INTRODUCTION

When I first began this little book, a window of opportunity having suddenly opened to allow me to write it, I kept hearing this phrase, *desperate desire*, going off like a firecracker in my head. And while I could never quite trace its precise origin, it seemed to me so telling a phrase that I seized upon it at once, determined to use it as both theme and title for the book. Alas, I had not reckoned with the warhead I was proposing to launch. (A brief Google search would soon reveal the full if unwitting extent of my folly.) Wiser counsels thereupon prevailed, with the happy result that a very different and, I have no doubt, less provocative title was then chosen—concerning which I will have something to say a little later on. . . .

Still, the idea behind the phrase, *desperate desire*, has stayed with me. The theme survived, you might say, the title's suppression. For as long as I can remember, in fact, its meaning has remained fixed in my mind. Indeed, the awful resonance of the thing continues to haunt my memory. It all began when, as a small child lost in a park following a family picnic, I wandered disconsolately about in an ever more frantic, desperate search for my parents. Yet my predicament was hardly hopeless. My family, after all, having at once realized I'd gone missing, mobilized straightaway their return to the park in order to fetch me. So it was, in retrospect, the briefest of separations. Besides, a kind contingent of campers, seeing me stumbling about in tears, quickly gathered me up and, between popsicles designed to assuage my grief, they drove me home.

Nevertheless, not knowing that a rescue mission was on its way, how could I possibly imagine the shape, much less the speed, it would take? And isn't that the whole point about being lost? *That the child simply cannot know*. And, of course, when it comes to being lost, we are all children. In her moving account of the short-story writer John Cheever, his daughter Susan explains the origin of her book's title *Home*

Before Dark: "My father liked to tell a story about my younger brother Fred," she begins about her brother who, at the end of a long summer's day, espied their father,

> standing outside the house under the big elm tree that shaded the flagstones in front of the door. . . . And when he saw Daddy standing there he ran across the grass and threw his little boy's body into his father's arms.
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> "I want to go home, Daddy," he said, "I want to go home." Of course he *was* home, just a few feet from the front door, in fact. But that didn't make any difference, as my father well understood. We all want to go home, he would say when he told this story. We all do.

But what if there were no home to go to, no one to welcome the child when he got there, indeed, his own father telling him in words so final that nothing more could ever be said to soften the sentence: "I do not know you"? Would that not force one out into a state of aloneness, solitude, and sorrow that, in point of fact, none of us was created to have to endure?

Let me say it again. What if there really were a loneliness so final that nothing in this world could remedy the pain of it? A circumstance of abandonment so definitive that neither word nor gesture could deliver us from it? Would not that frightful condition find its precise and formal theological equivalent in what we call hell? Isn't hell that very depth of loneliness where no love, no relation of real communion, can reach one in order to set free the soul of one's solitude? A life bereft of both hope and home, lacking all sense of community, or sanctuary, or escape? Think of the prodigal son fated never to find his father's love but, like the Flying Dutchman, is left aimless and alone forever—an eternity of grief, no less. Who could bear it?

Isn't that what makes us most afraid of death? That the inevitable darkness awaiting us is perhaps but a prelude to still greater horrors? Asked once by an interviewer what bothered him most about life, the poet Robert Lowell answered simply, "That people die." And knowing nothing of what may lie on the other side (Shakespeare's "undiscovered country" is not a place from which we are free to return), the mind naturally falls prey to the most awful phantoms of fear and desolation. Death, you see, is never far

away; the beast is always close at hand. And wherever it is he lurks, even were he to hide behind the nearest shrub, his jaws are poised ever to strike the unsuspecting. No one gets out alive. There is no gainsaying the Old Guy—nor, as I say, the dread of what may come after. Hidden in the shadows, he remains always at the ready, always set to pounce. "It is the blight man was born for," says the narrator of Gerard Manley Hopkins's *Spring and Fall* to the young child who has wandered innocently into the autumn woods where, weeping but not knowing why, she watches all the fallen leaves die. "Margaret," he asks, "are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" And with what has always struck me as a kind of brutal finality, he tells her, "It is Margaret you mourn for."

We must all die, and so, like young Margaret, we are given over to grief at the loss even of the leaves, since in nature's passing we glimpse the clearest prefiguring of our own. But have you noticed? We are not resigned to die—neither are we resigned to suffer, or to remain always alone—and so we rage (most of us, I suspect) "against the dying of the light." It is not only poets, I am saying, who exhort us to resist going "gentle into that good night," to recall the moving words so sternly spoken by the

Welsh poet Dylan Thomas to his own father as he teeters on the cliff edge of death. The life force itself is quite sufficient to move humankind to "burn and rave at close of day." These things are a problem for us, an outrage even, against the heart of what it means to be human, which is the yearning to live always, and in communion with others, and without pain.

Is the problem even soluble? Or is it instead one of those intractable things the unraveling of which meets head on with *mystery* itself, which is a wall too massive for mere reason to knock down? The problem is the very thing, in other words, we feel obliged to try to penetrate yet remain powerless to do so. ("Human reason has this peculiar fate," reports Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, "that . . . it is burdened by questions which . . . it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.") In short, the mind is forced to look elsewhere, to lift its sights still higher. "Leaving one still," to quote a telling passage from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings." And so, like the figure of Jacob locked in mortal struggle with the angel, we dare not desist until we

too have extracted a blessing. There can be no rest, I am saying, no quitting the field, until one arrives at real and lasting resolution, a resolution, moreover, that refusing any sort of cheap and facile closure, reaches right into the very heart of the human condition, which is one of forlorn brokenness beneath an immense weight of sin, suffering, and death. It must do justice, in other words, to that *tragic sense of life* that Miguel de Unamuno among others rightly insists is the chief, aboriginal truth about man. "The man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies." Not the talking head, not the mere idea of man, his mind filled with the empty straw of abstractions that know nothing of passion or pain. It was not the concept of humankind that engaged Unamuno, who could never put his trust either in the adjective "human" or the substantive "humanity," both of which he fiercely and categorically rejected as no better than a pair of bloodless abstractions untethered to the world he knew, which was always a real and concrete place, circumscribed by the exigencies of time and circumstance, sin and sorrow. Only someone who actually does exist, he would repeatedly insist, is qualified to speak, because only he is "infinitely interested in existing."

Moved by considerations of this sort, what I aim to do here is to set down a few modest reflections regarding this business of living in a world that—given the sheer frightful insolubility of its problems, chief of which being suffering and death—one quite understandably desires, and most desperately so, to escape. From what do we wish to escape? We desire to escape from the very terms of death and desolation that life imposes. And to what end? Where are we to escape to? To the *still point*. And why is that? Because it is necessary to do so in order to anchor the soul to that which finally transcends death, desolation, and loss—and thus to fulfill that longing for God that is both constitutive of who we are and indispensible to what we hope to become. The maintenance of our human dignity, you could say, the very life of the soul, depends on holding fast to the *still point*. Without God, we are less than zero; indeed, we become a kind of demonic nothingness. Honorable escape, therefore, is an urgent need of the human heart. We simply must try and find a way past the sheer desolation of death, those "vasty halls of death" of which the poet Matthew Arnold speaks, whose lethal coils have wrapped themselves tightly round our lives. We need to navigate our way past that fearsome, devouring figure, the awful dragon about whom St. Cyril

of Jerusalem warned the catechumens of the early Church who had come to him for instruction: "The dragon is by the side of the road," he told them, "watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go the father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon."

None of this can happen, of course, without attention being paid to the *still point*, to the sheer mystery of that time and place where, says T. S. Eliot, "past and future are gathered." It is the point on which all the polarities converge—matter and meaning, grit and grace, history and heaven, man and God. "Except for the point," he reminds us, "the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance." Here is the point toward which the poetry of *Four Quartets*, Eliot's enduring masterpiece, moves in its own rhythmic, sublime dance.

How we all long for this union; it is the consummation we most devoutly, most deeply, desire.

> The inner freedom from the
>   practical desire,
> The release from action and
>   suffering, release from the inner