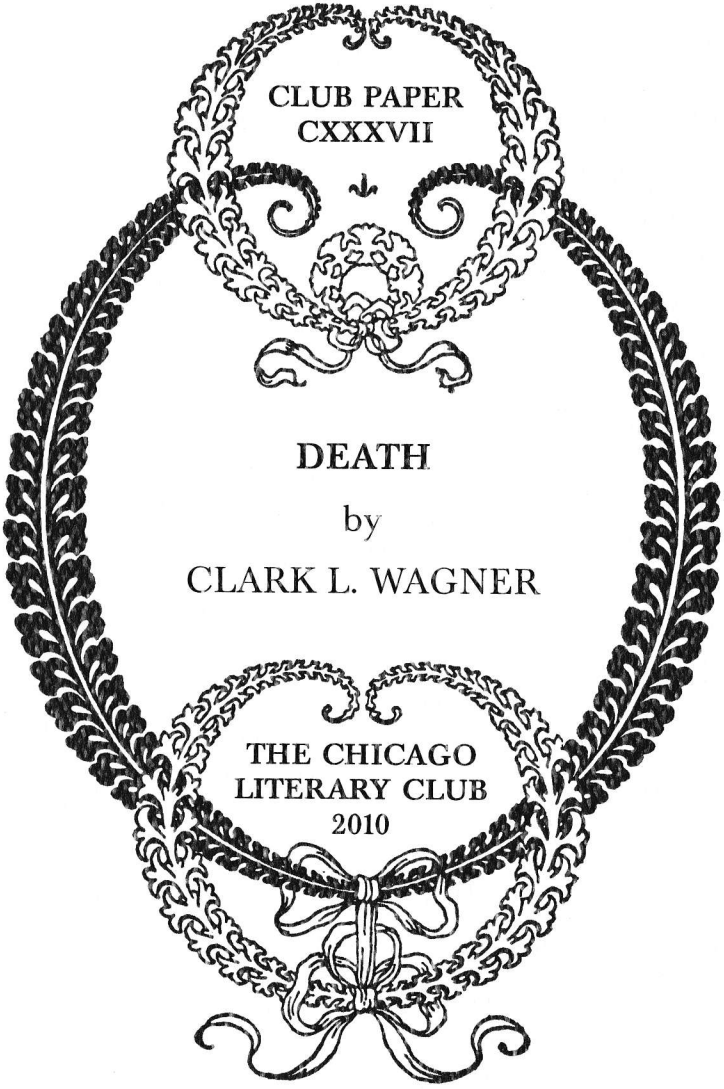
CLUB PAPER
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DEATH
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CLARK L. WAGNER
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Death

The subject of my sermon this evening is death. Let me begin by saying that this is not the first paper on this subject that has been presented to the Club. On May 23, 1977, Benjamin Boshes gave a paper entitled "The Late Twentieth Century Looks at Death." It was presented at the Arts Club of Chicago on the occasion of the last meeting of the 1976-77 season. The last meeting of each season was then known as Ladies' Night, taking place at a time when women were not eligible for membership in the Club and being the only meeting to which they were invited as guests.

Dr. Boshes's paper may be found in the Club's archives at the Newberry Library. Although my wife and I were present the evening on which he read his paper, I had only a faint recollection of its contents when I first began thinking about my own paper. Both of us, however, clearly remember the effect his subject had on members of the audience. Five minutes into his paper, a few senior members of the Club stood up and walked out of the room. Some minutes later they were joined by several others. None returned, and it was obvious, or at least it seemed so to Joanny and me, that the subject matter of the paper had been too painful for contemplation.

I do not stand here this evening to inflict pain on any of you. All of us have experienced the crushing—the deep, irreversible—loss that accompanies the death of a beloved friend or of a family member, especially one who may have been taken on the threshold or in the fullness of life. If there are—and I believe it to be so—if there are things in life worse than one's own death, the loss of such a friend or family member is among them. That said, I hope it is possible to take a somewhat dispassionate look at the subject—and even treat aspects of it with humor, which we often employ to conceal, or to lessen, the impact of those matters that affect us most profoundly.

In straightforward terms, death is the cessation of life, and the traditional medical position held that death occurred when the heart and lungs ceased to function. That position, however, became problematic with the development of artificial means for sustaining the functions of these two organs, and, while not altogether displacing the heart-lung function criterion, a new criterion—brain death—entered the picture.[1] While an examination of the physiological aspects of death is interesting in its own right, it is not my intention to address that subject. In earlier times, it was often said of a deceased person that he was "as dead as a door-nail." While hardly scientific, the "door-nail" criterion possesses the virtue of simplicity and is sufficient for our purposes this evening.

Insofar as I know, our species lives alone in its awareness that our individual and collective lives are terminal. It is not clear when in human history this awareness first appeared. Perhaps it was when our remote ancestors began to bury or otherwise formally dispose of their dead, recognizing the occurrence of a puzzling transformational change that might someday affect them, yet nevertheless perhaps not quite willing to believe that what we call the corpse (as distinguished from a carcass, a term we assign to other animals) was now so much clay. The biblical account, of

course, is clearer. After Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they discovered not only that they were naked, but, much worse—or at least I assume much worse—they knew, as they had been warned, that they would someday die. (You will also recall that there was another tree in the Garden of Eden—the tree of life. Had Adam and Eve got to that tree first, they would presumably have become immortal and would have had all eternity in which to deal with their nakedness, with consequences that only the likes of John Milton or Woody Allen could imagine.)

Regardless of the origin of humankind's consciousness of death, anthropological or biblical, the common view is that "a person's death is one of the greatest evils that can befall him."[2] Perhaps nobody has expressed this with greater satisfaction than the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.

> Life itself is a sea, full of rocks and whirlpools, which man avoids with the greatest care and solicitude, although he knows that even if he succeeds in getting through with all his efforts and skill, he yet by doing so comes nearer at every step to the greatest, the total, inevitable, and irremediable shipwreck, death; nay, even steers right upon it; this is the final goal of the laborious voyage, and worse for him than all the rocks from which he has escaped.[3]

Opposed to this commonly held view is the philosophical assertion that death—that is, one's own death—is not a bad thing. One of its earliest proponents was Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, who was born on the island of Samos in 341 BC and founded a school in Athens in 307 BC. In a letter to his friend Menoeceus, he wrote as follows: ". . . death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist."[4] Epicurus's argument is straightforward. For something to be harmful, there must be a subject on which the harm can act. But in the case of one's own death, there is no subject. As one observer noted, ". . . when

death occurs it obliterates the subject, and thus excludes the possibility of harm."[5] This view, sometimes referred to as the "existence requirement," is perhaps expressed most succinctly in the maxim that "what we don't know can't hurt us." (Shakespeare expressed the same thought more eloquently, but more on that, and more on Shakespeare, later.)

In a book entitled *The Metaphysics of Death,* published in 1993 as a part of the Stanford University Series in Philosophy, sixteen professors of philosophy and one lay-philosopher considered the Epicurean view that death can never be bad for the person who dies. The overwhelming majority of the sixteen philosophers rejected the Epicurean view; one supported it outright; another supported it conditionally; and a few others took positions that I have been unable to decipher. The one lay-philosopher, incidentally, is Woody Allen, and in addition to the inclusion in the book of his play *Death Knocks,* nine of the other sixteen contributors included a quote from a Woody Allen film, play, or other writing as a preface to their own essays.

The philosophers contributing to this compilation make a number of arguments against the Epicurean view. Some argue that death is bad because it frustrates an individual's "categorical" desires. Along what seems to me to be a similar line, others argue that death is bad because it deprives one of the goods of life.[6] These arguments, despite some inscrutable permutations, I find straightforward, or at least understandable. Other contributors to the discussion, however, are less clear. One, for example, constructs a four-dimensional framework in which posthumous events can inflict harm on the deceased.[7] Another purports to defend the following three theses:

> (1) Death is an evil, a misfortune, and one that befalls the nonexistent themselves. (2) The dead, appearances to the contrary, are not nothing. (3) Most people will never exist [!].[8]

A third commentator says that the main obstacle to accepting the thesis that death is bad for the one who dies "is the disturbing notion that it would involve backward causation."[9] Indeed.

I give these examples not to poke fun at those making these arguments. The metaphysical fog surrounding this discussion is thick, and I confess that I have been unable to penetrate much of it. Perhaps we are back where we started. While we can comprehend, and even admire, the cold logic of Epicurus, we nevertheless do not want to die—at least not right now. I think we can conclude, in the liberally paraphrased words of another of these authors, that the near-universal interest in avoiding death is sufficient proof of its harm.[10]

The acceptance of the conclusion that one's death is harmful to one raises a number of interesting questions. The first of them is as follows: If death is bad, does this mean that life is a joke? There are those who claim that "death obliterates meaning" and "renders all of our strivings pathetic and absurd."[11] This view is verifiable in the philosophical movement known as existentialism that developed in continental Europe during the 1800 and 1900s and achieved prominence in the years following the Second World War. Both Camus and Sartre, for example, wrote widely on the futility and absurdity of human existence. Though not known as an existentialist, Schopenhauer also speaks directly to this viewpoint: ". . . perhaps at the end of life, if a man is sincere and in full possession of his faculties, he will never wish to have it to live over again, but rather than this, he will much prefer absolute annihilation." He then goes on to say, "According to this, the brevity of life, which is so constantly lamented, may be the best quality it possesses."[12] Finally, the point is driven home most succinctly by the German poet Heinrich Heine, in a statement that is perhaps the darkest I have ever encountered: "Sleep is good; and death is better yet; and the best of all is never to have been born."[13]

These writers, then, not only deny death's badness, they take the position that since life is futile if not an outright evil, death is a good. An examination of the philosophical systems on which this viewpoint is based is beyond the scope of this paper, and I'm reasonably confident that few of us would in any event be persuaded of the merits of such a viewpoint. Basically, the vast majority of humankind live their lives as best they can, hoping that things will get better but, if not, that they won't get much worse, all the while firmly convinced that death is the ultimate harm. (We know, of course, that things are never so bad that they can't get worse.)

This brings us to another question. As one commentator has stated, if the Epicurean view is wrong—that is, if death is bad for the one who dies—"we seem committed to wanting to be immortal."[14] (I distinguish here between the physical life that never ends and the eternal life beyond the grave that many religions promise us, although considerations pertaining to each kind of life are sometimes the same.) Most modern commentary on the subject of physical immortality starts with the Makropulos case, which is the title of a play by the Czech author Karel Čapek that was later made into an opera by Janáček. In that case, a forty-two-year-old woman becomes immortal by drinking an elixir of life provided by her father. She lives for another three hundred years, whereupon, exhausted by the pain and apathy of so long a life, she refuses to continue to take the elixir and willingly chooses death.

Over the years, philosophers, scientists, science fiction writers, and writers generally have been intrigued by the many questions posed by the imagined prospect of physical immortality. The most recent example of which I am aware is the novel *Death with Interruptions* by the Portuguese author José Saramago, which was reviewed in the October 27 issue of the *New Yorker*.[15] In this story,

Death decides to take a holiday in the case of the ten million inhabitants of an unnamed country. The results are both comic and profound. Among them is the terrifying intuition of church leaders that "religion needs death" and could not exist without it, and, also, that if humans don't die, then any kind of conduct will be permissible.

Another consideration to be taken into account is the likelihood that a state of physical immortality would destroy motivation, since it would always be possible to put off until tomorrow what we don't wish to do today—or any other day, for that matter. Apart from this, and apart from the fact that we'd have a Malthusian nightmare on our hands, some of the more important—or at least more practical—questions regarding an unending existence are as follows: What do we do with the mother-in-law? What about the son who graduates from college and moves back home? Will I have enough money for my retirement? Will there be enough Botox? And what about other species? Do cockroaches and mosquitoes get a free pass, too? No, I suspect that none of us wants to live an endless life or to live in a world in which all lives are endless. But I suspect, also, that we want a Goldilocks life: not too short and not too long, but just right, perhaps something along the line of the nine hundred and fifty years that God granted Noah.

Let me now turn to a closely related topic. One of the comforts that many religions provide is the promise of another kind of immortality, of a life after death. Polls consistently show that most people believe in heaven—or at least that they say they do.[16] The same polls show that significantly fewer believe in hell, which, considering the conduct of people everywhere, is a belief that probably contains a large element of wishful thinking. For many, however, the mere promise of an afterlife is not enough. Few are content, in the words of World War I poet Rupert Brooke—few

are content to become "[a] pulse in the eternal mind."[17] Instead, they want to take their earthly lives with them, including their mortal bodies—which brings us to a brief consideration of resurrection theology.

In a book published in 1995 under the title *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336,* the author, Caroline Walker Bynum, identifies two broad lines of Christian thought on the subject of the resurrected person.[18] The debate here, which dates to the beginnings of Christianity, is whether the resurrected person is a spiritual entity (however manifested) or actual flesh (that is, like us, in our present incarnation). Although Church authorities such as Aquinas and Augustine argued for a spiritual afterlife, the proponents of what is known as the "hard body" model seem eventually to have prevailed. Basically, at least in the Middle Ages, this model prevailed because that is what parishioners wanted: they wanted the assurance that the self—the actual flesh-and-blood self, the only self that they knew and were comfortable in possessing—would rise triumphant at the Last Judgment and exist forever in a heavenly setting.

Having accepted the hard body model, the Church was thereby compelled to explain how the bodies of the deceased were to be returned to them. This was a particularly difficult question in cases where the body had been consumed by wild animals or even in the case of cannibalism, a circumstance addressed by Augustine in the work for which he is best remembered, the *City of God.* The Church's answer here was that everything is possible in God and that the destroyed bodies would be reassembled, scrubbed clean of their earthly imperfections, and restored to the last hair. All of this is verifiable in early pictorial representations of resurrections that featured "various and sundry creatures of the land, sea and air spewing back legs, arms, eyes, heads and other devoured elements of deceased human bodies" for reclamation by their original owners.[19]

The bodily resurrection debate—at least to my knowledge—is no longer on the front burner. That it ever occurred with such intensity may now seem puzzling to most of us. At the same time, however, we need to acknowledge that resurrection theology found its place in the Christian church and in other religions as a bulwark against the ever-present, universal fear of death and offered, and continues to offer, comfort to those for whom the prospect of total annihilation is an unacceptable end to life's journey.

An ancillary question here is, what is heaven like? I do not purport to have the answer, but would nevertheless like to suggestively address the question. First of all, there are some of us, who, when we cross over to the other side, would be disposed to ask, "Where're the squash courts?" Or, "Who are the Bears playing next week?" That, however, let us acknowledge, is too much to ask—that is, that our earthly existence should continue in such a delightfully uninterrupted fashion. Indeed, theologians, philosophers, and artists have grappled with the description-of-heaven question for millennia, with results that are varied and for the most part insufficiently persuasive.[20] Part of the problem here was best explained by Schopenhauer in the following passage from *The World as Will and Idea:*

> . . . For whence did Dante take the materials for his hell but from our actual world? And yet he made a very proper hell of it. And when, on the other hand, he came to the task of describing heaven and its delights, he had an insurmountable difficulty before him, for our world affords no materials at all for this.[21]

This question—what is heaven like?—has proved an interesting challenge for visual artists. Setting aside strictly religious paintings, whose authors most often put heaven somewhere high in the clouds, there appears to be a striking unanimity among such artists. John Martin, a nineteenth-century English artist, is a good example. Inspired by the works of John Milton, his large canvases depict

biblical scenes. Three of these paintings were on exhibit at the Tate Gallery in London several years ago. The first of them, entitled *The Plains of Heaven,* depicts heaven as a vast pastoral landscape, suggestive of eternal serenity. Another example typical of the genre is the first of the four of Thomas Cole's paintings in the series *The Course of Empire,* which hang in the New-York Historical Society. Though not religious in tone, this painting depicts an Arcadian landscape devoid of the footprints of civilization. By and large, these artists tended to show heaven as a Garden of Eden, a place of nature and innocence, of green pastures and still waters, free of sin and sorrow. In American Indian lore, this would be the happy hunting ground.

As for that *other* place, as Schopenhauer observed, those who set about to describe hell have had no problem doing so. The material has always been fresh and readily at hand. The terrors portrayed in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* scene in the Sistine Chapel are tangible and vivid. And, yet, even this somber work cannot describe the terrifying dimensions of the theological conception of hell. While it portrays the terrible punishments inflicted on the damned, it fails, as it must in the medium in which it is executed—it fails to convey the eternal, the unending nature, of that punishment. Nobody, to my knowledge, does this as convincingly as Umberto Eco, the Salvador Dali of literature, in his book *The Island of the Day Before.* In the passage I wish to refer to, the questioner asks

> 'Suffering that never ends? Does that mean that we shall suffer until a little goldfinch, drinking one drop every year, succeeds in draining all the world's seas? . . . Shall we suffer until a plant louse, taking one bite every year, has devoured every forest? . . . Will we suffer, then, until an ant, taking one step every year, has circled the entire earth? . . . And if all this Universe were desert and once every century a single grain were taken from it, would

> we perhaps end our suffering when the Universe was empty? Not even then [is the reply].'[22]

What's going on here? Does this mean that after billions of years when the sun has burned out and the solar system is no more, that even after the universe has reached the outermost limit of its expansion and retreated to that original state in which all matter was compressed into a space with no measurable dimensions and time had not yet begun to flow—does it mean that, yes, after all of that, the most stupendous show of all time, billed as "A Place Called Hell," will nevertheless continue to continue its long run, *somewhere* . . . ? Think about that, all you sinners! Is it any wonder that Christopher Marlowe's Faustus, fully aware of the fate that awaited him, pleaded for total annihilation at the hour of his death? Or that any of us, in such circumstances, would make the identical plea?

If you believe, as I do, that almost everything worthy of expression about the human condition has been distilled and best articulated by the poet, then you would naturally turn to poetry for understanding and instruction on the subject of death. William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," which the anthologist Louis Untermeyer calls "the first important American poem,"[23] is familiar to most of us. A generation or two ago, when the memorization of poetry was still commonplace (but is now sadly lacking), schoolchildren knew by heart the lines that read, "So live, that when thy summons comes to join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm, where each shall take / His chamber in the silent halls of death . . . ." Bryant wrote this poem when he was seventeen, and when it was sent to the *North American Review,* Richard Henry Dana told the editor of that magazine that he (the editor) had been "imposed upon"—that "No one, on this side of the Atlantic [especially one so young], [was] capable of writing such verses."[24]

Other familiar poems and poets come readily to mind, including John Donne's *Holy Sonnets,* Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," Walt Whitman's "The Last Invocation," and W. E. Henley's "Invictus." Edgar Allen Poe's stories and poems seem almost entirely given over to the subject of death, and Emily Dickenson frequently addressed the subject in her verse. Of special interest to us, perhaps, is Edgar Lee Masters, who was a member of this Club. His voices from the grave, immortalized in the 214 verses comprising *Spoon River Anthology,* are as compelling today as when they were first published in 1914. And, then, there is Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a poem being newly discovered by members of the Boomer generation, who are becoming increasingly aware that they, too, notwithstanding earlier expectations, must someday also join the "innumerable caravan."

It has always seemed to me that one of the more poignant themes addressed in poetry is the loss—the loss in the midst of life—that occurs with the death of a loved one, with the decline of our powers of comprehension and expression, or, simply, with the passing of life's precious moments and experiences that are among our most cherished memories. None, perhaps, has expressed this phenomenon more movingly than Tennyson, in one of the poems from his *Songs from The Princess* that begins as follows:

> Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
> Tears from the depth of some divine despair
> Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
> In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more.[25]

And which Tennyson concludes, three stanzas later, with the exclamation, "O Death in Life, the days that are no more!" This sentiment—death in life, a most singular form of death—was expressed by Shelly, Keats, and Poe, and innumerable others, but perhaps no poet has addressed it with such sustained intensity as

A. E. Housman. His poem that begins with the lines "With rue my heart is laden / For golden friends I had" is among his best known.[26] The sentiment is also captured in his poem that begins "Into my heart an air that kills," in which he invokes remembered scenes and landscapes and then laments

> That is the land of lost content,
> I see it shining plain,
> The happy highways where I went
> And cannot come again.[27]

That Shakespeare is foremost among those writers and poets who have grappled with the subject of death should come as no surprise to us. One could, it seems, read Shakespeare on the subject and have no need to read anything else. His play *Hamlet* is perhaps all-encompassing in this regard. While Harold Bloom has written that ". . . the play does not seem to me any more obsessed by mortality than is the rest of Shakespeare . . . ." and adds, "[n]or does Hamlet seem as preoccupied with death as many other Shakespearean protagonists,"[28] Bloom nevertheless goes on to say

> G. Wilson Knight [a noted Shakespeare scholar] admirably characterized Hamlet as death's ambassador to us; no other literary character speaks with the authority of the undiscovered country, except for Mark's Jesus.[29]

The play has barely begun when the ghost of Hamlet's father—from purgatory or perhaps from hell, we don't know which—makes its appearance. Many lines later, after shows of indecision, scenes of madness (feigned or real), a play-within-a-play, the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—indeed, after all seven soliloquies—, the action moves to a graveyard (the only scene outside the walls of Elsinore) and later ends in the hall of the castle with the deaths of all the major characters.

One commentator has observed that *Hamlet* may be read as "a prolonged meditation on death."[30] And so—if we pay close attention, so it seems to be. Early in the first act, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, invoking the universality of our destiny, enjoins Hamlet to set aside what she sees as a sadness attributable to his father's death: "Thou knows't 'tis common; all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity." (1.2.74-75) Later, in the third act, in about the middle of the play, we encounter what is generally regarded as the most famous soliloquy in English literature, if not all literature. Hamlet, heavy with the burden of revenge that his father's ghost has placed upon him, opens with the line "To be or not to be," and then ponders his own question. He speaks first of the dissolving comfort of death—". . . 'tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished," he says (3.1.71-72)—but then hesitates, and gives quiet voice to our near-universal apprehension of death.

> . . . in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause.
> . . . . . .
> Who would fardels bear,
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others we know not of?
> (3.1.74-90)

This ambivalence toward death on Hamlet's part, I suggest, is resolved midway into the final scene of the play. There we see a different Hamlet: composed, seemingly untroubled by past events, resigned to a destiny now controlled by others. Claudius has arranged a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, taking steps to ensure that the outcome will be fatal to Hamlet. When

Horatio, believing he senses uneasiness on Hamlet's part, proposes that the match be postponed, Hamlet demurs: "Not a whit. We defy augury." He then says to Horatio, in a passage which Harold Bloom suggests represents "the prince's final advice to the audience"[31]—Hamlet says to Horatio:

> There is (a)
> special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be
> (now), 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
> now; if it be not now, yet it (will) come. The
> readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves
> knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be.
>
> (5.2.233-38)

How should we read this passage? First of all, the penultimate line—"Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is 't to leave betimes?"—translates as follows: Since no one knows what he leaves behind, what difference does it make to leave early?[32] This, in a nutshell, is the Epicurean view—that death cannot harm the one who dies. Second, while Bloom reads these words as a farewell by Hamlet to his youth (that is, the youth of the young, conflicted Hamlet portrayed in the first four acts of the play), it seems to me that Hamlet's farewell reaches even farther and may be read as a farewell to life itself. Before the fencing match commences, Hamlet is prepared for an outcome that he knows may be fatal. "The readiness is all," he says. What difference does it make to leave early? And finally, the last two words in the passage, taken from Scripture: "Let be."[33] [34]

We could dig more deeply into Shakespeare, but time has become a limitation, leaving room at this point for only one more example of his supremacy over the subject. I introduce this example with a reference to an essay dealing with death by Arthur Schopenhauer—I believe it was he—in which he fashioned a dialogue between two philosophers. In this dialogue, one philosopher asks the other, "What will it be like after I am dead?"

And the other answers, and this answer seems to me to offer as much solace as we can plausibly expect in this life—the other philosopher answers, "Why, it will be just like it was before you were born." And here is Shakespeare's expression of the same notion, from *The Tempest*: In Act 4 of that play, following a brief performance of a masque celebrating the prospect of marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda, Shakespeare has Prospero tell us, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," and then Prospero (or is it Shakespeare?) concludes by saying "*and our little life is rounded with a sleep.*"[35] (emphasis added)

For me, a consideration of the subject of death would be incomplete without a reference to Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632. He is regarded as among the greatest of the metaphysical philosophers. He completed his masterwork, *The Ethics,* in 1675. It was published two years later, after his death in 1677. (John Locke, it may be noted, was profoundly influenced by Spinoza's ideas, and Locke, in turn, had a profound influence on our Founding Fathers.) Spinoza's studies led him increasingly away from the religious orthodoxy of the day, both Jewish and Christian, and in 1655 he was accused of heresy in the Amsterdam synagogue and one year later was excommunicated by the Jewish community of that city. From what we know, Spinoza was unperturbed by his excommunication. His vision of things was larger than that of the community from which he was expelled, just as it is infinitely larger than ours today, more than three hundred years later.

What Spinoza had to say about death comes to me from secondary sources: I am unable to understand Spinoza by reading him first hand. I am greatly indebted, therefore, to Rebecca Goldstein, who first made this thinker accessible to me—whose book *Betraying Spinoza* was published in 2006, with the subtitle *The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity.*

Spinoza does not get tangled up in the philosophical question of whether or not death is bad for the one who dies. His system, set forth in *The Ethics,* asks us to undertake a rigorous, lifelong examination of the conditions that affect and define our existence. He believes that reason alone can bring us to an understanding of that existence and that by striving to gain that understanding we will be, or will become, indifferent to our own mortality. In Goldstein's words, that pursuit "will lead us to an objectivity so radical that even our own demise can be contemplated with equanimity."[36] And in Spinoza's own words, "A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life."[37]

This, I believe, is what Epicurus tells us: think not of, nor fear, death, but strive instead to spend your life seeking wisdom and justice. It was also very much what Oliver Wendell Holmes had in mind, when, on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, in a national radio address, referring to his own mortality, he liberally paraphrased the words of a Latin poet, as follows: "Death plucks my ear and says, 'Live—I am coming.'"[38] Justice Holmes, incidentally, would live another four years. In his ninety-second year, in declining health but still mentally vigorous, having resigned from the Supreme Court a year earlier, he was paid a visit by FDR a few days after his inauguration in 1933, and when Roosevelt found Holmes in his library reading Plato and asked, "Why do you read Plato, Mr. Justice?" Holmes replied, "To improve my mind, Mr. President."[39] Spinoza would have applauded that response, and Epicurus, too.

Six or seven months ago, I was having lunch with a longtime friend, who is a member of this Club. The subject of my paper came up, and I told him that I was going to write about death. His instant reaction was, "My God, half of everything that's ever

been written is about death." I acknowledged that this was so and quietly began to wonder, "What kind of folly have I committed myself to? Instead of death, maybe I should be writing about sex"—the other half of all that's ever been written. I decided, however, to forge ahead, but with considerably less conviction than when I had started.

As if the growing burden of this questionable exercise were not enough, a number of unforeseen events occurred in the intervening months. First, there was the cyclone in Myanmar, resulting in the blinding loss of more than 120,000 lives, soon followed by the devastating earthquake in China—both events now mostly forgotten by us these few months later, like so much discarded newsprint. Suddenly, it seemed—what's the appropriate word here?—it seemed *ridiculous,* in the face of so much calamity, to be writing a paper speculating about death. Then, in late July, my wife and I received the stunning news of the death in a motorcycle accident of our daughter-in-law's brother, a young man in his thirties whose close relationships with so many friends and family members greatly magnified the enormity of that personal tragedy—and I immediately lost my appetite for any further work on this paper, putting it aside until a few weeks ago . . .

In case anyone should be left wondering, I wish to state that I do not embrace the deeply pessimistic view regarding the human condition that persists in Western philosophy and literature. The history of our species, however, provides compelling evidence supporting such a view. And I am sometimes persuaded that perhaps Matthew Arnold has correctly revealed to us the truth about our existence in his poem "Dover Beach," the concluding lines of which see humankind "as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night."[40] At the same time, I am not convinced that this is what the Intelligent Designer had in mind. To accept as an explanation

for our serial disasters the assertion that God moves in mysterious ways is an abnegation of all that it means to be human. In fact, if we were to be able to look through the other end of the celestial telescope (something that Spinoza asks us to strive to do), I think we could fairly conclude that it is man, not God, who moves in mysterious ways.

In preparing this paper, it was not my intention to present any conclusions on the subject of death, and none are offered. It is sufficient, perhaps, to acknowledge how difficult it will always be to say goodbye to those who leave us who have been so deeply a part of our lives. It is perhaps sufficient, also, to comprehend the wisdom contained in the following lines from the poem "The Garden of Proserpine" by the nineteenth-century English poet Algernon Swinburne, lines that seem to have found their way into the dairies and papers of some of our parents and grandparents:

> From too much love of living,
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
> Whatever gods may be
> That no life lives forever;
> That dead men rise up never;
> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea.[41]

Finally, let us reserve, as is so often the case—let us reserve the last word for Shakespeare. Of all that has ever been written or spoken or thought about the subject of death, he perhaps foremost, in the simplest of words, tells us all that we can really ever know with certainty, from the play *Julius Caesar*:

> [it] will come when it will come.[42]

Notes

1. See, generally, John Martin Fischer, "Introduction: Death, Metaphysics, and Morality," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 5-8.

2. Harry S. Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* 95.

3. Arthur Schopenhauer, "The World as Will," in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer,* ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Random House, 1928), 253.

4. Quoted in Silverstein, 95. See, also, http//ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/e/epicurus/meneoceus/ for the complete text of the "Letter to Meneoceus" (translated by Robert Drew Hicks).

5. Joel Feinberg, "Harm to Others," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* 172.

6. For an explanation of the distinction between "conditional" and "categorical" desires as well as a discussion of the "deprivation theory" of death's badness, see Fischer, "Introduction: Death, Metaphysics, and Mortality," 16 et seq.

7. Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," 95-116.

8. Palle Yourgrau, "The Dead," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* 138.

9. George Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* 164.

10. Feinberg, "Harm to Others," 173.

11. Fischer, "Introduction: Death, Metaphysics, and Morality," 8.

12. Schopenhauer, "The World as Will," 267.

13. Quoted in *Familiar Quotations,* ed. John Bartlett, 13th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 486b.

14. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *The Metaphysics of Death,* 81.

15. James Wood, "Death Takes a Holiday," in *The New Yorker,* 27 October 2008, 88-91

16. See Manya A. Brachear, "Poll finds a lot of gray area when it comes to salvation," Section 2, *Chicago Tribune,* 21 June 2008, for a report on a Pew Forum survey on the subject.

17. Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier," in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963), 105.

18. Caroline Walker Bynam, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

19. Brent D. Shaw, "Out on a Limb," in *The New Republic,* 17 April 1995, 46.

20. Concepts of heaven vary by religion and among individuals. An Internet inquiry turned up the following: a place beyond the Universe; far out in space; a plane of existence or another dimension; a concept of the mind or heart; a state of mind; a spiritual realm; or, simply, a place where God dwells without any particular location. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* the animals were told that it was a place where "it was Sunday seven days a week, clover was in season all year round, and lump sugar and linseed cake grew on the hedges." Signet Classic reprint edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1946), 27.

21. Schopenhauer, "The World as Will," 268.

22. Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 453.

23. Louis Untermeyer, ed. *A Treasury of Great Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 777.

24. Ibid.

25. Alfred Tennyson, "Tears, Idle Tears," in *A Treasury of Great Poems,* 832-33.

26. A.E. Housman, "With rue my heart is laden," in *A Shropshire Lad* (New York: Shakespeare House, Inc., 1951), 85.

27. Ibid., 62.

28. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (first Riverhead trade paperback edition) (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1999), 414.

29. Ibid., 423.

30. Michael Neill, "Hamlet: A Modern Perspective," in *Hamlet,* The Folger Shakespeare Library edition, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 323. The quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from this edition of the play.

31. Harold Bloom, introduction to *William Shakespeare's* Hamlet, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1986), 3.

32. See *Hamlet,* The Folger Shakespeare Library edition, 272.

33. See Harold Bloom, Hamlet: *Poem Unlimited* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 89, and Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 104-05.

34. A further word is appropriate here. As the play is ending, with Hamlet knowing that he is fatally wounded, as Horatio prepares to follow Hamlet in death, Hamlet stays Horatio's hand and speaks to him as follows:

> Absent thee from felicity awhile
> [meaning "keep yourself from the *happiness* of death"]
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story. (emphasis added)
>
> (5.2.382-84)

This passage takes us beyond the Epicurean view that one's death is merely not bad, with its statement that death itself is "felicity." For Bloom's comment here, see Hamlet: *Poem Unlimited,* 147.

35. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* The New Folger Library, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994), 133. [4.1.173-75]

36. Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), 188-89.

37. Quoted in Goldstein, 189.

38. Sheldon M. Novick, *Honorable Justice: The Life of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 373-74.

39. Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Yankee from Olympus* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1957), 318.

40. Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *A Treasury of Great Poems,* 922-23.

41. Algernon Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine," in *A Treasury of Great Poems,* 963-65.

42. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* The New Folger Library, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 77. [2.2.39].

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