The House of Death
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Death in Earnest: “Tichborne’s Elegy”

It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature; or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seems progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine.

BROWNE, Urne Burial

Over a long period the philosophical and religious arguments on the subject of death had been worked out with an irresistible clarity. By the end of the sixteenth century these arguments had been supplemented by a body of bold alternative arguments and briefly flourishing variations—all programmed for exemplary self-destruction. For whatever the length of rope to be played out by subversive counterarguments, the rope was real, fixed, unfrayable, and always ready for abrupt recall. Many of the authoritative ways of understanding death could be reduced to rule and aphorism illustrated by some reliably familiar pregnant images. These conditions did not, of course, eliminate all free room and energy for conflict. In taking up the task of presenting wrong arguments, conscientious writers, well motivated but inspired by the desire to make the bad look as tempting as possible, could produce deviant arguments and their supporting images, which, however wisely contained at the last, might still retain an uncertain incandescence and be perhaps too well remembered. This danger latent in images has always worried the teachers of right thinking as they have weighed the obvious benefits and the partly unpredictable risks.

But the great historical enemy of right thinking was the restless crowd of affections within, those passionate desires that could generate a power and display capable of sweeping the individual toward good or plunging him into ill. Nor did the affections lack their own forms of reasoning—products of chaos, no doubt, but stubbornly determined, elusive in changing their apparent shapes, and not without a cunning apparatus for selective hearing, vision, and memory. Though every instructed person knew the right way to think about the passions, the methods appeared to work best in the absence of strong opposition.
In writing on the subject of death, I repeat, poets addressed their thoughts along the ways known to them. They needed to speak in the language they had, which belonged, by the history of use, both to right thinking, as that was understood, and to the passions. Their language was also in part a special one, endowed with the privileges and restrictions of poetry as these had been granted by custom or acquired by the history of successful accomplishment. These privileges and restrictions included the traditional materials, methods, and rules of expression. To these may be added the uses of commonplaces, conventions, and other punctuating assurances that a discourse licensed to imagine nevertheless resembled truth. Everything was to be ordered by the poet’s wit (which included his power to invent) and by his “learned discretion,” as a means of satisfying both the particular and the more comprehensive laws of decorum while figuring forth the chosen subject and, as not a few believed, the author by the style.

I begin by considering poems that can illustrate, but may also test and perhaps offer some qualifying views of the general conditions I have been describing. Poems written under the anticipation of imminent death—as on the eve of the author’s execution—present a category so convincing that few readers will want to resist believing in the literal truth of the circumstances and the timing. What the poet writes in his “last words” will easily command a special attention. Indeed, belief may be disposed to anticipate matters by some willing initiative, and not a few poems were circulated and received as Sir Walter Raleigh’s last literary testament. We shall come to him next, after looking at “Tichborne’s Elegy”:

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares;  
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain;  
My crop of corn is but a field of tares;  
And all my good is but vain hope of gain:  
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun;  
And now I live, and now my life is done.

My tale was heard, and yet it was not told;  
My fruit is fall’n, and yet my leaves are green;  
My youth is spent, and yet I am not old;  
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen:  
My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun;  
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death, and found it in my womb;  
I looked for life, and saw it was a shade;
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I trod the earth, and knew it was my tomb;  
And now I die, and now I was but made:  
My glass is full, and now my glass is run;  
And now I live, and now my life is done.¹

If the title had been lost (not likely), or never been assigned (almost as unlikely), one might just possibly be reading a meditative exercise. Nor would the verses be out of place as the formal speech of a character in an early drama (or a later one cultivating an old-fashioned scene and style)—a character who has just heard bad news or felt some premonition that moves him at once to a set speech taking an inventory of life from the perspective of death and across the passage of time. The actual imminence of death may be the point of leverage but does not obtrude itself, and the fact of death, not any particular form, swings its weight more like a pendulum than an axe.

We may observe that rejection of the values of life, like many rejections of love, will be supported by traditional reasoning but also by the resources of the passions and their dubious but insistent forms of reasoning. Under some circumstances a kind of opportune, if temporary and informal, partnership can be arranged, by which the passions are available for trying to hate what cannot be possessed or loved. In order to achieve a willed and honorable acceptance of necessity, and to do so by means of a difficult transition that cannot be memorized or reduced to habit, if a man finds himself rejected he may need to answer by a reciprocal action that also rejects. Toward life the comprehensive religious answer was acceptance of its loss, but that answer has traditionally accommodated itself to human weakness, including a transitional middle ground of rejecting the values of life by summoning up the rhetoric of contempt or hatred, after which the expendable instrument of hatred can simply disappear into the true form of the highest love for the divine.

These matters will occupy us further, but let me touch briefly upon another habit of thought which may be observed in Tichborne’s poem. Some of the qualities of stiffness make claims on our attention. Men had written similarly for a long time. Eyes, ears, and expectations had been thoroughly trained, and the normal reading, we may well think, would have responded, not to the peculiar and the individual, but to the aesthetic satisfactions of recognizing the expected and its ordered appropriateness. The manner is deliberately artificial, in the old sense of the word, and is made by art to express a formality proper to a serious address. Every age enjoys, as a privileged courtesy, the experience of recognizing the particular right kind of skillful expression of shared
taste—and also enjoys, when the timing and the skill are right, the special opportunities for making that taste the occasion for artistic games. In the 1580s, through long familiarity and respect, the formal manner provided pleasure on its own, and a capable poet would know how to impose apparent solemnity upon slight fictions as well. Sidney had the gifts and the refined sensibility to make poems out of the exploitation of what he was rejecting.

A decade later the style could be mocked and usefully parodied by writers moving toward a different outlook and trying out new skills widely available but not yet fully exploited. By then the old taste had lost much of its appeal and authority. The deliberately stiffened address and some of the very limitations that once were anticipated and desired, and must then have struck the right chords of response, had become predictable in many of the wrong ways. Stories of this kind are well known, and it always requires an imaginative effort to acknowledge what may no longer be experienced as it was. Every outmoded style, once valid, raises many problems. Even when the style may have been discarded chiefly because newer manners opened more and apparently better possibilities, there will always be losses, often not inconsiderable ones, which other improvements will not be able to replace in kind.

Occasionally the charm of a famous gesture may owe something to the fact that the manner went out of date before the gesture, which became prominently fixed in a style that could not be revived. I am thinking of Dyer's best-known poem, “My mind to me a kingdom is,” but I mention it for other purposes. The basic form is that of the inventory, which is, however, less tightly organized than in Tichborne's poem. But the address and the manner do not neglect the reliable properties of formal seriousness. Contrasting pairs are frequently yoked in service and the linkage of consonants and of syntactic units makes certain that the pairings are not marred by any unwanted shadows or muting:

No wily wit to salve a sore.

They get with toil, they keep with fear.

I fear no foe, I fawn no friend.

Their treasure is their only trust,

A cloaked craft their store of skill.

The climax of one stanza collects the sober march of antitheses with an extravagant exhibition of virtuoso compressions:
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Some have too much, yet still do crave;
   I little have, and seek no more.
They are but poor, though much they have,
   And I am rich with little store:
They poor, I rich; they beg, I give;
They lack, I leave; they pine, I live.

(Ault, p. 124)

A flourish of sententious fireworks like this may signal the end of a long, once thriving line. Still, better poets like Sidney or Raleigh could continue to dazzle without abandoning all the old ways, while producing more strenuous inventions gracefully carried through.

The taste for certain formal rigidities may be difficult to recover once it has been lost, but such basic devices of expression as refrain, ironic antithesis, inventory, and the summing up at a time of crisis could hardly go out of poetic use, whatever modifications might be made from time to time. We may feel confident that we have not lost touch with these devices.

If Tichborne is writing in anticipation of certain death on the morrow, he is nevertheless doing so while following one set of established rules for the regular meditating on death by arraigning the deceptions of life. Whatever the actual circumstances and the actual time schedule, he fixes the tempus dramatis of personal death in a special dimension of time, an intensely imagined present. The declared “now” of the poem is an imagined present in which the mind methodically reviews and judges a past that deceived or disappointed in every respect, in which the inventoried past confesses the faults of illusions and false promises—an imagined present in which past life, present life, and future death exist together, now.

The inventory is drawn up in double columns as the paired items begin to march by, one pair to a line and every line end-stopped. When the first stanza comes to a close with no evident progress and is apparently summed up by its last line, the second stanza turns back as if to begin a similar series. But the antitheses do not again begin by juxtaposing the hopefulness of then and the wretchedness of now. The dominant copular unit “is but” becomes “and yet” in stanza two, and the second term of each pair does not now complete any absolute contrasts like those in which spring “is but” winter; joy, pain; harvest, weeds. Instead, in all but the first and fourth lines the first term presents the now (fallen fruit, youth spent, thread cut), and the second term, in all the lines, unfolds a potential dissipation or anomaly of the first term. The effect is to ring out changes on the unfulfillment of time and to empha-
size an abnormal arrested state, “And now I live, and now my life is done.”

Looking back, one can see that though stanza one makes no evident progress and has to start again, a shift probably begins at line four (“And all my good is but vain hope of gain”) and is clearly evident in the following line (“The day is past, and yet I saw no sun”). But it is the kind of transition that is more likely to be noticed in retrospect—after the repetitions of the second stanza have confirmed the change. Stanza two comes to a close, having made its repeated and varied point, circling without apparent progress. The last line announces itself as a refrain, which promises that it sums up more than the single stanza and that we shall hear it again, with further meaning possible and further feeling certain in its renewed vibrations. When we look back, the refrain seems to confirm the state of standstill, in which the illusions of the past have been brought up to date, and in which present illusion includes the baffling sense of living and concluding life in the same arrested moment of time.

The third stanza immediately begins a progressive development. The paired antitheses occur in a syntax again slightly altered, but the verbs are now active and purposive. The speaker is himself the agent, and what the antitheses represent is expressed with a charged intensity and concreteness:

I sought my death, and found it in my womb;
I looked for life, and saw it was a shade;
I trod the earth, and knew it was my tomb.

The pointed succinctness of the first three lines offers a review that makes the previous reviews seem leisurely by contrast, with ample time to arraign and lament betrayals and losses and the loss of time. Death is now first named directly, and the contrasting term declares an identity at the source before personally experienced time and its metaphorical representations began. Everything points toward a deepening quality of knowledge by a responsible agent who sought, found, saw, knew. It did not, somehow, happen to the man; he made it happen, was actively present in the process of discovery, and established, one is led to think, some purposeful relationship with what he came to understand. The knowledge is not at all original but reflects philosophical and religious traditions of thought and imagery. The knowledge feels, or is made to feel, new to him, however, and comes in a new way, breaking the old rhythm of exposition. For one thing, the sense of time is different, no mingling of past and present but all put in the past tense. Yet the past invoked is a special one that exists in a state and a relationship that assert
unquestionable authority. Though this past is never explained, it is made to feel different and separate from the past of the previous itemizations. The summary effect is also different—like a past action brought to mind with a present clarity that suggests the imminence of a further action, or resolution, of the mind. A parallel effect is that such a firm and focused grasp of traditional thought would lead those familiar with the issues, and with their history in human crises, to expect a further step available to religious belief and resolution.

Instead, the episode turns out to have been a climactic recapitulation that finds in active, urgent knowledge only a deeper level of illusion in the nature of life itself. No further step occurs, and the old rhythm begins to assert itself again. “And now I die,” he writes, as if to counter the refrain from a new perspective of time and knowledge gained from the past. But he concludes the line with an antithesis that fuses past and present in a powerfully imagined abbreviation: “and now I was but made.” The sense of personal wonder and dismay is directed toward the illusion of time as a fact that cannot be suppressed. It simply is, and does not yield itself to moral or intellectual rearrangements—to established patterns by which rejection becomes transformation and enters an order leading toward comfort and hope. The second half of the line that comes after the climax (“and now I was but made”) suggests a muted cry of anguished bewilderment, articulated as a kind of semiobjective wonder but felt within as a stir of recognition protesting the blank brevity between death and birth. The expression is also in effect a nonverbal refrain that heightens the self-directed movement in those brief, undeveloped, unconnected statements of unfulfilled personal history: “My tale was heard, and yet it was not told . . . I saw the world, and yet I was not seen.”

The penultimate line seems to return to the style of the first two stanzas: “My glass is full, and now my glass is run.” But the opposition, only this once, imitates the form of the refrain. The fullness of life comes first and is present, while time has run out. In effect, the illusion is like that of the preceding line but does not repeat the sense of pained immediacy which comes in part from acknowledging an interval, however short and meaningless, between birth and death. The refrain then finishes the closing up—of the poem, and of the speaker’s relationship to the poem—which expresses the speaker’s relationship to life, imagined in a moment occupied by past, present, and future and wholly dominated by a future implicit in the past but explicit only in the present.

The reader who anticipated the disclosure of a further stage of meaning in the refrain was partly mistaken. Like the forward move-
ment in the first three lines of the last stanza, the promise latent in a refrain serves only to confirm the turning back. All that is new is that the old meaning was and is final. The imagined present and the methodical review have stated their evidence against the illusions of life and time, but the poet, by what he says and by what he will not say, refuses to move beyond the determined shape of his vision.

Life can be, and is, rejected by the mind here expressing itself in naming and characterizing externals while describing itself very little, and that indirectly. Death is not, and cannot be, rejected. It is not, however, here accepted by the mind, though the human records demonstrate that it can be accepted, and some of the ways to do so are well known. In the poem death is not dealt with as an illusion but was there from the beginning and could be known, as a future implicit in the past. All of the history of death’s having been felt, however, is contracted into the imagined present of eighteen lines of poetry which create the sense of an arrested moment of composite time, in which all parts freely move and interchange—except the future, which is death and the un­moved mover of the poem.

Life looked for was seen to be “a shade”—a summary judgment of the world and of everything in it. “My tale was heard, and yet it was not told.” Is that only a single item in the inventory of illusion or a special protest in his own case, one not adequately covered by the definitive judgment against life? Is he referring to the foregone conclusion of early death recognized when the “end” of his personal story (his “life,” the testimony he gave at his “hearing”) was known in advance to the listeners, and perhaps to the dispirited teller? Does he refer uniquely to a peremptory hearing, pro forma, in which his own giving of evidence was blocked and confined routinely and was telling only in its failure to be taken into account? In an older sense of the word, “told” could mean “reckoned,” “esteemed.” If he is entering a personal protest, the disabling unreality of life would make the desire to tell one’s tale so that it would be heard a joint venture in idiocy. If life is altogether illusory, his own case is trivial and repetitious. What is he trying to tell now so that it will be heard? Not that “all must die,” though that was an inexhaustible sweeping theme into which every item he adduces could be made to fit, even if not in the poem as he composed it. The judgment against life, if true, would extend to his own feelings. They may be absurd but they are not registered as unreal; nor is that dominant, unjudged urge to persevere in writing the poem unreal.

Except perhaps for the tale heard but not told—and that chiefly if interpreted as a personal reference, disguised and muted but smoldering with disruptive potency—there are no thoughts, images, or
rhythms that may pass as original. Yet the poem is moving, beautiful, and original in its deployment of the familiar. If we fail to respond unreservedly to the formal parade of meditative rediscoveries, arranged and costumed in accord with a prevailing code of intellectual and aesthetic propriety, we may still give respectful attention to the tale and to the values represented by once-current ways of thinking, though these are dressed out in a style that has been antique for centuries. Our critical habits of thought, insofar as they are habits, must be different from Tichborne’s and from those of the first readers of his poem. But one may not unreasonably imagine that any “judicious sharp spectator” (Raleigh’s phrase), or Raleigh himself, would have heard the part of the tale that was not told. That it would have been heard with differences we cannot doubt; nor can we enter fully into a superior, living sixteenth-century response.

What I have tried to hear and describe is a lyric that expresses both in its subject and in its composition a commanding sense of the urgent pressure of time. The lyric is unflinching in its meticulously orthodox use of the passions to produce the arguments of illusion in the service of the established ends of reason. But the poet refuses to discard the passions when they have done their appointed work and to move beyond them to a further path. He does not move beyond the one mystery discovered and adhered to, the personal reality of the arrested moment that contains all of his own past, present, and future.