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The Poetics Of Death: Intimations And Illusions

Lawrence Kimmel

“...at bottom, no one believes in his own death—or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious everyone of us is convinced of his own immortality.”

--Sigmund Freud,
“Thoughts on War and Death”

I

From whom shall we learn about death—that is, death itself, the intimacy of our own death? From biologists, priests, physicians, psychologists, philosophers, poets? Or from the aged, the dying, the terminally ill? And in relation to what? Self, others; body, mind, soul, world? And with respect to what? Acceptance, denial, reassurance? Surely all the above—understanding the enigma of death at any depth requires whatever assistance we can get. It is equally important to acknowledge, however, that the context and occasion of our asking is not incidental to what we can finally learn. In the most general way it is arguably from the acute insights and particularized expressions of poets that we best come to understand the name and nature of death. The poetic focus of consciousness is on the thing itself—on the consciousness of what a thing means. But first it must become a thing; which is to say that the nature of what is unknown becomes embodied in its naming, and the field of its meaning is discovered therein. But it is only the *field* of its meaning that is available in the case of death: the most we can hope for is some hermeneutic understanding of the mystery in which it remains embedded.

In speaking of the *poetics* of death I have in mind a *process* of philosophy which incorporates the *perception* of the poet. *Poiesis*, “to make”, is at the heart of this endeavor of imagination; following Heidegger’s analysis, *poiesis* is a making space in which meaning emerges and through which truth (*aletheia*) comes to presence. The dialectical result of this philosophical poetics is a focused inquiry in which one comes to understand in an acute form what it is he already knows (Plato on method, Heidegger on death) and through this existential dialectic, becomes who he is (Kierkegaard on existence.)

In the poetics of the old testament, one of the many points of understanding the story of Eden is that the soul of Man can have no garden without a snake—a presence which is hidden, dangerous, seductive, secret, evil... Recall that the choice in Eden was mortality—i.e. to become a human-being. Man becomes a conscious creature in time and death becomes the definitive limit of his existence. Embodied in this myth is a primal recognition that alive we are strangers unto ourselves; that whatever meaning there is to our own existence ultimately is beyond us—that death is the final and finally irresolvable riddle of life well beyond the promised knowledge of good and evil. This is not quite so in practical terms of course: one may resolve the riddle of death by dissolving the mystery—the strategy of the Stoics. Or, one may introduce a Master Riddle Solver as an addendum to the Stoic idea that death is nothing, in which death becomes rather a transitory abstraction between mortality and immortality. But the *Deus ex Machina* only postpones the problem of a solution so far as consciousness is concerned. One may be convinced and so become habituated to the idea of immortal life—a denial of death and/or a belief in ‘a resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come’ and this pragmatic override of consciousness may indeed bring comfort in the face of the unknowable, but the riddle of

death continues to gnaw at the edges of our most quiet moments.

At the very least an adequate understanding of our own death requires that we remain acutely aware of the mystery of life, and so requires the focus of the poet whose particular genius is to touch the face of the mysterious and leave it unchanged. Why poets? Poetry is engaged in the making of meaning, and in the case at hand, the making of space within which the meaning of death becomes intimate, becomes real, becomes...mine. We do not want death explained; we want rather to understand the mystery of its meaning. Wisdom is not in finding an explanation which will satisfy another, but of discovering and unfolding a word, a name, a meaning which finds resonance with one's own life.

The power of words: what is in a name—"love, death, truth, beauty, justice..?" Words as such and in a primal sense are occasions that open up understanding to the mystery of existence. Some words more than others, obviously: so the challenge of poetic discourse is to probe the intimate and shared mystery of life and death through a primal naming that seeks to arrest for a *kairic* moment the current of existence. Words constitute a distance from the ongoing flux that otherwise carries captive each living moment into oblivion and this distance allows a doubling of existence in which we are enabled to understand that we exist, that we are live, and that we will die. It is the space of consciousness within this doubling that the paradox of existence grows into mystery, and it is that within and for which poetry strives for expression. There are no experts on death, however, any more than on life, or truth, or beauty. The poet's voice is always that of an amateur, whose hands are empty of an instrument of surety. It is a voice which at its best provides a wisdom of intimacy which she brings to the common and deeper concerns of existence.

II

Aside from the figurative humor about Death and Taxes, only the literal certainty of death remains: the one certainty in life is death—not love, not truth, not justice, not redemption... So in one sense we are as certain of our death as we are of our life. They are two sides of the same coin of existence. Life and death are limiting concepts of individual existence; life can be short or long while death can only be final but together they are easy or difficult, pleasurable or painful and for the individual both are absolute. Life and death as different and definitive aspects of existential certainty are a common pairing in philosophy as well as poetry. Whatever Descartes' prior and ensuing doubts about things generally, the *Cogito* captures the immediacy and certainty of individual existence. Consciousness and life are thus jointly immanent, but this is realized only upon reflection and this reflection brings with it the parallel certainty of death. "What is life?" is no simpler question than "What is death?" and the deep sense of connection between these two poles of existential certainty constitutes the imaginative ground of poetic insight.

For the individual, consciousness is life, but this same consciousness is an awareness however repressed or remote of death. Freud's analysis of consciousness argues that it has no clear acknowledgement of an ending; however this is not to say that we are unaware that our existence is being toward death (Heidegger.) Being *in* death, just as being-in-life are two ways of expressing the same existence in time. Freud's analysis of death is unusual in that the contrast in his account of the dynamics of consciousness is not a confluence of life and death, but of *love* and death: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Freud's (late) idea in developing this pair of primal instincts is that they seem to hold operational dominion in terms of emotional life and development as elemental drives of the organism itself: "Organism" is already greatly transformed

in the case of homo-sapiens, however, so that its range includes not only physiological but psychological—moral and spiritual—dimensions. Love and death as elemental instincts are functional in human consciousness at the point of first awareness. That is, with the birth of consciousness in Man come the combinatory features of the paradox life/death. It may be important to acknowledge that ‘lower’ forms of animate life possess similar capacities—in the higher primates there is evidence of grieving, for example a gorilla may pine away at the death of a mate or offspring. Whether or not it can be aware of the accompanying paradox, the rising creature arguably has an intimation of the intimate connection between its own life and death.

The insistence in literature that only man dies remains an elemental focus of the poetic, as in Yeats’ familiar lines from his poem “Death”:

Nor dread nor hope attend/ A dying animal;
A man awaits his end/ Dreading and hoping all...
He knows death to the bone/ Man has created death.

The attribution to human beings of the singular capacity of knowing that she is going to die becomes the touchstone of the poetic celebration of life. That this awareness of life in human beings is at the same time and always the awareness of not-life, death, gives life a fullness and depth it would otherwise lack. There is an irony in this awareness of death as the end of existence and also the end of consciousness: death as a presence in consciousness is the most secret and intimate fact of psychic life, but as an event will in the end be not experienced as such. The commonly cited claim, usually stated as a logical impossibility is that one can no more experience his own death than he can jump over his own shadow. I am arguing, however, that in terms of consciousness I do experience death, the death which is mine. In the relevant sense, death is no more an *event* for the individual than is his life. We say easily enough that one

experiences her own life, but notice that this is a peculiar expression. Compare “I experience my own speech, I experience my own thinking.” Does this mean anything more than acknowledging the necessary awareness that ‘I speak, I think?’ We might rather say that experience *is* life and life experience and acknowledge the tautology.

The fact that human reflection is a conceptual doubling of ourselves, however, means that we can not only do things, but can attend to and reflect on what we are doing, so it is as if we were split into two persons, one observing or critical of the other. The parallel with life and death is not that anyone would say that experience is death or equate the two in this same way, but the question remains whether consciousness/experience/life must include death. If life and death arrive in consciousness (or with consciousness) together, then death is in and with me as much and as long as life is in me. To the extent I am my life—the limits and substance of my consciousness—I am also my death. As temporal creatures consciousness is a factor of time, so that human beings are in life, in the world, and in consciousness all at the same time and in the same way. And it is in the same way that in living we are dying: as we are *in* life, then we are also *in* death. Consciousness comprehends both, whether Freud is right about these as primal instincts or not. That we are anxious about our own life is an acknowledgment that we are haunted by the certainty of our own death.

There is an odd disconnect between knowledge and belief that occurs in the question of my own death. As death is the one thing about which we are certain (taxes however predictable can be avoided, while death holds dominion over individual life) there is that important and residual sense in which I cannot imagine it, as in the opening citation from Freud. In this sense I know I’m going to die, but I don’t believe it. Descartes and Russell are curious places to begin

this puzzle and the unraveling of paradox, but it is familiar ground. ‘The cat is on the mat, but I don’t believe it’ is Russell’s paradigm of nonsense. To be cognitively aware of the cat on the mat entails belief: If I know the cat is on the mat, I cannot not believe it. But this is not the case with death. ‘I know I am going to die (that I am dying), but I don’t believe it’ is curiously intelligible if in order to believe it, I must be able to imagine it. Is it that imagination balks at the prospect of its own demise? Something more than this, I think. Descartes’ *Cogito* illustrates the point in another way if we take it not as a deduction but as an equivalence in which the “*ergo*” is eliminated—*Cogito, Sum*: I think, I am. I cannot think my own death; in imagining the world without me, I am still imagining and here is the conundrum: it is an imagining necessarily of an existential fiction. The result is that I am quite certain that I am going to die, I simply cannot imagine it. I can believe it as a result of my knowledge of the world and its ways, but I cannot believe it in the sense of an independent cognition of my non-existence. This is the sense in which I am my life as I am my world. Even so, and this is the juncture of the uncanny: imagination carries with it the emptiness of what it is not—death.

III

Heidegger puts it that *Dasein* is always a being toward death, but once again as with Freud, so understood death is not an experienced terminus, not an event. The point rather describes the process of human-being as consciousness aware of its own contingency. From the perspective of a life narrative, thinking of our lives as a space between natality and fatality parallel to the auto-bio-graphy—the self writing out of one’s own life--abstracts time into space and configures life on a progressive scale or graph: beginning/middle/end —birth/life/death. We record births as events, of course, as we record deaths as events. But as independent events they are not a part of the ongoing current

of consciousness that is my life. It is only later, of course, that I reflect on my birth—that is achieve an acute awareness that *I am*, and this existential awareness brings with it the corresponding awareness that I might not have been, and indeed an acknowledgment that I will not be. However much consciousness balks at this contraction, death itself is rooted in the genuine awareness of my own existence.

Heidegger persuasively argues that we are not only beings toward death but equally beings-in-death—that death is with us from the very *arche* of our individuated being. As a mere happening or event, death is the routine if sorrowful acknowledgment by someone concerning some other person. It is only in realizing my death in the awareness of my life that makes *my* death finally absolute and completes the paradox of human existence.

Given this focus we must attend the detail of consciousness of death. I can be interested in the life and death of others in much the same way as my own—of the preciousness and contingency of their existence only in so far as I share a consciousness with them. The event of their death—that is, death considered as an event, a fact—is of interest to me in the sense that consciousness no longer shared—either of life or death.

Apart from the abstractions and speculations about our common lives and deaths, Love and Death remain the staples of consciousness and the ground of philosophical thought in the poetic creation of cultural life. In one of Freud's incidental essays, "The Uncanny", he refers to the consciousness of death as a primitive and uncanny feeling and remarks that there has been no emotional change in the attitude toward death since earliest times. Elsewhere he remarks that Silence, Solitude, Darkness are elements in the production of infantile morbid anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free.

Such is the human condition that only Man knows what it is to die, knows that he is going to die, and so only for man is there death in life. Heidegger's now familiar description of human-being as being-toward-death, in terms of individual human consciousness makes it equally true to say that human-being is being *in* death, being *in* time; consciousness is a being conscious of mortality. Recall Nietzsche's line concerning that moment in the quiet alone in the darkest night when all the usual business of life has fallen away: we are left to wonder about our own existence and are met with only a deepening silence.

IV

There is a grasshopper on the screen as I look out the window. It has been in the exact same spot since yesterday morning. It is clearly dead; it is just there. It came to its final moments there for whatever reason. There was life in it, and it is no longer there. And how is it different with *my* life? We make a great deal of our lives, and so make a paramount issue of death as well. When all is said and done it is surely a matter only of human perspective and individual concern. As human beings we have a choice to be as indifferent about our death as we are of the absence of life in that grasshopper. Recall Hume's remark that from the standpoint of reason—that is, in the absence of sentiment—I no more care about the life and death of something or someone than the scratching of my little finger. The problem is that such an indifference to death seems to require a similar attitude toward life, which constitutes a pathological perversion of human-being itself. Heidegger's familiar description of human-being centers in 'care' or 'concern' for the same reason, and Rilke's poetic expression in *Duino Elegies* echoes the same point:

Why, then have to be human?
Because everything here/ Vanishing so quickly,
seems to need us...

To have been here once/ To have been at one with the
earth—
This is beyond undoing.

We noted at the outset that the occasion of the asking about the question of death—young or old, well or ill, in the joyful embrace of strength, or weary of life’s demands—will make a difference in what one can hope to learn from the question. We should note also that a sense for the poetics of the question also makes a difference. Robert Frost’s poetry as in the following from “Acquainted with the Night” has often a contextual sense of the depth of such questions:

I have walked out in rain/ outwalked the furthest city
light
Stood still and stopped the sound of feet / When far
away an interrupted cry
Came ...not to call me back or say good-bye/ And
further still at an unearthly height / A luminary clock
against the sky/ Proclaimed the time was neither
wrong nor right/ ...I have been one acquainted with
the night.

While natality/mortality is the discursive dyad of human existence, it is less a question of fact than of value whether there need be an existential melancholy connected with this linkage—whether as human beings we necessarily suffer from an elemental death anxiety as Freud describes and as Ernest Becker, for example, has elaborated it in *The Denial of Death*. This idea taken as fact—that the reality (physical or psychical?) of our condition is dismal—has the effect that philosophers, poets, pundits, priests, and publicists have all joined in the view that human beings require the distractions of culture against the pressing and ubiquitous inevitability of death. This anxiety in turn leads to an analysis of social order and cultural perspective as providing an illusion of meaning in an otherwise chaotic (human) universe. But

chaos in this general and not technical sense is in fact a derivative notion; it emerges only on the insistence that the universe be compliant to human regulatory needs. From the standpoint of physics of course, chaos itself becomes incorporated in the larger scheme of regulatory description. In the real world beyond the compensatory needs and logistical schemes of human beings, however, there is only continuous motion: hunger and satiety, exhaustion and recovery: needs generated and satisfied (or not) occur at every organic level. So it is not a fact but a perception that induces and accompanies the pensive moments in human consciousness when it focuses on death as an offense, an obstacle, a sentence, an affront to consciousness. However primal the anxiety, it is, for all that, optional not necessary in our comportment toward the human condition.

The cultural activities of human kind may and have been interpreted and analyzed as elaborately constructed diversions from the primal anxieties of death and its associated metaphors of silence, solitude and darkness, but there is nothing finally compelling in this view. We have still to determine how much weight to give to the idea that “only man dies”, how much value to attach to an acute awareness of the inevitable contingencies of existence. There is both romance and depth to this awareness, but melancholy and madness as well. Marlowe’s remark in *Heart of Darkness* that ‘We live as we dream, alone.’ carries in context an intimation of a lament to mean: we live as we dream, and as we die—alone. But of course this is not really true: we do not live or dream alone unless we pathologically lose a sense of distinction between waking and dreaming; even dreams are populated with the intrusive residuals of others—we are no more alone there than in our waking moments of consciousness. The configured isolation of death is an existential construct of solipsism which has a certain appeal to the dark side of our sensibilities, but it is a construction no less, and hence optional. Must we, however,

die alone? Is death that final distancing which separates us into individuated creatures? It is tempting to think that death is in this way singular and definitive of the human condition, but this too is misleading. Many persons do not die alone: In response to the battlefield cry ‘Once more into the breach dear friends...’ the valiant go to face their death together. Suicide pacts are attempts to avoid just this isolation—it is impossible to forget images of people joining hands and leaping to their death from the flaming ledges of the crumbling twin towers during the horror of September 11th. People die at home in beds, or in hospitals surrounded by family and friends. And, of course, some indeed do die alone, isolated, lonely, and miserable. On the psychic no less than practical level, death is a matter of perspective and perception, and the resolution of the puzzle of existence is a matter of comportment, not simply concession.

Existential angst *may* but *need not* accompany the realization that the human condition is being toward death. The sometimes weary resignation this realization may bring is recalled in Addie Bundren’s acceptance of the truth of her father’s counsel in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* that living is just getting ready to stay dead a long time. Implied in Addie’s resignation is also the common assent that there are worse things than dying. That this is so and a common belief—for example in the case of constant and irremediable pain, or loss of sentience, or even deep humiliation—living may become such that death is no longer a matter of dread, but a consoling consummation devoutly to be wished. Or not: once again the voice of the poetic embraces a range of options to this comportment. At the cusp of death, there are resources still; recall Yeats’ familiar lines that an old man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick—unless soul clap its hands and sing. Dylan Thomas’ counsel as if to his father but speaking for himself and to all of us that wise men, good men, wild men, grave men—none go gentle into that good night, but rage, rage against the dying of the light. As

Tennyson reminds us, the woods decay and fall, the vapors weep their burden to the ground, Man comes to till the earth and lie beneath, and after many a summer dies the swan. Whether on the occasion of death the individual rages or sings there is beauty in the realization of the fullness of his existence.

There are, then, no facts that decide the issue of human anxiety, whether of death or any other. If death anxiety is primal, it none-the-less can be displaced by a simple resolution to cease upon the midnight with no pain, no less than an elaborately conceived scheme of human immortality to counter despair. Having said all this, it is no more true of ordinary language and sensibility than it is of theological constructions that any of this does away with the riddle of existence and the inevitability of death. Whatever we say, whatever we discover in or about ourselves as human beings, the mystery remains. Death is a phenomenon that focuses consciousness on the paradox of human existence, and whatever results from subsequent inquiry seldom gets beyond an acute recognition of this mystery. Wittgenstein remarked that it is not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, that is the mystery. The same can be said about life, of course, and about death. There is no small revelation in this recognition that at the heart of the human condition we discover not simply a primal anxiety concerning death, but a mystery that quickens the imagination and deepens the soul. Acceptance of this elemental mystery and a poetic reconciliation with the paradox suggest that the secret of any genuine resolution to the question of death will be found less in the distractions of abstract immortality, than in simple acts of mortal fulfillment.

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