



## IN XANADU I HAD SUCH FRIENDS: TEACHING THE LITERATURE OF ANTICIPATION

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*Donald E. Morse*

*A human being could certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning.*

—KARL JUNG, *The Stages of Life*

*Preparatory to Anything Else[. . .]*

JAMES JOYCE, *Ulysses*

Teaching the poetry, drama, film, and fiction of old age presents a unique set of difficulties and opportunities subsumed in the phrase “teaching the literature of anticipation.” Because 99% of our students will be young, whatever insights, metaphors, images that may be gleaned from literature portraying the old must remain truly the theoretical for them and often must appear almost completely irrelevant to their lives. Only after they, too, have paid their dues and spent time in what Lionel Trilling liked to call “the strenuous business of living” will their persons catch up with their reading. In the meantime, teaching such works to such students poses difficulties and may be fraught with frustration. For example, back in 1987 I was teaching a class of graduate students at the col-

lege in Eger—then named Ho Chi Minh Teacher Training College rather than the current far more elegant denomination, Esterházy Karoly College. As part of the seminar, I went with the students to see a local production of Eugene O’Neill’s late and posthumously published play, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1940). The play is one of a series of late and posthumously published plays, since O’Neill did not want any one in his family to have to experience the content of any of these plays. In *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* and the other late plays, he explores his origins in his family and the forces that eventually made him into a playwright. The Irish writer, Tom MacIntyre defines a writer as “someone who has been hurt by life and lived to sing about it.” O’Neill’s hurt, that he did live to sing about in his old age, lay embedded in his family and so he did not want any of them to have to experience it as he had in writing the plays.

I found the director’s Hungarian perspective on American life, as reflected in this Eger production of *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, fascinating and the production itself appeared to me excellent. Most of the students had been out of college for about ten or so years. Although they had seen something of the world, most of them had not yet encountered in their lives that urgent need to understand origins and family so characteristic of the old and which had given impetus to the play. Clearly, O’Neill could only have written this play in his latter years as he attempted to understand his personal and family history. I hoped the production would stimulate discussion of O’Neill’s attempt to plumb the depths of his particular family hell as an activity typical of the old. When I met the class the next morning I asked innocuously, I thought, how they liked the performance. One person quickly put Mr. O’Neill and me firmly in our places by pointing out important cultural and social differences between Hungary and the United States not immediately related to age. In no uncertain terms, she told the class and me—as I am sure she would have told Eugene O’Neill himself had he been present—“You have to understand, Mr. Morse, that in Hungary all

of us are far too busy working at several jobs to spend so much time drinking night after night.” The remainder of the class hour went down hill from there.

In order to avoid such misunderstandings this time, I would like to frame my argument using the works of James Joyce.

## *The Life Cycle and James Joyce*

In his life work, Joyce ambitiously attempted to capture the whole of the life cycle. He began with the child’s earliest memories in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*—“Once upon a time and a very good time it was”—and the vicissitudes of childhood itself in much of that novel along with the early stories in *Dubliners*. He analyzed adolescence, coming of age, and early adulthood in the middle stories in *Dubliners* as well as in the bulk of *Portrait* then depicted those memorable middle mature years of Leopold and Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*. Finally, he pictured the close of life in “*The Dead*” and in the end and rebeginning of *Finnegan’s Wake*.

We heard *Finnegan’s Wake* described as the preeminent post-modern, post-structuralism work that destabilizes the reader and that is surely true. But as the voice of the *Wake* admonishes “Let us leave theories there and return to here’s here” . My own reading of *Finnegan’s Wake* has a quite different focus.<sup>1</sup> (Both are equally valid.) The challenge the book presents lies, I believe, not in its linguistic puzzles that do indeed destabilize the reader, but in its vision of the totality of all life and the whole life cycle. Life in *Finnegan’s Wake* imagined as one story “ There extend by now one thousand and one stories, all told, of the same”. No wonder it is “Hush! Caution! Echoland!. This single story is the life cycle in which all of us are participating. Birth, maturation, fertility, decline, and death and then the cycle repeats again and again like Vico’s road “to end where it began.” Hence the heart-wrenching sadness mixed with joy in the ending of

*Finnegan's Wake*. "Soft morning, city! Lsp! I am leafy speafing". The speaker is female. She is all women—she is woman at the end of life acquiescing to approaching death. "[. . .] There'll be others but non so for me," she says. She must leave, but others will continue—they always do. So she turns and looks one last time at her husband, son, and children: "Yes, you're changing, sonhusband, and you're turning, I can feel you, for a daughterwife from the hills again." The young always replace the old. We who began the day as sons and lovers, find ourselves becoming fathers and husbands and then old and older.

[. . .] And she is coming. Swimming in my hindmost. Divetaking on me tail. Just a whisk brisk sly spry spink spank sprint of a thing theresomere, sultering. Saltarella come to her own. I pity your oldself I was used to. Now a younger's there. Try not to part! Be happy, dear ones! May I be wrong. For she'll be sweet to you as I was sweet when I cam down out of me mother [. . .] End here. Us then. Finn again! Take. Bussofilhee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. the keys to. Give! A way a lone a last a long the

—and so the life cycle of birth, growth, decline, and death begins again but with different players.

## ***"Very Good Poets" and "Great Poets"***

W. H. Auden once differentiated between what he called a "very good poet" and a "great poet." While I do not like his terms, I find his distinction not only valid and important, but also eminently useful. It was Auden's opinion that what distinguishes the great poet from the very good poet, is that the great poet has a mature period—one that reflects the concerns and discoveries of old age. John Milton is a preeminent example whose late great period may exceed most, if not all,

other poets who have written in English—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Sampson Agonistes*. Judged by these criteria. W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens are also prominent examples of Auden’s “great poets” while Sylvia Plath and John Keats are examples of his “very good poets.” This is not to take anything away from these and other truly fine writers who die young. Thoreau, Keats, and Plath wrote important, undeniably significant and often great works but their focus differs from that of Auden’s “great” poet who maturely reflects on old age writing at and about the end of life. Contrasting Plath’s “Ariel” and Stevens’ “the Planet on the Table” may help clarify the distinction. Plath’s extraordinary poem captures the exhilaration of a wild ride on horseback where she feels “sister to / The brown arc / Of the neck I cannot catch.” Her words reflect an extremely energized, highly accomplished poet aware of mortality. The poem concludes:

And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

The speaker identified with the ephemeral dew evaporating in the heat of the sun and sees herself as the unerring arrow flying to perish in the “cauldron of morning.” Death appears close at hand. Yet for all that, this is the poem of a young person indulging in heroics bravely facing her chosen end.

In contrast, I think of the persona in Stevens’ poem “The Planet on the Table” as also heroic but not, like the speaker in “Ariel,” because he appears larger than life as he hurls himself “into the red eye” but because with equanimity and composure he accepts the fast-approaching inevitable end. Like Thoreau, he “regrets nothing” and is proud of how he spent

his life. The portrait emphasizes his integrity yet neither boasts nor proclaims.

**The Planet on the Table**

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.  
They were of a remembered time  
Or of something seen that he liked.

.....

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were part.

The poem is a quiet summing up, an evaluation of a lifetime of work. Values are affirmed. The end accepted. The modest accomplishment celebrated. What is distinctive and most valuable about the poem lies not in its language as a thing in itself but in its language as it reflects a person at the end of life. Yes, the language is distinctive. We recognize immediately that probably no other twentieth-century poet writing in English would or could use such vocabulary but such or similar language may be found throughout Stevens's work. No, the power, for instance, of "It was not important that they survive" derives from a reader's knowledge that this is one in a series of last poems Stevens wrote and this is his final assessment of his life's work. Here, eschewing despair he continues affirming the integrity of his work. There is a kind of wisdom in these last poems—as there is in Yeats's last poems—a quality found as rarely in literature as it is in life.

"Despair," "integrity," and "wisdom"—these are crucial qualities shared by all such "great" poets in their mature period. They also are the terms the developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson employed to help define what he saw as "The dominant antithesis in old age [. . .] *integrity vs. despair*": Erikson spent his lifetime studying the life cycle writing a series of

illuminating books on it beginning with *Childhood and Society* (1950) through *Vital Involvement with Old Age* (1986). But it is the series of books that he wrote at the end of his life, especially *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982) about the end of human life that I wish to highlight. What Erickson first postulates in his writing, but then experiences in his own life, is that dominant antithesis in old age, that of “*integrity vs. despair.*”

Integrity, however, seems to convey a peculiar demand—as does the specific strength that we postulate as maturing from this last antithesis—namely, *wisdom*. This we have described as a kind of “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself”[. . .]. [. . .] wisdom rests in the capacity to see, look, and remember, as well as to listen, hear, and remember.

One of the many values of imaginative literature must surely be to provide us with examples of physical, emotional, and mental states we have not yet experienced and some that we may never experience. Through imaginative literature written by writers in their latter years, readers experience vicariously the central preoccupation of old age that Erickson succinctly describes as “a meaningful interplay between beginning and end as well as some finite sense of summary and, possibly, a more active anticipation of dying”. Yeats is a prominent example. In the last months of his life he devoted considerable time and much of his waning energy to arranging his poems so that they would culminate in exactly such “interplay between beginning and end.” Unfortunately, when his collected poems did appear after his death, the book did not follow his arrangement. For decades, Yeats’s *Collected Poems* as well as all of the volumes of selected poems based upon it ended with his histrionic epitaph:

*Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!*

How many of us gladly, if dutifully, made the pilgrimage to that Sligo graveyard “[u]nder bare Ben Bulben’s head [. . .]

[where] Yeats is laid?”. All the while assuming that those words cut “by his command” were not only the ones he wished incised on the limestone grave marker which they were, but also the very ones with which he wished his work to conclude. How wrong we were.

The conclusion Yeats planned for his collected poems was quite different. He intended “Under Ben Bulben” not as the conclusion but as the *introduction* to the final section of his *Collected Poems*. Years later, Richard Finneran reordered the poems as Yeats has planned. He also added a clarifying title “[*Last Poems* (1938–1939)]” to that final grouping of poems. In this new, actually old original, ordering, the last poem with which the book ends “Politics,” is exactly as Yeats wanted. The immediate as well as the over-all effect in this apparently simple change is striking. Unlike “Under Ben Bulben,” “Politics” prominently employs humor and irony to achieve the distancing perspective in verse that Yeats had acquired through life. The poem is prefaced by an epigraph from Thomas Mann.

### Politics

*In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning  
in political terms.*

—THOMAS MANN

How can I, that girl standing there,  
My attention fix  
On Roman or on Russian  
Or on Spanish politics?  
Yet here’s a traveled man that knows  
What he talks about,  
An there’s a politician  
That has read and thought,  
And maybe what they say is true  
Of war and war’s alarms,  
But O that I were young again  
And held her in my arms



“Politics,” for me, clearly illustrates Erikson’s “[. . .] dominant antithesis in old age [. . .] *integrity vs. despair*”. That last longing for physical contact could have led the poet into despair but instead yields integrity resulting from his wisdom in recognizing both the reality of his desire and the impossibility of its attainment given his physical debility. The longing to hold the girl is as real for the speaker as his inability to do so. Auden once remarked that if one is honest, one never regrets a physical pleasure. “But O that I were young again” is the cry of one who affirms rather than denies his desire while at the same time recognizing that both he and his desire now must occupy the “country for old men.” This response represents an informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” to quote Erikson again.

Mann’s famous dictum “In our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms” appears pompous, if not pretentious, viewed by the light of the poem’s suggestion that from Roman times till now politics remains but our collective public enterprise, while our destiny as individual humans lies in the life cycle itself. Written on the eve of the European conflagration, Yeats’s poem incorporates a kind of “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” and thereby qualifies as wisdom according to Erikson’s definition.

## *At Xanadu*

But such an informed and detached concern with life itself may be difficult not merely to attain, but also to maintain in the face of the inevitable loss that life must sustain. Good byes and farewells of all kinds dominate Kurt Vonnegut’s “last” novel, *Timequake* (1997). Yet the novel never loses its “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself.” The book’s “epilogue” focuses on the seriousness of having to leave life and the terrible reality of losing loved ones. All of which runs parallel to the reader’s awakened

knowledge that soon this author, too, will depart. Kilgore Trout—Vonnegut’s inspired hack, failed science fiction writer-persona—returns in *Timequake* to lead the chorus of good-byes and Vonnegut himself appears as a character to thank his family, readers, and friends for their roles in his life and work.

*Timequake*, published in 1997 when Vonnegut was seventy-five, gathers together the various strands of his life. This gathering becomes exemplified by the appearance in this fiction of those to whom he has dedicated his novels, critics of his fiction, even characters drawn from his novels, people he has known, family members, the unknown and the famous from Indianapolis and New York. They all appear at a future, 2001 amateur play production cast party, a clambake on the beach at the writers’ retreat, called Xanadu after Vonnegut’s favorite poem. “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree.”<sup>2</sup> At this retreat, the living, the fictional, and the dead receive equal attention. As the novel progresses, however, the dead grow in numbers and importance. They begin to crowd out the living—Vonnegut’s powerful metaphor for the experience of growing old while family members, friends, and acquaintances die. Those we love leave this life, while we, the living, must continue on without them. Vonnegut’s sister, Alice, for instance, died almost forty years before he writes *Timequake*, yet she is very much present in the work. His older brother, Barnard, palpably present throughout the novel, is diagnosed with cancer as Vonnegut writes the last chapters, then dies a few days before he writes the epilogue.<sup>3</sup> In memorializing his dead fellow writers along with his dead brother, sister, and ex-wife he accepts the pain of loss in order to overcome it.

Like Joyce, Yeats, and Steven, Vonnegut between age sixty-three and seventy-five created a substantial body of work that reflects the cares and concerns of people in the last phase of their lives. *Galápagos* (1985), like Yeats’s late “Crazy Jane” poems, employs an improbable persona using an inventive comic style to discuss the future, if any, of the human race. *Bluebeard* (1987) focuses on a person’s last weeks as he con-

fronts his past and present until finally able to affirm all of life including mistakes and errors—much like Yeats’s “Circus Animals Desertion.” Both are joy-filled books—a quality that also characterizes Yeats’s *Last Poems*. Like those final poems, *Bluebeard* also reflects a late-life acceptance of what cannot be changed—part of the inevitable process of preparing to leave this life. The horror, waste, omnipresent suffering, and death, so palpable in Vonnegut’s earlier novels, recede into the background of *Bluebeard* leaving life and the living in the foreground. This acceptance of life in all its fragility and mutability permeates *Timequake* as well, but the distinction between the two books inheres in *Bluebeard* remaining clearly fiction, a novel, while *Timequake* mixes fiction mostly by and about Kilgore Trout with Vonnegut’s autobiography thus bringing art and life together.

Moreover, the losses that occur in *Timequake* are in no sense preventable—they happen simply from time taking its toll<sup>4</sup> and they are personal because more deeply rooted in Vonnegut’s vocation. “I don’t have survivor’s syndrome from the Second World War, but I sure do from the writing profession,” he quipped in an interview after publishing *Timequake*. As evidence, he cites in *Timequake* the names of recently dead writers, such as Jerzy Kosinski, Nelson Algren, Isaac Asimov, Borden Deal, Tennessee Williams, and so forth— all appear with considerable regularity. Vonnegut couples this sense of loss to a sense of his own considerable writing career coming to an end. This creates, in turn, a sense of “meaningful interplay between beginning and end as well as some finite sense of summary and, possibly, a more active anticipation of dying” (Erickson).

## *Envoy*

Like Vonnegut—and perhaps like each of you—I concluded years ago that the most fundamental experience life offers us and, therefore, the one most prevalent in literature is that of

loss. Life is the process of letting go not only of that which we no longer need or require but also of that which we love and desire. Poetry and fiction may help illuminate that inevitable process. In the last weeks of his presidency, for instance, President Bill Clinton closed his last speech in Ireland at the town of Dundalk on the Irish-Northern Irish border with the concluding lines of W. B. Yeats's poem, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited."

Think where man's glory most begins and ends,  
And say my glory was I had such friends.

President Clinton appropriately quoted those lines in the Dundalk town square because he was about to leave the presidency of the United States. That high office had brought him to Ireland and led him to play a crucial role in the Northern Ireland peace progress for the last six years or more. "My glory was I had such friends" in President Clinton's speech referred to his "friends" on the international stage, especially those key players in the Northern Ireland Peace Process.<sup>5</sup> When, however, we place those lines back into the context of Yeats's poem and then place the poem within the context of the whole of the *Collected Poetry*, their emphasis shifts away from leaving the stage of world politics to leaving life itself. This memorable couplet—"Think where man's glory most begins and ends, / And say my glory was I had such friends"—occurs after the speaker of "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" reviews "the images of thirty years" of those who played a part with him in Ireland's stormy political and cultural life in the first decades of the twentieth century. All those he calls to mind are now dead including Roger Casement, Arthur Griffith, and Kevin O'Higgins, Lady Gregory, Hugh Lane, and John Millington Synge. By deliberately using the past tense—"My glory was I *had* such friends"—Yeats generously celebrates the past accomplishments of others while acknowledging that he himself has not years but rather only months or weeks to live.

At the end of the last century, Erik Erikson contended that "wisdom rests in the capacity to see, look, and remember,

as well as to listen, hear, and remember”. But as Karl Jung asked at the beginning of the twentieth century “Where is the wisdom of our old people, where are their precious secrets and visions?” . One answer surely must be that their wisdom maturing from “the dominant antithesis in old age [of] *integrity* vs. *despair*” is to be found in the “great poets” and, indeed, in all those great writers who have a mature period. In teaching this Literature of Anticipation—these often-neglected works—we may also impart wisdom to our young students as they, too, encounter what Jung so aptly called the “precious secrets and [. . .] visions” of our old people.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I think of *Finnegan’s Wake* as the work of this new twenty-first century that through the happy accident of Joyce’s genius fell into the first half of the twentieth century. Small wonder it has taken us decades to learn to read it. For further discussion see Morse, “All Your Life Again.”

<sup>2</sup>Vonnegut has said that this is his favorite poem but he also adds that he believes the first two lines may be the most perfect poetry ever written in English. Clearly he wishes the person from Porlock had dropped by a few minutes earlier.

<sup>3</sup>“Beyond the poignancy of the farewells in *Timequake*, nuggets endure, not least the generosity with which Vonnegut memorializes his late ex-wife, or recalls his tight-lipped sister’s passion for the unfashionable form of humor, the pratfall [. . .]” .

<sup>4</sup>Unlike earlier parodies in *Breakfast of Champions*, *Timequake* seriously reflects upon events in Vonnegut’s life and fiction writing.

<sup>5</sup>In contrast, a few decades ago George McGovern, then a candidate for the presidency of the United States, also borrowed Yeats’s lines to close his speech accepting the Democratic Party’s nomination for the presidency. But his was a most unfortunate misappropriation. McGovern meant the couplet to apply to his loyal campaign workers and supporters who had helped to bring about his nomination. “Think where man’s glory most begins and ends / And say my glory was I had such friends.” But the words struck a discordant note since such speeches should be the beginning of a campaign for the presidency rather than as here a signal of its end. “My glory was I had such friends” proved all too apt as McGovern’s campaign ended almost before it began.