

THEOLOGY AND THE DARKNESS OF DEATH

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A MAJOR difficulty with the contemporary theology of death is that it is seldom confounded, seldom at a loss for explanation, seldom disarmed and left groping. From the very start, most theological analysis of death displays an assumption that which should more aptly function as final hope: the belief that death is undone. In this a priori certainty theology appears to be thoroughly victorious, but to a straightforward empirical perspective the victory can seem to be simply a turning away from death's darkness, a denial rather than an exploration of life's end.

To turn away from death is humanly quite comprehensible, but the move becomes self-defeating for theology when it is carried out under the rubric of investigating death. When confrontation is reduced to circumvention, then theology strategically denies whatever is toxic or terrible in death. In actual practice this denial is usually accomplished by means of a descriptive model that is empirically aseptic, that shapes death to consoling purposes, that provides it from the start with a systematically positive core of meaning.

The first point at issue in this matter is, therefore, theology's use of pretheological models, models which are not explicitly shaped by theistic categories or doctrinal logic, but which supply a primary focus for theological discussion nonetheless. Invariably such models are positive, "illuminated" ones, offering an explication which denies death's darkness or, by reductionist logic, tempers it. Thus armed, theology *begins* its discussion of death with models which are highly insulating, which protect it from ever being threatened or appalled. In effect, such conceptualizations supply theology with an *answer* to death, a response rather than a primal description, an image of death already fashioned in positive terms. Unfortunately, the "help" which positive, illuminated models press upon theology is frequently accepted at the price of theology's investigatory openness and credibility. Thus a critical question naturally arises: Is it possible to construct a model which would draw theology into the bleakest and most empty reaches of death? More pointedly, by what model can death be made woefully dark for theology?

To suggest the terms of such a model, the following pages will first investigate how the dominant positive models deny death's darkness, how they supply theology with a presumptive view of death's inner sense and malleability. It will be suggested that the most grievously positive model presents death as a "merely" physical or corporeal threat, a power strong only against the mortal crust of body and matter, not against the

human center of soul or spirit. Such an anthropological dualism of spirit and matter (a body-soul model) puts death in its place even before any explicitly theological confrontation can begin.

Other forms of reductionism employ psychological rather than philosophical perspectives. In such models death's darkness is defined as the inner network of fears, angers, and illusions which prevent an individual from affirming his own death as a natural quietus, a culmination in harmony with the primordial rhythm of all life and growth. But if, in keeping with these categories, death is viewed as part of the natural life cycle, if its acceptance expresses emotional maturity and psychic integrity, then again neither theology nor religious faith need be threatened. Death *in itself* is reduced to manageable categories; its starkness is broken in the crucible of a natural-acceptance model.

Even models which profess to recognize death's darker elements can distill these elements into affirmative essence. Thus, in "final option" and other freedom-based models the power of death is directly admitted, but the power is then dialectically transferred to the dying person who "achieves" his death, makes it an act ratifying his whole life's fundamental purpose and direction. Consequently, what appears to be a dark collapse becomes, by the dialectical victory of freedom and choice, an act of affirmation and integrity. Once again, death is made pliable for theology.

The following pages will explore all the above positive models more fully, attempting to clarify their focal bias, their shaping of theology's almost irrepressible presumption of death's goodness. This presumption will, in turn, be challenged by a description of death as distinctly *not* good, as radically untheological—a blank, eyeless stare back at all positive conceptual overtures. Such a dark description will indicate how a pre-theological model might press theology to give death its due, however dreadful that might be. The concluding portion of the discussion will attempt to sketch some general theological responses to a dark model of death.

THE BODY-SOUL MODEL

Theological models which perceive the human person dualistically, in terms of an imperishable spiritual element and a quite perishable material one, unswervingly confess death's intelligibility, its radical sense and reason. When death is described as the separation of the spiritual element from the corporeal, the breaking of soul from body, then its deepest threat is controlled. Only the body is surrendered to the disintegrating power of the end, and even this surrender may be strategically eased by depicting the body as a thing of defect and decay, an encumbrance and prison house to the soul, a dragging hook of temporality and transience and temptation. Understandably enough, then, the corporeal element

can be handed over as hostage and victim to death. As long as the soul perdures, death is still explicable.

Obviously, the theological crux of this dualistic model is the affirmation that the spiritual core of the person is deathless, that the soul escapes perishing and emptiness, that it never has to face the full and utter blankness of being no more. Death, therefore, is no radical, penetrating threat, no defeat to shard us to pieces, but merely a bodily corruption which the soul sheds. In the immortality of the soul, then, the body-soul model pulls back from the whole dark side of death, and theology, in choosing this model, can claim for itself some massive methodological prerogatives. The logic of the soul's immortality can be made theology's own logic. Just as the soul does not descend into the dark vacancy of death, so too theology need not. It can turn away from mortal darkness, claim immunity from the unnerving doubt which death breeds elsewhere in human thought.

Josef Pieper, in his *Death and Immortality*, offers a sharp example of how a dualistic description works to deny the dark of death.¹ As a case in point, Pieper's work displays, actually, a kind of methodological poignancy, for it initially sets itself against all attempts to dispel the darkness of death. Pieper begins by roundly attacking the "spiritualistic minimalizing" which separates immortal soul from perishing body.² He rejects the programmatic use of immortality as an automatic "answer" to death, since such reflex answers suggest that "at bottom . . . man does not 'really' die at all," that simply the body dies.³ Against this dualistic simplification Pieper argues that death claims the whole man, body and soul, that it is, therefore, devastatingly thorough, a destruction and disaster for the whole human person.⁴

Although Pieper clearly states his intention of giving death its due, he chooses nonetheless to work with the classical body-soul model. As a result, his discussion is constricted within a dualism which will not allow him to speak of the death of the whole person. Ineluctably, the model works against Pieper's aims, leading him first to replace the terms "person" or "whole man" with "soul," leading him finally to argue that the soul "although profoundly affected by death . . . nevertheless persists indestructibly and maintains itself, remains in being."⁵ This qualifying "nevertheless" is, actually, the crucial gear of the body-soul model. Operating continually, even if implicitly, it determines the ultimate course of Pieper's discussion, bringing it inevitably to deny that death is a massive, dark threat to the whole person.

¹ Joseph Pieper, *Death and Immortality* (New York, 1969).

² *Ibid.* 35 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.* 32, 36-46.

³ *Ibid.* 12, 117.

⁵ *Ibid.* 37.

As Pieper struggles to give death its due within the constricting terms of the body-soul model, he comes to describe what is perhaps the darkest limit of the model. The soul *is* affected by death, he suggests, insofar as death violently interrupts and destroys "the forming of the body . . . contrary to the innermost intention of the soul and of man himself."⁶ But even here, as he attempts to admit darkness into the deathless chamber of the classical model, Pieper reveals how the soul is radically untouched, how from its immortal vantage point it simply watches the body's collapse. Even if it finds its own intentions foiled in the body's death, in no case is the soul itself directly threatened or terribly darkened. Moreover, Pieper's very language begins to show the pressures of the dualistic model. "Man himself" ceases to be a holistic declaration at all; it becomes instead a modifying addendum (if not a simple synonym) for "the soul." Thus talk of the whole person inescapably slips into talk of the soul. The model's inbuilt bias guides the whole discussion away from the dark, away from what Pieper calls the "concatenations of matter"—the fiercest of which, of course, is death itself.

The course charted by Pieper is really the only course permitted by the body-soul model, a model which always insinuates into the discussion a positive and affirmative bias, a denial of darkness, a persistent apologetic for immortality. As a result, the model allows no real exploration of death as an incalculably blank prospect, an appalling and fearful tearing of the *whole person*.

Because it cannot look, except with conceptual disdain, upon the devastating work of death, the classical model is empirically and heuristically limited. For an exploration of the dark reaches of death, its dualistic focus is purblind, unable to discern the experiential threat, unable to linger on the speculative possibilities of death's power. To see beyond the limitations of this model, then, to venture into the dark experience of death, it would be necessary to look in the direction suggested by Karl Rahner when he urges theology really to give death its due. Theology, says Rahner, should not view death as that which "affects only the so-called body of man, while the so-called soul . . . [is] able to view the fate of its former partner . . . unaffected and undismayed as from above."⁷ Death affects the *whole man*, says Rahner, the soul included.⁸

In Rahner's estimate, the classical definition of death, though neither false nor unjustified on its own terms, is seriously limited by reason of those terms, by reason of their failure to admit the characteristic feature

⁶ Ibid. 72.

⁷ Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Death," *Theological Investigations* 13 (London, 1975) 179.

⁸ Ibid. See also Rahner's *On the Theology of Death* (New York, 1965) 30.

of death: "that it is an event for man as a whole and as a spiritual person."⁹ In freeing the immortal so easily from the grip of death, the body-soul model, says Rahner, offers an intellectually and affectively thin definition of death.¹⁰ While Rahner's own attempt to develop a fuller definition of death will be considered below,¹¹ it might be clarifying to note here that he suggests by thesis what Pieper does by default: the classical body-soul model prevents a full-fledged exploration of death's darkness. This failure indicates that, whatever its speculative attractiveness, the model is functionally limited. It simply does not allow theology to walk in the shadow and blankness of death; it is a censoring model, excising darkness from its evaluative, soul-biased anthropology of death. At its worst, then, the body-soul model fails to take death seriously, refuses to face death's deep threat. At the very least, the model is a misleading adumbration, offering resolution under the pose of description, disguising the answer as a question, using body-soul language to mute death's dark interrogative.

To correct and counterbalance the biases of the classical model, theology must develop models which eye sceptically any diminution of death's pain or power, any recourse to a priori immortality or imperishably secure spiritual powers. At issue here is not a debate about the existence of the soul but a question about theology's ability to face death directly, without immediate recourse to ameliorating models. In other words, putting the issue by way of question, can theology confront death without dependency on categories prefitted to Christian belief? Without the softening assurances of the body-soul model, can theology seek out death at its worst, look at it not as some religiously ingestible datum, but as a woefully dark threat, a fearsome drowning of all personal life, a seizure and breaking of the whole human being? Can death be seen as a dread thing, a blind alley to conceptual management, a blankness offering to theology no obvious resolutions, no grand dualistic solution to itself? Such questions lead into a dark model of death, a model which will be more properly discussed after the following considerations of "acceptance" and "final decision" explications of death.

MODELS WHICH VIEW DEATH AS "NATURALLY" ACCEPTABLE

The metaphysical workings of the body-soul model reduce death to manageable terms by suggesting that its darkness is merely apparent—apparent because only the spiritually "dispensable" body is cast into the shadow of mortality. A similar managing of death can be found in the reductionism of many "natural" or "life cycle" models of death. Just as in the body-soul model, death's devastation is here reduced

⁹ *On the Theology of Death* 17.

¹¹ Cf. 35–39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 84.

to a surface phenomenon, an ambiguous outer dimension which can be "seen through" and finally dissolved. Schematically, life-cycle models suggest that, underneath the cloak of human fright, death is an utterly natural event, an inescapable fact and part of life. Accordingly, by direct and honest confrontation, by an open and courageous grasping of life's own terms, death can be made tolerable, if not actually acceptable. Strong examples of a psychological founding of such a death model can be found in the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Robert Neale; Roger Troisfontaines, on the other hand, offers a clear example of a full-fledged theological development of the model.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* is rightfully recognized as a seminal contribution to the contemporary focus on the "death question" in the United States.¹² Her work is both incisive and compassionate, written from deep personal and professional concern for the ways people struggle to keep death at bay, the ways they deny or kick against its power. From her personal perspective as a psychiatrist who has worked intensely with terminal patients, from her wider reflections on cultural patterns and values underlying death attitudes, Kübler-Ross probes the death-blocking mechanisms of modern society: institutionalized, depersonalized dying, a paralyzing inability to think and speak about death, to be with the dying, to express grief, to cast off the pretense which masks the difficulty and darkness of dying.

Within a cultural perspective which turns away from death, Kübler-Ross attempts to gaze boldly at it. She plots out a psychological trajectory of dying, a curve of five basic attitudes which she finds traced out, again and again, in the experience of terminal patients. Linked in progressive order, these five attitudes describe the experience of dying, an experience which, in its fullest course, moves from rigidity to resolution: from initial denial of death's imminence, through consequent stages of anger, bargaining, depression, to final acceptance. The first four stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression) are all dark and inhibiting; they are elemental refusals, struggles against the inevitable conclusion of life. In Kübler-Ross's scheme these stages are psychologically understandable, but they are also destructive if not eventually resolved, if not passed through and left behind on the way to acceptance of death.

Thus, for Kübler-Ross, the path from denial through depression should be deeply and positively cathartic. Denial and anger, bargaining and depression are not viewed as discrete, static points but as an attitudinal spectrum; they trace a development, a "loosening," in which the individual, stage by stage, lets go of life's continuance and comes to accept its conclusion. There is no guarantee, however, that this will happen. Each

¹² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, 1970).

stage is wedged tight with unadmitted dread, with unspeakable fears and flights of pretense, refusals of life's movement toward death. Given this psychological impaction, each stage is potentially crippling. The individual can journey to acceptance, then, only by taking on at each stage a particular and difficult struggle, only by working through the darkness, resolving it, passing beyond it.

It is worth emphasizing here that Kübler-Ross does not perfunctorily pass over or dismiss these dark stages. On the contrary, her analysis of them is careful, compassionate, clearly aware of the suffering and isolation which make dying so awful. This awareness is expressed in what is actually a reverence for human dying, a reverence which defends the individual's right to a death free of anyone else's forging or meddling. Any attempt then to *pressure* a dying person out of the dark stages into the light of acceptance is, in Kübler-Ross's view, simply wrongheaded, even destructive. Nevertheless, despite this great sensitivity to the dark stages and their therapeutic needs, Kübler-Ross persistently interprets these stages as preparatory and provisional. As a result, the schematic terms of her discussion constantly present acceptance of death as the norm, as the attitudinal stage in which psychic maturity and self-understanding break through to the most balanced and valid perception of death. Kübler-Ross's five stages, therefore, trace a clearly *normative* progression, a movement in which acceptance of death is the final, therapeutically desirable goal. Whatever the cautions and concerns of her praxis (with its acute awareness of and response to each stage), her systematic explanation gives an absolute priority to the stage of acceptance.

Obviously, Kübler-Ross's acceptance model does not depict death as an ultimately dark and destructive reality. Whatever darkness attends death comes from our distorted individual perceptions and wider social practices, from attitudes which are askew with psychic revolt and which breed us full of denial and anger, hostility and despair. Death looms forbiddingly primarily because we perceive it through our own conflicted attitudes, through our failure to accept the natural shape and conclusion of life. The real truth about death can be found, then, only in the state of acceptance; for only in this state does inner attitude match outer reality, only here do we truly see death for what it is—not a negating collapse, not a dread breaking of life's continuities, but "the final stage of growth."¹³

Kübler-Ross's focus on death as naturally acceptable leads her to develop, at least implicitly, a model which psychologically mediates the darkness of death. The same kind of mediating resolution can be found

¹³ Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975).

in Robert E. Neale's *The Art of Dying*.¹⁴ Neale, like Kübler-Ross, offers an approach to death which is basically psychological or practically therapeutic in outlook. For our discussion, however, Neale offers an added element in that he raises explicit theological issues, particularly in the final chapter of his book. He offers a transition, then, from a nontheological development of the "acceptable death" model to its eventual theological use.

In agreement with Kübler-Ross, Neale focuses on the psychological conflicts which make death a tangle of denials, an unspeakable event, a block to imagination and affectivity and human sharing. Like Kübler-Ross, Neale knows that human fears about death are deeply rooted, intricate, not easily unwound. In fact, this is precisely his point: to identify and, if possible, dispel the blockage which keeps us fearfully silent and full of denials about death. An irony works its way into Neale's discussion, however, and it is the same one which undercuts Kübler-Ross's treatment, which threatens, perhaps, any attempt to confront death by a model bound to a notion of natural acceptability. Although Neale strives to face death head on, his therapeutic goal is to exorcise death of its deep and frightful darkness. He wants to identify and dismantle the mechanisms of fear and denial which work within human attitudes toward death. But a massive premise lurks behind this therapeutic goal, a conviction that *death itself* is not dark, that it is not an alien growth in the marrow of human experience. For Neale, the threat of death is only a darkness cast by psychic failure, a penumbra of human fear and fright. According to this scheme, we *must* admit that we are afraid of death, but we must then work to dispel the fear; for it is a clogging and distorting force, engendered from our fears of life and not from death itself:

... our fear of death is basically our fear of life. If our fears were rational they would not prevent us from looking at the inevitability of our own deaths and learning about ourselves and our lives. Since our fears are for the most part irrational, we run away from death, and what we are fleeing as well is our own life.¹⁵

Neale argues that if our distorted life patterns can be identified, they can be challenged and corrected—and with them, our dark fears of death. When life is fully accepted, it culminates in a "finely finished death."¹⁶ Thus Neale's psychological interpretation, like Kübler-Ross's, mediates death's dark aspects, transposes them into the flawed products of our individual psychic histories. Whatever we perceive as grim and dreadful in death is really the result of our own inner negations and impotencies.

¹⁴ Robert E. Neale, *The Art of Dying* (New York, 1973).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 42-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 85, 90.

Reduced to psychic symptoms, the darkness of death is simply human misperception, an indication of personal resentment against the nature of life, an immaturity determined to "hold on" even against life's very own terms. Such psychological interpretation clearly demythologizes death's darkness, but it does so by a high rationality, by a robust disallowance of loss and lament, a strategy which runs the risk of minimalizing death, of reducing its dark prospect to the quirks and tics of human personality. Neale himself alludes to the danger:

What are we to make of all this psychologizing to the effect that fear of death is related to perception of oneself as inadequate and unloved? Our fears about living do lead to irrational fears of death. But stress on our irrational fears of death may serve as a way of minimizing our rational fear of it.¹⁷

Neale's caution about minimalizing death is certainly to the point, but it fails to exert final control on his operative model. The basic thrust of the model is not checked; death is still seen as *apparently* dark, *apparently* incomprehensible. In the end the darkness, the incomprehensibility turn out to be a reflection of our inner failures and inadequacies. And once death ceases to be mirrored out of our own fears, once we see it in itself, we will recognize its pattern as the basic pattern for all psychological maturity—the pattern of growth through change, through flux, through movement and process. The change of life's end, suggests Neale, is one with all the other "deaths" and rebirths of life.¹⁸ Because the elemental rhythm of life includes separation and ending, a fearful refusal of death simply indicates an inability to accept what is natural: change, movement, rebirth into the unknown.

Neale's discussion does, of course, suggest some specific theological uses. In company with Kübler-Ross's treatment, it reveals how acceptance models can articulate death so that a theology drawing upon them need not risk any dark and numbing struggle. By describing death through a positive, growth-enunciating logic, these models resolve the problematic and offer systematic explication. Death is the last rhythm of life, the final possibility, the ultimate potency of being human, the climactic move into what is unknown and "new." Immortality, in some form, is only a breath away.

Roger Troisfontaines's work *I Do Not Die* provides an example of how an acceptance model can make an easy move into immortality and explicit theological service.¹⁹ Employing a model whose premises parallel those of both Kübler-Ross and Neale, Troisfontaines describes all human

¹⁷ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸ Ibid. 95–143.

¹⁹ Roger Troisfontaines, S.J., *I Do Not Die* (New York, 1963).

life in terms of two natural components or curves: the downward curve of the body's diminishing powers and the upward curve of the human spirit's growing potential. Although the natural dynamic of life is plotted by *two* countercurves, by concomitantly fading and growing powers (the body's inescapable descent and the spirit's persistence toward apogee), the two trajectories are not simply equal. For Troisfontaines, it is the spirit's curve, positive and upward, which plots the really significant line of life and offers the primal clue to the meaning of death. According to Troisfontaines, the upward journey of human spirit imposes on each individual

a forever-binding obligation to tear himself away, willingly or reluctantly, from an environment where his equilibrium [is] more passive, more external, and to enter into a more vast, more complex new situation, where he is bound to fail unless he enters deeper and deeper into his own self and is united ever more intimately to the being he discovers step by step.²⁰

Seen in these terms, all meaningful human growth is a "tearing away" from environments "which have become like so many prisons."²¹ Throughout the course of life, spirit moves primarily by separation, by a series of dislodging births, womb-leavings. Within this paradigmatic scheme death itself is conjugated as the final birth, the last womb-leaving, *the* climactic outward surge of growth. As such it is no diminishment at all: "Is not this body, whose power is constantly diminishing, an indispensable but only provisional womb? Does it not have to be relinquished if the person, developed through its means, is to be born?"²²

Charting life by the "natural" curves of diminishment and growth, defining growth, moreover, as the primary curve, pre-eminently the curve of spirit, a curve traced by separation and tearing away, Troisfontaines is able finally to describe death within totally positive bounds:

As the butterfly leaves the cocoon where it has developed as a chrysalis, as the fetus breaks the amnion at birth, so also, when we step into the final state of our destiny, we leave this body which has been the primary condition of our personal ripening.²³

When the umbilical cord breaks at the moment of birth, a new, vast horizon opens out. It will continue to extend. This earthly body, this placenta of the spiritual person, is a nourishing as well as restrictive agent. It will be abandoned insofar as it means limitation; as a result, the soul will find that its relationship with the world becomes easier and more universal. Death enlarges our "situation" indefinitely.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid. 133.

²³ Ibid. 140.

²¹ Ibid. 135.

²⁴ Ibid. 146.

²² Ibid.

In the end, Troisfontaines's model strategically transforms death into an event more fetal than fearsome, a natural culmination to the interplay of life's ascending and descending curves. In death the falling curve of bodily energy fades completely and ceases any longer to chart a course for human experience; at the same time the rising curve of inner development reaches apogee, becomes the only possible tracing of human meaning. Death, then, is neither choke nor cudgel, but rather something supremely natural and fitting, a surrender which brings all our human growth to term. Whatever strikes us as bane or penalty is merely an appearance, an outer grimness which hides the inner grace of death. On the whole, Troisfontaines's reclamation of death is accomplished through an unblinking philosophical optimism. As life's final and fullest "birth," death is wholly conceivable and tolerable, heartening, thoroughly a piece of sense. Seen as another birth, indeed as life's ultimate birth, death offers no obstinacy, no brutal blockage to religious faith or theological systematicizing. It does not pull theology toward any darkness, toward any dread sphinx of a question.

In his reductively positive view of death Troisfontaines is in resonance with both Neale and Kübler-Ross. All three approaches—the life-curve approach of Troisfontaines, the acceptance models of Neale and Kübler-Ross—finally present an image of death conquered. Like the classical body-soul model, these models programmatically resolve death by depicting its "inner meaning," by finding that inner meaning to be consistent with the values and verities of life. Quite definitely, all these models in their closure to death's destructive, emptying aspects offer theology little journey into the dark reaches of death. If theology is to explore the terrible aspects of mortality, then, it can hardly follow such models, hardly *begin* with death as an end product of resolution and comprehension. At the very least, it must counterbalance these positive models with negative ones, with models which do not bind death's naturalness to the logic of acceptance and affirmation. Most certainly, acceptance is a true human possibility, even a rich one, fulfilling, worthy of effort, therapeutically desirable. But if "acceptable death" becomes the single, normative possibility, then theological sight is systematically fixed on the ideal death we *should* die, not the awful deaths we actually suffer.

If theology is bound to models in which death is *only* acceptable and intelligible in itself, then theology is heuristically hobbled, unable to venture into death experienced as dark danger. Surely, though, theology can explore this too, can explore a vision of death that has no intelligibility, no inner secret hidden under its blank surface. At least for investigative purposes, theology can avoid the monochromatic, though consoling views of the acceptance models. It can choose to gaze on the bleak side of death, to brood on all the human experience which simply

cannot come to terms with death, which sees it as a hostile, destructive power, a threat provoking denial and anger, desperate bargaining and despair.

There is a countermodel, then, which rises out of the very limits of the positive models. Pressing an "unresolved" view of death, this countermodel frames some pointed questions: Is death theologically perceivable, a "properly" religious datum, *only* when it is predictably acceptable? What would it mean for theology to perceive death darkly, as unmanageable, unacceptable, not merely as a climactic caesura in the rhythm of life? What can theology say to a death which is awful to the core, *in itself*, not simply in our imperfect perceptions of it? What if, despite all our psychic integrity and wholeness, death is still a dread fracturing of us? What might theology confront in a death which shows itself to be incomprehensible and systematically unamenable, a sheer stone to all human schemes, a dread silence before all inquiry?

DEATH AS FINAL DECISION

The psychological models developed by Kübler-Ross and Neale envision death in terms of psychic integrity, in terms of our ability to confront and accept the mortal nature of human life. A shift into comparable philosophical categories elevates "acceptance" from a psychic attitude to an essential anthropological attribute, from a psychological possibility to a metaphysical property. Thus a model develops in which acceptance is not merely a possible stance toward death but an intrinsic element in the very definition of death. In these terms, death ceases to be an event which befalls us, which "happens" to us; instead, it becomes the central inner act by which we finally accept and affirm ourselves. It becomes the act in which we at last "take" our lives, actively grasp and affirm them for what they are. The power of death is, therefore, not alien and intrusive but personal and fulfilling. By entering into death, by making it our own personal act, we seek out authentic existence, give our lives their ultimate shape.

One highly enthusiastic (and often quoted) exponent of this approach is Ladislaus Boros. His writing develops a "final option" model in which death is "man's first completely personal act, and is, therefore, by reason of its being, the place above all others for the awakening of consciousness, for freedom. . . ." ²⁵ Death is the place where we ultimately opt for who we are. Such a model depends on an anthropological scheme which focuses on the radical incompleteness of human life. This philosophical sighting finds that all the central areas of human existence—knowledge,

²⁵ Ladislaus Boros, S.J., *The Mystery of Death* (New York, 1965) ix, 84. Cf. also "Death: A Theological Reflection," in *The Mystery of Suffering and Death*, ed. Michael J. Taylor, S.J. (New York, 1973) 140.

volition, self-awareness, affectivity—are radically limited by life's finitude, by the essentially partial, transitory acts of the human person.²⁶ During life no individual human act is ever fully expressive of the person; no act ever brings about and states, once and for all, the final and complete meaning of the individual. Accordingly, it is only death which offers finality, which breaks the stuttering of finitude and speaks the completeness of life. "The first integral act of knowing will be possible for us only at the moment of death."²⁷ Only in this moment will we have life's final option, only here will we decisively shape ourselves, achieve the self-integration which the passing and incomplete condition of life always denied us.

Death of this sort is not concussive but culminating, not disintegrating but decisive. It is the moment when the deepest levels of the person are fused and freed from the shifting, mutable patterns of life:

Here the streams of life meet together. [The individual] "is" finally; he no longer lives like a rushing mountain brook, but like a calm mountain lake, clear and deep, reflecting the whole world in its profusion. But this moment can occur only in the moment of death. For only in death can there simply be no more "further" in the same direction, into the empty openness of time. . . . Only in death, therefore, does man reach the total unity of his being; he gets away from the universal constriction and unease and enters into the depths of the world, into the heart of the universe.²⁸

The conceptual constructs of this final-option view define death in terms of finality, thoroughness, completeness, release from time's fragmentary modes, from what is "mere" process and possibility. Although Boros does not outrightly deny the painful and destructive aspects of death, the positive valence of his model allows these aspects little systematic impact. In the final-option hypothesis which he proposes, death is notionally purified; all its darkness is blanched, all its disharmony muted. Nothing makes this more dramatically clear than Boros' attempt to render death from "within":

I plunge more and more deeply into the misty darkness. Where, in fact, am I being hurled? Out beyond all earthly shores. But the amazing thing is that I do not find it strange to be hurled out in this way. I am plunging into something I have always known. It is as if I already once experienced this—and, indeed, not only once, but often in my life. I am being carried away to where I have always been in my dreams, in my longings, to that region which I have always divined behind things, persons and events.

This perception now strikes me with singular clarity. All around me now is light. The dominion of darkness has now ceased. Everything that I ever wanted in my

²⁶ *Mystery of Death* 31–47.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 35.

²⁸ "Death: A Theological Reflection" 141–42.

life is now here. Here there awaits me the first smile that I ever perceived on the face of someone I loved. Here there awaits me that greatness which I sought in love, fatherhood, motherhood and friendship. . . . All this now becomes one, submerged in a wondrous light, a light that does not dazzle but heals. Everything is here. All that was beautiful and precious on earth I find here again. Everything merges into one, marvelously radiant; everything glows, beats like a single heart; everything surges and blazes up. I am at last at home and hold fast the universe.²⁹

Boros here displays the major difficulty within the final-option approach: its refusal to contemplate the blank face of death, its seeming ignorance of death's cruelty. In his development of the final-option hypothesis, Boros refuses to attend to death's sepsis of fear and grief. Yet ironically, for all his lush consolations, Boros' model is curiously disdainful and discomfiting. By concentrating all the decisiveness of life in the philosophically high moment of death, Boros broadly and consistently devalues the quotidian sums of human effort and choice. Death's positive meaning is built upon a systematic derogation of the rest of life.³⁰ All "predeath" experience fumbles incompletely in time and space, trudges through disparate, transient attempts at integration, produces no systematic completeness. Only death, then, can offer final seriousness; only death can be the locus of full personal integration.

Obviously, the apotheosizing tendencies of the final-option model can be highly protective to theology, offering death fully transformed, death turned into a supermystical moment, into an event freed from all the flawed history and poor stuff of life. In such a model, death's strangling becomes a release from time's inadequacies and discrepancies. If theology chooses to work with such a highly selective and transformed version of death, it chooses by premise and principle to have nothing to say about the darkness of human dying. Confronted with death's void, theology will, then, steadfastly and systematically look the other way.

Realizing the affirmatively distortive extremes to which the final-option hypothesis is prone, Karl Rahner attempts to describe death as an integrating decision, without at the same time dismissing or conceptually dissolving its darkness. Accordingly, Rahner calls death the "radical spoliation" of man, "destruction, a rupture, an accident which strikes man from without, unforeseeable," "a blow of fate, a thief in the night."³¹ What death offers for reflection, then, is its own "empty, unsubstantial uncanny character, a kind of de-personalization, loss of self, destruction."³² Before all this the human creature shrinks back in horror;³³ and the

²⁹ Ibid. 152-53.

³⁰ For an incisive critique of Boros' questionable handling of the "seriousness of life," see Matthew J. O'Connell, "The Mystery of Death: A Recent Contribution," *TS* 27 (1966) 439-41.

³¹ *On the Theology of Death* 40.

³³ Ibid. 55.

³² Ibid. 41.

horror is apt, for the dark elements are not mere surface qualities, not peripheral and dismissible, but anthropologically central, rooted in the unity of person and nature, the interpenetration of freedom and fate.

The inescapable tension between choice and constraint, between the individual's inner freedom and the world's ineluctable determinations, is, for Rahner, a primary principle of human existence. From this tension a dialectic develops in which the individual experiences both potency and obduracy, the malleability and intransigency of life, the pathos of an external fate running counter to inner choice and meaning.³⁴ In the predicament of death this pathos comes to its highest pitch. Here the individual's choice and self-determination are checked by a massive clot of fate; here person succumbs to nature; the individual sinks into a passivity that is not merely corporeal but that envelops his whole being.³⁵ Rejecting any reductive view of death as a mere bodily fate, Rahner describes it as an event into which the *whole person* sinks. This holistic perception is in keeping, of course, with Rahner's criticism of the classical model for compartmentally sending the body to the grave while sealing the soul in immortality. In contrast to this separation, Rahner consistently speaks of the whole person's freedom and fate, activity and passivity, not the *soul's* freedom and the *body's* fate, or the *soul's* activity and the *body's* passivity. In addition to refusing dualistic solutions, Rahner avoids the terms of the acceptance models; nowhere does he resurrect death into a disguised birth or reduce death's dreadfulness to the psychological defects and misperceptions of human personality. Moreover, in distinction from Boros, he does not bind himself only to the final-option categories of freedom and act; he postulates no unencumbered final decision which breaks free from life's history of struggled choices.

Granting all of this, however, it is crucial to note that in his major essays on death in Volumes 4 and 7 of the *Theological Investigations*, as well as in his monograph *On the Theology of Death*, Rahner's theological passions and strengths are exercised predominantly in favor of the "active" side of death. Although he admits the darker side far more readily and thoroughly than anyone else we have considered, he uses it mostly as a methodological check, a braking reminder within a model that is systematically propelled toward a positive interpretation of death. Even though Rahner calls death a humiliating passivity, he also, and more significantly, names it a noble action—in fact, "the noblest action" of the human person,³⁶ "an act that man interiorly performs,"³⁷ "an active consummation from within brought about by the person himself, a maturing self-realization which embodies the result of what man has

³⁴ Ibid. 26–31, 38–46.

³⁶ Ibid. 55.

³⁵ Ibid. 31.

³⁷ Ibid. 30.

made of himself during life, the achievement of total self-possession, a real effectuation of self, the fullness of a freely produced personal reality."³⁸

For Rahner, the tension between freedom and fate, between the person's inner act and his outer passivity, supplies the essential dynamic for resolving death. Resolution comes as the dialectic of act and passivity reaches toward some conclusion, some final statement and meaning. What that meaning will be in any individual's case we cannot at all know, for it is buried deeply within the individual. But while the individual, particular death remains opaque to us, death itself, in essential and universal terms, is illumined. It is not merely end but also fulfilment, an event in which the person, by confronting the terms of life's collapse, "brings the total result of his life's activity to its final state."³⁹ Thus the tension between personal act and natural fate becomes itself the locus of freedom. The individual's positive or negative stance toward this tension, the mode by which the person accepts the plight brought by nature—this will speak the individual's last freedom, finally bring the tension of act and passivity to conclusion.

It is this declarative side of death, this integral conclusiveness, that Rahner is most concerned to affirm and explore. Consequently, his model gives primary emphasis to death as a final, personal, culminating act. Methodologically, such a focus is in accord with Rahner's systematic concern for the philosophical and theological ideal, his search for a quintessential paradigm, a model which might capture the deepest possibilities of human death. Fittingly, then, Rahner's model is directed toward resolution; death is not an *unmitigated* tension between passive and active elements; it is no dialectical "draw," no question left hanging between freedom and fate, between the forces of blind, external collapse and purposeful, inner choice. The tension is resolved; the dialectic brings all questions to term; the struggle with darkness and fate finally reveals *its own* deep intelligibility. From a formal, systematic perspective, death is ultimately declarative, not interrogative; it is a climactic expression of what it means to be human, to be fully and finally human.

In Rahner's model the blankness and impenetrability of death is limited to the individual, experiential level, to the history of each particular human death, which is marked by unresolved ambiguities. But on the systematic level these ambiguities are penetrated and death reveals itself as the ultimate human act, a quintessential expression of *all* human action, of all choice and determination; death is a primal speaking of self (positively or negatively) in the midst of life's most questioning circumstances. In its culminating vision this model of death displays the

³⁸ *Ibid.* 31; cf. also 32, 40, 84–85.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

conceptual grace and scope of Rahner's systematic approach. At the same time, however, it presents theology with a death which, on its own terms, is ultimately manageable, ultimately in control of what is destructive and dreadful.

In its paradigmatic power Rahner's model is bound to ideal possibilities, to speculative coherence, to terms which disclose (within death itself) a conceptually schematic and positive resolution. In the end such a model dispels all negative categories and presses towards a "good death" reminiscent of the acceptance models:

When a man dies patiently and humbly, when death itself is seen and accepted, when it not merely "happens" in the course of striving for something else and when perhaps death is not envisaged through blind eagerness for something (flight from shame, something obstinately sought, etc.), when death is loved for its own sake, and explicitly, it cannot but be a good death.⁴⁰

As he speaks of the "good death," Rahner reveals his model's ultimate philosophical cast—and its theological readiness. The conceptual intent and scope of his system create a methodological bias against death's disabling aspects, its incoherence, its brutish tearing through order and explication. The noetic terms of the model inherently abhor death's lack of sense.

Rahner shares with Boros a conviction that death is a locus of meaning, a source of its own explanation, answer as well as question. *Within* death, both theologians find an intelligible and systematic center of meaning: the individual's last act, the individual's final decision to be this particular person, to affirm, even at death, this particular grasp of the tension of being human. Because Rahner and Boros find this deep inner structure, this stability, unshaken by all the rending of life's end, their models are radically *knowing* about death. Consequently, their metaphysical descriptions of death provide an amenable departure point for theological reflection. On the other hand, from within a dark experience of death their models can appear to be too programmatically positive, too relentlessly affirmative. Even as enthusiastic an interpreter of Rahner as Robert Ochs admits this when he laments that Rahner does not admit more often and more clearly that "there is no good death."⁴¹

Surely, methodological variety and heuristic enthusiasms should suggest that theology not limit itself to descriptions in which death is conceptually manageable and ultimately explicable on its own terms. Whatever the advantages of explicative, declarative models, there are

⁴⁰ Ibid. 111. Cf. also "On Christian Dying," *Theological Investigations* 7 (New York, 1972) 288.

⁴¹ Robert Ochs, S.J., *The Death in Every Now* (New York, 1969) 50.

other contrapuntal possibilities—interrogative and exploratory models, models which are not readily adjutant to theological purposes, which press theology to bear the brunt of death, to walk nakedly into its worst dark. To break into these dark recesses, to persist there, theology would have to seek out models which do not “resolve” death in the manner of Boros and Rahner. If Rahner’s active-passive dialectic resolves into an affirmation of act, then theology might also consider the opposite outcome: a dialectic working emptily, spinning into passivity and negation. This would entail viewing death from the dark side, working with a model in which death makes no promises to philosophic systems or religious faith, a model in which death remains a persistent void of a question.

LINEAMENTS OF A DARK MODEL

To combat, or at least to counterbalance, its penchant for positive models, theology can choose instead to work with descriptions of death as something tangled and unresolved, sharply barbed to the grasp of immortality and final options. Such methodological choice might seem single-mindedly negative, morbid even. On the other hand, there is no reason why death should be presumed to supply positive vantage points, why it must present itself to theology in amenable guise. Moreover, there would seem to be no absolute requirement that theology confront death’s darkness by proxy, by the intermediary of models which resolve the dark elements. In fact, if theology is truly jealous to fight its own battles, it must seek out *all* of death, avoid any symbiotic dependency on a range of models which supply it principally with positive perspectives.

Moving in a dark direction, theology would have to seek out a particularly spare kind of model, one that would be bare, lean, toughly impatient with all benign diagnoses of death. Such a model would not describe a systematically complete or normatively ideal death, nor would it attempt to unveil death’s “inner” logic or sense. Instead of offering deep secrets, it would simply remind theology that death is constant scoff and hatched to human understanding. From beginning to end, a dark model would present death as relentless and implacable, a breaking of the whole human person, an unacceptable and repugnant event, disintegration rather than achievement, a final fall into the weakness of being human—a fall even for religious faith and theological articulation. With such a model, theology would be called into grievous and desperate struggle.

Death Breaks the Whole Person

As we have seen, the body-soul model proves inadequate to the demands of a dark perspective. By consigning the body to mortality and

granting unabated life to the soul, the model produces a selective reading of death, a propaedeutic reduction which announces that death's grasp is not anthropologically total. Here, then, theology finds a strongly positive description, a prepossessing solution to death, a model which locks out all deeply perturbing darkness.

In contrast to the body-soul model, a truly dark model rejects all dualistic resolutions and presses toward the worst and grimmest possibility, namely, that death threatens even the deepest reaches of the individual, the inner poise and balance of all human meaning. When no part of the human being possesses an a priori guarantee of life, then death strikes most menacingly. In consequence, theology is forced to step into the darkest place. It cannot hold back, "outside" death, in the soul. Death's threat is holistic, caustic to all conceptualizing, a fist in the face of all dualistic explanation.

Viewed through a dark model, death is a raw datum of experience, unmediated, unilluminated, unarticulated into any system. The human person rigored into cadaver speaks no explanation of death, unfolds no meaning, no palpable promise. Only a question is forthcoming—ironically out of silence, out of the sad emptiness which has replaced the person. In its broken and dumb evidence, death raises unbelieving questions about immanent meaning and transcendent possibility. It reveals no hints of a soul's escape, no signs of God's work. So theology finds death a clueless dark. Within this dark it must wait, in wake, and mourn. It must do this, it must mourn first, because death produces no denials about itself, no voluble assurances about immortality, no solutions about bodies and souls. It offers theology no reasons, no self-explanations, only the husking of denial: a stripping away of all personal elements, a blanking of all affective, volitional, intellectual activity, a breaking of all sensate presence and participation in the world. In its darkness, death is the cold fact of human dispensability in the universe, the empirical proof that human life is finite, markedly inabsolute, eminently transient. As a truly dead limit, death offers no internal shape or form, no heart of the matter to see into, to describe, to imagine even.⁴²

A model which presents death as such a clueless and impenetrable fact can make no claim to reveal the inner workings of body and soul. On the contrary, death is seen as the inert end of the whole person, a collapse in which there is no evidence of surviving inner structure. There simply are no "innards," no deep configuration which explains what happens to the person "inside" death. In fact, death is awful precisely because it is such a dread silence about the person, such an impenetrable

⁴² For a sharp critique of existentialist attempts to "see" into death, cf. Paul Edwards, "Existentialism and Death: A Survey of Some Confusions and Absurdities," in *Philosophy, Science and Method*, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser (New York, 1969) 473-505.

end to human intricacy and intimacy. In death's stifling, the person vanishes from living reach and touch; he sinks into memory, into images dependent on the stirring and shaping of our recall. He is given over to the past and the subjunctive, buried in what once was, projected into what might have been different, into what might have been said or done but never was. From death comes no present, no declarative.

For a truly dark model, then, death is an iron wedge driven into life and sense. Stupid, brutally dull to all human desire and meaning, death reveals no intelligibility working away beneath surface obscurity. It offers no hints about human elements that live on, that escape the blocked corpse of death. In the conceptual asceticism of a dark model, then, theology finds no evidence for the presuppositionally charged language of body and soul. Exploring darkly, theology strains to see what death offers as its primary and most powerful evidence, what it shows, in its own terms, about the whole person—nothing. Nothing at all. Confronting this nothing, the explanation of the body-soul model can appear deceptively voluble, loquacious about the mutest fact, eloquent about what is experientially empty. A counterbalancing choice of model would seek, on the other hand, to be darkly careful, reticent. Daring no words but those broken by the rod of death, it would begin by saying that death strikes and takes the whole person, leaving, by way of explanation, only absence and void.

Death Is Unacceptable

In construing death's darkness, it is not enough for theology to avoid dualistically resolved models of death; for even holistic models can reduce death to manageable terms, thereby presenting theology with explicated, "clean" deaths. As we have seen, the models proposed by Kübler-Ross, Neale, and Troisfontaines admit death's impact on the whole person. Yet these models view death as pre-eminently natural, acceptable, even as culminating and beautiful. Thus the dark aspects of death are schematically absorbed, reduced to provisional, anticipatory stages or to (correctable) failures in psychological growth and maturity. If theology is to explore death's poignancy and pain, however, it must put aside models which reduce death to one of the natural (and therefore acceptable) rhythms of life or to a problem in psychological development. Such reductions generally rehabilitate death by focusing on its inevitability. Because death is inevitable, it is seen as natural; because it is natural, it is (and must be) acceptable. This mortaring of inevitability and acceptability builds a highly rational and affirmative structure, one that blocks off all the dyslogical shadow of death. The blockage comes from the model's selective conceptualizing; for death is not "natural" in the sense of being a simple continuation of the rhythms and involvements of life,

a clear and obvious extension of its most valued meanings and intelligibilities. On the contrary, in its dark aspects death is much more clearly a climactic discontinuity, a sundering of life's patterns.

Of course, to explore death's discontinuity means to reject univocally positive models, such as Troisfontaines's, which find within the *seemingly* harsh husk of death a kernel of birth and renewal. "Natal" death of this sort displays the ultimate transformation of the acceptance model. It argues that all human experience (even death) can be monistically deciphered, since in essence it is a movement of risk and rebirth, a growing out of the known into the unknown, a leaving of the past for what is new in the future. Such definition absorbs crucial differences, turns metaphor into literal logic, and romanticizes the pain and puzzlement of death. Its very waxing about death stirs the scepticism of a dark approach; for if death is so religiously pliable, then theology will never show any scars, any marks of death's grip, any signs of elemental struggle. From the very start death can be defined in confidently affirmative terms, which deny any need to explore death's darkness. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Troisfontaines, but the approaches of Kübler-Ross and Neale also "positively" limit the scope of death, reducing its threat to provisional or psychically unintegrated stages of human development. For them, death is fearful principally because individuals have blocked responses to it, misperceptions which envision it darkly instead of "naturally." Such psychological reductionism easily tempts theology to canonize acceptance as the normative and only fully human response to death. When this happens, especially when it happens by way of methodological or systematic premise, there is little chance that theology will explore death's darkness fully or openly.

In contrast to the acceptance models, a dark model eschews ideal terms, does not find that death is intrinsically intelligible, deeply consonant with and expressive of life's central meaning. Altogether forsaking a "high thanatology," an understanding of death "from above," that is, from the vantage point of some all-embracing scheme, a dark model says simply that death is a low business, that it lacks sense and comfort, that it suffocates life's meaning and breaks life's covenants. In such terms death affects the whole person in ways that are naturally tearing and unacceptable. There is no psychological superperspective which might disarm human rejection and fear of death, for death is a *true* inner tangling. Human denials and anger, desperate bargaining and despair, stem not simply and solely from failed vision and inner imbalance, but also (and fittingly) from a piercing sense of death's loss and blankness.

Obviously, a dark model of death counterbalances the paradigms offered by Troisfontaines, Kübler-Ross, and Neale. More accurately, it

harries these positive models, presses them interrogatively, asks them to confront the unreasonable face of death, the cold fact which prompts human panic and psychic impropriety, which makes us resist the "meditation" of death's naturalness. A dark model asks why theology should not explore the fearful side of death, the place of stones and bruising and crying out. It asks why theology should not take human fright at death seriously, why it should not struggle from a difficult perspective, why, simply, it should not grieve.

If theology follows the questions which lead away from acceptance models, it finds death as rupture and discontinuity, death which is no metaphor for change or development, but is sheer vacancy, blankness, unspeakable poverty. When theology explores the steep and dark side of death, it finds not part of life, not a final and fitting event, but an alien, dismembering force. Here human lives are cast into a void which offers no inner view, no explanation, no experiential quantum at all, only disappearance and absolute closure. On these terms death is intrusive, overwhelmingly negative, impenetrable. It delivers human lives into emptiness, often suddenly, "needlessly," without warning, by error and accident and cruelty, by all the pointless workings of the universe. Even when death comes slowly, with warning, with time and energy for reflection, for "coming to terms," even here death is loss and separation, stoppage and disintegration. Whatever sense we find is not in the stuff of death itself but in some human leap from the evidence, some selective reading of it, some sight or hope which has another source than death's blankness.

If theology wants to feel death's full impact, therefore, it cannot simply back away from what is brutal, from death as deep threat to the whole human person, an end to all experience of growth and development and interaction. The radical no of death must be felt as a beaked fact which tears the modes and meanings of life, as a radical negation whose very unacceptability challenges theistic faith and theological explication.

Death Is Optionless

Theology gives death its due when it tries to conceive, as intensely as possible, the empty darkness of life's end. In doing this, it must look sceptically at schemes which claim to unveil death's "inner workings," which propose that the true center of death is choice, freedom, personal culmination, final integration, decisiveness. When the dark collapse of life's end is interpreted as an act of self-affirmation and identity, indeed as the fullest and most resounding act of integration, then death is made gracious for theology, described in terms already refined and ready for theological articulation. As long as death's "proper" meaning lies under (and contrary to) its "surface" negations, then the experiential threat of

death will be conceptually bypassed. As long as death possesses an inner center composed of act, of final option and decision, then death can be readily understood and explained through the basic continuities and strengths of life. Theology does not have to brood, disturbed, on broken fragments and unjoinable gaps. Theology is easily free of the dark clutching and breaking of death.

In his hypothesis of the final option, Boros proposes just such a positively "freed" model of death. Rahner's approach is far more complex, far more sensitive to the dark elements in death, but in the end he too defines death through the categories of human freedom and integration, categories which are shaped more by the rich anthropological focus of his system than by the meager empirical leavings of death. Rahner and Boros both, therefore, choose explicatory models, models in which *death itself* offers resolution. Within death, within its deep, inner structure, they both find an anthropologically coherent system, an intelligible and unifying meaning, a culminating act of integration and choice. Although this center of decision is empirically obscure, hidden beneath all the twists and ambiguities of experience, it is still, in principle, accessible to reflection, to analysis which examines the essential constituents of human being. Insofar as freedom, choice, self-determination, self-integration, the interplay of person and nature, action and passivity, all describe the basic continuities of human meaning, they also describe the meaning of death. According to this approach, death *must* be, on some deep level, the interaction of those principles which are essential to being human. The elements which are primordial to life must operate within death. Whether this is a piercing metaphysical insight or a premise questionably gravid with assumptions is not the point at issue here. The point is that such a model, whatever its intrinsic validities or dubieties, is simply a poor guide for exploring death's darkness. Given its programmatic biases, an act-centered model necessarily perceives death as conceptually coherent and manageable, possessed of an intrinsic meaning which is continuous with the categories of life. When theology comes to such a model, it finds that a way around darkness has already been charted by *death itself* as it were, by death's revelation of its own inner sense and structure.

Of course, if death offers such perspicuous meaning, theology need only appropriate this meaning, fitting it into religious categories and schemes. There is no need to struggle with death's tearing stupidity. Theology can remain unshocked and unshaken. But it is precisely this protected status which imprisons theology, keeping it distant, even if secure, from the full reality of death. It is precisely this nurtured isolation which points to the need of negative models, models which might force theology to wander death's worst straits, to confront its blankness, its unilluminated redundancy, its *deadness*—that nothing which death is in

itself, that total silence it gives back to our proposals about freedom and final options.

Described for theology in a dark vein, death is a defeating struggle for human volition and self-determination. Even when choice and option, freedom and self-focus, are used as the conceptual probes of death, they chart sadness and despondency; for, empirically, death is a fall into human inoperancy and inaptness, a sinking of all the person's constitutive powers. Although the individual struggles, even heroically, to die his own death, to grasp the ending of life in a way which is coherent with his past, with the deepest convictions and character of his being, still, in the end, death brings this effort to nothing. Death's nothing. The nobility of dying passes into the emptiness of death, and the starkness of this "resolution" is a dark message about human finitude.

What death does to human choice and freedom is to take no notice of it, to deny it, to leave it to charnal pointlessness. In death the individual is unable any longer, even in the most paltry way, to hold on to the self which he has been all the years of his life. In its blankness and silence death in no way affirms the self, offers no evidence that the dialectic of dying has ended in anything but the depletion and disappearance of the person. In a dark model, then, death remains thoroughly impassive and unpromising. Even the intensity of the struggle between person and nature only underscores the poignancy of the situation; despite all of the person's inner wrestling, the dialectic of action and passivity, of freedom and fate, still ends thwartingly in death—in unilluminated fate and empty passivity. A dark model focuses on this empirically bleak, ineluctable fact, this unqualified and unabating negation, rather than on any hidden, positive "secrets" such as those hypothesized by the models of final option and freedom. At the very end there are no options. Death means the loss of all personal holds—sensate, emotive, intellectual, volitional. A dark model nowhere attempts to forge such poor stuff into climactic option and self-definition. It simply accepts the evidence of impotency, simply stands and broods before utter void. And no assurance comes forth from this emptiness, no semiconcealed message about lasting freedom and vindicated choice. Freedom is finished, choice gone. In a dark model this is what theology must work with.

Death Is Untheological

Seen in its darkness, death is the human person husked into nothing. It is a fall into stringent silence, inertness, unreachableness; it marks an end to life's needs and gifts, to all plans and relationships, to whatever is fine or flawed in a given individual. Fittingly, though most painfully, the human cadaver is the dramatic sign of this. Far from being a "mere" bodily fact which theology might disdain or high-mindedly pass over,

the repelling yet poignant corpse is a primal countersign, an awful contradiction to the once-living person, a negation impassable to human bargaining and reasoning. Any truly dark definition not only admits this but expounds its empirical ramifications, reminding theology that death is a dread disintegration coming perhaps in a slow wasting that must be watched, paid for in pain and regret by the one who dies and those who share the dying with him; at other times death descends suddenly, in massive physical brutality, by inner breakdown or outer violence, bringing an unexpected, unprepared, disruptive end to life. In either instance it is, experientially, an awful closure, and its natural inevitability is small answer to our sense of being robbed, cheated, left wanting life back, wanting something beyond the impassive and unfulfilled thing which is any person's death. In making this experiential point, a dark model describes death as a total cipher. Within that cipher we have no eyes with which to see. Death only takes away; it reveals nothing, says nothing to us. It is a silence we cannot coax into any self-revelation.

It is perhaps repetitiously clear by this point that a chief characteristic of a darkly developed model is its refusal to give theology an obvious foothold. Approached by way of its darkness, death is not only experientially unamenable, systematically impenetrable, but totally without resonance to religious faith or theological concern. Death is radical dissonance, void, vacancy, unaltering and constant *nada*. Any attempt, therefore, to seek *within death's own terms* for an understanding and articulation of theistic faith is doomed. A model constructed from death's darkness offers not the slightest evidence of immortality or new birth, of natural culmination, final options, freedom—of anything which might support theology's confession of a God whose involvement with each individual is unbroken by mortality. In death's darkness there is no clue about the possibility of such involvement, no clue about survival, continuance, "inner" victory, deliverance, personal salvage of any sort from what is, empirically, unconditional loss.

In its attempt to affirm an elemental covenant of life between God and humanity, theology finds death a clenched dumbness—no light, no word, no stirring. In its dark intransigence, death signals no perduring existence for the individual; its blank facticity challenges any thought of a transcendent meaning for personal life and experience. Death simply implies that life is without any covenant except the fragile, transient ones of space and time. Here, then, theology faces a stark threat, the human experience of an end which negates any suggestion that there might be, amazingly, a Lord of this awful death-loss, a savior from it.

A dark model offers theology no network of hypotheses, only the nettle of a most unworkable human thing—final darkness and emptiness, a desperate collapse which leaves no clue about the person, nothing that

theology might have faith in or count on. And if human death is so reticent about the human person, it most surely speaks no syllable about God. It is, in fact, the elemental case against God, at least against a God who would be radical affirmation and grasp of all human being, who would not let any person sift into nothing. Precisely because death is nothingness, the eradication of all personal dimensions, it is a corrosive argument against meaning, not to mention benevolence, in a universe measured by personal being. What theology comes upon, then, is not a religiously malleable and edifying fact but the most sparse and mean datum of human experience: death inflexible and inert, death cracking no bit of light for theology, death refusing to relent one moment so that faith might ascend to certainty or even to comforting probability.

Within the terms of a dark model, death says nothing for the logic of God; in fact, it discourages God-talk, actually calls God into stark question. Thus theology is spared nothing, offered no resolution, no intrinsically comforting solution to death. Instead, it is summoned to a task dramatically different from that suggested by all the "illuminated" models. While the latter present death as conceptually "ready," open, plausible to theology's purposes, a dark model portrays death as closed, unconcerned, intractable. It offers no theological amenities or affinities, no clues about the person, about God, about what words might ever join the two, might make some sense, across the gap of death.

SOME INITIAL THEOLOGICAL REPERCUSSIONS

A dark model calls theology to task, asks it to brood on the absence of immanent purpose and transcendent possibility in the empirical fact of death. A full-fledged theological response to the dark dimensions of death is beyond the scope of these pages, which have attempted, as an initial step, merely to plot out the configurations of a dark model, to suggest the particular kind of setting such a model would provide for a theological discussion of death. By way of conclusion, however, it might be helpful to indicate some tentative "leads" for a theological response to a rigorously dark model of death.

In the first place, when theology takes up a dark model, it must clearly admit its own humble place within human fear and loss, within the tearing perplexity of death. In no way can it remain conceptually aloof from threat and risk. Dialectical flourishes, "knowing" analyses, have no place here. Because death is stolidly untheological, it cannot be reduced to liminal status, to a conceptual passageway through which religious categories might easily pass, through which these categories might enhance their logic and power. On the contrary, death is a harrowing of religious categories. Thus, in exploring death, theology takes on primordial test and struggle. It must stand before the last poverty and nakedness,

the bare testimony of dead bone and spiritless flesh. From this abject position theology must try to speak of the plentitude of God, try to make consonance between the provoking senselessness of death and the promise given to faith.

Methodologically, then, a dark model presses theology to recognize empirical bounds, to deal with human experience that does not readily supply religious frameworks and explanations. But this is not a subversive pressure; for if religious faith involves a seizing and risking of an individual's whole life, then, inescapably, whatever is humanly flawed and fearsome must be included. In fact, it might be argued that theology should be particularly drawn to whatever resists religious formulation. Rather than avoiding such experience, theology might explore it as the heart of its problematic, the heart of its attempt to understand a world which is not simply synonymous with religious faith.

In a dark model of death, theology confronts the radically alien possibilities of human experience. In this confrontation the gap between religious faith and empirical fact is not diminished by anything in the nature of death. Death does not speak of faith or from faith. It remains singularly dumb and uncommunicative, and it thereby forces theology to demarcate most carefully the difference between the stark "stimulus" of death and the "response" of faith. A dark model, therefore, clarifies faith by refusing to mingle its perspective into the data of death, by refusing to find the awful human fact already infused by theologically amenable forms. In short, death is not merely apparently or superficially dark (but in essence illuminated); it is unrestrictedly and deeply dark. Theology does not merely pretend at a difficulty which, in the end, will be revealed as no difficulty at all, but as a provisional unclarity, part of a theological equation that was simply on the way to solution.

Working from a dark model, theology receives intense formal or methodological pressure. It is pressed to exhibit, at every possible turn, the difficulty of its task, the elemental mystery it attempts to articulate. Theology must strain to show its strain—not an easy accomplishment, for even the discursive forms of theological language tempt it into an explicatory and assertive manner that can quickly belie the difficult burden of death. A dark model makes theology sensitive to all of this, constantly reminding it that it must *show* the weight it bears in speaking about death and faith.

In a darkly-set investigation, theology must face the full force of death; it can count on no philosophical or psychological remission within death's malignancy; it is not allowed any response which is not clearly the response of faith, a response which must come across an awful and inimical gap. From an investigatory perspective, therefore, faith stands before death as nonfaith does; within death itself faith finds no revealing

fact which disbelief overlooks. Death's emptiness is common and universal, it holds no hidden theological lode. In death, theology must deal with the unfaithfulness of human existence, with the lack of any proof or promise that this existence includes individual survival and ultimate meaning. Within this infidelity, however, there lurks a more difficult question: that of God's faithfulness. If death in itself is unresolved darkness, what can it mean to speak of God? If death is negation and unresolved darkness, if it is utterly faithless, by definition a breaking of life, removal, silence, an empirical sign only of loss and emptiness, then it holds no theistic hints. For faith, it is a dark unknown, proclaiming indeed that there is nothing to know. From the human side, then, death radically questions faith. It reveals nothing that would serve as the barest ground of trust in God.

When death is viewed as unmitigated darkness, the very existence of God becomes a moot question. For even if God exists, says death, God makes no difference to the dead, no difference that can in any way be perceived, described, understood. In death's collapse of the human person, faith is therefore drastically questioned. At the same time, however, the primal shape of faith is revealed; the essential task of theology comes to the fore, the task of showing how, before death, faith is an empirically unprotected and humanly uncontrived possibility. When death is seen as uncompromising negation, then faith is no sensible human judgment, no syllogistic contraption, and theology is no drawerful of answers. Death clears out all rationalizations, all the human construction which would soothingly pass for faith. Confronted point blank in its darkness, death is no comfort to faith and no help to theology. Thus faith has only itself to rely on; the faithful person has only the sheer promise of God to rely on. And it is this which theology seeks to speak about, even as death takes within its darkness all the language of promise and hope.

Because death is so utterly untheological, such an awful silence about human continuance and God's meaning, it dramatically clarifies the scope and risk of faith, its descent even into a Sheol of nothingness and vacancy. In this dark descent faith is revealed for what it is at its very center: a stark empirical risk, a counting on God when every reason for such counting is clearly and deeply challenged. Conceived in these terms, faith is not a stance assumed from human conclusions or sustained through the strength of human conceptualization and analysis. As it closes in on death, faith must increasingly, even frighteningly, cling to the God who is in no way affirmed by the darkness ahead. The dark model thus draws faith to naked self-awareness of itself. Because death offers nothing but denial and disbelief, faith can count on nothing that would assert death's perspicuity to human mind, death's malleability to human will. Faith is consummately seen, then, for what it is, a risk-

laden response, a holding to the truth of God—but the holding is no simple certitude and the truth is no function of human logic and evidence.

From still another perspective, a dark model of death can be methodologically purgative for theology. In its empirical blankness, its totally untheological nature, death threatens all faith with godlessness, with the cynical charge of being simply a contrivance of human wishing, imagining, delusion. In this dark questioning death warns theology of the anthropomorphic risk of all its images, of the tendency of all human thought (even theological) to be self-protective, to build abstract refuges from the chill and grief of experience. The concerted formal effect of a dark model is, then, to make theology sensitive to its own paradoxical process: the constant “pulling back,” the indispensable ebb of self-scepticism which should mark all theological schemata. This inner questioning and sense of incompleteness is theology’s confession, by form, of the incomprehensibility of God, the deep danger of faith, the danger that it might be illusion, idolatry, a peddling of easy answers to human pain and puzzlement.

The advantage of a dark model of death is that in its speculatively ascetical terms it presses theology to cast off all conceptual presumptuousness, all assumptions that would make God a calculated and obvious comfort, that would make death a test fulsome with piety. From a dark perspective death is simply a block of silence, and theology’s only words must come from the side of faith, where there is nothing but God. The result, therefore, is not sweeping explanations of death but a heightened sense of God’s mystery, a sense that is not delivered as conclusion but is only *shown* and grasped in the theological painfulness of struggling with dark death. Because death gives faith no theistic clues, nothing it might cling to or find comforting, theology must show that faith simply waits for God to be God, *on God’s terms*, in a freedom of being beyond all human sight and experience. But this is no soft mystery, no sweet “mystic” breathing about God’s being. It is a realization of transcendence shaped by a *via negativa*, by admission that human understanding is unwound in death, that human argument and analysis, language and imagination here find nothing to fatten on. Again, the dark model stresses that faith has no option, that it must go into death’s hold, must suffer the blind void, hoping that still, even here, its God will indeed be God, hoping that the empirical blank of death, the lack of all discernible survival, will not be the only truth.

Given a dark model of death, faith can look to nothing that experience discerns or can call its own, nothing it can clutch to itself by the claims of human verification, nothing it has ever depended on so totally before, nothing it has ever needed in such desperation. Faith goes into the nothing of death, clinging to God’s mystery, but this clinging is so

paradoxical that it comes only when all the normal ways of clinging are sheared off. In the darkness of death faith grasps nothing that experience can point to or verify, nothing it can explain from "within" death, nothing it can rationally prove, nothing it can control or possess. As theology traces out these dark terms, it describes, in a kind of negative braille, the transcendence of God.

A dark model shows how, even by the route of the most scant possibility (the rigid blankness of death), theology must still come to the transcendence of God. Of course, this coming to transcendence, to God's otherness, God's freedom from human inspection and determination, can be terrifying, as Rudolf Otto, among others, has pointed out:

Taken in the religious sense, that which is "mysterious" is—to give it perhaps the most striking expression—the "wholly other" . . . that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the "canny," and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment. . . . The truly "mysterious" object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently "wholly other," whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.⁴³

Whatever the impact of God's transcendence, purely as a theological theme or schema, darkly perceived death stuns thought with the visceral impact of this otherness. In the opaqueness of death the otherness of God is faith's only possibility, for all human possibility has perished. There is either God or nothing. The cliff of fall, to transpose Hopkins, is "frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed." And theology struggles to depict this, to show that faith counts totally on God, that this counting, by all empirical norms, is the barest, thinnest thing, fragility beyond all hyperbole, a hanging between the promise of God and the obvious nothing of death. All is risk. From the perspective of a dark model of death God's transcendence is the end of empirical plausibility and protection, an end starkly clarified by the naked need which is human death. Collapsing into this dark, faith can only wait for the mystery of God to declare itself—against all evidence, beyond all empirical clues, despite the forsaken, godless thing which death so clearly is. Such a waiting is closer to the mystics' dread and dark night than it is to the deaths wrought by hagiography.

In addition to urging upon theology a distinct approach to the discussion of God's transcendence, a dark model offers as well a particular perspective on the question of God's immanence. The perspective arises from the Christological ramifications of the dark model, from the prospect

⁴³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York, 1958) 26, 28.

of Jesus' death as bleak and emptying. When the terms of death itself are unrelievedly dark, faithless, untheological, then the death of Jesus becomes paradoxically crucial for theology. At the place of human collapse where there is only choked and beaten silence, here faith dares to confess the counterpresence of God. In the death of Jesus the two are joined: the awful, blind, blank thing of death and word of a wholly Other, death's very denial. Pursuing a dark model of death, theology seeks no easing of the paradox. The blankness of death does not disappear within the promise of faith. Instead of mere dissipation and denial of darkness, faith sees Jesus die a truly hard human death, sees him fall into frightful loss, into the forsaken end which he fears and prays against in the garden, which he succumbs to, crying out, in the passion narratives of Matthew and Mark.

Focusing on the darkness of Jesus' death, the paradox of God and negation brought together, theology feels and shows an apt Christological tension: it is stunned in its own conceptualizing, forced to struggle with God's passion to grasp the human condition, on its own terms, even to the point of death. Thus a dark model nourishes a Christology constructed "from below," one that is rooted in the humanity of Jesus, that searches out the revelation of God within all the forms of human history, even within the ragged unravelling of death. Within such a perspective the death of Jesus cannot be reduced to an act of expiation, an event principally concerned with sin and its satisfaction. Far less humanly schematic and manageable than that, the death of Jesus is a contradiction, rationally untrackable, a paradox for faith, the word of God's descent to the very last place, to the human nothingness of death. For Christian theology, there is no further length to which God could go, no more removed possibility, no end more dead. In this last place faith finds a primordial and perplexing sign, a paradoxical binding of God's mystery and death's darkness.

God's immanence within death's emptiness is literally inconceivable, indescribable, empirically unverifiable. Yet this is precisely what the death of Jesus proclaims, that God has entered into human dying, into the fright of dead body and traceless spirit, into the whole welded awfulness of death—the body's broken limbs and sunken features, the stiff gape and parody of death, the spirit's separation and loss, the dread slippage from oneself and others, the slide forward into a terrible unknown. That God bears this, this brunt of human being, is of utmost significance to faith, but only because death is a massive burden, so massive that theology's thinking is dumbstruck to explain how God's immanence achieves in Jesus *even this*. Bereft of inner explanation, unable to produce plausibilities and proofs about God's immanence in Jesus' death, theology comes again to faith's idiosyncratic terms, its

thoroughly paradoxical shape: the promise of God is bound to what is empirically the end of all promise.

In the death of Jesus, theology finds the elementally taut quality of faith, the sheer risk of its covenant, the scandal of Jesus, God's Word, being broken in death. Thus theology must struggle to plot out what it means to have faith in a God who does not hold back from the godlessness of death, from that dark which is no proof or case for God's existence, that blankness which is also no proof or case for faith's validity. The paradox amazingly binds God to the place of faith's darkest difficulty. Moreover, it demands that theology emphasize the unfacile and conceptually fractious nature of God's immanence—the closeness of God cloaked in the human event of utter removal, the human medium, death, straining away at every point from the revelation, God. As the dark of death is held in unbroken tension with Christological confession, theology expresses the primary mode of faith: mystery, but not mystery as some catchword or master key or easing of the tension. Death's bleakness gives no ground before catchwords. And knowing this, faith holds to a God whose closeness is stunning but never simply apparent, never directly held in the grasp of human experience.

As Christian theology attempts, through a dark vision of death, to confront these central issues, it looks, of course, to the primal clue which comes from faith's side: the resurrection of Jesus. Working with a dark model of death, theology must, however, affirm that the resurrection is no perspicuous anthropological possibility, no obvious, perceivable, "natural" fruit of death. It is, instead, a counterclaim, a message as empirically unverifiable in its illumination as death is empirically unknowable and blank in its darkness. As such, the resurrection of Jesus does not serve as a shelter from the awful cost and cruelty of death, from its hollow beckoning, its experiential breaking of us. The resurrection does not dispatch death's emptiness and supply in its place a death replete with meaning and good sense. Precisely because death is such a burial of human experience, such a burial of the possibility of God, precisely because of this does the resurrection stand as a shocking and scandalous counterclaim.

Confronting the dark, contentless shape of death, faith looks to the resurrection of Jesus as *the* promise that God will be God even in the massive nullity which no human experience can breach, the nullity of life's end. Given the stringencies of the dark model, the resurrection is, however, experientially astounding and schematically uncontrollable. It is Jesus' not-fitting into the web of death, the web of all human experience, the stretch of all human reason and proof. Again, the otherness of God's word speaks paradox—comfort and disturbance, a promise about human experience which runs deeply counter to this experience, a mes-

sage which radically counters death but leaves it empirically unaltered for us. Because death itself offers not the slightest, faintest hope, the resurrection of Jesus makes human experience gasp in hope; it asks human mind and heart to take the risk of faith beyond all calculation, beyond any protection against the nay-saying of death. In the stringent terms of the dark model, faith clings to the word of the resurrection even as it sees the awful shape of death. Death's darkness does not diminish; faith is simply clarified for what it is—a reaching whose logic tears against human definition and counts on the paradoxical word spoken in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Needless to say, these last pages of theological “repercussions” do no more than indicate some general directions which a dark model of death might give to theological discussion. Although it would be an extensive task to plot out these leads more completely, it might also be a productive task, contributing to theology's sense of what is atonal and disharmonic in human experience. At times—at least in death—faith's struggle with these discordancies can become a descent into epistemic and spiritual poverty, a journey into loss and lament, a deep risk that theology can trace only in contrarities, only in faith's search through forbidding places.