

CRISIS AND THE HEREAFTER*

I

THE TRAGIC SENSE OF DEATH-IN-LIFE

WHEN you see a war movie—men with guns stalking their brother men through a shattered city, men falling grotesquely in death—your mind is torn by questions. How has the world come to this cruel pass? Why were leaders so earthy and blind? Why do men choose false leaders, and so become pawns in the immemorial game of power? But beneath all these questions is another, as old as life and as inescapable: “If a man die, shall he live again?”¹ Watching the picture, you say just what the noble Greek woman said as she looked at German corpses in the early war in Greece: “They are too young to die.” You think of the soldier asking his chaplain, “I wish you would tell me, man to man—do we go on living?” and then adding, as he struck a match and blew it out, “Is that what happens to us?” There is not much value in a war, but it has this merit: it makes it hard, even for our sensate generation, to ignore the question of the hereafter. Crisis raises the issue of immortality—in deeper ways than we first realize.

I

Our age has conspired—not successfully—to evade the fact of death. Since the Renaissance our thought has been

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¹References will be found on pp. 87–89.

largely earth-centered and man-centered. Science is the prime instance. It deals with what we call "the natural order." Its tests are quantitative; and other tests, such as the sense of beauty, are suspect lest they should bias the dispassionate and objective mind. These observations are not carping: science has its rightful place in man's endeavors, and within that place it has won honor by fidelity to truth. Religion has no quarrel or cause for quarrel when science says, "Mine is a necessary way of looking at life." The protest comes only when science says, "Mine is the only and determinate way of looking at life." As a matter of fact, strict science is not the only way, and it is not the determinate way. Science can explain almost everything about my friend and me except—my friend and me and our friendship. For the tests of friendship are simply not the tests of science. Probing a man's flesh will never reveal if or why a man is friendly: we might as well try to explain the leadership of George Washington by sifting his ashes. Perhaps our probing of the universe is as little likely to discover God. These matters have a bearing on the causes of war. A man may cut down a tree without committing murder, for a tree is in "the natural order." If man is merely in the natural order (strict science is required by its self-imposed limits to treat him as if he were), we may cut down the man without committing murder. But if the man is both within and above the natural order, if some eternity and some sanctity are in him—what then? Scientific absorption has beguiled us into thinking of man as being only in the natural order, a creature of mere time and sense, a more intricate and skilful animal. So we can cut him down with callousness: Germany and Japan appear to have been dominantly scientific in their educational interests. And we?

As for applied science, it has succumbed to body worship, and has further distracted us from the thought of death. A

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 39

newspaper printing machine is a swifter set of fingers; an automobile a swifter pair of legs; an aeroplane bestows wings on a hairless biped; air conditioning clothes him in garments almost magically adapted to the weather; the telescope and microscope, the movies and the sound-track, give godlike expansion to his eyes and ears; and, as for bazooka guns and bombs, just think of having fists that can punch hard enough to kill several men (and perhaps women and children) at one blow! This cult of a gigantic body we have labelled progress. It manifestly is not progress in our time; and, if man is more than his body, it could not be progress at any time except as accompanied by inner growth. But education has fallen under the spell of this cult of the gigantesque. Education also has called it progress, and has become more and more technical; even careerist, with an itch for money. Dr. P. A. Sorokin² would presumably trace our decline as follows: a sensate civilization (it is sensate in art and philosophy and business, as well as in science) becomes materialistic, a materialistic civilization becomes greedy, a greedy civilization becomes quarrelsome, a quarrelsome civilization breaks into the violence of war; and he might tell us that wars will not cease until individuals first, and then groups, renounce the sensate obsession. In short, we have become so preoccupied with this present world that death and whatever may lie beyond death have almost fallen from our thought.

II

This busy concern with the stuff, rather than with the spirit, of man and the universe, has tried to justify itself in slogans. Why it should feel the need to justify itself is an interesting question! It has its dogmatisms: "One world at a time!" it says dogmatically. The dogmatism is a defence: it proceeds from a vague awareness that we *cannot* live that

way. We cannot indeed: we cannot totally ignore that shrouded silence called death, and we cannot forget those whom we have loved and lost from sight: we are people, not cattle. It has its scorns, this materialism: "Pie in the sky by and by," it says scornfully. The scorn is worthy if it is aimed at the false religion which moons over heaven to neglect the injustices of earth; but *unworthy* and blind in so far as it ignores the fact that death itself is an injustice unless there be something better "by and by." It has its sentiment even, this earth bound mind: "Life can be beautiful," it says romantically; forgetting that a bouquet whose fragrance slays, or which has a dagger hidden in it, is never beautiful. These slogans are as hollow as the average political slogan, but we use them—to justify ourselves in an outlook which hardly can be justified.

But our neatest evasion of the fact of death is still in our theories of progress. Man, we say, becomes a little more civilized (we really mean more subtly sensate), and dies. God, or whatever power rules the world, then uses that accretion of culture as a starting-point for the next generation—almost as if He ground down the skulls to make an added length of runway. So the next generation has a better start. But, with hardly more than a start, *it* dies; and its skulls are ground down to make a longer road. Why? Where does the road take the race? (We always use the word "race" when facts become uncomfortable:

. . . infant science makes a pleasant face,
And waves again that hollow toy—the race.)³

This process of life-and-death leads only to one final generation which, for no particular virtue in itself, flourishes in history's brief paradise. Then? Oh, then the road plunges into an endless gulf: the planet becomes extinct. Such a theory, when examined, is seen to be the degradation of man and

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 41

the blaspheming of God, but we call it "progress." If it is a true theory, God, if He exists, is a devil. Then why not say so? Why call it "progress"? Why not admit that history is meaningless unless we can come to some truthfully bearable terms with death? But death—death is the fact which we must ignore. We must not admit that our road ends at a skull in a chasm, that capitalistic "free enterprise" and Marxist revolutions are alike mere dust and motion, that our science is only the last dinner before we are led to the electric chair; that all our martyrdoms, the soaring schemes of human brotherhood for which a million men must die, are only sand castles swept away by the tide; that

The pillar'd firmament is rottenness,
And earth's base built on stubble.⁴

We must not admit it: it is easier to ignore death, and to live strictly in the present world.

This evasion has been carried, as we might expect, into our daily practice. When a man is critically sick, the average doctor does not tell him. His friends assure him, "You are looking better today." When the minister calls, the family suggests that it might be better if the minister did not see him: "He might think he is going to die." If the minister answers, "Well, isn't he, sometime?" the family circulates the word that the church ought to have a more tactful and happier-spirited minister. Meanwhile the man's wife has searched for the insurance policies, and finds he has none—because he might think he is going to die. She looks for the will, but he has never written a will—because he might think he is going to die. Even when the man dies, the undertaker makes it appear that he has not died: he dresses him in a tuxedo, and sets him in a coffin, as if he were asleep—even though men do not usually sleep wearing a tuxedo or lying in a narrow box. Of course the man *has* died (callously incon-

siderate of our evasions), and there is a funeral. "Well, that's that! Too bad about so-and-so. But don't let's think about it." Thus the onlooker runs again to his hiding-place in this sensate world. And they call religion an "escape"! Our scientific generalizations are the escape. Our gadgets are the escape. Our cynical use of the word "escape" is the escape. Religion refuses to be blind to the fact of death.

III

Why these evasions? Why the piled-up justifying and "rationalizing" of the evasions? We have not mentioned all these excuses: "Immortality is a selfish doctrine," is one of them. Selfish to hope for men in France and Saipan that they have not been cheated of life? Immortality is a selfish doctrine only as anything else is selfish—when we think of it only as it concerns ourselves; and it is not selfish as anything else is not selfish—when we think of it, not as it concerns ourselves alone, but as it concerns God and our neighbor. Why these repeated evasions? Why these justifying? Why this painfully busy absorption in the stuff of the world?

Because death scores deep the fact of our ignorance: we do not know what, if anything, lies beyond death unless God may choose to reveal it. As a matter of fact we are constitutionally ignorant, not about death alone, but about life. Even in the realm of our knowledge we are ignorant. Our wealth of facts is now so embarrassingly large that no one mind could contain it, let alone bring it to synthesis. Besides, every mystery solved—the Copernican theory, if you will—only arouses other mysteries from their sleep, so that the goal of knowledge recedes as we advance. Besides, we are ignorant in judgment, and constantly err, as when we headed direct for world-cataclysm without suspecting it. We are constitutionally ignorant (which, if you please, may be only

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 43

another way of saying that we are creatures made for a revelation), but we can usually pretend we know—until death comes. Death scores deep the unwelcome fact of our ignorance.

Why the evasion? Because death scores deep the fact of our finitude. Death reminds us that, despite our new gigantic body, we are helpless. A rusty penknife can pierce our guard. A microbe can defeat us. We may bring our skill in surgery, our penicillin, our glandular pills, our oxygen tents at the last; but all in vain. Death comes—stalking us from the cradle, wounding us from time to time as we fly from him, and finally slays us. Death is a fatal blow, not only to our body, but to our self-centered purposes and pride. That is why we evade the fact of death.

Why the evasion? There is a deeper reason: because death scores deep the fact of our sin. "The wages of sin is death." In our world that fact could hardly be denied. Our arrant nationalisms, our racial arrogances, our business greeds have plainly brought death; not only to some who deserve it, but to many who are beyond primary blame—children and youths, mankind being perhaps the only breed that sacrifices its youth that the breed may live. If you do not wish to say that all death is sin, you can hardly doubt that all sin is death. In our minds, therefore, death is always entangled with sin. Perhaps we should omit the phrase "in our minds." We know that we deserve to die—or we know that we do not deserve eternal life. Thus someone has said in tremendous phrase: "Death is the sacrament of sin." Perhaps that is why we evade the fact of death. It leaves us defenceless in our ignorance, in our finitude, and in our sin—unless God, into whose Hands we fall at last. . . . Unless God! Death is the token that our life is meaningless apart from God.

IV

Actually our evasions never succeed. Every time we see a war picture the question returns, "Are these men gone?" We look at a blown-out match, "Is that what happens to us?" When the question concerns someone we have intimately known and loved, it is poignant, ultimate; and it can be evaded only by our doing violence to our essential nature. "There's the rub": we are not creatures of "one world at a time." The very word *time* is relative: we cannot use it without thinking, however dimly, of eternity. Every war is attended by a recrudescence of spiritualism. Thus our evasions backfire. Any minister invited to preach on a college campus will testify that the question about immortality is almost certain to be asked by student groups, youth being the saddest as well as gladdest period of our life. No one evades the question: it haunts all the doors of our mind.

The poets, being people who live on the bridge of tension between the actual and the ideal, return again and again to this issue of death, and ever ask the question you and I strive not to ask. Thus Browning's Cleon, who knew only the hope of cultured paganism:

Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,
 In this, that every day my sense of joy
 Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
 By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;
 While every day my hairs fall more and more,
 My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—
 The horror quickening still from year to year,
 The consummation coming past escape,
 When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
 Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,
 Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
 I, I, the feeling, thinking, acting man,
 The man who loved his life so over-much,
 Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible,

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 45

I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus
 But no!
Zeus has not yet revealed it.⁵

William Watson writes that same "blank misgiving," the more strikingly because he has caught our modern mood:

"Not ours," say some, "the thought of death to dread;
Asking no heaven, we fear no fabled hell:
Life is a feast, and we have banqueted—
Shall not the worms as well?"

Ah, but the Apparition—the dumb sign—
The beckoning finger bidding me forego
The fellowship, the converse, and the wine,
The songs, the festal glow!

And ah, to know not, while with friends I sit,
And while the purple joy is passed about,
Whether 'tis ampler day divinelier lit
Or homeless night without;

And whether, stepping forth, my soul shall see
New prospects, or fall sheer—a blinded thing!
There is, O grave, thy hourly victory,
And there, O death, thy sting.⁶

Try as we may, we cannot escape the question, "If a man die, shall he live again?"⁷ for the question has been breathed into our dust.

As a matter of fact, the evasion is not honest even if it were possible; and to live in dishonesty is to be cheated of joy. Miguel de Unamuno would quote Spinoza to us: "The free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is (therefore) a meditation not of death but of life."⁸ He would tell us that when we do not think of death, but only of gold and gaiety, we are inevitably sad—if only because we know that we are living in evasions; whereas if we rigorously contemplate death, we are carried beyond it, if only by some transcendence; and we are, not happy, but joyous with the poignant joy of an awe-filled love. Here are Una-

muno's own words: "Unhappy those modern European countries in which people live their lives thinking of nothing more than of life. Unhappy those countries in which men do not continually think of death and in which the guiding principle of life is not the thought that we shall all one day have to lose it."⁹

Confront the fact that you and I are ignorant—about life as well as death: does it mean that we are already above our ignorance, that we are creatures made and waiting for a revelation? For a man who knows he is ignorant is already in touch with infinite truth. Confront the fact of our helplessness at death: could it mean that we are now not helpless, but in the Hands of Eternity? Confront the fact that "death is the sacrament of sin," that we do not deserve eternal life: does that honesty mean that we are now already above our sins, and waiting for redemption? Confront the fact that your name will one day soon be seen in the obituary column: "Buttrick, George Arthur; born . . .": does it mean that you are already transcending death, and are standing on the threshold of eternity? In any event, we are not honest, and we have not deeply sounded life, until we have confronted the fact of death. Saint Philip Neri used to ask the law students of his city why they studied law. Foolish question: "To begin the practice of law." The saint replied, "And then?" The silly saint!—a man must get on in the world. "And then?" Well, then, presumably a man will marry. "And then?" Why then (this was becoming uncomfortable!) a man will raise a family, and enjoy his home. "And then?" . . . "And then?"¹⁰ The story goes that thus St. Philip recruited law students for the Christian ministry. "And then?" To think on death is honest. It need not be morbid. For when a man thinks on death he is already in some real sense above death.

In any event, we shall go on thinking about death despite ourselves. For there is in our nature what Plotinus called "a sense of the Yonder." On "this bank and shoal of time" we cannot help but peer into the eternity from which we come and to which we go. Call it the "longing for survival," or call it in Dr. J. A. Hadfield's phrase, "the urge to completeness,"¹¹ we have some instinct for the hereafter. It cannot rightly be called "wishful thinking." It is too primal and ingrained for any such dismissal. There are three deaths every minute in the United States. On any street any day you may see the pathetic flowers that show the Reaper has entered another home. No mere "wish" or self-deceit could stand against the agelong, multitudinous fact of death.

Our sensate age, with its blunting of faith in the hereafter, is an exception—almost an affront on man's nature. In ancient Egypt the next world was perhaps more real than this world. In ancient Gaul debts were sometimes written to be payable beyond death—a transaction that would seem to us a dubious risk. In ancient Etruria burial urns were engraved with pictures of the rising sun. This faith in the future, with its rewards and punishments, continued into our era of science and the machine. Then it suffered eclipse. A man busy exploiting the earth will easily forget the sky; and a man intent on his own clever fingers may for a time ignore God. But, even with us, the clouded faith has not vanished. We say to our dead, "Good-bye"—which is a contraction of "God be with you." We say, "Farewell"—which is a blessing on a traveller: "May you fare well." A cemetery we still call "God's acre," the field in which God sows seeds that die to live; and the very word *cemetery* means a sleeping chamber. Even those who today cannot believe in immor-

tality are sad or rebellious or cynical or stoical because they cannot believe. That is to say, they are to some degree at odds with themselves. This instinct so profound, so persistent, in a world in which death is so inescapable, so cruel in its silence, is no mere wish: it is rather a primacy, and almost an axiom.

The instinct is entangled with our conscience. Must we defend that word? We need not waste time and breath: it can defend us. Conscience is not a father-complex: any child and any father knows the difference between the voice of a father's dominance and the voice of right. Conscience is not a tribal custom: it brings every tribe under judgment: it brings *our* tribes under judgment for poverty and war. Conscience is not a human convenience: for most of us it is an inconvenience. Even Freud unconsciously assumes that, when by Freudian psycho-analysis Freudian light has dawned upon us, we are under some obligation to walk in the light. Thus Freud also makes his backdoor confession that we are *responsible* creatures, that is to say, people of conscience. Besides, this relativism of our day, this superficial notion that standards are our fashion rather than a cosmic sanction, has been brought to tragic absurdity by the war. If conscience is what Hitler has called it, "a Jewish invention," who is to say that Hitler is wrong? He, and any other man, is entitled to his own devisings. There is then no standard by which men and nations can be judged. Thus the conscience we have shallowed, or tried to shallow, returns on us in earthwide holocaust.

Strikingly this instinct for the hereafter claims as if by right the reinforcements of conscience. For almost any worthy man, taken offguard, will tell you that if there is no hereafter "there ought to be!" You say as you watch that moving picture, "They are too young to die": they *ought*

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 49

to have somewhere, beyond this tragic planet, their chance at life. When you see genuine sainthood, whether in some Francis or in some obscure neighbor, that *ought* has double force: the saint ought to have, not some gilded reward, but "the wages of going on." Of the converse of character there is the same righteous conviction: wicked men, plunging nations into war, ought to be brought to the bar of judgment. Only a fraction of our human crimes are exposed, and cleansed in holy fires. Nevertheless we must establish and maintain our law courts—dim broken shadows of a Righteousness written on the skies—and we must believe that beyond these shadows there is rectifying Light. The Greeks called it Nemesis: the Christian calls it "His Presence Who is Holy Love."

This instinct for the hereafter has other allies. One of them is our sense of love. Even the materialism that dismisses love as an affair of the glands and chromosomes must meet this fact. For why, when the optic nerve advises that there is no hereafter, and the glands testify there *is* a hereafter, should we believe the nerve rather than the glands? Actually we never can equate our love with our body. We may pretend to that pretense, but when some loved one dies we shall still act as if we believe in soul. We shall care for the body-house as if the one-time tenant were watching us for assurance of the honor of our love. We shall bring flowers—because flowers are the sign of springtime. We shall erect a remembrance in stone—because stone is the sign of the enduring. We may even build a Taj Mahal—which is (if you remember) a mausoleum that required twenty-two years in the building, the work of twenty thousand men, and a fortune of perhaps fifty million dollars; for even a Taj Mahal is no sufficient witness of the devotion which refuses to believe death against love.

Sometimes this love is a remembrance that does not fade. The university professor said, "My son would have been twenty-five years old today." His friend asked, "How old was he when . . . ?"—the voice stopping at "when," refusing to say "when he died?" The professor paused, then said, "He was five." No professorial learning could ever make him forget the boy who would have been a man. Sometimes this love becomes almost the glow of certitude, as when Hale White said at the grave of Thomas Carlyle:

Was it possible that such as he could altogether die? Some touch, some turn, I could not tell what or how, seemed all that was necessary to enable me to see and hear him. It was just as if I were perplexed and baffled by a veil which prevented recognition of him, although I was sure he was behind it.¹²

In our age we are torn asunder by a sensate learning that bids us doubt and a love that bids us trust. For love is entangled with our instinct for the hereafter.

"What shall I more say?" This, in clarion urgency: prayer also is an ally of our "sense of the Yonder," and the knowledge of God is its very home. An instinct which gathers reinforcement from conscience, love and prayer cannot lightly be dismissed: it is a prime datum. Perhaps conscience is a kind of prayer—God's prayer in us, and our prayer in response; for conscience, far from being a mere force or law, is a Personal constraint. Perhaps love is a kind of prayer, for the bonds of love are not merely ours, but born in us. Whenever men feel the Mystery—whether in the miracle of the night sky, or in some human heroism (like that of the submarine commander who saved his crew by giving orders to submerge while he was still on deck)—whenever our minds are thus pierced and overwhelmed, death seems a figment. So with the deliberate "practice of the Presence": those who pray, by meditation or pleading or adoring worship, tell us

The Tragic Sense of Death-in-Life 51

that they have found God; and that when they find God they share God's eternity.

This plea was the testimony Jesus used about life after death, for it was testimony rather than argument. When captious doubts were raised, He waved them aside with, "Ye do err, not knowing . . . the power of God."¹³ It was as if He said, "You think this life is all? It is only the tentative theme tapped out on a piano. One day you shall hear the symphony!" Constantly He made that kind of plea—a direct appeal to God directly known: "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."¹⁴ To ignore this age-old witness of the saints is but a brash dogmatism. To dismiss it as "projection" is worse than shallowness. For it has awakened the glad thunders of a Hallelujah Chorus, flamed in pictures like The Angelus, turned stones to worship in a Rheims Cathedral, sealed itself in a thousand martyrdoms; and age on age has given solace and sinew to our race. The man who, standing before this immemorial travail of the spirit, can say only "projection" or "escape mechanism" does not indite prayer: he shrivels his own soul. Those who have known God by prayer have known that death is a shadow because God is all and in all. They have cried with St. Francis: "Praised be my Lord for our sister, the death of the body, from which no man escapeth. . . . Blessed are those who die in Thy most holy will."¹⁵

VII

But that is not the mood of our age—perhaps because we have forgotten to pray. Aware that we shall die, we are to that measure above death, but only to that measure; and we are therefore suspended between death and heaven. The sensate world does not content us, yet we have discarded our spiritual faith. We try to evade death, but cannot; and

so are divided against ourselves. Thinking only of life we have been brought to death; refusing to think of death we have been cheated of life. Such is our tragic dilemma—in a planet that has become a charnel-house.

But one Man walked the earth, never dodging death, ever instinct with life. He alone fulfilled the plea of the villager who, gazing into the eyes of a holy man, said, "Please be as good as we think you are!" He alone: He chose shameful death rather than surrender any truth-in-love. His gallows is now against the skyline of our earth—strange sign of deathlessness. Perhaps, in the default and wreck of our sensate creeds, we must turn again to Him. But that is the story for another day.