

THE EVENING OF LIFE

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THE DYING of one's friends is the proto-dying of one's own life, since with them go memories. Memories no longer shared lose relevance. They may make stories for telling, but that is something different from recollections of experiences which still seem living things, renewable so long as those with whom they were shared are still alive to walk into the room and pick up the strands again. The stories we tell of things that have happened and that we alone now retain in the form of personal memories are dead letters; however interesting they may be as records of events and persons, they can have none of the incandescence of the shared memory. Perhaps we have to see them more clearly as having served their purpose, like food that we have eaten that has contributed to our nourishment, but which only a glutton would try to make a feast of in solitary reminiscence. For while memories shared may still contribute to our experience and understanding, memories indulged alone can readily become day-dreams, conducive to a half-life. We do not have to live that sort of life, even although circumstance and some limitation of physical powers may prevent us from doing the things that we once regarded as almost essential to our happiness. There is still a present, a time of acceptance, of gratitude for the love we have shared, without repining for the separation inevitable to humanity.

In a remote hebridean island, Dr Johnson records meeting an elderly minister 'with a look of venerable dignity, excelling what I remember in any other man. His conversation was not unsuitable to his appearance. I lost some of his good will, by treating a heretical writer with more regard than, in his opinion, a heretic could deserve. I honoured his orthodoxy, and did not much censure his asperity. A man who has settled his opinions does not love to have the tranquillity of his conviction disturbed, and at seventy-seven it is time to be in earnest'.¹

Life, intellectual life in particular, in the Hebrides in the eighteenth century, was more tranquil than it is in a clamorous world,

¹ Johnson, Samuel, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*.

in which many settled opinions are challenged so that sometimes it may be difficult to feel that intrinsic elements of our faith are not threatened by that challenge. It is always tempting to stabilize our ideas in firm convictions, but quite often these convictions are not essential to our faith. It is not that they are valueless; they contribute to orderly thought; they may be more or less sound, but still only be opinions that we may be all the better for shedding, or at least for coming to hold more tentatively, as opinions, not as inviolable truth.

No doubt Johnson's elderly minister held certain strongly calvinistic opinions that would be acceptable to relatively few people nowadays. Johnson himself had no time for calvinism: yet it is plain from the respect with which he writes of the old man that he felt more drawn by what they shared than put off by their differences.

'A time to be in earnest'. Possibly nowadays we should rather say 'a time to be serious', since earnestness has come to be associated with a kind of dogged, humourless assumption, tending even to presumption. There are details of our personal beliefs to which we must hold lightly, knowing our own fallibility, yet in that very lightness of approach find ourselves more assured in a deposit of faith that has grown, often imperceptibly, even while concepts that have aided it came to be discarded. We have often met people who expressed opinions incompatible with those that patently inform their lives: people, for example, of noble gentleness and true charity who express themselves violently in a way that we know they would never act. We learn, said Père de Caussade, 'not by ideas but by pains and contradictions'.¹ Our ideas after all were not so important as our idea of them claimed. They were more transient, assimilable: as Eliot put it,

time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place.²

The ideas themselves are consumed as we move through time and place, but the faith remains, and we find at last that it is curiously independent of the ideas in which it once seemed established. We find that rather than the ideas 'faith is the light of time', to quote

¹ de Caussade, J. P., *Self-abandonment to Divine Providence* (London, 1959), p 58.

² Eliot, T. S., *Ash Wednesday*.

Caussade again; 'alone it attains truth without seeing it, it touches what it does not feel . . .¹ For it is through our faith rather than through our ideas, or even the structures founded upon our belief, that the living God communicates himself to us: and that is something that we generally come to apprehend more strongly as we grow older. Faith is the condition of this life: there will be no need of faith in purgatory, just as in heaven we shall no longer have need of hope but will live forever in charity. There is every reason to exult in faith while it is still the source of our hope and charity

Life at last can become rather like a lumber room. We have climbed the stair, left the well laid-out apartments: the nursery where we began, the practical kitchen, the correctly appointed dining room, the elegantly comfortable drawing room, the library walled with learning, the intimate, reflective study. Rooms may not in fact have been so ideal as we had hoped when we started to furnish them. We became conscious of compromise and innovation as we adapted aspiration to circumstance. But, even if the furniture was secondhand, and the carpets not after all persian, there was a recognizable order to those other rooms. Now we have climbed the last winding stair and found ourselves in the attic of our lives. Here order seems to have disappeared: the shapes crowd around us in the form of junk. Even the sentiment that clings to them is often a wistful, or sad one, because where they once seemed to promise much, many of our acquisitions achieved little, they even became obsolete and redundant before they had achieved any significant purpose. Now the dust of time lies heavy on them, they are grey and ghostly. But the window in the attic gable; it is much smaller than the windows in the lower part of the house, and, just because it is smaller, is focussed with greater intensity upon its view. The view is more remote from here, the detail less clamant, the perspective clearer: we can see the way the path led through the trees, the contours of the distant hills are no longer so perplexing. Now that the things immediately around us, the *penates* of our mental household, are diminished, we have more time and inclination to spend upon this further view, one not so private or subjective. But there is yet another window, a skylight draped in cobwebs clotted with dust. Strangely enough, the view from this ultimate window is the most formidable in the whole house. Here we know there will be little detail for our delectation. We are apprehensive, fearing that

¹ *Op. cit.*, p 19.

if we brush aside the cobwebs we may find ourselves gazing into what seems only an emptiness, colourless and dark, without even features in the cloud, that veritable cloud of unknowing. Even if the sky be radiant and cerulean, as sometimes it must be, it will offer us the very minimum of association with our experience of the world. Although it, the sky, was always there, we are approaching the time when only it is there, and there is nothing else. At the point of death we have a choice between looking forward to the unknowable, or desperately trying to discern detail in the bric-a-brac, the lumber with which we have surrounded ourselves, like Browning's dying man who consoled himself by visualizing past romance amongst the medicine bottles at his bedside.

Lust and malice, said Yeats, were all that were left to an old man. It was a poetic truth, neither more nor less; a part truth, depending for its impact upon being partial, made sharp by brevity and oversimplification. The temptation of the old towards malice is the fruit of inevitable disappointments. They may feel, with or without justice, that they have been thwarted, overtaken by those whose talents and methods they have little reason to respect. Even what they have achieved can rarely live up to what they hoped to achieve. It is easy to become embittered, and bitterness finding an outlet towards others turns to malice. When disappointment has robbed life of its savour, malice is a spicy stimulant to emotion. Hatred, we know well, brings quicker returns in the way of emotional satisfaction than love. Malice shores up battered pride with a buttress of contempt. Equally viable as compensation for disappointment is lust, lust after any bodily satisfaction. Even the man whose life has hitherto been restrained, who has quite cheerfully, confidently, deliberately, denied himself sensual satisfaction in his pursuit of finer things, may find himself growing old and, faced with a sense of failure and futility, turn to bodily gratifications as if to make up for time he feels he has lost.

I struck the board, and cried, no more;
 I will abroad . . .
 Is the world only lost to me?¹

George Herbert perfectly describes this feeling, a feeling that after all we denied ourselves to no purpose, and, now that little time may be left us, we might as well console ourselves as best we can.

¹ Herbert, George, *The Collar*.

The temptation may be strong even when we know perfectly well that we shall find no deep happiness through our physical senses. In fact by indulging them we are now actually jettisoning happiness: it is escape that we are seeking, not happiness; escape from pain and difficulty that seemed more acceptable when we foresaw a possible outcome for our efforts in the world, but that now seem frighteningly as though they may be all that is left to us.

We may go through life sustaining two images of ourself, a public image and a private image. The former is how we hope, or like to think, we impress others in a general way. The latter is not strictly confined to the picture we present to ourself, for most of us would like at least one other person to share that more personal view. This desire forms a strong element in the act of falling in love: the self, or selfish element, which so readily becomes dominant. Throughout our lives these two images are subject to change, for every such image is an ephemeral figment of imagination; and it would seem that the more we relinquish having any idea of ourselves, making any effort to see ourselves as others might see us or to conceive a self for private satisfaction, the more likely we are to reach that immediacy of living that is the prerequisite of unalloyed happiness. Neither lust nor malice can give us that because each demands a particular image of self for its realization. Malice depends on seeing ourselves in a superior light, in a position to criticize, giving us a capacity for contempt for the inferiority, the weakness, even the virtues of others. Lust itself, since man is not an animal and therefore can never be perfectly content with unadorned carnal gratification, he decorates with various prettier names, love or manliness, romance, charm, personal attraction, sex appeal, freedom of choice. Always he is creating an *alter ego* incompatible with sheer happiness.

Much of the business of life seems to devolve upon progressive strippings, strippings of the pride of both the public and the personal image. Constantly after fresh humiliations we feel that now at last we are bare to the bone, no illusions left, but after a little time we find ourselves having to disabuse ourselves all over again. It is hard for us to recapture the immediacy of living of the little child, but it is in this sense that the injunction to do so is laid upon us, like this that we enter the kingdom of heaven.

The seeds of death are always within us, eventually they must germinate and put down roots: and this we experience as decline in health. While it is right to take all reasonable care of our health (Cardinal Newman regarded the scrupulous observance of doctors'

orders as a matter of obedience), we should not allow ourselves to be over-concerned with it. After all, what is our health for but to be expended in this life: it will be of no use to us in the next. If we live to anything approaching our three-score-years-and-ten it would be a positive pity to carry away too much health with us, and to feel that we had not used up what we had been given to a degree appropriate to our time of life. If we accept that our life is not only a bodily one, we cannot be obsessed with the preservation of the body.

An elderly lady laughed when her grandchildren commiserated on her restricted life and the imminence of her death. But of course, said she, the one was a preparation for the other. Physical disabilities made her the more ready to discard her body, and, in a way, helped to make her conscious of a distinction, real even although never complete in this life, between herself and her body – that the two were not irrevocably bound together as one.

It is neither possible nor desirable for us to stay young. Sympathy with the young is not acquired by trying to remain like them. We understand them not by refusing to be our age, but rather by keeping pace with it. Yet there is one faculty that the young possess that we, grown old, must not lose: the keen interest and enthusiasm for life which, at its best, is intrinsically an adoration of God seen in his creation. Whatever sources of delight are lost to us by the diminishing of our powers, if we have grown in wisdom the essence of what we adore should have become clearer, less tied to creation, more bound to the creator. The sense of surprise and delight that we still keep for the world about us should not diminish, but rather be the purer as our desire to possess, to use the world for our own ends, grows less. If we lose our sense of surprise and delight it may be because we have tended to become know-alls, and know-alls know nothing, for all their pride in amassed information. We retain sympathy with the young so long as we have the humility to recognize that whatever their ignorance we too are very ignorant. In matters of the world, in a changed environment, they may perceive details to which we are blind, of which our ignorance is perhaps irremediable. They may be seeing further around the next corner than we ever can.

Certainly a big loss to some contemporary societies is the segregation of age and youth. Societies that slice up and compartmentalize the age groups deprive both young and old of wisdom and happiness. Youth has obvious things to learn from age (although it cannot learn them if age assumes omniscience), and age can re-learn from youth much that it may have forgotten during years of anxious

preoccupation with the small-change of living. Confined to the companionship of their own contemporaries, both young and old are liable to sillinesses from which a broader-based social life would save them.

Realization of the inevitability of death, death as a personal event, commonly comes to the individual quite late in life. To the young his own death remains, beyond reason, something surprising, almost unnatural, hardly a part of everyday expectation – even when he is a soldier, with death all around him. Young people suffering from incurable disease feel death an affront, to be bitterly resented, or heroically accepted. But, growing older, the realization comes, perhaps abruptly, that death, neither remarkable nor heroic, lies ahead, unavoidable, and perhaps at no great distance in time. It is a sobering thought liable to demolish many a worldly ambition; although indeed we may sometimes cling tightly enough to worldly prospects and possibilities, beguiling our minds with them so that thought of death may not obtrude too heavily. But in doing this we are seeing death too much as an end, in the sense of a snuffing-out. Death should be an end rather in the way of achievement. Then it does not obtrude for us any more than the good craftsman fears the finish of his task: he is instead absorbed in the immediate detail of his labour while never losing the vision of its final perfecting. Yet loss of worldly hope can be embittering. If few of us ever feel that we have fulfilled our potential, so long as life seems assured we may still have hope in possibilities. It can be chilling to realise that as far as worldly achievement goes hope itself has gone: there is neither time nor scope left to complete what we aspired to achieve. Perhaps we should realise that after all, whatever of value we may have been contributing to those close to us, or to the world in general, and however much this might seem the principal object of our efforts, our first duty being towards God, it is what, in disinterested service, we have made of ourselves that is of ultimate importance. We know of many saints that they died when all they had worked for seemed lost, or indeed in the immediate issue actually was lost: died with every appearance of defeat, so that their last struggle might have to be against despair itself. To how many of those uncanonized and unsung must the last conflict have been the same? But we are not judged upon appearances.

Probably what most of us dread as much or more than pain itself is the premature decline of mental powers. We hate the idea of being a burden on those around us, and, for ourselves, we dread the

humiliation of becoming idiotic. But just as we know little enough what goes on in the psyche of anyone else, sane or mad, nobody can know what is going on in the personalities of the senile. Yet psychologists say that in the very rare event of a person recovering from mental senility, becoming again clear and responsible in mind, remarkable developments in character have been observed, as though, while to the outside world a person may seem only confused in memory and insensible as to what goes on, growth of personality continues behind this screen of oblivion. The suggestion that the senile are only ciphers to whom it is immaterial whether they live or die is at variance with belief in God's providence; a conceited supposition that we can judge the wholeness of things for ourselves, and that externals truly interpret internal states – this last a mistake all the less defensible in the light of modern developments in the realm of psychological studies. It seems likely that in the life of some of us a time comes when the eye of the mind must turn inward and the faculties be so absorbed in inscrutable processes of growth as to appear to be atrophied. It is a phase that could be profoundly important to our fulfilment, even although it looks so futile to the world, like a void in human life. Blessed are those who help us through it with patience.

Doubtless most of us have difficulty in living fully in the present. Our memories detain us in the past: our imaginations project us into the future: both, when out of control, do us disservice. But to know 'the sacrament of the present moment' is to experience life as an immediate here and now. It dispels fears and regrets, and the obsessive image of ourselves with which we populate memory and anticipation. It is a growing love of God and can be an instantaneous prayer – this sacrament of the present moment, a hint of the eternity that begins here, already conceived within us. It should, although it may not always seem so, be easier in life's evening when there is less purpose in thinking backward and forward, and we can enter fully into the passing, momentary beauty of tree or flower, peaceful pond or turbulent sea. We should see these things contemplatively, in a way that is both stimulating and reposeful, rather than involving them, meditatively, with associations, for they no longer have the ulterior motives to serve in our lives that they once had.

To live in the moment is to live ready for death, which, however long, weary, painful, its approach may be, is itself just one moment away from life. It is this culminating moment that opens on to life more abundant, and the source and fulfilment of all our longing.