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LAWRENCE KIMMEL

DEATH, AND THE ELEMENTAL PASSION OF THE SOUL:

An Ancient Philosophical Thesis, With Poetic Counterpoint

In his famous “Letter”, Epicurus writes to his young friend Menoeceus that “Death is nothing”—either to fear or to hope for.¹ This counsel further suggests that death is not something one can claim as his/her own, and that even its contemplation brings “a craving for immortality”, and so, loosens the fragile hold we have on the life of the soul.

In one of Pindar’s Odes, the poet seems to provide a nearly parallel expression to amplify Epicurus’ point: “O my soul do not seek immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible”.² This self-counsel desists from speculation and, rather, contrives to experience life to the full. Both cases seem to restrict the possible to the actual, however, and require further investigation. This is particularly so in the case of Epicurus, who disconnects the soul from passion in the confrontation with or even consideration of death.

There is a stoic as well as sensual core to Epicurus, of course, and his rule for the refinement of passion carries a moral abridgment of what is accessible and nurturing and hence worth pursuing in the life of the soul. This is not a matter merely of historical or cultural curiosity, for it is not difficult to detect in the bias of modern science and the counsel of contemporary empiricism similar restrictive dispositions toward the soul. But whatever legitimate objections may be raised against systemic claims of theology, such an eclipse of the soul’s dimensions seems patently and unnecessarily preclusive of quite ordinary facts of experience and of meaningful expression in literature.

In an effort to set aside the ancient and modern walls of the Epicurean garden, I will take a corrective conceptual cue from a comparable passage in the work of Heidegger. I will then consider several poets of differing spiritual persuasions who seem to catch the poetic spirit of Pindar while they offer further witness against the rule of Epicurus.

Heidegger is no less severe than Epicurus, of course, in rejecting the practice of idle speculation and the indulgent varieties of distraction. He is equally intent in his concern for authentic existence. He finds, however, a way to conceptually ground this concern which does justice to the full experience of thought and action, life and literature. The crucial question is, I believe, one of transcendence. What kind of meaning, if any, can constitute the existence of a being caught in time, facing death and dissolution? Heidegger shifts the issue not to escape temporality or mortality, but to fully disclose the content of these experiences:

Only authentic temporality which is at the same time finite, makes possible something like fate—that is to say, authentic historicity.³

If death does indeed hold dominion, still it is domain that can be claimed, and thus becomes a possible and genuine source of the soul’s understanding. Heidegger’s remark bears the same critical posture as Epicurus’ toward any illusion of imagined “salvation” from this lifeplace. It also calls for a concrete understanding of temporality which expands the existential horizons of

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authentic possibility to time-past and time-future. Both memory and imagination, history and literature become, through the resource of thought and language, means or ways to the experience of Being.

It is perhaps an arguable and relative matter whether to choose the refinement of sensation or the expansion of consciousness as a preferred or prescriptive mode of human-being, although the latter seems the richer and deeper if it is viable. It is, moreover, a vital domain in which literature must find its place. The question of viability may be clarified by analyzing Epicurus' counsel concerning death and the care of the soul.

Is Death nothing? Even if it should be so, we must ask: what is it to *realize* that? And does the confrontation with nothing lead *only* to a "craving for immortality"? Must one be frightened by absence and the prospect of nothing? Is there nothing but illusion to fill the space of that fear? Epicurus' basic intuition is that there is only present, continuing, experience and that one must make the most of it - "exhaust the limits of *it's* possibility". For Epicurus, authentic existence is not one which confronts but which forgets death, absence, nothingness.

It is quite possible, however, to concede the case annihilation for the existent, and still find meaning in the soul's elemental confrontation with death—even in Epicurus' limited terms of nothing, of absence. Once again, from a passage which seems almost a direct response to Epicurus, only consider without argument Heidegger's reminder:

The default of God and the divinities is absence. But absence is not *nod-Ling*, rather it is precisely the presence, which must first be appropriated, of the hidden fullness and wealth of what has been and what, thus gathered, is presencing, of the divine in the world of the Greeks, in prophetic Judaism, in the preaching of Jesus. This no-longer is in itself a not-yet of the veiled arrival of its inexhaustible nature.⁴

I am here interested only in limiting structures of possibility for the expression of transcendence in literature. It is not my concern to explicate or defend Heidegger, but I do want to find a brief way to introduce literature both as a means of the presencing of Being (simply making present what is genuine and authentic in human experience) and as a mode of conversation, the cultural discourse of the soul. To be open to this range of possibility which includes the absent gods as well as one's own annihilation, is not to seek immortality but simply to seek the fuller disclosure of Being.

Even if death is nothing, it remains a possible experience. In literary expression, death is, for example, the confrontation of the soul in its most elemental form of passion. What does such confrontation disclose? Most importantly, it discloses itself and the project of its possibilities. Transcendence is not rejected in Epicurus; indeed, the point of the refinement of passion, of the garden, is precisely transcendence of the vulgar, of the mundane and banal, of the empty fears of death and the cravings which some emptiness can induce.

But what is lost in the avoidance or denial recommended in the counsel to Menoeceus? The soul carries within it the root metaphors of passion, including Man's most contingent relation to being which may manifest the experience of despair and joy, of hope and anguish. The context of the disclosure of such moods of soul has been a central consideration of the world's great literature. On this theme, poetry not only expresses the passion of the soul, but is itself a manifestation of soul. Fiction, with more distance and less intimacy, structures possibility

through alternative perspectives, but still makes accessible disclosures of the ways of human-being.

As Heidegger's language suggests, and any survey of literature confirms, the usual accompanying language of soul is God or gods. Thus, we will look at two primary poets whose work manifests and expresses the confrontation of soul with death, and so with God(s). The question may be: is such confrontation itself a distraction? an indulgence? a fictive episode of mind and nothing else? Heidegger's suggestion is that the key may be in the absence itself, in the silence. Heidegger speaks of absence, of the "no-longer", as also a not-yet in its equally important sense, and of its "inexhaustible nature" in relation to experience of Being.

Whatever has been and still remains accessible through language and literature, is wholly open to continued interpretation and understanding and so creates a space for the presencing of soul. What is required, however, is a *movement* of the soul—what Kierkegaard meant by the elemental passion of faith.

Thus a fundamental understanding of soul requires movement as well as grounding in the possibilities of its own disclosure. In a famous passage in "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth echoes in a poetic medium Heidegger's lesson on the need to be open to the disclosures of Being:

And I have learned to look upon Nature not as in the hour of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes the still sad music of humanity, nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power to chasten and subdue. . .⁵

This poetic sensibility of openness is expressed once again in his "Ode On The Intimations of Immortality":

Our noisy years seem moments in the being/ of the eternal Silence ... Though nothing can bring back the hour/Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower; We will grieve not, rather find/Strength in what remains behind;/ In the primal sympathy,/Which having been must ever be ...⁶

Wordsworth's "pan-theism" is responsive to the elemental music of Being in nature which further discloses to consciousness "intimations of immortality". Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry as "powerful emotions recollected in tranquility",⁷ sounds on the surface compatible with the procedure of the refinement of pleasures in the Epicurean Garden. However, as we have noted, there is between Wordsworth and Epicurus, the poet and the philosopher, a definitive disjunction in their prescriptions toward passion, and the risk of consciousness in the face of death. There is an even stronger example of the expression of this difference in Kierkegaard's depiction of the poet as exposed to the pain of life, but one who has his lips so formed that the expression of sound which emerges is beautiful.⁸

The point of involvement in literature is not to reference or verify objectivity, but to disclose possibility in consciousness. In Kierkegaard's idiom of the spiritual, its "truth" is "subjective".⁹ While literature has no proper interest in schemes of explanation or verification, it does as metaphors do, intimate domains of reality and existence which are neither universally acknowledged nor linguistically invariant. There are forms and systems of language for which such expressions are void or absurd. Literature can, however, incorporate and assimilate both absurdity and the void in positive ways within discrete "referential" forms.

Wordsworth thus continues Pindar's poetic expansion of the possibilities open to the soul, still within the general groundwork of Epicurus but free from the strictures of moral authority

carried in his philosophical perspective. A host of contemporary poets continue to infuse life and passion into the confrontation with death without falling into either moral pronouncements or nervous speculation. I will, however, take the work of Rilke to be in its uniqueness, representative.

A distinctly modern poetic response to the soul's elemental passion in the confrontation with death is found throughout the work of Rilke, which at nearly every turn is a poetic confirmation of Heidegger's insights. In a note praising the English translation by A. Poulin, Jr., poet Robert Lowell comments that it is as hard to imagine Rilke's elegies first written in English as it is to imagine Wordsworth's poems to be first written in any language other than English.¹⁰ However, despite the singularity of their cultural and linguistic styles, both speak in the continuing poetic voice of the passion of the soul in the tradition we are discussing.

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Odes to Orpheus* provide both a song of lamentations and funeral ode, as well as a song to echo the singer of the dead. Rilke's elegies resonate with strains of nature and passion held in the grip of death. While Wordsworth's passion is somewhat tamed, a calm recollection in tranquility of benign nature, it still successfully resists the temptation of Epicurus' refined withdrawal behind the domestic garden wall. But with Rilke, a more agitated voice emerges. Rilke's soul breathes more like a child deliberately exposed to the raw elements: ". . . and if I cried who'd listen to me? ... oh the night when the wind full of outer space gnaws at our faces"¹¹

The aching question in such confrontation is where or to whom to turn, and there is no clear answer forthcoming: "Neither angels nor men, and the animals already know by instinct we're not comfortably at home in our translated world"¹² Before the mountainous mute things of nature itself ("Fortunate first ones, creation's pampered darlings") we do indeed face annihilation. "But we, we vanish in our feelings, we breathe ourselves out, our smell dissolves from ember to ember. . ."¹³

The task of the poet is presented in terms of clarity and understanding, but not explanation or moral counsel:

Who'll show a child just as he is? Who'll set him in his constellation and put the measure of distance in his hand? Who'll make the death of a child out of gray bread growing dark—or leave it there in his round mouth like the core of a sweet apple? Murderers are easily understood. But this: to hold death, the whole of death, so gently even before life's begun, and not be mad—that's beyond description.¹⁴

In the concluding elegies, Rilke offers counsel which seems to incorporate all the anxious worry of Epicurus and exceeds the passionate appeal of Pindar. The poet's question is "Why, when this short span of being could be spent like the laurel ... do we have to be human and, avoiding fate, long for fate?"¹⁵

The response is shaped by the same understanding we have attributed to Heidegger above, in much the same idiom and voice:

Not because happiness, that quick profit of impending loss, really exist. Nor out of curiosity, not just to exercise the heart—that could be in the laurel too ... but because being here means so much, and because all that's here vanishing so quickly seems to need us, and strangely concerns us.¹⁶

The detail of Rilke's response is perhaps less crucial than the tone of the passion which expresses it, but in the face of annihilation his voice is steady, articulate, and courageous and directed both to the concrete present, and also to the possibilities contained in the whole of what is expressible. When we compare this finally with the remarks of Epicurus it becomes clear which is the closer

embrace of truth, the resource of passion available to the soul. While there may be things that are better left unsaid,

... to have been on *earth* just *once*—that’s irrevocable. *This* is the time for what can be said. Here is its country. Speak and Testify ... Praise the world not what can’t be talked about ... show some simple thing shaped for generation after generation until it lives in our hands and in our eye, and it’s ours.

... Earth ... you were right, and your most sacred idea is death, that intimate friend. Look, I’m alive. On what/Neither childhood nor the future grows less ... More being than I’ll ever need springs up in my heart.¹⁷

I will give only a brief citation from the companion *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which speak to the same issue of the passion of the soul:

Though he works and worries, the farmer never reaches down to where the seed turns into summer. The earth grants.¹⁸

Banana and pear, plump apple, gooseberry. All these reveal life and death inside the mouth. I feel ... read it in the features of a child who’s tasting them.¹⁹

... of the dead, those who strengthen the earth. What do we know of the part they assume? Its long been their habit to marrow the loam with their own free marrow through and through.²⁰

Sleeping with roots, granting us only out of their surplus ... are they the masters?²¹

Whether or not we are moved by Rilke’s invitation to “Dance the orange”²² to the strains of Orpheus’ lyre, there is, in his intelligible response to the question of death and time, nature and soul, an understanding of which we are all capable, an intimation that we all, however dully, have perhaps secretly sensed, if not tasted. I suspect this experience is closer to our shared world than Wordsworth’s gentle musings; but more importantly, we must notice how bold in spirit are both these poets caught in nature’s throes, far removed from Epicurus’ garden haunts!

Finally, what is so, in the philosophical rendering of the poets’ verse and trade? What does the soul confront in its own natural time and language? What should the soul in its most elemental passion be (not do)? We have shown, I believe, a convergence of poetic sensibility in the concern to ground the spirit in the most profound awareness of its own being. This concern, felt by Pindar and echoed by both Wordsworth and Rilke, yields intimations which have no quarrel with Epicurus or the facts disclosed by natural life; but the intimations require the confrontation with death to complete the vision of life and self-understanding.

Thus the philosophical core of what we discover in the poetic idiom concerns man’s relation to Being; the poet’s expressions outstrip the moral counsel of Epicurus and suggest that a full understanding of Being requires the embrace of death, of the nothingness which rises up to confront the individual soul which questions its own being in time. What leads up to and away from our lives? Can it be known or comprehended? It can, at least in the poetic idiom available to language, be intimated and assimilated.

To contrast the literary with the philosophical, if that rather artificial distinction (not disjunction) will be allowed for the moment, is to ask if poetic understanding can expand the horizons of the soul—its full range of possible expression and passion—beyond those open to philosophy? English-speaking philosophers must be aware these days of Wittgenstein’s distinction between what can be *said* (propositionally claimed and verified) in science and philosophy I take it, in contrast to what can only be *shown* (expressed or intimated) in art and literature. I have set up in a short space contrapuntally the poetic intuitions and expressions of

Pindar, Wordsworth, and Rilke against the philosophical-moral rationality counsel of Epicurus in regard to the risk of passion, and the elemental scope and experience of the soul.

In conclusion there are two crucial points, drawing again on the model of Heidegger: (1) a confluence of poetic and philosophical sensibility is required which will fully shape the idioms appropriate to the expression of the soul's passion; (2) we must guard against those inclinations in our own field which would make philosophy a legitimating authority for the reduction of forms of expression. We must, in a word, categorically affirm the philosophical import of literature.

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NOTES

¹ "Letter To Menoeceus", Epicurus, Transl. C. Bailey, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1926).

² "Pythian Odes", Pindar. Transl. R. Lattimore, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 62.

³ *Being And Time*, Heidegger, Transl. J. Macquarrie, p. 437.

⁴ Quoted in *Phenomenology and Literature*, R. Magliola, (Purdue University Press, 1977), p. 75.

⁵ "Lines" Wordsworth, from *Prelude, Collected Poems and Sonnets*, Edit. C. Baker, Rinehart, 1948, p. 99.

⁶ "Ode to Intimations of Immortality", Wordsworth, *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁷ "Preface, Lyric Ballads", Wordsworth, *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸ *Either/Or*, S. Kierkegaard, Quoted in *Kierkegaard*, R. Bretall, (Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. xxvi.

⁹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Trans. D Swenson and W. Lowrie, (Princeton Univ. Press, 1941), p. 169.

¹⁰ *Duino Elegies*, Rilke, Trans. A Poulin, Jr. Houghton, Mifflin Co. 1977.

¹¹ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 5, First Elegy, l. 18.

¹² Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 5, First Elegy, l. 10.

¹³ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 13, Second Elegy, l. 10/17 ff.

¹⁴ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 31, Fourth Elegy, l. 76 ff.

¹⁵ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 6 1, Ninth Elegy, l. 1 ff.

¹⁶ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 61, Ninth Elegy, l. 7 ff.

¹⁷ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 65, Ninth Elegy, l. 68 ff.

¹⁸ "Sonnets to Orpheus", Rilke, *op. cit.* p. 107, # 12.

¹⁹ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 109, # 13.

²⁰ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 111, # 14.

²¹ Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 111, # 14.

²² Rilke, *Ibid.*, p. 113, # 15.