

# *Immortal Longings and Common Lyings: Denials of Death, from Jacobean Literature to Modern Journalism*

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"To Conclude, let this ever be holden as a principall by all Christians, that how soever our death is ordinarily brought upon us by sicknesse, decay of nature, or other inferiour meanes, yet are they all swayed and ordered not onely by a generall influence, but even by a speciall ordinance and appointment of God."<sup>1</sup>

William Sclater, *A Funerall Sermon* (1607)

"Certainly, we were better to call twenty naturall accidents judgements of God, then frustrate Gods purpose in any of his powerfull deliverances, by calling it a naturall accident, and suffer the thing to vanish so . . ."<sup>2</sup>

John Donne, *Sermons*

## I - Evasions of Death

Putting a funeral urn in the middle of one's mental landscape is something like Wallace Stevens placing a jar on that Tennessee hillside: reality seems to organize itself around that empty core, that plain but mysterious concept. In his Pulitzer-winning book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker demonstrates how many of our social institutions and psychological tendencies can be explained by the need to disbelieve in mortality.<sup>3</sup> As I studied the ancestry of these evasions in Jacobean culture for my book *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance*, I began noticing how ingeniously our own popular media abets our denials.

The instances in novels and (especially) movies tend to be quite transparent: a thousand machine-gun bullets barely miss our beloved super-spy, a mourned side-kick turns up alive after all, and love stories extend into the happily ever after. When

real-life vehicles of our immortal longings actually die, the culture finds marginal outlets for the need to believe that one can become famous enough ("Elvis lives!" announce the tabloids) or cool enough ("Bird lives!" declare the graffiti) to overcome death. Those who have based their own unarticulated hopes of immortality on achieving a particular mode of perfection will not easily accept that the ultimate hero of that mode has proved mortal, rendering their aspirations pointless. "Give me my robe, put on my crown," pleads Shakespeare's Cleopatra, "I have / Immortal longings in me." Death must not be allowed to close a window to transcendence. But these are (literally as well as figuratively) the empress's new clothes: the notion of surviving death by glory, which Renaissance culture tried to revive from its classical inheritance, was evidently not sustainable outside of such imitations of antiquity. The "common liar" can destroy the fame of even Julius Caesar. As Shakespeare suggests through a kind of litotes, in the wry voice of the clown telling Cleopatra about the asp, "his biting is immortal; those that do die of it do seldom or never recover." This tragedy and its protagonists also seem aware – as the younger heroes of a younger playwright do not, in *Romeo and Juliet* – that immortality through erotic love is a fantasy, however beautiful and necessary.

The medium need not be escapist to be evasive, however. News reports ostensibly an objective presentation of hard realities actually assist us in imagining that death is an accident we may hope to avoid. The standard journalistic phrasing that says an event saved or cost a life derives from, and endorses, a presumption of immortality; otherwise one would say instead that the life was prolonged or shortened. We see an effort in the latter direction in the discussion of "procrastinating Villupo's death" in *The Spanish Tragedy* (3.1.128) – a play by the notoriously atheistical Thomas Kyd, and one which (I have argued) repeatedly taunts its audiences about their fantasies of afterlife. To think of life as a circumscribed period of survival runs against a deep need to envision some potentially final triumph that will allow us to live ever after, and therefore surely happily ever after.

If only we can avoid murderers, crashes, and a few famous ailments, we have nothing to fear: this is the delusion of Tolstoy's Ivan Illych (who does not understand how he can be dying when he has always behaved so prudently), the delusion of many hypochondriacs (who covet diseases partly so that they can isolate and combat the agency of their mortality). Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge-tragedies, like modern detective stories, reflect this incentive: to sustain the fantasy that death is a contingency, every death must turn out to be a violent crime, and a crime that can be undone

by punishing the agent (in its mildest form, this means requesting, in lieu of flowers, donations to research against the disease that proved fatal). But, "For mortal beings ... violence is time compressed,"<sup>4</sup> time in disguise. The villains are thus essentially scapegoats. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Augustine's interpretation of death as punishment for sin eclipsed Pelagius's argument that death was merely natural law.<sup>5</sup> People prefer a death embedded in a narrative of justice to an indifferent and inevitable one, just as children would rather be punished than left unattended to await physical or emotional starvation.

The vivid types of death the news media emphasize are those from which either Providence or probability may be trusted to protect us (and medical technology will take care of the rest, if we are prudent). Ordinary mortality is not in the popular repertoire. Political critics will hardly be startled at the assertion that news reporting is not a disinterested reflection of objective reality. My point is that the distortions are not merely evidence of, say, pro-capitalist partisanship; they also demonstrably serve the psychological demands of our group bred individual narcissism. Like the Jacobean canon as I read it, they may be read as a broader kind of cultural service and (therefore) cultural symptom. The news media manufacture idols of mortality – perhaps a critically ill or injured child whose death we would never have heard of, if the media had not offered us an opportunity to declare symbolic solidarity with all the other innocent victims of mortality. The illusion of connection with these idols allows us (like Margaret in Hopkins' "Spring and Fall") to displace self mourning into sympathy, or disguise it as sympathy. At the same time, we are provided with distancing devices that make the idols into ritual sacrifices: television screens and newspaper formats function like proscenium stages and holy altars.

Surely there is something insane about our frenzied attention each evening on television, each morning in newsprint, to the daily dozen local victims of flying metal, when a hundred times as many people have died that day from cancer. Yet news directors rarely dispatch remote camera crews to roam the corridors of nursing homes in search of death: that would be banal news, useless news the news of mortality. As Duke Vincentio observes in *Measure for Measure* – a play much concerned with the tension between the demographics and the psychology of human mortality – "This news is old enough; yet it is every day's news." The fact that a particular cause of death is likely to appear in reportage – or in Jacobean tragedies – in roughly inverse proportion to the likelihood that it will cause the death of the average viewer or reader certainly invites inquiry. Even the advertisements that punctuate news broadcasts

regularly serve through their thriving protagonists and their fanatical devotion to the "new and improved" the ridiculous, relentless hope that somehow, aided by advancing technology, we can now decisively beat back death. Every promise to prevent tooth decay is also a synecdochal gesture against the decay of mortality. Advertisers – like Ben Jonson's *Volpone* when he plays the patent-medicine salesman Scoto of Mantua – are selling sex, surely, but they are also selling exemptions from death. Some analogue of the Pelagian heresy keeps trying to subvert the harsh predestination of evolutionary biology.

This cultural reaction formation is not new; nor was it new even in the England of Shakespeare and Jonson. Sir Thomas Browne recognized it in the ancients:

If they dyed by violent hands, and were thrust into their Urnes, these bones become considerable, and some old Philosophers would honour them, whose souls they conceived most pure, which were thus snatched from their bodies; and to retain a stranger propension unto them: whereas they weariedly left a languishing corps, and with faint desires of re union. If they fell by long and aged decay, yet wrapt up in the bundle of time, they fall into indistinction, and make but one blot with Infants.<sup>6</sup>

To be "considerable" and earn our gratified attention, corpses must (like Donne's in "The Relique") spare us the terror of "indistinction." They must also (like King Hamlet's ghost) endorse our fantasy that death is a contingency in a providential universe. When the occasional failure of an airplane's engines or pilot causes a crash, the news media can be counted on to offer stock consolatory mythology under the guise of analysis. If none or few of the passengers die – as recently when Captain Sullenberger safely ditched his plane in the Hudson River – we are almost invariably told that "authorities are calling it a miracle." If most of the passengers die, then those who survive will be described as, all the more clearly, saved by miracle. Even when all aboard die, the undaunted newscasters find someone whose tire was providentially flattened on the way to the airport.

Life thus finds its meaning in the evasions of death. A headline in *The Los Angeles Times* read, "Fighter Jet Crash Kills 2 in Georgia; Woman Reading Bible Escapes." Even in this relatively thoughtful secular newspaper, one must read carefully into the late paragraphs of the story to discover that the facts contradict the conventional pietistic headline:

Atkinson County Sheriff Earl Haskins said Mabel Guthrie walked out of her living room, where she had been sitting and reading a Bible, just before the crash. The fuselage tore through the room just after she left to answer the telephone, he said.

"The woman was unharmed," Haskins said. "It was miraculous."

(May 26, 1990, p. A23)

Unless it was God on the phone, interrupting his usual programming for an emergency bulletin, and Ms. Guthrie had Caller ID, her preservation would seem to endorse AT&T as the greater tetragrammaton. Otherwise her abandonment of Scripture in favor of the phone would seem to have deserved divine anger rather than protection. And what would have become of the miracle if Ms. Guthrie's much less fortunate cleaning-woman had answered the phone instead and been the one spared? These may seem facile targets, but if they are, it seems worth asking why they have been eliminated by centuries of satiric exposure. This kind of pietistic and anthropocentric analysis continues to dominate news coverage of the natural disasters that etched the earth for eons before *homo sapiens* arrived to interpret them.

## II – Earth Shaking News and American Dreams

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears

Men reckon what it did, or meant

But trepidation of the spheres,

Though greater far, is innocent.

– John Donne, "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

The day after the 1989 earthquake near San Francisco, the local newspaper's sports section featured a column beginning: "Forget about baseball. People are dying." A few days later the same columnist was appalled by the decision to resume the World Series: "Excuse me," he wrote with astonished sarcasm, "but didn't 57 people die in this city last week?" If no professional sports events were held in any city in which 57 people had died the previous week, there would be no professional sports events. What subconsciously bothered the columnist must have been the fact that these were visible deaths, and to go on with normal life would be to acknowledge that death was normal. Some protest had to be filed with the

providential deities, and denying them baseball seemed a logical place to start. The clouds of mourning must hang ostentatiously long on the boys of summer, as they do on Hamlet.

Even in the "hard news" section, this myth making impulse predominated. Earthquake coverage focused on the story of Buck Helm, the man who was extricated alive from the wreckage of the Nimitz Freeway. The lead story reporting this rescue construed Helm as a kind of blue collar Lazarus whose recovery (or survival, or rebirth) offered every ordinary American hope of defeating death, tied to a fantasy of similarly reviving the tough, lovable, white salt of the earth America of Reaganite nostalgia:

So how did Helm make it, defy the disbelievers and prove that the never say die optimists who had urged on rescuers were right? It took, of course, nothing short of a miracle. . . . Drilling through concrete on the freeway's eastern flank, workers made a hole in Helm's tomb. The Jaws of Life were used to punch through his car, and a gurney was brought in. As a waiting crane lowered the delicate cargo, a rescuer riding with Helm gave the thumbs up to a stunned and elated crowd. Cheers and applause boomed out through the light rain. Perfect strangers embraced; video cameras captured the historic event.

"Anybody who's been under that devastation and come out alive is an extraordinary human being" . . . As it turns out, a lot of people think Helm is just that. Take his co workers at the Oakland waterfront, where Helm has been a member of the longshoreman's union for 20 years . . . He frequently proclaimed to friends that no challenge was too great for a guy like him. "Nothing I can't handle," he would always say. . . . Pastor Daniel Tennyson described Helm as a "Santa Claus," noting that he often treated [his daughter's] entire elementary school class to ice cream [and] tried never to miss a son's football game.

Nor were these reflexes limited to the local media, where they might be attributable to local stressors. The lead of *The New York Times* story of October 23, 1989, asserted that "Today, the name Buck Alvin Helm is synonymous with hope," because he ascended alive from "a sandwich of concrete that has entombed at least 38 people," apparently because of a "tenacity" evident even in the crushed car that "had more than 200,000 miles on it." "Once he set his mind to something, you couldn't get him to do anything else" – including die, is the clear implication. The dauntless mind trumps the vulnerable body, in a story combining resurrection (from entombment)

with rebirth: "When Mr. Whipple shined his flashlight at a crack between the two decks, he saw the back of a man's head." Another friend testified that "Buck is not a follower," he said. "He goes his own separate way." And in a fight, "you'd have to keep knocking him down or he would come back at you."

This is Falstaff popping back up after Hal's battlefield eulogy for him near the end of Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV*, or Bottom springing back to his feet to dance a bergomask after his "Die die die die die" ending as Pyramus at a similar point in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But one need not be a Shakespearean to recognize the cluster of symbolic and rhetorical reassurances about mortality pervading this reportage. Virtually every telling of the story in subsequent days, in newspapers and on television, included folksy testimony associating Helms's survival with his lovably ornery temperament, as if to authorize each of us to hope that (though we seem to be middling members of a mortal race) we might overcome certain death by sheer force of will; as if Helms's "fighting spirit" would have availed if he had been directly crushed by tons of concrete as were most of the other Nimitz Freeway victims.

Anyone who loved those victims – indeed, anyone who has lost a beloved to death – would have reason to feel affronted by the implication, yet the reporters still felt it worth implying. Death is for losers, or at least (at best) for the secretly willing. Helm was one of us, and he became a screen onto which we projected our individual, national, and almost universal fantasy that we might survive the death and burial visited on all those around us, that stubborn American individualism might conquer even the frontier of death, where the Greatest Generation now stands on patrol. When Helm died of kidney complications from his injuries a few weeks later, the story was reported very briefly, with quiet grimaces, and without reference to Santa Claus. A national NBC Special Report on Helm, titled (of course) "The Miracle of I 880," had concluded, "A man who was virtually anonymous this morning is now the focus of America's hopes and prayers," specifically the hope "that miracles can happen more than once."<sup>7</sup> And indeed they could: several years later, a television movie appeared that was also called "The Miracle of I-880," with a different survivor as its subject. Even if the man died, the story of his immortality would itself be resurrected.

At the risk of applying a negative and predictable perspective to a unique event well worthy of celebration, I will note that U.S. reportage on those who survived weeks of burial in the rubble following the recent Haitian earthquake – while still, amid the violent death of hundreds of thousands, finding proof of God's care for individuals ("Haiti: God's Miracle for Darlene Etienne" turns up prominently in related Google

searches) – generally avoided attributing the survival of Ms. Etienne, or of Evans Monsigrace, who himself calls it “a miracle,” to the character of their nation or their social class.

“American exceptionalism” is certainly a symptom of political arrogance, but it has supplementary appeal when it implies an exception to mortality. Another example of such denial, and a potent one in the political culture of the United States over the past thirty years, has been the campaign to rescue American soldiers supposedly still held prisoner in Southeast Asia. This cause unites our appetites for national and for personal immortality into an anti-death religion: the fervent belief that our people, and with them our military pride and our sentimental hopes cannot have been simply lost forever in the accidents of the jungle. Instead, these sons of our men stoically await a redemption which requires our leaps of faith and our lasting love. What allows this idea to override commonsensical questions about its practical likelihood is its affiliation with our chief narrative genres about resurrection as well as with our national price. It casts the soldiers as national Christs whom we have sacrificed to the adversary (the economically ascendant Asian race, the communist system, the devil in all his avatars), and who are (as in the frequent torture scenes in the wildly popular Vietnam POW rescue movies) re-crucified every day.

We have thus accrued a staggering national debt of guilt, first in our naive primal disobedience in the 1960s against traditional American patriarchal authority, and again in our silent complicity with the Pilate like bureaucrats of the 1970s and 80s – the ultimate villains in both the movies and the scenarios popularized by H. Ross Perot’s third-party presidential campaign in 1992, which emphasized the plight of these supposed POWs. Those bureaucrats are charged with ignoring the redemptive imperative, with concentrating on demographics instead of on the miracles of individual life and individual will. Someday, however, the martyrs will return to restore our prelapsarian state; and at that second coming they will judge us on our belief in them and in the holiness of their cause. American soldiers returning from the war in Kuwait were worshiped with an apologetic zeal arising from a widespread sense that they had redeemed the lost immortality of our entire nation a half million Buck Helms on parade, with Vietnam as their Nimitz Freeway.

These POW captivity narratives were for the political right what JFK assassination theories became for the political left (culminating at about the same moment, with Oliver Stone’s conspiracy-minded 1991 film *JFK*): a myth about whether we really belonged in Vietnam. Underlying both myths is the denial of death, the *Hamlet*

like refusal to believe in mortality apart from contingent, nefarious, and punishable causes. For most Americans it would probably be more deeply disturbing to confront the fact that Kennedy would likely be dead by now from natural causes anyway than to discover that he was shot by two guns instead of one. When a major tabloid cover story claimed JFK was alive in hiding, and retouched a photo to make him look elderly, the editors were gambling that it would exert more horrified fascination than any gory frames from the Zapruder film of the assassination. The old face is about mortality, the shattered face only about death.

Perhaps the moral heroism of Shakespeare’s last plays lies in his willingness to acknowledge aging – not only the macabre violence of Jacobean tragedy – as a path toward death. Politically minded critics have surely been justified in attacking those last plays as sentimental evasions of the brutality and injustice by which the Jacobean social hierarchy defended itself, yet it also seems true that the plays confront the brutality and injustice that mortal flesh is heir to, which no social reform is likely to prevent. In Leontes’s struggle to embrace a wrinkled Hermione, we may read Shakespeare’s own embrace of mortal decay. In Prospero’s struggle to surrender his god-like magic and return to the business of regulating mortal frailties in a real city “where every third thought shall be my grave,” Shakespeare not only retracts the subgenre of blood-revenge; he also abjures the durable fantasy that often drove that subgenre.

### III – Ordinary Dying

“There is therefore an ordinarie way of dying, which is upon ordinarie causes, and is common to all the sonnes of Adam since their transgression: or there is a death by causes more rare and extraordinary, as by pestilence, famine, battell, opening of the earth, wilde beasts, and the like.”<sup>8</sup>

– Thomas Tuke, *A Discourse of Death, Bodily, Ghostly, and Eternall* (1613)

On the one hand, there are actuarial deaths: the virtually countless expirations of obscure people by common, unglamorous, and stubbornly persistent causes such as age and disease, which are doubtless on average no more or less painful than the deaths highlighted by popular media, whether modern television news or Jacobean revenge tragedy. On the other hand, there are what might be called focal deaths, designated as important, to be moralized and placed (like Hamlet’s corpse) centrally in view, if only to block our view of a massive graveyard. In sustaining and exalting that arbitrary distinction, literary genres and other cultural media abet the denial of death, even while



ostensibly on other missions, such as the chronicling of public events or the creation of aesthetic pleasure.

Death, not suffering, becomes the one essential evil, obliging us to spend huge sums of money prolonging the painful bare survival of a terminally ill person, when the same resources could save dozens of children from the miseries of disease or starvation. The severe and long standing social incentives against suicide – even against euthanasia – indicate a deep fear of accepting death; listen to what is said of Ophelia, what Edgar says even to the aged miseries of the blind Gloucester and the heartbroken dying Lear. Perhaps we have inverted the common tendency of cultures to deem human sacrifice the one absolute necessity for group survival, and made it instead the one taboo that allows each of us to preserve our sense of individual immortality. Hence the political efficacy of rumors about government-run “death panels.”

At the other end of the life-span, the right to life movement evinces our traditional commitment to assuring that all potential human lives be allowed their existence, not to assuring that these lives achieve meaning, pleasure, freedom, or love. Long before the digital age, our understanding of life and death was already trapped in a binary model: the only numbers are one and zero. The tragic psychology of Claudio in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, who says that the meanest life is a heaven compared to what we fear of death, sits uneasily alongside the collective life affirmations of that play as a whole; and in John Donne’s sermons and lyrics the Protestant concern with the existence or erasure of the interior self becomes a mania.

Death is such an absolute cataclysm to the person who dies that the rest of the world must try, if only in courtesy, not to admit how ordinary the event seems and how little it may finally seem to matter. And it is not courtesy only: to avoid falling into the most banal and horrible evils (as Hannah Arendt’s formulation suggests),<sup>9</sup> we must overlook the banality of death. Few ethical systems could be sustained without the belief that each life is sacred a belief compellingly encouraged in the *Bildungsroman* and other works (from the sentimental thrust of *The Prelude* and Dickens to Holocaust-themed novels such as Thomas’s *The White Hotel*, Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Schlink’s *The Reader*) where the rich interiority of a single psyche opens out against the backdrop of mass death. But the fact that we need to believe something does not make it true. The idea that each life is entirely unique and infinitely valuable is steadily eroded by anonymous urban life (as it was, newly, in Elizabethan London), by the duplications and homogenization offered by modern media, even by the ethical dilemmas generated by modern medical technology. It is always easy to

exploit this imperative politically by accusing someone of “putting a price on a human life” – a serious stumbling-block in recent health-care debates – yet it is hardly a secret that every society must do so. The ambivalence seems virtually irresolvable, which is why great tragedies such as *King Lear* and *The Duchess of Malfi* can hover so uncannily between immense tenderness and black humor. To deny that a single human death is an immeasurable loss to say, with Iago, “’Tis but a man gone” (*Othello*, 5.1.10) entails sociopathology and invites holocaust.<sup>10</sup> Yet, to perceive such a death as anything other than routine and inevitable requires a highly elaborate and durable system of denial. Christianity has thrived in the marketplace of beliefs partly because it addresses so effectively the longing for personal immortality, promising to compensate for our transience as well as for (other) earthly oppressions.

The point of this argument is not that people are stupid, but rather that the evidence of personal annihilation and the need to misperceive that evidence are both so powerful that people are compelled to baffle their intelligence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William Sclater, *A Funerall Sermon Preached at the Buriall of the Right Worshipfull Mr. John Colles, Esq.* 1607. London, 1629, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, *Sermons*, VI, 219 (cf. 349)

<sup>3</sup> Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973, passim. The conclusion of Becker's book seems to me unsatisfactory, turning finally to a faith in "higher powers" as the only way to manage the painful contradictions of our existence, without asking whether this form of denial is any more valid merely because it is harder to refute than the ones he has exposed as delusional. But those earlier exposures make the book a remarkably powerful and accessible tool for exploring the psychic palliations at the foundations of modern Western culture.

<sup>4</sup> Watson, Robert N. *The Rest is Silence*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1994, p. 59; on this function of revenge tragedies, see pp. 55-73.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Humphry Sydenham, *Nature's Overthrow And Deaths Triumph* (London, 1626), pp. 6-7, which dismisses as "an error of the Pelagian" the argument that man "was mortall before he sinned, and so death seemed to be of nature, and not punishment."

<sup>6</sup> Browne, p. 306.

<sup>7</sup> NBC News Special Report, "The Miracle of I-880," Maria Shriver. This brief report contained virtually all the patterns I have been describing, beginning with the assertion that Helms' rescue "is being called a miracle," and adding immediately that "the big burly longshoreman . . . is described by co workers as 'a fighter.'" Several years later, a television movie appeared called "The Miracle of I-880"--with a different survivor as its subject.

<sup>8</sup> Tuke, Thomas. *A Discourse of Death, Bodily, Ghostly, and Eternall*. London, 1613, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* 1964; rev. and enlarged ed. New York: Penguin, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> "'Tis But A Man Gone': Iago as Serial Killer," *Shakespeare Magazine*, 1999, pp. 10-11