The House of Death

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At the beginning of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser takes the opportunity of relating the shape of his career to the famous Virgilian model: pastoral, eclogue, epic. In doing so Spenser quietly removes from the record some earlier apprentice work, his *Complaints*, the “Sundrie Small Poemes Of The Worlds Vanitie.” “Small” in part belongs to the courteous idiom of self-deprecation but is not quite the equivalent of calling *The Faerie Queene* “this rusticke madrigale.”¹ Spenser must also have had in mind as one reason for the suppression the derivative nature of his *Complaints*. They include essays in lofty elegiac lament based upon admired models, set pieces in a not quite yet “worn-out poetical fashion,” the content still believed to be timeless but the manner perhaps beginning to feel dated, still looking backward and not yet ready to draw the authentically old into something new. What Spenser learned he could say in a voice more clearly his own in “November” of *The Shepheardes Calender*.

For that poem still older models, but recently renewed, provided more flexibility and flow and some new opportunities for achieving a different inner balance. In “November” the “trustlesse state of earthly things” does not overpower alternative possibilities of statement, and another set theme, the encouraging rediscovery of the earliest humanism, does not appear—the blazoned immortality (as it were) of good fame in good verses. Instead, the verse performs its aspiring work without pausing to praise itself as a human answer to time. The poet is not himself the chief mourner but speaks for others (at least one of whom is more important under his pastoral name). In a major thematic development the poet relates the occasion of grief to the human world and to the world of nature (all of which laments except the “wolves,” who continue about their business and their opportunities). And when the time is right, after the brief lesson drawn from the unreliability of “earthly things,” the poet brings forward the solving truth: “Dido nis dead, but into heaven bent.”

The joys in prospect of those “Fayre fieldes” of the supernatural provide the concluding answer to human grief in the present and past.
The poem of mourning is over and the subject brought to a close. But when the naive auditor replies he speaks in character, for himself, and the larger audience of readers are free to measure their own responses against his. For the terms of this pastoral drama are designed to prevent any complete identification and to encourage the larger audience to remember their individual differences. They will enjoy a conscious displacement (what’s “Dido” to them or they to “Dido” that they should weep or rejoice for her?), and they will relish toward the representative auditor a sense of their own superior discrimination while they also feel a submerged flow of agreement.

In addition to the formal answer to grief provided by the lament and consolation, any of the unrationalized excesses and confusions of death have been removed from the present occasion and from the subject itself, removed or at least deflected and in part transferred to the naive auditor’s response:

Ay, francke shepheard, how bene thy verses meint
With doolful pleasaunce, so as I ne wotte
Whether rejoyce or weepe for great constrainte!
Thyne be the cossette, well hast thow it gotte.
Up, Colin, up, ynoough thou morned hast:
Now gynnes to mizzle, hye we homeward fast.

“Thenot” testifies in his own way to the effectiveness of inspired art and properly has the last word, for he requested the song, though an elegy was not his first choice. The poet has mourned enough—“Thenot” can say so as an authoritative answer, which, if it were addressed to the reader, would be a tactless irritant the poet and his spokesman avoid. The opportune tears of nature’s drizzle remind the man of his nearest abode. He feels better and finds the conflict in his emotions a pleasant one, a created irresolution that feels no desire for a further extended answer.

The poet who can step into a formal context and so has a position from which to perform a service for others does not have to establish his personal credentials as a mourner. The central speech of his lyric discourse then can begin without expository and other preparations and can end at the moment most advantageous to the development of his poem. Among Sidney’s many verse experiments in Arcadia, the 1593 version assembles a group of elegies in response to the supposed death of Basilius. The poems were brilliantly executed but not likely to inspire a tradition in English. On the one hand, they serve the general purposes of Sidney’s romance, and he exploits his technical virtuosity as part of the normal atmosphere of Arcadia. One remarkable effect is that
of imposing an extraordinary exoticism upon the familiar materials of public mourning. On the other hand, the poems remain isolated experiments. They belong in their narrative context, an unusually full one for the subject but altered and blurred by subsequent revisions.

The community of shepherds grieve, especially "the very borne Arcadians" (2:138); the others, though moved by human pity and a sense of their past benefits, could not "so naturally feel the lively touch of sorrowe." "Good olde Geron" articulates the anxieties of change in prose; then Agelastus, noted for his skill in poetry and for the austerity of his grief, produces a sestina that "seemed to despise the works of nature." (In the 1593 version the recognized poet volunteers; in the Old Arcadia, after the random praise and lamentation of individuals, they all unite in desiring Agelastus "to make an unversall Complaynte for them in this unversall mischeef" [4:265]). Others then volunteer to follow his example, and the single lamentation quoted ("as well as might bee") is a formal pastoral elegy. Nature is enlisted, urged, and drawn upon for lamentable comparisons. After a hundred lines in which (so the claim of more sincerity than art declares) "One word of woe another after traineth" (2:142), the scope of "detestation" is enlarged briefly and then focused upon the loss of the leader and the consequent losses of the community. The modest personal merits of Basilius impose no limitations on the general or poetic grief. He is dead (supposedly), and therefore "favoure and pitty drew all thinges nowe to the highest poynte" (4:264). The resolution of a Christian answer is not available to their pagan mourning, and only when the "Muse hath swarved" from the true subject to the bereaved subjects does the poet anticipate obliquely, as conclusion, topics that might be an evolving part of traditional Christian arguments with death: "Death is our home, life is but a delusion. . . . His death our death" (2:142–43). Finally, "one of great account among them" is allowed to contribute a rhyming sestina. This poem serves to fix the universal complaint even more strictly:

Let teares for him therefore be all our treasure,
And in our wailfull naming him our pleasure:
Let hating of our selves be our affection,
And unto death bend still our thoughts' direction.
Let us against our selves employ our might,
And putting out our eyes seeke we our light.

(2:144)

In revision Sidney's purpose of illustrating the implications of social and political behavior at the death of a prince is considerably nar-
rowed and muted when a brilliant passage of description and authorial comment is omitted. (I shall quote this in a moment.) The poems as they stand clearly do not memorialize the truth of Basilius’ life; they do, however, put into highly formalized order the griefs and worries released by his death. Sidney would seem to be well aware of the artistic privilege he is exercising. The poems are wildly extreme in feeling and rigorously mannered in form. A modern prince might expect to receive poems that were better coordinated, harmonious and believable, more befitting an enlightened age. In them the feelings might perhaps appear to be mannered, but only as they struggled visibly under their civilized restraints. Avoiding extremes, the poesy in all its expressive aspects would aim at a gracefully rigorous sincerity, and any hesitation or lapse would clearly show itself as tutored by honest grief. In Sidney’s original prose comment the mob of mourners, and the objects and motives of their grief, are brought under some cool, ironic attention. Their frenzy may tell too many stories and may initiate a dangerous raid on the sacred treasury of grief, but the original comment described their behavior as “a true testimony, that Men are Loving Creatures when Injuries putt them not from their naturall course” (4:265)—a testimony that a prince might well consider when alive. In any case, the poems are highly ordered, marvelous productions of pagan spontaneity. No doubt they tempered the impulses of the listening mob, if only by repeating and concentrating them. At least the mob was turned into an audience by listening.

The excesses and confusions of death are extravagantly disported, compressed into rigid attitudes, and left without connections to other known attitudes. The incompleteness may be no less deliberate than that of Spenser’s “November,” but Spenser’s incompleteness belongs to the poem and its relations to an immediate and a larger audience. The larger audience of Sidney’s poems could acknowledge little relationship to the fictional audience of the Arcadia, and the poems themselves acknowledge no incompleteness. They are severely ordered to present views complete in themselves. The omissions are obvious, and savage perhaps, but they are overshadowed by the triumphs of virtuoso specialization. What is omitted is outside the poems—to be thought of, no doubt, but assisted by no bridges of feeling.

Colin will not sing on any subject, but he is quite ready to express the burden of grief he carries. The mourning for Basilius does not suffer from a lack of volunteers, and whatever the usefulness to the audience the relief to the speaker may be taken for granted. It was a well-known truth that the best medicine for a sad heart is to lament aloud. Or as Malcolm responds to the silence of Macduff at the news that his family has been massacred:
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Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.
(Macbeth, 4.3.209–10)

As a first channel of release, though not only that, words were essential to human beings. Donne turns an old example to enlarge the point. If one cannot pray, one can at least confess that one cannot pray: “For, as in bodily, so in spirituall diseases, it is a desperate state, to be speachlesse” (5:233).

But words were notoriously subject to secret partnerships between the passions and the will. The traditional tripartite soul was understood as characteristically transferring certain surpluses from one part of the soul to another, a difficult economy to manage in spite of the wide agreement concerning means and ends. For instance, the everyday asceticism practiced in forms of self-denial could be rationalized as disciplined restraint of the “sensitive” faculty in order to strengthen the “intellectual” faculty. A more complicated exchange moved the fear of death along charted paths toward the love of God and the promised good of immortality. But there were imponderables. Bacon puts his fundamental trust in the evident force of custom as “the principal magistrate of man’s life,” for we commonly “hear men profess, protest, engage, give great words, and then do just as they have done before; as if they were dead images, and engines moved only by the wheels of custom.” So Bacon could observe, relishing the wit, “A single life doth well with churchmen; for charity will hardly water the ground where it must first fill a pool.” Furthermore, the greatest public contributions are likely to be made by childless men who “have sought to express the images of their minds, where those of their bodies have failed.” These are standard examples of transfers from one part of the soul to another, and easier to observe and apply to illustrate particular aspects of life than to encompass in a general theory. Besides, there were often intricate exchanges and counterbalances governed by particular conditions. When there was a crisis of passion, as in the death of another, the settled customs of explanatory wisdom might encounter some unexpected observations: “Silence augmenteth grief, writing encreaseth rage.”

“Man is a stranger to himself,” Henry King writes in a meditation on the ills of life reviewed from a sickbed. In a sunny letter of old age Petrarch congratulates himself on having conquered his passions and their power (either directly or by insidious imagination) to disturb his mind. He feels at home with himself and free of that “perpetual civil war” in youth between “the different parts of my mind” (p. 256). Even the wrench of grief at the death of dear friends must be kept in bounds:
“I shall stand upright if I can; if not, fortune will lay me low dry-eyed and silent” (p. 223). Montaigne reports being “amid ladies and games” when struck with the remembrance of one who died suddenly, “on leaving a similar feast, his head full of idleness, love, and a good time, like myself” (1.20.60–61). Montaigne thinks of himself and how his own end may be the same at any time. His account is unmorbid and cultivates indifference, the purpose being to counter egoistical extravagances and to lay out casually the materials for acquiring a rational attitude toward death. Be that as it may, the dead man remembered by Montaigne is not remembered as a friend but as some one, “I don’t remember whom”; and the self of the writer, in spite of a sprinkling of token intimacies, remains aloof, like some one or other writing on the subject of how to regard death. There are many ways and many degrees of being a stranger to oneself, and the steep climbing toward a state of no feeling may do as much as the abrupt plummeting of excess.