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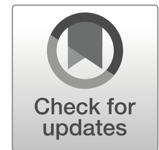
SYMPOSIUM: REFLECTIONS BEFORE, DURING, AND BEYOND COVID-19



Immortality

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Abstract

This essay is an exercise in what might be called Metaphysical Sociology. It suggests that in the secular modern Western world immortality has become the great question mark. It explores possible responses, drawing on a range of fictional examples, including the novel and film *Gone with the Wind* and Nicolas Poussin's painting of *The Last Supper*. It draws a contrast between vitality and ego, on the one hand, and soul, on the other.

Keywords Immortality · Scepticism · Ego · Soul · Death · *Gone with the Wind* · Poussin

Immortality has become the great question mark. For the secular modern age belief in any form of life after death is in doubt. The metaphysical supports that directed earlier generations, keeping them on their feet and moving, have lapsed. Most no longer believe in a supernatural being—whether providential, guiding, punishing, or forgiving. God has become a figment of the archaic imagination; gods of any type are mere alien superstitions held once upon a time by naive, even primitive ancestors. Belief has long gone in an eternal destination for the departing soul at death—Heaven or Hell. The very existence of a soul is in question; never mind whether that hypothetical soul survives the death of the individual human. All in all, human consciousness has narrowed down to focus on mortal life lived here and now, on a this-worldly plane; a finite span bound by birth and death, governed by everyday pleasures and pains.

Individuals today find themselves in the position of Socrates, if they are honest. During his Defence at his trial in Athens in 399 BC, the seventy-year-old philosopher reflected that he did not fear death. Socrates knew fairly surely that he was going to be found guilty and sentenced to death. He told his fellow citizens that he did not know what awaited him once he was gone. There were two possibilities. Either death was final, like a form of eternal dreamless sleep. Or, his soul was immortal, and would migrate off, somewhere beyond, to join other immortal souls. Socrates was the paradigm agnostic.

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The death question has not gone away. Its centrality for all humans, and in all times, is illustrated by the fact that religions pivot their theology on finding an answer to it—on proving that death is more than death. The first great work in the Western tradition, Homer's *Iliad*, focuses on death: even though it is a war and conquest story, the nature of mortality is of much greater concern than fighting and glory. Christianity instated the Cross as its commanding symbol, a death and resurrection symbol. But today, in a seemingly quite different world, one pervaded by scepticism, what is it possible to believe? Where do the boundaries of metaphysical plausibility lie? In response, let me build up from first principles.

Consider a room full of people. When a stranger comes through the door, those whom he or she encounters will recognise that a kind of force has arrived, changing the atmosphere. An extraordinary concentration of presence has infiltrated among those assembled. That individual human being is more than the sum of their known and observed parts: physical form, the complex of their gestures and expressions, voice, and attributes of character, and its biography. The derogatory Yiddish term *nebbish* underlines the point, in negation, referring to an inconsequential person whose presence on entering a room is null.

We see this in parenthesis in some fictional examples. When Achilles stands up unarmed on the edge of raging battle, in Book Eighteen of *The Iliad*, and the goddess Athena bathes his head and shoulders in metaphoric golden light, the fighting Trojans stop in mid-stride, quaking in fear, although they are armed and winning the battle. When Audrey Hepburn enters the royal ball in *My Fair Lady* the assembled throng is hushed, awestruck by her shimmering beauty, a beauty that outshines gorgeous gown, gracious figure, and finely

proportioned face. She is a modern goddess, a film 'star', the many association with divinity indicating that some kind of supernatural glow is seen to have manifested, emanating from her.

The stranger who enters the room is more than personality, although personality may have its own impact, whether brashly domineering, slyly insincere, formidably intelligent, sparklingly alert, or even insightful and knowledgeable. Personality may even predominate. It, in turn, may be amplified by physical bulk, litheness of movement, fidgety restlessness, or slothfulness.

Nor does the stranger introduce just a new energy field. Shadowing the physical form, some kind of spiritual aura has been revealed. Those already in the room, were they to calm themselves, put their egos into recess, and half-close the eyes, might sense a concentration of spectral force. Sacred impregnation of the ether contrasts with carnal thereness. Here lies the supreme potential power of living humans.

Intimidation may follow, as with Achilles on the edge of battle. Alternatively, a process of psychic contagion may impose myriad other influences. The presence of the other can inspire, excite, or charm; calm, or unsettle; or distress, deplete, and depress. Psychic contagion is arguably the least understood factor in personal and social relations, and the most underestimated.

This is why a corpse is unnerving. The physical form is there, largely unchanged. But the animating presence has gone, the light switched off. The face is a mask, whether chalklike or heavily made-up, ghastly, quite different from the prosaic outer form of the person who recently was. For, the corpse embodies an unimaginable horror.

The eerie horror that leaves the observer grave, shaken, and mute—that simply cannot be comprehended—is that this person, lying here as a ghostly physical residue, is gone forever. No breath remains to flutter the veil. The body, cold to the transgressive touch, commands deathly silence, awakening consciousness of the vacancy of life, its little consequence when seen in the context of the infinite, eternal void. So it is that a human corpse, in its negative power, is unlike a dead fish lying on a beach. This negative power, in turn, however, implies an opposite, positive truth—two sides of the same coin—a truth of such engaging potency that to remove or deny it, may paralyse the witness.

This brings me to my topic. It is difficult to believe that the concentration of spectral force that, but an hour earlier, animated the human entity that is now a cadaver, simply disappears into nothing. It is said that death is final. But those are mere words.

For the preceding three thousand years in our culture, it was assumed that a *soul* inhabited the living person. According to most beliefs, it arrived at birth and departed at death. With their last breath, the person *ex-pired*. The spirit that was breathed out for the last time was the 'immortal soul'.

To progress further we need to distinguish between two quite different phenomena animating the human psyche. On the one hand, there is vitality, energy, life-force, and ego. On the other, there is soul. The former constellation is mortal. Energy ebbs as a person gets older, or sickens; the ego shrinks, even withers. When the person dies their vitality is snuffed out, extinguished; the door shuts and the life-force is no more. If we reflect on the nature of the human ego, it appears unambiguously mortal. Already in Homer, a distinction is made between the immortal soul, which has no psychological traits, and the vital self, which is mortal.

The novel (and film), *Gone with the Wind* (1936, 1939), makes the point—a 2014 survey found it the second favourite book of American readers, just behind the Bible. *Gone with the Wind* contrasts Scarlett O'Hara, as lead character, with Melanie Hamilton. Scarlett is a force of nature, extraordinarily vital and resilient; petulantly childish, selfish, insensitive, and indomitable; all ego, yet shrewd and realistic in practical matters. Melanie is soulful, an exemplar of selfless charity and goodness. She is low on ego, naive, and sickly; whereas Scarlett is low on soul. Scarlett's vitality seems to have its source less in a love of life's potential fulfilments, than a tenacious clinging, driven by an assertive, buoyant ego that refuses to be cowed. The inference may be drawn that once the struggle is over nothing will be left—and indeed for Scarlett the life essence is *struggle*. Scarlett's one reverent attachment is to her land, Tara, expressed at the end of the novel, if only as a consoling flicker. In general, the animal life force, which Scarlett incarnates to the full, does expire.

With Melanie, the grip on actual living is weak; the influence of her spirit strong and resolute. Most who move within her orbit, hold her in awed respect. She is the unassuming centre of gravity in the novel: her grace, kindness, and incandescent virtue a beacon to others—evocatively portrayed by actress Olivia de Havilland in the film version of the story. It is more difficult to imagine the extinguishing of her spirit when she dies, which she does in the story.

St. Augustine made a distinction between two deaths, the death of the soul and that of the body. The soul may die but the person goes on living—they die twice. As an illustration, those rendered permanently unconscious by severe stroke, with the body still breathing, the heart beating, may give the overwhelming impression to those close to them that the spirit has already absented itself—the animating aura of the person, or the soul, appears to have departed. Vernacular references to the 'walking dead', or the 'living dead' suggest something similar.

Primo Levi, in *If This is a Man* (1958), his account of his own experience in Auschwitz, draws an inflexible distinction among humans between those who are saved, and those drowned—a more useful distinction today, it seems to me, than the moralised one between the saved and the damned. The distinction was more obvious in the extreme environment

of the Nazi concentration camp. The camp term used for those who had lost the will to live, but were still alive, was *Muselmänner*:

> *an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.*

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is the singular book and film phenomenon of recent times, in terms not just of sales and viewing, but of capturing the imagination of child and adult alike, its scope as vast as its world-wide influence. The seven-volume *Harry Potter* series posits a similar understanding of the immortal soul, by casting sinister black, wraithlike creatures called Dementors, which chill the atmosphere whenever they are present, making anyone in their vicinity gloomy and unhappy—they represent psychic contagion writ large. When Dementors attack, they attempt to kiss the victim, in order to suck out the soul, through the mouth. Professor Remus Lupin puts it:

> *You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no…anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just—exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever…lost.*

In a largely post-Christian world, it is telling that Primo Levi and J. K. Rowling should evoke almost identical imagery for the existence of the soul. Auschwitz had swarmed with Dementors.

This reflection may be deepened by considering a work from a much earlier time: Nicolas Poussin's painting of *The Last Supper* (1647), the one that belongs to his second series of *Seven Sacraments*, now hanging in Edinburgh. The Gospel scene provides the vehicle for a Poussin meditation on immortality.

Jesus presides in a gloomy room, dimly lit by a tri-branch oil-lamp with three small flames hanging over the circle of his followers, sprawled around a low table. Poussin's Jesus is a massive figure, wearing a white tunic covered by a heavy red cloak. He sits erect, with his right hand, the one of command, pointing, it seems, inwards to his own breast. With his other hand he holds up, in front of him, a golden bowl—the cup of fate, about to be fulfilled next morning, in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The wine in the bowl is his blood—reflecting the red cloak. The bowl itself is numinous, as if hovering weightless, resonating his presence. It combines with the lamplight above, and Judas over on the far left, to hint at some transfiguration of the wine into charged vapour, which becomes the essential medium of the scene. A curtain hanging behind Jesus shields the breath of spirit.

In John's account, as painted here, the single disciple to receive bread dipped in wine—the unholy wafer—is Judas, also in red, who is exiting through a door on the left. Poussin depicts Judas in deep shadows with his right hand raised, index finger extended close to his lips, as if motioning himself to silence. In his mouth, the wine has not been transmuted into sacred blood. The gesture, and facial profile, signal two ways: one, angry resentment and malicious deliberate intent; and two, that his own breath has stopped—in shock—sucked out, as if by a Dementor. The remaining eleven followers sprawl around in their dark circle, agog with incomprehension and dread.

But what is the nature of the Jesus presence here? His form is misty, enigmatically obscure—charismatically dominant yet, at the same time, absent. Eyes no longer penetrate the world, seizing it, taking it on. Abstracted, they are already in transition, distant, gazing beyond. His pointing at himself seems in part to anchor his being in the world for one last moment, as if to warn about not taking outer forms literally, for all that matters is what in-dwells, however fleetingly, constrained in the cup of destiny. And what dwells within is independent of the body, and the logic of its vitality. In this paradigmatic scene, it is the force that has taken over the room, possessing Judas with a negative compulsion that chases him out, his own malevolent absence repulsive to himself, a non-man shuffling into oblivion.

We might call it the power of *soul*, for want of a better expression, that has overwhelmed this darkened room—a soul unique in its charisma, yet representative of the potential of all human souls. Its force has intensified here in inverse proportion as the active Jesus self withdraws (a trope also found in the character of Melanie Hamilton). Infinite expanses of eerie spirit dwelling somewhere beyond are marshalled, attracted, and concentrated here, conjoining with what swells within this man, an infinite wellspring surging up and spilling out, unchained from worldly concerns, timeless, overflowing the cup of destiny. Ordinary everyday chronological time gives way to epic *kairos* time—one particular Thursday night, long ago in Jerusalem, standing for everywhen, everywhere.

Jesus, in the antechamber of his own death, has set up a magnetic field, charging the atmosphere with eerie otherworldliness, in this darkened upper room, deranging all the others present. Peter reels backwards, blank-eyed; John is frozen in horror, mouth open, fingers tightly clasped (struck with sacred fear); the remaining followers of Jesus are diminished to a frenzied, confused insignificance. And Judas, the only one tuned in to Jesus, in negation, is seized by the discharge of this force, his own animating spirit wrapped up by it, straitjacketed so he can hardly breathe, and propelled out of the room. In his case, nothingness awaits non-being; or, in the cryptic,

portentous words John uses to end his account of the scene: 'And it was night.'

Viewers who manage to immerse themselves in the painting may find themselves captured by an 'oceanic feeling', to use Romain Rolland's term. The way in is through identification with Jesus, which he invites, by pointing at himself. To sit, as it were, inside his skin, is to lose self as he does, the spirit freed, to dwell, hovering in the transformed air, dark with fearful wonder, flowing out in expanded consciousness. The scene contrasts the saved with the drowned.

Romain Rolland writes of a feeling he was never without, of something limitless, unbounded, a sensation of eternity. He suggests that this feeling is the universal source of religious energy, whatever the religion and whatever the particular forms of belief and worship. Tolstoy evokes something very similar in his description of the death of Prince Andrei in *War and Peace*. The oceanic feeling, Romain Rolland adds, brings no assurance of personal immortality.

Human tragedy is not the only transmitter of the potential embrace of an oceanic beyond. The modern world continues to provide its own meditative devices. There is, for instance, a work of art like this neo-classical painting, its own meditation independent from any saving God, or doctrine of Resurrection. The leitmotif in *Harry Potter* runs parallel. Poussin and J. K. Rowling both give authority to the existence of an immortal soul.

On another modern front, work, when it takes the form of vocation, is the most commonly practised of meditations. Vermeer, contemporaneously with Poussin, revealed its archetypal sacred quality. In the Dutch painter's portraits of astronomer, geographer, and lace-maker, solitary individuals all focus silently on the task at hand, with contemplative devotion. Heads bowed over their task—inwardly focussed in secular prayer—they are taken out of themselves, transported into some vast other-worldly domain.

Plato suggested that all things have an ideal form—for every imperfect table there is an archetype, to which the real carpentered creation approximates, to a greater or lesser degree. On those rare occasions on which a novelist, poet, or painter gets the form right a sense of fulfilment and right order follows, for creator, as for reader or viewer. *Pride and Prejudice* is a near perfect novel, as is *The Great Gatsby*; Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* a near perfect painting; and Donatello's *Mary Magdalene* a near perfect sculpture. Contrariwise, when a story has the wrong ending, or seems unfinished, the reader feels instinctively unsettled, ill at ease, even cheated. When the act of creation is going well, the writer, artist, or composer will usually be unconsciously tuned in to the hidden, completed form. They will intuit when the work is not quite right—something missing here, something awry there, or the ending discordant. They will then await clarification.

In sum, things, including human creations, have their right forms, as if determined by some eternal law, a law that transcends both the creator and the time of creation. Here is another intimation that humans belong to a timeless, higher order. Maybe it is the soul of the writer or artist that is attuned to the inviolable laws inscribed in some metaphysical domain.

The concept of the soul mate, and, with it, soul-mate love, has recurred in the Western tradition since Plato first articulated it around 380 BC. An affinity between two people is signalled, an elective affinity different in constitution and more enduringly powerful than shared interests, compatible personalities, or physical attraction. True, it often fails when subjected to the test of time, and reality, coming to be looked back upon as misguided, or an illusion. But not always. Popular culture alludes to a union of heavenly complexion, created in the stars, one that transcends earthly setback and suffering. And indeed, attitude surveys show that the feeling that *She is the One; He is Mr Right* continues to project a widespread hope today, even among otherwise sceptical and unsentimental new generations of young adults. Here is further evidence that while God may not have survived, belief in the immortal soul has.

The most direct modern experience of the oceanic feeling is in nature. Out on the sea, adrift on a lake at night, climbing mountains, hiking through forest or bush, camping, resting under a tree, or lying in long grass, the spirit may soar—the person finding release from self, their consciousness expanding to conjoin with an infinite oneness. Romantic painting and literature evoked the sublime catharsis of storm, raging ocean, precipitous cliff, and soaring peak. *Kairos* conjoins with cosmos, and the human individual is saved from drowning.

Jesus, on the night before his crucifixion, has unconscious knowledge of what will come—he refers to his 'hour'. He tunes in to what lies in the cup of destiny. Others may too, alerted as they approach the end of their own life path, tuned into another dimension, the *kairos* dimension, intuiting what is to come by means of premonitions, or dreams. Alternatively, as I have myself witnessed, an unconscious drive may direct someone about to depart, but completely oblivious to the fact, to get their worldly things in order. Here are obscure signs that the script of fate is written on a page kept in a paranormal domain, hovering somewhere behind the chronological line of events charting an individual life from birth to death, shadowing and directing those events.

We might also ask whether some choose their time, or is the cup of destiny inviolable? It may partly be a case of choice for the last of the line of Buddenbrooks, as described by Thomas Mann in his epic depiction of the decline of the bourgeois order in nineteenth-century Germany. Hanno Buddenbrooks dies, aged fifteen, of a lack of will to live. His is an issue of both vitality and soul—a feebleness of soul

sapping his vitality. Dying from lack of a will to live is perhaps common, but in people who are eighty-five rather than fifteen. It might, however, equally be said of Hanno that he was chosen from the start to be who he is, and from that moment the path was set.

At the other end of the spectrum from Hanno, some resist impending death. They wrestle with a body that has betrayed them—perhaps, by becoming cancer-ridden and sinking them in unspeakable pain. They cry out: *I am not ready to die; I have more to live for*. Disturbance of soul may be suggested, in some cases, by such disharmony between the cup of destiny and the mortal will.

Let us now turn our angle of vision through a hundred and eighty degrees. What would sceptics say? In fact, they can counter with one simple axiom: Fear of death gives birth to many a powerful illusion.

The pure atheist, at the extreme, does not believe in God, and goes further, to reject all metaphysics. A counter-faith is set up, a new orthodoxy staked to materialist science, which, it is held, explains everything; or at least will do so, once it advances further along its path. Human beings are but material entities, and when they die, matter rots and decays, returning to dust, as it was in the beginning. Whatever cannot be proved by scientific method and experiment, is mocked as fairy tale and superstition, fantasy food for those who are insecure, or a bit backward. Likewise, the human mind is no more than myriad neuron reactions in the brain; love merely a learnt survival mechanism with origins in the collective behaviour of ants and bees. This brand of hard-core atheism is a form of monomania that is hard for the sensible person to take seriously. It would dismiss Homer, Shakespeare, and Jane Austen as kin to the tooth fairy; Raphael and Poussin as daydream doodlers; and Plato and Freud as speculators in froth.

Excessive reliance on reason is a type of ideological defence against the deep and enigmatic truths. Hard-core atheists appear to display a common human dissociation, that between what a person thinks consciously and their inner knowledge.

I shall restrict myself to the case put by the more moderate and cautious sceptic—Freud himself was one. Freud interpreted the belief in God as a product of anxiety, triggering regression to the early childhood security of having a benevolent and protective father. The fantasy of the all-powerful, invincible father is projected onto God, who is then worshipped, propitiated, and slavishly obeyed. A similar line of thought might be applied to death anxiety. Fear of death motivates the compensatory illusion that the essence of the person survives them.

Let one elaboration serve to illustrate. It is common to hear the life partner of someone who has just died claim that they can, at times, feel the presence of the departed near them. The departed spirit remains nearby, watching over the living. The experience may continue for a few weeks, in rare cases much longer. Freud suggested that mourning involves sadness at the loss of a part of the self, which dies with the loss of someone close—the other had been internalised. This sounds analogous to the reports of those who have had a limb amputated, sometimes feeling that the limb is still there. The sceptic might point out further, that powerful human experience tends to generate vivid memories, but ones that recede and dim with time. All in all, the departed is still present in fantasy, but not reality.

On the other hand, acute human experience, notably death, may leave psychic residues that are more substantial than fantasy imaginings. To give a personal example. I was told after I had bought a house, by the previous owner, that there was a ghost in one of the bedrooms. I took little notice of this until several years later when a friend of one of my daughters, visiting from Europe, slept in that room, and announced the next morning over breakfast that there was a ghost. Not long after, a woman I didn't know, who claimed to have psychic powers, was looking around the house: she commented that someone had died in that same room—the death, she added, was not a particularly disturbed one. I was reminded of an experience of much greater gravity. Once, when visiting the German city of Munich, I was shocked to see a station at the end of an ordinary train line named *Dachau*. How, I thought, could a 'normal' suburb be built on the site of one of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps, given what traces of unutterable human nightmare must swarm in the air, and contaminate the soil.

I suppose my reflex intuition about Dachau was something akin to the folk wisdom that the spirits of those who suffer a tormented death find it difficult to escape, continuing to haunt the place where they died. The Homeric Greeks believed that the soul hangs round for a few days after death.

Experience points in two opposite directions here. It is common to revisit a place in which fateful personal events had taken place—tragedy, romance, sporting triumph, or even the house in which one grew up—to find it resistant to nostalgic memory, cold and empty, indifferent to the past, as if that past had never happened. The bedroom of a child who has left home, or died, may similarly be most striking for the total absence of the person who once animated it. Maybe the suburb of Dachau is just like any other modern Western community, with a bank, a supermarket, and a children's playground. The minds of the living may be haunted by ghosts from their own past, but those ghosts will vanish with them, or even before.

Yet, the opposite is equally true. There are places haunted by ghosts from the past—personally, I find it hard to imagine this is not the case with Dachau. There are

spaces that resonate with sacred atmosphere—Delphi comes to my mind, as does the inside of Bourges cathedral, the Alhambra in Granada, and some ancient Australian Aboriginal ceremonial grounds.

We are in territory in which there are no proofs. Even in the case of someone living with an ever-present, reassuring sense of eternity, their feeling, as Romain Rolland remarked, does not necessarily imply personal immortality.

Let me press further. In Poussin's *Last Supper*, Jesus awakens the sense of eternity in the darkened room, by responding to this moment in his life, and the company he has gathered, shaped in the cup of destiny. Through him, the room is bathed in otherworldly energy. But the oceanic feeling, activated here, depends on what is present within the man himself: an inner concentration of timeless being, infinitely expansive in its pulse. This wrought serenity should not to be confused with ego, for it is the switching off of worldly pride that has helped free the charismatic spirit. The ego fears death; the soul does not. Accordingly, people are drawn to charisma in another, as to a beacon from beyond, signalling that an eternal flame may kindle their own particular spark. The difference in the high drama of Poussin's Last Supper is that the charisma is blinding in its demonic potency.

Jesus is never free from the sense of eternity within, which includes confidence in personal indestructibility. Except at rare moments, like his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, which occurred directly after the Last Supper: in the garden, he loses his nerve, crying out that he has been forsaken and wants to evade his fate. This moment serves to underline how different was his normal condition; how much his Gethsemane dispiritedness was at odds with his prevailing temper.

Jesus is known by those who flock to him, including his followers, as the Teacher. The ultimate truth he teaches, as recorded by Mark, is cryptically put in two words: 'I am!' Timeless being, he implies, is the still-point around which everything else in life orbits. It is the key to equanimity and fulfilment. This teaching finds its expressive climax at the Last Supper, as painted by Poussin.

Here is the Judas secret. Judas is a man of insight who sees himself as lesser than Jesus. The lack is not a failure of personality, or weakness of character. It is a corrupted or inadequate quality of soul. He is not whom he would like to be, and this recognition drives him mad. In the painting, one can feel the withering of the soul as he absents himself.

There are cases, in contrast with that of Judas, in which the soul is stifled by the housing personality, rather than being flawed in itself. Scarlett O'Hara is deeply moved by the death of Melanie Hamilton, as if by the death of the universal soul, following which she returns home to Tara, to free her own spirit, let it breathe, in hope it may come to life. The Mafia gangster Tony Soprano is enchanted when wild ducks settle in his swimming pool, then devastated when they fly away, never to return. The ducks represented the hope for metamorphosis, out of his violent, sadistically sociopathic self—he is a drowning swimmer, the soul choked by weeds. After the ducks leave, he collapses unconscious in a panic attack—symbolic death.

Achilles set the paradigm of metamorphosis. In battle, he is ego supreme, the rampaging man-slaughtering hero, without pity, driven by a mania of blood-lusting grief and revenge. The gods punish him for his excess. After the battle, Achilles changes into a paragon of courtesy, welcoming the enemy king to his tent, addressing him 'Aged, magnificent sir!' and proceeding to weep with him about the tragedy of mortal human life, the loss of those who were close, and the futility of glory and victory. Achilles has found a charismatic, other-worldly aura similar to that emanating from Jesus at his last supper.

Shakespeare's King Richard II provides a modest variant. As king, Richard lacks judgment: he is proud, wasteful, lazy, irresponsible, and unjust. Once he loses power, however, he switches into a dignified, majestic reflection on life:

Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs,
Make Dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth….
For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court;….
I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief,
Need friends.

Once Richard tunes in to these things of ultimate gravity, he stills the audience. He has been transported out of the realm of worldly ambition, achievement, ego, and flawed character. Liberated, he surrenders to timeless truth, embracing it, and he gains the rare power of being able to speak with its voice.

The deep and eternal truths about the human condition are one of the soul's currencies. The hollow crown within which Death keeps his court, as poetry, somehow neutralises the paralysing potency of Richard's impending death, and frees the soul, to pass through a door into another order. So does a Bach death Cantata, for instance *Ich Habe Genug (I have enough)*.

Let me return to the Jesus poise. There is a sceptical psychological interpretation of the feeling of indestructibility. As usual, it is most cogently made by Freud. He suggested that devoted, loving mothers can induce an infallible sense of omnipotence in a favourite child; further, those chosen ones will go on to feel like conquerors throughout their lives, irrespective of what happens to them. Yes, up to a point, and in some, perhaps many

cases. Freud's argument supplies a psychological context. However, the conqueror referred to is the triumphant ego, and has little to do with the soul.

Freud admitted to being religiously unmusical. His interpretation of the omnipotence feeling is limited, deaf to the quality of immortal spirit evoked in some of the greatest Western art—by Homer, Aeschylus, Donatello, Raphael, Shakespeare, Poussin, Vermeer, Bach, Mozart, and Tolstoy. Evoking this quality might well be the deepest purpose of art. High art provides a range of meditations on immortality.

Freud's psychology also fails to address the eternal laws that govern individual works of art, orchestrating their forms. It has no grip on archetypes. Nor does it explain all that happens when a stranger enters the room.

What I am suggesting, in conclusion, is that Romain Rolland's abiding sense of eternity beyond the individual is matched by a sense of eternity within. An electric current needs two poles. It is the conjoining of the two, beyond and within, that counters the threat of drowning. This is precisely what Vermeer and Poussin paint.

The belief in the immortal soul has its roots somewhere here.

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