The House of Death
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CHAPTER SIX

Dying in Jest and Earnest: Raleigh

As if when after Phebus is dessended
And leves a light mich like the past dayes dawninge,
And every toyle and labor wholy ended
Each livinge creature drawth to his restinge

Wee should beginn by such a partinge light
To write the story of all ages past
And end the same before th’ approchinge night.

. . . . . . . . . .
Thus home I draw, as deaths longe night drawes onn.

RALEIGH, The 11th: and last booke of the Ocean to Scinthia

Raleigh inherited the same basic ways of thinking about death as his younger contemporary, Tichborne. He was, however, not an obscure youth remembered for a poem about a personal crisis. The great courtier, captain, exile, and prisoner inhabited a world in which other people, friends and enemies, were real and not to be thought of as secondary images in the general shadow of existence. His own actions and words were reported and studied at home and in centers of power throughout Europe. His sense of himself as private and public person was not subject to disabling thoughts about illusion and reality. In response to conflict he acted with a certainty that commanded imagination and excluded any reflexes not to his purpose. So if there is a tale to be told, he will make it heard.

The poem written in his Bible and left in the Gatehouse the morning of his execution I shall consider last and approach from the discussion of three poems that present views of death. The first is “The Life of Man,” which jests at the methodical order of play that comes to an appointed end:

What is our life? a play of passion,
Our mirth the musicke of division,
Our mothers wombes the tyring houses be,
Where we are drest for this short Comedy,
Heaven the ludicious sharpe spectator is,
That sits and markes still who doth act amisse,
Our graves that hide us from the searching Sun,
Are like drawne curtaynes when the play is done,
Thus march we playing to our latest rest,
Onely we dye in earnest, that's no lest.  

Until the radical coda, the relish of the wit lies in discovering and placing the few right points of comparison that will give a figurative answer the look and feeling of truth. The answer offers a selection of metaphorical equivalents and does so with casual precision, as if these were drawn from a comprehensive inventory that a more solemn writer would have delivered with unsparing completeness. The last line, however, the extrinsic point upon which the fiction turns, would seem to strip the fiction with one rending gesture that mocks the whole enterprise—which includes the self-conscious art that conceals its grim determination and acts out the neatly turned and fitted nature of a well-made play, the precision of marching parallels that do not sense the end of the game they are playing. Yet something is not included and persists beyond the final answer that seems to dismiss the figurative answer. For the image of “our life” is not itself retracted. The answer is a figurative one, and both the initial choice and the selected comparisons contain a critical view that does not neglect the element of illusion—from womb to the grave that stops all searching inquiry; from the dressing rooms, where the illusion is made ready in advance, to the drawn curtain that finally divides the spectators from the actors. The one simile of the poem likens grave and curtain; we are left to imagine ourselves on either side of that full stop. Everything in the imagined play must be directed toward the satisfactions and regrets that mark the success of a final curtain; at the same time the comedy must maintain, among its other illusions, that until the very end the end has no part in the action. What is not included in the mockery, or pointed to as an answering moral to cap the fiction and the last gesture that seems to destroy it, is any discernible suggestion that the existence of “earnest” death should make us revise the acting of our lives, or should lead to the closing of the theaters or to an act of abolishing the basic validity of the comparison between life and the stage. The heavenly Spectator takes critical notes on individual performance in the spectacle; we may note that the Judge seems to take excellence for granted and records only “who doth act amisse.” We may also note that the Judge seems to side with the figurative answer, that life is a play and the standards are those of the stage.
Indeed, for the play that is an image of “our life” there is no distinct audience except God.

A human audience is nevertheless implied. The poem takes up the familiar message that “all must die” and makes the jesting communal and symbolic, like the experience of spectators. The “earnest” part is actual and individual. No competent reader of the poem needs to be told that we die separately, one at a time, and that we may treat life like a play, and it is, until the end. The ultimate wit of the poem is in its not saying more than it does. It presents a truly elegant *memento mori* without a shred of applicable advice.

“The Lie” begins:

Goe soule the bodies guest  
Upon a thankelesen arrant,  
Feare not to touch the best  
The truth shall be thy warrant:  
Goe since I needs must die,  
And give the world the lie.

(p. 45)

After an inventory of the world’s ills, the poem concludes with one reference to a rule of social custom (that giving the lie “Deserves no lesse then stabbing”) and one reference to higher law:

Stab at thee he that will;  
No stab thy soule can kill.

“Since I needs must die” would suggest that the truth-telling is occasioned by some calculated imminence of death. By the end of the poem we must revise our sense of the calculation.

The central method is encyclopedic. That is, the coverage is extensive but selective in the length of the entries, the omissions, and the choice of detail. The warrant for truth and full coverage is also a license that permits some latitude (not unprecedented in encyclopedic practice) for afterthoughts and items not quite in order but self-justifying and a shame to leave out. The survey begins with two brief, well-placed demolitions—of court and church—and then moves with more leisure to the analysis of “potentates,” executives in high position, and wealthy free-spenders. These are real figures in any Renaissance polity; nor were their names unknown in England. Then comes a list of particular abstractions that men serve or seek or possess ignorantly—each pricked off in a single line. “Wit” and “wisdom” conclude this stage of an evolving list, each honored by requiring two lines to set them down properly. Then certain learned institutions and their ways are lined up,
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and also charity, fortune, nature, friendship, and so on. What is told to
each of these is concentrated into one line; seeming to conclude this
group, “arts” and “schools” both receive the relative amplitude of two
lines of exposure. Finally, there is a kind of addendum of four items
which have thus far gone unmentioned. The last two items read like
rough notes from an unending list not yet put into grammatical form:

Tell manhood shakes off pittie,
Tell vertue least preferreth.

The force is cumulative and the point of view single in its direction,
though the wit adjusts itself skillfully to the accepted challenge of re­
VEaling an essential falsehood in every object brought under attention.
Part of the warrant would seem to be that of a contemptus mundi, though
the illusions of life are not the standard ones for man contemplating the
world and the state of his soul; the illusions are, rather, more special
ones—those that belong to the institutions and preferred values that run
the world.

Instruction to the soul is a motivating device—like “Say, Muse,” or
the later instructions to a painter, or the still current allegorical proces­
sions. As we begin with the leading figures of power in the state we
seem to be invited to view a procession. But the apparent order
changes, and by the tempo and bulk of its inclusions a parade becomes a
crowded show, as the undeviating purpose quickly applies to each rep­
resentative subject (literal or figurative) a comment that exposes the
limiting or disabling fault underneath its name.

The telling suggests a last testament, a compendium long in the
making and, as it were, under the compacting pressure of extended time
and enforced silence, a final telling, now with no time to waste. An
anonymous man, ready to die, reads from his prophetic scrip and tells
the devastating truth to a world that lives by a code requiring rebuttal in
the brief and punctual form of stabbing. The initial cause of the poem,
the soul’s errand (“since I needs must die”), is transposed, with a silent
omission of process, into effect. And while the soul tells mortal truth, a
comprehensive story of the world’s body, the soul’s own tale is not told.
Its authorized compulsiveness is borrowed without due payment except
for the brief, bare, defiant reference to the known immortality of the
soul. There is no mention of higher values; nor is there even the sug­
gestion of a hierarchy of falsehood which might imply some positive
guide leading toward a central fault such as pride, self-love, avarice, or
lack of charity. Instead, we are treated to a whole world of appearances,
all different, all the same, and the many lies are without a master lie.

But the inventory of accusation pointedly ignores the standard
inherited illusions man has repeatedly found in life. For all of the crowded room is preempted by the display of man-made illusions crafted out of the opportunities of position and privilege. The death briefly and vaguely referred to at the beginning is a feigned death, a jest that is the occasion for a long, earnest comedy, mocking what man has made out of life. One unmistakable effect flowering from no acknowledged cause is that the poet takes exceptional pleasure (certain to infuriate contemporaries) in the act and display of his marksmanship. Everything is exactly aimed, and there is a flowing wealth of targets. Toward each there is an appropriate concentration of economy—one or two shafts, though potentates merit three. The soul celebrates its expected enfranchisement from the body by producing the remarkable flourish of many acts of ostentatiously spare precision.

Time is pretended, not seriously engaged or imagined time, the occasion of the jest but not part of the subject. For all of the itemization is concurrent and exists in a kind of corrupt eternal present from which the immortal soul is taking its own sweet ceremonial departure. No private revenge upon his body will be able to match his public arraignment of the false souls that animate the world. And to judge from the record, the master jest of a master poet can safely anticipate the angrily inept poetic replies provoked by his individual condemnations and his general imputation, always carefully repeated, that all ventured answers will be falsehoods in defense of falsehood.

"The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage" does not use the point of death as a platform from which to deliver an oration that gives the world the lie. The point of death has a literal basis, which makes its use as a pretext a more powerful and flexible conceptual device for writing the story of one’s own death. The poem mingles abruptness and leisureliness, earnestness and jest, in unprecedented ways. We are at first introduced to objects and attitudes that belong to thoughts of death as the entrance into the desired second life. The traditional enemy of life, time and its circus of treacherous illusions, is quite ignored. The poem will weave together an open, unrationalized schedule of time in the hereafter, and then the calculated placements of past, present, and future in a skillful deployment of narrative time. The standard illusionary aspects of life are not taken up directly. Our bodies, for instance, have simply been shaken off as “gownes of clay” somewhere or other on the path of travel. The opening vision acts as if it is too happy contemplating its new life to waste time and attention by considering, in order to disparage or belatedly reject, the flawed materials of earthly life. Everything necessary is expressed by the implied contrasts between life and the eternal rewards of peace, faith, joy, and glory in the bliss and beauty.
of a heaven where the fulfilled soul no longer thirsts. As an ecstatic vision, the early part of the poem differs from what might be expected, chiefly in the matter-of-fact tone with which the soul settles down among the standard wonders that can only be dreamed of in the different landscape of earthly life. It is also remarkable how easily the rapt courtier slips into a homely pilgrim style of seeing and saying, as he names the activities and the accouterments of his journey. The one assertive abruptness that momentarily disturbs the landscape and anticipates the central scene of heaven’s court and trial is the powerful

Blood must be my bodies balmer,
No other balme will there be given.

He begins alone, not praying exactly, and speaking in the grammar of the imperative mood but neither demanding, quite, nor entreat ing, nor exhorting. “Give me,” he says, as if to some invisible quartermaster, the following standard equipment for my pilgrimage:

Give me my Scallop shell of quiet,
My staffe of Faith to walke upon,
My Scrip of Ioy, Immortall diet,
My bottle of salvation:  
My Gowne of Glory, hopes true gage,
And thus Ile take my Pilgrimage.

(p. 49)

He speaks from a willed threshold of imagined time, present to the mind and hence graduating to a distinct mental future, a freely moving modality of time, as if autonomous, but still anticipating in the narrative an ordinary future that is on the schedule but has not yet arrived.

Then comes the abrupt, punctuating reference to blood, anticipating the plea of Christ’s blood—past and eternally present, to be invoked, but not yet—to coincide exactly with that near-future moment when the executioner’s axe will release his own blood. The poem takes its own good time in the leisurely travel of visionary exploration in the new world of heaven. Soon the speaker enjoys the society of similar happy souls, and he shares the knowledge of his (unexplained) visionary priority, showing them where to drink and fill their pilgrim bottles with “immortality.” Then they travel, as one, to their destination, the high court of heaven. The earnest, naive manner of pilgrim vision drops away without the slightest trace of anticipation, or any token of narrative rationalization, or later renewal by touch or echo, as the descriptive account begins in a new voice to insist on the explicit contrast between heaven and earth:
From thence to heavens Bribeles hall
Where no corrupted voyces brall,
No Conscience molten into gold,
Nor forg'd accusers bought and sold,
No cause deferd, nor vaine spent Iorney,
For there Christ is the Kings Atturney:
Who pleades for all without degrees,
And he hath Angells, but no fees.

The jury then evoked, however it may resemble the terrible ones con­stituted on earth, is nevertheless made up truly “Of our sinnes and sinfull fury,” and the verdicts against our souls are just, but Christ pleads his own death, “and then we live.”

All companions drop silently away, and he returns from the im­agined future to the imagined point of death.

And this is my eternall plea,
To him that made Heaven, Earth, and Sea,
Seeing my flesh must die so soone,
And want a head to dine next noone,
Just at the stroke when my vaines start and spred
Set on my soule an everlasting head.
Then am I readie like a palmer fit,
To tread those blest paths which before I writ.

The conclusion begins in the high rhetoric of public oratorical prayer, the first member of a proposition that characterizes itself as an “eternall plea” and implicitly claims a place in the community of prayer by including a basic ritual of praise to the Creator. At the same time, the syntactic form of the prayer is clearly indicated: that of a suspended sentence, the closing of which lies within the control of the speaker, within his choice of the degree and kind of intervening detail and its termination. He first moves from the “eternall” to a nonvisual “seeing,” the death of the flesh, “so soone.” He then constructs a detached and humorous visual scene of his personal death—presenting a gracefully indifferent close view of the violence of the severing as if it were merely a natural act of description. When the “everlasting head” closes the period of his prayer, it does so with a dazzling virtuosity of exact temporal coincidence—executorial, syntactic, and devotional. The jest is consciously one that may have to be made good in earnest, before the eyes of friends and foes, which this dress rehearsal anticipates in calm, clear defiance—so perfectly poised that it can afford a generous measure of delight in the performance.
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The last couplet brings time back to the present moment of contemplation. “Then am I readie,” for all has been brought up to date—the past of narrative vision, the episode of heavenly judgment, the future (“so soone”) imagined as present, and the formal last word of the “eternall plea.” To which is added a further last word, as epilogue. The emphasis of the poem is left where intended by the casual brusqueness and air of finished business, the vision already on record, and no further inclination to repeat or vary or amplify it. One assumes that the manners of the speaker’s piety were not intended to please all. Participants in Raleigh’s own trial would feel themselves aspersed, defamed, traduced; and even dispassionate participants, or friendly readers, would nevertheless be reminded uncomfortably of their own acquired religious wisdom concerning the proper frame of mind and spirit for accepting death. Raleigh’s taste and tone are quite out of the ordinary at a time when nothing but the ordinary can be thought right, and the poem should trouble many decent practitioners of piety—not less because the speaker, in those matters he regards as the essential ones, is aggressively orthodox. He takes the limited phase of earthly existence quite for granted; he indulges in no angry dismantling of illusions he can no longer enjoy. All the weight of his emphasis falls on the mercy and fidelity of the Christian promise and its absolute difference from the practice of power and justice on earth. Therefore, the part of the message he proclaims does not lead to being dutiful and docile—least of all to those who run the world. He is himself, however briefly, acknowledged to be a sinner who nevertheless claims the due of his faith in Christ’s sacrifice. The acknowledgment is hardly a penitential confession, but it does resemble his prayer from the scaffold, inviting all witnesses to join in his prayer for forgiveness and salvation as he rejects the sinful state of having lived in a sinful world—of having lived as a man, “full of vanity . . . a sinful life in all sinful callings.” In the poem he is briefer and more general, acknowledging “the grand twelve million Iury, / Of our sinnes and sinfull fury.” That is a good round number that seems to take sin seriously but is an obstacle to any penitential consideration of one’s own particular sins. He is less brief and general in contrasting chosen aspects of Christ’s exemplary life with earthly departures from that model.

The manner of his leaving the world, for which the poem offers itself as testament, has indeed made parts of his challenge to the world and its lies extremely difficult for his Christian enemies to forgive—though that, properly, is their problem and not his. Friends and dispassionate,
“judicious” spectators will observe that (except for neglecting to forgive his enemies) he does not act “amiss” in the difficult last scene, which he plays through as a comedy for which he has already written the happy ending. It is one’s own death, individual and center stage, but with something of the free, eccentric, venerable hilarity that the old oracular message, “all must die,” could liberate from strange recesses of the human mind. As for the absence of any trace of humble acceptance and resignation, or of the humanizing tact of discernible hesitancy or reluctance, what he has to offer instead is the demonstration of uncowed, clear-eyed contempt for the human agents of his death, and the demonstration of a simple, untroubled Christian faith.

Finally, there was a last night and morning and the verses he left at the Gatehouse before his execution:

Even such is tyme which takes in trust
Our yowth, our Ioyes, and all we have,
And payes us butt with age and dust:
Who in the darke and silent grave
When we have wandred all our wayes
Shutts up the storye of our dayes.
And from which earth and grave and dust
The Lord shall rayse me up I trust.

(p. 72)

The first six lines are borrowed, with one change, from the sixth and last stanza of an earlier poem, “Nature that washt her hands in milke.” “Oh cruel} Time” becomes “Even such is tyme,” and without a preceding fable and its kind of ironic detail and development, the one stanza now gains in stark concentration. The cruelty of time belongs to love’s story and its well-known plots. The barest summary of the one essential story now tells all. Besides, a coda has been added, the Christian answer to time. We may well be uncertain: the tone is not at all triumphant, as ordinary expectations would have preferred, and the last line may be, one cannot tell, more or less muted. I read the ending as nevertheless firm, quiet, and humble, Raleigh speaking to himself in solitary earnest. All are included in the public fate presided over by time (we—our—all). But the release from each death is a private negotiation between God and the self for which the only pledges and warrants are personal hope and trust.

Preparing for death, he sums up his life and character. Without the bold wit, the character here is the same as that which displayed itself in “The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage,” and will play out the public scene on the scaffold, where wit is necessary to validate the truth of character.
What seems clear in the main statement of the poem is that, like Tichborne’s elegy and like none of Raleigh’s other poems on death, these few lines respond entirely to a vision of time and to those bare actions and consequences that, when contemplated, present the one knowable face of death. The poem speaks from a point clearly and personally chosen, one that lies beyond the possibility of seeking any relief by naming or abusing the illusions produced and fostered by time. Time takes in trust all that we have and leaves us in a state that only another trust may remedy. As in the play that represents the mirth and passion of our life, there is no suggestion that all is a mistake or dream, which we could deny and so escape acting out the illusions of life.

In this poem he does not deign to argue with the conditions of human fate. He is making no discoveries, and he is not appealing the judgment, which he can see as clearly as others who have cast up accounts on the point of death. The flourish of joys is repaid, and the all of our story shut up, the whole business conducted in a kind of encompassing present. The courtesy toward God is brief and in basic form, a summary statement without personality or fervor. The future lies in God’s action, the present in the condemned man’s trust. Elsewhere he is the master of an art that takes upon itself the high privilege of taunting with splendid incivility man-made illusions and their custodians and beneficiaries. In writing of his own death in earnest he is the master of an intellectual courtesy that will not rail against or lament over the illusions of life which he as others accepted in youth and joy and hope.

In other themes and other actions Raleigh can sail with the wind. He would flatter the Queen and others in passion and mirth. Time has a painful but less absolute face in the vicarious death of exile, when joys expire “Like truthles dreames”; when the story is that of a wanderer “in unknowne waies,” and the worst of time is that “Of all which past, the sorrow onely staies” (p. 12). In the epitaph nothing stays, but the summary at hand is an act not altogether without some force of resistance. For the poem is an effort to complete the story himself before time “Shutts up the storye of our dayes.” To name the silence is to have the last word possible, which, given the conditions described, is not a negligible accomplishment.