

OCT. 5, 1978

An Autumn Review
~~Full Length Review~~

"Old age - A sense of doors quietly shutting, one by one;" The body's quickening ebb tide, atoudh of senility, the varied decor of physician's waiting rooms, the map of it all on a furrowed face. Is it not also ~~as~~ personal situation. Alive and alone under cold skies; in the bosom of one's family, respected, comforted, ~~and~~ provided for in accord with former custom, ~~merely~~ abandoned to the institutional mercies of the nursing home or, precious thought, hacking it, poolside, ~~in~~ flowing shorts at Sun City. Oh we have charts, we have numbers, we have reams of geriatric data presumably telling us what we need to know of age and yet telling imperfectly at best what is most worth knowing - that old age is but another picture in the mind and the heart's accompanying cry of joy or pain. Pictures ~~are~~; let us contemplate them together, these fleeting fantasies of age etched in symbol and metaphor by the poets of our ~~own~~ native tongue.

Then,
~~Let us~~ begin with that apostle of the everlasting yea, Browning's wise Ben Ezra as he intones:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made;
Our times are in his hand
Who saith "Awhole I planned,
"Youth shows but half; trust God;
See all nor be afraid;

Well, perhaps - We listen, but do we hear? Somehow the voice of this good man so immaculately clad in the whole armor of his faith rings faintly in ~~in~~ ^{our} harsh and jangling world. Few there are who would not willingly exchange what they perceive to be ~~at best~~ ^{clouded} a ~~second~~ birthright, "the last of life" for the more immediate pottage of personal pleasure. Better attuned to the temper of our times is a ~~kind of~~ naked apprehension springing ^{from} the psalmist's cry!

2

Cast me not off in the time of my old age
Forsake me not when my strength faileth
... Oh God for sake me not (71 psalm)

From that most passionate of Irish singers, William Butler Yeats,
~~comes another~~ ^{of further} damurral to Browning's unqualified optimism. Like a beacon
in the night there leaps a single flash of insight from the poem "Sailing
to Byzantium". Elliptical, suggestive, it manages to illumine the entire
landscape of old age.

. An aged man is but a paltry thing
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

No great difficulty here for Christian interpreters - but wait!

^{This} ~~is~~ ^{yeats} ~~is~~ ^{is} man wedded to Ireland's pagan past. Conceivably the message reads
~~like this~~ ^{difficultly}. Decline and debility are the inevitable wages of long life.

One shoulders them in stride as it were and defeats the ugliness not by
faith ~~and~~ ^{or} avoidance but, paradoxically, ~~by~~ by flying in the face of it
through song and affirmation. Label it truculent acceptance or what you
will; For Yeats, a ~~1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-28-29-30-31-32-33-34-35-36-37-38-39-40-41-42-43-44-45-46-47-48-49-50-51-52-53-54-55-56-57-58-59-60-61-62-63-64-65-66-67-68-69-70-71-72-73-74-75-76-77-78-79-80-81-82-83-84-85-86-87-88-89-90-91-92-93-94-95-96-97-98-99-100~~, defiance is plainly the proper temper - song
the weapon at hand. Add aquart of Irish whiskey to the mix and ~~one~~ it serves
well enough as a typical gaelic ~~approach~~ ^{antidote} ~~solution~~ to all of life's
unpleasantness. On second thought, ~~such~~ ^{this} a combative outlook may be broadly
Celtic rather ~~than~~ narrowly Irish. Consider how ~~the~~ ^{that} Welshman, Dylan Thomas
offers neither song nor affirmation - only a shriek of outrage as he goes
kicking and struggling into the vale of years.

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.

Scarcely ~~r~~ rational prescriptions for autumnal years. Defensible perhaps on psychological grounds in that an act of defiance, real or symbolic, can provide a valid catharsis for the troubled soul.

Closer to home and in language more suited to American ears, Edwin Arlington Robinson paints ^a ~~the~~ haunting portrait of old Eben Flood trudging his solitary way above Tilbury town towards

...the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should know
On earth again of home...

, Pausing warily to make certain the road is his and his alone, he addresses himself:

Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the ~~wing~~ wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird." He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill
And answered huskily; "Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will."

Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armour of scarred hopes outworn,
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.
Below him in the town among the trees,
Where friends of other days had honored him,
A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eben's eyes were dim.

Then, as another lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
 In a long time; and many a change has come
 To both of us, I fear, since last it was
 We had a drop together. Welcome home! "
 Convivially returning with himself,
 Again he raised the jug up to the light;
 And with an acquiescent quaver said:
 "Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

"Only a very little, Mr. Flood -
 For auld lang syne. No more sir, that will do."
 So, For the time, apparently it did,
 And Eben evidently thought so too;
 For soon amid the silver loneliness
 Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
 Secure, with only two moons listening,
 Until the whole harmonious landscape rang -

"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,
 The last word wavered, and the song was done.
 He raised again the jug regretfully
 And shook his head, and was again alone.
 There was not much that was ahead of him
 And there was nothing in the town below -
 Where strangers would have shut the many doors
 That many friends had opened long ago.

Was ever the well of sadness so deep? Ah my friends of the many
 splendored Athenaeum, how many ~~voices~~ broken voices, behind how many
 cracked panes in the numberless back rooms of the world have echoed the
 conviction of this defeated old man. Alone, at journey's end, Eben Flood
 finds his answer to life's non-mystery. Hell going is earth knowing that
 most things - break. As if to confirm so mournful a verdict, the venerable
 Yeats, writing in his last years, contributes a final gray epitaph to the
 hopes and dreams of youth.

(5)

Why should not old men be mad?
Some have known a likely lad
That had a sound fly-fishers wrist
Turn to a drunken journalist;
A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce;
A Helen of social welfare dream,
Climb on a wagonette-to scream.
Some think it a matter of course that chance
Should starve good men and bad advance,
That if their neighbors figured plain,
As though upon a lighted screen,
No single story would they find
Of an unbroken happy mind,
A finish worthy of the start.
Young^a men know nothing of this sort,
Observant old men know it well;
And when they know what old books tell,
And that no better can be had,
Know why an old man should be mad.

Granted, poets have a vested interest in the miseries of this world.

These are after all the raw stuff of the trade. Still it's something of a shock to realize how far we've journeyed from the confident optimism radiated by old Ben Ezra. Here perspective seems all but drowned in a sea of unrelieved darkness. If lines like these reflect the nadir of poetic insights, where does one turn for balance, for a measure of sanity to counter the ^{gloom}~~negativism~~. Apart from the exultant songs of faith, few examples of hope or assurance abide. Here and there an occasional ripple of sunshine through rifts in the clouds. For the most part a sense of purpose, a degree of tenacity, the will to persevere appear to be the compensating qualities that see one through a difficult time. Stoic virtues to be sure ~~and~~ yet at times the miracle of ~~charac~~ human character can suffuse them with a ^{unique}~~special~~ zest and flavor.

^{Fantasy}
As if to rebut the lopsided verdict of Yeats' mad old men there looms a formidable figure - non other than that bottomless well of loquacity,

that paragon of 14th century matrimony, the indomitable Wife of Bath.

There she rides, amply proportioned, ~~both~~ frolicsome, ~~and~~ contentious, amidst that colorful band en route to the shrine of St Thomas a Beckett in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Husbands at church door had she five
...bedded them, bawded them, buried them - gone through them all like a dose of salts. Now well into her autumn years, though he is nowhere in sight, she confidently anticipates the prospect of number ~~six~~.

I will bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and fruits of marriage

(I will expend the flour of my old age
In the acts and fruits of marriage) ... she vows.

Pausing abruptly in her rambling discourse ~~on the rites of matrimony~~ she looks back with relish.

But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee
It tikleth me aboute my herte roote.
Unto this day it doth myn herte bote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.

(But, Lord God! when I remember
My youth and its pleasures
It warms the cockles of my heart.
To this very day it does my heart good
To know that I have enjoyed my life in my time.)

And then wistfully:

But age, alas! that poisons everything
Has stolen away my beauty and my pith.
Farewell! Let go! The devil take it!
The flour is gone, there is no more to tell
The bran as best I can now must I sell.

A note of regret here but not the slightest hint of self ^{pity} ~~pity~~ or defeat. Though her tools be blunted her resolve remains intact. A man she means to have, in lawful if not precisely holy wedlock; and woe betide the hapless male who attempts to elude her nets once they are cast. He has as much chance of ~~eluding~~ ^{escaping} her as the minnow has of escaping the shark. For all her profane and unorthodox proclamations this remarkable woman manages to send one positive signal echoing down through the centuries. Ebbing strength, the decline and hazards of age need not determine a picture in the mind. What are these after all but nature's legacies to all men. Chart a course; have the courage and resolution to see it through. Whether the goal be Husband No. six or to breed a lily of the purest blue - no matter. 'Tis the purpose and the pursuit that afford a measure of reprieve from the slow ~~in~~-winding down of ~~the~~ of body and mind.

In a sceptical ^{age} dominated by pretensions of human equality, the ^{hero} is an endangered species. Americans in particular have ambivalent feelings about him. We hunger for his exploits even as we question his motives, and most especially when his exploits tend to diminish our own self image. Still, and old hero like an old horse poses ~~no~~ no threat to current runners in the race for status. He tends to be safe merchandise, the more so for having ruled three thousand years ago amidst the barren crags of Ithaca, that famed Achaean King, Ulysses, grown old and done with wandering yet restless now with the doling of

Unequal laws unto a savage race...

I am a part of all that I have met;

he muses...

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

Slowly, his dreams begin to jell...

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark broad seas...

...and abruptly to his mariners makes known his new resolve;

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.

...and then ^{that} ~~the~~ slow majestic music;

The lights begin to twinkle from tje rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
't is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die...

The much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in odd 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 stive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.