In Extremis

ANASTASIA REZNIK

> The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God.
>
> —St. Teresa of Avila

I am thinking of a marble sculpture of St. Teresa in the chapel of the cathedral Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. It is by Bernini in High Baroque. Under the canopy of an alcove, there is a triangular configuration of a woman, an angel, and an arrangement of gold spears that seem to rain from above. The woman reclines as if swept off her feet by some immense force; her body is swallowed and obscured by swathes of stiff and crumpled cloth. She is held aloft, it seems, on a cloud cut roughly out of rock. The line of her body is bent in a posture of supplication. It is as if any desire to stand and straighten her spine, to lift her chin and assert herself, has been taken permanently from her, yet she is brimming with thankfulness. The conqueror is an angel in the form of a young boy frozen with a beatific, unconcerned smile on his face. He is standing atop Teresa's recumbent body with his right arm drawn strongly back, holding a spear that he is about to thrust into the woman's vulnerable chest. His left hand is delicately lifting an edge of vestment over Teresa's heart. But the only flesh of hers that we see is a small supine hand and an arched foot that have escaped the folds of her mantle, suggesting that Teresa's body is of only secondary importance.

Bernini directs us to look at her face, as deliberately the focal point of the dynamic energies of the sculpture as the center of a wagon wheel is to its surrounding spokes. The yielding expression he has chipped out of the impenetrable stone is arresting, a perfect foil to the unconcerned features of the angel. Teresa's eyes are half-closed, and her brows are relaxed on her smooth forehead; her mouth, a heavily cut black recess, looks as if it has fallen open accidentally. She does not seem conscious of her own beauty; self-awareness

has melted off her face like wax under flame. There is an overriding sense of serenity, as if in the moment of her body's mortal death her soul is liberated from the coils of torment. Indeed, an alternative name for her ecstasy is transcendence: her bliss is spiritual despite the inadequate metaphors of physical eroticism that might describe it. She is unaware of the angel; he may even be a personification of an internal capacity of her self, but the fact remains that she is ultimately awakened on a cosmic scale, liberated in her moment of death. The shower of golden rays that descends from behind the woman and her angel extend from some peripheral sun, emphasizing that the subject of Bernini's sculpture is not earthly, not even physical: we glimpse an approximation of an ideal, heavenly state—a transfiguration.

This sculpture allows us to see, in representation, the duality of death and salvation that those who have not died cannot experience first hand. We are the "things and creatures of spring, glowing with desire and with assertion," and we are "deathless in [our] coming" (Lawrence 17). We can dream, fantasize, paint, write, but the true transcendence of death is a taboo that cannot be crossed. We can only contemplate "the idea of death" (Forster 221) and feel the liberating rush of "black intoxication" that arrives with the acknowledgement of ultimate limitation (Kundera 220). But Bernini's masterpiece affords access to the limitless even as it acknowledges finitude. We may be chained slaves in Plato's cave, glorifying shadows of marionettes held up by real things, but perhaps, as Aristotle teaches, we can only appreciate these real things, life and death, in likenesses and representations.

Especially in the excessive flair and melodrama of Baroque, where cloth billows as if in a tempest, and tiny gilded arabesques adorn impossibly thin surfaces, the quotidian passage of human life is heightened to the level of the epic so that the jaded viewer can experience, as if reborn through art, the forgotten delight of creation and the taste of the heroic. Great art allows us to see as if we have been resurrected through the agency of the artist; often it allows us to court death in a way that is unattainable without an impossible leap of faith, and by glimpsing death, we can share in St. Teresa's ecstasy of liberation.

Evelyn Waugh describes the necessity of this leap of faith, this realization that goes beyond "vanity of vanities, all is vanity," through the development of Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* (351). The story is a retrospective, so even as Charles' life begins to be revealed to us, we sense how it will end, which suggests that the significance is not so much in the outcome as in the transformation of Charles himself. The novel is divided into two parts; the

first is called “Et in Arcadia Ego” or ‘I am even in Arcadia,’ referring perhaps to an artistic tradition that was popular in Baroque paintings of allegorical depictions meant to remind viewers of mortality. Paintings of death are significant for Charles not only because he is a painter by profession (and if an artist is “an eternal type,” he is nothing if not concerned with the limitations of life and death), but also because he is commissioned to paint decaying, decrepit houses that are about to be torn down (52). His ostensible role may be to preserve sentimental memories, but he is ever aware that his attendance in the lives of others is a certain “presage of doom” (207). At Oxford the main decoration of his writing table is a human skull in a bed of roses (42), and even on his first enchanted outing to Brideshead, the Flyte’s glorious castle, his friend Sebastian reminds us of being “old and ugly and miserable” and having nothing left of the precious past but dwindling memories of happiness (24). In the sweetness of arcadian youth, in the midst of the delight and love of Sebastian, Waugh alludes again and again to shadows of the end, thereby connecting us to a meaning greater than the little “clustered feats of daring and invention,” a meaning that is apparent only in Charles’ final triumphant return to Brideshead that both begins and ends the novel.

What is essential about Charles Ryder is that he is practically an orphan; like many of us, he is entering a world at Oxford and then at Brideshead that is foreign and unknown to him. The only family that Waugh creates for Charles is an estranged father and a censorious cousin. His isolation makes Charles sadly incomplete; “like a horse in full stride suddenly refusing an obstacle,” he is severely limited as if something as old as a river and as essential as a breath has been interrupted (310). The two things that Charles is most ignorant of—family intimacy and religion—are the two things that are most central to the Flytes, a clan that stretches over two continents of space and generations of time. Lack of love and lack of faith constrain and limit Charles to an existence that is chained to the ephemeral present, but these very qualities are infinite and limitless for the Flytes. Brideshead is a school of life that educates Charles in the vital connection of the “fierce little human tragedy” to a redemptive eternal flame that “burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart” than any physical battlefield (351). There is a central mystery of redemption stirring around Brideshead and its owners.

The awakening of “a whole new system of nerves alive within him” is tied critically to the very architecture that surrounds Charles at Brideshead (82). It is in the stone underbelly and the soaring, vaulted crown of this enchanted place; it is even in the name. Brideshead connotes the fecundity of marriage that is endlessly, erotically creative, as in the source, the secret mouth, the

maidenhead. But Charles doesn't discover the painful rebirth of the regenerative "life-giving spring" until he falls desperately in love with Julia Flyte (82).

Julia is a woman with mystical healing power for Charles; he is not a complete human being until she sacrifices him. There are two aspects that add to her potency, both of which make her unattainable. Julia is a married woman, taboo, in a world where sin is a very heavy thing; she is a Flyte and therefore not only is she part of the mystical Catholic clan, but also her status as Sebastian's sister lends an element of the incestuous to her affair with Charles, who is, in a way, adopted by the Flytes. By trying to embrace Julia Flyte, trying to possess her on his own terms, Charles learns the humility of human limitation, and through his struggle to consummate a lasting bodily affair, he is transformed, united, as through "a prayer, an ancient, newly learned form of words" (350). Body and soul in this story are not reconciled, but there is something spiritually transforming for both Julia and Charles in their earthly separation.

In a different but no less revealing way, E. M. Forster's Margaret and Helen Schlegel are transformed through an analogous rite of transgression in *Howards End*. The two sisters have such a close, dependent, symbiotic relationship that they are really one person separated into what Forster sees as the two faculties of body and mind. "The younger [Helen] is rather apt to entice people, and, in enticing them, to be herself enticed" (28). Helen falls passionately in love and gives birth to a child, having been tempted and enthralled by the physical impulses of the human body that are also her limitation. "The elder [Margaret goes] straight ahead" in life (29), intellectually unencumbered as she is by the contradicting desires of the flesh. Through their interaction, Margaret and Helen compensate for each other's shortcomings, transcending their "eternal differences" (314).

But, although Margaret is an orphan like Charles Ryder, she is not cold; in fact, she inherits the mantle of a great heroine from the late Mrs. Wilcox precisely because of the emotional empathy and humility that stem from her acceptance of "the idea of death," the ultimate limitation and constraint on the human mind (221). Margaret is self-conscious, reflective, aware that "life's very difficult and full of surprises" and that finitude is woven into the fabric of desire (69). She supports the structure of her marriage to Henry Wilcox in a way that Helen cannot because if "a woman's love for a man" is to survive "the idea of death" it must transcend physical desire (313). There is some timeless connection that is wanting in Helen's immediate lust for Leonard Bast. She confesses to Margaret that although "she ought to remember [him]

as [her] lover," she cannot (314); soon after his death she senses herself forgetting him. Lust alone is an imperfect and ephemeral diversion from the grave; it is in "truer relationships" that hope can be found (307).

Margaret sees through the materialistic, vain "outer life" (25) to a wider horizon where the destiny of humanity is redeemed through union "to history, to tragedy, to the past, [and] to the future" (14). She is the philosopher who catches "glimpses of the diviner wheels" when death parts the clouds to reveal endless constellations (307). In a realm of Wilcoxes, Munts, and Basts, Margaret is the spiritual elite.

Mrs. Wilcox is nothing if not a classical mother figure. Although she is indifferent to Margaret's modern sensibilities, she possesses the mystical, "instinctive wisdom [of] the past," which she uses like the stars to steer her family to infinity as she completes the great heroic journey of her life (21). After adopting first Helen and then Margaret into her inner world, Mrs. Wilcox dies suddenly. There is something romantic in the coincidence of her relationship to Margaret at this crucial junction; the timeliness of her death seems so contrived that it mirrors the bizarre fortuities in real life. Forster is warning us to keep our eyes open to these accidents on the mysterious periphery of knowledge because that is where life may illuminate a path for us.

In the enchanted kingdom in the distant countryside, Margaret replaces a woman twice her age, called mother, as wife to the widower Mr. Wilcox, father. If we allow that Howards End were Thebes, London were Corinth, and Margaret were an expression of Forster the man, we have intimations of the Oedipus prophecy of inheritance through transgression, with one difference. Mrs. Wilcox was not murdered by Margaret (but she was by Forster); she chose Margaret to be her virgin avatar as if to perpetuate an earth-mother ritual of rebirth; and instead of ultimate punishment, Margaret is rewarded with transcendence. Calling Forster Oedipal in a psychosexual sense would be sadly reductive of the rich tapestry of this novel, which is in fact a complex, tangible, and generative expression of the human desire for life and creation. But the metaphor is appropriate in the sense that authors, artists, and human beings, as individuals capable of considering and questioning themselves, are constantly engaged in a struggle to come to terms with the ends of their tethers (between life and death), with the blinding human struggle for understanding, and then to find ways of breaking through to the unknown beyond this earthly life. Margaret is Forster's clairvoyant messenger who voyages "beyond the limits that fetter us now" (307). Howards End is bequeathed to her from beyond the grave; she arrives at a destination illu-

minated by an unseen torchbearer. Her inheritance transforms her into the figure of a resurrected Mrs. Wilcox; she holds spiritual congress with both life and death.

In *The Man Who Died*, D. H. Lawrence moves the investigation of transcendence to yet another level, exploring the cosmic liberation that accompanies a more literal resurrection of the body. Christ is the central focus of the story, and from the onset, our minds are traveling once again across a threshold where our bodies cannot follow. The "deathless" man is paradoxically trapped in his "doom of littleness and meanness and pain" as in a tomb (17, 71); he sacrifices his precious life for a holy mission without sharing the healing warmth of passionate love. The man dies and, with the magical transcendence of imagination, Lawrence revives him to discover the splendid, ceaseless rhythm of the sexual tides that not only recede but also inundate the barren shore of a more human life than the man once lived.

It is important here to concentrate on the expression of Lawrence's artistic truth rather than on any preaching he is doing. The man who died is the risen Christ (and perhaps this is a fantasy about his afterlife or an effort to rewrite a mystical tautology), but the novel's value lies in the artistic contribution that transports the reader beyond the outer realm of social opinion and into "the circle of the greater life" (69). The man who died is returned to life. Death has taught the man a valuable lesson: "I have died, and now I know my own limits" (23). But it is not enough to learn firsthand about absolute finitude; the man who died is not "risen" until he surpasses the isolation of his newly accepted mortality through the rite of union with "the woman" who is a priestess of Isis, a mythic goddess herself in search of her slain husband's sacred phallus (28).

The healing potency of the priestess of Isis restores the man who died to life through the "great atonement" of touch (81). At first, the man laments that she cannot understand the trial of death that he has experienced alone; death is the chasm that isolates him still. But the woman trusts him with the delightful gift of her love, and he basks in it, melting, like St. Teresa, in the kindling warmth of an unseen sun. The life-worshipping female deity—fertile, cyclical—completes and overcomes the opposing death-worshipping, eschatological male deity so that we come to understand these archetypal differences and their relationship to ordinary men and women. Lawrence believes that man's destiny is to love and that completion, and even transcendence, can be found in the waxing and waning of two bodies given selflessly to passion.

But what about "deathless," ordinary man, who is imprisoned in his body and has never glimpsed infinity through an obliterating union? Except in ephemeral moments of sexual catharsis, his mind cannot freely ascend to the stars because his body tethers him to the earth. The man who died is resurrected fully in a way that is realistically unattainable outside myth and art, but the contemplation of death that such mediums afford us intimates what we cannot otherwise know in advance. Margaret finds her place in *vselennaia* through the acceptance that "life and death were anything and everything" (307). *Vselennaia*, an untranslatable Russian word, suggests something close to cosmos or universe, but it does not encompass all of existence; rather, it points to human communities. The root is *selo*: a small village. *Vselennaia* allows for the discrepancy between the cosmos as we try to imagine it and the cosmos as it might actually exist; it calls to mind a universe that is grounded in the peculiar idiosyncrasies of humanity.

What these novelists and Bernini seem to be telling us is this: cosmic union requires that the little contradictions of mind and body be reconciled; cosmic freedom requires that the urge "to be greater than the limits of . . . hands and feet" be abandoned. But if transcendence is a limit that we cannot cross alone, we can at least approach it with a friend or a lover because "to know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom" (Waugh 45). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera suggests that Tomas and Tereza have risen, transcended death, by telling us of their deaths before they occur. This prescient knowledge of death foretold elevates one day of happiness to a special significance precisely because it is the last day of their lives. This is an old trick, this sacrilegious foretelling of time. But Waugh's employment of the same technique lends a special poignancy to *Brideshead Revisited*. The knowledge that Charles would inevitably wander the abandoned staircases of Brideshead alone enabled us to see the significance of each transient impulse in relation to a greater, unseen transformation that the novel reveals—Charles' own movement toward some understanding of and submission to a transfiguring religious power. But knowledge of the end of life itself is an illusion that can only exist in fiction; the only certain end in life is death, yet we come to believe that we can, if only momentarily, glimpse it vicariously through art and the lives of these fascinating characters.

For Charles Ryder, the key to individuation and transcendence lies in the "conversion to the baroque" that extends beyond the sterile, truncated present into a lofty architecture of mystery and grandeur, faith and heroism (Waugh 82). For Margaret Schlegel and the man who died as well, transcen-

dence lies in "personal intercourse . . . that alone . . . ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision" (Forster 77). Each of them expresses the universal human desire to transgress the threshold of death and to unite soul and body. Often desperate and destructive in our struggles for transcendence, we don't want to give up the seemingly impossible because in our transgressive pursuits we discover that the accompanying spiritual agony carries its own surpassing delight.

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