

No Hope, No Fear

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During the filming of David Bowie's *Lazarus*, one of the songs on his final album *Black Star*, the doctors informed him that the cancer he'd been suffering from was terminal and that they would discontinue treatment. The video features Bowie in close-up on his deathbed with a blindfold and buttons stitched over his eyes, aware of the impending death and seized by a desire to make art for one last time. *Look up here, man, I'm in danger/ I've got nothing left to lose [...] This way or no way, oh I'll be free/ just like that bluebird, now ain't that just like me?* In the last scene, Bowie walks backwards and locks himself in a dark, empty wardrobe. The image, at once moving, desperate, and full of vitality, reminded me of a historical precedent from five centuries earlier. One of the ambitions of Renaissance poet and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London, John Donne, was to die in the pulpit, and he almost managed it. On February 25, 1631, seriously ill, he got out of bed to preach his last sermon, the famous *Death Duel*. His appearance was dreadful and caused alarm in the congregation. Dr Donne has preached his own funeral service, a contemporary commented. He didn't die in the pulpit, but found another way to turn his death into a work of art. He obtained a large wooden urn and a board, undressed, put on the shroud, with knots tied to his head and feet, climbed onto the urn where he kept his balance while an artist drew his life-size portrait. This was then hung next to his bed, to remind him what the future had in store, and to show his courage in facing it. Like Bowie, Donne staged his own demise five centuries earlier, coming close to accomplishing that mastery of death which suicides arguably seek.

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Our session is early today, 8am on a Tuesday morning on a mid-November day. Unusually warm, the sky dense with clouds, autumn's beauty a blessing. Predictably, I think of that old song on my way to the clinic: *Since you went away, the days are long and soon I'll hear old winter's song. But I miss you most of all my darling when autumn leaves start to fall.*

At the start of every session, Rafael closes his eyes for a few minutes before speaking. This time it takes him longer. I keep my eyes half-closed, waiting for him to speak.

Ruby is away, he finally says. She left last Thursday to some exotic place in search of 'nature', away from her demanding job. Won't be back for a while. I have no problem with us being apart. In fact, I think it's good for us. Still, I don't know what got into me. It's like, 'I don't *really* know Ruby even though we've been together on and off for nearly four years now. I remember that night when I couldn't sleep. She was so far away in her slumber. When morning came and I had to go, she stayed there in that other world – remote, inaccessible. As I stepped out, under late summer's soft drizzle, I felt an unbridgeable distance. How will I ever see the world, even for a moment, through her eyes? I asked myself.

The next bit is a bit embarrassing, Rafael says. You see, where she is now, the kind of place, the sort of holiday, how can I say, it doesn't square up with all our deep talks and with what I know of her. Realizing that I don't really know her derails me. I felt so down this morning. I thought that if I were to, you know, *exit* this life, that wouldn't be such a crazy idea after all. I feel ashamed of being so shaken up by my realization that I don't know her. Last time after love we cried our hearts out reading Tsvetaeva's poem to Rilke who was dead by then. *What's it like there Rainer, how are you feeling? How does a poet's first sighting of the universe square with his last glance at the planet, this planet you got only once?* We read the poem looking at the white ceiling, so together, so alone in the world and for a rare brief moment surrendered to our love. *How was your trip Rainer? How did it tear, did you bear, did it burst your heart asunder? Was your very breath sweet or worse? Was it sweet?* Reading Tsvetaeva through the tears, we held each other like there's no tomorrow, Rafael says, as if the whole sky had flooded the room; as if nothing else mattered. *How's writing in the new place Rainer? If you're there, there must be poetry. You are poetry. How's writing in the good life, no table for your elbow, no forehead for your palm? Drop me a line, I miss your handwriting.*

I should come the fuck down, Rafael says. She is so good, so polite and I'm a drama queen; Southern soul and all that. She sent me friendly messages on *WhatsApp* as she usually does, and photos of the dogs in the house of friends where she stays. Then I had a meltdown after a difficult night. I felt so utterly desolate. It was like all we had had been brushed aside, that it didn't matter; that my name is on her list of chores if you see what I mean. I'm a fallen leaf in the wind. I rang her; she held me tenderly – on *WhatsApp*! In the background, chairs lined with the Union

Jack. Getting out the door to come to our session, I thought ‘what’s the fucking point?’ I have lived, loved, tasted the honey and the vinegar, the sweetbitter and the bittersweet. What’s the point of going on?

I watched a Norwegian film the other night, Rafael says, *Oslo, August 31*. The protagonist, Anders, is a thirty-something junkie, a talented but disheartened writer. He visits his old haunts after a successful spell in rehab. Memories of an old love spoilt by his addiction. Failed attempts at finding her. His state of mind is such that throughout the film you don’t know whether this is the first day of his new life, or his last day on Earth. The last scene affected me deeply, Rafael says, then pauses. He is crying softly now. Sorry, he says. So ... Anders visits his sister’s empty apartment. Sits at the piano, plays a classical tune. Then expertly prepares what it’s going to be his last fix. He draws the curtain, sits on the bed and after injecting himself he gently reclines on the bed. The film ends as it started. With loving, lingering shots of Oslo, the town Anders had loved.

We sit in silence. I don’t know who Ruby is, he says. Nor do I know who I am. It’s weird. When we are apart, which is most of the times, she holds a part of me I don’t know. And in her absence I hold a part of her she doesn’t know.

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I don’t endorse literal suicide. I’m in favour of *symbolic* suicide – the difficult detachment from the *role* we play in the world, something I partly learned from reading the philosopher Jan Patočka. Friend of Husserl and former student of Heidegger, he was forced to retire prematurely from Charles University in Prague for his political convictions (including the signing of the human rights manifesto *Charta 77*). Patočka died of a brain haemorrhage following gruelling police interrogations in hospital. “Platonic philosophers – he writes in his *Heretical Essays* – triumph over death in the sense that they do not run from it, they look it straight in the face. Their philosophy is *melete thanatou*, concern for death” – inseparable from genuine concern for life. Looking death in the face is an act of freedom, which requires leaving behind the undifferentiated mode of the herd, the latest manifestation of which is technological proliferation. It requires what Plato calls, responding to Cebes and Simmias in *Phaedo*, a truth ‘gathered into itself alone’. This meditative attempt to recognize the reality of death implies a move towards interiority, a gathering of our mind/heart.

Technological civilization is not *per se* evil, as some would have us believe. Fleeing to imaginary Arcadias won't help. It's just that technological civilization's understanding of subjectivity is trivial: it is stuck at the level of *persona*, our social role. Like many, I like my posts being liked on social media. I even relish the shabby provocations of rabid, ignorant trolls who attack my writings without having read them. Technological civilization turbo-charged this fixation with the persona but did not initiate it. Idealization of our role and simulacrum had a long gestation with the Italian Renaissance through the bourgeois revolution two centuries later, when its ideals of *liberty, equality, and fraternity* merged with an irredeemably blighted notion of individuality whose only claim remains to this day inert. For it merely calls for the measurable equality of *roles*, rather than the equality of real bodies or body-subjects. For Patočka, a necessary re-connection with our vital force occurs, paradoxically, via a *withdrawal* of being. There are echoes here with Zen, a tradition I had the privilege and honour to study and practice for many years. An intensive silent retreat in this tradition is called *sesshin*, 'gathering of one's mind/heart'. In Patočka's terms, this move subordinates the undifferentiated dimension (what he calls 'the orgiastic'; what Heidegger calls *das Man*) to a difficult stance of radical interiority and freedom/responsibility. This shift *may* happen when acknowledging the certainty of death or when examining the persistence of suicidal thoughts in difficult moments in our life. It does *not*, however, unveil 'the truth'. Instead, it journeys from one enigma to another. The enigma – of my own being, of my unknowability to myself, of the sheer insolvability of human interactions – deepens. This enigma is the *secret*, from *se-cernere*, to set apart from the frantic triviality we often immerse ourselves in our everyday.

Those who elect *symbolic* suicide aim to restore the secrecy/sacredness of their subjectivizing individuality and of their loves. They personify a refusal to have one's heart scrutinized by the auditor, the lawyer, the moralist, the policeman – and the therapist. Unless the therapist is a fellow explorer instead of a stand-in for the auditor/lawyer/moralist/policeman. A shift towards secret/sacred interiority folds on itself; it is auto-affection. It is, for Spinoza, an *intensive mode*, turning the natural passivity of affects into *active*, affirmative affections. Becoming less subjected to potentially destructive encounters, we can afford to be traversed by the intensity of the vital force itself. This is what *care of self* means – the cultivation of intense affections that do not rely on the actions of other bodies but are traversed by power itself. Or paraphrasing Spinoza: a mode of existence which is less dependent on forces invading us from outside and is increasingly filled by the insight of the interior life as part of infinity. This is highly pragmatic too;

it means creating a habitable zone where we can breathe, think for ourselves, *live* – away from the coercion of State, parishes, and coteries. The transformative shift into this active mode of affection may for some of us unfasten suddenly, when facing the reality of death and gazing at its shimmering abyss. Far from the existential heroics of staring at the sun, this is closer to owning one’s inherent human frailty, discomfiture, and faltering – finding in these an opening towards creation and communication. “It is strange how great thinkers have a fragile personal life, an uncertain health, at the same time as they carry life to the state of absolute power or of ‘Great Health’”, Deleuze wrote. The frail health that eventually prompted Deleuze to suicide was that same force that made his ground-breaking, luminous work possible.

As with other artists and poets attuned to the inner life, John Donne championed its sovereignty over and above the presumptions of coercive institutions. His controversial treatise *Biathanatos* echoes Epictetus (‘Remember the essential thing: the door is open’) and Schopenhauer (‘Is Hamlet’s soliloquy the meditation of a criminal?’). It defends suicidal thoughts from societal impositions, claiming that Jesus himself – an argument already present in Thomas Aquinas – was in essence a suicide. Authoritarians are often anti-suicide, except when sending the young to be slaughtered in their criminal and pointless wars. Rationalists and moralists parrot the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for whom suicide is a citizen’s neglect of his/her obligation to the commonwealth.

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At your funeral I thought of our last conversations. You’d drift, doze, then wake up and apologize. We’d both look at the tree outside your bedroom window, autumn well on its way. We both wished we’d met earlier in our lives. You drank with relish the hot chocolate I brought you. It gave me pleasure to see you enjoying it even though you’d drift, forget to drink, then take another sip. ‘How was your night? ‘I spare you the details’.

To me you were a true sailor. We spoke about Joseph Conrad; you quoted him: ‘you’ve never been at sea unless you’ve been 1000 miles away from any shore’. You did just that. You experienced that and understood what he meant.

We both shared a love of Ovid, the poet of exile. You showed me the following poem from book 15 of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and asked me to read it out to you. I did, and you then told me to read it better, more emphatically. *Now since the sea’s great surges sweep me on, all canvas spread, hear me! Listen! In all creation nothing endures, all is in endless flux, each wandering shape a pilgrim passing by. And time itself glides on in ceaseless flow, a rolling stream – and*

streams are never still, nor softly creeping hours. As wave is driven by wave, and each, pursued, pursues the wave ahead, so time flies on and follows; flies, and follows, always for ever new. What was before is left behind; what never was is now; and every passing moment is renewed.

I felt a beautiful sense of calm next to you and so loved our conversations. On the day before you died, I felt you had no fear and no hope. No hope, no fear. What an enviable way to live and die.

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Manu will facilitate an in-person weekend workshop *Love, Identity, and Transformation*, at the Philadelphia Association, Hampstead on 1-2 June 2024, and *Appreciate Your Life*, a week-long Existential Zen retreat in the Lake District UK, 10-15 November. For details of these and other events, please visit www.manubazzano.com