

9 ENVOI: THE LAST JOURNAL ENTRY

Facilis descensus Averni,
 Nocte atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
 Sed reuocare gradum superasque euadere ad auras,
 Hoc opus, hic labor est.

—Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.126ff¹

Do I have nothing to look forward to but dying in my sleep? Yes and no. After that cold, legalistic discussion of self-inflicted and other death—except for the mention of my current remission—it might seem strange that I am still here, and writing. What could be an epilogue to that? Perhaps the fact that I am indeed still here and wanting to write is itself an epilogue of sorts, a touch of the positive after the icy negativity of what came just before. But there are, finally, some (ambivalently) optimistic and not totally deathly things to say.

Strangely, I have just realised, during this last long remission, that the name for what chapter 1 describes is a *breakdown*. Simple, colloquial, familiar. Odd that I never saw it before, but only from my current position perhaps halfway up an unstable and likely unscaleable hill of repair, that I had a nearly classical ‘nervous breakdown’. Before I began to know what was wrong with me, and started the journal that makes up most of chapter 1 and chapter 6, I used to keep sporadic notes of things that happened and seemed significant, or weird. Looking through some papers I came across a note to myself about myself from 1994, made during a trip to Edinburgh for a conference. I think this was the point when I started acknowledging that there was something really wrong, that I was tipping over some kind of precipice.

Odd experience. Walking down by Waverley Station. A pinched-looking busker playing the pipes (well) launched into O Flower o’ Scotland, in a slow, much slower than customary, beautifully ornamented pibroch style. Superb. Just stood there looking up at the castle. Suddenly found myself on going back to hotel about to weep. This is the first time in over a year that *anything* has actually moved me—like an unfreezing, freeing of the waters. Am I going insane, or have I been? I’m actually sitting here almost crying.

You know how I am about synchronicity, etc., well bugger me if as I came back from dinner, approaching Princes Street from St Andrews Sq I heard Flower o’ Scotland again, and there was the same piper, in a different place, and I had to pass him to get into the hotel. What is this? It somehow rounded off the day, and scared the shit out of me.

Couldn’t sit still, went out for a walk, round to George Street, nearly dark now, church towers and crowstepped gable-ends outlined black against a luminous pinkish yellow sky. Here the church of St Andrew & St George, that glorious *rational* 18th-c. tower. That church helped to put the piper in perspective. Wild things out of the Highlands subdued by the Enlightenment. Better. Can now maybe go to

¹Easy is the descent into Hell:/Night and day the black gates of Dis [Hades] lie open;/But to recall one’s steps and escape up into the air./That is an accomplishment, that is a labour’.

bed.

That was the last time in years that I was moved enough by anything to feel even remotely close to tears, except maybe once or twice listening to Bach, once the slow movement of the Mozart clarinet concerto. The momentary 'freeing of the waters' was perhaps a presage of what could someday happen, an augury of something like the 'normal' (though not previously for me). It was freezing that dominated the following years; even the manic rages were cold. Depression is a stiffness of the spirit, wraps you in icy linen in yourself as your own sarcophagus.

But now I have somehow loosened, I am exhumed, the metaphorical freeing of the waters is once more plausible and laden with significance. I recall one hideously cold April day in Helsinki, after two weeks of silent snow, skeletal birches and black pines, frozen water, driving to the airport along the river Vantaa, and suddenly seeing for the first time breaking ice, the waters moving again after the stasis of winter, alive. Is this what rebirth is about? I now more often inhabit clear uplands, there is less need to keep up my dark facade, to look in constant trepidation over my shoulder, to cultivate customary suits of solemn black as an artificial protection, regardless of my current mood, so the contrast will be less devastating when the real thing comes. I can even love again, relish my friends, look coolly on death and life, or better coolly on the first and with some inkling of joy at the second.

Improvements. I am not just in remission, but a better, at least at very rare times almost skittish and loopy magical kind of remission. Unstable, some deep depressions, a lot of general flatness, frequent bouts of anxiety and black twitchy hypomania, but coupled with occasional bright hypomania and periods of what seems to me 'normal' mood, not unpleasant but without any particular affective colouring.

The story moves between two doors of hell; a couple of Virgils, perhaps myself included, a Beatrice or two, drugs above all have somehow got me through both. Though even the exit from Hell is only the entrance to Purgatory, and there are sixty-odd cantos to get through yet before the real light appears, if it ever will. Perhaps I have traversed Purgatory too, without knowing. But somehow the starlight coming through now is good enough for the present, I even have my fine moments, my exaltations and exultations, things I thought were banished forever, disappeared down the plughole my brain and I had carefully constructed over the decades for just this arcane purpose. (But again, so as not to tempt fate, I must remember another song, this time by John Anderson: 'There's a light at the end of the tunnel/Just hope it ain't a fast-moving train'.)

I haven't really invoked Dante before, though the imagery of the *Commedia* has been with me as it always is, a Baedeker for the most critical of journeys. Only now I have some idea of what it's really about, and the poem is not a versification of a theology only (though it does *that* better than any other) but a real journey, and I've taken at least the first third. I have now seen the *botafumario*² sweeping majestically down the south transept in the cathedral of Santiago de

² The *botafumario* is a giant baroque silver censer, about five feet tall, swung down the hundred-odd feet of the transept during special services. It's like a pendulum or a bell at the end of a rope operated by eight skilled men, rushing down fantastically ten feet or so over the heads of the congregation from the far end of the

Compostela, the incense pouring out in huge clouds as the priest (hieratic, with a numinous theatricality despite his commonplace bald head and glasses) says 'spiritus', and I know that journeys to the underworld and out take place in this world, all the time, and I have been on one, and still am. I could bracket and define the past decade and a half with two passages from *Inferno*, the first two verses and the last:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahì quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
questa selva selvaggia ed aspra e forte,
che nel pensier rinnova la paura !

—*Inf.*I.1ff³

salimmo suso, ei primo ed io secondo
Tanto ch'io vidi delle cose belle
che porta il ciel, per un pertugio tondo;

e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle

—*Inf.* XXXIV. 136ff⁴

I am released to see some stars again, at least from time to time. I am free in a way now, partly through learning to live with what is unavoidable, and I find more joy than I ever expected to feel in the newly visible, fresh and lovely contingencies of the world.⁵

transept, past the altar and back. It is one of the most terrifying and joyful sights in the world, the billowing smoke of the incense somehow an embodiment of the archetype of Spirit. (Which of course I don't believe in.). More and more what counts in life is metaphor. Thank you M for teaching me this.

³ 'In the middle of the road of our life/I came to myself in a dark wood /where the straight way was lost. O it is such a hard thing to tell/how harsh and powerful that savage wood was/that the fear renews itself in thought'.

⁴ 'We climbed up, he [Virgil] first, me second/until I saw those lovely things that the sky bears, through a round opening; and then we came forth to see the stars again'. William Styron (1990: 84) also chose these same two passages to epitomise his experience of depression and remission, though I had apparently forgotten that, and chose them myself because they seemed so right. I was pleased in rereading Styron to find those verses there. Who knows, maybe I got the idea of using them from him.

⁵ But a caveat. I know my enemy. However I may appear to have triumphed over sickness, or perhaps better how sickness has tended to retreat, I am not whole and never will be. This does not contradict the careful and ambivalent optimism that pervades much of this chapter, but is its obverse. My disease and my bereavement, since I have undergone both sickness and the death of love, have left scars, deep and unhealable. Maybe I'm even better for them, but no matter, they are there and the ineffaceable background of whatever other picture I present, and the future is always uncertain and still frightening. I still check my moods when I wake in

But despite the partial remission, even occasional happiness (never felt that as long as I can remember), still the lurking fear, only somewhat dimmer than before, the firm certainty of new episodes. I doubt that many of the new ones will be quite as cataclysmic as the old, as if once you've gone through hell the second or tenth journey is already familiar, you say what the fuck, I've been through this before, I know who lives down there. The great difference is that now I can say it—though the suicide option still hangs there ready for the time, if it comes (no longer *when* it comes). I still think, but a bit more mutedly, of suicide and death, of a time when it all may come back, the floodgates open, god knows what tsunami is waiting there for me. But it's now more abstract than before, remote and translucent, relatively unthreatening for the moment. (At 6.40 AM this present Thursday, so as not to pre-empt things.)

But there are still days, as there always will be, when my perpetual walkabout across the landscape of my brain leads me from the Mediterranean south of Africa and heads North, Cape Town dissolves into Iceland. I can wander here too even under the African sun in a barren lunar landscape over lava flows wrinkled and congealed like black Devon cream on the verge of butter, revisiting myself as years ago in Reykjavík, alone, uncommunicative and unable to communicate, shivering in a polar wind astride the Atlantic Ridge and watching the swans and eider ducks and hearing the fulmars and petrels scream at the edge of the world.

The lifting of the worst clouds has brought out a soft-centredness in me, almost a romanticism, a sentimentality, that early in my *Life in the Sarcophagus* I would not have admitted to, probably in fact could not have felt. The old Hard Man, the waspish malcontent, the eternal pessimist and cynic, the destroyer, the obscene, obsessive stand-up black comedian, is still a comfortable persona, still integral to me. I still wear it occasionally, if much less often than before, but there's something else now, maybe the result of having gone through this *descensus Averni* and not died. I wonder often if this isn't a false dawn; I will always wonder about such things, because from the beginning I was made this way, and the paths my life has taken early aborted the possibility of an innocent and unreflecting optimism.

But most of the low moods when they strike now are somewhat less depressed and tenebrous, more elegiac. Is this farewell, disengagement? Probably not right now, but perhaps a preparation, even in the midst of increasing wellness and work. And music, back again, a more and more intimate part of my life, a groundwork of my salvation or persistence. A consolation that I could not properly avail myself of before, a consolation even designed by some designers. I return endlessly to the late Haydn quartets in my lowest moods, and now I know why, because he made them for that. I came across a letter of his, in which he describes what his music does for him and is intended to do for others:⁶

the morning, to see where I am and if I can guess what's coming.

⁶ My translation. I found this letter in a tourist guidebook to Haydn's birthplace, *Haydn-Geburtshaus Rohrau* (Mödling: Druckerei St. Gabriel, 1985), p. 6.

Often, when I am ringed about with all manner of impediments, which rise up against my work, when the strength of my spirit and body sinks and the life I have entered on is hard to bear—then a secret feeling whispers to me, there are so few happy and satisfied people here below, grief and sorrow follow them always, perhaps your work will be a momentary spring from which the sorrowful and those weighed down by the affairs of the world can, for a moment, draw peace and recovery. [1802]

That I can do this now is a sign of something positive and good; I have not put my sickness behind me but, I don't know how, made something of it that sometimes feeds rather than feeding on. I feel an elegiac happiness; a peculiar notion perhaps, a muted happiness intertwined of course with dullness and depression and agitation and panic, but a background with occasional bursts of startling and gorgeous fireworks and agitated mixed states or the black curtain dropping over both the 'normal' and the rare manic explosions.

I feel I ought to end with the last of Strauss' Four Last Songs, I'd like this page to have a recording on it, but for those who know the music, and even those who don't, here is the poem he set in his old age. Not only for the reader to think about, but as a tribute and consolation for those who have helped me through this, my Virgils and my Beatrices:⁷

Wir sind durch Not und Freude
gegangen Hand in Hand,
vom Wandern ruhen wir beide
nun überm stillen Land.

Rings sich die Täler neigen,
es dunkelt schon die Luft,
zwei Lerchen nur noch steigen
nachträumend in den Duft.

Tritt her, und laß sie schwirren,
Bald ist es Schlafenszeit,
daß wir uns nicht verirren
in dieser Einsamkeit.

O weiter, stiller Friede!
So tief im Abendrot,
wie sind wir wandermüde –
ist dies etwa der Tod?

⁷ Joseph von Eichendorff, 'Im Abendrot' ['In the gloaming']. 'Through distress and joy we have/walked hand in hand/We both rest now from our wandering/Above the silent countryside. Around us the valleys bow their heads/already the air darkens./Only two larks still rise/half-dreaming, in the scented air. Come here, and let them flutter./Soon it will be time to sleep./So that we do not lose ourselves in this solitude./O spacious, quiet peace!/So deep in the Twilight,/how tired we are of wandering–/is this perhaps Death?'