

DAY BY DE SENECTUTE

by

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THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1991

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Day by de Senectute

"I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have."

Thus bleated Macbeth when the witches nixed his application to the retirement home and he saw the golden years, with all their fancied perks, slip through his fingers.

Marcus Tullius Cicero also met a violent end, culminating in the hands and head of his corpse being nailed to the Roman rostrum with a hair-pin stuck through his tongue. Generations of high school juniors might have described this punishment as too little and too late for by then the mischief had been done—orations, letters, treatises, polemics—all translatable in 20-line assignments.

Having spent his entire life in the public eye—either in office or in active opposition to those who were, or both simultaneously—his sudden exclusion from the arenas of power for lack of political judgment, coupled with his precarious financial situation and a devastating series of personal tragedies, forced him, at sixty, to change the focus of his life from political to bucolic. Retiring to his country estates, he learned the trade of farm-manager while pursuing the study of Greek and editing his *œuvres*—twenty-eight (read my lips: 28!) volumes of treatises, orations, and letters. Perhaps as therapy or perhaps to fill evenings without canned entertainment he wrote philosophical essays—

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often in the form of imaginary conversations among distinguished Romans of earlier and, presumably, happier days. One of the last of these was entitled "Cato Maior de Senectute" or "Cato the Elder on Old Age" which may be freely translated as "Elderly Prolixity with Name-Dropping."

Here were outlined the blessings to which he looked forward as well as the hazards and limitations to be anticipated. Based largely on Xenophon and Plato with an occasional dip into Aristotle, it ranges from clear and indisputable logic to flights of the impassioned disingenuousness of a televangelist. Cicero's principal thesis is that he finds four reasons why old age could be perceived as unhappy:

- A. It withdraws us from active pursuits.
- B. It makes the body weaker.
- C. It deprives us of almost all physical pleasures.
- D. It is not far removed from death.

One could dismiss all this with a "pish-tush" and thereby achieve the shortest essay in Literary Club history or one could examine the complaints and exultations and digressions of a Roman mugwump.

A. As to withdrawing one from active pursuits, he says that, on the contrary, it frees the mature citizen from the rigorous and physically demanding pursuits of middle age, leaving time and energy for intellectual interests. He cites the example of a pilot sitting at the helm of a ship while letting young sailors climb the rigging—proving that greatness is achieved by judgment rather than physical strength. The Yuppies and the Dinks are dusted off with the statement that glory is not in making money but in ruling those who do. Above all, the mind must be kept alert and the obvious way to do that, at any age according to Cicero, is to take an active part in politics—in spite of the fact that his idol Plato said that there is no place for men of conscience in active politics.

Instead of withdrawing from active pursuits, why not continue them?

B. Weakness, says the puritan, Cicero, is not the fault of age but of youthful excesses. That aging makes the body weaker is indisputable. That deterioration of mind and memory are often a part of this process

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is regrettable. But, we are urged, fight back! Farmers work until they die—or move to California. Classical philosophers were tireless. Cicero says that Zeno went on developing the stoic philosophy until his death at ninety-eight although modern scholarship affirms that he took his own life at seventy-two. Plato died, stylus in hand, at eighty-one. The Walt Disney artists go on creating until they drop from animation. The Supreme Court, like Kelly services, has no retirement age. What a pity that President Roosevelt forgot Cicero's dictum that "It is in *old* men that reason and good judgment are found." Physical disabilities when irreversible may be conquerable. We are told that, by giving us more leisure, they enable us to devote our energy to teaching the young as well as to improving our own minds.

Impaired memory is the bane of the aged just as too creative a memory is the bane of historians. Every night our own late Geza de Takats honed and polished his memory by reciting the telephone numbers of his medical associates—no doubt with special attention to the younger nurses. He did not equate this to counting sheep. Cicero claimed to know the family connections of all the upper-class Romans—surely the Cholly Knickerbocker of his day. To achieve this awesome triviality he nightly reviewed everything he had done, said, or heard during the day—a regimen undoubtedly undertaken after he learned that Themistocles called all twenty thousand citizens of Athens by name.

My sister and brother and I were once given a tape-recorder on which to recapture the joys of our long-gone-childhood. Although we each insisted that it had been idyllic, the resulting tape could have been dubbed in as the sound-track for an Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation. Each knew that his memory produced the canonical version.

Talking too much, often the result of living alone, is the first symptom of anecdotage. No effective relief is available to the well-bred victim.

Diminution of acuity is a nuisance. The widow of one of our members, herself a distinguished artist, was asked how she spent her days after moving into a retirement home. To which she answered quite simply: "Looking for things." Kenneth Conant, the architectural historian at Harvard, reported that he felt fine on his 84th birthday except that he missed his mind. On the other hand, as Sophocles grew older his sons sued to be appointed as his conservators. Without argument or ado the old gentleman proved his intellectual competence by simply

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reading his current play to the court—concluding with the statement, “If I am Sophocles I am not mad; and, if I am mad I am not Sophocles.”

C. “Old age deprives us of physical or sensual pleasure and thus,” we are told, “frees us from youth’s most vicious fault.” Now the big guns are brought up to reinforce this pronouncement. Archytas of Tarentum, Pythagorean philosopher and intimate of Plato, pronounced:

“No more deadly curse has been given by nature to man than carnal pleasure, through eagerness for which the passions are driven recklessly and uncontrollably to its gratification. From it come treason and the overthrow of states; and from it spring secret and corrupt conferences with public foes. In short there is no criminal purpose and no evil deed which the lust for pleasure will not drive men to undertake. Indeed rape, adultery, and every like offence are set in motion by the enticements of pleasure and by nothing else. Since nature has given to man nothing more excellent than his intellect, therefore this divine gift has no deadlier foe than pleasure. For, where lust holds despotic sway self-control has no place, and in pleasure’s realm there is not a single spot where virtue can put her foot. Imagine a person enjoying the most exquisite bodily pleasure to be had. No-one will doubt, I think, that such a man, while in the midst of this enjoyment, is incapable of any mental action and can accomplish nothing requiring reason and reflection. Hence, there is nothing so hateful as pleasure since it turns the light of the soul into utter darkness.” Had such purple prose been included in the office manuals of Washington it might have kept the trysts at the water-cooler instead of at the shredder.

In the year before quoting this uplifting tract Cicero, at the age of sixty, had himself been “cursed by carnal pleasure.” After thirty-one years of felicity, he divorced his wife in order to marry his young and wealthy ward—a match, as it shortly turned out, not made in heaven. Perhaps it was at this point that his adaptable reasoning persuaded him that we should be grateful to old age for removing the desire for pleasure. Or should we? His philosophy may have been more pragmatic but Ramses II with 63 wives and 157 children lived 92 years (surviving his first twelve sons) and extended his empire to a length and breadth undreamt of by the later Romans. Or consider the creator of Saudi Arabia, the late Ibn Saud, who seems not to have been inhibited by this

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curse as he reached age seventy-one when his forty-third son was born. (Daughters weren't counted.) In his middle sixties Harold Ickes, the late Interior Secretary, begat two sons and now the Census Bureau predicts over a hundred thousand centenarians by the turn of the century. Will progress get completely out of control?

D. The imminence of death, though not in itself an attraction, Cicero found to be a stimulus to speculation on the immortality of the soul. After recommending to the young that they think often about death in order to get used to the prospect, he says: "Oh wretched, indeed, is that old man who has not learned in the course of his long life that death should be held of no account" and then goes on to write about it for eighteen pages full of such engaging aphorisms as "Death followed by eternal life is not a cause for grief." Having counselled the young to think often about something that should be held of no account, he goes on to ask, "Shall wise men fear something despised by youth? Just as apples when they are green are with difficulty plucked from the tree, but when ripe and mellow, fall of themselves, so with the young death comes as a result of force, while with the old it is a result of ripeness. To me, indeed, the thought of this ripeness is so pleasant that, the nearer I approach death, the more I feel like one who is in sight of land at last and is about to anchor in his home port after a long voyage." Very good copy, indeed! as is the following sentence: "The most desirable end to life is that which comes while the mind is clear." With such beautiful thoughts in his head he must have warmly welcomed the secret police when they came on their grisly errand two years later.

A conspicuous swinger in the Roman society in which Cicero took part was Cleopatra who must have shared his appreciation of the next world as she sent so many men there. Preoccupation with the hereafter apparently replaced television, politics, and professional sports as the focus of leisure time as well as the principal intellectual stimulus of ancient Egypt. A pantheon of largely animal-headed gods (many as oversexed as their Greek or Roman successors) was developed to cover every situation to which there was no human or natural solution. Various "Books of the Dead," or guide books, pointed the way to a vaguely-conceived underworld where, if properly preserved in a mummy, the deceased could live happily ever after. To this end tombs and burial

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chambers were crammed with the necessities of a comfortable, sometimes even luxurious existence, while the walls and ceilings were covered with murals describing the life to which the occupant had been or hoped to become accustomed. His accomplishments were also detailed; (much like seconding letters to a club. After all, who knew precisely what to expect?) No matter how nebulous the concept of an after-life it provided a reason for looking forward.

Since the standards of research set by the Chicago Literary Club favor original sources, I will venture to recount to you my personal experience in this matter:

One of my first architectural commissions was to design and supervise the alteration and restoration of a small fundamentalist church in a town known to its denizens as "Ashcan". Since the resources available to the church, even after the members did all the construction work themselves, were not sufficient to include an architect's fee in cash, the super-conscientious vestry far exceeded their fancied obligation by offering me eternal salvation instead. This generous offer could, of course, only be made good by my conversion to the True Faith—a prospect of bringing a new lamb into the fold which caused the itinerant preacher to salivate and my hackles to rise. After the closing hymn had been repeated several times to give me the opportunity to approach the altar and show my joyous contrition and acceptance of grace, a temporary set-back was admitted and we re-grouped at the house of my host for Sunday dinner. There, quoting and misquoting scripture and stricture, the glorious prospect of life everlasting was revealed to me. At last, perhaps seduced by the aroma of chicken and canned peas coming from the kitchen, the preacher played his trump card: "Surely," he said, "you don't want to be separated from your friends and ship-mates (this was in 1946) for all eternity?" "But Reverend," I replied, "staunch friends as they are, they might consider joining me where no reservations are required."

Cicero, who looked forward eagerly to a reunion with his father and son and daughter in some untroubled and serene after-life—location unspecified—declared that: "If I err in my belief that the souls of men are immortal, I gladly err, nor do I wish this error, which gives me pleasure, to be wrested from me while I live." He exorcised his own old age by writing about overcoming its annoyances and, no doubt, enjoy-

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ing the literary royalties this brought in, but his concern did not extend to such problems as the aging of wine or cheese or institutions or rain forests.

From womb to tomb the aging process is as inexorable as it is longed for. Babies want to crawl, then run and, finally, walk. Boys hanker for a deeper voice and the need to shave. Girls look forward to being more demonstrably girls. Youth wants independence and, occasionally, even the responsibility that goes with it. Men aspire to the maturity that brings leadership, women to the liberation that gives scope to their talents. Adults seek fulfillment without being able to define it and seniors are glad to be told that they have reached the summit and are entitled to perks. "Perks" range from comfortable, carefree retirement—perhaps in a luxurious, risk-free community with every imaginable amenity and pre-perpetual care—to the chance to work harder than ever in a think tank or a soup-kitchen or even the peace corps. Physical change doesn't stop, why should mental? To the fortunate will be given that rarest commodity, Time. The even more fortunate will have no time at all.

Dr. Faustus notwithstanding, who wants to go back to a previous stage of life—to rumble-seats and pimples, to ukeleles and translating Cicero? Was Aeson, the father of Jason, happier for being cut up and boiled by Medea to restore his youth? Did Harold's monkey glands bring sunshine into the life of Gana Walska? Cicero asked whether old age should lament the loss of youth any more than youth laments the loss of infancy. Complaints by the elderly he attributed to their character rather than their age. Today the elderly are maturing instead of aging and who aspires to immaturity?

"Live long and die young" is the paradox on which an increasing segment of the world's economy bases its growth. Cosmetics, whether for deceit or enhancement, and gerontology resource centers compete for the Social Security or pension dollar with travel bargains such as Club Med or Antarctic Expeditions (which are said to be less expensive but more structured than those of Scott or Shackleton) as well as athletic coaching and basket weaving. The fact is that today's Seniors have become a force to be reckoned with in terms of disposable income, housing, travel, volunteerism and, of course, political influence which Cicero considers the "crowning glory of old age."

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Sometimes the idyll of retirement is forsaken for mopping floors in MacDonald's which not only supplements a meager income but is often more fun than a day alone with the tube. Many professionals regret that licensing or insurance requirements nip their careers in full bloom and have found rewards in education—their own, or teaching or research or in writing. The up-to-date financial guru now advises clients to count on spending as many years in retirement as they spend working. The consequent proliferation of shuffle-board courts, calligraphy classes, and senior day-care centers boggles the mind! Does the frenetic pace of today's mature citizens, which barely leaves time for bank, camera shop, and laundromat between trips, allow leisure for contemplation, speculation, or passing on experience thus gained? Perhaps, however, this is better than Cicero's ideal of an old age spent in the recollection of earlier accomplishments.

Two millenia after the publication of De Senectute Lewis Carroll finally wrote the coda:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,
“And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

This paper was written for The Chicago Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday evening, the twenty-sixth of March, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety. This edition of two hundred and fifty copies was printed by the Club for its members in the month of November, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-One.

[PRINTED]
[IN U.S.A.]