mocking Wang each time the exuberant blossoms return to the trees, emphasizing how helpless he is to resist the advance of time. The matter-of-factness and open-endedness of the third line (“Happiness resides in a wine cup”) causes it to be read as a suggestion: drinking wine can bring happiness. Wine's effects, though, are also impermanent. A glass of wine can temporarily numb the mind and the body, foster lively conversation, and allow us, if only for a moment, to leave behind our worldly concerns. To overindulge, however, is to lose connection with our temporal reality. A drunkard who tries to extend the temporary sensations of inebriation by drinking morning, noon, and night will find that drunkenness comes at the cost of straining one's ability to earn a living, thereby making mere survival a challenge. Wang understands this. Just as the contrast between the desolate winter and warm spring serves to highlight the beauty of springtime, so too do the harsh realities of daily life serve to compound the blissful apathy that wine can bring. There is certainly happiness in wine, but unless we know when to put the bottle down, consciously accepting the impermanence of wine's gifts, we cannot fully enjoy the happiness it brings.

Wang isn't simply saying that drinking wine can make you happy. Instead, he is telling the reader that the small pleasures of life, such as enjoying a cup of wine, are what give our lives significance. Given our impermanence, we cannot afford to constantly dwell on our mortality. The only way to truly enjoy life is to occasionally kick back, put our responsibilities aside and do something solely for the sake of our own enjoyment. All forms of indulgence, drinking included, are by their very nature temporary experiences that we enjoy despite their capacity to thwart our work and prosperity. Drinking can lighten our mood at the cost of our ability to work and be productive. Eating excessive amounts of rich foods brings momentary pleasure but can also make our bodies sluggish and soft. Conversely, performing manual labor enables us to survive and provide for our families at the cost of our personal anguish and stress. In this sense, indulgence is the antithesis of toil. Working in the fields does not directly bring us happiness, but rather it allows us to have those brief moments of happiness once the day's work is done. At the same time, though, we would not enjoy drinking and other indulgences if they were not such a sharp contrast to the more difficult aspects of our life. If one were to sit at home and drink all day, that same
glass of wine would be routine and would not have the same relaxing qualities. Just as wine can bring happiness by virtue of the fact that when we are drinking we are not working, the impermanence of our existence gives our life meaning: each moment we are alive is a moment we have staved off our inevitable death.

The poem’s last line (“Mourn not the blossoms’ passing”), too, is straightforward. In this line Wang delivers a simple but important suggestion: don’t worry about what you cannot change. Flowers, like people, are impermanent. Just as each moment one spends preoccupied with one’s own mortality is a moment not spent enjoying our impermanent existence, each moment one spends mourning the loss of a blossom is a moment wasted. To fixate on our mortality only gives our impermanence more power to control our well-being. True to Wang Wei’s Buddhist influence, we can be at peace with what we cannot change by simply letting go the desire to change or control what will forever be out of reach. By letting the desire go, we can be freed from the related suffering.

Overall, the tone of “Farewell to Spring” suggests that Wang wrote this poem as a sort of instructional piece on how to cope with and even embrace the impermanence of life. Our life force is continuously draining, but that shouldn’t stop us from looking forward to the bright days that still lay ahead. We should indulge ourselves in moderation when we are able. Indulgences must be impermanent to hold value, as overindulgence inevitably leads to pain. We can be freed from suffering by letting go of our desires and not concerning ourselves with things we cannot change. The English translation may never perfectly recreate the nuance and contemplative modesty of Wang’s original words, but the translation provided accurately reflects Wang’s thoughts on the relationship between the impermanence of life and its value.

Lament on an Autumn/Winter Night

Much like “Farewell to Spring,” the second poem, “An Autumn Night, Sitting Alone” (“Expressing My Mind on a Winter Night”), describes the struggle to find meaning in and to come to terms with our mortality. Here, too, aging is described as a draining of vitality and the physical manifestation of our mortality. Compared to “Farewell to Spring,” this poem is less abstract and more active. Each line contains at least one verb, and the poem progresses with an almost narrative feel. The first two lines establish an initial tone of emptiness and despair, with a white-haired Wang Wei sitting alone in his empty home in the dark night. Wang seems helpless as each passing moment makes his hair whiter and his body weaker. There seems to be life and vitality, in one
form or another, everywhere but within the grieving poet. A ripened fruit falls from a branch outside just as a grasshopper is chirping under his lamp. The outdoors and indoors become a continuum that surrounds and forms a dynamic contrast with the sitting poet. Unlike Wang, neither the grasshopper nor the tree nor the fallen fruit are concerned with their own mortality. The grasshopper doesn’t have the time or intelligence to question if it will live through the fall and winter and thus can chirp happily as it moves ever closer to death. Man’s intelligence has lengthened and improved his life, but has also made more evident that our mortality is always beyond our control.

The fifth and sixth lines connect man’s inability to reverse the aging process with the inability to perform alchemy; it simply cannot be done. The fourth line uses the further degeneration of Wang’s white hair as a metaphor for his entire body, stating that his physical condition will only get worse, not better. The ongoing whitening of hair in the fifth line links back to the grief of his sideburns in the first line. The inevitable whitening of the hair that suggests the unavoidable passage of time likewise forms a cyclical progression that echoes the cyclical changing of the seasons. This physical degradation is made all the more painful by the fact that the breakdown of the body is not always directly linked with the breakdown of the mind; we often don’t have the gift of sensing the decay of our physical form. Interestingly, if we view line five in the context of line six: “Gold can’t be made,” one may be inclined to assume that Wang desires to connect the reversal of aging with alchemy, turning base metals into gold. While the two notions are linked—that is to say, if scholars were able to turn lead into gold, it is conceivable that they may also be able to restore youth—Wang likely mentions alchemy as an archetypical example of the impossible, not because there is any direct correlation between the two processes: obviously, the process of turning lead into gold would have no effect on a man’s aging. The line “White hair is hard to change after all” clearly states Wang’s desired message: the draining of our vitality is constant and unstoppable.

The last two lines of the poem provide a Buddhist solution to the irreversible process of aging. Considering the original Chinese of the seventh line (yu zhi chu lao bing 欲知除老病) and the accompanying word-for-word translation (“desire know rid old ill”), we might be led to think that it speaks of a desire to stop illness and aging and escape the tyranny of time. However, in his comfort and security, Wang acutely senses his inability to control the process of aging and death. A wealthy man could have access to cures for many ailments, but even the most powerful would inevitably fall victim to the deadliest illness: old age. Word-for-word, the last line can be translated as “Only learn no birth,” which suggests that the only way to triumph over aging and death is to
learn and reach non-rebirth. The line, however, can also be understood as “Only school no students,” which suggests that the line is a sort of abstract metaphor. Almost cryptically simplistic, the line concludes Wang’s contemplation of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of aging and death. For Wang, the only absolute truth about man is impermanence. In this context, it is not a far stretch to consider this line’s mention of school and learning as suggesting that Wang is studying or contemplating something. As the entire poem deals with Wang’s aging, it is likely that he is contemplating impermanence and by extension studying the nature of time itself, in the hope of finding a way to stop or reverse his own aging. As long as time continues to pass, we will continue to age. This implies that the only way to stop aging and death would be to manipulate the very nature of time itself. Much like alchemy, this is impossible and is likely used as a representation of how futile that pursuit would be. A possible translation to communicate this futility would be “time has no students.” This alternate translation removes some of the ambiguity of Wang’s original line and more clearly communicates that Wang is essentially discouraging individuals from obsessing over their inevitable mortality.

Conclusion

Both “Farewell to Spring” and “An Autumn Night: Sitting Alone” deal with the impermanence of human life. As time passes, our bodies inevitably break down and fail us. Our anxious awareness of the inevitability of death leads us to seek ways to postpone the inevitable. Avoiding death, though, is impossible. Wang tells us that we must let go of the desire to control the uncontrollable in order to free ourselves from suffering. At the same time, though, we cannot ignore the fact that it is precisely our impermanent nature that gives meaning to our lives. Simply put, we must accept that without death, life would not be precious.

“Farewell to Spring” and “An Autumn Night: Sitting Alone” are simple poems. Combined, the two poems contain a mere sixty characters, sixty-seven words including the titles. How can Wang Wei encourage others to embrace impermanence in merely two short poems? Simply put, he can’t. In writing these two poems, all Wang has done is share his inner thoughts, memories, hopes, and fears. All he has done is remind us of a simple fact that we all know to be true but are afraid to face: impermanence is pervasive. Our lives, loves and homes are all destined to fade from existence. A cynical man may be crushed by the weight of these harsh realities, but Wang sees this impermanence as the source of all that makes life worth living. Life, wine, love, and friendship are
valuable because they are fleeting. We indulge in all manner of earthly delights knowing they are but temporary respites from toil. Each day of our lives is precious because we can never know if we will live to see another. We seek and hold onto friendship and love with such vigor because we know they can't last forever, forcing us to share all of ourselves with those we love while we still can. For Wang, the passage of time is the only true constant. All other things, including life and love, owe their value to that fact.

References


