

SPQR

On Old Age

MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

Musean Translation

MOUSEIA

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Translated by Michael Berardi

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THIS EDITION

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TRANSLATOR

Michael Berardi

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Chapter 1



- ¹ “O Titus, if I brought you help, or lightened the care
That burns you now and, lodged within your breast, torments you,
What would my reward be?”
For I may address you, Atticus, in the same verses that were addressed to
Flamininus by
“That man of little wealth, but rich in loyalty,”
although I know for certain that you are not, like Flamininus,
“So troubled, Titus, through the nights and days.”
I know your self-command and even temper; I understand that you brought
home from Athens not merely a surname, but cultivation and good
judgment. Yet I suspect that the same matters which sometimes trouble me
deeply trouble you as well. Consolation for those calls for a greater
undertaking and must wait for another time.
For now I have thought it right to write you something on old age,
- ² since I wish to lighten, for you and for myself, this burden we share: old age,
already pressing upon us, or at least approaching. I know, of course, that you
bear it and will bear it, as you bear everything, with moderation and wisdom.
But when I wanted to write about old age, you came to mind as a man worthy
of a gift from which we might both draw benefit. For my part, composing this
book gave me such pleasure that it not only brushed away all the troubles of old

age but made old age itself gentle and delightful. Philosophy, then, can never receive the praise it deserves: whoever obeys it may pass every season of life without distress.

- ³ On other subjects we have said much and shall often speak again; this book I send you is on old age. I have entrusted the whole discussion not to Tithonus, as Aristo of Ceos did—a fable would carry too little authority—but to Marcus Cato in his old age, to give the argument greater weight. I represent Laelius and Scipio expressing their wonder that he bears old age so easily, and Cato answering them. If his discussion seems more learned than his own books usually are, attribute it to Greek literature, which he is known to have studied with great devotion in his later years. But why say more? Cato's own words will now unfold our entire view of old age.

Chapter 2



- ⁴ Scipio: “Gaius Laelius here and I often marvel, Marcus Cato, at your outstanding and consummate wisdom in other matters, but most of all because I have never seen you find old age burdensome. Most old men detest it so much that they say they bear a load heavier than Mount Etna.”

Cato: “You seem to marvel, Scipio and Laelius, at something not particularly difficult. Those who have no resources within themselves for living well and happily find every age burdensome. But those who seek all their goods within themselves can regard nothing that nature’s necessity brings as an evil. Old age belongs above all to this class: everyone wishes to reach it, yet complains when it arrives. Such is the inconsistency and perversity of folly. They say it crept upon them sooner than they had thought. First, who compelled them to think falsely? Does old age steal upon youth any faster than youth upon childhood? And then, would old age weigh any less upon them in their eight-hundredth year than in their eightieth? However long a life has been, once it has flowed away, it can offer no consolation to a foolish old age.”

- ⁵ “So if you are accustomed to admire my wisdom—and I wish it deserved your opinion and my surname—my wisdom lies in this: I follow nature, our best guide, as I would a god, and obey her. Having planned the other parts of life well, she is unlikely to have neglected its final act like an incompetent poet. Yet something had to come last, something that, like berries on the trees and the

fruits of the earth, would wither and fall when its proper ripeness came. A wise person must bear that gently. For what else is resisting nature but waging war upon the gods, as the Giants did?"

- ⁶ Laelius: "But Cato, you would do us a very great kindness—I can promise this for Scipio too—if, since we hope to grow old, and certainly wish to, we could learn from you long beforehand how best to bear the growing weight of years."
Cato: "I certainly will, Laelius, especially if, as you say, it will please you both."
Laelius: "Indeed we wish it, Cato, if it is no trouble. You have, so to speak, completed a long road that we too must travel, and we want to see what the place you have reached is like."

Chapter 3



⁷ Cato: “I shall do what I can, Laelius. I have often heard the complaints of men my own age—for, as the old proverb says, like most readily gathers with like. Gaius Salinator and Spurius Albinus, both former consuls and about my own age, used to lament that they were deprived of pleasures without which they thought life no life at all, and that those who once honored them now held them in contempt. To my mind they were blaming the wrong thing. If old age were responsible, the same would happen to me and to every other elderly man. Yet I have known many whose old age was free of complaint, who did not resent their release from the chains of desire and were not despised by their families. In complaints of this kind the fault lies in character, not in years. Moderate old men, neither difficult nor unkind, enjoy a tolerable old age; harshness and inhumanity make every age a burden.”

⁸ Laelius: “It is as you say, Cato. Yet someone might suggest that your wealth, resources, and standing make old age seem more tolerable to you, and that few can have those advantages.”

Cato: “There is something in that, Laelius, but it is very far from the whole. Themistocles is said to have answered a man from Seriphus during a quarrel, when the man said that his distinction came not from his own glory but from his country’s: ‘By Hercules, if I were from Seriphus I should never have become

famous; nor would you, if you were an Athenian.’ The same may be said of old age. In utter poverty it cannot be easy even for a wise man; nor, even amid great abundance, can it fail to burden a fool.”

- 9 “Altogether the best weapons of old age, Scipio and Laelius, are the arts of virtue and their practice. Cultivated at every age, they bear marvelous fruit when you have lived long and fully: not only because they never abandon you, even in life’s last days—great as that advantage is—but because the consciousness of a life well lived and the memory of many good deeds are supremely sweet.”

Chapter 4



¹⁰ “When I was young I loved Quintus Maximus, the man who recovered Tarentum, as though he were my contemporary, though he was old. His gravity was seasoned with courtesy, and age had not altered his character. When I began to cultivate his acquaintance he was not extremely old, but already advanced in years. His first consulship fell the year after my birth; during his fourth, I went as a very young soldier to Capua, and five years later to Tarentum. Four years after that I became quaestor, holding office in the consulship of Tuditanus and Cethegus. By then a very old man, he spoke in favor of the Cincian law on gifts and payments. Though well advanced in years he still waged war like a young man, and by his patience wore down Hannibal in all his youthful exultation. Our friend Ennius said admirably of him:

One man, by waiting, restored our state;
He set no public clamor above its safety;
So now his glory shines ever more brightly.”

¹¹ “And with what vigilance and judgment he recovered Tarentum! I heard Salinator, who had lost the town and fled into the citadel, boast to him: ‘Through my efforts, Quintus Fabius, you recovered Tarentum.’ ‘Certainly,’ he answered with a laugh, ‘for if you had not lost it, I should never have recovered it.’ Nor was he more distinguished in war than in civil life. During his second consulship, while his colleague Spurius Carvilius remained inactive, he

opposed, as long as he could, the tribune Gaius Flaminius, who was distributing land in Picenum and Gaul to individuals against the Senate's authority. And though an augur himself, he dared to say that whatever was done for the state's safety was done under the best auspices, while measures brought against the state were brought against the auspices."

- ¹² "I learned of many splendid qualities in that man, but nothing more admirable than the way he bore the death of his son, a distinguished man and former consul. His funeral oration is still in circulation: when we read it, what philosopher does not seem small beside him? Great as he was in public and before his fellow citizens, he was greater still within his home. What conversation, what counsel! What knowledge of antiquity and of augural law! And, for a Roman, what wide learning! He remembered everything, wars abroad as well as at home. I listened to him then with such eager delight that I seemed already to foresee what came to pass: after his death I should have no one left to teach me."

Chapter 5



¹³ “Why, then, have I said so much about Maximus? Because you surely see how wrong it would be to call such an old age miserable. Yet not everyone can be a Scipio or a Maximus and look back upon captured cities, battles fought on land or sea, wars conducted, and triumphs celebrated. There is also the calm and gentle old age of a life passed quietly, purely, and with refinement. Such, we are told, was Plato’s: he died writing in his eighty-first year. Such was that of Isocrates, who says that he wrote the book entitled *Panathenaicus* in his ninety-fourth year and lived five years longer. His teacher, Gorgias of Leontini, completed a hundred and seven years, never ceasing from his studies and his work. Asked why he wished to remain alive so long, he replied, ‘I have no complaint to make against old age.’”

¹⁴ “An excellent answer, worthy of a learned man!
“For fools charge their own faults and failings to old age. Not so Ennius, whom I mentioned just now:

Like a gallant horse that often, on the final stretch,
Won at Olympia, now worn with years he rests.

He compares his old age to that of a gallant, victorious horse. You can surely remember him well: the present consuls, Titus Flamininus and Manius Acilius, took office in the nineteenth year after his death. He died during the consulship of Caepio and Philippus, the latter’s second, when I, at sixty-five, supported the

Voconian law with a strong voice and sound lungs. At seventy—for that was the age Ennius reached—he bore the two burdens generally thought the greatest, poverty and old age, as though he almost delighted in them.”

Chapter 6



- 15 “When I survey the matter in my mind, I find four reasons why old age is thought miserable: first, it withdraws us from active affairs; second, it weakens the body; third, it deprives us of nearly every pleasure; fourth, it stands not far from death. Let us consider, if you please, how weighty and how just each of these reasons is.

“Old age removes us from active affairs. Which affairs? Those conducted by youth and strength? Are there, then, no activities proper to old age, directed by mind and thought even when the body is weak? Was Quintus Maximus doing nothing? Was Lucius Paulus, your father and my excellent son’s father-in-law? Were those other old men, the Fabricii, Curii, and Coruncanii, doing nothing when they defended the state with counsel and authority?

“Appius Claudius had blindness to bear as well as old age;”

- 16 “yet when the Senate’s opinion was inclining toward peace and a treaty with Pyrrhus, he did not hesitate to speak the words Ennius put into verse:

Where have your minds, once accustomed to stand firm,

Turned from their former course along the path of madness?

He spoke further with the greatest force—you know the poem—and Appius’s own speech survives as well. He did this seventeen years after his second consulship; ten years had separated his two consulships, and he had been

censor before the first. This makes it clear that he was indeed old during the war with Pyrrhus; and this, moreover, is the account handed down by our forefathers.”

- 17 “Those who deny that old age has a part in active affairs therefore have no case. They are like men who say that a helmsman does nothing in sailing a ship because, while some climb the masts, others hurry along the gangways, and others bail out the bilge, he sits quietly at the stern, holding the tiller. He does not do what the young men do, but he does things far greater and better. Great achievements depend not on strength, speed, or bodily agility, but on judgment, authority, and counsel. Of these old age is not usually deprived; rather, it gains in them.”
- 18 “Unless perhaps I seem idle to you now because I no longer wage war, though as soldier, military tribune, legate, and consul I have served in many kinds of war. Yet I prescribe to the Senate what must be done and how. Long in advance I announce war upon Carthage, which has long been plotting evil; I shall not cease to fear her until I know she has been destroyed. May the immortal gods reserve that prize,”
- 19 “Scipio, for you, so that you may finish what your grandfather left undone. This is the thirty-third year since his death, but all the years to come will inherit the memory of that man. He died the year before my censorship, nine years after my consulship, during which he was elected consul for a second time. If he had lived to his hundredth year, would he have regretted his old age? He would not have relied on running or leaping, on spears thrown from afar or swords wielded at close quarters, but on counsel, reason, and judgment. Had old men not possessed these qualities, our ancestors would not have called their highest council the Senate. Among the Spartans, indeed, those”

20 “who hold the highest office are called what they actually are: elders. If you care to read or hear about foreign peoples, you will find that the greatest states have been shaken by young men and upheld and restored by old men.

Tell us, how did you lose your mighty state so quickly?

That is the question asked in the poet Naevius’s *Wolf*. Among the answers, this comes first:

New speakers were coming forward, foolish young men.

Rashness, plainly, belongs to the flowering years; prudence to the years of age.”

Chapter 7



- ²¹ “But memory declines. I dare say it does, unless you exercise it, or if you are naturally rather slow. Themistocles had learned the names of all his fellow citizens. Do you suppose, then, that as he grew older he used to greet Aristides as Lysimachus? For my part, I know not only the men now living but their fathers and grandfathers as well. Nor, when I read tombstones, do I fear the loss of memory they are said to cause: reading them brings the dead back to my mind. I have never heard of an old man forgetting where he buried his treasure. They remember everything that matters to them: appointments to appear in court, who owes them money, and whom they owe.”
- ²² “And what of elderly lawyers, pontiffs, augurs, and philosophers? How much they remember! Old men retain their powers of mind, provided their interest and industry endure; and this applies not only to famous and honored men, but to those who lead quiet, private lives. Sophocles wrote tragedies into extreme old age. His sons thought that his devotion to writing made him neglect his property and brought him into court. Just as our custom allows fathers who mismanage their affairs to be forbidden control of their property, they asked the judges to remove him from its management as a man of unsound mind. The old man is said to have recited to the judges the play he had just written and was still working on, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and asked whether they thought it the work of someone whose mind was failing,”

- 23 “after which the judges acquitted him. Did old age, then, compel him to fall silent in his studies? Did it silence Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, or Stesichorus, or Isocrates and Gorgias, whom I mentioned before? Did it silence those foremost philosophers, Pythagoras and Democritus, or Plato and Xenocrates, or later Zeno and Cleanthes, or Diogenes the Stoic, whom you yourselves saw in Rome? Or did their pursuit of learning last as long as their lives?”
- 24 “But leave aside these exalted studies. I can name Roman farmers in the Sabine countryside, my neighbors and friends, without whose presence scarcely any important work is undertaken on their farms: sowing, harvesting, or storing the crops. In the other tasks this is less remarkable, for no one is so old that he does not think he can live another year. Yet these same men labor over things they know will bring them no benefit at all:
- He plants trees to serve another generation,
as our Statius says in *The Young Comrades*.”

Chapter 8



25 “And however old the farmer may be, he does not hesitate when someone asks for whom he plants: ‘For the immortal gods, who intended me not merely to receive these things from my ancestors but also to hand them on to those who follow.’

“Caecilius speaks better here, of an old man providing for another generation, than in these other lines:

By Pollux, old age, if you brought no other fault

With you when you arrived, this one would be enough:

Living long, a man sees much he would rather not see.

And perhaps much he wishes to see as well! Youth, too, often meets what it would rather not. Still worse is this passage by the same Caecilius:

This, I think, is the greatest misery of age:

To feel that at that age one is hateful to another.

Welcome, rather than hateful!”

26 “For just as wise old men delight in young people of good character, and those whom the young honor and love find old age lighter, so the young welcome the counsel of the old that guides them toward the pursuit of virtue. I know that you find my company no less pleasing than I find yours. You see, then, that old age is not merely free of languor and idleness: it is busy, always acting and undertaking something—something, naturally, in keeping with each person’s

pursuits in earlier life. And what of those who even learn something new? We see Solon boasting in verse that he grows old learning something every day. So did I: I learned Greek literature in old age, seizing upon it as eagerly as a man seeking to quench a long thirst, so that I might know for myself the very examples you now hear me use. When I heard that Socrates had done the same with the lyre, I wished I could do that too, for the ancients used to learn it. But with literature, at least, I worked hard.”

Chapter 9



- ²⁷ “Even now I do not miss a young man’s strength—and that was the second charge against old age—any more than, as a young man, I missed the strength of a bull or an elephant. We should use what we possess and, whatever we undertake, act according to our powers. What words could be more contemptible than those of Milo of Croton? When he was already old, he is said to have watched athletes training on the course, looked down at his own arms, and wept: ‘But these are dead now.’ Not so dead as you yourself, you fool! Your distinction never came from yourself, but from your lungs and muscles. Sextus Aelius said nothing of the kind, nor Tiberius Coruncanius many years before him, nor Publius Crassus more recently. These men laid down the law for their fellow citizens, and their wisdom continued to grow until their last breath.”
- ²⁸ “An orator, I fear, may lose vigor with age: his work requires not only talent but lungs and strength. Yet somehow the voice’s resonance retains its brilliance even in old age. I have certainly not lost mine, and you see how old I am. Still, quiet and unhurried speech suits an old man, and the composed, gentle eloquence of an elderly speaker very often wins a hearing by itself. If you cannot practice it yourself, you can at least teach Scipio and Laelius. For what is more delightful than old age surrounded by the eager attention of the young?”

29 “Shall we deny old age even the power to teach young men, train them, and equip them for every duty? What work could be more splendid? To me, Gnaeus and Publius Scipio, and your two grandfathers, Lucius Aemilius and Publius Africanus, seemed fortunate in the company of noble young men. All teachers of worthy accomplishments must be considered happy, however their strength may have aged and failed.

“And indeed, that failure of strength itself is more often caused by the faults of youth than by old age. A youth of lust and excess hands an exhausted body on to age.”

30 “In Xenophon, Cyrus, speaking on his deathbed when he was very old, says that he never felt his old age had become weaker than his youth. As a boy I remember Lucius Metellus, who became chief pontiff four years after his second consulship and held that priesthood for twenty-two years. At the very end of his life he was so strong that he had no wish for his youth back. There is no need for me to speak of myself, although that is an old man’s habit, and a privilege allowed to our age.”

Chapter 10



- ³¹ “Do you see how often Homer’s Nestor proclaims his own achievements? He was living through a third generation of men, and had no reason to fear that a truthful account of himself would make him seem too boastful or too talkative. As Homer says, speech sweeter than honey flowed from his tongue; and for that sweetness he needed no bodily strength. Yet the commander of Greece nowhere wishes for ten men like Ajax, but for ten like Nestor. If he had them, he has no doubt that Troy would soon fall.”
- ³² “But I return to myself. I am in my eighty-fourth year. I wish I could make the same boast as Cyrus, but I can at least say this: though I do not have the strength I had as a soldier in the Punic War, as quaestor in that same war, as consul in Spain, or four years later when I fought at Thermopylae as military tribune under the consul Manius Glabrio, old age has not, as you see, utterly weakened or broken me. The Senate does not find my strength wanting, nor the rostra, nor my friends, clients, or guests. I have never agreed with that old and much-praised proverb which advises you to become old early if you wish to be old for long. I would rather be old for less time than be old before my time. So far, no one who wished to meet me has found me too busy.”

33 “But I have less strength than either of you. And neither of you has the strength of the centurion Titus Pontius. Is he therefore the better man? Let a man only husband his strength and exert himself to the extent he can, and he will feel no great longing for more. Milo is said to have walked the length of the stadium at Olympia carrying an ox on his shoulders. Which would you rather be given: his bodily strength or Pythagoras’s strength of mind? In short, enjoy that advantage while it is yours; when it is gone, do not yearn for it. Otherwise young men should yearn for childhood, and those a little further on for youth. Life has a fixed course, and nature one simple path; each part of life has been given its own season. The weakness of children, the impetuousness of youth, the gravity of settled years, and the ripeness of old age each have something natural that should be enjoyed in its own time.”

Chapter 11



- ³⁴ “I imagine you have heard, Scipio, what Masinissa, your family’s hereditary guest-friend, does today at ninety. Once he sets out on foot he never mounts a horse; once he sets out on horseback he never dismounts. Neither rain nor cold can persuade him to cover his head. His body is remarkably lean and hardy, and he carries out every office and duty of a king. Exercise and moderation, then, can preserve something of our former strength even in old age.
- “Suppose old age has no strength: strength is not even demanded of it. Both law and custom exempt men of our years from duties that cannot be sustained without it. We are therefore compelled not merely to do nothing beyond our powers, but not even all that we can.”
- ³⁵ “But many old men are so weak that they cannot perform any duty or any task of life at all. That, however, is a fault not peculiar to old age, but shared by ill health. How weak was the son of Publius Africanus, the man who adopted you! How frail his health—or rather, how nonexistent! Had it not been so, he would have emerged as a second great light of the state: to his father’s greatness of soul he had added a richer learning. Why, then, wonder if old men are sometimes weak, when even the young cannot escape it?
- “We must resist old age, Laelius and Scipio, and make up for its failings through diligence. We must fight it as we fight disease, take care of our health,”

³⁶ “practice moderate exercise, and take just enough food and drink to renew our strength, not overwhelm it. Nor should we help the body alone, but much more the mind and spirit: these too are extinguished by old age unless you feed them as you feed a lamp with oil. And though bodies grow heavy with the fatigue of exercise, minds are lightened by exercising. When Caecilius speaks of ‘the foolish old men of comedy,’ he means the credulous, forgetful, dissolute ones: faults not of old age, but of an idle, sluggish, drowsy old age. Just as insolence and lust belong more to the young than to the old, yet not to all the young but to the disreputable, so the foolishness commonly called senile dotage belongs to frivolous old men, not to all.”

³⁷ “Appius governed four vigorous sons, five daughters, so large a household and so many clients, though he was blind and old. He kept his mind stretched taut like a bow, and did not surrender feebly to age. He retained not only authority but command over his family. The slaves feared him; his children revered him; everyone loved him. Ancestral custom and discipline flourished in that house.”

³⁸ “For old age is honorable when it defends itself, maintains its rights, becomes no one’s dependent, and rules its household to the last breath. Just as I approve of a young man who has something of age in him, so I approve of an old man who has something of youth. Whoever follows that principle may be old in body, but never in spirit.

“I am working on the seventh book of my *Origins*. I collect all the records of antiquity; just now I am preparing the speeches for the notable cases I have defended. I study augural, pontifical, and civil law; I also draw extensively on Greek literature. Following the Pythagoreans, I exercise my memory by recalling each evening what I have said, heard, and done during the day. These are my exercises of talent, my mind’s running courses. Sweating and laboring over them, I feel little need of bodily strength. I stand by my friends; I attend the Senate frequently and bring forward, unasked, matters I have considered long and deeply, defending them by strength of mind, not body. Even if I could not do these things, my couch would still delight me as I thought about the very activities I could no longer perform. But my past life makes their performance

possible. For a man who has always lived among such studies and labors does not notice when old age steals upon him. So gradually, imperceptibly, life grows old: it is not suddenly broken, but extinguished by the passage of time.”

Chapter 12



- ³⁹ “Next comes the third reproach against old age: they say it lacks pleasure. What a splendid gift of years, if it takes from us the very thing most corrupting in youth! Listen, my excellent young friends, to an old discourse of Archytas of Tarentum, a man of the first greatness and distinction. It was passed on to me when I was at Tarentum as a young man with Quintus Maximus. No more deadly scourge, he said, had nature given humanity than bodily pleasure, whose greedy desires rush recklessly and without restraint toward gratification.”
- ⁴⁰ “From it spring betrayals of country, overthrows of states, secret dealings with the enemy. There is no crime, no evil deed, to which the lust for pleasure does not impel men. Sexual outrages, adulteries, and every such disgrace are roused by no lure but pleasure. Since neither nature nor any god had given humanity anything more excellent than the mind, nothing was so hostile to that divine gift and endowment as pleasure.”
- ⁴¹ “For where desire rules there is no place for self-control, and in pleasure’s kingdom virtue cannot stand at all.
“To make this clearer, he asked his hearers to imagine someone stirred by the greatest bodily pleasure it was possible to experience. No one, he thought, would doubt that while enjoying it such a person could neither think anything through nor achieve anything by reasoning or reflection. Nothing, therefore,

was so hateful and so destructive as pleasure, since in its greatest and most prolonged form it extinguished all the mind's light. Nearchus of Tarentum, our guest-friend, who had remained loyal to the Roman people, said that he had learned from his elders that Archytas spoke these words to Gaius Pontius the Samnite, father of the man who defeated the consuls Spurius Postumius and Titus Veturius in the battle at Caudium. Plato of Athens was present at that conversation; I find that he came to Tarentum in the consulship of Lucius Camillus and Appius Claudius."

42 "Why tell you this? To show you that if reason and wisdom could not teach us to disdain pleasure, we should owe great thanks to old age for making us no longer desire what we ought not to desire. Pleasure obstructs judgment, is hostile to reason, dazzles, so to speak, the mind's eyes, and has nothing in common with virtue.

"It was with reluctance that I expelled Lucius Flamininus, brother of the valiant Titus Flamininus, from the Senate seven years after his consulship; but I thought his lust deserved the censor's mark. As consul in Gaul, he had been persuaded at a banquet by a prostitute to behead one of the prisoners condemned on a capital charge. He escaped punishment when his brother Titus was censor, immediately before me. But Flaccus and I could never approve such shameful, abandoned lust, which joined the disgrace of public command to private infamy."

Chapter 13



⁴³ “I have often heard older men, who in turn said they had heard it from old men when they were boys, tell how Gaius Fabricius used to marvel at something he had learned while serving as envoy to King Pyrrhus. Cineas the Thessalian had told him that at Athens there was a man who professed wisdom and declared that everything we do should be directed toward pleasure. On hearing this from Fabricius, Manius Curius and Tiberius Coruncanius used to wish that the Samnites and Pyrrhus himself could be persuaded of it, so that, once surrendered to pleasure, they might be defeated more easily. Manius Curius had lived alongside Publius Decius, who in his fourth consulship, five years before Curius’s, had devoted his life to death for the state. Fabricius and Coruncanius had known him too. From their own lives and from the deed of this Decius, they judged that there was indeed something noble and splendid by nature, something to be sought for its own sake, which the best men pursued in scorn and contempt of pleasure.”

⁴⁴ “Why, then, so much about pleasure? Because it is not a reproach to old age but its highest praise that it has no great longing for pleasures. It lacks feasts, heaped tables, and frequent cups. Then it also lacks drunkenness, indigestion, and sleeplessness. Yet if we must yield something to pleasure, since its blandishments are not easily resisted—Plato divinely calls pleasure ‘the bait of evils,’ evidently because men are caught by it like fish—old age, though it forgoes extrav-

agant feasts, may still delight in modest gatherings. As a boy I often saw Gaius Duilius, son of Marcus, returning from dinner in his old age. He was the first to defeat the Carthaginians at sea, and took pleasure in a waxen torch and a flute player accompanying him: privileges he had assumed, without precedent, as a private citizen. Such license did glory grant him.”

- 45 “But why speak of others? I shall return to myself. First, I have always had companions in a dining fellowship. These fellowships were established during my quaestorship, when the Idaean rites of the Great Mother were received. I used to dine with my companions, then, altogether moderately, though with a certain warmth of youth; as age advances, everything grows gentler day by day. I measured the pleasure of these gatherings not so much by bodily delights as by the company and conversation of friends. Our ancestors rightly called friends’ reclining together at a feast a ‘living together,’ since it involved a sharing of life. That is better than the Greeks, who call the same thing a ‘drinking together’ or an ‘eating together,’ as though what is least important in it were what they valued most.”

Chapter 14



⁴⁶ “For the pleasure of conversation I delight even in dinners that begin early, not only with men of my own age, of whom very few remain, but with men of your years and with you yourselves. I am deeply grateful to old age for increasing my appetite for conversation while taking away my appetite for food and drink. But if anyone still delights in those things—for I would not seem to have declared outright war on pleasure, which may perhaps have some natural limit—I do not see that old age is insensible even to these pleasures. I enjoy the presidency of the table instituted by our ancestors, the conversation begun over the cup, according to ancestral custom, by the guest at the head of the table, the little cups that sprinkle us like dew, as in Xenophon’s Symposium, coolness in summer, and in winter sunshine or a fire. I keep up these practices on my Sabine estate as well, gathering my neighbors daily for a dinner that we prolong far into the night with as varied a conversation as we can.”

⁴⁷ “But old men do not feel pleasure’s tickling so keenly. Granted; but neither do they feel the longing. What you do not desire cannot trouble you. Sophocles answered well when someone asked him, already well advanced in years, whether he still enjoyed sexual pleasures. ‘May the gods spare me!’ he said. ‘I have escaped from them as from a savage and raging master.’ For those who crave such things, deprivation may be hateful and distressing; for those who

have had their fill, it is sweeter to be without them than to enjoy them. Yet a man who feels no desire is not deprived: what I call sweeter, then, is the absence of desire.”

48 “And if life’s prime enjoys these pleasures more eagerly, first, as we have said, they are small things to enjoy; and second, old age is not wholly without them, even if it does not possess them in abundance. Just as a spectator in the front rows takes greater delight in Turpio Ambivius, yet the man in the back rows enjoys him too, so youth, viewing pleasures close at hand, may perhaps rejoice in them more, but old age too, watching from a distance, takes as much delight as it needs.”

49 “But how precious it is for the mind, having served its time in the campaigns of lust and ambition, rivalry and enmity, and every passion, to be with itself and, as they say, to live with itself! If it has, besides, some nourishment of study and learning, nothing is more delightful than a leisured old age. We used to see Gallus, a friend of your father’s, Scipio, absorbed in the task of measuring, one might say, heaven and earth. How often dawn overtook him at a diagram begun during the night, and night at one begun in the morning! How he delighted in predicting eclipses of the sun and moon long in advance!”

50 “And what of lighter studies, which still require a keen mind? How Naevius rejoiced in his Punic War, and Plautus in his *Truculentus* and *Pseudolus*! I even saw Livius as an old man. He had produced a play in the consulship of Cento and Tuditanus, six years before I was born, and lived on into my youth. “Why speak of Publius Licinius Crassus’s devotion to pontifical and civil law, or of the same studies in this Publius Scipio, who became chief pontiff only a few days ago? We have seen all the men I have named burning with enthusiasm for their studies in old age. And with what zeal we used to see Marcus Cethegus practicing oratory even when old—he whom Ennius rightly called ‘the marrow of Persuasion’! What pleasures of feasts, games, or prostitutes could compare with these? These are the pursuits of learning, which in prudent and well-edu-

cated men grow along with their years. So Solon's words are honorable when, as I said earlier, he declares in a little verse that he grows old learning much each day. Surely no pleasure of the mind can be greater."

Chapter 15



- 51 “I come now to the pleasures of farmers, in which I take an extraordinary delight. Old age never hinders them, and to my mind they come closest to the wise man’s life. For farmers deal with the earth, which never rejects their rule and never returns what it receives without interest, sometimes less, but usually a greater yield. Yet it is not the harvest alone that delights me, but the earth’s own power and nature. When its softened, cultivated lap receives the scattered seed, it first hides and covers it—hence the name ‘harrowing’ for the work that conceals it. Then, warmed by its breath and pressure, the earth opens the seed and draws from it the green growth. Supported by the fibers of its roots, this gradually rises, lifting itself upon a jointed stalk and enclosed in sheaths as though coming to maturity. Emerging from them, it brings forth grain arranged in the order of an ear, protected against the bites of little birds by a palisade of awns.”
- 52 “Why should I describe the origin, planting, and growth of vines? I cannot have my fill of delight in them—so you may understand the solace and pleasure of my old age. I pass over the very power of all that springs from the earth: from so tiny a fig seed, a grape pip, or the smallest seeds of other crops and plants, it produces such mighty trunks and branches. Do not hammer-shaped cuttings, slips, shoots, rooted plants, and layers fill anyone with wonder and delight? The vine, naturally inclined to fall, sinks to the ground unless supported; yet to raise

itself it grasps whatever it finds with tendrils like hands. As it creeps through many winding, wandering courses, the farmer's skill checks it with the pruning knife, lest it run wild with shoots and spread too extravagantly in every direction."

- 53 "So, at the beginning of spring, what is called the bud appears, as it were, at the joints of the shoots that have been left. From it the young grape emerges, growing with the earth's sap and the sun's warmth. At first it is very sharp to the taste; then it ripens and grows sweet. Clothed in vine leaves, it neither lacks a gentle warmth nor suffers the sun's excessive blaze. What could be more pleasing in its fruit or more beautiful to see?

"As I said before, it is not its usefulness alone that delights me, but its cultivation and its very nature: the rows of props, the joining of their tops by cross-bars, the tying and layering of vines, the pruning away of some shoots, as I mentioned, and the letting out of others.

"Why should I bring up irrigation, digging, and trenching the soil afresh, by which the earth becomes so much more fruitful? Why speak of the usefulness of manure? I have discussed it in the book I wrote on farming."

- 54 "The learned Hesiod, however, did not say a single word about it when he wrote on agriculture. But Homer, who I believe lived many centuries earlier, depicts Laertes easing his longing for his son by cultivating and manuring his land. Nor do crops, meadows, vineyards, and trees trained with vines alone make country life rich: there are gardens and orchards too, pasturing flocks, swarms of bees, and flowers of every kind. Not only planting gives pleasure, but grafting as well; agriculture has discovered nothing more ingenious."

Chapter 16



55 “I could pursue very many of the pleasures of country life, but I feel that even what I have said has been rather long. You will forgive me: my love of farming carried me away, and old age is naturally somewhat talkative, lest I seem to defend it against every fault. In this way of life Manius Curius passed his last years, after triumphing over the Samnites, the Sabines, and Pyrrhus. When I look upon his villa—it is not far from mine—I can never sufficiently admire either the man’s own restraint or the discipline of those times.”

56 “When the Samnites brought Curius a great weight of gold as he sat by his hearth, he rejected them. He said he thought it glorious not to possess gold but to rule those who possessed it. Could such greatness of soul fail to make old age delightful?

“But I return to farmers, so as not to stray from myself. Senators—that is, elders—lived on their farms in those days. Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was plowing when he was told he had been appointed dictator; at this dictator’s command, his master of horse, Gaius Servilius Ahala, forestalled and killed Spurius Maelius as he sought kingship. Curius and the other elders were summoned from their villas to the Senate; hence those who summoned them were called ‘travelers.’ Was the old age of these men, who delighted in tilling the soil, miserable? In my judgment perhaps none could be happier: not only for its service, since agriculture benefits the whole human race, but also for the pleasure I

have described, and the fullness and abundance of everything needed to sustain human life and even to worship the gods. Since some people miss these things, let us now be reconciled with pleasure. A good and diligent master's wine cellar, oil store, and larder are always full. The whole farm is rich, abounding in pork, kid, lamb, poultry, milk, cheese, and honey. Farmers themselves call the garden their second supply of bacon. Fowling and hunting, even in their spare time, add further relish to these things."

- 57 "Why say more of green meadows, rows of trees, or the beauty of vineyards and olive groves? I shall cut it short. Nothing can surpass a well-tended farm in richness of use or beauty of appearance; and old age, far from hindering its enjoyment, invites and draws us toward it. Where else can people of those years warm themselves better in the sun or by the fire, or find more wholesome coolness in shade or water? Let the young, then, keep their weapons,"
- 58 "their horses, their spears, their club and ball, their swimming and running. Out of all their games let them leave us old men knucklebones and dice; or let them do as they please even about those, since old age can be happy without them."

Chapter 17



- 59 “Xenophon’s books are most useful on many subjects. Read them attentively, I beg you, as indeed you do. How richly he praises agriculture in the book on managing an estate entitled *Oeconomicus*! To show you that he thought nothing so kingly as devotion to cultivating the soil, Socrates in that book tells Critobulus about Cyrus the Younger, king of the Persians, a man outstanding in talent and the glory of his command. When Lysander the Spartan, a man of the highest excellence, came to him at Sardis bringing gifts from the allies, Cyrus treated him with courtesy and kindness in every respect and showed him an enclosed garden carefully planted. Lysander admired the trees’ height, the straight rows arranged in a pattern of fives, the soil, cultivated and clean, and the sweet scents wafting from the flowers. He said he admired not merely the care but the ingenuity of the man who had measured and laid it all out. Cyrus answered, ‘But I measured all this myself. The rows are mine, the plan is mine; many of these trees were planted by my own hand.’ Then Lysander, looking at his purple robe, his splendid appearance, and his Persian adornment of much gold and many jewels, said, ‘They rightly call you happy, Cyrus, since fortune has joined herself to your virtue!’”
- 60 “Old men too may enjoy this good fortune. Age does not prevent us from holding fast to our other interests, and above all to farming, to the very end of our years. We are told that Marcus Valerius Corvinus lived to a hundred, spend-

ing his later life on his farms and cultivating them. Forty-six years separated his first and sixth consulships. Thus his career in office lasted as long as the span our ancestors reckoned before old age began. His final years were happier than his middle ones in having more authority and less labor.”

61 “For authority is the crown of old age. How great it was in Lucius Caecilius Metellus, and in Aulus Atilius Calatinus! Of the latter the epitaph says:

Many peoples agree that this one man

Was the foremost citizen of his nation.

You know the whole poem engraved on his tomb. Rightly, then, did a man carry weight when everyone’s testimony agreed in his praise. What a man we saw not long ago in Publius Crassus, the chief pontiff, and later in Marcus Lepidus, who held the same priesthood! Why speak of Paulus or Africanus, or, as before, of Maximus? Their authority resided not merely in their opinion, but in their very nod. Old age, especially honored old age, possesses an authority worth more than all the pleasures of youth.”

Chapter 18



- ⁶² “But throughout this discourse remember that I praise the old age built upon foundations laid in youth. Hence follows what I once said to great general approval: miserable is the old age that must defend itself by words. Neither gray hair nor wrinkles can suddenly seize authority; an earlier life honorably lived gathers authority as its final fruit.”
- ⁶³ “For those very attentions that seem slight and commonplace are honorable: to be greeted, sought out, given the way, risen for, escorted out and home, and consulted. Among us and in other states, the better their customs, the more scrupulously these observances are maintained. Lysander the Spartan, whom I mentioned just now, is said to have declared that Sparta was the most honorable home for old age: nowhere was so much accorded to years, nowhere was old age more honored. Indeed, it is recorded that when an elderly man entered the theater at Athens during the games, none of his fellow citizens in the great gathering offered him a seat. But when he approached the Spartans, who as envoys sat in a designated place, they are all said to have risen together and invited the old man to sit;”
- ⁶⁴ “and when the whole assembly gave them prolonged applause, one of them said that the Athenians knew what was right but did not wish to do it.

“Our college has many excellent customs, but foremost for our purpose is this: the eldest takes precedence in giving his opinion. Older augurs rank not only before those who surpass them in honors, but even before men holding supreme command. What bodily pleasures can compare with the rewards of authority? Those who have enjoyed them nobly seem to me to have played the drama of life to its close, not collapsed in its final act like unpracticed actors.”

- 65 “But old men are peevish, anxious, irritable, and difficult. If we look for it, they are greedy too. These, however, are faults of character, not of old age. Still, peevishness and the other faults I named have some excuse—not a just one, certainly, but one that may seem plausible. Old men think themselves slighted, despised, and mocked; besides, every affront is painful to a frail body. Yet good character and cultivation soften all these things. We may see this in life and on the stage in the brothers in *The Brothers*. How harsh one is, and how kindly the other! So it is: not every nature sours with age, any more than every wine. I approve of sternness in old age, but, as with other things, in moderation; bitterness I cannot approve at all. As for an old man’s greed, I cannot understand what it means.”

Chapter 19



⁶⁶ “For what could be more absurd than to seek more provisions for a journey as less of the road remains?

“The fourth reason remains: the approach of death, which seems above all to distress and trouble men of our age, and which certainly cannot be far from old age. Miserable indeed is the old man who has not learned in so long a life that death should be held of no account! Either we should disregard it altogether, if it wholly extinguishes the soul, or even desire it, if it leads the soul somewhere it will exist forever. There can certainly be no third possibility.”

⁶⁷ “Why, then, should I fear, if after death I shall either not be unhappy or shall even be happy? Besides, who is so foolish, however young, as to be sure of living until evening? Indeed, the young face many more chances of death than we do. They fall ill more readily, suffer more severely, and undergo harsher treatment. So few reach old age. Were it otherwise, life would be lived better and more wisely. For understanding, reason, and judgment belong to the old; had there been no old men, there would have been no states at all.

“But I return to death’s approach. How can this be a charge against old age when you see it shares that condition with youth?”

- ⁶⁸ “I learned through the loss of my excellent son, and you, Scipio, through your brothers, from whom the highest distinction was expected, that death is common to every age. But the young man hopes to live long, while the old man cannot hope for the same. It is a foolish hope: what could be more foolish than taking uncertainty for certainty and falsehood for truth? But the old man has nothing even to hope for. Then he is in a better position than the young man, for he has already obtained what the other hopes for. The one wishes to live long; the other has lived long.”
- ⁶⁹ “And yet, good gods, what is ‘long’ in human life? Grant us the furthest limit: let us expect the lifespan of the king of Tartessus—for I read that there was a certain Arganthonius at Gades who reigned eighty years and lived a hundred and twenty. Still, nothing seems lasting to me that has an end. When that end arrives, all that has passed has flowed away; only what you have gained through virtue and right conduct remains. Hours give way to days, months, and years; time past never returns, and what will follow cannot be known. Each should be content with whatever time is given him to live.”
- ⁷⁰ “An actor need not play the whole drama to win approval, provided he pleases in whatever act he appears; nor need the wise reach the final ‘Applaud!’ A brief span of years is long enough to live well and honorably. If it extends further, we should no more grieve than farmers grieve when spring’s sweetness has passed and summer and autumn arrive. For spring, like youth, promises and reveals the fruit to come; the other seasons are suited to reaping and gathering it.”
- ⁷¹ “The fruit of old age, as I have often said, is the memory and possession of good things won before. Everything that happens according to nature must be counted a good; and what is more according to nature than that the old should die? When the same befalls the young, nature resists and rebels. So young people seem to me to die as a flame is overwhelmed by a flood of water; old people, as a fire goes out of itself, with no force applied, when its fuel is spent. And just as unripe fruit is scarcely torn from the tree, while ripe and mellow fruit falls, so

force takes life from the young, ripeness from the old. That ripeness is so sweet to me that the nearer I draw to death, the more I seem to sight land, and at last to be approaching harbor after a long voyage.”

Chapter 20



72 “Old age has no fixed boundary. We live rightly in it so long as we can perform and uphold our duties and hold death of no account. This makes old age even more spirited and courageous than youth. Such was the meaning of Solon’s answer to the tyrant Pisistratus. Asked what gave him the confidence to oppose him so boldly, he is said to have answered, ‘My old age.’ But the best end of life comes when, with mind intact and senses clear, nature herself dissolves the work she put together. Just as the builder most readily dismantles a ship or a house, so the nature that joined a human being together most fittingly takes him apart. A new bond is always hard to break, an old one easy. “It follows that the old should neither clutch greedily at the brief remainder of life nor abandon it without cause;”

73 “and Pythagoras forbids us to leave life’s guard post and station without orders from our commander, that is, from God. There is an elegy of Solon the wise in which he says he does not wish his death to pass without his friends’ grief and lamentation. He wishes, I suppose, to be dear to his own people. Yet perhaps Ennius speaks better:

Let no one honor me with tears, or mourn my funeral with weeping.
He thinks a death followed by immortality should not be mourned.”

- 74 “The act of dying may involve some sensation, but only for a little while, especially for an old man. After death sensation is either desirable or nonexistent. But from youth onward we should have reflected on this, so that death does not concern us. Without that reflection no one can have a tranquil mind. For die we certainly must, perhaps this very day. How can anyone stand firm in spirit while fearing death, which hangs over him every hour?”
- 75 “There seems little need for a long discussion of it when I remember—not Lucius Brutus, killed while freeing his country; not the two Decii, who spurred their horses toward a death freely chosen; not Marcus Atilius, who went to torture to keep the pledge he had given an enemy; not the two Scipios, who wished to block the Carthaginians’ path even with their own bodies; not your grandfather Lucius Paulus, who paid with his death for his colleague’s rashness in the disgrace at Cannae; not Marcus Marcellus, whose death even the cruelest enemy would not allow to go without the honor of burial—but our legions, which, as I wrote in my *Origins*, often went eagerly and proudly into places from which they thought they would never return. Shall learned old men dread what young men, not merely uneducated but country-bred, hold in contempt?”
- 76 “Altogether, as I see it, satiety with every pursuit brings satiety with life. Childhood has its own interests: do young men miss them? Early youth has its interests: does the settled age we call middle life long for them? That age too has interests, and even these are not sought in old age. There are certain final interests of old age itself. Just as the interests of earlier years die away, so those of old age die away as well. When that happens, life’s fullness brings the ripe time for death.”

Chapter 21



⁷⁷ “I see no reason not to venture to tell you what I myself think about death, since I seem to understand it better the nearer I stand to it. I believe that your fathers, Publius Scipio and Gaius Laelius, those most distinguished men and my dearest friends, are alive—and living the only life worthy of the name. While we are enclosed in this framework of the body, we perform a compulsory service and a heavy labor. The soul is heavenly, cast down from its highest dwelling and, as it were, submerged in the earth, a place alien to its divine nature and eternity. But I believe the immortal gods scattered souls into human bodies so that there might be guardians of the earth who, contemplating the order of the heavens, would imitate it in the measured constancy of their lives. Not reason and argument alone moved me to this belief, but also the eminence and authority of the greatest philosophers.”

⁷⁸ “I used to hear that Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, almost our neighbors, once called the philosophers of Italy, never doubted that our souls were drawn from the universal divine mind. I was also taught what Socrates, whom Apollo’s oracle judged the wisest of all, said on his last day about the immortality of souls. Why say more? This is my conviction and belief: since souls have such swiftness, such memory of the past and foresight of the future, so many arts, such learning, and so many discoveries, the nature that contains all these cannot be mortal. Since the soul is always in motion and its motion has no

beginning, because it moves itself, neither will its motion have an end, because it will never desert itself. And since the soul's nature is simple, with no mixture unlike and different from itself, it cannot be divided; if it cannot be divided, it cannot perish. A strong argument that people know much before their birth is that even as children, when learning difficult arts, they grasp countless things so quickly that they seem not to be receiving them for the first time, but remembering and recalling them. These, in substance, are Plato's arguments."

Chapter 22



- ⁷⁹ “In Xenophon, Cyrus the Elder says on his deathbed: ‘Do not suppose, my dearest sons, that when I leave you I shall be nowhere, or shall cease to exist. Even while I was with you, you did not see my soul, but understood from my actions that it was in this body. Believe, then, that it still exists, even though you see nothing of it.’”
- ⁸⁰ “Nor would the honors paid to famous men endure after their deaths if their souls did nothing to make us retain their memory longer. I could never be persuaded that souls live while they are within mortal bodies, but die when they leave them; nor that the soul becomes unwise when it escapes an unwise body. Rather, when freed from all mixture with the body it begins to exist pure and whole, then it becomes wise. Moreover, when a human being’s nature is dissolved by death, it is plain where each of the other elements goes, for all return to their source. The soul alone is invisible both when present and when departed. And you see that nothing resembles death so closely as sleep.”

Chapter 23



- ⁸¹ “Yet the souls of sleepers reveal their divinity most clearly: when relaxed and free, they foresee much of the future. This shows what they will be like when they have wholly released themselves from the body’s bonds. So if these things are true,’ he said, ‘honor me as a god. But if the soul is to perish along with the body, you will nevertheless, in reverence for the gods who guard and govern all this beauty, keep my memory devoutly and inviolate.’ Such were Cyrus’s words as he died. Let us now, if you please, consider our own case.”
- ⁸² “No one will ever persuade me, Scipio, that your father Paulus, or your two grandfathers Paulus and Africanus, or Africanus’s father or uncle, or the many outstanding men whom there is no need to list, would have attempted such great deeds to live in posterity’s memory unless they saw in their minds that posterity concerned them too. Do you imagine—to boast of myself a little, as old men do—that I should have undertaken such labors by day and night, at home and in war, if my glory were to end within the same bounds as my life? Would it not have been far better to pass my years in leisure and peace, without labor or struggle? Yet somehow my soul, rising up, always looked toward posterity as though only when it had left this life would it truly begin to live. Were it not true that souls are immortal, the soul of every excellent man would not strive above all for immortal glory. Again, the wisest man dies with the most tranquil mind,”

83 “and the most foolish with the most troubled. Does it not seem to you that the soul whose sight is clearer and longer sees that it is setting out for something better, while the soul of duller vision does not?

“For my part, I am carried away by eagerness to see your fathers, whom I honored and loved. Nor do I long to meet only those I knew, but also those of whom I heard and read and wrote myself. Once I set out for that place, nothing would readily draw me back, or boil me young again like Pelias. And if some god offered to turn me from my present age into a child again, wailing in a cradle, I would firmly refuse. Having run the course, I should not wish to be called back from the finish to the starting gates.”

84 “For what advantage does life offer? What labor does it not offer instead? Yet grant its advantages: it certainly has either satiety or a limit. I have no wish to lament life, as many, and learned men too, have often done. Nor do I regret having lived, since I have lived in such a way that I do not think I was born in vain. I leave life as I would leave a lodging, not a home: nature has given us an inn to stay in, not a dwelling to inhabit.

“What a glorious day, when I shall set out for that divine assembly and company of souls, and leave this crowd and confusion behind! I shall go not only to the men of whom I spoke before, but to my Cato, than whom no better man was ever born, none more eminent in devotion to duty. I cremated his body, though it should have been his part to cremate mine; but his soul, not abandoning me but looking back toward me, surely departed to the place where it saw that I too must come. I seemed to bear that loss bravely, not because I bore it calmly, but because I consoled myself with the thought that our parting and separation would not be long.”

85 “These things, Scipio, make old age light for me—the very thing you said you and Laelius so often wondered at. It is not merely untroublesome, but delightful. And if I am mistaken in believing that human souls are immortal, I am gladly mistaken; I do not wish, while I live, to have this delightful error torn from me. If, on the other hand, after death I feel nothing, as some petty philosophers maintain, I need not fear that dead philosophers will laugh at my

mistake. Even if we are not destined for immortality, it is still desirable for a person to be extinguished at the proper time. Nature sets a limit to living, as to everything else. Old age is the completion of life's drama; we should escape its weariness, especially when fullness has joined it.

"This is what I had to say about old age. May you reach it, and through your own experience confirm what you have heard from me!"