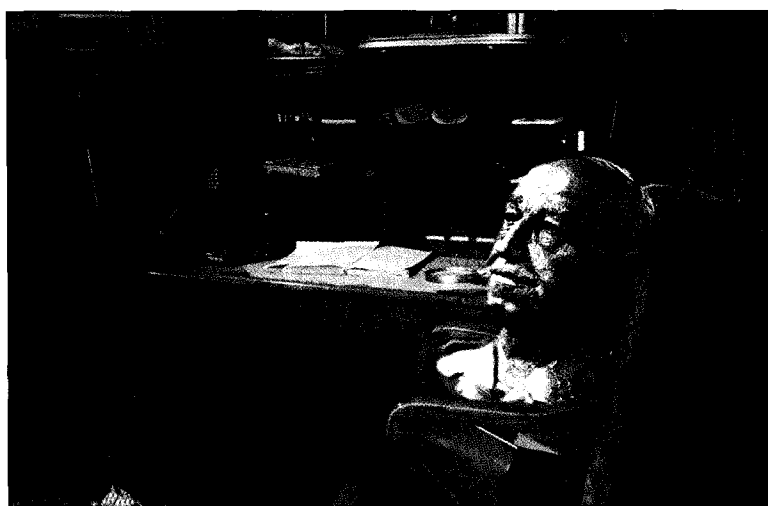


Portraits

Some Notes on the Poetry of Growing Old

by George Garrett



Years and years ago—it would have to have been in 1958-59, a year that my wife and I and our two young children were living in Rome—I wrote a little satirical poem about famous old poets and what’s to become of them. It was occasioned by a couple of things. First, there was the arrival at the library of the American Academy in Rome, where I was working, of an anthology of contemporary poetry, one in which, to my foolish and youthful dismay, I was not mentioned or included. That same day and place, I saw two bronze portraits done by one of the sculptors at the Academy, one of John Ciardi, the other of Archibald MacLeish. Both of these men were featured in the new anthology. I have no copy of my poem, only a loose memory of the last few lines (such as they were):

What finally becomes
of all these people,
people I mean
like John Ciardi
and Archibald MacLeish?
They get old.
They have their portraits
cast in bronze.

As best as I can recollect, it was never published anywhere. Which is just as well. It was disowned and discarded by myself, or perhaps some insistent editor or other, as being too “mean spirited” to see the light of day. Since then, for better and for worse, I have written a good many things that could justly be so classified. I never met MacLeish (1892-1982). Ciardi (1916-

86) and I were to become good friends later on. And, anyway, in today’s context of the new and unimproved illiteracy, a time described by a fellow poet (in part reacting to the dismal facts of illegal immigration and outsourcing) as “the age of broken English,” all of our old literary joys and woes seem to be more than slightly irrelevant.

Even so, we are not quite done with this story. Lest I should misread and misinterpret the lessons out of my own past, something happened during this writing (springtime 2007) that took me by surprise. One day, I heard from the widow of the sculptor Allen Harris that she was passing through Charlottesville and wanted, if possible, to stop by and drop off something for me. (I am, appropriately, housebound these days with a rich variety of geriatric ailments.) I had no idea what she might be bringing. A gifted and accomplished sculptor, Allen had been my friend in Rome, and I have written about him elsewhere. Jean, his widow, arrived and handed me a heavy box. She explained that it contained a work by Allen, one which she had found while clearing out his old barn/studio. Unpacked, it turned out to be a bronze cast, a portrait of myself as I was in 1958. Other than a wincing laugh at the irony of it all—live long enough, and you’ll discover that irony is the last infirmity of fading minds—I have no smart comment to make. Take it for what it’s worth, no more and no less.

Meanwhile, friends and enemies in the shrinking literary world, poets and critics alike, seem to be dedicated to trying to create a “legacy,” trying to determine whose names and works will be remembered and who shall be sent off with a one-way ticket to oblivion. We read the obituary pages, usually in vain, looking eagerly for the names of our rivals and always wondering how it is that the death of A earned respectful attention in the *New York Times* while B gets a brief nod and a misspelling of his name in the local newspaper.

A fictional character of mine, John Towne by name, seri-

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ously considered setting up shop as an obituary agent, aiming to aid his paying clients to receive the accolades and laurels of celebrity, if only posthumously. Some prominent literati whom I know of (not to mention the usual suspects, like politicians and pundits) have taken at face value the late Brother Dave Gardner's argument in favor of atomic warfare—that we would all go at the same time and “maintain our present status.” Meantime, we all grow older, living beyond our time and means, and suffering many of the same aches and pains and symptoms. I will spare you their recapitulation here and now, instead recommending an article in the *New Yorker* (April 30, 2007): “The Way We Age Now,” by Atul Gawande. It will acquaint you with the nasty and often scary details of degeneration.

It is not, as Yeats splendidly noted, a country of and for old men. Without doubt, Wilde had an agenda, one that we find all too familiar in our panic-stricken and rigidly secular age. We allow ourselves the myth (fiction) of nonbelieving even as all our plans and agendas and legacies are shattered to pieces by the simple and triumphant fact of death.

On average, our poets, like others, are living longer; but, for a variety of reasons, not many of them are writing much in their old age. There are, of course, some notable exceptions. I think fondly and gratefully of John Hall Wheelock, my first editor, who wrote some of his finest poems in his 90's; of Stanley Kunitz, who was still writing (now and then) at a hundred years; of Richard Wilbur, now in his late 80's, still favoring us with his shapely and admirable poems. To be sure, the superb exception of Sophocles, all those years ago, remains monumental. And looking forward, there may well be a good many more from the ranks of the next and coming generations. Most poetry about getting and being old, some of it excellent and accurately empathetic, has been written by poets who had not yet arrived at the bleak destination of old age. T.S. Eliot, and especially in “Little Gidding,” seems again and again to speak for us, the elders, as well as to us: “Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age . . .” And you might want to take a look, with full allowance for its eccentricities, at *The Oxford Book of Aging* (1994), at least as a starting place. There, one finds examples of our classical originals—Aeschylus, Aristotle, Greek lyric poets, Hippocrates, Ovid, Plato, Seneca. And there I came upon a pertinent excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where bodily decrepitude makes no claims of wisdom and is the declared enemy of the “new Hedonism”

of which Dorian Gray is to be “its visible symbol.” What is the perception of the aging process as witnessed by Wilde, or, more accurately, his narrator? He writes:

The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty becomes sluggish. Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth.

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Which leads me to my final portrait, a group portrait, a photograph of members of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, taken a few years ago and framed and hanging on the wall near the desk where I am writing this piece. A cheerful, smiling photograph—the photographer must have told us all to “Say cheese!” Not all of the members were present, but, among those who briefly posed for the photographer, a number have died since then, and those who are alive are surely older. Here are the names of the dead: Cleanth Brooks, James Dickey, Shelby Foote, Andrew Lytle, Mary Lee Settle, Lewis P. Simpson, Walter Sullivan, Eudora Welty, and C. Vann Woodward. I see their smiling faces, and my own among them, every day. Sooner or later, it was bound to happen; I would have to make some sense out of that picture in the only way I can and know how—by making a poem, a small one, about it:

Group Portrait

Here I am again,
smiling broadly,
one face only
among a row
of famous faces,
the faces of
my elders and betters,
now lost and gone
to glory or surely
going that way soon.

What on earth
are we all
smiling about?

I put on my glasses
and turn on the lamp
to see myself
spring back to life
among the grinning dead.
Must we pose there forever
together in faceless dark?
Or will we, too, rise again
in the sudden gift of light
smiling?

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The Last Adieu

A Wake for the Living

by George McCartney



Melanie Anderson

It is not surprising that death has always been a target for comedians and satirists. After all, dying is the ultimate prat fall, an ungainly reminder to others that their time is coming. When Leo Tolstoy wanted to have a good laugh at the expense of the Russian middle class, he naturally chose a funeral for his setting. His story “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” one of the starkest evocations of mortality in fiction, begins with mockery. Ivan Ilych, a judge of middling distinction and enormous vanity, has died. At the news, his colleagues in the judiciary immediately begin calculating how his demise will affect them. What realignments and promotions will follow? At the same time, these good gentlemen “could not help thinking . . . that they would now have to fulfill the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and paying a visit of condolence to the widow.” At the wake in Ilych’s home, these fellows bumble about not knowing what they are supposed to do in front of the coffin. Should they bless themselves or bow? Or is it both at once? Of one thing, however, they are all certain: As the narrator explains, “the death of a near acquaintance aroused, as usual, in all who heard of it the complacent feeling that, ‘It is he who is dead and not I.’”

The television comic Jackie Gleason used to paint a cruder — some would say more congenial — version of Tolstoy’s portrait of death’s comedy with a story of an Irish wake held at home. It seems that, before he died, Frank told his wife, Eileen, that he wanted a wake that would please his family and friends. When the time comes, Eileen fully honors her husband’s wishes. She furnishes his wake with ample food and drink. From the first night, it’s a success. By the second night, it’s a lively party; by the third, a roaring one. Happy to see this, Eileen decides to keep the wake going. But toward the end of the fourth night,

she begins to worry. How much longer can she delay putting Frank in the ground? In a quandary, she approaches Frank’s best friend, Pat, to ask his advice. Pat puts down his tumbler of Bushmills and says, “Ah, sure, Eileen, and Frank was as good a man as ever walked God’s earth. And since you’re asking my opinion of the matter, I’ll tell you. I’m thinking you should have him stuffed and keep the party going.”

I suspect Gleason got the idea for this joke from a tradition of lively funerals that had not quite died out among the Irish, both here and in the old country. The Irish, like the ancient Greeks, made a point of celebrating at funerals. Games and dancing used to be the rule in earlier days. And, of course, drink was necessary to keep the mourners’ energy up. So spirited were these funeral parties that guests sometimes could not refrain from including the corpse in the fun, hoisting him from his coffin to join them for a reel or two.

Then there’s the legend that comes down to us from 1899 in Annagh, Northern Ireland. There lived a certain George McCartney, the grandfather for whom I am named, who was known to have livened up a wake or two. At one, however, his high spirits turned regrettably mischievous. An aged farmer had died and was being waked in his barn. Arriving well before the scheduled hour of 7:00 P.M., George and his friends prepared a surprise for the evening. When the guests began to walk in a half-hour later, George rose from his seat and walked with reverent slowness toward the back of the barn as if he intended to greet them. As he did so, he pulled the slender rope he had tied around his waist under his jacket, a rope whose other end he and his friends had earlier tossed over one of the barn’s rafters and tied underneath the corpse’s armpits. In the darkened barn, the nearly invisible rope created an unnerving spectacle. The corpse began to sit up in his coffin, his head

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