Accepting Senectitude:
Some Thoughts on the Occasion of my Approaching Seventieth Birthday

In 1947, the then thirty-three-year-old Dylan Thomas wrote a villanelle, which begins:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
> . . .

Seemingly addressed to his dying father (who didn't in fact die until 1952, a year before Dylan Thomas' own death), the Welsh Romantic's poem urges us to consider the wise man's "words [that] had forked no lightning," the good man's "frail deeds," and the grave man's "blind eyes."

Thomas' exhortation for us to rail "against the dying of the light" does not really resonate with me. William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis"—apparently composed in 1811 when the American poet was seventeen years old—is more up my alley:

> . . .
> When thoughts
> Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
> Over thy spirit, and sad images
> Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
> And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
> Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
> Go forth, under the open sky, and list
> To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
> Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
> Comes a still voice—
> Yet a few days, and thee
> The all-beholding sun shall see no more
> In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
> Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
> Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
> Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
> And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
> Thine individual being, shalt thou go
> To mix for ever with the elements,
> To be a brother to the insensible rock
> And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
> Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
> Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.
> . . .

Asher Brown Durand. *Kindred Spirits*. 1849. Oil on canvas, 111.7 × 91.4 cm. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. The Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant are depicted, presumably while they "list[en] to Nature's teaching."

While I must admit that I do feel some Thomasian rage when I contemplate my "last bitter hour" and "the stern agony, and shroud, and pall, /And breathless darkness, and the narrow house" that awaits me, I do draw comfort from Bryant's—for his time radical—observation that after I die the Earth shall claim my individual being and the roots of the oak

will pierce my mould, mixing me “for ever with the elements” and making me “a brother to the insensible rock /And to the sluggish clod.”

[If the thought that after my demise some of the atoms of my mortal coil might be reincarnated as a carnation or a carrot brings me some comfort, I am not about to jump on the “natural burial” bandwagon fad, making sure that my corpse is naturally recycled, burying it sans formaldehyde or in a decomposable coffin or shroud. I doubt that my heirs would, even if they could, follow the codicil I put in my will, that my dead body “be thrown to the dogs.” I imagine, rather, that my corpse will be incinerated, a few ashes being strewn in places that had figured prominently in my lifetime, with the remainder being put in an ornate jar while a cenotaph inscribed with my name and birth and death dates is erected on my wife’s family’s burial plot in Swanzey, New Hampshire.]

In her famous 1862 poem “Because I could not stop for Death - ” and in her less well-known 1863 poem “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died - ”, Emily Dickinson gives us a radically different take on William Cullen Bryant’s vision of death (the literal translation of Bryant’s neologism “Thanatopsis” from the ancient Greek). In the former poem, Dickinson has the narrator climb into a carriage with kindly Death (and Immortality) and ride off, not into the sunset but to her grave:

> We paused before a House that seemed
> A Swelling of the Ground –
> The Roof was scarcely visible –
> The Cornice – in the Ground –
>
> Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
> Feels shorter than the Day
> I first surmised the Horses' Heads
> Were toward Eternity –

In this poem, the use of the first-person pronoun in the final stanza belies Dickinson’s traditional Christian belief in the immortality of one’s personal consciousness—a far cry from Bryant’s Lucretian atomism. [I would suggest that Dickinson’s real immortality is due to the stunning brilliance of her verse, not to any supernatural power!]

Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz” poem, written when the body count of young New England men dying in the Civil War was dramatically mounting, ends with the narrator making her last will, after which:

> . . . – and then it was
> There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

Here also we have that first-person pronoun announcing a personal immortality after the narrator's "Windows failed." The stumbling Blue Buzz of the Fly would seem to be a gruesome foreshadowing of the maggots that will inevitably crawl through the decaying flesh of our dead bodies—again at odds with Bryant's much more benign ". . . each human trace, surrendering up/ Thine individual being, shalt thou go /To mix for ever with the elements . . ."

The fear of a rapidly approaching death is one of the reasons that Cicero cites in his essay *Cato Maior qui est scriptus ad te de senectute* (more commonly referred to today as *De Senectute*—"On Old Age") for why people dread growing old:

> The fact is that when I come to think it over, I find that there are four reasons for old age being thought unhappy: First, that it withdraws us from active employments; second, that it enfeebles the body; third, that it deprives us of nearly all physical pleasures; fourth, that it is the next step to death.

The *De Senectute* was composed in 44 BCE—the year before the then sixty-three-year-old Cicero was murdered while trying to flee from Marc Antony's soldiers, who cut off his head and hands and brought them to Rome to be displayed at the Rostra. The essay, addressed to Cicero's friend Atticus, takes the form of a made-up dialogue purportedly delivered by an eighty-four-year-old Cato the Elder to Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus and Gaius Laelius, two young admirers who praised Cato because "old age never seemed a burden to you, while to most old men it is so hateful that they declare themselves under a weight heavier than Aetna." As Cicero writes in his introduction to this essay "Cato's own words will at once explain all I feel about old age."

Cato begins his discourse with a Stoic sentiment:

> Men, of course, who have no resources in themselves for securing a good and happy life find every age burdensome. But those who look for all happiness from within can never think anything bad which Nature makes inevitable. In that category before anything else comes old age, to which all wish to attain, and at which all grumble when attained. Such is Folly's inconsistency and unreasonableness!

When Laelius suggests that the reason Cato can bear old age magnanimously is because he is wealthy, the elder statesman agrees: "For the philosopher himself could not find old age easy to bear in the depths of poverty, nor the fool feel it anything but a burden though he were a millionaire"—a rare example of class consciousness in Classical literature.

Cicero's Cato then proceeds to argue in turn against each of the four reasons most people dread old age. In arguing against the idea that old age withdraws us from active employments, Cato cites several examples of men who were active into their eighties or nineties, from the Greek Sophocles, Plato, and Isocrates, to the Roman Appius Claudius, Ennius, and Fabius Maximus (and Cato himself!). Cato supports his argument with a simile:

> They are like men who would say that a steersman does nothing in sailing a ship, because, while some of the crew are climbing the masts, others hurrying up and down the gangways, others pumping out the bilge water, he sits quietly in the stern holding the tiller. He does not do what young men do; nevertheless he does what is much more important and better. The great affairs of life are not performed by physical strength, or activity, or nimbleness of body, but by deliberation, character, expression of opinion. Of these old age is not only not deprived, but, as a rule, has them in a greater degree.

[I suspect that these lines from Cicero might be trotted out in opposition to amending the US Constitution to set an upper age limit for the office of the Presidency—something that has gained traction at a time when the current President is 79 years old and the former President is 75 years old, and both are considering running for office again in three years.]

Cato goes on to note "But, it is said, memory dwindles. No doubt, unless you keep it in practice, or if you happen to be somewhat dull by nature." In advising us—assuming that we were not dullards to begin with—to keep our memory sharp through practice, Cicero was influenced by a medical tradition stretching back to Hippocrates—the 5th-century BCE "Father of Medicine" who held that human diseases were not due to supernatural causes but rather by misalignments of the four humors—and to the 2nd-century BCE Galen, who maintained that dementia in the elderly was caused by an excess buildup of black bile in the brain. [We might also note that Cato's advice aligns with modern medicine, e.g., www.health.harvard.edu: "Challenging your brain with mental exercise is believed to activate processes that help maintain individual brain cells and stimulate communication among them."] Nonetheless, Cicero's Cato does declare, in the most well-known passage from *De Senectute*;

> Nor, in point of fact, have I ever heard of any old man forgetting where he had hidden his money. They remember everything that interests them: when to answer to their bail, business appointments, who owes them money, and to whom they owe it. What about lawyers, pontiffs, augurs, philosophers, when old? What a multitude of things they remember! Old men retain their intellects well enough, if only they keep their minds active and fully employed. Nor is that the case only with men of high position and great office: it applies equally to private life and peaceful pursuits.

Cato next turns to the second reason people fear old age—that it enfeebles the body. Repeating the point he made with his steersman metaphor, Cato admits that "Bodily strength is wanting to old age; but neither is bodily strength demanded from old men." Still, Cato asserts that "Active exercise, therefore, and temperance can preserve some part of one's former strength even in old age." Although an advocate for physical exercise in the elderly, Cato maintains that mental exercise is more important:

> We must look after our health, use moderate exercise, take just enough food and drink to recruit, but not to overload, our strength. Nor is it the body alone that must be supported, but the intellect and soul much more. For they are like lamps: unless you feed them with oil, they too go out from old age. Again, the body is apt to get gross from exercise; but the intellect becomes nimbler by exercising itself.

In addressing the third cavil against old age—that it saps our physical pleasures—Cato cites the 4th-century BCE Greek philosopher Archytas of Tarentum:

> "No more deadly curse than sensual pleasure has been inflicted on mankind by nature, to gratify which our wanton appetites are roused beyond all prudence or restraint. . . . Fornications and adulteries, and every abomination of that kind, are brought about by the enticements of pleasure and by them alone. Intellect is the best gift of nature or God: to this divine gift and endowment there is nothing so inimical as pleasure. For when appetite is our master, there is no place for self control; nor where pleasure reigns supreme can virtue hold its ground. . . . Therefore nothing can be so execrable and so fatal as pleasure; since, when more than ordinarily violent and lasting, it darkens all the light of the soul."

Cato augments Archytas' point with the answer Sophocles supposedly gave when, as an old man, he was asked if he was still sexually active: "'Heaven forbid!' he replied; 'I was only

too glad to escape from that, as though from a boorish and insane master.'" (This probably apocryphal Sophoclean quotation comes from a speech given by Cephalus in Book I of Plato's *Republic*, an antiquarian fact that Cicero curiously does not have his pedantic and garrulous old Cato note.)

Cato does admit that "for myself, owing to the pleasure I take in conversation, I enjoy even banquets" (by which he means the Latin *convivium*—a "living together"—as opposed to the Greek *symposium*—"drinking together"—the often ribald rounds of drinking that came after a meal):

> I am thankful to old age, which has increased my avidity for conversation, while it has removed that for eating and drinking. But if any one does enjoy these - not to seem to have proclaimed war against all pleasure without exception, which is perhaps a feeling inspired by nature - I fail to perceive even in these very pleasures that old age is entirely without the power of appreciation.

Among the pleasures that Cato holds old age is still capable of appreciating are the joys that come from farming:

> These are not hindered by any extent of old age, and seem to me to approach nearest to the ideal wise man's life. For he has to deal with the earth, which never refuses its obedience, nor ever returns what it has received without usury; sometimes, indeed, with less, but generally with greater interest. For my part, however, it is not merely the thing produced, but the earth's own force and natural productiveness that delight me.

In my favorite passage from *De Senectute*, Cato observes ". . . no one is so old as to think that he may not live a year." And farmers, Cato says, "bestow their labour on what they know does not affect them in any case."

> Nor indeed would a farmer, however old, hesitate to answer any one who asked him for whom he was planting: 'For the immortal gods, whose will it was that I should not merely receive these things from my ancestors, but should also hand them on to the next generation.'

De Senectute ends with a discussion of the topic that led us to this rather long excursus into Cicero's essay in the first place: ". . . the fourth reason, which more than anything else appears to torment men of my age and keep them in a flutter - The Nearness Of Death, which, it must be allowed, cannot be far from an old man." Not surprisingly, Cato

declares “But what a poor dotard must he be who has not learnt in the course of so long a life that death is not a thing to be feared?”

Cato’s argument for why death is not to be feared is a curious anticipation of Pascal’s Wager for why we should live our lives as if God really existed:

> Death, that is either to be totally disregarded, if it entirely extinguishes the soul, or is even to be desired, if it brings him where he is to exist forever. A third alternative, at any rate, cannot possibly be discovered. Why then should I be afraid if I am destined either not to be miserable after death or even to be happy?

In the concluding section of *De Senectute* Cicero has Cato give a series of similes:

> Now the harvest of old age is, as I have often said, the memory and rich store of blessings laid up in earlier life. Again, all things that accord with nature are to be counted as good. But what can be more in accordance with Nature than for old men to die? A thing, indeed, which also befalls young men, though Nature revolts and fights against it. Accordingly, the death of young men seems to me like putting out a great fire with a deluge of water; but old men die like a fire going out because it has burnt down of its own nature without artificial means. Again, just as apples when unripe are torn from trees, but when ripe and mellow drop down, so it is violence that takes life from young men, ripeness from old. This ripeness is so delightful to me that, as I approach nearer to death, I seem, as it were, to be sighting land, and to be coming to port at last after a long voyage.

[Note: the above excerpts from *De Senectute* come from the translation by E.S. Shuckburgh, published in *Cicero, Marcus Tullius. Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero, with his treatises on friendship and old age*, The Harvard Classics v. 9. New York: P. F. Collier, 1909.

Readers might want to check out Jeffery Levine’s, “A Geriatrician Reviews Cicero’s ‘On Old Age’,” *GeriPal*, A Geriatric and Palliative Care Podcast for Every Healthcare Professional, 5 April, 2017. Web. Levine argues that our modern world would do well to heed Cicero’s advice to accept old age and death as natural and inevitable, and thus avoid the pain and suffering that is often inflicted on the elderly by a medical profession dedicated to the preservation of life at all costs.]

Clearly, *De Senectute* rings a bell with me. (I think that it should be required reading for anyone over sixty-five years old!)

I feel that in my life I have indeed laid up for my old age a harvest of memories and a rich store of blessings. I grew up privileged never to have known poverty or want. I had a (more or less) happy childhood with three brothers who still mean the world to me even though we are scattered nearly evenly across the globe. I have been blessed with a forty-year marriage to a woman I love deeply; together, we raised a child who grew up to be a brilliant, delightfully creative man I am so proud of. I had a deeply fulfilling career as an archaeologist and as a teacher, and I am enjoying a rich retirement after I left the US to live in northern Spain.

And I agree with Cato when he said

> But this is enough to show you how, so far from being listless and sluggish, old age is even a busy time, always doing and attempting something, of course of the same nature as each man's taste had been in the previous part of his life. Nay, do not some even add to their stock of learning? We see Solon, for instance, boasting in his poems that he grows old 'daily learning something new.'

My life in Asturias is indeed busy. I am "always doing and attempting something" as I negotiate living in a foreign country and communicating in a language that is not my native tongue—something that has long been part of my life. My wife and I have a close circle of friends whom we see frequently, and we daily walk around the medieval city where we live, doing our shopping, stopping in at the art museum or archaeology museum, or just admiring the 15th-century Cathedral or gawking at the 13th-century city walls. We are "'daily learning something new,'" which, given our taste for art and antiquity, mostly involves researching the history of this or that pre-Romanesque church or delving into one of the many caves in the region that are adorned with astounding Paleolithic paintings.

And of course I read (mostly science fiction), strum my guitar (badly), and watch (way too much) TV. But my real passion is writing sentences. Hence this essay.

As a committed atheist, I am by no means tempted to take a Pascalian Wager to assuage a fear of death by buying into a myth of immortality, whether that be a Platonic/Buddhist reabsorption into a world soul or a Christian heaven where an "I" sits up on a cloud looking down at earth for all eternity. I'd rather follow Lucretius or Bryant and let the atoms of my dead body be reincarnated as vegetables.

[In a jejune essay, "A Question (and Two Sub-Questions) about the Afterlife," I wrote last year and posted on my website murraymcclellan.com, I address one of the reasons that a personal immortality would be abhorrent to me:

> But, as a life-long student, I've always felt that an eternal afterlife would be a living hell for me. In my mortal coil, I've struggled to learn a smattering of Latin and ancient Greek as well as the rudiments of human prehistory and history, and I've managed to read (mostly in translation) only a handful of the great works of human literature. What a burden if would be if time were to stretch out endlessly for me: I would feel compelled to learn every language that ever existed and read every book ever written, not to mention gaining at least some competency in biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. And don't get me started on music: oh, how many instruments to learn how to play or classical scores to master!

So no, the "Nearness Of Death" in my old age does not keep me in a flutter. I take comfort in *Psalm* 90:10:

> 10
> Our days may come to seventy years,
> or eighty, if our strength endures;
> yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
> for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
> (New International Version)

[One might think that this seventy- to eighty-year life limit given in a prayer supposedly composed by Moses—a man who reportedly lived to be 120-years old—is haughtily cruel. In my lifetime, life expectancy rates in the US rose from seventy to eighty years, although with the current COVID19 pandemic, it has been going down in recent years. We might also note that the low average life expectancy we estimate for previous generations is a bit misleading; if, in an age before penicillin or modern medicine, one managed to survive one's childhood and early adulthood, one stood a good chance of living the Biblical seventy or eighty years.]

Of course I've seen "trouble and sorrow" in many of my days, and as I've aged my body and mind have naturally become enfeebled. I do follow Cato's advice to undertake "moderate exercise." (And I think that those old men who engage in excessive exercise and post Facebook selfies of their Charles Atlas six-pack abs are "gross.") Still, my left shoulder aches, especially when I do the crawl stroke while swimming. (I simply can't do the breast stroke, but then I never could even in the prime of my life.) My right big toe throbs all the time, and walking any distance over a mile is a real chore. And my brain! Although I am still living an active mental life, every day I walk into a room forgetting why I was going into that

room in the first place. And every day I tail off in a conversation and have to ask "what was I talking about?" While I might like to pretend that my forgetfulness is just a way my brain is making more space for "'daily learning something new,'" I suspect that I am seeing the early stages of dementia—something that I fear above all else. But, as yet, I haven't forgotten where I have hidden my money!

On this topic, here is a little poem I recently wrote:

Growing Old

The train of my memories
Takes me on trips
Away from myself.

I forget where I am
And button up my jeans
While still on the toilet.

And just as I resist Cicero's and Dickinson's suggestion that a belief in Immortality assuages a fear of death, I also find Sophocles' and Archytas' denigration of sensual pleasure in the elderly to be off the mark. If anything, I find that as I have grown older I enjoy a delicious meal or a glass of really good wine more than I did when I was younger. And while my libido may not be what it was when I was sixteen, I still enjoy sex as much as I ever have.

To conclude: I disagree with what Macbeth says after learning of Lady Macbeth's death:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time.
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Yes, our tomorrows creep in faster every day and our brief candle goes out more quickly than we might want, but I have found that life—even my often idiotic life—is not a "walking shadow," a tale "full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing." I have lived a rich and fulfilling life, but even as I seem "to be sighting land, and to be coming to port at last after a long voyage," and know that I am soon to "fly away," I am still not "so old as to think that [I] may not live a year." This spring I will plant my garden again.