The House of Death

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There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, But the end thereof are the ways of death.

PROVERBS 14:12

In Western civilization, since the first golden brevity of the Garden of Eden, the character of human actions may be presumed to owe something to the imminent presence of personal death and to the quiet fact that death as universal law exists prior to the existence of intelligence and will. As an instrument of thought, priority is a hard-working principle; if excluded, the thinker may have difficulty in controlling the way its shadow falls. As for the character of human actions, when the arts of thought turn upon themselves as strictly as they turn upon other arts, the “something” they may detect is a trace of reaction affecting and constricting the nature of action as expressed in thought. A mere storyteller can say as much, demystifying and remystifying, as Kafka’s “Hunger Artist” does when his last words reveal the secret of his prodigious accomplishments in the art of fasting: “because I couldn’t find the food I liked.”

As preface to what will follow I offer some review, with additions, of matters previously considered. One learns from responses to the thought of impending death that variations have been numerous but major choices few. I mean choices around which thought can organize and defend its explanations, understanding, and acceptance of the fact of death. The Socratic model, with its calm and optimistic equilibrium, displays its easy trust in the life of virtue and the immunity of that life to external ills. The historical image is that of one freely choosing to accept the judgment of death, and with modest indifference remaining fully himself to the last moment—the philosopher who enjoys a gracefully effortless control of his life and death. Epicurean indifference develops a more specialized and argumentative version. The Stoic choice builds upon the wisdom of obeying the laws of nature, and the acceptance of death becomes a form of control by the rational will, which asserts its
superiority through the arguments it marshals and repeats. The deliberate choice of death may also become the conclusion of a rational process in which the value of indifference is minimal. In these examples from the ancient world a sense of control is important and desired, whatever the differences in the apparatus of acceptance. Among the uneducated and those with small aptitude for thoughtful inquiry, custom and temperament may produce their own modest apparatus, and, to the thoughtful, acceptance, however arrived at, may suggest the presence of a primitive form of reasoning that supports the evident control.

When we turn to the Christian paradigm, it is more difficult to exclude qualifying variations from the essential choice. We begin with a religion based upon revelation, upon the factual events of history, upon the death of Jesus as providential sacrifice, with the rich materials of sacred scriptures offered as the word of God in poetry, story, prophecy, and studied by gifted expositors and ardent schools throughout a long history of exegetical interpretations that contribute to the systematic building of religious philosophy. One important difference is that death is no longer a phenomenon governed by the law of nature but is redefined as the punishment of divine law first declared in the Book of Genesis. Death is made more acceptable by the Christian promise of salvation and resurrection, but also made more terrible by the alternative of damnation and its netherworld of eternity. Everything certain about death continues, but to the uncertainties of the when and the how is added the major uncertainty of the last judgment; and when, as happened, the belief grew that the question of salvation was probably decided at the time of death, balancing the claims of life and death became far more difficult than pagan philosophers had thought.

Yet some of the elements of pagan choices continue under other auspices. Indifference reappears in changed contexts. Voluntary acceptance and the sense of control are still supported by an apparatus based upon reasoning as well as faith. One answer was the severe choice of John 12:25: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world, shall keep it unto life eternal." Among other things, the answer reinforces an old suspicion in the world: that life is troubled, its griefs real, its joys deceptive, and death is release (but also, now, a true beginning). If the answer does not supply full directions for living, it is always available as reminder and correction, to mortify exuberant feelings or to authorize melancholy reflections on the state of things. So Donne, perhaps but not necessarily thinking of his dead daughter Lucy:

If there were any other way to be saved and to get to Heaven, then by being born into this life, I would not wish to have
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come into this world. And now that God hath made this life a Bridge to Heaven; it is but a giddy, and a vertiginous thing, to stand long gazing upon so narrow a bridge, and over so deep and roaring waters, and desperate whirlpools, as this world abounds with. . . . As houses that stand in two Shires, trouble the execution of Justice, the house of death that stands in two worlds, may trouble a good mans resolution. As death is a sordid Postern, by which I must be thrown out of this world, I would decline it: But as death is the gate, by which I must enter into Heaven, would I never come to it? certainly now, now that Sinne hath made life so miserable, if God should deny us death, he multiplied our misery. (Sermons, 7:359)

As “the house of death . . . stands in two worlds,” it may indeed trouble resolution, and the image of dead bodies as the rubbish of life discharged ignominiously through side or rear gates, and successively thrown out of graves, charnel houses, and common pits, is an image that reflects familiar actuality as well as psychological response. Hamlet, thinking of himself and the dead Polonius linked together by the ways that heaven is pleased to punish, says of the body, “I will bestow him”; but some thirty lines later, “I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room”; and of Yorick’s skull, “My gorge rises at it.”2 The house of death in this world “may trouble a good mans resolution,” but any man’s imagination. In presenting a “sordid” view of death, Donne’s language implies or reflects a sordid view of life, as that of one who “hateth his life in this world.” But any suggested hatred of life is linked directly to the expressed hatefulness of death in this world. Something other than hatred surely informs the “long,” precarious view of life as a narrow bridge over waters and whirlpools. To complete the line of relationship: sin and misery in this world (“now, now”) are linked to the house of death but in the merciful jurisdiction of the other world.

Yet elsewhere and often Donne shifts the balance to commend fulfilling the many and good obligations of life. Furthermore, God “loves the Body of Man.” “Every man that hath not devested Humanity, hath a desire to have his bones lie at rest,” and preferably in consecrated places. Though “Some Nations burnt . . . some drowned their dead . . . some hung them up upon trees . . . Some Nations eat their dead themselves, and some maintained dogs to eat the dead,” all these practices may be explained, with minimal figurative effort, as ways of providing “graves.” And therefore, to understand the most comprehensive conditions of the Apocalypse, “The state of the dead is their grave, and upon all that are in this state, shall the testimony of Gods
love, to the body of man, fall.” Donne’s most personal voice among these quoted passages is, I believe, one in which the house of death in this world is governed equably by the justice of both worlds: “Still I say, it is a comfort to a dying man, it is an honour to his memory, it is a discharge of a duty in his friends, it is a piece of the Communion of Saints, to have a consecrated grave” (Sermons, 6:273–74).

The conduct of burial, then and now, is part of the “justice” of this world, and troubling. Though “God hath made the Body as a House for the soule, till he call her out, and he hath made the Grave as a House for the body, till he call it up” (6:273), and though God loves the body, and the promised triumph in heaven will not be fulfilled until, at last, glorified bodies are there (an unbroken continuity in which Donne passionately believes, as he believes that saints and angels also yearn for the fulfillment)—still, that continuity is subject to the troubling dual jurisdiction of death. For the doctrinal separation of body and soul at death directs climactic attention and religious hope to the “commendation” of the soul. To affirm continuity is to strive, in spite of traditional difficulties, to balance the claims of body and soul. If the soul alone is loved, then the body is corruption and waste and properly hated, not only for itself but as representing the abandoned house of “life in this world.” Balancing the claims of body and soul is not the same as, but is an image of, the claims of life and death. As either balance moves, the imagistic relationship also moves, and even small changes may release the surprising appearance of auxiliary images and thoughts. If the desire to have one’s bones “lie at rest” is attributed to everyone “that hath not devested Humanity,” the dignity of life and the body is affirmed as part of the authentic justice of this world. To dissociate oneself from that affirmation is by inference to reject as worthless the memory of friends, the contiguity of comfort to the dying and duty to the living, and to call into question the reality of the “Communion of Saints.” The argument is a very quiet one.3

The wish not to have been born if there were any other way to be saved, like the wish to “decline” death considered only as a final, “sordid” state—these are expressive responses that register their forceful sense in the context of the authoritative reasons why they cannot represent an actual choice. As I began by saying, it is difficult to exclude qualifying variations from the essential choice of the Christian paradigm. That choice was consciously radical in rejecting traditional ways of thinking about death, but the growth and consolidation of Christian thought also included a careful winnowing and assimilation of what had been thought previously. In addition, there were the inevitable effects of a long history involving the debates of conscientious believers who
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gained or lost influence, and also the historical effects of social changes that occurred without the benefit of classic arguments to be approved or not. Besides, although citizens of all decades of the Christian centuries did not hold the prevailing tenets concerning death in exactly the same way without diversity of emphasis, there was nevertheless a remarkable stability of belief in basic matters, and unresolved differences were still expected (and the individual was reminded where necessary) not to stray rashly across recognizable boundaries.

Basic matters included thinking of death as divine punishment inherited from Adam and turned into the promise of eternal life through the death of Christ. The right acceptance of death presumed purposive thinking on the subject throughout life, under ecclesiastical direction and periodic reminders, in order to avoid sin, mitigate terror, and prepare for a final acceptance based upon sincere penitence, belief in Christ, and trust in God's mercy. One might then die thinking only of one's love of God and of the life to come. The new premise of human weakness and sin permitted standards of control in acceptance that ancient philosophical practitioners would not have understood, but Christian thought worked out these and other problems with a diligent regard for the value of systematic reasoning. Humility could afford to acknowledge and build upon weakness and fear, and could reason out the good of affliction and the normalcy and uses of fear, and even the benefits of anticipating moments of uncertainty, faltering, and temporary retreats on the course. Christ's death was not only a perfect model, authorizing the normalcy of some impulses of human reluctance ("let this cup pass") and the transitory irruptions of fear at the thought of having been abandoned by God, but finally closing with the deliberate commendation of the soul to God. It was more than a model, and it could inspire some perfect believers who would go on record as moving with no punctuating hesitation or agony of doubt straight to the aim of the appointed design.

I have tried to suggest something of the dynamic complexity and subtlety of the essential choice, supported as it was by the resources of a treasury of ancient wisdom and by the continuing traditions of active thought, which included the results of accurate psychological observations on the motives and responses of human beings under sentence of death. My last word for the moment is to repeat the prominent emphasis on control and reasoned acceptance.