Consolation's Afterlife: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Illusion in Facing Death

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Consolation’s Afterlife:
The Ethics and Aesthetics of Illusion in Anticipating Death

A dissertation presented
by
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to
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Abstract

What might constitute an attitudinal excellence for anticipating one’s own death? That is the guiding question of this study. In pursuing this question, though, several others arise, suggesting a nested sequence of problems: pull one apart and the next awaits, ever closer to the core of the issue. The first arises from contemporary moral vocabularies for facing death, which often center around a binary opposition of acceptance (good) versus denial (bad). Should we think about this differently? I argue that we should, but a second problem to arise is whether we could. The binary actually grows from a more deep-seated critique of consolation before death as an illusory avoidance of difficult realities, and without going to those roots, alternative proposals may be short lived. So, third, what motivates the critique of consolation as illusion? I show how it trades upon a notion of illusion as a kind of veil, under which we hide from hard truths, and how this notion has been co-defined with religion in prominent strands of critical thought—religion as illusion as consolation. So, fourth, could we think about consolation differently, to conceive it as a kind of excellence for living with our mortality? Could we do that while preserving important insights from critical theory of religion, to think about consolation before death after the death of God, a consolation that does not rely upon once-standard notions of afterlife?

My method for pursuing these questions is a mix of historical, philosophical, and literary analysis—historical analysis to contextualize the issue and show its contingency; philosophical analysis to assess rival concepts of consolation and explore their implications; literary analysis to discover sources of alternative imagination and consider how the excellence of consolation may
actually be cultivated. After an introductory chapter that surveys a variety of voices critical of consolation, subsequent chapters perform close readings of a few poets and critical theorists, paired together, whose work is especially pertinent to these questions: Wallace Stevens and Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke and Sigmund Freud, Geoffrey Hill and Theodor Adorno.

This study finds that contrary to common scholarly opinion, consolation has had an afterlife in modern religious thought and poetry by, as it were, passing through death by critique. Illusion is not always simple avoidance of reality; it may also be a reframing of reality through capable imagination, pressing back upon the merely given to make for ourselves a habitable world. Such illusion can support an earthier sense of afterlife rooted in identification with one’s beloveds, a process through which those who pass on continue in us, as us. This may transform one’s own anticipation from an imagined blank, a brute cessation, to a vision of continuity. This may not be consoling in the sense of “feeling better” about mortality, but it can support a sense of flourishing, a sense of continuing to live until we don’t, in face of anticipated ends. For what we most require in face of death may be a state of mind that supports the integrity of love.
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................................... iii

Preface.......................................................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter One: The End of Consolation ..................................................................................................... 1

Chapter Two: Intermediate Illusion ......................................................................................................... 28

Chapter Three: Love Eternal, While It Lasts ......................................................................................... 103

Chapter Four: Love Archival, Across the Gaps ...................................................................................... 170

Chapter Five: Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 233

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................................. 242
Preface

Consolation before death is a work of love, less about assuagement than attunement—attunement to what matters most, to those who matter most, both here and no longer. I learned this through the attention so many people lavished on me over the course of this study, which, at times, seemed as though it might just coincide with the course of my life.

Not all this attention has been easygoing. Indicate among polite company that you’re studying death and how “people” (read: you and I) anticipate it, and whatever benevolent curiosity prompted them to ask may shade quickly into concern. What, after all, could prompt a relatively young, relatively healthy person to have such a morbid bent? In my cheekier moments, I’ll just shrug and blame it on a Southern Baptist upbringing that subjected me to one revival too many. Without fail, they would conclude with an alter call, a liturgical innovation in which the preacher urges you to consider what your eternal destiny would be if you were to die then and there. Or perhaps in a fiery car crash on the ride home. A fate that would but faintly approximate the flames awaiting sinners on the other side. You get the idea. It leaves an impression, however determinedly you walk away.

In less cheeky moments, I narrate the study’s origins with reference to more proximate experiences that prompted not aversion but rather curiosity, to such an extent that hearing me talk about it has led several people to expect an ethnography or confessional autobiography. In the study itself I allude to those experiences infrequently (and even then, obliquely), approaching the subject instead through textual and philosophical analyses, content to let them stand, like
Nietzsche describes philosophy, as “a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.”¹ But at this moment, some narration may help to give context for my offerings of thanks.

The roots of this study lie in my work as a hospital chaplain over the last eight years, which put me into astonishingly close contact with patients, families, and medical teams in various clinical settings, especially adult oncology, cardiology, and intensive care units. It was not my plan to stay so long. (Nor, for that matter, even to begin: as a child, I once vowed to my pious mother that I would never become a minister, because I’d have to visit sick people.) Yet I found myself drawn, ineluctably, to the questions that arose while present to people at the edges of their lives. At some point I realized that, for me, there would be no way out but through. My introduction to this work was an internship at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, where Katherine Mitchell and George Winchester, S.J., offered the most generous-spirited counsel a newcomer could hope for. Later, at Tufts Medical Center, I continued to learn from my colleagues James Shaughnessy, S.J., Mary Fitzgerald, Mary-Lou von Euw, and Janusz Chmielecki, O.F.M. Without them and the opportunities they extended, without the openness and courage of the many patients and families who, for the sake of confidentiality, must remain nameless here, I would not have been able to think the thoughts that made this study possible.

After a few years working in the hospital, I developed what educational theorists sometimes call an illusion of mastery. I grew comfortable—much as one ever can be—accompanying strangers in their dance with death, and from this I concluded, without being so bold as to articulate it explicitly, that I had grown comfortable with death as such. Cavalier attitudes like that are easiest to maintain from a distance. And all such distance collapsed when an advisor figure for my doctoral work, Ron Thiemann, received a terminal diagnosis just before

my second year in. We had not known each other long. Yet the impact of his diagnosis on me was enough to convince me that, regardless of how diligently we contemplate death in the old tradition of *memento mori* exercises, there may be no experts here, only beginners. Much of what I’ve learned about facing one’s end came to me that fall, when Ron invited me and a few others to gather every couple weeks at his home in the countryside of Concord, Massachusetts—the leaves around turning to their annual blaze—for a seminar that would be his swan song. For all I remember of the books we discussed, they might as well have been teen gossip magazines. What I will never forget is his grace, his poise, that mix of humor and seriousness of purpose, and the red leaves of a Japanese maple raining down, lacily, just outside the dining room window. His example is never far from my thoughts on anticipating death, and I am grateful to him and Beth Thiemann for sharing that time with us.

A host of others helped this study to grow from roots into full flower. Hearty thanks are due first and foremost to Mark Jordan, my advisor. Through several drafts, he read every word that appears here, and a good many words that, deservedly, don’t. Mark really has been the best of readers: lucid in identifying what works and where work remains to be done, willing to talk through questions whenever they arise, invested in the study’s success but not its particular trajectory, letting it develop however I see fit. Early on, I learned from his example that form matters just as much as content when thinking about ethical instruction, and that one’s language needn’t—shouldn’t—distinguish too firmly between the academic and the literary. That openness to experimenting with form made this process far more delightful than I ever thought a dissertation could be.

Several other faculty members at Harvard have been indispensable. Amy Hollywood and Charles Stang, who both served as readers for the dissertation, had been constant supporters and conversation partners well before I’d taken the first steps on this particular project, and they
continued that support throughout the process. It will become clear in due course that I approach my questions with a pragmatic slant, drawing from traditions of critical thought about religion, and I learned much of this from David Lamberth, who generously lent a hand at a couple pivotal moments in my research. Among this cohort, I also wish to thank Kimberley Patton for wise counsel. At a moment when I’d reached a dead end and had no idea how to proceed, she helped me to find my bearings and encouraged me just to do whatever I wanted, whatever would revive my excitement, which, at that time, was to throw myself into poetry.

Special thanks are due to the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, which supported me with a graduate fellowship over the 2016–17 academic year. Danielle Allen and the staff of the Center that year—Emily Bromley, Susan Cox, Maggie Gates, Kyle Hecht, Joseph Hollow, Jess Miner, and Monica Tesoriero—created a hospitable environment where tender young ideas can grow and flourish. Eric Beerbohm and Mathias Risse, co-directors of the graduate fellowship program, nurtured a lively and mutually-supportive seminar among the Fellows and read our work with great care, offering in due measure both praise and critique. I was able to draft and workshop chapters three and four during my time at the Center, and along with Eric and Mathias, I would like to thank Roni Gura Sadovsky and Myisha Cherry for reading and offering written responses to my work. Thanks also to the other Fellows—Roni Bar, Kelsey Berry, Brandon Bloch, Jacob Fay, Barbara Kiviat, and Michael Rabenberg—for always asking questions and pushing me toward better versions of my argument. It is no doubt better for that year spent in conversation with them.

I could go on with stories of people who, knowingly or unknowingly, shaped this project by thoughtful conversation and support. But for brevity, I must resort to a roll call of gratitude: my parents, Becky and Perry Campbell; Kent Blevins, Mara Block, Jason Bruner, Lisa Cahill, Joshua Cohen, Joyce Dehli, Zainub Dhanani, Jon Eden, Samantha Guhan, Maggie Hartman,

Before the opportunity of one final offering I find myself fumbling for any word at all—not for want of anything to say, but for staggering abundance. What word of thanks does not drift feebly off like a leaf in an autumn gust, when thanking one who is the very condition of the occasion, one without whom none of this would be? Leona Campbell persisted with me through every twist in this journey, offered encouragement whenever it seemed to stall, listened to every half-coherent thought I voiced, elicited thoughts I’d never managed to consider, shaped my approach to this topic by her clarity of mind and incisive critiques. Most of all, she’s shaped me. From her I caught the zest for literature that guides my thinking here. From her I learned empathetic imagination, which animates my argument at so many points. From her influence on my very pattern of inhabiting and noticing the world, I learned that our meditation on death, if it may resolve, resolves into a meditation on love, the twist in this whole journey of which I am most proud. However feebly, I offer my thanks. And this study, in dedication to you.
Chapter One: The End of Consolation

1.

Imagine you knew that you were going to die. You already do, of course—in an abstract way. All humans are mortal and you are a human. The proper inference, however, is notoriously difficult when we move from abstractions of logic to appropriating the inference for ourselves, connecting the “you” of the premises with the voice sounding them out. We might say, for anticipating death, there is knowing and then there is knowing.

The reason is not just creaturely recoil from grim thoughts. Anticipating death challenges the imagination in peculiar ways. For one thing, writers like Sigmund Freud have long pointed out that it involves a contradiction: to really imagine being dead, you would have to imagine the cessation of imagination, of all consciousness in fact.2 And that is something imagination cannot do. Add to this our ordinary experience of consciousness, with one thing flowing into the next, into the next, continuing on with apparent ceaselessness. To imagine a sudden and permanent break in this continuity could be like imagining a river coming to standstill when it hits a dam, neither pooling nor diverting, but simply ceasing to flow.3 Some might whiff sophistry in all this. While we cannot imagine being dead, we can certainly imagine the world without us, and the abstract premises of human mortality can help this along.4 But the imaginative challenges may be sufficiently strong to require certain kinds of shock to bring us into that more visceral knowledge.

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3 Thomas Nagel makes a similar point in The View from Nowhere (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 225.

of our mortality. Such shocks could include, for example, the death of someone close to you or—in what may be the paradigmatic case of such knowledge in contemporary conversations about mortality—diagnosis with a threatening illness.

So imagine you came to know, by way of some such shock, that you were going to die. You would not know when. Few of us ever do. But you would know that while your actions in the intervening time might delay the hour, they could never unfix the outcome.

In light of this knowledge, a couple questions would present themselves: what attitude should you have toward your mortality? And what language would be available for even conceiving your options among attitudinal ideals? This study examines some of the most important important answers to these questions developed over the last hundred years or so.

But let us begin with the present, with the options that would emerge for you, say, in the clinical scene of diagnosis. You would likely not be presented with a glossy, tri-fold brochure that explains any of this explicitly. But what is likely is that your conversations from then on would be shaped by a definite moral vocabulary—sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly—that has taken root in clinical conversations around death and dying. Its central terms are acceptance and denial. Understanding their valence would not take you long. Acceptance is good. Denial, which more often than not is regarded as people’s baseline, the suspected condition which must be disproven by patients’ gestures and avowals of acquiescence, is something to be overcome. And they are opposed, as simplistic moral vocabularies often are, in binary fashion: acceptance excludes denial, and vice versa. Acceptance is a kind of warm, reclining, resigned embrace of

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5 Alfred Schutz, Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 231. Schutz argues that people are generally unable to break through what he calls “finite provinces of meaning” apart from some shock that shifts the accent of reality from one province to another.
one’s fate, whereas denial involves pretense, a mode of talking and behaving as though one’s fate were somehow different.\(^6\)

Where did this vocabulary come from, and how did it become so established as a way of approaching mortality? For perhaps the most proximate explanation, we should look to the Swiss psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her 1969 book *On Death and Dying.*\(^7\) At a cultural moment when dying was being relocated from domestic to clinical spaces and becoming more hush-hush, Kübler-Ross started a seminar at the University of Chicago to address the subject, involving, most crucially, interviews with dying patients at the medical school’s hospital. The book compiled what she learned from those meetings and took her advocacy for death awareness to a public stage. She was hardly the first writer of that period to call for more open conversations about death. Murmurs of discontent had been welling up since the 1950s.\(^8\) But her institutional location, combined with the alluring clarity and simplicity of her proposed approach, propelled the book to the center of conversations not just in medicine, but in wider American and European culture as well.\(^9\)

Her approach to dying is a bit more elaborate than the acceptance-denial binary I described a moment ago. She describes dying as a process composed of five now-familiar stages:


\(^7\) Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families,* 40th anniversary ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009). The success of one book might not bear the entire responsibility, of course. We could also consider how medical discourse relies heavily on schemas, and this one, provided by a member of the guild at a crucial time, proved alluring. And because it does not necessarily entail any pharmaceutical treatment regime, it was not subjected to the same kind of clinical scrutiny.


denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. *On Death and Dying* conveys the impression that she derived these stages inductively from her qualitative research with the terminally ill, as though they were always there, just awaiting discovery.\(^{10}\) But if we step back and consider the rhetorical force of the stage model, we can also see that it reads like a normative teleology, mapping an itinerary from a least ideal starting point toward the end goal for our character.\(^{11}\) In this respect, we could read the acceptance-denial binary as a shorthand developed through repeated use over time. Although it leaves out important features of Kübler-Ross’s account, it focuses attention on the models’ most ethically salient features, the negative starting point and the desired end point, and allows for quick recitation on occasions when mortality is salient.

Kübler-Ross’s own framing remarks for the project help this interpretation along. In the first two chapters, “On the Fear of Death” and “Attitudes toward Death and Dying,” she does not actually address people nearing the hour of their end. Instead, she addresses to the rest of us mortals, arguing for a practice of contemplating death by appeal to the goods that may come from acceptance. Consider a couple of her most explicit statements to this effect:

If all of us would make an all-out effort to contemplate our own death, to deal with our anxieties surrounding the concept of our death, and to help others familiarize themselves with these thoughts, perhaps there could be less destructiveness around us.\(^{12}\)

If all of us could make a start by contemplating the possibility of our own personal death, we may effect many things, most important of all the welfare of our patients, our families

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\(^{10}\) Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 30. “In the following pages is an attempt to summarize what we have learned from our dying patients in terms of coping mechanisms at the time of a terminal illness.”

\(^{11}\) See Lucy Bregman, “Dying: A Universal Human Experience?,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 28, no. 1 (1989): 58–69. To take issue with the model’s normative teleology is different from a more standard critique of its descriptive adequacy. Kübler-Ross was hardly unique in offering a stage model that thinly veils its normativity. One might place this work in a broader cultural moment that would include the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg on stages of moral development or the theologian James Fowler on stages of faith.

and finally perhaps our nation…Finally, we may achieve peace—our own inner peace as well as peace between nations—by facing and accepting the reality of our own death. Less destructiveness, welfare, peace—these are what we might expect from contemplating the possibility of death. The formal repetition across the statements gives them the feel of a refrain, not dissimilar to what one might hear from a revivalist preacher, calling us to turn from our fallen ways toward a better path. And we can see that the scope of the call extends well beyond the extreme circumstances of a clinical scene, implicating every person at every moment of life. Indeed, as Kübler-Ross’s terminology gained popularity, her vocabulary was taken up in domains she might not have anticipated, ranging from environmental activism to management consulting.14 “Acceptance” and “denial” now are likely to appear in just about any discussion that involves a call to face hard truths, especially about the future.

The opening discussion of On Death and Dying gathers around these terms without much explanation as to why they work better than other possible candidates, but Kübler-Ross does anchor the discussion in a cursory survey of contemporary practices around death, in light of which the terms’ significance becomes clearer. A chief culprit behind contemporary denial of death is lack of familiarity. Human fear of death, she thinks, is constant across time, but in former periods, especially in more agrarian settings, where death was more integrated into workaday existence, there was a more placid acceptance of death as a fact of life.15 Now that death is sequestered in medical spaces, and in many ways more gruesome (just consider the beeping,

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13 Ibid., 14.


15 Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, 5–6.
buzzing apparatuses that entwine a body in decline), people attempt to turn away.\textsuperscript{16} And with the constant threat of unexpected annihilation that her Cold War-era audience felt, she supposed that people must have their psychological defenses on overdrive.\textsuperscript{17} Try as we might, however, denial cannot be sustained indefinitely.\textsuperscript{18} Those shocks to imagination, they confront us eventually. Then we might just swing to another extreme, and aggressively try to master death. Perhaps we become daredevils and attempt to challenge death, or perhaps we feel a giddy excitement when learning about—or even orchestrating—the deaths of others, assuring ourselves thereby that it only ever comes a-calling for someone else.\textsuperscript{19} Acceptance, she thinks, would help us to avoid such ills.

“Religion used to try, / That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die”: these lines from Philip Larkin’s “Aubade” embody the perspective from which Kübler-Ross promotes acceptance. Expectations of afterlife used to provide some balm for death, but no longer, not in the stalwart way of days past. Just as well. That too may have been an elaborate denial of mortality.\textsuperscript{20} The only trouble about this decline is that it does not seem to have reduced denial, but rather sent people clawing after replacements, ones not nearly as well

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 6–8.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{18} On this point Kübler-Ross is at odds with another leading thinker on death from this time, Ernest Becker. His book \textit{The Denial of Death} (New York: Free Press, 1973) argues that death denial is, to some extent, inextricable from human life. The illusions of immortality, especially around themes of heroism, sustain us through life's difficulties. This project took new form in the last few decades with a group of experimental psychologists inspired by Becker who operate under the banner of "terror management theory." But in an interesting twist that shows the rhetorical pull of Kübler-Ross's acceptance-denial binary, a recent book they published to popularize the theory concludes with a very similar exhortation to confront our mortality and overcome our denial. See Sheldon Solomon et al., \textit{The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life}, First edition. (New York: Random House, 2015), 123, 218. They do not follow her all the way, however. Instead, they temper the exhortation with a call also to develop non-destructive forms of death transcendence.

\textsuperscript{19} Kübler-Ross, \textit{On Death and Dying} 10–11.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 12.
calibrated for social cohesion. With that in mind, she asserts that “if we cannot anticipate life after death, then we have to consider death” and through considering it, accept it. The attitude that previous generations cultivated through familiarity and structures of everyday life must now be cultivated through steely-eyed contemplation. Indeed, insofar as previous generations mixed their acceptance with the denials of religion, the thrust of this story suggests that the acceptance we cultivate now better approaches the attitudinal ideal.

Conversations about the legacy of Kübler-Ross often begin with gestures of obeisance, acknowledging the nobility of her project and how greater openness to conversations about death and dying has alleviated some of the suffering that our society layers onto the final days of life. Count me in. We would do well to carry forward the basic contours of this project, as some of the trends she described take new pernicious forms. But we would also do well to consider how, good intentions notwithstanding, her approach to mortality merits scepticism.

One of the most obvious points to contest would be her story about the decline of afterlife belief. Surveys have actually shown it to be quite persistent, at least in the United States, even as participation in religious institutions declines. This fact would undermine a core motivating factor, even if it would not undermine the approach as such, for she could say that regardless of the resources available to support our denial, we still ought to strive for acceptance.

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21 Ibid.

22 To appreciate how difficult public conversations about death and dying remain, at least in the United States, one need only recall the howls of “death panels!” that emerged in 2009 in response to a proposal to fund voluntary counseling by physicians for Medicare patients about end-of-life options.


24 We should note here that I am talking about the Kübler-Ross of On Death and Dying. Later, she herself would become a vociferous proponent of certain notions of afterlife. The important thing to keep in mind here is that the account’s original form is what would become most influential.
More consequential critiques could focus on the normative adequacy of acceptance. Some readers of Kübler-Ross have observed that her stage theory comports with the certainty expected in medical discourse, and that, when elevated into a moral vocabulary, it authorizes new forms of control over the lives of dying people.\textsuperscript{25} Acceptance here amounts to compliance. To appreciate the point, a quick comparison with Michel Foucault’s account of “the repressive hypothesis” in understandings of sexuality could be instructive. With death, as with sex, we observe a society “which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say,” under the assumption that profusions of speech about the thing may usher in a new, liberated era.\textsuperscript{26} But it may be that repression (or denial), such as it is, actually works through discourse. All this talk of peaceful acceptance could in practice amount to the next stage of medical management of dying bodies, bringing death into the open the better to sequester it.\textsuperscript{27} Using this moral vocabulary as a guide, patients could be sized up according to where they stand in the stages, and in the process, a biomedical perspective fixated on acceptance and denial would crowd out, like so many thistles, whatever language patients themselves lisp toward as they grapple with their plight.\textsuperscript{28} Certainly unwelcome would be overt demonstrations of protest; never mind the possibility that a somewhat rebellious attitude might actually improve certain health outcomes.\textsuperscript{29} And if the vocabulary of acceptance and denial proves dubious in


\textsuperscript{28} Telford, Kralik, and Koch, “Acceptance and Denial.”

these extreme clinical settings, we may wonder about the adequacy of orienting ourselves around
them in the rest of our lives as well.

These and other critiques have emerged over the last few decades, and my own clinical
experience makes me sympathetic toward them. Theorists have even proposed alternative
models for responding to loss, actual or anticipated. Yet the vocabulary has stuck.

Why would that be? Perhaps these critiques have been marginal, relative to the Kübler-
Ross paradigm, and simply need better publicists. Other explanations, more deeply, could speak
to the stickiness of binaries in cultural repertoires, as well as this particular binary’s suitability for
what Foucault calls biopower. But I will take a different approach. This study will reframe the
conversation around the ethics of anticipating death radically, in the most literal sense. I propose
that we consider the roots of Kübler-Ross’s approach, see how it participates in wider discursive
trends that do not obviously trade upon notions of acceptance and denial, and with that in view,
begin to reimagine possibilities for anticipating death.

Footnotes are not abundant in On Death and Dying, but it is possible nonetheless, if you listen
closely, to identify one of its main background sources. Consider especially remarks like these:

To a psychiatrist this [fear of death] is very understandable and can perhaps best be
explained in terms of our understanding of the unconscious parts of the self; to the
unconscious mind, death is never possible in regard to ourselves. It is inconceivable for
our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life
of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the
outside by someone else.31

30 See especially Thomas Attig, How We Grieve: Relearning the World, Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press,
2011).

31 Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, 2.
The second fact that we have to comprehend is that in our unconscious mind we cannot distinguish between a wish and a deed. We can all recall illogical dreams in which two completely opposite statements occur side by side—very acceptable in our dreams but unthinkable in our waking state. Just as we, in our unconscious minds cannot differentiate between the wish to kill somebody in anger and the act of killing, so the young child is unable to distinguish fantasy and reality.\(^{32}\)

If you were to encounter these remarks out of context, you could be excused for thinking that you were reading Freud. Not only for reciting key ideas like the unconscious, wishes and deeds, fantasy and reality, but also for the very argument about our problem with confronting death that I mentioned before, Kübler-Ross so founds her project on Freudian conceptions of the mind that, were psychoanalytic theory not so commonplace in academic discussions of the 50s and 60s, one might suspect plagiarism. Having begun her remarks with “to a psychiatrist” may have seemed a sufficient nod to her source.

That Kübler-Ross develops her stage theory from Freudian presuppositions has not escaped commentators. As is well known, Freud posited various “defense mechanisms” of the mind, denial among them, and it is easy to see how Kübler-Ross might be carrying forward the concept.\(^{33}\) But the overlap goes further, and is actually located elsewhere. Beyond this one term, her project of describing our problems with death and calling an entire society into a practice of contemplation leading to acceptance bears a striking affinity with some of Freud’s most famous public essays. In them, the central concept is not so much defense mechanisms as \textit{illusion}, the concept which seems to inform Kübler-Ross’s account of denial even more. To my knowledge, no one writing on death and dying has appreciated the extent of this overlap and what it could mean for conversations about anticipating death. So let me turn now to survey briefly two essays,

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 30. She even notes that she is exploring people’s “coping mechanisms.”
“Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” and The Future of an Illusion, and draw out the connection.

Freud wrote “Thoughts for the Times” amid the First World War, calling upon his psychoanalytic theory to help people make sense of the catastrophe—or at least of their own reactions to it. One of his main claims is that the war forced upon people an altered attitude toward death.\(^3^4\) In developing the claim, he introduces some of the ideas already covered here, but with further ramifications that Kübler-Ross does not explore. People do not really believe in their own death, because when they imagine it, they are present as spectators. And when death comes for someone, onlookers often blame external causes, as though a body could continue on indefinitely were it not for malignant forces.\(^3^5\) This is an illusion that our minds lead us into. With the war, however, illusion crashed into reality and was shattered.\(^3^6\) Why war would shatter this illusion is not immediately obvious. Sure, each casualty heaps on evidence of human mortality. But it is imaginable that, especially in war, one could double down on the notion that death always comes from without, that one never just dies but rather is killed.

The difference here seems to be a function of both emotional investment and volume, driven by a key concept that I would call sympathetic analogy. A central dynamic of love, on Freud’s account, is identification with another, whereby we regard ourselves and our beloveds as one. Whatever happens to them portends what could happen to us as well.\(^3^7\) So we can disbelieve our own mortality only as long as no one we love has died. The basic mental step here would be akin

\(^{34}\) SE 14:275.
\(^{35}\) SE 14:289–90.
\(^{36}\) SE 14:280.
\(^{37}\) SE 14:293. A more thorough application of the logic might say that our beloved dies, we die too. Freud does not make that suggestion here, but it will become more important in the third chapter.
to the more abstract inference to one’s own mortality from the mortality of all humans, but its rooting in our affections would help to overcome the resistance otherwise mounted by the unconscious. With so many people involved in a war so deadly, just about every family over the span of a few years found their resistance overwhelmed. Death permeated people’s everyday awareness, simply could not be avoided. And while this was primarily death by killing, reports back about the carnage eroded whatever illusions remained about noble, bodily endurance.

“What passing bells for these who die as cattle?” wrote the British soldier-poet Wilfred Owen, “Only the monstrous anger of the guns.”

Freud concludes that we stand at a crossroads of sorts. We could either attempt to retrieve our eroded illusions or brave a new path in our attitudes. While illusions often make life more tolerable, the pervasiveness of death in the war—and the impossibility of abolishing all future bellicosity—means that our illusions with regard to mortality actually make life harder. Far better would be to keep the truth about our eventual fate top of mind. Reinforcing the point with a flourish, he cites an old Latin saying, “si vis vitam, para mortem.” If you want life, prepare for death—a maxim originally for individuals that he applies to an entire civilization.

Exactly as we saw with Kübler-Ross, the descriptive psychological claim about our disbelief in mortality serves a normative claim about the attitude of acceptance we should cultivate through contemplative awareness. What Freud characterizes as illusion, she transposes into terms of denial. And while he does not adopt the same kind of sweeping claims for social

38 These lines open his poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth.”

39 There is a conceptual tension in this claim worth noting. If we cannot imagine our death, there is little sense in an exhortation to contemplate it. Neither Freud nor Kübler-Ross observes this. One way of reading the claim would be to consider “unthinkable” in the sense of something we cannot bear to do, even if we could theoretically manage to do it.
benefit here, they do share a view that this practice of contemplation would support an individual’s flourishing.

What about the place of religion in anticipating death? Aside from a brief speculative overture about the origin of afterlife belief, Freud has little to say about it in this essay. But that changes in *The Future of an Illusion*. There, alongside a more fully developed concept of illusion, we find a narrative of decline that serves to further motivate a call toward acceptance of hard facts like mortality.

Freud works up to religion by ruminating on the broader project of civilization. Its principal task, as he understands it, is to defend people against the wild vicissitudes of nature, making it hospitable to human needs and distributing its bounty by rule-based systems. The measures necessary to support this project, while often good for collectives, are rarely satisfying to individuals, because they require much renunciation of instinctual urges that never go away. And when people do not willingly comply, they find themselves coerced. Indeed, the intractability of human passions and the limitations of reform by education means that coercion attends the experience of civilization more often than not. In light of this, crucial to keeping the project afloat are what Freud calls civilization’s “mental assets,” devices that both internalize coercion and provide some recompense for the sacrifice—things like moral norms, ideals, artistic creations, and, most important of all, religious ideas or the illusions of a civilization. Religious

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40 He considers the persistent memory of dead beloveds to be the psychological basis for afterlife belief. This, too, will become important later.

41 SE 21:6, 15–16.

42 SE 21:7.

43 SE 21:8–9.

ideas have been so important because civilization can often seem like a bad deal. Even though it offers, on balance, a tamer run at life than one could expect in a state of nature, its protection against nature still has cracks. These show most visibly in the whims of fate that bring on death.\textsuperscript{45} In such moments, people may suspect that civilization adds only suffering onto suffering. But these mental assets quell potential unrest, offering “substitutive satisfactions” that make life incrementally more tolerable, not least by suggesting that we may yet partake of all we have missed.\textsuperscript{46}

Most of these mental assets might be understandable enough. But Freud finds religion puzzling. Its mental assets are among our most important, yet they are at the same time the least well authenticated.\textsuperscript{47} No grounds, whether in accumulated experience or the analytical truths of reason, can be found for the claims that religions make about reality. To him, this suggests that they instead originate in people’s minds.

Specifically, he thinks they originate in people’s \textit{wishes}. “Illusion,” as he defines the term in this essay, is a mental contract geared to fulfill a wish that might not be fulfilled otherwise.\textsuperscript{48} This is a development from how he used the word in “Thoughts for the Times,” where illusion was something like a trick that the unconscious plays upon the conscious mind. He is not saying that religion involves mistaken belief or perceptual trickery—although he would not disagree with allegations that it does.\textsuperscript{49} This is primarily an account of origins, not an evaluation of correctness. The definition rather focuses on the practical interest that guides people toward and

\textsuperscript{45} SE 21:16.
\textsuperscript{46} SE 21:13–14, 18–20.
\textsuperscript{47} SE 21:27.
\textsuperscript{48} SE 21:30.
\textsuperscript{49} SE 21:30–31. He suspects that they verge awfully close to delusion.
sustains them in religion. Indeed, part of his puzzlement is at how a mental construct so poorly authenticated could satisfy our practical interests so well.

As Freud elaborates on that practical interest with a view to substitutive satisfactions, another term prominently enters the discussion: consolation. He writes that “man’s self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors.” Consolation appears to be the practical object of religious illusion. Indeed, the terms “consolation,” “illusion,” and “religion” are so tightly coordinated in Freud’s account that it would be difficult to understand one without the other two. The sense of consolation operative here is, in part, common in ordinary speech. Think here of a “consolation” prize, something presented as a less desirable alternative to something you really wanted. You may have really wanted a fulfilling life, but failing that, at least you could have a fulfilling afterlife. Another sense of consolation operative here is that of palliative narcotics. To anyone acquainted with Marx’s account of religion as an opiate of the people, this will be familiar enough. Consolation dulls the senses, cancelling out the pain that comes from a sober confrontation with reality, and though its delights may be cheap, doing without them can become unthinkable as addiction takes hold. This makes consolation out to be an act of avoidance, a turn from reality and the difficult facts that comprise it.

A better attitude, Freud thinks, would be humble acquiescence: maintain a lively sense of one’s insignificance in the universe, renounce your wishes, and inhabit the world as it really is.

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50 SE 21:16, 32–33
52 SE 21:49. Admittedly, Freud puts this into the mouth of his constructed interlocutor.
53 SE 21:32–33, 36.
In his estimation, religion has never been completely successful in its attempts at consolation, just as it has never managed to accomplish widespread social regulation. In fact, basing moral claims upon religion courts danger. For whenever the hold of religion weakens, people may see no reason for conducting themselves well. And weaken it will. Instinctual life generally overpowers the intellect, but the intellect, he thinks, persists until it gains a hearing. “In the long run,” he writes, “nothing can withstand reason and experience,” including the old consolations of religion. Learning to part with them would no doubt be difficult, given how entwined they have been in human life, but his pessimistic vision of human beings gives way, if only for a moment, to a hopeful scepticism, one that acknowledges how little his contemporaries actually know about the possibilities for human life apart from the influence of religion and its consolations. Gradual progress may be possible through much effort at what he calls an “education to reality.”

This call to adopt a posture of humble acquiescence bears so striking a resemblance to Kübler-Ross’s acceptance that, given the clear influence Freud had on her understanding of the difficulties of contemplating death, we may reasonably conclude that she extends his work on this score as well. With this comparison in view, we might even hear fainter resonances of Freud in moments when she phrases her call in terms of accepting “the reality of our own death.” It would certainly help to explain the way she motivates the call toward acceptance with a story about religion’s decline, a trend that Freud had not so much witnessed as foreseen. What Freud construes as an opposition between consoling illusion and reality, Kübler-Ross transposes into

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corresponding terms of attitudes, denial and acceptance. Indeed, “denial” could be a stand-in for what Freud means by “consolation.”

Admittedly, this connection could seem strained. While Kübler-Ross does seem to work from a Freudian conception of illusion, it is by no means clear that she would share Freud’s call to renounce consolation. You may have noticed that among all the benefits she trots out in favor of acceptance, one that she especially favors is *peace*. That is not quite the same as consolation. But both could be classed under a more general category of “feeling better” in spite of unfortunate circumstances. Furthermore, she mostly works from a descriptive account of religion’s decline. Although she classes afterlife belief as a form of denial, its affiliation with a mode of life more conducive, on balance, to acceptance of mortality stops her from joining in Freud’s view that religion ought to decline, whether or not it actually has.

But these differences may only be superficial. Take the emphasis on peace, for example. If critics are right and Kübler-Ross’s version of peace really amounts to compliance with the power structures of biomedicine, overshadowing thereby the terms people articulate for themselves in dying, the displacement of “denial” might be functionally similar to Freud’s critique of consolation. Though peace here would perhaps involve relaxing tension in the manner of consolation, the inner movements that effect it would be more in keeping with consolation’s removal. And supposing that Kübler-Ross would still object to this association, keep in mind that one need not endorse every aspect of an intellectual program to carry forward its most essential contours. In the case of Freud’s critique of consolation, those contours are the opposition between illusion and acceptance of reality, terms which, as we have already seen, map neatly onto the shorthand version of Kübler-Ross’s approach to dying. Indeed, everyday reductions of her stage model to a denial-acceptance binary may simply track the normative structure that undergirds her vision. Likewise with her understanding of religion. While her account of its
declining role in how people approach their deaths is mostly descriptive, she seems happy to bid any form of denial good riddance. And as her stage model makes abundantly clear, descriptive claims can offer a backdoor to normative ones: “People don’t do that anymore. No, really. Stop it. People don’t do that anymore.”

The point of drawing out these affinities with Freud is to identify a way of getting critical purchase on Kübler-Ross’s moral vocabulary for anticipating death. While the term “denial” is relatively new and, for that matter, fairly vague, “consolation” and “illusion” have much richer histories, with a variety of possible approaches to weigh in developing one’s own position. My working hypothesis is that by reframing the issue around consolation, we can look past the engrained opposition of denial and acceptance altogether, and glimpse new possibilities for how to posture ourselves toward our end.

3.

What you first see when looking for new possibilities, however, may in fact be barrenness. For reframing the issue around consolation puts us in contact with what I would call a critical ferment, a collection of different voices making different arguments of different provenance, but that all converge on a similar view—namely, that consolation has become impossible, or if not impossible, irresponsible. Freud merits special attention both because he haunts Kübler-Ross’s approach to dying and because his critique of consolation is one of the most thorough, but his is only one voice in this wider trend. He certainly was not the first to worry about pernicious effects of consolation, as I already suggested in reference to Marx. Nor was he the last. Explicit scepticism toward consolation is well distributed in subsequent twentieth-century works, especially among the philosophically inclined. To give you a fuller sense of this critical ferment in
a short space will require something like a scrapbook of snippets, but it will be worthwhile to appreciate what a search for new possibilities in anticipating death comes against.

When I say that these voices converge on a similar view, one might get the impression that they basically agree. They do not, in fact. As a rough heuristic, we could gather the voices into two opposing paths in disconsolation, one that promotes something like acceptance and another that instead promotes rebellion.

On the side of acceptance, Freud and Kübler-Ross clearly stand as exemplars, but we could also include writers in the vein of Martin Heidegger. In a memorable stretch near the midpoint of Being and Time, he considers how anticipation of one’s own death contributes to authenticity. Death is what he calls one’s “ownmost” or “non-relational” possibility, because it pertains to oneself and oneself alone. And it is a peculiar possibility: a possibility of one’s impossibility, of not being-there anymore. Most of the time, people occlude this possibility from themselves, as well as each other. Tacit but extensive collusion helps to fasten the drapery, such as when well-meaning neighbors talk to a dying person as though they will soon get better. “Such ‘solicitude’ is meant to ‘console’ him,” Heidegger writes, but this is just a “constant tranquilization

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58 Walter Kaufmann alleges, correctly to my mind, that Heidegger’s “pages upon pages about death are in large part long-winded repetitions of what Freud had said briefly at the start of his paper [‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’].” The result is that subsequent interpreters must spend as much time talking about Heidegger’s quirky vocabulary as they do the ideas themselves. In conversations about my project, some people have wondered why Heidegger does not figure more prominently, and outside of sheer editorial needs to cut somewhere, this is why. See Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays (New York: New American Library, 1976), 199.


60 Ibid.

61 ¶50, BT 295.
about death,” for the dying person and the community alike. The trouble with such consolation is that it alienates us from that central possibility of our lives. Far better would be to anticipate one’s possible impossibility, to allow this possibility to be disclosed to oneself as a possibility indeed, and to accept that death, despite our efforts at occlusion, cannot be done away with. Doing so returns us to our very selves.

On the side of rebellion, one finds, unsurprisingly, a somewhat more fractious bunch. Their positive proposals diverge, even as they share a view that the problem with consolation is not its evasion from death but rather its slackening of the tension that attends vitality. Some of them even regard proponents of acceptence with suspicion for how they retain elements of the consolation they purportedly reject.

A bridge figure between the two sides is Jean Améry, the subtitle of whose work *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* captures the tension succinctly. Though his central theme is aging, he is also concerned with contemplation of death, for the accumulation of incremental losses through the former intimates the latter. Resignation, he admits, is perhaps the sensible approach, since death forces itself upon us sooner or later. But he no sooner admits this than rejects it. Since death is “absolute non-sense,” being “sensible” is out of the question. Reconciling ourselves “means to accept death. But that would mean refusing life on the spot. Neither the one nor the other is possible.” We can accept death only when we do not really feel its threat. Such

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63 ¶53, BT 306–08.


65 Ibid., 121.
reflections, he suspects, might “disturb the balance, expose the compromise, destroy the genre painting, contaminate the consolation.” But he “hopes so. The days shrink and dry up. He has the desire to tell the truth.”66 Recall here that one fairly standard definition of truth is agreement with reality.67 If we assume Amèry works from such a definition, we could surmise that, like Freud, he judges that reality as such, independent of human constructs, has no consolation to offer. Truth-telling becomes tantamount to pronouncing words that will disconsole, “nothing more terrible, nothing more true.”68

Ratchet up the tension enough between revolt and resignation, and one may just start thinking about suicide. Amèry did. A few years later, he would write an entire book on the subject.69 And it was the centerpiece theme for another writer who meditated on why we should reject consolation, Albert Camus. His Myth of Sisyphus famously starts by positing that the only serious philosophical question is why we should not just end ourselves, in light of the absurd tension between our human yearnings and the indifferent silence of the universe.70 The problem with suicide, he eventually concludes, is that it provides a spurious resolution to the absurd, freeing us from experiencing the tension while leaving the tension itself intact. It turns out to be an extreme form of acceptance.71 “Living is keeping the absurd alive,” he says, and so “one of the

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66 Ibid., 128. Emphasis mine.

67 William James, Pragmatism, in Writings: 1902-1910, Library of America 38 (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987), 572. James aptly notes here that this definition does not communicate much, since it depends heavily on what you mean by “agree” and “reality.”

68 This is another line from Larkin’s “Aubade.”

69 Jean Améry, On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). He would also go on to end his own life, although his reasons were no doubt more complex than simply meditating on the absurd.


71 Ibid., 53.
only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt…That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”

Consolation, in its own attempt to resolve the absurd, is thus a form of suicide. Only by refusing consolation and all renunciations can we adequately engage with the absurd.

Regardless the inflection of disconsolation, such writers generally echo Freud’s anti-religious tone. Consolation gets identified with a distinctly religious engagement with (or avoidance of) hard realities that we should allow to wither. But the picture is more complicated. Even writers sympathetic to religion have recently made consolation an object of scorn. Consider, for example, Paul Ricoeur’s unfinished work *Living up to Death*, published posthumously as a collection of lapidary fragments. On the cover page, his notes include this:

Consolation and mourning
Contestation and mourning: the peak of lamenting

“Consolation” gets transposed into “contestation,” as though, in weighing his options and sounding them out, he opted for a position of greater revolt from death. Indeed, through the early pages in the work, it is clear that he tried to exorcise the various “make-believes” people use to approach death, without, for all that, commending a position of acceptance. He actually muses toward some kind of theistic approach to the moment of dying, captured in terms of an encounter with “the Essential,” while also resisting “a hypocritical form of imaginary projection, of ‘consolation’ as a concession to the imaginary.” Ricoeur’s overtures against consolation here

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72 Ibid., 54.
73 Ibid., 26–27, 60.
75 Ibid., 8, 11. Ricœur explicitly rejects what he calls “philosophies of finitude,” such as one finds in Heidegger.
76 Ibid., 43.
are all the more interesting for their contrast with some of his earlier work, in which he tried to articulate some version of consolation that could stand up to Freud’s critique.77 Since he never references that earlier work, it is unclear whether he intended this as a recantation; it may well be that he works with a different sense of “consolation” between these works. Even so, to find a writer as sympathetic to religion as Ricoeur turning against consolation—a gesture in which he is hardly alone—indicates just how sorry its standing has become in learned discourse.78

This critical ferment, while not always sympathetic with Kübler-Ross’s exact schema, nonetheless supports the basic paradigm of “denial” by casting consolation as an avoidance of difficult realities. So although questions around consolation provide richer material with which to consider attitudinal ideals toward mortality, getting past engrained binaries will require deeper work than simply exchanging one set of terms for another. We need to work our way into a different posture toward consolation.

One way to proceed would be to press deeper with the radical move I proposed earlier and observe that this construal of consolation is relatively recent and thus hardly definitive. “Consolation” is a very old word, a direct carryover from Latin’s consolatio, a word enmeshed in a rhetorical practice bearing little resemblance to what modern disconsolers have impugned. Indeed, they would likely recognize some affinity with ancient consolation, inasmuch as it

77 Paul Ricoeur, “On Consolation” in The Religious Significance of Atheism, Bampton Lectures in America (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969); Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, Terry Lectures (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), esp. 545–51. In the consolation essay, Ricoeur suggests that consolation could only re-emerge from critique through the tragic faith of a character like Job. It would be a consolation beyond the desire for protection. The word-event of Job turns out to be consoling, for it links the character to the world that would undo him. (87–90)

78 Ricoeur has not been alone in this. Other relevant works by writers sympathetic to religion yet critical of consolation include Timothy P. Jackson, Lost Disconsolled: Meditations on Christian Charity (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Don Cupitt, Creative Faith: Religion as a Way of Worldmaking (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2015), 97–100, 107–09.
attempted to instill peace in troubled minds by way of gestures resembling acceptance or enlightened disregard.\textsuperscript{79} In Seneca’s moral epistles on consolation, for example, one finds exhortations to confront mortality and the fleetingness of all that is, learning to die that we might learn to live.\textsuperscript{80} Or in Epicurus’s \textit{Letter to Menoeceus}, one finds encouragement to turn away from thoughts of mortality, because death is, properly speaking, not part of life. When we are, it is not; when it is, we are not.\textsuperscript{81} Consolation as a philosophical practice was even imported into early Christianity. The most important text in the genre may be Boethius’ \textit{Consolation of Philosophy}, a sixth-century work composed while its author was imprisoned awaiting execution, and that would become one of the most influential texts in Europe for about a thousand years, right up to the doorstep of modernity.\textsuperscript{82} Most of consolation’s modern critics equate it to some notion of afterlife, but Boethius makes no such appeal. Instead, he draws together philosophical argumentation and carefully crafted verse to produce consolation through literary form. If his work may be considered religious nonetheless, it would be for reasons more complex than simply invocations of orthodox tropes. Indeed, just about all ancient consolation operates as what Pierre Hadot calls a “spiritual exercise,” a complex interplay between the rhetoric of texts and the contemplative movements they facilitate, moving along an itinerary reliant not so much on


\textsuperscript{80} Exemplary in this respect is a line from his \textit{De tranquilitate animi}, XI.4: “Male vivet quisquis nesciet bene mori.” (Whoever does not know to die well, will live badly.)

\textsuperscript{81} Epicurus, \textit{Letter to Menoeceus} 124–27. Lucretius develops the idea further in \textit{De rerum natura} III.830 and surrounding lines. This might not technically count as a consolation, since it was more an occasional genre. But the moves are similar.

\textsuperscript{82} See John Marenbon, \textit{Boethius} (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 9.
airtight philosophical logic and discursive content as on a sequence tailored to the needs its practitioner.83

Sympathetic as I am to this kind of approach, it has limitations. After appreciating that consolation has a richer history than its modern critics suggest, we would still need to undertake the tricky work of bridging between ancient practice and our own context, which would not be as simple as cut-and-paste. What “consolation” has meant provides some indication for, but still underdetermines, what it may yet mean. Rushing the work of bridging might skirt around the subtle changes that consolation underwent between that epoch and this one. I will not indulge in a full excursus on those changes, but Boethius’ Consolation is a useful reference point for what the practice would later become. In brief, consolation in modernity seems to have split into the work’s most salient formal elements, high-flown philosophical theodicy and elegiac verse. On one hand, we find works like Gottfried Leibniz’s Theodicy (1710), and on the other, a whole tradition of poetic works like Milton’s Lycidas (1637).

Neither element has fared well. Leibniz would be eventually overshadowed by Voltaire’s satirization of his philosophy in Candide. And although some have attempted to improve upon Leibniz in better attempts at theodicy, it has acquired a bad name even in religious circles, not least for its failure to offer consolation alongside rational cohesion.84 Elegy had a somewhat better run. As Peter Sacks notes in his study The English Elegy, the genre has served as a vehicle for mourning that, even as it incorporates wild swings of anger and despair, tends to lead readers


toward a state of consolation in the end. But the elegy, too, began to show fissures. After Sacks, a consensus emerged among literary scholars—supported by much textual evidence—that the tenor of elegies began to shift drastically sometime in the nineteenth century, no longer serving as a vehicle to lead its readers to consolation but rather to express intractible disconsolation. Interestingly, the explanation they offer for this shift roughly follows the view of consolation’s critics: as old notions of afterlife became unavailable, so did consolation. Without this, poets had little recourse in face of death, and so turned their art toward a darker repertoire.

Another approach to finding a fresh posture toward consolation would be to look more deeply into this recent plight. Leaving aside questions of theodicy, we should find it surprising if poets, inventive bunch that they are, have had their imaginations hobbled insuperably by the loss of a commonplace trope. One form of consolation may indeed have met its end through changes in the modern west’s imaginative landscape—not to mention the actual landscape, cragged and hollowed by machineries of war. Yet consolation may have had an afterlife of its own. While I do not, in the main, dispute the descriptive story about the fate of consolation in modern thought and poetry, significant exceptions have been overlooked, sometimes in figures typically adduced to support that story. This study will consider some of the exceptions, writers who have refigured consolation after the loss of its previous bases.

The significance of this group extends beyond a soft qualification to the descriptive story of what happened to consolation. They offer imaginative resources for moving past the normative configuration that story has supported, allowing us to develop a reconstructed—and

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ultimately constructive—account of consolation that can support us in those moments when our end insinuates itself into imagination, however fleetingly, and whispers its nearness.
Chapter Two: Intermediate Illusion

1.

In the previous chapter, we saw that recent critiques of consolation before death go hand in hand with suspicion toward illusion. Even where this category is not manifest, as with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s opposition to death denial, the arguments often follow so similar a pattern that we can reasonably suppose that old critiques have found new vessels. These views emerge in what I called a critical ferment; you can find them in a wide range of texts, with various lineages and networks of influence. But I have given special attention to Sigmund Freud, not only because of his discernible resonances in Kübler-Ross, but also because he developed a fuller critique than most, while still exemplifying wider trends. That development offers some purchase on the critical ferment, a place from which we could begin to imagine alternative accounts of consolation.

Before springing toward such alternatives, it would be worth reminding ourselves of Freud’s position. Few have summarized it better than the American poet Wallace Stevens, who addressed The Future of an Illusion in a 1949 lecture called “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”:

The object of that essay was to suggest a surrender to reality. His premise was that it is the unmistakable character of the present situation not that the promises of religion have become smaller but that they appear less credible to people. He notes the decline of religious belief and disagrees with the argument that man cannot in general do without the consolation of what he calls the religious illusion and that without it he would not endure the cruelty of reality. His conclusion is that man must venture at last into the hostile world and that this may be called education to reality.\(^\text{87}\)

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\(^{87}\) Wallace Stevens, Collected Poetry and Prose, Library of America 96 (New York: Library of America, 1997), 651. Further references to this volume will be abbreviated as CPP.
Stevens rightly observes that Freud, like others in the critical ferment, links consolation to illusion and religion. The three terms appear as mostly synonymous. And together they stand opposed to another term, one that Freud lifts up as a positive alternative: reality. Chilly as the tone of his critique can be, promoting an education to reality shows that Freud aims not simply to leave people disconsoled before death, but also to recruit them into an ethical project. His specific turn of phrase evokes a paradigm of progressive moral and social development that has appeared in western thought since at least Enlightenment writers like Lessing and Kant, which responds to religions’ lost hold on individual and collective imaginaries by raising other compasses.88

Education to reality could seem especially attractive now, in a political moment whose detachment from reality has rendered it, by any measure, regressive. And in regard to anticipation of death, critics are right to caution against turning away when circumstances call for more direct engagement with our mortality.89 Certain facts, mortality prominent among them, impinge upon us despite all avoidance. Indeed, as I have observed in the occasional spiral of immiserating “heroic” measures toward the end of a sick person’s life, avoidance can simply compound the facts’ difficulty.90

Yet this chapter will cast doubt on Freud’s stance toward illusion. The category holds fruitful possibilities left unexplored in his critique, and from those emerge further possibilities for understanding consolation.

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88 Exemplary titles would include The Education of the Human Race by Lessing and “What Is Enlightenment” by Kant.

89 When circumstances call for such engagement could be debated, and always on a case-by-case basis. Certain moments in the arc of medical treatment, when denial would encourage an approach that ultimately proves immiserating, might be particularly ripe for attention. For a study of how religiosity correlates with “aggressive” medical treatments in some medical settings, see Tracy Anne Balboni et al., “Provision of Spiritual Care to Patients with Advanced Cancer: Associations with Medical Care and Quality of Life Near Death,” Journal of Clinical Oncology: Official Journal of the American Society of Clinical Oncology 28, no. 3 (2010): 445–52.

I will articulate those possibilities in due course. But allow me to work up to them by first reading more deeply into Stevens’s take on Freud, which will establish some parameters for my re-evaluation of illusion. Consider how he introduces the summary quoted above:

Boileu’s remark that Descartes had cut poetry’s throat is a remark that could have been made respecting a great many people during the last hundred years, and of no one more aptly than of Freud, who, as it happens, was familiar with it and repeats it in his Future of an Illusion.91

Then, immediately after the summary, he follows with an elaboration of that opening point:

There is much more in that essay inimical to poetry and not least the observation in one of the final pages that “The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing.” This, I fear, is intended to be the voice of the realist.92

These framing remarks present an interpretive puzzle. Knowing what we do about Freud’s essay, we would expect his judgment about The Future of an Illusion to be that “there is more in that essay inimical to religion.” Yet Stevens focuses on its antagonism to poetry—despite the fact that, aside from the remark on Boileu, Freud has very little to say about poetry in that book. Why would Stevens level this charge?

Two possible explanations come immediately to mind: either his reading is sloppy or keenly insightful. The first strikes me as unlikely, considering the scrupulous attention that Stevens had given Freud’s essay over the years.93 It may be, then, that Stevens detects something in Freud’s remarks about religion that would cut into poetry as well—perhaps because the two share certain basic features. Specifically, Stevens may consider illusion and consolation to be common to poetry and religion alike, such that a critique of illusion focused on one actually entails opposition to both.

91 CPP 651.

92 Ibid.

Other remarks in Stevens’s prose works confirm as much. For example, one of Stevens’s most famous aphorisms states: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.”\(^9^4\) You might notice that he does not say “abandoned religion.” Instead, he focuses on the specific element of belief. Lapsed Calvinist that he is, Stevens may cite “belief” as a shorthand for religion, but the specification is important. It suggests, first of all, that whatever redemption may be found in poetry arrives through a functional similarity to belief in god. This is a rather high view of poetry. As Stevens’s upbringing in church would have impressed upon him, redemptive belief is not understood in Christianity as merely cognitive assent, a belief-\textit{that}; it also involves a volitional orientation of trust, a belief-\textit{in}.\(^9^5\) And this high view of poetry carries a second suggestion about life after abandoning belief in god—namely, that while we may abandon belief’s erstwhile object, we rarely abandon belief as such. \textit{Pace} Freud and his ilk, religion’s decline would not be purely subtractive, a break requiring radically altered ways of inhabiting a cruel and indifferent universe. Instead, it would occasion substitutions.

Stevens is hardly original in focusing a search for substitutions on poetry. The idea first cropped up in Romantics like Friedrich Schlegel and then found prominent expression for English-language readers in Matthew Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry.”\(^9^6\) And it appears still,

\(^9^4\) CPP 901. He expresses the idea more fully in “Relations between Poetry and Painting”: “The paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince.” CPP 748.

\(^9^5\) The biblical \textit{locus classicus} on this issue is James 2:19, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” (NRSV) The distinction between belief-in and belief-that was drawn most sharply by H. H. Price in \textit{Belief: The Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of Aberdeen in 1960} (London: New York: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

\(^9^6\) Matthew Arnold, \textit{Essays in Criticism, Second Series} (London: Macmillan, 1888), 2–3: “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.”
especially now that discussions of secularity have begun to move past old notions of rectilinear subtraction.\textsuperscript{97} Indeed, the idea appears with sufficient frequency to have attracted strident criticism in recent years. Generally, critics trot out something about religion that the arts could never replace—and rightly so.\textsuperscript{98} Even Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerke, their creators’ valiant efforts notwithstanding, fall short of whole cloth substitution. But this need not be all-or-nothing. Humbler versions of romanticism, such as we find in Stevens’s limited focus on belief, can disaggregate aspects of religion and undertake their substitutions piecemeal. While poetry cannot do all the work of religions, there may indeed be sufficient similarities on the level of belief to allow for something in the neighborhood of redemption. In this, Stevens’s most important precursor might not be Arnold but a philosopher for whom he wrote one of his finest elegies, George Santayana.\textsuperscript{99} The overlap of their vocabulary is especially significant. In the introduction to his Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, Santayana argues that the two are identical “in essence” and that they “differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs…Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen

\textsuperscript{97} The old theory of secularization was that religion declines in proportion to a society’s modernization. The more recent literature overturning this theory is vast beyond easy citation. Helpful starting points could be Peter L. Berger, The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics (Washington, D.C.: Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) and Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

\textsuperscript{98} See Terry Eagleton, Culture and the Death of God (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 205ff.; and Gordon Graham, The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Eagleton’s critique strikes me as the most compelling. He cites the sociological aspects of both art and religion, and notes that few things—certainly not art—can resemble religion’s ability to unite people across social classes. The critique itself is nothing new, however. One can find it as early as T. S. Eliot’s 1927 essay “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” where he writes: “Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy or theology or religion, as Mr. Lewis and Mr. Murry sometimes seem to think; it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional, it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms. We can say that it provides ‘consolation’: strange consolation, which is provided equally by writers so different as Dante and Shakespeare.” Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 137–38. Emphasis mine. Notice that even as Eliot rejects any notion of substitution, he nonetheless attributes to poetry the role of consolation.

\textsuperscript{99} The poem is “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.”
to be nothing but poetry.”  

By calling poetry the “essence” which follows lost belief in god, Stevens may have knowingly evoked this passage, suggesting that the two fields begin to blur as poetry makes a practical impression on human life.

And the effect of substitution, as Stevens envisions it, would indeed be practical. His aphorism uses language of “redemption,” but other remarks in the *Adagia*, the posthumous collection of his notebooks, gravitate toward cognates of consolation. Consider this one: “Seelensfriede durch dichtung [sic]” (peace of soul through poetry). The art would instill an affective state, one that tends to be implicit in common usage of “consolation.” Or this: “Poetry is a form of melancholia. Or rather, in melancholy it is one of the ‘aultres choses solatieuses [sic]’” (other solacing things). Poetry is that which brings solace, not instead of but alongside melancholy. It allows peace to coexist with pain. Even more ambitious statements of the practical role of poetry appear in “The Noble Rider.” Describing the poet’s task in relation to others, Stevens claims that it is “to make his imagination theirs…to help people to live their lives”—a claim he emphasizes by repetition in the subsequent paragraph. If we synthesize these claims about practical effect, a sense of consolation markedly different from Freud’s account begins to come into view: *consolation as a complex attitude blending peace and pain, one that aids us in living, and is cultivated by the imaginative resources of poetry.*

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100 George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), v. He goes on to say that religion pertains not to facts but rather to “idealizations of life.” Religion thus gets into trouble when it makes pretensions about being scientific.

101 CPP 904.

102 CPP 902.

103 In a discussion about Freud, any mention of melancholia is bound to make our ears perk up, but as far as I can tell, Stevens employs the term casually, in the non-psychoanalytic sense of general sadness. The next chapter will pursue possible links between poetry, melancholia, and consolation.

104 CPP 660–61.
Notice that when Stevens talks explicitly about consolation in his notebooks, he switches to another language. Perhaps he is simply quoting someone else in the original (although the reference would be obscure enough to have eluded my extensive search-engine sleuthing). But we could also read this switch as a subtle recognition that if this new sense of consolation is to have a place in a hostile milieu, it may require altered linguistic form. To further understand Stevens’s take on both the milieu and the sort of alterations needed, we should return for a moment to “The Noble Rider” and consider the wider context for his remarks on Freud.

The close of those remarks quoted earlier shows Stevens worrying aloud about the “voice of the realist.” As he develops the worry in this essay, it becomes clear that Stevens worries not about reality as such, but rather about how “realists” attempt to disentangle reality from imagination. The relation of reality and imagination is hard to maintain, for it can be given to excess on either side. In fact, he titled the essay after the moment in Plato’s *Phaedrus* when Socrates spins an image of the soul as a pair of winged horses guided by a noble charioteer—an image that, he claims, suffers the opposite excess, a priority of imagination over reality. From where we stand in history, it is possible only briefly to get caught up in the image, to feel ourselves soaring to the edge of the heavens, because before long, “we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground.”105

People have a belief deficit. Then again, lack of belief may only be a remote effect of a lost capacity for belief—a loss suffered, in part, through a shriveling of language. Whatever such images may have done for readers in the past, imagination can now arouse belief only when guided on the strength of reality.106

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105 CPP 643.
106 CPP 645–46.
But the current shape of this bias toward positivist versions of reality makes it hard for any such image to take flight. Stevens identifies in his time an outsized “pressure of reality,” which he later clarifies as “the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation.” The contrast between external events and contemplation suggests not only a locus of origin—contemplation being, presumably, internal—but also a basic phenomenology. As external events impinge from without and overwhelm “any power” of contemplation, there might follow a sense of fundamental helplessness. Stevens says nothing specific about how this situation affects our agency, our ability to intervene in these external events, but as our mental life is shaped by an order not our own, cast this way and that with every happening, we may find the thought of constructive intervention in that order—or even just living on our own terms—ever more inconceivable. Mentally, we would be as flotsam heaved about on angry swells. I noted above that Stevens seems to recognize a need for altered language if we are to initiate a novel sense of consolation in this milieu, and he confirms as much in this discussion. One symptom of external events overpowering contemplation is a flight from connotation into denotative modes of speech—from new associations forged between things, to things in bare facticity, refusing all extrapolation beyond the given.

This elaboration on the trouble with realism shows that framing it through a conflict with Freud could give a misleading impression. It could suggest that consolation is just another site in the long conflict between science and religion, and that poetry incurs damage by its proximity to the latter. If Stevens is correct about the overwhelming force of external events, however, the chief competitor to the poet may not be the scientist so much as the journalist, sounding alarm

107 CPP 650, 656.
108 CPP 652.
bells through daily bombardments of news, commentary, infotainment. While the situation may indeed be rooted in a concept of objective reality that held sway among scientists for a long time, reality as a collection of objects extended in space independent of all observation, it comes packaged now with the added normative claim that one ought to attune one’s mind to them—not to mention the media machinery snarling out anything else to which we might attend. Freud comes in for Stevens’s criticism because his admonitions to realism both embody and lend support to this trend.

Keep in mind that Stevens delivered “The Noble Rider” in 1940. Under the circumstances, attunement to external events would be completely understandable: the world was embroiled in a war whose outcome was still uncertain, and there would have been no dearth of things to report as people looked for signs of things to come. Thumbing through the evening papers may have felt like the least one could do in solidarity with those engaged in the fight. It is worth keeping in mind, in this regard, that Freud also began to articulate his thoughts on death in response to war, and the memory of that conflict gave him the appreciation of civilizational frailty that appears throughout The Future of an Illusion.

For all his worry about the impingement of external events and the reign of denotation, Stevens is not insensitive to this context. In his words, the prior ten years disclosed a radical “impermanence of the past” and this in turn suggested “an impermanence of the future.” The rise of tyrants and the outbreak of war had interrupted ordinary expectations of things going on in continuity with patterns of the past. This interruption, in turn, made it possible for his

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109 CPP 655. We could see interesting parallels here to the meditation of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus in Philosophical Fragments, especially the chapter “The Situation of the Contemporary Follower.” Indeed, writers commonly classed as “modernist,” Stevens among them, often share a discomfort with the tyranny of the contemporary.

110 Ibid.
audience vividly to imagine the end of everything they took for granted. While one might have previously acknowledged the impermanence of things in a distant, abstract way, circumstances were such that one could concretely imagine how it might ravage the given order. That ravaging had not yet come to pass, not completely. Yet one could anticipate it—and, indeed, might have had a hard time thinking about much else. In other words, something very much like anticipation of one’s own death had settled into social life writ large. And as with anticipation of death, this condition involves a challenge of inhabiting the troubled present as an interim between the life you had known and looming ends. Once the surprising possibility of an end comes into view, it may be hard to do much besides anticipate, to look for any sign as to whether it might come tomorrow or be delayed until the day after—or the threat possibly be shown to have disappeared.

Stevens’s resistance to Freudian realism revolves around the central view that under conditions of such anticipation, our practical interests—at least the mundane business of living our everyday lives—would be served better by the imagination. Building on that, he tries to outline what it would take in his own time for a poet to stoke people’s imaginations and, in a way, serve as their noble charioteer.

Much of the outline is phrased negatively, in terms of what the poet would avoid. As the discussion of realism might have led us to expect, Stevens’s poet would resist or evade the pressure of reality, even when life is in a state of physical and spiritual violence. That poet’s imagination offers “a violence from within that protects us from the violence without.” But he specifies this resistance in further terms we might not have expected. While the poet would help people to live their lives, they would bear no social obligation, and their role would not to be

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111 CPP 659.
found in morals.\(^{112}\) As he puts the idea in the Adagia, ethics has no more to do with poetry than with painting.\(^{113}\) Driving the point home with a flourish, Stevens goes so far as to say that poetry is “psychologically an escapist process”—ostensibly preserving Freud’s description of illusion while flipping its valuation.\(^{114}\) It seems as though poets must be out of step with their own time, contemporaries who refuse to be contemporaries.

We should take care with how we read these remarks. Having encountered Stevens’s view that poets are to help people live their lives, we could suppose that the negative phrasings are less about indifferent withdrawal than about clearing a space amid the clamor. One concern may be to avoid the deformation of art by exigency. A well-intentioned but incautious poet could be lured into the role of sloganeer or political propagandist. Another concern may be with a proper framing of the stakes. While the poet’s task conduces neither to pamphleteering nor to a predetermined set of principles that one could memorably hawk through a sing-song jingle, the task can and should be understood within a paradigm of ethics. Helping people to live under conditions of anticipation pertains to a paradigm classed nowadays by some under “virtue ethics”: forming our manner of being in the world, the patterns of perception with which we find our way, the kind of character we inhabit, and how those, taken together, conduce to our flourishing.\(^{115}\) We already saw in the previous chapter how critiques of consolation and its cognate attitudes are often motivated by these very sorts of concerns. For writers like Freud, consolation—or even the pursuit of it—hinders the development of character and makes us, to

\(^{112}\) CPP 660.

\(^{113}\) CPP 904.

\(^{114}\) CPP 662.

\(^{115}\) Other writers, especially Foucault and those inspired by him, would speak not in terms of virtue ethics but arts of living or self-stylizing. Attractive as I find this terminology, I take the approach I do the better to bring Stevens back, despite himself, into a discussion of ethics.
some extent, mentally ill. When distributed among an entire population, it compromises the moral integrity that would keep us from turning against one another in violence. Similar accounts appear in forebears like Marx and successors like Kübler-Ross. But Stevens indirectly suggests a different possibility: consolation might actually be conceived as a sort of virtue, a state formed into us through poetry that conduces to flourishing as we anticipate death.

What would it mean to flourish under these circumstances? This is a question I will ask throughout this study, and my own answer will not appear until the conclusion, since it emerges from this and the following two chapters, all of which offer variant approaches. But for a preliminary indication of Stevens’s approach, consider again his claim that the poet’s task is “to make his imagination theirs…to help people to live their lives.”

The succession of these infinitive statements suggests that that there is something about a poet’s imagination, when lent to others, that helps them to live. We should ask what it is exactly about a poet’s imagination that makes this possible, but in light of how Stevens describes the “external events” of his time as overwhelming all power of contemplation, the very act of lending imagination of any kind to others would be significant. Such a poet would be like a first responder who transfuses their own blood into the wounded of a great disaster. Perhaps, under less dire circumstances, the patients would be more capable of sustaining themselves by their own imaginative powers, but for the meantime—which may be a rather protracted time—the poet offers a supplement to allay the powerlessness instilled by constantly impinging external events. Stevens elaborates on the need for this imaginative supplement further down, saying that the poet “creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it” and that “he gives

\[116\] CPP 660–61.
to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it."\textsuperscript{117} In other words, imagination helps us to live because we require imagination even to conceive of the world. These claims imply, by extension, that living requires some kind of conception of our world, a sort of orientation to a mental map that helps us to develop an integrated approach, one that makes sense to us and that orders the riot of facts spewing into our awareness every day. That to which we turn in daily life does not just exist “out there,” in the array of external facts. It also exists in our imagination, forged as much as found.\textsuperscript{118}

You may have noticed by now that Stevens talks more about imagination than illusion. He seems to do that largely because the terms, to him, are interchangeable.\textsuperscript{119} Freud’s attack on illusion amounts to an attack on imagination, and we could read the terminological emphasis here as way of highlighting that implication for his audience, building support by leaning on the less negatively freighted term, one that may even arouse protective instincts when imperiled.

Yet he does not develop this link with a straightforward definition of either term. The definition, such as it is, seems largely functional: illusion is what it does. One slightly more substantive aspect of illusion that we could intimate from this functional definition is its quality of excess, illusion being a mental product that goes beyond the merely given. This follows from Stevens’s claim that we do not simply receive the world to which we turn, but also construct it through our fictions. But that characterization too is largely schematic. Without further

\begin{flushleft}117 CPP 662.\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}118 An objection to this interpretation could be that Stevens merely replicates the issue by making the poet’s imagination an external source of imagination for the people they serve. That is, imagination would still be found rather than forged. But there are ways around this. Perhaps the poet’s imagination, once made their own, would still be on the order of a violence from within resisting the violence without.\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}119 How exactly the terms relate in Stevens’s work could be a promising subject of further study. They might actually be in a part-whole relation, illusion being a subset of imagination writ large, but from at least this essay and the poem I consider below, there appears to be no consistent pattern in their use, leading me to the judgment of interchangability.\end{flushleft}
elaboration, it would be hard to appreciate how exactly illusion supports the alternative version of consolation that I have discerned his stray jottings. Indeed, it may even be difficult to differentiate Stevens’s account of illusion from Freud’s. Guided by his theory of wish-fulfillment, Freud also defines illusion in mostly functional terms and appreciates its quality of excess beyond the merely given.

Even from the little we have considered thus far, it is of course clear that these two are worlds apart, but acknowledging the similarity of their definitions presses us to where the difference really lies. Rather than in their explicit descriptions, the difference lies in the unarticulated attitudes behind them. A Freudian realist’s attitude is primarily one of suspicion. Recognizing our mental life as a seething cauldron of desire, one would start from the position that our conceptions of the world are, more often than not, to varying degrees, distorted. That suspicion could encourage its own sort of wish—namely, that our world “in here,” in our minds, could perfectly reflect the world “out there,” without that messy element of the mind’s inventiveness. By contrast, Stevens’s attitude is one of embrace, perhaps even celebration. While he could agree that our conceptions tend to go astray—such that some are preferable to others—he suggests that since conceptions are how we find our way through the world, embracing them allows us more deeply to immerse ourselves in relation with the world. The direction would not simply be “inside-out,” as though the world we inhabit must be purely of our own invention. It would rather involve reciprocation between “inside” and “outside,” a dialogue.\textsuperscript{120} As often as our imaginations might lead us astray, they also give us a world that is recognizably ours. That would be difficult to achieve from an attitude of suspicion.

\textsuperscript{120}I put these terms in quotes to emphasize their metaphorical quality. As I will show later, Stevens is committed to blurring all distinction between internal and external, when that distinction maps imagination and reality.
What prompts Stevens to adopt such an attitude, and what would prompt us to follow suit? We might simply consider it the bias of a poet, but that would press the question back to what shapes his particular bias. And looking there could in fact be fruitful. Already, I showed that central to Stevens’s understanding of poetry is its work of consolation, in the distinct sense he gives that term. It may be that seeing possibilities for what consolation could mean, beyond the now-standard understandings prevalent in critical thought, opened Stevens to re-valuing illusion as well and promoting it as a support for consolation.

Evaluating whether to follow Stevens in this approach will require, over the rest of this chapter, more exploration of how he understands consolation. But this much has become clear already: the story of consolation has, until now, been partial at best.

As I noted in the previous chapter, many scholars of modern poetry narrate a decline in the availability of consolation much as Freud does. The old tropes and literary techniques by which writers once sought to console—especially those that center on the eternal life of the dead—have been replaced by a predominantly disconsolate attitude.\(^{121}\) Stevens often figures prominently in such accounts, and not without good reason. His entire career could be viewed as one long attempt to work out the aphorism quoted above, to consider what poetry can do for people after abandoning belief in god. Quite often, this attempt manifests itself with a resolute chill, facing “the nothingness that is,” the barrenness of things after gods have vacated the scene.\(^{122}\) Sensitive to the intertextual resonances of this attitude, influential readers of Stevens like Harold Bloom have argued that his poetic project can be understood as fundamentally


\(^{122}\) I quote here from his poem “The Snow Man.”
consonant with Freud’s response to the decline of religion and his call for greater acquiescence to reality.\textsuperscript{123} Stevens’s biographer, Joan Richardson, even draws attention to the specific passages that the poet marked in his copy of \textit{The Future of an Illusion}, and argues that Freud’s views played such an important role in the his intellectual development that his later work, especially “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” supposedly follows the Freudian critique of consolation point by point.\textsuperscript{124} But Stevens’s stated worries about “the voice of the realist” suggest that even as the so-called death of God has closed down some possibilities for consolation, sensitivity to this closure has spurred some poets to seek—and discover—alternative possibilities.\textsuperscript{125}

This will be the first of three chapters that fill in the story of consolation. In these chapters, I do not overturn prior interpretations \textit{tout court}; consolation has indeed become troubled. But I do suggest that, for the poets I present here, this trouble has spurred a generative search for new forms that can nourish imagination amid agonizing interims. The guiding problems of each chapter will emerge in a first section that engages extensively with prose texts, but the chief work of this study will happen in close readings of long poems or poem sequences. That choice is guided by two related considerations. First, consolation has been maligned for so long that it may take an immersive experience, such as one finds in reading an extensive poem, to rework ingrained assumptions.\textsuperscript{126} Second, regardless of consolation’s background situation, approaching

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\item \textsuperscript{124} Richardson, \textit{Wallace Stevens: The Later Years}, 60–61.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Let me emphasize that, while the textual evidence from “The Noble Rider” seems conclusive, mine is a minority view. The only piece that I have found to identify Stevens’s critical posture toward Freud is Raina Kostova, “The Dangerous Voice of the Realist: Wallace Stevens’ Extended Critique of Freud’s The Future of an Illusion,” \textit{Wallace Stevens Journal: A Publication of the Wallace Stevens Society} 34, no. 2 (2010): 222–240.
\item \textsuperscript{126} In this method, one might observe an affinity with the method of Boethius’ \textit{Consolation}. See Stephen Blackwood, \textit{The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy} (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015).
\end{itemize}
it through a paradigm of ethical formation—considering how it supports a way of inhabiting an imperiled world through a particular vision of reality—requires considering how such formation happens. Long poems can offer insight into the diachronic process of initiating people into such a vision. My selections have been guided by fairly basic criteria: they all speak “consolation” explicitly, usually as part of the larger nexus of themes that appear in critiques, and they do so while being, in their own ways, post-Christian. And just to show that these are not marginal to the writers’ work, the texts also figure among their most prominent accomplishments.

But these chapters will not be purely descriptive, where that means trying only to relay the nub of these poems in the allegedly more accessible form of scholarship. I am interested in how, under their instruction, we can articulate a novel sense of consolation, and how that might reframe discussions around the ethics of facing one’s mortality. Good readings will be foundational for that. Even good readings must be partial, however, especially when dealing with such complicated matter. And by drawing out the elements of these works most relevant to the task at hand, by melding images and ideas beyond what is given in the texts, by extending the insights of each poem into a more overarching account of consolation, I will be constructing, through dialogue, something as much my own as theirs.

This chapter will center on Stevens’s late poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” One of its attractions is that it reads like an unacknowledged companion piece to “The Noble Rider.”127 It meditates upon the nature of reality, illusion’s place in human life, time and the anticipation of ends, and even makes a few thinly veiled jabs at Freud. Plus, the poem hinges

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127 Helen Vendler notes that Stevens tends to be at his best in his longer work, although she considers the poem to be a decline in accomplishment from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Auroras of Autumn." In it she finds one of his harshest experiments, full of insuperable exhaustion and despair. As my reading will make clear, I disagree vigorously with this characterization. See On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 6 and 269ff.
upon the theme of consolation, mentioning the word explicitly about two-thirds of the way through the poem, at the start of the twenty-second canto:

“The consolations of space are nameless things.”

It is an enigmatic line, and I will attempt to understand it through attending to its immediate context as well as the wider work. In fact, I will pause midway and pan out to understand how Stevens’s approach to consolation draws upon certain strands of western critical thought. That he opposes Freudian realism is abundantly clear by now, but keeping in mind that Stevens was no great friend of religion suggests an important nuance in what critical thought can mean. We can distinguish between critique as dismissal and critique as creative reinvention. I will argue that Stevens’s most important forebear in this regard may be Nietzsche, whose problem with religion is never that it trades upon illusion, but rather that its illusions have become moribund and must be replaced by better ones. Identifying resonances with Nietzsche will, in turn, help to delve more deeply into “Ordinary Evening.”

As with every work considered in this study, the specific contours of Stevens’s retrieval of consolation and illusion emerge only through close reading. But I can offer brief indication of where we are going. This poem reminds readers that seeing is always seeing-as, without thereby spiraling into an abyss of perspectival claims incapable of correction. For Stevens promotes what I will call an intermediate illusion. It attempts the fullest possible grasp of reality by mediating between the world as given and the world as constructed. It is also intermediate in nurturing a particular sense of time, standing between the present moment and whatever ends we anticipate, and humanizing time’s passage by placing it under the auspices of promise.

128 CPP 412.
Instead of jumping right into the consolation passage in “Ordinary Evening,” let me begin with a few notes on its form. Schematics first: it is 558-line, blank verse poem divided into thirty-one cantos, each with eighteen lines divided into six tercets. Rhythmically, the lines follow no fixed pattern and their length also varies on occasion by several metrical feet, making the poem feel like highly controlled free verse, where the priority is to say just the right thing in just the right way.

The cantos are only numbered; no section titles aid interpretation as in, for example, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” This leaves readers to discern from one section to the next how the poem fits together, which demands sustained attention. Sometimes, the first line of a canto indicates a clear link to the previous one, or a group of cantos play upon the same words or themes for a sustained period. At other times, the poem seems to move by juxtaposition, as though the speaker had completed one thought and abruptly takes up another. Once you have read the work as a whole, it becomes clear that it does not develop in any straightforward way. To the contrary, it exhibits a willingness to oscillate wildly in its topical focus and images, as though it were constantly trying out new ones in search of something that would finally be adequate. The cumulative effect of such oscillation could be characterized as a swirl of movement at a standstill. It frustrates expectations of progressive development while also amplifying the passingness of things. This will be crucial for our interpretation of its pedagogy, but for now, suffice it to say that we need not take the poem, at least for our purposes, step by linear step.

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129 For elaboration of this idea in Stevens, see J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 258–60.
As we move into interpretation, the title could seem to be a lodestar. For it locates us in a definite place and a general time. “Ordinary,” in its everyday use, immediately suggests an evening that is nothing exceptional: these meditations might apply just as well to any other evening. But considered from a more specific use, the time would be nearly as definite as the place. In the Christian liturgical calendar, “ordinary” time designates the periods between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, as well as between Pentecost and Advent. These calendrical periods have a settled quality. In contrast to, say, Lent, they involve no mounting tension of anticipation for an event to come. Indeed, they are periods after anticipated events—specifically, after some revelation of the presence of God among humanity. In keeping with that, the “ordinary” liturgy somes without any special hymns or antiphons, being a time of ordinary language for the divine. It would hardly be a stretch consider the title with this sense of “ordinary” in mind, considering the other theological resonances in the poem’s language, as well as the fact that New Haven’s town green features three churches in prominent array.\(^{130}\) By layering these two senses of the ordinary, Stevens frames the poem with his own distinctive variant of afterness: a turn toward the commonplace after one is finished with the search for revelations from beyond. In turn, this shapes how the poem develops its approach to consolation in anticipation of death.

But the title could also raise mistaken expectations. With such specificity as to place and time, one might be primed for a detailed description of New Haven after the day’s bustle has subsided, strung with iconic *bons mots* that the tourist bureau could print on coupons for guided

\(^{130}\) Some theological resonances in the language include “the lion of Juda” ([XI], “a figure like Ecclesiast” ([XIX], and “things seen and unseen, created from nothingness” ([XXVIII]). Anthony Libby notes that Stevens's language in this poem is frequently biblical, although he misses the fact that it also reflects the Nicene Creed. See *Mythologies of Nothing: Mystical Death in American Poetry, 1940-70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 57–58. These references will not appear in the analysis because they, strictly speaking, are ancillary to the theme of consolation, but are worth mentioning here to give a sense of context.
tours of Yale. There is little of that. Except for a few characterizing remarks peppered here and there, the poem is fairly abstract and could be set just about anywhere. The setting may actually be the mind of the speaker wandering the town, who finds the evening in this town an apt occasion for—rather than object of—a reverie on the nature of illusion, reality, and consolation.\textsuperscript{131}

This arousal and redirection of expectations contributes to how the poem initiates readers into its particular vision of reality. In “The Noble Rider,” Stevens argues that we should not see reality as an “external scene,” a “collection of solid, static objects extended in space.” Instead, we should see it as “the life that is lived in the scene that it composes.”\textsuperscript{132} The ethereal, ostensibly placeless meditations that fill “Ordinary Evening” may very well be an attempt to grasp the kind of life that transpires at such a time in New Haven. The most realistic depiction of the scene, with all the relevant elements that compose its life, would be a depiction that keeps the bare objects themselves on the periphery, and instead brings us into the mind which encounters them. The claim of ordinariness, in this frame, would suggest that poetry (or liturgy) suffuses all, even a scene such as this—that to hymn the reality of the plainest town requires a verse previously reserved for occasions most extraordinary.\textsuperscript{133}

With these formal considerations in view, let us now approach that dense, enigmatic line, “The consolations of space are nameless things.” A simple way of reducing the density, and

\textsuperscript{131} A case could be made for how this setting stands in agonistic relation to some of T. S. Eliot’s work. Consider, for example, a recurring figure from \textit{The Waste Land}: “Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn....” As with most of Stevens’s references, this would be so subtle as to defy certainty, but it is worth noting all the same, if only to draw attention to the intertextual elements of “Ordinary Evening.”

\textsuperscript{132} CPP 658.

\textsuperscript{133} There is a convergence on this point with Ronald F. Thiemann’s \textit{The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief} (London; New York: Tauris, 2014), although Stevens does not figure among the writers considered in that work.
thereby getting interpretive traction, would be to consider each side of the copula in isolation: “the consolations of space” and “nameless things.” Isolating them makes clear that “consolation” is doubly augmented, first with reference to space and then to namelessness. In neither case does a meaning suggest itself straightaway. If anything, these combinations sow in readers a sense that we do not understand consolation so well as we might have thought. Yet the statement’s simplicity of syntax gives it a directness that we might associate with more obvious claims, perhaps instilling suspicion that, somehow, we should know exactly what the speaker is talking about.

Context provides some guidance. I mentioned a moment ago that sometimes the cantos of “Ordinary Evening” are tightly linked, and this is one such instance. The first side of the copula continues a thought that began in XXIII. The other side then expands upon that thought in XXIV, the canto in which the statement appears. Considering this context will be crucial, since “space” appears but four times in the whole work (once in XXIII, twice in XXIV, and another time that I will treat later). With that in mind, allow me to quote canto XXIII in full:

```
The sun is half the world, half everything,
The bodiless half. There is always this bodiless half,
This illumination, this elevation, this future

Or, say, the late going colors of that past,
Effete green, the woman in black cassimere.
If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,

At evening, after dark, is the other half,
Lighted by space, big over those that sleep,
Of the single future of night, the single sleep,

As of a long, inevitable sound,
A kind of cozening and coaxing sound,
And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound,

Unfretted by day’s separate, several selves,
Being part of everything come together as one.
In this identity, disembodiments
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Still keep occurring. What is, uncertainly,
Desire prolongs its adventure to create
Forms of farewell, furtive among green ferns.\textsuperscript{134}

“Space,” buried here in the third tercet, lacks the formal prominence it has in the line on
consolation. But thematically, it is even more salient. Space illuminates the “other half” of New
Haven, after dark—standing clear in contrast with the sun.

The speaker sets up this contrast sparingly, with a few characterizing remarks that ripple
into a wider field of associations. Some are analytically entailed by the contrast. For example, if
the sun is “the bodiless half,” it follows that the half lighted by space, the half which concerns this
poem, is \textit{bodily}. Other associations enter through familiarity. We might not understand what it
would mean for space to provide illumination, but the suggestion of illumination after dark, in
contrast with the sun, could hasten our minds toward the moon.\textsuperscript{135} Take care, though, not to skip
too quickly to the familiar. Gathering the scene under a rubric of space helps the poem to do
more than just conjure a heavenly orb. For one thing, the unfamiliar combination of space and
illumination could prime us to think metaphorically, and that might draw us toward another
association with light: revelation. Just as space would be an unfamiliar source of light, the night
would operate by an unfamiliar paradigm of revelation. Ordinarily, revelation implies an act of
bringing something from the shadows or under a veil into the light, where it can be beheld
completely, without any obstruction between us and the object of our contemplation. This
ordinary language use remains faithful to the ancient Greek word for revelation, \textit{apokalypsis}
(literally “unveiling”). The evening revelation in New Haven would come through the soft,

\textsuperscript{134} Note here that green, a color which appears twice in this canto, is the color of ordinary time.

\textsuperscript{135} Street lamps would be another possibility, attractive for its element of artifice, but I find nothing in the poem to
suggest that. Indeed, street lamps often function to push back the evening and allow us to continue our business as
though daylight had never waned—hardly in keeping with the spirit of the poem.
imperfect light that we could expect after dark. Far from lifting all veils, it might offer revelation through immersion in shadows and darkness—a eucalyptic revelation.\(^{136}\) Day involves separation, discrete individuals, well-marked features like effete green or black cassimere that we would behold well in the light. Evening involves the indistinction of everything, everything having come together as one in a single sleep, an identity that may be difficult to grasp under the light of day.

Another reason to resist simply glossing space as a stand-in for moonlight is to preserve the multi-layered contrast suggested in this particular phrasing. Not just between sun and moon, day and night, also the poem suggests a contrast between space and time. The sun-half involves past and future, which implies a linear arrow of time—perhaps reinforced by an image of the sun’s flight from east to west. Space involves some awareness of “the single future of night,” but by contrast with the sun-half, space here mainly concerns the present, and not as a mere point in time’s march from future to past. This present harbors stillness, as though removed from that march. As with the image of day, the poem’s guidance for imagining the scene, with a soft evening light and all things together in sleep, reinforces this sense of stillness. Even if the moon also courses across the sky, variations in evening light are so imperceptible that, unlike the various times of day, ordinary speech tends to treat evening as one bloc.\(^{137}\)

The moon is not the only strong association here that emerges through thematic familiarity. References to a single future of night, sleep, and inevitability could suggest that the speaker is talking obliquely about death. After all, night and sleep are among its oldest

\(^{136}\) On Stevens’s tensive relationship to apocalyptic thinking, see Malcolm Woodland, *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).

\(^{137}\) Lack of variation in evening light is not necessarily the only explanation of this treatment. It could simply be that the majority of people do not now carry about their business after dark, and words tend to proliferate into refinement only for things that receive much attention. Even this, however, would support Stevens’s basic opposition of day and evening, for it most pertains to people’s perception of difference.
metaphorical links. Plus, claiming by implication that evening is the bodily half of the world could lead us to attribute to this half all sorts of bodily things, mortality included. And unlike what I suggested in the previous paragraph about the important silence about the moon, death’s not being mentioned here may simply derive from a discerning avoidance of cliché. Yet as before, we would do well to consider the possible effects of this omission, how it might reshape readers’ associations. One thing that stands out especially is how the canto, despite its suggestions of stillness, conveys a distinct kind of vibrancy. In this space desire remains, and “prolongs its adventure”—keeps itself alive, as it were—in creating forms of farewell. I suggested a moment ago that the canto’s construal of space reformulates common notions of apocalypse as unveiling, and here we see a further reformulation, this time in regard to the sense of catastrophic ends.

With a constant creation of forms for our farewell, we are not approaching an end full stop. We inhabit a dilating space near an end, a space in which we ever prolong our adventure. “Ordinary Evening” may itself be enacting such a form by its refusal to mention death here. Its art of prolonged adventure diverts attention from that which we cannot forget entirely. And in so doing, it opens a space to reconsider what it means to dwell in anticipation and even what that end would be like, were it suddenly to come. That may be why the poem suggests that “the single future of night,” while inevitable, is also a source of comfort—coaxing and maternal. Indeed, this direction of imagination may break with associations of tombs and move instead toward wombs, less a site of closure than new generation.\(^{138}\)

\(^{138}\) There has been illuminating work in feminist thought questioning the orientation many philosophers have to mortality. A better focus, some argue, would actually be natality. On this see Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004); and Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
Altogether, this link of “space” with evening suggests that despite the word’s infrequency, the whole poem is framed by these concerns. The moony elements of this contrast suffuse everything else.

Now let us turn to the other half of the consolation line and reflect on the element of “nameless things.” The canto we just considered already provides some clues as to why the consolations of space would be such. Blurring identities in the unity of night could make naming—an act which introduces distinction among things, thisness rather than thatness—moot. To name these consolations could be a category mistake. But the next canto, XXIV, offers further suggestions that deepen the discussion considerably, and connects consolation explicitly to religion. As before, it would be most helpful if quoted in full:

The consolations of space are nameless things.
It was after the neurosis of winter. It was
In the genius of summer that they blew up

The statue of Jove among the boomy clouds.
It took all day to quieten the sky
And then to refill its emptiness again,

So that at the edge of afternoon, not over,
Before the thought of evening had occurred
Or the sound of Incomincia had been set,

There was a clearing, a readiness for first bells,
An opening for outpouring, the hand was raised:
There was a willingness not yet composed,

A knowing that something certain had been proposed,
Which, without the statue, would be new,
An escape from repetition, a happening

In space and the self, that touched them both at once
And alike, a point of the sky or of the earth
Or of a town poised at the horizon’s dip.

Although “space” in the first line thematically bridges between this and the previous canto, we encounter a different kind of statement verging on a shift of genre. Whereas previously we had a
lyric meditation drawing out contrasts between the sun and the spatial light of evening, here we find quasi-mythological reportage. We learn of a definite event at a not-so-definite time in the past; only the season is clear. The previous canto’s suggestion of presence, in contrast with a linear rush of time, prepared the way for this lack of definition. Indeed, the mythological register could reinforce that sense of presence, since events in myths often have a kind of timelessness—continually present even if they first transpired at some point in yesteryear. What matters to the speaker is only the event itself and its aftermath, destruction of Jove’s statue and a readiness for something new, something that would happen both in space and the self. Having considered Stevens’s worry in “The Noble Rider” about the proliferation of news and its approach to reality as a series of events impinging upon us from without, we could read this as an ironic reformulation of the genre. The narrated event demands consideration, but its lack of temporal and locational specificity gives it a different tenor than megaphone headlines drowning out all imagination. If anything, this announcement demands it.

One reason it demands imagination is that the narrative’s relevance to naming is far from explicit. The newness of the happening, in space and the self, could certainly imply namelessness: it arrives having never happened before, breaking from repetition and thus from our accumulated store of appellations. But the formal prominence of namelessness in this canto almost urges us to consider whether there might be more.

To press deeper, we would do well to consider another moment in Stevens’s poetry in which he writes the destruction of a god. The first canto of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” has this to say:

The death of one god is the death of all

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Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that could never be named.  

Notice that the final line distinguishes between names and that which one tries to name, futilely. With this distinction, the proclaimed death of god becomes less absolute. For we could ask, was it the name that died or its intended object? The poem most strongly implies the former. Citing Phoebus twice in the same line establishes continuity between the proclamation of death and the qualification that what we took for a god was just a name. Also, the contrastive “But” prepares readers for a softening, as though the death of Phoebus were not the end. This construction conveys a mixture of finality and ongoing possibility. Even as “Phoebus” fades from view, the speaker opens a sense that what people were trying to name may yet make itself felt under other guises. That which they tried to name, in short, remains alive.

If one god’s death is the death of all, this moment in “Notes” can throw light on “Ordinary Evening.” Phoebus being dead, Jove must be too. The death of one implies the death of all because, perhaps, what holds for Phoebus, holds for every other divine name. “Jove” too was a name for something that could never be named. And the death of one god—or one divine name—may touch off an uncontainable crisis of confidence in every other. The destruction of Jove’s statue replays, in more dramatic fashion, the death of Phoebus. Like a name rolled casually off the tongue, a statue gives a sense of approachability, a possibility of holding, containing, rendering stationary—permanent even. That statue attempts to signify something that refuses signification, and once its inadequacy becomes clear, it may feel like an eyesore, a moldering idol taking up space.  

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140 CPP 329.

141 It is worth noting here that the poem mentions statuary one other time, at XII: “The poet speaks the poem as it is, / Not as it was: part of the reverberation / Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues / Are like newspapers
Stevens is being very delicate. Describing this death and destruction in relation to gods who evidently belong to a mythological past—a past for which most readers feel no pangs of loss, no residues of a cult half-practiced—provides an innocuous anchor for the imagination. It allows readers to realize, on their own, that the same would apply to their personal God or gods. The crisis of divine names may abate for a time, perhaps after a new name emerges that feels more apt than the last, but it may never be settled. The problem is not with this or that name; it is with the incommensurability of names as such with what they reach toward. The recollected destruction then turns into a prospective invitation. Which statues of ours would best be blown up? What possibilities might that create? Could a god’s funeral be turned into a festival?

Not that such an event would push unbridled positivity. It would finalize the severance of a certain connection to the heavens. It would require thinking in terms other than a secure and stable permanence, both in regard to the divine and also to ourselves. The canto’s statement about the prolonged effort to “quieten the sky again” obliquely suggests a sort of wailing that may be heard through the booming of destruction.

And yet the effect of god’s death is underdetermined. If you pass through the wailing, you find that what you lost actually obstructed the way to what you really desired. Surrendering the name may afford a deeper pursuit of the unnamed. Indeed, this canto follows Freud and others in intertwining consolation and religion, but inverts the standard accounts of consolation’s fate amid an interruption in religion: far from undermining consolation, the death of gods makes possible a consolation that was unavailable before.

blown by the wind.” Here too, the statue seems to embody things as they were, not as they are, and to reach the present requires some discomfiture of its baseline stability.
Synthesizing this canto with how the previous one characterized “space,” we could say that such consolation stems from a newfound ability to inhabit intermediacy. Two particular kinds of intermediacy seem salient here. The first would be the formless potential, just beginning to take new form, that emerges from the reversion to namelessness. Language of subtraction or vagueness permeates the canto: a clearing, an opening, “a willingness not yet composed,” about “something certain,” an “escape from repetition, a happening.” But this subtraction does not simply leave a gap open like an untreated wound. The sky’s emptiness, we are told, was refilled by the edge of afternoon, on the cusp of evening. This phrasing suggests that the sky’s recovered fullness just is its emptiness, this formless potential. And this happening “in space and the self” nudges us to recognize that such formlessness ties back to the previous canto, in which the illumination of space allows, among other things, a blurring of distinctions and a constant generation of new forms that refuse finality—even in the lead-up to farewell. The formlessness of intermediacy here designates not a lack of form, but a lack of final form. The space of evening proliferates forms, perhaps especially in names gently held, tried out for a while and then replaced in an incessant pursuit. Giving form through statuary to that which is supreme, by contrast, could suggest finality rather than intermediacy.

Why this matters for consolation becomes apparent in the second sort of intermediacy here, the intermediacy of anticipated ends. Consider again these two images from the canto: “the edge of afternoon, not over, / Before the thought of evening had occurred” and “a town poised at the horizon’s dip.” Both mark an interim between one definitive moment and the next—the edge between day and evening, the town between a stretch of space that we can see and another that we cannot. The first brackets anticipation quite markedly. Although afternoon is nearly over, no thoughts of evening have cast their shadows yet. Readiness for something new comes at a moment when possibility could seem used up. We have seen how the space of evening will be
generative in its own ways and counters the linear march of time with an emphasis on vibrant stillness in the present. But one standing on the edge of afternoon may not know that. Their sense of indeterminate possibility could bring its own sense of presence, quelling anticipation of the uncertain future to come.

The second image indicates a play of perspective in this relationship between present and indeterminate future. For the most part in this poem, the speaker’s perspective is within New Haven. Although the meditations can be abstract, we do nonetheless follow the speaker through streets, look upon the houses, and even sit with some of its denizens in their quarters amid a passing rainstorm. With the town poised at the horizon’s dip, as though it will vanish from view as the turning Earth takes its course, verging the unknown dark, the speaker seems to look beyond, to another town whose precise contours cannot be clear. Or might it instead just be another take on New Haven, from the outside?

If so, the image would convey something important about how the poem reframes anticipation. The reality confrontation encouraged by Freud involves, among other things, acquiescence to the given fact that one is just another mortal creature, countering the psyche’s wishful claims for specialness and indestructibility. Healthy disillusionment allows us to see ourselves from the outside, a perspective from which we can embrace the hard truth about ourselves. This quasi-Stoic meditation encourages distance from the grain of personal experience and a “view from nowhere” upon the self.142 The poem acknowledges that sense of impersonal distance by only designating “A town” on the horizon’s dip, having no other name because, from that perspective, it may indeed any other. To watch a town fall below the horizon’s dip would

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require one to float above the earth, rooted in no particular place and therefore dispassionate about all. But the “happening / In space and the self” after the statue’s destruction suggests a less distant vision. Dwelling in the afternoon not yet over allows the town to become something more than “a town” about to descend below the horizon. The town may become New Haven, one’s own dwelling, a space one occupies not at a distance but presently and intimately. This would not bracket anticipation entirely. Consciousness can be relentless in its strain toward whatever comes next. But with anticipation reframed from within the town, the evening we anticipate may become the evening of the previous canto, which breaks down distinctions between selves, which eases the onrush of time with the vibrant stillness of space.

I have described these contours of consolation as following from the canto’s quasi-mythological narrative of destroying Jove’s statue, but this could be misleading. It could suggest an inevitability about the possibilities that follow from any such destruction. And that is not obviously correct, especially given that, in outline, this destruction resembles Freud’s own move of displacing erstwhile sources of consolation. We need to refine the account.

Earlier in the poem, we find suggestions that consolation after the death of gods may have much to do with the manner of their death—or at least the manner in which one reacts to it. It does not follow from simply harping on about reality, trying to dispense with Jove and company as so many illusions cooked up by frightened children needing comfort. While the pyrotechnics might, on first glance, complement moves toward disconsolation, in lines like the following we see that these are rather different projects:

IV.
The plainness of plain things is savagery,
As: the last plainness of a man who has fought
Against illusion and was, in a great grinding

Of growling teeth, and falls at night, snuffed out
By the obese opiates of sleep. Plain men in plain towns
Are not precise about the appeasement they need.

They only know a savage assuagement cries
With a savage voice; and in that cry, they hear
Themselves transposed, muted and comforted

In a savage and subtle and simple harmony,
A matching and mating of surprised accords,
A responding to a diviner opposite. […]

After reading “The Noble Rider,” this opponent of illusion sounds a lot like Stevens’s impression of Freud as an exemplar of pernicious realism. His sharp-toothed fight against illusion (which, to Freud, was a kind of waking dream) is a campaign for living with eyes only ever open, in daylight rather than evening. Replacing worn out illusions with better ones is not on the table; the goal here seems to be simple expungement. And the campaign bears not just on illusion, but also extends to consolation, suggested here through cognates like appeasement, assuagement, comfort, and (most tellingly) opiates.

We can distinguish, then, between the destruction of Jove as an end goal in the campaign against illusion, and destruction as furthering a pursuit of better illusions. This chimes with something I noted before in my reading of “The Noble Rider”—that the difference between Freud and Stevens on illusion may ultimately come to a difference of attitude, resistance with one and embrace with the other.

But this particular moment in the poem adds an important twist to that difference. Through its micro-narrative, the poem likens this fight against illusion to a fight against sleep. Flood your room with light and your mind with caffeine but, sooner or later, you will drift off—and with less grace than if you simply let yourself go. The following canto puts the claim even more directly, starting thus:

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143 Kostova also makes this point in “The Dangerous Voice of the Realist,” 233–34.
Inescapable romance, inescapable choice
Of dreams, disillusion as the last illusion,
Reality as a thing seen by the mind, […]

A problem with savage critiques of illusion, in other words, is that they ignore their own illusory quality. Reality is never merely given, but always a thing seen by the mind. Notice how the claim comes in an associative form that reinforces the point—a form Charles Altieri calls a “grammar of `as`,” in which Stevens employs that word in moments that would ordinarily call for “is.”

Reality might be a thing seen by the mind, but using “as” here reinforces that we are always already in a world of likenesses, from which we cannot—and should not pretend to—escape.

The tacit conception of illusion here differs slightly from the Freudian version. Desire and dreaming are certainly present. But more crucial to the poem’s intervention is a simpler point. Illusion, most basically, is a mental addition to the bare givenness of things. And even that bare givenness is something we must imagine beyond what is put before us.

This point, though simple, makes a difference for the posture one takes toward the difficult facts of reality. Reality as a thing seen by the mind suggests that we are not mere recipients of whatever it brings, but participants in its very constitution. Reality exceeds us, to be sure. The images we entertain may be mistaken. And in those cases, reality may press back. Yet we may also press back against its impingements through our own reconceptions, through which we may make of the unhospitable world a habitable town—a New Haven at evening, after dark. This intermingling of reality and illusion turns the tables on Freud, suggesting that the most robust acceptance of reality would actually involve a constructive rebelliousness from the mere givenness of things. In fact, the speaker sets a tone for this from the very outset of the poem:

I.

The eye’s plain version is a thing apart,  
The vulgate of experience. Of this,  
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

As part of the never-ending meditation, […]

Three soundings of “and yet”: constant contrariety and a refusal to resolve, to settle down into a stable given to which we must submit, characterize the meditation.

We have an inescapable choice of dreams, according to the speaker—not a choice of whether to dwell in illusion or not, but a choice among illusions. How should we go about choosing? It would be tempting to inflate the momentousness of one’s method. But simply adopting an attitude of embrace toward illusion and this constructive rebelliousness would be a considerable advancement over Freudian realism. And plain men in plain towns, we hear, are not precise about the appeasement they need. Appeasement alone is their aim, however it comes. That further chimes with what I identified in the previous section as Stevens’s functional criterion for evaluating illusion: whether it helps people to live their lives through adopting the poet’s imagination as their own. With an inescapable choice of dreams may come the freedom to try out several as though in a dressing room, sift through the pile, find one that fits for now, and go back for an exchange whenever it seems worn out.

But this meditation on plain men in plain towns is not just more of the same. It draws us into a deeper appreciation of what illusion, when it satisfies Stevens’s criterion, may do for us. First, it \textit{transposes} us. To appreciate this effect requires some reflection, because the word does not normally belong in the semantic field of appeasement. Its most literal sense means to place elsewhere. In that case, it could mean that people feel themselves placed somewhere beyond the plain town, the place where they find themselves in need of appeasement. The notion would have affinity with older notions of consolation that appeal to otherworldly redemption, which alone suffices to show that this reading of transposition would itself be out of place here. A better
reading would approach the word through its more frequent use in music. Indeed, the poem nudges us in that direction when it mentions that these plain men feel themselves comforted in a “simple harmony.” Technically, transposition preserves the basic form of a musical phrase while taking it to a different key—a different place in tonal register, if you will. This act can change one’s experience of a phrase dramatically, especially if the transposition switched the key from minor to major or vice versa. The plain men, in other words, might remain in the same place but feel the quality of their life transformed by their proper appeasement.

The idea of harmony in this connection is significant. Technically speaking, harmony matches two or more different notes to create sonic tensions. Individual notes are often still distinguishable, at least to a trained ear, but the tension that emerges through matching them has a dynamism that neither could produce on their own. If I may be permitted a bit of imaginative liberty, the harmony we find in this passage might be what emerges in the matching of these plain men and the world they inhabit. The world may impinge upon them in ways that, starting from their standard attunement, sound dissonant or even cacophonous. But when they feel themselves transposed, that which was dissonant suddenly becomes harmonious and soothing. The world itself would not have changed. Nor the plain men. What would have changed would be their relationship to the world in their tonal register, as it were. That could make all the difference for their sense of comfort in the hard edges of life. They remain in the same town, yet to their surprise, find themselves in accord with it. Our “diviner opposite,” no longer a heavenly redoubt to which we escape, perhaps would be instead the poem that stands before us and the world, conducting us as we squeak toward harmony.

Something odd also happens in these lines. The speaker critiques the man who fought against illusion, calling his plainness savagery. And yet “savage” appears three more times, in conjunction, apparently, with positive statements about the assuagement of plain men. They
know “a savage assuagement cries / With a savage voice,” and that cry is what comforts them in a harmony that is, among other things, “savage and subtle and simple.” The speaker thus seems to be of two minds—being at once resistant to savagery and recognizing how it can contribute to consolation.

If we gloss savagery in terms of a spirit of critique, one way of navigating the duality would be to consider it a matter of degree. A cry can be savage without forming into a call to dispense with all illusion. In fact, this duality might speak to a second aspect of illusions that would satisfy Stevens’s criterion: the kind of illusion that helps us to live might actually incorporate some measure of critique, especially inasmuch as it insists on staying connected to the plain town we inhabit, not drifting into fanciful flights toward something beyond.

Critical illusion, admittedly, could sound like a contradiction in terms. Ordinary senses of illusion imply a kind of immersion in belief, or suspension of disbelief, such that we are momentarily bound to the perspective we have adopted (or have been lured into). By contrast, critique requires an ability to recognize perspectives for what they are—partial, contingent, not as they must be and thus subject to revision. But Stevens seems to have in mind what I would call an intermediate illusion, one that mediates between the world as given and the world as constructed. Tilt too strongly to one side, and you get the emaciation of imagination. Tilt too strongly to the other, and you begin to drift away from the plain town in which these plain people reside.\(^{145}\)

Transposition requires a balance of both, and this illusion would be critical in how it resists any tilt toward extremes. Stevens implies here, as he claims explicitly elsewhere, that recognizing illusion as illusion need not impede our ability to immerse ourselves. In fact, such conscious

\(^{145}\) This suggests further connection with a paradigm of virtue ethics, which, in its Aristotelian inflection, is concerned not just with flourishing but also with steering toward a mean between extreme character states.
participation may afford the constant proliferation of new forms, in search of better aids for living, promoted in the poem.

Critique as an auxiliary to illusion and consolation: this fundamentally reconfigures how these terms were framed in the previous chapter. From what we have covered thus far, it could seem that Stevens’s configuration is novel intervention. But in fact, this move situates him in a less appreciated strand of western critical thought; he may even derive some of his operating assumptions, without citation, from particular forebears. By turning in the next section to survey aspects of this strand, we can better appreciate the context from which Stevens writes and return to “Ordinary Evening” prepared to press toward deeper insights about its renewal of consolation.

3.

It has been commonplace verging on cliché since at least the eighteenth century for philosophically-inclined writers to claim that religion, as embodied in traditional practices and teachings of ecclesiastical institutions, is problematic. Yet, like most commonplaces, this claim’s simplicity papers over much variety in the specific positions of its adherents. For our purposes, I would like to distinguish between two slightly less broad types. On one hand, some critical theorists have treated religion as an atavism that distorts social life. And what such theorists consider a proper response to atavisms is expungement, so that progress in science and education may advance. This is the position of Freud and his ilk, and has become so prominent in subsequent attacks on religion (as well as the sense of embattlement that some of the faithful cultivate in themselves) that it is easy to neglect the possibility of other approaches. One such approach has responded to contemporary formations of religion with calls not for expungement but revision. The chief rationale is that the problems with religion belong to a wider field of human
concern than religion alone. Religion might just be a gathering place of human tendencies that would not simply go away with the closure of churches.146

As I have been suggesting, Stevens belongs in this latter group. And although he tends to be cagey about his influences, it would not be hard to draft a short list of earlier analogues. One possibility would be Immanuel Kant. Stevens seems to poetically rework Kant’s most basic epistemological argument that while we can affirm a reality beyond our minds, reality as we know it is always constructed.147 Extending this approach to religion, Kant presses for a “symbolic anthropomorphism” in which we imaginatively project possibilities for what divine nature would be like, were it somehow possible to know.148 Another possibility would be Ludwig Feuerbach. His crucial move in the critique of religion was to cast theological thought as a projection. On this view, objects for the imagination like “God” are exaggerations of human qualities, and they serve, often without our realizing it, to deepen self-knowledge. Theology would thus resolve into anthropology, although not as a nullification of theology.149 Rather, Feuerbach gestures toward a humanistic theology to come, one which consecrates bread, wine, and water—indeed, all stuff of human reality—makes it holy, and revels in the everydayness of things, won back from stultifying conceptions of divinity. Clear literary extensions of this project

146 The positions I sketch here are hardly exhaustive. It would even be possible to imagine middle positions between them, such as one finds, for example, in the enthronement of Reason in Notre Dame, suggesting a liturgy for philosophes.


148 Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Ak. 357–58. We might also note here that he concludes his investigation with a claim that metaphysics is possible, but only when undertaken through critique, in the sense he gives the term. Ak. 367–69.

can be found in the work of proponents like George Eliot, and Stevens’s valorization of the ordinary, which also nods to our “diviner opposite,” may suggest traces of this project as well.

But when approaching Stevens through questions about illusion, consolation, and the death of gods, these possible analogues get overshadowed by one for whom these themes were an obsession—namely, Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, a possible connection with Nietzsche has been the subject of important studies on the poet. Interpreters like Harold Bloom have noted that Stevens’s late work dropped the Freudian overtones found in earlier work and moved toward a more Nietzschean outlook.150 Somewhat contrariwise, B. J. Leggett identifies a Nietzschean intertext in the earlier poetry, focusing especially on Stevens’s perspectivism. Both scholars support their claims for influence through Stevens’s extensive correspondence with his friend Henry Church on the subject of Nietzsche. Although their letters usually focus on Church’s interest, not Stevens’s, there are ways in which Stevens—ever reluctant to admit influence from any writer—tips his hand.151 Connections between them are evident enough in the limited selections we have considered thus far. One can hardly mention the “death of God” without calling to mind the figure most associated with the phrase. In Leggett’s view, Stevens’s later poetry would resonate most with Nietzsche’s suspicion toward the modern category of “truth,” lifting up instead illusion and untruth as positive values that we promote through art.152 And we have indeed seen such moves through our brief foray into “Ordinary Evening.”

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150 Bloom, Wallace Stevens, 189 and 200; Miller, Poets of Reality, 224.


152 Leggett, Early Stevens, ch. 8, especially 213–19.
The case for these connections is somewhat less settled when approached through Nietzsche scholarship. I said that he was obsessed by questions of illusion and consolation, but people differ on what role these play in his thought. Many consider illusion to be a central category for his project of affirming life through art.\textsuperscript{153} In fact, Nietzsche appears as the culminating figure in Hans Vaihinger’s study \textit{The Philosophy of As-If}, a work whose promotion of useful fictions, notably, attracted an explicit rebuttal from Freud in \textit{The Future of an Illusion} for remaining too close to the pernicious illusions of religion.\textsuperscript{154} But others, such as the French philosopher Clément Rosset, situate Nietzsche among modern illusion busters. For Rosset, illusion is structured as a double—another, truer version of the present world before us—and he points to Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysical ideals as a prime example of resistance to such.\textsuperscript{155} Of consolation’s importance to his thought precious little has been written, and the studies that do exist tend not to focus on his actual use of the word.\textsuperscript{156} All this is to say: building viable connections to Stevens will be helped along by direct consultation with Nietzsche’s work, sampling from exemplary moments.

When thinking about the implications of God’s death, the best place to begin may be the famous parable in \textit{The Merry Science} when it is announced by a madman. To recall some leading details: the madman enters a marketplace, carrying a lantern despite the flood of morning light.

\textsuperscript{153} See, for example, Bernard Reginster, \textit{The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Daniel Came, ed. \textit{Nietzsche on Art and Life}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).


He announces that he comes in search of God. The indifferent onlookers, themselves unbelievers, chuckle among themselves at the silliness of the question. Unfazed, the madman then proclaims that they have killed God, he and his indifferent compatriots. He explains that he carries a lantern in the morning because this event brings ever more night, having unchained the earth from its sun. The tone here is much more frantic than what we found in the narrative of Jove’s statue being blown up in “Ordinary Evening,” as though the death, from the poem’s vantage point, had happened long enough ago that a sense of calm could overlay the mourning. And yet the poem too suggests cosmic disruption. For the remainder of the “day,” the sky was unquiet.

Having Stevens in mind as we recall the parable can help us to hear a question from the madman that rarely attracts attention. After again proclaiming that God is dead, remains dead, that we are the killers, the madman asks: “How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” The madman’s question, in immediate context, seems mostly to pertain to an unrelinquishable guilt for the wretched deed. It would be hard to console yourself for the death of a beloved when you were behind it. But the question also proposes a more general problem, murder aside. The death of God has such sweeping implications for our orientation in the cosmos that just as one needs a lamp at morning, one may have trouble finding consolation at all, even when innocent. Where once this would have been guided by a given light, we may now have to ignite our own torches.

The parable seethes with concern over what may come after unchaining ourselves from the sun. But for insight into how we might chart a future course for consolation through renewals

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of illusion, we should first look backward, to earlier works like the *Untimely Meditations* and *Birth of Tragedy*, because they more straightforwardly articulate the underlying issues with consolation and how it relates to illusion.

The centrality of illusion stands out in Nietzsche’s second untimely meditation, “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” He works up to the topic by exploring the hypothesis that happiness—indeed, acting in the world at all—requires forgetfulness, which he likens to a limited horizon.\(^{158}\) Happiness requires this not because of anything to do with particular contents of memory (whether, say, our sense of history has been shaped by historical traumas).\(^{159}\) Instead, the trouble lies with the extent of memory, and how it encourages a particular attitude toward history.

There are two basic attitudes to be distinguished, which Nietzsche, not at his most creative, designates simply as “historical” and “supra-historical.” Historical types, on his account, exemplify a healthy way of living with history. Though deeply interested in history, they are not interested for its own sake, but rather use history to inform their present and impel them to move toward the future. In this selective interest, they actually think and behave unhistorically—that is, with a modicum of forgetfulness.\(^{160}\) The supra-historical attitude is where trouble begins. It is marked by pretensions to a God’s-eye view of time, made possible through a saturation of historical study that embraces the widest possible sweep of events. As a result, it makes the

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\(^{159}\) I am admittedly being anachronistic by mentioning “trauma” as a category here. The point is just that Nietzsche seems unconcerned with whether our memories are experienced as good or bad.

\(^{160}\) Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 64–65. Discussions of this essay often concentrate upon his threefold typology of historical study—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—but this distinction among attitudes comes before them, both in sequence and logical priority. The historical attitude thus seems like a broad container for the more famous typology, given that they are variation on unhistorical relationships to history, relationships that attempt to use history in service to the present.
present seem like a feeble, predictable extension of the past we have already known. With this comes a weariness with time, since the present arrives, as it were, already past.161

Such an attitude does not just encourage retrospect. It also arouses a kind of anticipation that Nietzsche likens to a practice of memento mori.162 From that God’s-eye view, you imagine your future end to come, and fund that imagination with analogies between yourself and others in the past who have already met their end. Indeed, Nietzsche suspects that the supra-historical attitude retains a residue of Christian views of Last Judgment. It should be noted, however, that original practices of memento mori did not aim to cultivate the weariness that worries Nietzsche.
Traditionally, they aimed to encourage virtues like humility (since pride may come from regarding oneself as less mortal than others) and courage (since contemplation of death may, with practice, release one from its fear), as well as a sense of urgency toward living rightly (since, in Christian paradigms, one would soon face divine judgment) and overall equanimity toward short-term fate. But whatever effects memento mori may have had—or aspired to have—in previous ages, he argues that it is different for people now. If we regard ourselves as being ever in our last hours, we might not engage in new planting and free aspiration, the sorts of things that constitute, for him, a vital existence.163

What changed between then and now? We might be tempted to chime, “the death of God,” but that would just be a placeholder where a fuller explanation should go. The

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161 Ibid., 66–67. I should note that toward the end of the essay (on page 121 of this edition), in summation, he seems to slip into a different use of “suprahistorical.” There, he treats this attitude as a salubrious move toward the stable and eternal in art and religion, away from becoming, and this too is an enemy of Wissenschaft. It might be that Nietzsche has a hard time making up his mind in this essay, but will come out against it later in his work more explicitly. From where he stands at the time of this essay, both attitudes promise a kind of attention to presence, mental habits that creatures like ourselves need in order to attain what is right in front of us.

162 Ibid., 102.

163 Ibid., 101
explanation Nietzsche offers is subtle: through overweening interest in historical science, knowledge about faith—historical-critical study of scriptures, say—could begin to stand in for faith itself. Indeed, he suspects that this actually happened among historicism’s most enthusiastic adopters in liberal Protestantism.\footnote{Ibid., 97; Santayana makes a similar point in \textit{Interpretations of Poetry and Religion}, vi.} He does not speak here in terms of God’s death, but it seems plausible to consider this transformation of faith as one plunge of the murderers’ knives. As with his take on \textit{memento mori}, Nietzsche is being a bit heavy-handed. Some historicist theologians were well aware of this problem and attempted to integrate their scholarly projects into a constructive account of faith.\footnote{Relevant examples would include Adolf von Harnack’s \textit{What Is Christianity}? (though in German, it is titled \textit{Das Wesen des Christentums}, the exact wording of Feuerbach’s critical work) and Ernst Troeltsch’s response in “What does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?”} Yet Nietzsche often speaks in such generalities to make a sizeable point, and he does have a point about the basic tension here. When historical study contributes to a supra-historical attitude, without any supplement of faith in anticipation, one may well encounter the chilly frisson of imagined ends without the corresponding balm of redemption on its other side.

For an example of someone who embodies the supra-historical attitude, Nietzsche points not to an historian or would-be theologian, but instead a poet, the Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi.\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{Untimely Meditations}, 66.} With a brief sample his work, you can get a better idea of what Nietzsche has in mind. Consider these lines from “A se stesso” (“To Himself”):

\begin{quote}
Now you will rest, tired heart, forever. Finished Is your last fantasy, which I felt sure Would endure forever. I know in my bones That hope and even desire are cold For any further fond illusions. [...] Now rest in peace. Despair For the last time. Fate gave our kind No gift but death. [...] \end{quote}
(Or poserai per sempre,
Stanco mio cor. Perì l’inganno estremo,
Ch’eterno io mi credei. Perì. Ben sento,
In noi di cari inganni,
Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.
[...]
T’acqueta omai. Dispera
L’ultima volta. Al gener nostro il fato
Non donò che il morire. [...]167

We can indeed observe a certain weariness here, even a drift toward the grave. Illusion having dissipated like so much mist, all that remains for the speaker is to quiet a fluttering heart, wind down hope and desire, and rest in peace. Although we find no mention of history per se in this poem, the basic attitude comports with what Nietzsche has described. The speaker’s last illusion may well have passed for feeling that he had already read his own story.

This example from Leopardi helps to illustrate the deeper stakes in our attitude toward history. Later in “Uses and Disadvantages,” Nietzsche claims that a surfeit of the historical sense uproots our future because it destroys illusions and robs things of the atmosphere they need to live. If a poet stands out to him as a prime example, it may be due to a special sort of horror. Illusion, as Nietzsche tries to make clear in another early work, The Birth of Tragedy, is the warp and woof of art.168 The artist creates illusions that shape and shape again our very sense of the world we inhabit—making art a point of origin for what we know as “truth.” An artist adopting the supra-historical attitude would, in so doing, be at odds with the substance of their art. Worse, their virtuosity may help to prettify the life-suck of disillusionment, and recruit undiscerning

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readers into its ranks. Worse still, the example of Leopardi could suggest that the illusions we need to live are quite vulnerable; if a great artist can slip into the attitude, anyone can.169

What exactly Nietzsche means by “illusion” becomes clearer when he augments the term to “pious illusion,” piety here implying love and unconditional faith in something’s right and perfection.170 Such illusion, we might say, limits our perspective to the goodness we can find in someone or something. A supra-historical attitude, by contrast, would vitiate our ability to act with vigor by (1) encouraging a long-view that (2) introduces evaluative qualifications, through which nothing is particularly special, and thereby (3) vitiates our engagement with the present. Put more simply, this attitude stews in the various possibilities someone in your position could undertake, along with the various reasons for not committing to them—informed by a surfeit of historical examples. Weighing positives and negatives is of course integral to wisdom in many cases. Marching along blithely through life, self-assured, may contribute to a certain vitality but it could also be destructive, for ourselves and others. Nonetheless, some kinds of action may require pious illusion to be carried out fully.

For example, when an artist goes to create something, familiarity with art history may enrich their vocabulary and aid in avoiding cliché, but it ultimately cannot bring the work about. To create something, you must commit yourself to this perspective rather than that, this form rather than that. Creation requires concentration, attention, and (most importantly here) self-limitation, cutting yourself off from myriad options in order to pursue one. Further, you must bracket what you know about the work of others—along with any worries about ever living up to

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169 Then again, in this connection it would be useful to distinguish between the production and audience sides of art: the attitude required to produce a great work is not necessarily tantamount to the attitude that the work instills in those who perceive it.

170 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 95.
their greatness—and focus on your own.\footnote{One of the most helpful studies of this remains Harold Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry}, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).} Part of that focus, quite simply, is to believe in the work, to believe it worthwhile. There will be time afterwards, once it is drafted, for judgment of every flaw. But in the moment of creation, a scrutinizing eye will strangle any tender idea before it peeks onto the scene. We must bracket our self-scrutiny so as to choose wholeheartedly.

Illusion, on Nietzsche’s account, thus stands for complete investment in the play of life, funded by the choice to limit ourselves to a certain perspective. It is illusion in the sense of \textit{il-ludere}, the ludic.\footnote{For a similar sense applied to “illusion” see Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{Pascalian Meditations} (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 206–23 on what he calls "illusio."} Notice how different this account is from Freud’s; they could seem to be talking about different things altogether. But not quite. Nietzsche would agree with Stevens’s worry that an ethic of reality-acceptance could dissipate every kind of illusion, not just the pernicious variety. And such disillusion would itself be an illusion, as Stevens suggests, because the supra-historical attitude requires its own imaginative construal of reality, an angle on the world that is thoroughlygoingly constructed. It requires a counterfactual imagination of what it would be like to consider reality in its entirety, were we more perfect observers than we in fact are.\footnote{See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, \textit{Objectivity} (New York: Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 2007).} Yet such illusion could rightly be called “the last illusion,” rather than a “pious illusion,” because it pulls us away from, rather than investing us more deeply in, the life we are living.

This approach to illusion is connected explicitly to consolation in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}. With language that tracks his account of the supra-historical attitude, Nietzsche’s critical preface of 1886 worries that some people search for repose due to weariness with life, a desire for non-existence. The culmination of this, he suggests, would be a search for metaphysical
consolation. Context suggests that by this he means a consolation rooted in otherworldliness, whether in religious notions of afterlife or simply an escape from this world through death. For he contrasts the metaphysical variety to what he calls an art of “this-worldly consolation,” a consolation born of laughter and levity, not gravity. This consolation allows for a playful immersion in life when tempted by thoughts of withdrawal. Nietzsche thus seems to treat this-worldly consolation and pious illusion as interlocking concepts, constituents of an attitude that stands in opposition to renunciant approaches to reality.

Key moments in the book suggest that such consolation relies on pious illusion, and that such illusion would be cultivated through works of poetic art. But realizing this requires interpretive care. Nietzsche, never one to scruple over consistency, also characterizes as metaphysical consolation the satisfaction that comes to us in tragedy, explaining that through tragedy we see life as indescribably joyful beneath the ravaging flux. The sense of “metaphysical” here differs from the critical preface. To understand the shift, it helps to know that he elsewhere designates art—rather than philosophy—as our properly metaphysical activity.

Metaphysical, in this case, need not imply an attempted escape from this world, but instead, a building-out of the world beyond the configuration in which we find it. Through an art like tragedy, we receive intimations of a world beyond the merely given, a sense of things being possibly otherwise. Indeed, what seems to allow the laughter he commends is a perspective

174 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, §7, 11.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., §7, 39.
177 This may be due in part to the time lag between the two documents: Nietzsche may have been relying more on his memory of the work than a recent rereading.
178 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, §5, 7. As Leo Bersani notes, taking Nietzsche's claims about art as metaphysical activity seriously means that "art is not symbolic or illustrative of metaphysical reality, rather it constitutes that reality.
through which we assume that our end may not be an end full stop, but rather an entrée into a more profound order of being.  

Nietzsche tells a story in this book parallel to that of “Uses and Abuses” on the troubled fortunes of such consolation. As he tells it here, the trouble is that Socratic truth-seeking gradually overtook the mythological frameworks of tragedy. While Nietzsche really does seem to worry about Socrates’ approach to truth, we can also see this assessment of ancient culture as a retrojection of his worries about modern Wissenschaft and its own distinct pursuit of truth at the expense, in Nietzsche’s estimation, of our every other vital interest. What worries Nietzsche is not that consolation became impossible after this event. (In this he differs from those surveyed in the first chapter.) What worries him is that people do still seek consolation, but that without sustaining illusions, we have no recourse but to the resigned peace-seeking of a Leopardi. Part of what tragedy offered, before its dissolution into Socratic pursuits of wisdom, was an ability to refer all their experiences to some mythological framework. No experience lacked a larger story. And those stories seemed to emerge from immemorial antiquity. This made people’s experiences of the present, in effect, timeless.

Nietzsche’s account of illusion and consolation in *The Birth of Tragedy* thus points to another crucial difference from Freudian critiques, which we might have begun to discern in

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180 Ibid, §§11–12, 54–64. He actually pins the death of tragedy on Euripides, but he claims that Euripides was just a mask for Socrates. I will not pursue a possible connection between the death of Phoebus noted by Stevens and the fact that Nietzsche designates the typical Apollonian art as sculpture—which may be relevant for understanding the destruction of Jove’s statue, as well as the constant references to music that we find in the poem. While a fruitful site of future comparison, it would take us too far afield.

“Uses and Abuses.” If we gloss mythology as a persistent form of illusion, generated through immersive art, Nietzsche seems to suggest that illusion has a temporal structure. Or rather, a time-denying structure. It wraps us in this present, with perhaps a little history, but by no means of expansive scope. More common approaches to illusion, by contrast, treat it as an impatient projection. One pulls oneself out of present sorrows by anticipating some future reward or nullification of everything around oneself—a palliation by distraction from the sharper edges of this present. That sort of illusion worries Nietzsche, too. But critique cannot stop at mere negation, lest it fall into a formally similar disconsolation. It should also point the way toward, as he suggests in one of his prefatory rhymes to The Merry Science, a “Consolation for Beginners.”

How to proceed? Could we beginners look to Nietzsche for guidance on consolation after disillusionment, after unchaining ourselves from our sun, after feeling a tug toward a supra-historical attitude? I believe we can, although the most fruitful guidance hardly announces itself as such. It comes in a later text, amid a discussion of an ostensibly unrelated topic: promising.

This discussion occurs in the second essay of Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals, on the heels of exploring ways in which people have, over time, altered the meanings of central moral terms like “good,” “bad,” and “evil.” This essay takes the exploration of words and morals in a different direction, starting with the proposal that nature’s self-appointed task toward human beings is “to breed an animal with the right to make promises,” to give their word. What gives someone this right, Nietzsche thinks, is to possess the self-mastery required to keep promises. And that is not easy. Much like his argument in “Uses and Disadvantages,” Nietzsche claims that we require a

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great deal of forgetfulness just to go about our lives. Forgetting performs a kind of mental
housekeeping, sifting out all but the most important things and thereby giving higher-order
functions room to operate, as well as letting us enjoy a modicum of happiness in the present.
Accordingly, our ability to forget—perhaps also to repress—is quite strong and requires little
deliberate cultivation. What requires deliberate cultivation is memory. Promising offers a
predictive guarantee about one’s own future, and for that, it is necessary to become as calculable
and regular as the turning of the earth. Nietzsche observes that some people, despite a baseline
resistance to it, have indeed cultivated an exquisite ability to remember—a memory that is due
not to the stickiness of phenomena in our minds, but a willful holding-on.

The rest of the essay tells a winding story about how we managed to become such
calculable creatures, and much of its interest—especially for scholars of religion—admittedly lies
there. But these remarks on promising are more than just a throwaway introduction. If we
imagine the basic phenomenology of a sovereign individual and their practice of promise-
making, fruitful contrasts emerge with the relationship to time, illusion, self-knowledge, and
consolation described in the earlier essays.

The first thing worth noticing is the sovereign individual’s orientation to the future. In all
likelihood, it would be quite limited. As someone with a right to make promises, they would
concern themselves a great deal with understanding how much of their future they could actually
shape. And with any reflection, they would see that it is not much. Innumerable circumstances,
both foreseeable and unforeseeable, can impede fulfillment of any promise. Nietzsche’s

184 Ibid., 57–58.

185 The story considers debtor-creditor relations fraught with the cruelest corporal punishment, relations to ancestors
who through indebted memory turn into gods, and the development of bad conscience through turning our impulses
to cruelty against ourselves when living in complex societies.
sometimes bumptious tone notwithstanding, nothing in the account suggests that the sovereign individual is akin to a Marvel superhero; they exercise sovereignty over themselves and themselves alone, superlative only in their strength of will and insight into their future capabilities. Given their concern with possibilities for shaping their future, it would not be stretched to suppose that the sovereign individual would concern themselves only with those limited possibilities, the future that falls within their scope of action. They may in fact care about a wider scope of the future—how it might shape up for others to whom one has made no promises, how it might shape up for others many years from now. But the future within one’s scope of action can itself be so unpredictable that concern with promise-keeping may, in practice, leave room for little else.

As part of that futural orientation and the insight into one’s limited scope of action, every promise from the sovereign individual may come with a codicil, whether tacit or explicit:

“…unless I am prevented by circumstances I cannot now foresee.” The bar on this codicil, we could imagine, would be high. Unforeseen circumstances would not include something merely preferable that comes up in conflict with a promise. For example, if you had promised to pick up a friend from the airport, it would not do to leave them waiting in the concourse just because you learned, moments before, that your favorite band would be playing a surprise concert at the same time. If you had promised to meet your friend for a casual drink after work, perhaps rescheduling in favor of the concert would not break your promise so much as defer its fulfillment, but even there, we would need to know more about the circumstances before being able to assess the promise’s fungibility.186 The circumstances implied in the codicil would be more like

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186 Extra details of the case would be needed for fuller evaluation, such as the purpose of your meeting. If it was just for catching up on gossip, that may be fine. But if your friend needed urgent counsel, rescheduling for the concert would seem dubious. There are also tiers of promises. In everyday speech, the notion of a promise has a slightly
impediments that frustrate our will. One type of circumstance would be the conflict of one promise with another, each having been made with incomplete knowledge of how your commitments would align with future events, such that you cannot fulfill both. Another type would derive from our physical limitations. Perhaps on the way to picking up your friend from the airport, a car collides with yours. Unless something about your driving was grossly negligent, most people, I assume, would not judge your failure to pick up your friend as a broken promise. And yet from the standpoint of the sovereign individual, the basic profile would be the same: you made a promise that you did not keep.

Why would such an outcome concern the sovereign individual enough to append a tacit codicil on promises? You would not have kept your promise because you could not have, so there would be no moral blame. But the ethical stakes of keeping a promise may run deeper than ordinary determinations of blameworthiness. To see how, reflect for a moment on a special kind of promise—namely, a promise made to someone who cannot comprehend it, such as an infant or a deceased beloved. Ordinary evaluations of broken promises, such as the airport example, often include the disappointment they induce in people as an important part of their badness. You should not leave your friend in the concourse because it would let them down. But if you consider breaking a promise to an infant or a dead person to be bad, it cannot be for that reason. Your infidelity would fail to register with them. Its badness may be due in large part to the disappointment you would induce in yourself. For someone who cares about keeping their

more portentous ring, as opposed to, say, the coordination of schedules. But the formal features are sufficiently close to class both gestures in the same account.

187 I am simply assuming here that the dead are not witnesses to our promises and have no postmortem agency. This is to keep with the paradigm of my interlocutors here, who assume that there is no literal afterlife. Literary examples of course abound with such promises and their effects on us as we try to keep them. Stay tuned for the next chapter, where I try to develop this idea further.
promises, who makes this part of their life project, any infidelity erodes the sense of character they have developed through the practice. They become less integral, less recognizable to themselves. Something similar may happen in circumstances like the car accident, where, despite disappointing someone, there would be no moral blame. That lack of blame would not mitigate the erosion, however slight, of your self-concept as a person who keeps promises. But having added a tacit codicil to the promise might. It would build the possibility of hindering circumstances into the structure of the promise, such that hindered fulfillment, while frustrating, would have integrity with a future you envisioned for yourself.

All this is to say that the sovereign individual’s orientation to the future would be very serious and thorough. With that orientation extended far enough, the sovereign individual might actually turn out to be among the most rigorous contemplators of their own mortality. For mortality belongs among the circumstances beyond one’s control, at the farthest stretch of physical limitation. Because we know, on some level, that mortality places a potential constraint on every promise’s reliability, the sovereign individual would work from this as a guiding background in the evaluation of every promise. At minimum, it would bolster the commonsense modesty we exhibit in the temporal duration of promises. Knowing we are but dust, we generally do not make promises beyond our expected lifespan. Imagine the puzzled—and concerned—looks you would get in response to a promise about what you will do 200 years hence.\(^{188}\) Not that the sovereign individual would be a paragon of *memento mori*, however. The focus of their contemplation would be the promises through which they invest themselves in life, with mortality as simply a background condition. And yet awareness of this condition would be sharp enough to

\(^{188}\) Then again, a last will and testament can function in some way like this. The dead have a kind of posthumous agency through their agents, who themselves keep their promises to the dead person by doing so.
deliver many of *memento mori*’s benefits—most notably, for this study, resistance to pernicious forms of death denial, perhaps alongside more traditional virtues like humility and courage—while also avoiding its modern excesses in the depersonalizing expanse of deep historical time. In short, the sovereign individual’s practice of promising seems to create the very kind of perspectival horizon that Nietzsche calls for in “Uses and Abuses.”

A second aspect in the phenomenology of the sovereign individual worth noting is that their practice of promising would place a stamp of human authorship upon reality. When we hitch our expected future to a web of promises, it comes to seem like our own project. This has a couple of important implications, perhaps the most important being its effect on one’s basic relationship to reality. In describing the supra-historical attitude, Nietzsche worries that it cultivates the feeling of being a distant onlooker, before whom everything passes as a kind of brute happening, through causal chains that do not involve us. And whatever happens there has already happened before, in patterns made all too predictable through a surfeit of historical awareness. For the sovereign individual, by contrast, the universe would be far more personal. It may be just as hard and averse to our interests, but through making and keeping promises, we would be conscious of partly giving the world we inhabit its particular shape. We would not just await the future, but actively create it.

Another important implication is that one could approach the future with an over-determination of perspective akin to artistic illusion. Above, I noted that a problem with the supra-historical attitude is how it hinders our ability to commit to any particular course because of how it diminishes faith in something’s “right and perfection.” In effect, that diminished faith floods us with a plurality of possible options, compounding the paralysis induced by gazing upon history as a distant onlooker. A stamp of human authorship on reality could potentially contribute to that flood, but conducting one’s life through a practice of making and keeping
promises radically constrains the flow, as it were. You approach the world not by attempting to seize every possible option, but by making good on the very few to which you have committed yourself. Appreciating this nuance can cast new light on Stevens’s description of the consolation that followed the destruction of Jove’s statue. While he could seem to suggest that the consolation is rooted in the very sense of nameless possibility that follows the destruction, it may rather be rooted in what that possibility affords—namely, to contribute to the particular shape of one’s future and not just be governed by the contours of a dead relic.

The sovereign individual’s promise is akin to artistic illusion in another way, too. Like creating a work of art, promising introduces something into the world that was not there before: a particular tie between people and their shared future, perhaps also a tie with oneself over time. Among art forms, this similarity would be strongest with poetry. The novel thing introduced into the world through a poem is very often a metaphorical tie between things, established, like promising, through linguistic performance. The common English-language idiom for promising expresses this well: to promise is “to give your word.” The word is given as a down payment on the deed, a temporary substitute which earns the right to substitute because, according to convention, it will determine your future action. In fact, word-giving, like poetry in prior eras, may have a magical symbolism that supports the idea of substitution. When someone shows themselves to be reliable and predictable in doing what they have promised (barring circumstances beyond their control), you may consider the thing they have promised to be as good as done, in anticipation of future action.

I index this claim to our everyday life in the modern west. It’s possible to imagine silent gestures in ritual that themselves bind us to a future course in the manner of a promise. My concern is not to claim a purely linguistic basis for promising. On certain accounts of poetry, it could be possible to consider how it too bears these gestural marks.
Poetic words are not so directly attached to practical effects as the given word in promising. But in each case, they participate in a more performative register of language than everyday denotation. The promise does more than predict; it sends you forth (pro-misso) toward the future, and creates a bind that guides you toward the promised deed. This also chimes with Stevens’s conception of poetry, in which words not only discover and represent the real world, but actually build out the real through a grammar of “as.” In both cases, poetry and promising, these words do not just receive and respond to the world. They are vanguards of what it will become.

Put differently, these words cannot just accept reality, for their chief work is to augment reality. They enter the world as a further set of facts. But the most important augmentation would be more than just their mere entry; it would be the enriched relationship to reality that such words afford. My choice of “augment” here—rather than, say, “alter”—is very deliberate. For no magic word can change the basic fact of our mortality. It will ever loom and confront. The sovereign individual’s relationship to this given order would, most basically, involve respect and appreciation, inasmuch as it stands as a surefire limit upon their will. But a paradigm of promise may further constitute that relationship as one of great resistance. For being intent on keeping their promises, they would exercise vigilance to ensure that circumstances do not impede their effort. The world would be organized around human will, not just for the sake of bare willing, but for the sake of fidelity.190 Indeed, given facts could come to seem pregnant with possibility, as so much raw material that you may seize upon in the effort to remain true to your

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190 This claim could use much more specification, because if carried to extremes, it could lead to potentially objectionable results. Much ecological thought, for instance, seeks to check the expansiveness of human will and encourage a respect for the unwilled, the configurations that we simply encounter in the world. But there is, alas, no space to specify my claim sufficiently, for it would carry us too far afield. For our purposes here, we might view the paradigm of human authorship to be, at bottom, a heuristic to help someone recover from the position of a passive onlooker to their fate amid a world indifferent or even hostile to their projects.
As Nietzsche himself concludes, this person may be mistaken for being engaged in a flight from reality. In actuality, however, they would be immersing themselves into reality.

Never does Nietzsche suggest that a practice of promising robust enough to replace lost illusions has fully come onto the scene. He seems constantly to long for a figure who can make good on the things he has glimpsed, one who will arrive “heavier with the future.” In his own anticipation, he may have looked for someone who could more thoroughly unite the mundane practice of promising with artistic creation, and thus more fully pave the way for a consoling relationship to sharp-toothed reality. An aging insurance executive in Connecticut may not have been the Zarathustra he envisioned. But as we have already seen, Stevens carries forward this strand of the critical tradition that, even as it points out the failures of illusion, seeks to replace failed illusions with better ones—in service to a more life-sustaining consolation. Our first foray into “Ordinary Evening” showed some of the broad contours of this attempt. Now, with a fuller appreciation of the stakes in illusion, let us return to the poem and consider more deeply how it develops themes of promise, habitation in reality, and a negotiation of inevitable ends.

4.

Something incomplete in the previous analysis of promising is the account of how that paradigm could affect our relationship with reality, especially with brute facts that constrain our projects. In my extrapolation from Nietzsche, I proposed that a paradigm of promise could augment reality

191 Nietzsche is famous for his suspicion of “truth” as a category. Indeed, he suspects that it contributes to a certain weariness of spirit. Such weariness might be due, in part, to thinking of truth as “agreement with reality,” and reality as just an impersonal set of given facts. But this paradigm of promise suggests an alternative model of truth that he does not quite voice explicitly. It would be truth in the sense of fidelity, “being true-to” one’s word, true to one’s relationships. Truth in the sense of assumed duty.

192 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, 96.

193 Ibid.
by contributing a further set of facts and inspiring resistance to anything that may impede us from being true to our word. But as we inhabit that paradigm and view reality as being composed, in large part, of a fine texture of promises, a spirit of antagonism may give way to one of cooperation—especially as the paradigm of promising gets taken up into the metaphorical possibilities of poetry.

We can find hints of such transformation as we read more deeply into “Ordinary Evening,” in a canto that fills out the picture of lunar light, the sort of light that, as we saw before, sets up the notion of consolation:

X.
[...] We do not know what is real and what is not. We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man

Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died. We are not men of bronze and we are not dead. His spirit is imprisoned in constant change.

But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
In a permanence composed of impermanence,
In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
This tendance and venerable holding-in
Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

Celestial bodies, taking their regular course, are likened here to promises kept. No longer impersonal happenings, their movements discharge a duty established in relationship to us. It is as though the sun goes down and says, “I will rise again;” the moon bathes the city in a cool evening light and says, “Didn’t I tell you that you would find repose under me?” Each day, each night, a resurrection foretold. Reality itself exhibits faithfulness.
This of course exceeds the bare facts. One of Stevens’s rigid realists might say that promises mean little when outcomes are inevitable—never mind the fact that these bodies, as inert matter, have no agency. But the poem has no pretense to simple denotation: these are like promises kept. And this faithfulness stands “as against the lunar light.” Such against-ness establishes a contrastive relation to the mere givenness of things, acknowledging that the likeness to promises kept stands in clear-eyed tension with that order. And yet the speaker’s awareness of the contrast does not impede a full-throated habitation of reality considered in such terms. The first line I sampled here, which casts uncertainty over our knowledge of what is real and what is not, allows this tension to be something more than a hard either-or, in which we must choose between likenesses and given order. Not making up one’s mind between them, the canto suggests, can be salubrious. What ails the man of bronze is having attempted such resolution, amid a world of constant change that bucks it at every turn. (Note, too, that bronze is one of the classic media for statuary. This figure could foreshadow the statue of Jove that needed destruction.) Giving ourselves over to a tentative way of seeing-as can make an otherwise deadly, uninhabitable realm seem hospitable. The quality of this relationship stands out in the enjambed line: “But ours is not imprisoned. It resides / […].” Evidence could support either imprisonment or residing. Learning to see under the paradigm of promise offers a path for the latter.

The punchiness of the end-stopped lines give an emphatic quality to the declaration that we are not dead. They ring of protest. The speaker seems tacitly to acknowledge the weight of evening’s typical associations with death by actively denying their relevance for the “we,” who are neither of bronze nor dead. And that may be apt for a setting that alludes to anticipated

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endings. Indeed, notice how the speaker attributes the man of bronze’s death to mental fixity, as though the death itself were, in some sense, mental. Perhaps he died by the act of counting himself dead, in advance of the actual event. In a world of constant change, that would be the only fixity.

To reside in “a permanence composed of impermanence” could seem similar to a desired fixity, but the emphasis matters. This permanence would not be a finality so much as a sense of being at home in the process of ongoing change—residing instead of being imprisoned. On the level of attitude, this could seem like the kind of reality-acceptance promoted by Freud, since it could involve giving oneself over to the flux. But as I noted in the first chapter, construing reality in terms of difficult facts comports with a focus on ends full stop, and the speaker explicitly resists this conception of reality. Two cantos after what I identified as a sketch of Freud’s resistance to consolation, the speaker develops the intervention further:

VI.
Reality is the beginning not the end,
Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,
Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals.

It is the infant A standing on infant legs,
Not twisted, stooping, polymathic Z,
He that kneels always on the edge of space

In the pallid perceptions of its distances.
[...]

[...] both alike appoint themselves the choice
Custodians of the glory of the scene,
The immaculate interpreters of life.

But that’s the difference: in the end and the way
To the end. Alpha continues to begin.
Omega is refreshed at every end.

The speaker suggests, in pointing to infant A and polymathic Z, each as claimants to being “immaculate interpreters of life,” that the given is never simply given. Approaching reality
requires interpretation, and interpretation requires selectivity, a deliberate constraint on imagination. We find here two possible paths of selectivity that stand in opposition to each other, reality as the beginning or as the end. The canto’s emphasis on reality as the beginning may best cohere with the view that approaching reality requires interpretation. For interpretations are rarely final, rarely just received as a complete, final package. And so it may be with reality as such.

Beyond coherence with the claim that approaching reality requires interpretation, what reason do we have to prefer one emphasis to the other, the beginning to the end? The speaker could have pointed out how new beginnings suffuse everyday life, springing up riotously when least suspected, and how endings themselves can issue into these beginnings. But such reasons do not appear in the canto, at least not explicitly. There may be wisdom in that. For knock-down arguments as to whether reality is the beginning or the end may be hard to come by. In light of the previous canto I considered, the most compelling consideration might just be how our patterns of seeing-as conduce to—or hinder—flourishing in the shadow of anticipated ends. Does it promote fixity and, with it, a kind of mental death? Or does it spur toward ever more life in the time that remains? Furthermore, we might consider how selective these approaches must be. How much of reality can they accommodate? The chief difference that the speaker announces—the end and the way to the end—suggests a capaciousness in reality as beginning. As though gazing out at that which will come, it acknowledges the end while insisting on all the beginnings that line the path toward it. With reality as the end, finality is all we get.

This interpretive emphasis could be read as an extension of Nietzsche’s pious illusion and the paradigm of promise. Seeing reality as beginning would train our vision on present events, rather than some expanse of time that undoes our aspirations. Insofar as our vision extends into the future, it would be a future that unfolds from the potential we seize upon now, rather than
one that is already established for us. Reality would be incessantly composed and recomposed through the entry of new facts that shape its particular path.

Notice that the elusive word “space” occurs again here, in the portrait of polymathic Z who “kneels always on the edge of space / In the pallid perceptions of its distances.” In the second section, I noted that it appears but four times in this poem, three of them immediately in relation to the phrase “consolations of space.” We were able to get some interpretive purchase on the phrase, but combining what I found previously with this stray appearance can add another layer of understanding, helping us to understand how “the consolations of space” extend beyond the destruction of Jove’s statue into more generalized anticipations of death.

The different moments of the word’s appearance each contribute to the others’ interpretation. For this passage, the instances considered previously suggest that polymathic Z would be one and the same with the rigid realist who fights against illusion. If “space” is a shorthand for evening light, it would make sense for this person, always emphasizing the end, to find themselves on the edge of it. And if “space” is a shorthand for consolation, we can see how a person focused entirely on endings might approach but never quite find their way to the center. Harping on about endings and how we ought to adopt an attitude of acceptance toward them, he would edge toward a kind of repose that may, in the end, prove deleterious. The posture of kneeling could signify utter exhaustion (perhaps also a reverential genuflection that one just cannot arise from). For the consolation passage itself, this new instance of “space” reinforces the sense of inchoate possibility—the prolonged adventure with forms of farewell, the namelessness of ultimate things. Residing on the edge of space misses that possibility. And missing it, paradoxically, would be due to incomplete immersion in the dynamics of space. To put that more plainly: the one kneeling on the edge of space emphasizes the end, but once in space, the space of evening and death but also consolation, the end becomes a matter of less concern. From
within the space of evening, it is possible to emphasize the prolonged adventure, the ever-dilating way to the end. *You may actually achieve the most robust “acceptance” of death through refusing to accept it.*

Glancing up from that kneeling position, polymathic Z has a “pallid perception of [space’s] distances.” That pallor and whatever contributes to it—weariness, fright, or something of the sort—may be what inspires this emphasis on the end. When you recognize that an end is near (or near enough to imagine vividly), patience with the interim can be difficult. The difference between A and Z here might not be so much that one perceives something that the other cannot, but rather that one can bear to live in a space from which the other recoils.

It thus appears that Stevens goes beyond merely expressing concern over the Freud’s critiques of illusion: he also cleverly inverts them. We saw some indication of this already in the portrait of “disillusion as the last illusion,” and now, he suggests that an embracing attitude toward illusion, rather than a critical one, may actually be our best aid in living with difficult realities. Trying to dispense with illusions altogether would be far from an act of maturation or “education to reality.” Rather, it would be tantamount to cutting oneself off from a chief source of strength. Perceiving the distances of space—that is, understanding that we are on the way to our end—may befall each of us, sooner or later. But the way illusion structures our vision may determine whether the perception becomes pallid.

What sort of illusion would add color to the perception of distance? If we call to mind the guidance of Nietzsche from the previous section, we might look for something that does not attempt to cancel the perception altogether, but that does constrain it somewhat—much as evening light affords limited vision, even when looking out over an otherwise unobstructed expanse. We might look for something that focuses attention on the present scope of our action and that connects any distance with the entailments of a given word. We might look for
something like the mentality suggested in these lines, which come a few cantos after the consolation passage:

XXVIII.
If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,
The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

Misericordia, it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
Before and after one arrives or, say,

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
Or Paris in conversation at a café.

I said before that “space” only appears four times throughout this long poem, but that was misleading, since many moments conjure relationships that one could only consider spatial. Here in particular, these spatial relationships involve negotiating the perception of nearness and distance. The three tercets present a conditional statement about reality, and an illustration of that statement through a series of evocations of definite places, considered at some remove.

Let us consider the place evocations first. Most basically, each invites us to consider how we relate to places through imagination. The first example, which stands out particularly for being the eponymous place of the poem’s title, conjures a fragmentary narrative. “New Haven / Before and after one arrives,” suggests a visit to the town, but focuses on what we, mindful of the last instance of “space,” could consider the visit’s edges: the moments on either side of the visit, when you cannot see the city as it is, but only as you imagine it to be. Consider how this focus further specifies the poem’s approach to reality. An illusion-busting approach, rooted in a positivist notion of objectivity, might portray reality as something that would be as it is regardless of our perceiving it—acts indifferent to perspective, place that has no need of us. The fragmentary narrative seems at first to comport to that approach. But the subsequent examples
suggest that the emphasis actually falls on moments of distance, when our particular perspective and the contours of imagination have everything to do with our relationship to place. The postcard, a city after dark, in description, with shaded eyes—these are all situations in which the city “as it really is” eludes us, and if we approach them, we do so through little devices of our own making, seeing aslant.

New Haven before and after arrival may get into our minds through some such device, some imperfect description that nonetheless conjures a world. The same could perhaps be said of New Haven amid the visit itself.

Consider in this connection the outlier among these evocations, the remark about Paris in conversation at a café. In this case, the scene might actually be in the city. It is difficult to say for certain, since for all we know, the conversation might be in a café elsewhere, with one person recollecting the visit to another. But the inability to say for certain might just be the point. By being joined seamlessly to the other examples, the poem suggests that even in the midst of a place, we stand at a distance, only ever approaching, only seeing in part. You may be in the heart of Paris or New Haven, but insofar as you relate to the city as such, beyond the part you see immediately, you relate through devices of imagination like a postcard or a conversation in an iconic spot. Those devices can remind you of your limited ambit while also providing a sense of space vastly disproportionate to their own smallness. They function *telescopically*, in the fullest sense of the word. Compressed with concentric layers, they can extend out beyond the state in which we transport them and, thus extended, may compress great distances for our vision. That which was distant becomes, through the work of illusion, part of our proximate, habitable world.

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195 I prefer the first, given the well-known café scene in Paris and how merely mentioning it could conjure an image of the city.
At the same time, it occupies our habitable world as but one small part among others. Squinting through such a device, with the eye positioned just so, serves as a reminder that even if we are gazing upon our end, we live only ever on the way.

The speaker uses these place evocations to reinforce the conditional statement, which sidles up to the possibility that reality exists in the mind. Its inferential form is noteworthy. Like the evocations, it conjures a sense of distance from the place we might expect for it, more likely a philosophical argument than a poem. But within the latticework of that form, the speaker supplies a kind of evidence that comes obliquely, through suggestions that rely on readers’ own recognition. The examples cited in the second and third lines of the canto are tactile things that exist first and foremost in the world outside us, ostensibly reinforcing, contrary to the first part of the conditional, a contrast between reality “out there” and reality in the mind. And yet they hint at the possibility of coinherence. They are place settings and elements to consume, as though these outward things, with the right instruments, might become inward things. Indeed, a theologian might see in them a minor nod to the Eucharist. Consuming the elements makes them a part of oneself, and by placing the elements before us in our mind, we do, in a sense, consume them. They might even function with roughly the same structure of a sacrament, as an outward and visible sign of an inward reality.

The entailment of the conditional deepens this impression. When we read “two in one,” it would be easy to think of commercial packaging or a two-for-one deal. These approaches would be basically additive. They give something “once more,” much like Nietzsche occasionally speaks of art as a giving us reality “once more.” But this distinction, the recognition of two, might only be analytical, a concession to how people ordinarily speak. If reality exists in the mind, the merger would always already have happened, for as long as our minds have been structured as they are. And again, recognizing theological resonances may assist in understanding. The notion
of two-in-one, in the same vein as the Eucharist, conjures associations with the incarnation of the divine in human flesh. Here, we find it transposed into the incarnation of imagination into reality, two natures that seem utterly different but that hold together in one space, the space of consolation. After the death of gods and destroying what idols remain of their defunct cults, this holding-together would remain. And it may nourish us, if only we would receive it as nourishment indeed. Seeing real and unreal as two in one may allow us to navigate the distances of space, such as we find in these unapproachable cities. Through holding these examples in mind, we may gradually come see that pretensions to total vision, an apprehension of reality as it is and only as it is, “in the intricate evasions of as,” always falter, and see our resources of partiality as help in navigating the more difficult spaces of reality.

“New Haven before and after one arrives”: while the phrase would bracket the narrative of a trip, it could also bracket the narrative of a life. That town existed before you and, barring some cataclysm, it will continue after you. The thought can be uncomfortable. It might conjure associated images of a dark, still pool of water, in which you suddenly plunge, struggle for a moment, then go under. Moments later, the pool reverts to placidity, absent of any ripple to indicate you were there.

But if the poem does its work in correcting an all-too-naïve sense of the real, it may also prompt a slightly different take on this narrative. Evoking all those places seen in part or from a distance might instill a sense for “the reality of the unseen,” just as it does the coinherence of real and unreal. The poem slowly initiates readers into a sense of reality that always exceeds vision, and that changes ceaselessly even when gripped. That change is not just some alien phenomenon. It comes about precisely through our active participation in reality, our

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196 The phrase is the title of a chapter in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience.*
imaginative contributions, which themselves cannot remain static. Through this initiation, we too may place an emphasis on beginnings even amid our endings, prolongations of the way to the end that show themselves to be ceaselessly generative. And in that perspective, trust that when our lights go out, they do so in a way that comports with the many acts of beginning that we made before.

5.
Let us step back now and bundle the long threads of this chapter. Its central moves have been to consider how Freud and other critics of consolation trade upon one-dimensional understandings of illusion, and then to begin glimpsing a renewed account of consolation through more fully understanding illusion’s role in our lives. Before going any further, I should acknowledge a danger in this move. Stevens wrote for a time that, to his mind, threatened to hollow out people’s sense of reality, leaving them with external facts and little else. By contrast, public discourse in our “post-truth” moment seems incapable of even rising to fact, certainly not of distinguishing fact from factitiousness. To join voices with Stevens and promote a sense of reality that is constituted in part through illusion risks reinforcing a trend which, on any account of intellectual responsibility, we ought to resist.

But a renewed appreciation of illusion might just be untimely, in the Nietzschean sense. Such a move refuses to march in lockstep with the time, which can indeed make it seem tone-deaf or worse. Yet that disconnect, that contrarian spirit, serves a beneficent aim. A dominant approach to responsible intellectual resistance, especially on the editorial pages of prominent newspapers, has been to call for renewed appreciation of facts—with the tacit implication that

197 The German word translated as “untimely,” unzeitgemäß, conveys a strong sense of disjunctive relation.
fact equals the whole of truth. Welcome as that appreciation would be, given the current alternative, it could also drift toward that Freudian brand of realism, which, as Stevens tries to show, would just bring another set of troubles.  

A headline that emerges from this chapter is that illusion and consolation need not be understood as insulation from reality. They are actually about getting our story of reality correct. No account of reality would be complete without accounting for the imaginative frames through which we approach it, the ways in which our seeing is always, to some extent, seeing-as. Trying to live without illusions would be hard not because we lack maturity, but because we would be trying to rid ourselves of a core part of consciousness, of our very selves. Disillusion would not just be the last illusion. It would impose a kind of self-alienation. The alienation would never be complete, of course, if disillusion would be its own kind of illusion. Yet it can turn this reality from a place of residence into a place of imprisonment.

In attempting the fullest possible story of reality, Stevens and Nietzsche promote what I have called intermediate illusion. Its intermediacy lies, in the main, between is and as, between the givenness of a world that confronts us and the constructs through which we poetically augment it and establish our residence. As a poetic enterprise, such illusion is constantly open to revision, open to being reshaped in response to new facts about the world. Yet it also retains a salubrious kind of closure. The closure stems from this illusion’s refusal of an apocalyptic mode, which would focus upon unveiling reality and presenting it unadorned, as it “really” is.


199 Freud, as a scientist of subjectivity, could have avoided committing himself to this view. Jonathan Lear argues that psychoanalysis is not necessarily committed to the vision of reality Freud advances in his works. See Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 9–11. Even so, what entered into the critical ferment around consolation was indeed that vision of reality.
Intermediate illusion is instead *eucalyptic*. It embraces veils, because, far from preventing knowledge or anticipation of that which is to come, they can draw us into the embrace of a more capacious, life-affirming vision. Indeed, Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition of *The Cheerful Science* points to a kind of wisdom that lies in resisting the urge to pull off veils, knowing that it might not actually give you the thing as it truly is.\(^\text{200}\) The closure of eucalyptic thinking would not so much be an act of deliberate turning away, but rather an embrace of our irreducibly partial vision.

This eucalyptic mode informs a second aspect of intermediacy, the intermediacy of time. Freud and other critics are only partly correct when they complain of how illusion distracts us from our end, for intermediate illusion lacks no awareness of what awaits. Yet it does involve a deliberate shift of emphasis—from the end to the way to the end. Whereas an apocalyptic mode tends to focus on looming catastrophe and death, a eucalyptic mode attempts to inhabit fully the present time. Its wisdom is to recognize that our imagination can become engrossed with the prospect of things to come, that any present we inhabit must be hard won, and counters this drift with techniques of concentrating imagination on what lies within our proximate reach. The account of promising offered one such example. It ensures that whatever future we gaze upon is limited and bears a stamp of human authorship, thereby unworking any tendency to feel oneself thrown into a future that is simply given.

Writers like Freud and Kübler-Ross might complain that this still leaves open too much room for death denial, but the practical effects of intermediate illusion may actually be much the same as what they envision for acceptance. It would allow you to live with your mortality with a clear-eyed calm. In fact, intermediate illusion might be even more effective at achieving this.

Remember that another band of consolation’s modern critics reject acceptance in favor of something like rebellion in face of death, for the reason that acceptance risks sapping people of vitality before they actually die. They work from the insight that there is conceptual ambiguity in the very concept of “dying,” because until you are actually dead, you are living. And as long as you are living, they promote the fullest sense of vitality possible, which means eschewing acceptance. Intermediate illusion strives to have it both ways. It mediates between acceptance and rebellion, incorporating the helpful aspects of both while checking those that are potentially deleterious. In the case of rebellion, that could very well be a resistance to death that gets trapped in a spiral of “heroic” interventions and makes one’s final days a stretch of biomedically managed bare life, unrecognizable to oneself or one’s beloveds.

I proposed in the first section that we could reframe the discussion of consolation and consider how it might be a virtue of sorts, an attitudinal excellence that contributes to flourishing in face of death. Now with the concept of intermediacy, we have a way of filling out that proposal further. Aristotle famously described virtue as a mean between two extreme character states, either of which would be undesirable. The virtuous person, in his account, maintains a delicate balance between them through exercising practical judgment about what particular situations call for, acting in the right way at the right time. Intermediate illusion occupies the space between acceptance and rebellion, our end and our present, unveiling and occlusion—even as proponents of either side attempt to force a choice. Why this balance might help us to flourish in face of death will become clearer through the subsequent chapters, but for now we can observe that it prevents the imbalance—indeed, self-alienation—that a forced choice between these sides could bring about.

You probably noticed by now that while consolation, as articulated by Stevens and Nietzsche, stems from the contemplative exercise of poetic imagination, it has nothing to do with afterlife. In a way, they are simply unconcerned with it. Their focus lies on the present, our life on the way toward whatever end we face. Nietzsche—and possibly Stevens more tacitly—emphasizes forgetting as a crucial element of the consoling illusion we need, and that involves forgetting the future as much as the past. But the exclusion of afterlife may also be a deliberate choice. As I suggested before, “Ordinary Evening” suggests that the death of gods actually makes a certain consolation possible. At least in many Christian iterations, the afterlife awaited beyond death is a permanence, a stasis that heals the raving fury of time’s flux. Classic statements of this appear in Augustine among others, but we also see it in modern poetry like the Four Quartets of T. S. Eliot, which yearns for a “still point” in the turning world. Insofar as consolation involves a push for eternal stasis, it would be accurate to class Stevens and Nietzsche among its modern critics.

But they turn this image on its head. Stability no more provides consolation than its loss inflicts disconsolation. This may in fact be a more radical critique of the erstwhile consolation than Freud’s. A spirit of cold resignation to reality remains tied to the comfort it tries to avoid—makes one’s position defined merely as the negative, a denial in a more fundamental sense. The consolation Stevens and Nietzsche promote may as yet be nameless, may not have sufficient definition to be elevated into a program. Perhaps the best we could do would be to sketch out

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202 These lines from Confessions exemplify Augustine’s neo-Platonic push for permanence: “O my soul, wearied at last with emptiness, commit to Truth’s keeping whatever Truth has given you, and you shall not lose any; and what is decayed in you shall be made clean, and what is sick shall be made well, and what is transient shall be reshaped and made new and established in you in firmness…shall stand and abide you with them, before God who stands and abides forever.” Saint Augustine, Confessions, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. (Francis Joseph) Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), V.xi.16, 64; T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” in Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 15.
some broad possibilities of what it would be like—and this is exactly what I will do in the next two chapters. But it does stage the first overture in retrieving the very category of “consolation.” In their hands it passes through critique and enters a new stage of positive affirmation. The culmination of its critique is not despair but a newfound vitality, a spring of creativity. And this mirrors the way they envision the consolation. What they promote is not stasis but a permanence composed of impermanence, a willingness to make a home in the flux of things, to invest themselves wholeheartedly in the creation of whatever is to come.

The arts—and poetry in particular—have a special role in cultivating this consolation. As I read Stevens and Nietzsche, intermediate illusion is a contemplative practice that can attend everyday life, but its most salient example, where we receive guidance on the practice, would be in artistic illusion. One especially important aspect of artistic illusion that emerged from “Ordinary Evening” was the poem’s ability to function telescopically, to imply a larger, unseen world from fragments of the seen. This confers a sense of the reality of the unseen, perhaps also an ability to be at peace with partial vision instead of trying to draw everything into apocalyptic disclosure. Yet these writers are themselves partial in appreciating the potential of poetry’s telescopic function for consolation. Once we cultivate a sense for the reality of the unseen, we may begin to wonder whether the concept of afterlife itself, along with consolation, could be rehabilitated. For the unseen may well include our dead beloveds, who remain present to us through the persistence of memory. If artistic illusion consoles, or at least attempts to console, it may need to press beyond a focus on our present and consider as well the connections that make forgetting, whether of the past or the future, impossible. For fuller guidance on this, we will need to leave Stevens and Nietzsche behind and extend their basic insights in conversation with others.
Chapter Three: Love Eternal, While It Lasts

I wondered that other mortals should live when he was dead whom I had loved as if he would never die; and I marveled still more that he should be dead and I his other self living still…And it may be that I feared to die lest thereby he should die whom I had loved so deeply.203

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In the previous chapter I showed that Sigmund Freud’s call to renounce the consoling illusions of religion and undertake a painful “education to reality” worries Wallace Stevens not because he wishes to defend religion (to him God is quite dead) but because Freud’s approach seems like removing a withered dandelion from your garden with a backhoe, indiscriminately taking along valuable things rooted in the same soil.204 Consolation may indeed be cultivated through illusion, but we should not treat all illusions as suspect. Their split with reality is not so absolute as Freud and others suggest. For conscious beings like ourselves, reality is actually composed of illusions, at least in part, and they can serve our practical interests, not least in helping us to live with our mortality. If consolation through religion has become unavailable, we would do well to seek other, still viable sources of illusion, like poetry. In this Stevens shows a strong affinity with Nietzsche, who argued that illusion serves this practical interest by how it structures temporality within a bounded horizon, a limit which we require to flourish through vigorous participation in the present. Without some such horizon, we may be liable to tilt into what he calls a “suprahistorical” attitude—that is, an extensive and vivid anticipation which


makes the prospect of eventual death so palpable that we regard ourselves, in a sense, as dead already.\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Untimely Meditations} (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65–67. For similar versions of this point articulated for a medical context, see Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Living up to Death} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jeffrey Paul Bishop, \textit{The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying}, Notre Dame Studies in Medical Ethics (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).}

On this view, the trouble with Freud’s ethic of acceptance toward death—and by extension, its clinical adaptation in the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross—would be that it indirectly promotes such an attitude. Disillusioned acceptance may verge upon renunciation. For Freud this might not be a problem so much as an unfortunate outcome of a commitment to reality. But insofar as commitment to reality sits alongside a commitment to flourishing in the stretch up to anticipated ends, there is reason to consider how that ethic of acceptance may be qualified by the riposte of Stevens and Nietzsche.

To consider that, however, we must leave them behind. For they are so concerned with establishing the need for some kind of illusion that they neglect to specify what kind of illusion that would be. And without such specification, their riposte could imply that anyone who partakes of artistic illusion (perhaps especially artists themselves) should be insusceptible to a suprahistorical attitude—a dubious claim at best.\footnote{It is highly doubtful whether Stevens or Nietzsche would actually make this claim. Recall that Nietzsche’s chief example of the attitude is the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. Perhaps we could read them as advancing a normative conception of artistic illusion. Art can be corrupted by the spirit of the “realist,” in which case it would be but a husk of its former self. Their argument remains so crude because they are fending of the intrusion of that spirit into art; apologists can become so concerned with threats from the outside as to neglect doctrinal precision, etc.}

In fact, another of Freud’s wartime essays, “Transience,” reflects on how something like this very attitude showed itself in “a young, already famous poet,” who, along with “a taciturn friend,” accompanied him on a stroll through a florid countryside in the summer before the First World War. The poet could not enjoy the beauty of the scene, Freud says, because he was
afflicted by thoughts of its fate. To use terms I developed in the previous chapter, his anticipation involved a sort of *anticipatory retrospect*, projecting himself into the future and imagining what it would be like to look upon it as a completed event, already past, represented grammatically by the future perfect. By winter, the poet mused, all the beauty of the countryside will have vanished— as will have been the case, someday, for everything of beauty, every work of humankind.\(^{207}\) As a result, all that he “otherwise would have loved and admired” seemed to him stripped of value.\(^{208}\)

Freud too wants to remedy this attitude, because he imagines more serious implications than simply shelving one’s Audubon field guide and never again partaking of the fleeting delights of marigolds and gentians. He concludes the essay by noting that the war showed even ostensible fixtures of civilization to be quite transient, and if transience strips something of value, one might be tempted to give up on the project of civilization along with everything else fated to eventual destruction.\(^{209}\) This worry is in keeping with the spirit of his overall critique of consolation examined in the second chapter. Our attitude toward death matters not just for the pursuit of excellence in character, but also for how that attitude disposes us to conduct ourselves in wider society. Resisting the consolations of illusion, on his account, disposes one to support more concrete social projects to ameliorate the painful character of human life in whatever ways we can.\(^{210}\)

\(^{207}\) GW 10:358: “daß sie im Winter dahingeschwunden sein werde.”

\(^{208}\) Ibid. Emphasis mine.

\(^{209}\) GW 10:361.

\(^{210}\) In this he follows Marx’s critique of consolation.
In this chapter I consider how reconstructing the conversation between Freud and this poet on transience might suggest ways for us to fill in an account of illusion in the service of flourishing. A basic direction for this emerges through Freud’s initial attempt to correct the poet, which takes the form of an argument about the relation of transience and value. It is worth close consideration not for its exemplary logic but because it fails productively, in ways that Freud himself only half glimpses.

Before getting to the main argument, Freud offers prefatory remarks that recapitulate (or rather foreshadow) a fundamental idea for his critique of consolation. Among responses one might have toward transience, two are particularly well marked: despondency or rebellion against the facts. In the latter, considering it impossible that things of value could actually pass away, one would posit their eternity. That, to Freud, is so obviously born of wishful thinking that it does not even merit rebuttal. Great sadness is the only realistic response to transience, and for that reason, he commends the poet’s basic disposition. But there is a further distinction, only tacit here, between feeling sad about a situation and using one’s sadness as a basis for value judgments. While our affective responses to a situation may be relevant for its evaluation, they are far from the last word, and to Freud, the poet’s main problem lies in treating them as such. In attempting to help the poet to appreciate this distinction, Freud maintains the experience-far perspective that informs his critique of consolation, yet finds himself in a position much like a consoler anyway, trying to produce in the poet an appropriate way of inhabiting sadness.

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211 The Future of an Illusion was completed in 1927, whereas this essay was published in 1915.

212 GW 10:358, “Auflehnung gegen die behauptete Tatsächlichkeit.”

213 As I argued in the second chapter, Freud’s ethic of acceptance has strong affinities with ancient Stoic approaches to consolation, especially those of Seneca. On the use of a more third-personal or experience-far perspective in this approach, see especially Gareth D. Williams, The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca’s Natural Questions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
His response to the poet has two aspects, one positive and another negative.

The positive aspect claims that transience actually adds value to something. Using an economic metaphor, he calls transience “scarcity value in time.” If you only have a short time to enjoy something, the enjoyment becomes all the more precious.214 Freud’s diction here is sloppy, because to speak of transience adding value suggests that transience is some accessory feature that may or may not be appended to the things we value. But the poet’s issue is that transience is a constitutive feature of this world. A better formulation of Freud’s point may be that transience is a fundamental condition of value. While we might wish for the things we value to not to be transient, presumably so that we could enjoy them all the more, this would be mistaken. Were they not to be transient, they would be different sorts of things, whose value would also be quite different, if we valued them at all.215

The negative aspect is less ambitious, in that it merely tries to show that transience does not detract from something’s value. What it lacks in theoretical ambition, however, it supplements with expansiveness, answering the wide reach of anticipation that could afflict someone in the poet’s state. To speak of transience as a condition of value presupposes a world in which even as some valued things fade away, others take their place. Substitution may never be perfect, especially in the case of persons we love, but the prospect of ongoing generativity may help to dull the sting of loss.216 Even so, anticipation might extend toward a time at which the cycle will have stopped, when every living thing will have met an end (say, through an entropic

214 SE 14:305.


216 Although the possibility of substitution itself might be a cause for distress, insofar as it seems to challenge our intuitive sense of someone’s importance to us, and ours to them. See Dan Moller, “Love and Death,” The Journal of Philosophy 104, no. 6 (2007): 301.
heat death of the universe). If everyday transience is part of a larger process that culminates in such an end, this could affect how one receives the first aspect of the argument. In response to this, Freud claims that value is subjective, a meaningful concept only in relation to a valuer. This sounds much more controversial than Freud means it to be, I think. Rather than a claim about the nature of value, Freud seems to treat it as a simple claim about valuing. We could understand it by analogy to the stock Epicurean argument against fear of death: it makes no sense, because death is not something you experience. When you are, it is not; when it is, you are not. Likewise with valuing, you do it only while you live. After you are gone, the transience of things you once valued will not—cannot—be your concern. So, Freud concludes, the things we value need not survive us to remain valuable to us now.

Freud mentions breezily that he took these considerations to be incontrovertible. Yet the poet was entirely unmoved. Encountering that resistance could have prompted Freud to ponder whether his argument needed work, but instead he doubles back to more familiar territory, as though he were hastening there all along. He surmises that the poet’s judgment must have been impaired by some powerful affective factor—namely, a subtler version of rebellion, not against the facts but rather, having accepted them, against mourning. The imagination of

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217 Freud refers in particular to a “geological epoch in which all life on earth is silenced.” Note that I do not insinuate that this undermines the argument rationally. It is not immediately obvious how the extinction of all life some trillion years from now should affect our present judgments of value. But meditating on this prospect may nonetheless affect us in ways that alter the rhetorical task of someone in Freud’s position. This worry is ramped up into a case for nihilism by Ray Brassier in Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction (Houndmills, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

218 GW 10:359.

219 SE 14:306.

220 Here too, his word translated as “rebellion” here is “Auflehnung.”
that florid countryside’s transience must have given him a “foretaste of mourning” over its eventual demise, and that pain must have been too great for his sensitive mind to bear.\footnote{SE 14:306. Emphasis mine.}

This puts Freud in the awkward position of acknowledging an untoward effect of his basic approach to transience, one that resembles the worry of Stevens and Nietzsche. But he draws a different lesson from it. To overcome our wishful, illusory thinking and to accept that things are transient is not enough. One must also overcome the mind’s instinctive recoil from pain. Only by learning how to live with this may we enjoy things of beauty and contribute to the project of civilization.

Now, Freud gets ahead of himself with this last move. Whatever else one might say about his argument, incontrovertibility would likely not come to mind. However, I want to hold back from critiquing the argument in itself. One hallmark of ancient consolation—amid a much wider range of philosophy conceived in terms of therapy—was a willingness to deploy series of bad, even contradictory arguments for the sake of helping one’s interlocutor overcome their grief, especially insofar as it threatened to divert them from an overarching ideal of character.\footnote{Throughout this dissertation I employ the colloquial “they/them/their” pronoun of gender neutrality for individuals wherever appropriate.} Indeed, what may look like bad arguments may be understood not as contradictory so much as polyvocal, carefully constructed to match the emotional complexity of a person’s situation.\footnote{See especially Pierre Hadot, \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault} (Oxford ; New York: Blackwell, 1995). The classic case of this, discussed in the introduction, is Boethius’ \textit{Consolation of Philosophy}.}

The reason I mentioned that Freud adopts the role of consoler in this essay was to assess the adequacy of his intervention from this sort of therapeutic paradigm. In other words, the most
important failure of the argument here would be its inadequacy to the poet’s plight, even in the terms with which Freud has described it.

Both aspects of the argument of his argument fail in this way.

In the negative aspect, Freud concludes that nothing needs to survive us to remain valuable to us now. *Pereat mundus*, provided I cannot witness it. By diagnosing the poet’s condition in terms of mourning, Freud subtly reinforces this point. The most paradigmatic cases of mourning are retrospective, pertinent to losses that have already happened, and no retrospect will apply to the grimmest reach of the poet’s anticipation. But casting this specifically as a “foretaste of mourning” raises a possibility that Freud does not seem to notice. Supposing that this foretaste really is a sort of mourning, it suggests that a sense of loss can afflict us when anticipating a malign future event, irrespective of whether we will experience it as loss when it actually happens. The sense of loss would come through anticipation itself, in ways that approximate an experience of the future event. All that would be needed to instill this prospective mourning would be anticipation with sufficient vividness and a present configuration of values such that if we experienced the event now, we would experience it as loss.

The possibility of this peculiar sort of mourning challenges any neat disconnect between long-term fate and present value. To see this more clearly, it could be helpful to consider for a moment a thought experiment developed by Samuel Scheffler in his book *Death and the Afterlife*,

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224 In fact, after diagnosing the poet’s condition, Freud launches into a theoretical excursus on mourning and notes that it presents a great riddle to psychologists, because we cannot bear to renounce our beloveds when lost, even when perfectly good substitutes await.

which turns upon a more definite anticipation.226 Suppose you knew that, thirty days after your
death, an asteroid would collide with the earth. You would obviously not be present, but with
that collision, everyone and everything you cared about would perish. Scheffler thinks this would
trouble you far more than simply knowing that you yourself would die in thirty days, with your
beloveds continuing on much as they are now. Indeed, he suspects that this knowledge would
prompt you to disengage at least somewhat from your current projects. The reason, Scheffler
thinks, is that human valuing has a projective character: how we value something now stands in
some relation to the future we expect for it. The anticipation of a postmortem asteroid strike may
not undermine anything’s value in an objective sense, but it may very well disrupt your valuing.

The concept of prospective mourning adds another layer of explanation for that
disengagement. Mourning ordinarily involves some process of orienting yourself to a world
altered by the loss of something you love. That means treating your world as truly altered, your
loss truly as loss.227 If prospective mourning allows a future loss to make itself felt even now,
approximating what it would be like affectively for it already to have happened, we may also
begin to treat whatever would be lost then as lost to us now, however irrational that
disengagement might be.

Scheffler’s thought experiment can help us to see a problem in the positive aspect of
Freud’s argument as well, the bit about transience as scarcity value in time.


227 There is much debate among psychological theorists on how exactly we should understand mourning. The
Freudian model emphasizes a process of gradual detachment through reality testing. An important alternative to this
can be found in Thomas Attig, How We Grieve: Relearning the World, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press,
2011). I have tried here to schematize this in fairly general terms that could accommodate either theory.
Recall from the outset of this discussion that the poet’s concern was focused on “all that he otherwise would have loved.” More fully expressed, the counterfactual would read, “he would have loved these things, were they somehow not transient, but because they are transient, he did not love them.” When Freud says that the poet deemed these things to be stripped of value, he is offering an interpretation of the counterfactual, glossing “would have loved” as “would have found valuable.” The gloss seems fairly straightforward. Loving someone, almost definitionally, involves valuing them.

But this gloss frames the discussion in a way that the counterfactual does not require. It focuses on transient objects and their worthiness of love, which conduces to subsequent questions about their value. Just as plausibly, we could take the counterfactual to suggest that anticipation under conditions of transience affects the worthiness of love itself. “Otherwise would have loved,” in other words, may express a judgment by the poet that love had been corrupted by his anticipation—that a piquant sense of transience is somehow incompatible with love as he understands it—and he would rather abstain from love altogether than participate in its travesty. (Although I present this here as but another interpretive possibility to account for the failure of Freud’s intervention, the next section will introduce reasons why it is preferable.)

A slight revision to the earlier thought experiment can help us to understand the poet’s point more clearly. Suppose that each time I affirmed my love for you (“I” being a stand-in for your actual beloved), I followed the affirmation with this codicil: “and in thirty days I will love you no more.” No looming asteroid strike will end the love by ending us. The codicil merely

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228 SE 14:305.

229 I hesitate to follow Freud’s language and speak of a judgment of value, given that love may not always be a matter of judgment. But such judgments may be tacit in our loving, such that were we called to account for our love, we could express them in some explicit form.
references the passage of time, essentially giving my love an expiration date. My guess is that this would strike you as odd. One question to arise might be how I could forecast this end with such definiteness, leading you perhaps to doubt the sincerity of the codicil. Maybe I am just making a manipulative threat. After hearing my repeated assurances that I intend nothing malign by this codicil— I love you, after all—you may then doubt the sincerity of my affirmation. If I really love you, how am I to know when, if ever, I will love you no more? Perhaps my affirmation too is sincere and I came to this knowledge by some mysterious insight into the future. Assuming I could convince you of this, the codicil would still cast a heavy shadow over the interim period, perhaps to such an extent that, somewhere in those thirty days, you would find yourself no longer loving me.  

How to account for the oddity of this codicil? One approach would be to point out how western intuitions and socially permissible speech about love have been shaped by the legacy of Romanticism, which transpose older Christian ideas that can encourage overinflated expectations that love will prance for all time upon a sparkle of sunrise, unending and unconditional. That legacy has indeed shaped ordinary understandings of love so profoundly that we must be circumspect about what intuitions can disclose here, but this explanation is not exhaustive. Press misty-eyed romantics hard enough, and even they might acknowledge that love can come to an end, sometimes much sooner than we could have expected. Many would also acknowledge that under certain conditions, love not only can end but should.

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230 Given the foreseeable trouble of announcing the codicil, one could wonder whether sharing this knowledge in the first place would be compatible with love.

231 On this point, see Laura Kipnis, Against Love: A Polemic (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). The legacy of Christian teaching on love and marriage important also for this story, such as 1 Corinthians 13 about love never ending and prohibitions against divorce, which elide marriage with love. Also there are longstanding theological ideas of God’s exemplary love being eternal.
After deflating expectations to a more reasonable size, a better approach would be to consider how we ordinarily expect love to be open-ended. In affirming my love for you, I tacitly claim that I will love you until whenever, the indefinite time at which I do not or cannot. This expectation of open-endedness has much to do with our acquaintance with love’s affective entanglements. We cannot simply turn off it like a spigot, nor predict the time of its coming or going like a sprinkler system. But the expectation also relates, I think, to the involvement of our will in love. Behind every affirmation of love may be a series of tacit conditionals of the form, “If this happens, I will love you no more.” Open-endedness would be the implicit flip side of such conditionality, “Unless this happens, I will continue loving you.” Many, perhaps most, of our conditions are never voiced, at least not in advance of the condition being met. Indeed, you may not know that you held something as a condition until you experience it as irreparable transgression. And that is just the point. With love’s conditions remaining mostly tacit and sometimes even unknown, our affirmations of love concentrate on the element of continuance. Even with a sense of conditions, the affirmation suggests that if love ends, it ends by something extraneous to itself.

What I take from these considerations is that if the poet’s concern is about the worthiness of love itself, rather than particular objects of love, Freud’s appeal to “scarcity value in time” is misplaced. Applying an expiration date to love increases its scarcity along the very lines he suggests, but that does not obviously increase its value. For scarcity value does not apply to love in the same way as other things. Among the reasons we might value love, surely one would be that its open-endedness confers a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity.232 Whether or not I

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232 Scarcity value does apply to some extent here, inasmuch as everyone has limited capacity for love, and a spirit of open-endedness may be scarcer still. But that value would not be primary.
formalize my love for you through making promises about continuing in it, merely affirming my love involves a more general sense of promise, an all-things-being-equal expectation of further love.

There will, however, be an expiration date for the objects of our love. Although the specific date is rarely known in advance, we do know that even the most enduring loves shall end, because there shall be an end for each of us. Someday I will love you no more, because someday there will be no “I,” no “you.” The continuance of life may just be the most basic condition for the continuance of love. On that basis, Freud might question the relevance of the thought experiment for explaining the poet’s despondency. It anticipates an end of love at a definite point in the future, asynchronous to the end of me or you. But because the timing of life’s end is ordinarily uncertain, merely knowing that it will end, someday, need not undermine our sense of love’s open-endedness altogether.

For the poet, however, these considerations do not seem to matter. He assigns no such definiteness to the end of love, yet reacts as though he had. What his anticipation may lack in temporal definiteness, it supplements with vividness sufficient to achieve a practical effect similar to the thirty-day codicil. As I argued in the previous chapter, our sense of reality is partly composed of objects and events that present themselves only in imagination.233 In certain cases, a mere possibility can affect us as much as an actuality. By making love’s otherwise indefinite end so vivid, the poet performs a peculiar version of love’s end as asynchronous to the end of me and you. He imagines the future with an anticipatory retrospect, looking back from a future point after which that love will have already ended, and while he could not say, from his standpoint in

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the present, that it had in fact ended already, the imagination makes the end much more affectively proximate. A thirty-day time horizon may or may not be the exact equivalent, but this anticipation does seem to interrupt his sense of love’s open-endedness, in a way that the fact of mortality alone would not. To cultivate an attitude of acceptance to this interruption would, in effect, endorse the beginning of love’s end, much along the lines I already suggested in connection with the poet’s foretaste of mourning.

Could any intervention have more success than Freud’s, helping the poet to recover a willingness to love? One may be tempted to take a much simpler approach: grab the poet by the shoulders and implore him, each word punctuated with a shake more vigorous than the last, to join everyone else in not thinking about such things. Just because an end is fated does not mean that it must dominate one’s thoughts. But restricting anticipation may not be so simple. If Scheffler’s basic point is correct—that valuing has a projective character, such that our present is qualified by our expectations for the future—the poet may present an extreme version of a cast of mind that can befall anyone, especially when given reasons for anticipating an end more pressing and personally concrete than the mere fading of summer.

Instead of restricting anticipation, a better approach might be to join Nietzsche and Stevens in attempting to reshape it. But we should tread carefully here, because this discussion has suggested shortcomings beyond a mere lack of detail in how they attempt to reshape anticipation through illusion. When Nietzsche discusses illusion’s practical value in terms of a bounded temporal horizon, he could seem to be offering just a more psychologically accommodating version of the exhortation not to think about grim things in the distance. The shortcoming here lies not in his approach to illusion as such, for the psychological accommodation differentiates it appreciably from the shoulder-shaking exhortation. Rather, the shortcoming lies, much like Freud’s intervention, in the basic framing of the problem it attempts
to solve. This study’s overarching is what may constitute an attitudinal excellence for living in anticipation of one’s death, and the prior two chapters have been framed accordingly, with a tight focus on the horizon of an individual’s life. By contrast, the poet’s issue pertained to living in anticipation of another’s death, not his own fate but that of everyone and everything he cared about.

While this difference of framing could make the poet’s issue seem somewhat beside the point for the overall study, it actually brings out a central element in anticipation of one’s own death. Indeed, inattention to this would render the study myopic. Recall from the first chapter that awareness of our own mortality may come with special salience through identification with those we have loved and then lost through death. In this we engage in basic analogical thinking: as they now are, so shall we be, there being no fundamental creaturely difference between them and ourselves. Reciprocally, anticipation of one’s own death may slide into anticipation of what will come of our beloveds who survive us. That is to say, the temporal entanglements of love make it difficult to scope illusion to the horizons of one’s own life alone. Anticipation for oneself and for another may be so intertwined that, while distinguishable, they must be treated in tandem. If illusion is to have practical value for living in anticipation of death, it needs to address our relations to others, including the dead, and how anticipation’s assault on presence may lie principally in its shaking of love.

This chapter considers how, for that task, an especially valuable illusion would be one that challenges what I said earlier about the continuance of life being the most basic condition for the continuance of love—one that affirms the possibility of love’s continuance after death. For Freud that would surely be a nonstarter, because it whiffs of the wishful, rebellious demand for eternity that he wrote off from the very first. In a way, his assessment would be correct. What I will consider specifically is the imagination of an afterlife for ourselves and those we love that
resists the plain sense of death as extinction. Yet even Freud, despite his suspicions toward a demand for eternity, seems to acknowledge the need for some kind of continuity that can withstand the ravages of transience. At one point in the essay he mentions trying to comfort the poet with the thought of nature’s cyclical movement, which promises the return of all that fades away, and he concludes his meditation on mourning and the war with the proclamation that “we shall build up again all that war has destroyed.”234 Along the same lines of my argument for a recovery of illusion in the previous chapter, I will consider how we can reimagine the specific illusion of afterlife without transcendental appeal, incorporating what is best in the critique of consolation without welcoming new forms of harm by abandoning it altogether.

“Transience” provides but a snippet of Freud’s conversation with the poet, and one may wonder how it continued after the failed intervention. Would they have just shuffled along in awkward silence, the poet lagging behind to scribble sullen lines as Freud points out more of the local flora for their taciturn friend? Or might the poet have articulated a response?

While the specifics of that day’s parley must remain unknown, the same does not apply to the poet’s response more broadly, and it is with that response that the next sections this chapter will be concerned. Freud conspicuously withheld the poet’s name in the essay, as though to cast him as an allegorical character in a tussle between science and poetry, whose two qualities of youth and fame would simply add to the atmosphere of transience. But some have identified him as Rainer Maria Rilke and the silent friend as Lou Andreas-Salomé, based on a note in her journal from the time at which Freud puts the conversation.235 Rilke certainly would have had

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234 SE 14:307.

235 The principal evidence comes from an entry dated September 7-8, 1913, headed “Münchener Kongress,” in which she mentions introducing “Rainer” to Freud. Indeed, Rilke had written to her in the year before seeking advice as to whether he should undertake psychoanalysis in the midst of his desert of uninspiration. The first analysis of this evidence seems to have been Herbert Lehmann, “A Conversation Between Freud and Rilke,” Psychoanalytic Quarterly 35 (1966): 423–27. See Lou Andreas-Salomé, In Der Schule Bei Freud: Tagebuch Eines Jahres, 1912/1913 (Zürich: M.
transience on his mind in 1913, as he had been at work on the most disconsolate of his Duiniser Elegien, a project that he would not complete until 1922. Whether or not the identification is historically certain, its plausibility gives imaginative fodder for considering how the later Elegies might answer the problems that linger in “Transience.” The longitudinal effort would not have been Rilke’s alone. By the time that Rilke was completing his masterwork, Freud would have articulated his theory of mourning and melancholia more thoroughly, which, perhaps despite himself, converges with the consolatory logic of the Elegies. The approach of one is hardly reducible to the other, and it is unclear whether they actually read each other’s work in those years following the country walk. But their affinities allow us to read them together toward an afterlife for consolation that is more than either one can voice alone.  

Such polyvocality, I will suggest below, is a crucial element of any consolation worthy of the name.

2.

In a letter dated January 6, 1923, the year after he published the Elegies, Rilke wrote to his patron Countess Margot Sizzo after learning that she had lost someone dear to her. Although long accustomed to playing the sage in his correspondence, Rilke starts by questioning the possibility—as well as the propriety—of using words to console for a loss so sudden, so great. 


236 See Judith Ryan, The Vanishing Subject, 61, for an argument that Rilke probably did not read very deeply into psychoanalytic theory, but rather, sensitive soul that he was, picked up bits here and there from the cultural zeitgeist. Ryan confirms Rilke’s affinity with the empiricist notions of the fragility of the subject and the reality of our imagination.

Indeed, one might detect an affinity with Freud in how he goes on to attack the very notion of consolation, speaking of it as a pernicious diversion from the reality of loss. Yet even as he disavows consolation as an explicit trope, he proceeds with a tone that sounds as though not yet ready to ditch consolation altogether, even more so than Freud’s double-minded intervention with him on their country walk. While noting his distaste for Christian notions of a beyond, he still insists that we can read “the word ‘death’ without negation” and “overcome everything negative that adheres to pain.” Central to overcoming this negativity is realizing that death “nowhere contradicts love.”

This last statement is but one among many plucked blossoms that Rilke offers the Countess, but the locution leaps out after working through the problems of “Transience,” which I suggested may hinge upon the poet’s suspicion of some such contradiction. What Rilke means by this, to judge by the wider context of the letter, is, first, that the continuance of life is no requirement for the continuance of love and, second, that death is actually part of love’s very nature. Whatever his trouble may have been during the conversation with Freud, this letter suggests a primary interest in how transience may affect the worthiness of love itself, irrespective of our beloveds’ inherent value. What happened in the interim to give him such confidence in this lack of contradiction? Rilke points the Countess back to his late poetry as the place where he discovers and bears witness, almost prophetically, to the solution.

It is alluringly simple to summarize. What we know as transience could be reconceived as a process of transformation. Things do not pass away so much as pass into another mode of being, which Rilke variously terms the invisible or inner-world space (Weltinnenraum). Death is not the

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238 Ibid., 378.

239 RL 2:317.
negation of life so much as a complementary side of life permanently turned away from us, like the dark side of the moon. Our love for another need not cease when they die, because love embraces all of life, including its shadow side.

Rilke encourages summaries like this by his own example. After the publication of the Elegies his letters are full of them, and some of those letters have attained a status among his interpreters that rivals the late poetry itself. But we should hesitate before following along. For one thing, it is debatable whether these poems—or any poem for that matter—can be convincingly reduced to propositional content without fundamental alterations. Even Rilke introduces language found nowhere in the poetry when comparing the invisible to the dark side of the moon. Whatever solution the poems may hold for the problem of transience, it is not a freestanding doctrine just waiting to be extracted like a jewel, but rather a dense textual performance, only in light of which may its significance be clear. As I argued in the introduction and previous chapter, part of poetry’s contribution to ethical inquiry lies not in particular ideas proposed, although poems may be of great philosophical interest. (Almost invariably, they arrive more as fraught observations or conclusions than arguments—as indeed they should.) Instead, they contribute in leading us through what some scholars call formative “spiritual exercises,” which draw readers into altered patterns of thinking, feeling, and imagining ourselves with others in the world, all through their peculiar uses of language. Their end is not simply to lodge

240 RL 2:316.

241 The letter to his Polish publisher Witold von Hulewicz, dated 13 November 1925, is one example of this. Maurice Blanchot discusses the oddity of how Rilke seems eager to unburden himself of the poetry’s "dark language." See The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 133.


different thoughts in our heads but—at least on occasion—to edify.\textsuperscript{244} To understand the patterns of this formation, there is no substitute for intricately attending to the language’s contours.

This ten-poem cycle hardly announces itself as the source of any grand solutions, at least at first. It rather begins with an enigmatic question: “Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?” (Who, were I to shriek, would hear me from the angel / orders?)\textsuperscript{245} Grammatically, the two subjunctive verbs situate the poem in a realm of merely imagined action, at remove from the course of ordinary time. Syntactically, the dependent clause spliced into the sentence doubles, one after the other, both the hard “w”-sounds of the question-words and the subjunctive verbs. This formal doubling intensifies the question, and by implication its implied answer, “no one.”

A little work is needed to understand the problem that this question embodies. Most apparently, it is a suspicion that despite rasping his throat for hours on end, the speaker’s voice would never reach angelic ears (assuming that is their organ for sound detection).\textsuperscript{246} But subsequent lines show that a deeper separation from the angels is also at issue. Even if he managed to be heard and aroused some sympathy, an embrace by such a being would cause him to pass away (\textit{verginge}).\textsuperscript{247} Note that the verb he uses here, formed as a substantive, would be

\textsuperscript{244} Here I am intentionally echoing Richard Rorty’s conception of “edifying philosophy” articulated in \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 378.

\textsuperscript{245} I.1–2. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I try to render them as literally as possible, while also preserving relevant syntactical and phonetical elements. As with any translation, complete success in this is elusive. Just witness how my translation changed Rilke’s portentous dactyls—a crucial element of the German elegiac tradition—into clip-cloppy trochees.

\textsuperscript{246} NB: When writing about poetry, it is common to refer to “the speaker” instead of “the author,” because an author may be establishing a persona distinct from themselves, even when the poetry takes a confessional tone. This is analogous with how one refers to “the narrator” in writing about prose fiction. I will follow that convention here, speaking of what “Rilke” does only when discussing more macro-level compositional choices.

\textsuperscript{247} I.3.
“transience” (Vergänglichkeit). Based on the speaker’s despair over passing away in that embrace, we might suppose that his shriek would have been a cry for help, prompted by horror at the fact of his transience, as well as hope that, if help were possible, it could come from a being different from himself, one unafflicted by transience. But the very condition that would prompt the call would also prevent its success. Any attempt to cross over from that different order of being would only exacerbate the speaker’s condition. This is not so much a frustrated attempt at transcendence as an undirected yearning for not-transience, expressing positive content to that desire only insofar as he imagines the rescue of an embrace.248

Having abandoned hope of rescue from an angel, the speaker then considers whether he might simply ameliorate his plight through the embrace of a lover. The Second Elegy goes so far as to muse that love involves an almost-promise of eternity.249 Lovers touch each other so blissfully because they feel that the place they cover (zudeckt) by their touch does not disappear; underneath, it takes on pure duration.250 This sounds like a farther reaching version of love’s promise of futurity that I discussed in the first section, and it also involves a similar shortcoming. That cover of touch, he realizes, cannot last. In the end, it just amounts to covering over (verdecken) a fate that remained all along, a momentary diversion and nothing more. And once he had

248 This is a somewhat controversial point in Rilke criticism. Many readers take a frustrated attempt at transcendence to be the poem’s core problem. The main problem with this interpretive strategy is that no word that could plausibly be rendered “transcendence” appears in the poems. For representative samples of the question of transcendence, see Kathleen Komar, “The Crisis of Consciousness in Rilke’s ‘Duineser Elegien,’” Germanic Review 57, no. 4 (1982): 149; Kathleen L. Komar, “The Issue of Transcendence in Rilke’s Duineser Elegien and Stevens’ Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Neophilologus 70, no. 3 (1986): 429–441; Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, “Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens,” The German Quarterly 83, no. 3 (2010): 275–296. An obvious retort to my position is that a specific word need not appear explicitly for it to be a poem’s preoccupation. But in Rilke criticism especially, there are bad habits, on which one might blame the outsized influence of Heidegger, of looking to the ideas implied by the poetry rather than the cumulative impression of the text.

249 II.59–60. “So versprecht ihr euch Ewigkeit fast / von der Umarmung.”

250 II.55–59.
realizes that even this modest hope will be disappointed, he not only lands back in despondency, but may wonder whether these putative means of rescue, including love, are worthwhile at all.

One problem with looking for rescue from our condition, whether by angel or lover or anything else, may be that this reinforces the very structure of anticipation that makes transience a problem in the first place, merely shifting its keynote from despondency to hope. Behind such anticipation, the speaker suspects, is an absolute distinction we make between the living and the dead, with transience as the nullifying process that separates one from the other.\textsuperscript{251}

The theme of voices returns here and guides his consideration. It is not the speaker who introduces the possibility that a sharp distinction between the living and the dead would be a problem, but a voice he reports hearing from another character, or ensemble of characters—the young dead (\textit{jungen Toten}).\textsuperscript{252} Many translators prefer a less strange locution like “those who died young,”\textsuperscript{253} but their message specifically conveys a sense of being young in death, growing into it as one must grow into life:

\begin{quote}
Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu bewohnen, kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben, Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben;[…] \\
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(\textit{It is indeed peculiar, to inhabit the earth no longer, to practice hardly learned customs no longer, not to give roses, and other specifically promising things, the meaning of human future;[…]})\textsuperscript{254}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{251}I.80–81.  \\
\textsuperscript{252}I.62.  \\
\textsuperscript{253}See, for example, that of A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 9.  \\
\textsuperscript{254}I.69–72.
\end{flushright}
The young dead speak from a liminal state, with the memories of their erstwhile lives still fresh enough for the changed situation to seem strange. Particularly strange is how they have a sense of promise apart from ordinary meanings of futurity. In this peculiar state, the young dead seem to have retained just enough contact with the earth to communicate with us, and enough contact with death to have gained insight into the angels’ manner of consciousness. They have gathered that angels often do not know whether they move among the living or the dead; there is an “eternal torrent” (*ewige Strömung*), they say, that rips all times through both realms, always together.²⁵⁵ From this the young dead conclude that the living are wrong to make such sharp distinctions between them. While we cannot alter the fact of our transience by angelic rescue, we might nonetheless alter the meaning of transience by learning to think like an angel.²⁵⁶

A tall order, that. For we do not just distinguish the living from the dead because of some deductive judgment. Part of what preserves our sense of that distinction is the way that loss of another truly registers itself as loss through mourning. The dead may need us no longer, but the speaker suspects that this is not reciprocal.²⁵⁷ And yet the young dead’s message, distant as it is from the speaker’s present experience, affects him by the very suggestion of a possible blurring of distinctions. He feels that his fate, as a transient being, must be mourning (*Trauer*), but considers it just possible that through lament, we might feel a vibration that actually consoles (*tröstet*).²⁵⁸

Mourning and consolation, *Trauer und Trost*: perhaps our share of angelic distinction-blurring lies in the possibility of finding one, somehow, through the other.


²⁵⁶ I.82–83. “Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter / Lebenden gehn oder Toten.”

²⁵⁷ I.90.

²⁵⁸ I.91–95.
How that could happen is less than clear in the First Elegy. The possibility comes as but a peripheral glimpse, more fleeting even than the transient things he mourns. After it, the next five Elegies—the ones that would have been his preoccupation at the time of the country walk with Freud—return to a sense of isolation and futility, distraction and dispersion, horror at the angel mixed with some tincture of envy. The possibility does not return until the Seventh and Ninth, but when it does, it is much more than a glimpse.

Both poems begin with textual cues that recall the First Elegy’s opening question, as though the speaker were attempting to start over, to approach its problems afresh.

The Seventh begins with a statement that proposes a revision to his expression of despondency: “Werbung nicht mehr, nicht Werbung, entwachsene Stimme, / sei deines Schreies Natur.” (Solicitation no more, not solicitation, outgrown voice / be the nature of your shriek.)\(^{259}\) No morphological variant of the verb I translated before as “shriek” had appeared in the intervening poems, yet here it is again. What motivates him to renounce solicitation, the line indicates, is newfound maturity. The speaker plots himself on a developmental trajectory, looking back interpretively on his imagined shriek and exhorting himself to adopt a different tone. As with the initially imagined shriek, however, it is not immediately clear what prompts this turn. Appeals to a developmental trajectory require elaboration of the relevant milestones and how to move from one to the other.

If this exhortation recalls the First Elegy, one explanation of his sudden change points back to the voice of the young dead. Perhaps it just took the speaker some time, with that voice

\(^{259}\) VII.1–2. “Werbung” has a variety of meanings, but I prefer this rendering so as to convey the pathetic, almost door-to-door search for a rescuer conveyed by the speaker in the First Elegy.
circulating in memory, to reach a fuller understanding of its implications. The mere fact of hearing that voice reinforces its claim about some kind of connection between ostensibly separate realms. Solicitation’s come-hither gestures bespeak a separation from the one solicited, but communication with the dead, those who are quintessentially separate from us, suggests the possibility of a certain presence-in-absence.

In fact, the Seventh Elegy finds the speaker talking back to the young dead. In a moment of reflection on the calling he had done, he says, “Siehe, da rief ich die Liebende” (Look, then I called the lover.) This comes as an acknowledgement of the futility of rescue-by-lover, because he follows this sentence immediately with

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Aber nicht sie nur
käme...Es kämen aus schwächlichen Gräbern
Mädchen und städen...Denn, wie beschränk ich,
wie, den gerufenen Ruf?
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(But not only she
would come...Out of soft graves would come
girls and stand...For, how could I limit,
how, the call once it went out?)

The speaker realizes that a lover cannot really promise eternity. Indeed, he seems to regard every lover as accompanied by a double, an image of the corpse they will be, imagined by analogy with those who have recently passed away. The image of soft graves evokes a recent burial, the dirt still mounded and unsettled at the site, which in turn indicates obliquely that these who would come belong to the young dead. Somehow, this realization of futility does not stir up the despondent reaction expressed in the First Elegy. That the speaker addresses these girls for several lines, reflecting on how they knew the gloriousness of being right here, in the midst of life,

\[\text{\footnotesize 260 VII.30.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 261 VII.30–33. Literally, “the called call.”}\]
goes some of the way in explaining his changed reaction, but it is not entirely satisfying. One need only recall Hamlet’s address to poor Yorick’s skull for an example of a similar address with a much more disconsolate tenor.

Of more explanatory value is what he says specifically in concluding the address, when he first lands on the thought of inner transformation:

Sichtbar  
Wollen wirs heben, wo doch das sichtbarste Glück uns  
Erst zu erkennen sich giebt, wenn wir es innen verwandeln.  
Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen.

(Visibly  
we want to elevate existence, although the most visible happiness  
first gives itself to be recognized, when we transform it within.  
Nowhere, beloved, will there be world, but within.)

These lines diagnose a habit of mind in which existence is correlated with visibility—and by implication, nonexistence with invisibility. Behind the speaker’s despondency has been a view that as transient things pass away, becoming invisible to us, they pass into mere absence forevermore. But the possibility of inner transformation suggests a different way of thinking about transience, one that appreciates the invisibility that will befall everything in this world, while also breaking the mental link between visibility and existence. No longer just hearing but also addressing the young dead, the speaker performs for us what it could be like to adopt this different habit of mind.

This is not just a sly reprise of old doctrines of immortality. He is not saying that when someone dies, an invisible part of their being flitters off to another plane. The primary emphasis

262 VII.39–49.
263 Hamlet, V.1.
264 VII.47–50. The antecedent of the contracted “es” in l.48 is “Dasein,” from l.45.
here is on the condition of inwardness, and inner transformation is a labor undertaken by the living, something that must be accomplished if it happens at all. Subsequent lines elaborate this point through architectural references: “Wo einmal ein dauerndes Haus war, / schlägt sich erdachtes Gebild vor, quer, zu Erdenklichem / völlig gehörig, als ständ es noch ganz im Gehirne” (Where once there was a sturdy house, / a conceived structure suggests itself, across, completely belonging to the conceivable / as if it still stood entirely in the brain.) Such a structure would be one that we ourselves build within (innerlich baun). If not into us, the passing world really will pass into nothing.

And even then, he is far from confident in the ontological status of this inward existence. The once-enduring house, built invisibly, has an “as if” existence in the mind, a subjunctive dwelling. The same applies to his acknowledgement of the young dead. His address conveys the impression that they are lined up visibly before him, but he only says that they would come and stand, not that they actually do. A large part of what Rilke means by “invisible,” then, could be rephrased in terms of merely dwelling in one’s imagination. But the specific terminology matters. Referring to them as “invisible” rather than simply “imagined” carries through the subjunctive treatment of their existence, allowing him to behave more consistently as if they were present. This seems to make a practical difference for the speaker in how he relates to the fact of transience, one that questions of ontological status may have themselves sought to attain.

Transformation (Verwandlung) is transience (Vergänglichkeit) reconceived as a task. While fully partaking of transience, inward transformation expands the notion of mere passing away to passing into, from subjection to fate to participation in its course. Its fulfillment may be only “as if,” only an impression that animates the imagination, but insofar as it allows the speaker to

\[265\] VII.52–54.
recommit himself to the passing things which he felt could not be loved with integrity, it would hardly be nothing.\textsuperscript{266}

But how does this transformation happen? Do you just imagine an invisible existence for something, and so it exists invisibly? The speaker provides few hints toward an answer. He seems delighted just to have landed on the possibility. We can make progress on that question, however, by asking another: if not solicitation, what would be the nature of his shriek?

Gestures at two related characteristics appear in the Seventh Elegy. First, and perhaps most fittingly for a turn to embracing the transient world, is praise.\textsuperscript{267} Indeed, the closest thing to a statement of how we achieve transformation is a string of imagery that evokes religious devotion:

\begin{quote}
Ja, wo noch eins übersteht,
ein einst gebetetes Ding, ein gedientes, geknietes —,
hält es sich, so wie es ist, schon ins Unsichtbare hin.
\end{quote}

(Yes, where one thing still survives, 
a thing once prayed to, a thing served, a thing kneeled to —,
is preserved, just as it is, already in the invisible.)\textsuperscript{268}

This statement repurposes vocabulary that may once have spurred the speaker’s search for rescue from his mortal condition, to show that while rescue may not—could not—come by escape or utter negation of that condition, something like this may come by more intimate acquaintance with it.\textsuperscript{269} Paradoxically, this vocabulary becomes most efficacious for his problem with

\textsuperscript{266} Reference ritualization material on the wider significance of this shift.

\textsuperscript{267} VII.76–77. “mein Atem / reicht für die Rühmung nicht aus.”

\textsuperscript{268} VII.58–60.

\textsuperscript{269} I am not sure whether Rilke ever read Ludwig Feuerbach, but this move is strikingly similar to the humanistic theology to which he gestures at the end of his massively influential \textit{Das Wesen des Christentums}. In the second chapter I show the Feuerbachian roots of Freud’s critical project, so it may be that we have here two different directions in the ways in which Feuerbach’s ideas could be developed.
transience once he turns from the heavens. And that leads to the second characteristic. His shriek turns out here to be a grand dismissal of the Angel, exhorting it to marvel, while scuttling from the scene, at the human work of transformation. The speaker now considers his voice to be a current (Strömung) against which the Angel could not possibly stride.\footnote{VII.87–89. “Denn mein / Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke / Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten.”}

That metaphor clearly recalls the “eternal torrent” (evige Strömung) mentioned toward the close of the First Elegy. Could it be that the voice of praise for transient things is that which draws together the living and dead, blurring all times together?

Perhaps. But that still leaves us to wonder what might be transformative about praise. To follow that question, I turn to the Ninth Elegy, which provides further clues within its own recollection of the First Elegy. This time, the recollection comes by adopting no particular term from its opening question but rather its spliced syntax—a gesture that becomes conspicuous as a recollection when it happens a second time around halfway through the poem. It begins like this: “Warum, wenn es angeht, also die Frist des Daseins / hinzubringen, als Lorbeer[…]” (Why, if it concerns passing the span of existence, like a laurel[…]\footnote{IX.1–2.}) And then later we read: “Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender Auftrag?” (What, if not transformation, is your pressing task?)\footnote{IX.71.} To see how the first question relates to the second, we need to see what the first is actually asking and even more, how the speaker answers. Toward the end of the first strophe, this winding question closes by asking why we humans both avoid and pine for fate—an ambivalence we have already seen between the First and Seventh Elegies.\footnote{IX.4–6.} The reason, he muses, is that
everything on this passing earth seems to need us, and what becomes of them strangely concerns us. This elicits an assurance from the speaker, “Erde, du liebe, ich will” (Earth, you [whom I] love, I want to.)

Within this frame of explicit resolve to transform the passing earth, two aspects of praise become particularly salient. First is perhaps the most basic aspect of praise, so obvious as to escape notice: verbalization. The significance of this for the poem lies in how it continues the Seventh Elegy’s renunciation of angelic assistance, evident in this self-exhortation, “Preise dem Engel die Welt, night die unsägliche” (To the angel praise the world, not the unspeakable). Our business in this praise is with things that can actually be spoken about, rather than heavenly realities that words would fail. Another exhortation a few lines later more fully expresses what this praise entails, “Sag ihm die Dinge” (Say the things to him.) When we think of praise, it is easy to imagine encomia, enumerating the positive qualities of something that give us reason to love it. But Rilke presents a denser vision. We are not to say anything about the things; we are to say the things themselves. In context, this seems most evidently to mean that we are to pronounce the names of things in a manner of praise. However, this is more than just a sentimental roll call. By exhorting himself to “say the things”—rather than “say the names of


275 Reference lines.

276 IX.72. More on the translation difficulties of this line.

277 IX.53.

278 IX.58.

279 IX.63–65.

280 IX.29–36.
the things”—the speaker implies that the things, in some sense, are their names. Or more precisely, keeping in mind that praise is supposedly transformative, we might read this to mean that in being said, the things acquire a new sort of existence in their names.

World transformed into word, while maintaining its status as world: this would indeed be a stay on transience, in a sense. Words come and go, but do not pass away like organic matter. They can enter into community possession and be transmitted across generations, a sort of living archive of a world that once was. This would of course be far from a perfect preservative. But this gesture of transformation would be a way of sustaining a sense of relationship with that which is passing away, a sense that something indeed remains. For good reason, then, verbalization has been the aspect of praise that most interests many philosophical interpreters of Rilke in their accounts of inward transformation.281

The problem with this interpretation, however, is that the Ninth Elegy locates transformation elsewhere. It happens not in speech but the speaker, not through expression but rather being taken into ourselves. When the perishing things of this world trust us for help, they want to transform “in—o unendlich—in uns!” (in—o unendingly—in us!)282 As though to make

281 Heidegger, for instance, understands the problem addressed by the Elegies as a willful orientation to the world that divides us as subjects over against the world as object, and the hallmark of that contrastive, self-assertive relationship is a constant negation of death, born of having come to see death itself as something negative. Visual representation partakes of that same objectifying approach to the world. The challenge is rather to find a way of embracing the full scope—or as he puts it, sphere—of being. Language, he says, is the house (templum) of being, and we can achieve modes of saying, such as we find in a poem or song, that is not mere signification, not just a reference to some other object, but that allows us to reach the inner space of the heart, rather than simply that which may be accessed by the eyes. Maurice Blanchot takes a slightly different course through the poems, although with a similar conclusion. He works from Rilke’s aspiration, stated elsewhere,281 for each of us to die our own death, combined with the difficulty of achieving that, given our inability to think death at all except doubtfully, as something that does not belong to our experience. The concept of invisibility provides a way through this impasse. A paradigmatic transformation of visible into invisible comes with the poetic word, which is both external to ourselves and yet constitutes a space which is not divisible, not characterized by the contrastive thought that Rilke’s speaker puts as our problem. The poem itself is the space of the invisible. Although you see the words, they are but the absent presence of what is spoken. See Heidegger, “Wozu Dichter?” translated in English as “What Are Poets For?” in Poetry, Language, Thought, and Blanchot, The Space of Literature, “Death and the Work’s Space.”

282 IX.67.
the point unmistakable, the speaker rephrases this as a desire to invisibly *resurrect within us.*

Moving as this desire might be, the speaker explores it in a state of bemusement, given that we too are of the earth, perhaps the most transient of all. Resurrection within us could seem to amount to mere deferral of something’s fate, pushing back its end to correspond with our own.

But our own transience may be part of what confers our aptitude for transformation. To meaningfully speak of transformation as resurrective, transformed things would need to maintain some continuity with the sort of life they will have lost. Otherwise, they might just be different sorts of things altogether. And just as continuity would be important for transformed things, susceptibility to change would be important for us, because in transforming things within us, according to the poem, we transform ourselves. While the spatial metaphor of “within” suggests a notion of the self as a menagerie, a storehouse for our transformed curiosities that maintains its basic character irrespective of what it contains, this would be misleading. Visibly we might appear the same, but transforming something within, the poem suggests, means to make it part of oneself.

This leads to a second possibility suggested in the Elegy for how we might understand the transformative nature of praise. It may not be the praise itself so much as the love for something that praise could imply. To locate transformation within ourselves suggests a relationship that continues over time, so when the speaker affirms his commitment to helping the earth undertake its task of transformation by saying, “Erde, du liebe, ich will,” we should not miss that he pairs this with an affirmation of love. We could read this simply as a casual address, thrown in to

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283 IX.68–69. “Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar / in uns erstehn?”

284 He mentions this twice in the poem, calling us both “die Schwindensten” (IX.13) and “die Vergänglichsten” (IX.65).

285 IX.67. “Wer wir am Ende auch seien.”
preserve the poem’s rhythm. But the compaction of this statement links love and transformation, strongly suggesting that one involves the other. Words of praise have some role in this, inasmuch as they help to nurture love. Still, transformation would not refer to the completed word in expression, as though it were a once-and-for-all event, but rather the relation that elicits them, in the breath before the work is bodied forth.

Rilke’s letter to Margot Sizzo shows that his own understanding of transformation revolves around this second possibility. In fact, he explains the claim that death nowhere contradicts love by appealing to her own experiences of love, asking her to recall how the influence of one’s beloved can become, over time, increasingly independent of tangible presence, because the person has been “borne unutterably” into one’s heart. When it comes to influence upon us, actual presence or absence eventually makes little difference, because they have so shaped our habits of perception and behavior that we behave almost as if they were present. Not that this invisible influence should be seen as love’s apogee. In that case, the presence of one’s beloved would strangely interfere with the realization of love. More basically, we can see this as a suggestion that we undertake some work of inner transformation even in the presence of another, and as our lives involve rhythms of presence and absence from those we care about, their invisibility provides a sense of presence and continuity through interruptions of embodied presence—a sort of affective object permanence. Death, considered from this perspective, would just be a more radical and lasting invisibility, not an end full stop but rather a transition to an exclusive emphasis upon one aspect of your relationship.

286 RL 2:315.

287 Rilke does in fact seem to suggest this at certain points, and his own checkered biographical record with love might offer some confirmation. But I follow Blanchot here in reading Rilke somewhat against himself, since the position could be developed along other lines.
It may have been somewhat misleading for me to characterize this earlier as a form of afterlife. This would not be “afterlife” so much as inner-life, a way of understanding love’s continuity that softens the distinction between life and death. While Rilke develops this in the *Elegies* with reference to the voices of the dead, post-mortem subjective experience is not his primary concern, and may actually be superfluous to the account. The focus here is the standpoint of one who reels from—or anticipates—the loss of their beloved, and insists on how the beloved can yet live *for them*, despite the reality of loss. To approach the matter this way escapes many of the perennial troubles faced by more metaphysically ambitious claims for afterlife, while also attempting to preserve some of their practical benefit.

Yet by that minimalism, this account could also smack of sophistry. In its basic contours, one could read it as just a tortured restatement of the old cliché that the dead live on in our memories. Without elaboration, it is not obvious why this should console us, because it trades upon an equivocation of “live.” To the extent that another must live in your memory, you may be reminded that they do not live in actual fact. The invisible influence of another, their presence in absence, can be a meaningful part of love because we also anticipate a return to real presence, without which their influence, along with love itself, may wither. If we are to lean upon Rilke’s notion of inner transformation to sustain the integrity of love under anticipation of death, we would need a more robust conception of memory than either the *Elegies* or his subsequent letters can offer. For such a conception, we would do well to return, perhaps surprisingly, to Freud.

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As a way of working back into Freud, I would like to distinguish between two kinds of memory relevant to the question of how the dead may “live on,” which I will designate as archival and formative. These were already implicit in the discussion about how we are to understand the operation of inner transformation in Rilke, whether it happens through the verbalization of praise or its motivating love, but I can introduce them most succinctly by reference to another philosophical dialogue set in a country walk, Plato’s Phaedrus.

Toward its conclusion, Socrates spins a myth about an Egyptian god named Theuth who claimed to have discovered a cure (pharmakon) for forgetfulness in committing things to writing. But the trouble with writing, Socrates says, is that while it may look like a means for remembering, it is only good for reminding. A memory of something would be etched on yourself, whereas a reminder would be etched on something outside yourself, keeping your own slate, as it were, clear of whatever is being reminded. Because of a reminder’s externality, reliance upon it may actually induce forgetfulness.\footnote{Phaedrus, 274c–275b. The use of pharmakon is important here, because it can mean both medicine and poison.} Plato’s high concept of memory makes him stingier with the term than our ordinary language would be, but he nonetheless suggests a useful contrast that we can develop in regard to our different ways of remembering the dead.

Archival memory’s paradigmatic case is the preservation of artefacts and various remains, transcriptions of a particular time that may sustain a sense, however illusory it may be, of the way things once were. This sense of archive is an elaborate version of the promise of writing as understood by Socrates, as well as what I called a project of “world transformed into word” in Rilke.\footnote{This is a grossly simplistic rendition of archives, a topic which has attracted sustained reflection in scholarship over the last twenty years or so. Here I am just making a first pass that attempts to represent a popular view, as it could be connected to the cliché of living on through memory. For a more rigorous account, one might begin with}
of “symbolic immortality,” whose most conspicuous instances are the province of the rich and powerful, like giving enough money to have a building named after you on the campus of an august university. But this happens in subtler, more everyday practices as well. In recent years, for instance, some people have seized upon the extensive possibilities for the capture and storage of information with digital technologies to promote a practice called “lifelogging,” in which one diligently records each moment, particularly through pictures, and stores that data into electronic repositories. There are variations on the idea, but it is not uncommon to find suggestions that someday, after one’s death, all this data could be run through an algorithm sophisticated enough to produce an avatar with one’s own personality, including an ability to interact with one’s intimates.

Formative memory, by analogy with Socrates on writing, is an inscription not on something external but upon oneself. On this point, however, the external-internal distinction shows its limitations and would be best viewed metaphorically, because we commonly think of memory as an explicit recollection of this or that into consciousness, and there is a sense in which ability to recall something to consciousness bespeaks its having been “written” onto one’s brain. Yet such writing would still be in the province of archival memory, for in this use, the brain would just be an imperfect hard drive. Formative memory is less about inner representations than a practical

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disposition constituted through one’s relation to another. Indeed, someone working from such memory may not even be able to give a coherent account of what they are doing. It is in the neighborhood of what psychologists sometimes call “implicit memory,” the kind at work, for instance, when you surprise yourself on a walk alone in noticing a particular shade-loving flower that your beloved has always had to point out for you. 293 Such memory happens in relationships through the ways in which love for another, over time, tends to shape our characters, to such an extent that they are literally impressed upon our way of being in the world. 294 We could think of this as a highly particularized version of social habitus, something that is not just rote habit but can produce new responses to new situations. 295 Contrary to the static externality of an archive, formative memory becomes so deeply part of ourselves that the things remembered carry on with a dynamism commensurate with that of our own lives. In other words, this memory is not purely retrospective; it launches us on our particular courses into the future.

The distinction between these modes of memory is far from absolute. Another problem with Socrates’ critique of writing is that it fails to note—ironically, given its compositional setting—how writing may itself be formative. 296 Indeed, this has been a major presupposition of my reading strategy thus far. But the distinction does provide a useful heuristic for approaching the question of how the dead may live on through memory. I would suggest that the most


294 While I emphasize here the positive processes through which formative memory develops, it would also be possible to explore the ways in which traumatic relationships with another can have similar effects.


296 What looks like a technique of archival memory may actually be for inscribing something upon oneself through the very process of writing or upon others through practices of reading that go beyond mere information transfer. An example given by Pierre Hadot is the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, a collection of writings not for the purpose of transmitting doctrine but for shaping the writer in accordance with doctrines he already knew.
familiar versions of this notion trade upon archival memory, and its relative externality is what makes the notion seem trite. While valuable for certain things, archival memory does little for the problem of love’s open-endedness, for an archive’s contents would be more or less static, present to us as they were but nonetheless devoid of the growth and change that characterizes ongoing relationships. Formative memory does not run against this problem. It offers a basic starting point for thinking about how relationships may not end after a loss so much as take a different shape. This is this sort of memory that seems to animate Rilke’s inner transformation, and the sort that Freud’s psychological theory provides such fruitful material for thinking with, even if we must read him against himself.

Were Rilke not to have needed upwards of ten years to formulate his response to the problem of transience and instead offered Freud the possibility of invisible resurrection on their country walk, Freud would no doubt have realized that his initial diagnosis of mourning had been incorrect. More accurately, the poet’s condition would be an articulate version of what he calls “melancholia.” For melancholia involves the same basic movement of turning inward after a loss, and importantly for this discussion, involves a sense of identification with the lost object. Indeed, Freud considers this to be love’s strategy for saving itself from extinction.

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297 One dramatic portrayal of this can be found in “Be Right Back,” (2013) an episode in the Black Mirror television anthology series written by Charlie Brooker.

298 Freud’s famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia” had been completed a few months before “Transience” in 1915, but he would not publish it until 1917.

299 SE 14:257. Cf. Robert Pogue Harrison, The Dominion of the Dead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 49–51, in which he speaks of Rilke’s project of internalization as laying the dead to rest in ourselves, as a burial ground of sorts.
In the transience essay Freud characterizes mourning as a refusal of loss after loss has already happened, even when substitutes are at hand. Melancholia is a more radical version of this, and we can understand it better by puzzling over this refusal. How can we meaningfully speak of such, if loss means an object is no longer there? In mourning, the refusal seems to pertain not to the loss as such but rather the substitute. The former object may be gone yet remain too fresh in memory for you even to think about substitutions. In melancholia, however, the refusal does indeed pertain to the loss. Instead of withdrawing affective ties, as Freud thinks we do eventually in mourning, you identify yourself with the lost object, such that you can feel as though the object has not been lost, at least not entirely. This identification consists of an affective and practical self-relation: you feel toward and treat yourself as if you had become the object. This identification needs no grand claims about metaphysical changes in selfhood. It is always partial. The self-relation implies that while part of yourself is identified with the object, part stands unchanged, at a distance sufficient to treat yourself as an object.

Yet this identification is not nearly as transient as the particular objects we love. One way of understanding identification would be as an indirect acknowledgement, through role performance, of how your character has already been formed through your relationships—to such an extent that who you are cannot be understood apart from who they are, or were. And in the affective intensity of a loss, identification would amplify the impression of the object into your character. I say “identification,” but Freud himself has a hard time settling on any particular term, also calling the movement “incorporation” or “introjection.” The reason he is drawn to

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300 SE 14:245–47.
auxiliary terms like these is that they speak to the end result of identification. What we know as our ego may just be a living mosaic formed from the shards of all our broken loves.301

Why would Freud not have suggested the formative memory of melancholia as a potential solution to the poet’s problems, sparing him several years of floundering? It certainly would not have been a mean-spirited holdout. Freud considers melancholia a serious pathology, for which he applies a key point from his general critique of illusion—namely, that the psychological maneuvers we use to avoid pain ultimately create more.

Identification with some beloved object may mitigate your sense of loss by keeping the object psychically present, but the mitigation too would be partial at best. The reality of loss has a way of making itself felt sooner or later. Melancholia would, in effect, combine an inescapable feeling of loss with the lost object’s presence. This combination was what I described above as an end of love asynchronous to the end of I or you, an end which may upset our sense of love’s open-endedness. Freud reports first noticing melancholia in how some people express moral self-critique after suffering a loss, beyond the commonplace regrets for how they conducted themselves while their beloved was alive. Upon close scrutiny, their critiques actually seemed to be meant for the lost object, although directed at themselves.302 If melancholia can prompt critique of oneself-as-object, it may be because, by that asynchronous end, melancholia can transpose the brute fact of loss into a sense of abandonment or betrayal. This would mean that attempting to preserve a sense of love’s open-endedness through melancholia, as Rilke seems to do, just substitutes one problem for another.


Like mourning, melancholia may cease after a time. That does not necessarily mean, however, that inward transformation would be better suited to the long term. Our ability to undertake the perspective play of treating ourselves as an object betokens what Freud calls a “split” in the ego, which, most pointed in melancholia, may be part of an ordinary and more lasting intra-psychic conflict.

The conflict allegedly occurs between the ego and what Freud eventually calls the “super-ego” or “ego ideal.” That too, on his account, has been formed through the history of our identifications with others. Indeed, the process works much like what he described in melancholia, with the main difference between the ego and super-ego, in respect to identification, being the latter’s antiquity and depth. The super-ego is constituted through our oldest, most intense relationships—in particular, though not exclusively, the people who raised us. Freud sometimes speaks of this as our ego ideal because one of its most salient features is its contribution to our basic moral psychology. These relationships form in us the pre-reflective ideals that comprise what is sometimes called “conscience,” that inner voice of self-scrutiny that alerts you to how well you are upholding the ideals. It is not a far step to here from the analysis of

303 SE 14:252.

304 Meissner notes that while Freud tries to distinguish the processes of their formation through different tracks of identification, his account is wooly and only becomes more so as he tries in later years to get ever more mileage from the theory. “Notes on Identification. I. Origins in Freud,” 586.

305 On this point I depart from Freud, who hitchs the formation of the super-ego to the Oedipal complex. On his account, the first object of one’s love is the mother, and the first identification is with one’s father. See The Ego and the Id, SE 18:31ff. This would be a special sort of identification, an immediate identification that did not begin as an object of love that we lost. One of the most basic troubles with this account is that he does not consistently distinguish the different types of identification, such that privileging so-called “immediate” identification seems somewhat stretched. A deeper problem, which commenters have long-noted of Freud’s psychological theories, is its exclusive orientation around the developmental experience of boys. Moreover, it fails to account for the variety of ways people can be raised as children, and how they may exercise a similarly formative influence upon us. There may be defenses that psychoanalysts may mount for Freud’s particular configuration of the Oedipal complex, but I wish not to muddle the discussion of the super-ego by considering them. For our purposes, simply pointing to the relationships of our personal antiquity will do.
melancholia. In both, we have a two-perspective view on ourselves, in which one perspective stands apart in judgment on the other. Those who have made the most lasting impressions upon you in your development are, on this view, literally the “higher natures” or supreme lawgivers that you might feel within yourself.306

You may have had a perfectly supportive, downright doting, relationship with your caregivers, making this conflict seem a little far-fetched. Still, Freud suspects that all conscience, at bottom, is bad conscience. As in the analysis of melancholia, he observes a tendency toward self-criticism that can be disproportionate to what conscience may objectively require. The reason for this, he hypothesizes, is that the super-ego is the center of activity for that mysterious function of the psyche he called the “death drive.” Recall from the second chapter that this drive for the utter peace of self-cancellation tends to turn outward and manifest itself as aggression. When we must check our aggression—as indeed everyday life requires—the circle is completed with that aggression turned back against the yourself, transposed into guilt.307 Even if we do not trace this back speculatively to a secret wish to die, this tendency of conscience could be seen as a self-undermining quality of psychic life, a rivenness that resists easy resolution.308

All in all, to press so insistently for internalizing our lost beloveds, as Rilke does, would to Freud amplify our attention to such psychological dynamics and perhaps even contribute to them.

306 Ibid., SE 18:37.

307 SE 18:53-54. In this, he follows Nietzsche’s account of guilty conscience in The Genealogy of Morals so closely that, were it not for the main conceptual inventions here, we could accuse Freud of the crudest plagiarism. The guilt he has in mind is not necessarily guilt for any particular misdeed, but a more generalized sense of personal shortcoming.

But to stop there would be incomplete. Grim as our psychic lives can sometimes be, you might wonder whether conflict must be all that characterizes these different perspectives we take upon ourselves, even in circumstances that arouse anticipation of death. Encountering the more sanguine view of Rilke could encourage this, and the over-reach that we saw from Freud in “Transience” provides some basis for regarding what the poet offers as more than just a masterful embodiment of naïveté. In the same vein of how I read that essay, I would like to propose that Freud’s understanding of formative memory has potential for consolation that he does not acknowledge, at least not readily.

One short essay of Freud’s, which has received scholarly attention more in proportion with its size than its theoretical consequence, actually presents overtures in this direction. The essay, simply titled “Humor,” has the additional interest of being published in the same year as The Future of an Illusion (1927). That no scholar seems to have appreciated how they form a tensive diptych in Freud’s approach to consolation is mostly understandable. The essay’s explicit purpose is just to update the account of humor that Freud first articulated more than twenty years earlier in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905). With his theory of the super-ego in hand, Freud realizes that he can resolve a question that lingered in the earlier work—namely, what psychological activity allows us to take up a humorous attitude in ourselves, without the external assistance of hearing someone else’s wisecrack.

Of particular interest for him is how we could adopt such an attitude in decidedly non-humorous circumstances, when we feel death to be near. In the essay’s most prominent example,
Freud, ever the jokester himself, asks readers to imagine a criminal being led out to the gallows on a Monday morning, who says along the way, “At least the week’s beginning well.”

What makes such humor possible, Freud hypothesizes, seems to be a play of perspective that he calls a transposition of “psychical accent” from the ego onto the super-ego. The perspective play comes through the prisoner’s knowing double-speak, in which he blatantly disregards the situation at hand, while slipping in a sober acknowledgment that he knows exactly what is going on. In this moment, he inhabits both the perspective of a concerned participant and, even more, that of a superior who treats his concerns like an adult would those of a child. Because the acknowledgment of reality is so indirect, it allows our frightened selves to rebel from reality, to effect a momentary “triumph of narcissism” in asserting the embattled ego’s invulnerability.

All this may account for humor, but it also opens a new line of thinking that Freud only acknowledges with a shrug, never to be addressed in subsequent work. It suggests that the conflict between ego and super-ego is hardly intractable. And in their newfound concord, the super-ego acts as a consoler through supporting the ego’s illusion. Freud’s closing statement repeats this point, as though in disbelief at what he has discovered. A rebellion from reality through illusion in the service of consolation, Freud notes, ordinarily results in some kind of pathology, but not in the case of humor. Quite the contrary, it is a valuable attitude that serves us well, even if we cannot account for why. He seems to be at such a loss because the terms of his account of consolation are all the same, with a reversal in the overall evaluation.

310 SE 21:164.
311 GW 14:389.
These expressions of puzzlement notwithstanding, possible explanations for this reversal are readily available. The most obvious would be that humor provides an indirect course toward the same ethic of reality acceptance that Freud champions elsewhere, since it seems to have much the same practical outcome. The prisoner would presumably make the joke while walking upright, without otherwise making a fuss, almost with an air of dignity. Perhaps the path of humor helps one to sidle up to grisly realities like impending death that would otherwise be too difficult to bear. Or perhaps humor would play a subtle trick on our relentlessly pleasure-seeking unconscious, masquerading an occasion for sorrow as an occasion for pleasure—a bit of sugar-coated arsenic, if you will.

Perhaps. Freud sticks by his puzzlement because this otherwise obvious line of explanation would neglect the very point that leaves him so mealy-mouthed: despite what we observe in the prisoner’s behavior, humor marks a persistent rebelliousness in spirit toward reality. Somehow, humor allows us to have our rebellious cake and accept reality, too.

A better explanation for the different evaluation of illusion may be that this case actually suggests an altered conception of illusion and consolation, for which the terminology of Freud’s critique is ill suited.

To speak of the prisoner’s humor in terms of rebellion is not inaccurate, but nor is it complete. It portrays the humor as an aimless attitude of negation toward the grim stretch before death, a cruder and less aspirational version of the wish for immortality to quell ravaging transience. Instead of aimlessly resisting reality, illusion here seems to mean a reframing of reality. This could look like aimless resistance in how it mutes important facts of the case. But this muting comes less as outright denial than transposition. A shift of psychical emphasis onto the super-ego, whatever else that may mean, involves a perspective shift on those facts that makes them seem like slightly different facts. Such reframing seemed to lie behind Rilke’s own undertheorized shift
of emphasis from transience to transformation. What changes are not the facts so much as your relationship to them.

This reframing complicates Freud’s overworked opposition of acceptance to rebellion because this particular perspective shift does not require the prisoner to choose between a first-personal stake in life’s continuance and a third-personal acknowledgement of an inevitable end as just another mortal rational animal. Humor would show that these two perspectives need not be enclosed within their respective logics, but may actually adopt language that would seem most appropriate within the other, producing the jest from that very incongruity.

And as illusion comes to be a matter of reframing reality, consolation begins to look much less like an assuaging, imperfect substitution for dissatisfied wishes. Instead, it principally involves an attitude of reconciliation between heterogeneous aspects of ourselves. Even as Freud prattles on in the familiar terms of narcissism and assertions of the ego’s invulnerability, the chief action of interest is the newfound companionship between the super-ego and ego. Consolation here would certainly consist of a momentary stay in the intra-psychic conflict discussed a moment ago, but its significance runs deeper. One of the discomfiting things about anticipating death, as I argued in the previous chapters, is that the different perspectives we may take upon that anticipation lend themselves to conflicting ideals. Whereas the first-personal perspective of the ego may promote an attitude of rebelliousness or even denial, a more distanced perspective, such

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312 Excellent discussions of these perspectives may be found in Thomas Nagel, Mortal Questions and The View from Nowhere. It would be a misreading of Freud to reduce the ego and super-ego to perspectives we may take upon our lives, because they are more like distinct, though related, functions of the psyche. But there is a strong perspectival element in these functions, especially for the super-ego, which by definition surveys our lives as though from above, even while being firmly “within.”

313 One of the most prominent theories of humor explains it by reference to play upon incongruity. A classic source of this is Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, pt. I, sec. 54, Ak. 332–33.

as we find in the super-ego, may suggest a sober acceptance. In much of everyday life, the tension between them may be hardly noticeable, but in the most intense moments of anticipation, it may become so sharp as to press us into siding with one over the other, thereby landing us in a sense of alienation from ourselves. The consolation of humor, on this Freudian account, would not suggest that the losses of death are anyhow less real, but rather that ultimate losses need not ripple back into penultimate losses—that we may face death with a sense of integrity, in the sense of holding together.315

You may have noticed that this discussion of humor and consolation has taken us afield from the concern with loss of another and a putative contradiction between love and death, so prevalent in Rilke’s Elegies. Instead, it returns us to the main theme of this study in a prospective concern for the loss of one’s own life. Yet as I suggested in the first section, there are important ways in which these concerns feed upon one another, and the analysis of melancholia actually suggests an even deeper significance for the consolation that may be had in gallows humor.

By referring to a “switch in psychical accent” from ego to super-ego, Freud’s account of humor in face of death points to another sort of process that would rely upon the work of incorporation. We would effectively occupy the standpoint of those we have loved and lost and then, in a sense, regained. From that vantage, we/they speak in terms that have the same effect as assurances that all will be well, come what may. If this proves consoling, the reconciliation of conflicting perspectives would only be its most basic, formal element. The more important thing, especially in light of the poet’s concerns in “Transience,” may be the ways in which this suggests an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead, taken to a new level. In this visitation of

our dead, we could feel, perhaps for the first time, that just as they continue to matter to us, we continue to matter to them. As we helped them to maintain a share of this life, so they await us as death’s human face.

To describe these dynamics on the level of their significance, it is hard not to veer into a mythological register. Yet nothing about this implies that our dead “really” speak to us. What I am describing here involves an illusion we construct for ourselves, whose efficacy need not diminish upon being recognized as such. The voice of consolation would be our own, while also being another’s, since the voice in which we speak to ourselves would be a voice formed in us through our very real relationship with that other. How we think of this, to follow Freud’s terminology, may simply be a matter of emphasis or framing.

By taking the perspective of your lost loved ones, you may be rehearsing your own death—not your own dying, but actually being-dead. And in that rehearsal, you encounter what you will have become, someday, for your loved ones who survive you. Perhaps just a memory trace, an echo wheezing its way into the outer dark. But perhaps a constitutive aspect of their very being, present to them despite the ravages of transience, lending them support at just the moment when they feel most forlorn.

As they are, so shall you be: in this analogical notion that may discomfit when viewed in terms of the most brute facts, we may find, by the slightest shift of emphasis, the possibility of consolation. For on this basis we may reframe the object of anticipation. No longer an end full stop that brings our projects of love to nothing even in the here and now, it rather becomes a process of change that supports love’s open-endedness.

Are these dynamics present in every instance of humor? Likely not. This is just an analytical enlargement of one particular case that Freud identifies. But it provides an entryway into thinking more expansively about consolation and the shape of anticipation. More important
is whether these dynamics may be present only in humor, or whether this localized case stands as but one particularly salient example of a broader psychological activity that we could cultivate. A problem with looking to humor for consolation, after all, is that it too can be quite transient, leaving us back in despondency as soon as a swell of laughter dissipates. The crucial thing here may not be any particular expressions of humor but rather the attitude that gives rise to them. This analysis suggests that the attitude is characterized less by a momentary lack of seriousness than a settled disposition to unite contraries. In particular, it unites the contrary perspectives we may take upon our mortality, and more distantly, puts anticipatory retrospect in service to the very projects it might have undermined.

Suggestions for how we might further articulate the intricacies of this attitude are unfortunately nowhere to be found in Freud; his remarks on humor stand as an outer limit of his theory, beyond which it may have had to become something else altogether—something better articulated by a poet.

4.

Fittingly, Rilke provides some of the most vivid guidance on this complex attitude toward death in his own depiction of a country walk. It comprises most of his Tenth Elegy, the final poem of the cycle and one that has long befuddled interpreters. The trouble has to do largely with the ostensible resolution that the Seventh and Ninth bring to the speaker’s problem with transience. Anything more could seem like a dilution spurted from the bottomless reservoir of a mind that does not know when to quit.316 The impression of superfluity is embellished by the departure in

316 Such is the opinion expressed by Komar, “The Crisis of Consciousness in Rilke’s ‘Duineser Elegien,’” 153. Komar goes so far as to suggest that one could rightly wish that Rilke had stopped with the Ninth.
this poem’s style from those that came before; in depicting a country walk, it drops lyrical
meditation in favor of an allegorical narrative or parable.317

But the dialogical reading I have pursued in this chapter offers a way of viewing this
strange poem as an essential contribution to the cycle, one that brings it to an apt conclusion. Just
as the Seventh and Ninth enact formal revisions to the speaker’s approach to transience voiced in
the First, we could read the Tenth as an intertextual revision to the walk depicted in Freud’s
essay, which crystallizes some of the cycle’s main problematics. By this I imply nothing about
authorial intent. For all we know, Rilke never read “Transience.” My suggestion instead pertains
to the construction of a continued exchange between Freud and Rilke in the minds of readers
who hold their texts side by side, much as I have been doing throughout this chapter. Whether or
not Rilke had Freud in mind, the text makes revisions all the same.

Its revisions consist of a supplement to the mythological lisps from the previous section,
along with an approach to a serious problem still lingering from the earlier discussion of inner
transformation.

The supplement develops what I mentioned in closing the previous section—that taking
the perspective of your lost beloveds rehearses your being-dead and so reframes the analogical
thinking of anticipation, as they are so shall you be, into something that may console. Rilke does
this by returning one last time to that elusive character (or class of characters; they may have
been different in each instance) who has appeared at the most pivotal moments of the Elegies, the
young dead. He makes this character the protagonist of his country walk, and we would do well
to trace and examine the principal moments of its itinerary, for its chief work consists in leading
us along.

317 Narrative elements do appear in earlier poems in the cycle such as III and V, but nowhere as thoroughly.
It is not initially clear in the poem that the protagonist is the young dead. Indeed, no character occupies the poem initially, but just a rolling observation of a place called “Pain-City.”³¹ eight One of the very first noted features of the city is the “consolation market” that abuts the church, hawking ready-mades for passersby. This market alone hosts activity; the church, says the speaker, is shuttered like a post office on Sunday. This pairing of the two sites suggests some relation between them, much in keeping with how “consolation” and “religion” have frequently been defined in tandem.³¹⁹ The details of the relation are undefined—whether, say, the merchants set up shop after noticing the church’s vacancy, or perhaps put the church out of business by offering a product more suitable to consumer demand—but the consolation market seems to function as a stand-in for the church, performing shadow liturgies of cheap assuagement. The speaker mentions these places as a way of introducing the Angel into this poem, musing that such a being could stamp out the consolation market without remainder.³²⁰ While it may be that we are to imagine a cosmic zap leaving behind a smoky crater, it may also be that the Angel’s arrival would, less violently but no less thoroughly, put the market out of business by showing its customers an altogether different approach to their sufferings.

Passing by the consolation market and through the city, we finally come to a string of billboards that mark its outer limit. They are covered with posters that read, “Deathless.” As with the market, what function they serve out there is not specified, in part because, as before, the

³¹ This format keeps with the German elegiac tradition, which commonly begins a walk in a city of corruption and takes its protagonist to the countryside, where moral insight may be attained. The classic example of this tradition is Schiller’s poem “Der Spaziergang,” which Freud himself may have had in mind by reimagining the setting of his conversation with Rilke. See Theodore Ziolkowski, The Classical German Elegy, 1795-1950 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³¹⁹ On this relation see chapter 2.

main function of this detail is to establish contrast with what the speaker introduces alongside it. Just behind those billboards, on the other side, is the real.\textsuperscript{321} Marking the border between the city and the real in this simple fashion suggests at once that the real is quite accessible and yet equally susceptible to being obscured by the flimsiest of devices. And here too, the poem follows a common view of consolation, so evident in Freud, as the quintessential activity of turning away from the real.

Are we to view the real here as coextensive with death? Do the billboards mark an outer threshold for life itself? The poem’s subsequent development makes a straightforward answer impossible.

On one hand, the answer seems to be clearly “no,” because immediately after these remarks, the speaker notes, “Weiter noch zieht es den Jüngling.”\textsuperscript{322} (The young man is drawn further still.) Suddenly, it seems that the survey leading out from the city was following the perspective of a particular character. And nothing has changed for him aside from a minor adjustment of location; the very notion of being drawn further suggests a thread of continuity with his journey out of the city. What draws him, the speaker hypothesizes, is love—in particular, love for a young Lament.\textsuperscript{323}

\textsuperscript{321} X.34–38. “...Oh aber gleich darüber hinaus, / hinter der letzten Panke, beklebt mit Plakaten des ‘Todlos’, / jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint, / wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreuungen kaun..., / gleich im Rücken der Planke, gleich dahinter, ists \textit{wirklich}.”

\textsuperscript{322} X.41.

\textsuperscript{323} X. 41–46. As they walk together through the fields, she tells him that, far out there, she lives with others. The young man follows behind, in raptures, speculating that perhaps she comes from a noble lineage. “Weiter noch zieht es den Jüngling; vielleicht, daß er eine junge / Klage liebt...Hinter ihr kommt er in Wiesen. Sie sagt: / — Weit. Wir wohnen dor draußen... / Wo? Und der Jüngling / folgt. Ihn rührt ihre Haltung. Die Schulter, der Hals —, vielleicht / ist sie von herrlicher Herkunft.” I read this as a moment of subtle, self-deprecating humor on Rilke’s part. Despite suffering from occasional dry spells in poetry, he neverflagged in his other well-honed art of cultivating the patronage of wealthy women.
On the other hand, the young man has a moment of doubt, and turns back. This turning comes at a stanza break, after which the speaker notes,

Nur die jungen Toten, im ersten Zustand
zeitlosen Gleichmuts, dem der Entwöhnung,
folgen ihr liebend.”

(Only the young dead, in their first state
of timeless equanimity, in that of weaning,
follow her lovingly.)324

Someone still alive, this turn suggests, may peek outside the city of vanities but never leave decisively, their love for a Lament amounting to nothing more than a fleeting crush. One must be dead to follow Lament wherever she may lead. This appearance of the young dead is mostly consistent with the First Elegy, in which they noted the strangeness of their new condition, still being weaned from their former lives. But the quality of “timeless equanimity” adds something here that goes beyond the inveterate cliché that, once dead, people enjoy everlasting peace. This particular phrase has more immediate resonances with the therapeutic paradigms of ancient philosophy, describing the end result of a properly performed consolation.325 While “timeless” may seem to pertain to the permanence of being dead, it may also refer to a fundamental condition of the consolation, namely, that it suspends ordinary senses of time.

These resonances of the language are worth our attention because while the poem could seem to indicate a shift change in its protagonist, the young man and the young dead may in fact

324 X.48–50.

325 Rilke could have used “Friede” instead of “Gleichmut” and even preserved the meter. For most ancient Stoics, consolation would be successful when one had achieved a state of apatheia, which does not mean “apathy” in our contemporary usage so much as a state of calm, untroubled by violent passions. For an excellent analyses see Martha Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), chap. 10: “The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions”; and Richard Sorabji, Emotion and Peace of Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181–97. For the Epicureans, its success would mean the achievement of ataraxia, literally “untroubledness,” which is closely related to apatheia in its sense of tranquility. Here too, Nussbaum provides illuminating analysis in Therapy of Desire. See chap. 6: “Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature.”
be the same character. One bit of evidence lies in the language describing the young man’s putative departure. His turning actually involves a series of movements: leaves her, turns back, wheels himself around, waves, and asks, “What the hell? She’s a Lament.”326 The first two clearly gesture toward the city, and its own inward turn upon itself. If the point were only to turn back, these movements would suffice. By including the second two, the poem suggests new resolve, completing a full turn with a wave to signal that he really is coming, if only the Lament would wait up. Further evidence appears in how, just after the young man seems to have been replaced by the young dead, he turns up again, now posing many questions to one of the older Laments who inhabits the valley where they live.327

Once we gather that the young man is dead, it could seem that this final poem spins a myth of afterlife, based around dwelling in the invisible. For the young dead’s tour through the landscape of Laments passes by things mentioned in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies that we could transform into the invisible, such as the columns of temples or trees with their tender leaves, here transposed as only the dead can see them.328

But we should not become too cozy in this reading. Nothing definitively indicates that this is the land of the dead; it is merely the land of Lament. Indeed, the young dead himself does not really seem to belong there. His early-death vision is deceptive, not having adjusted yet.329 And

326 X.46–47. Aber er läßt sie, kehrt um, wendet sich, winkt . . . Was solls? Sie ist eine Klage.

327 X.55–56. “Aber dort, wo sie wohnen, im Tal, der Älteren eine, der Klagen, / nimmt sich des Jünglings an, wenn er fragt[...]” This reading departs from Kathleen Komar and others, whose interpretation of the Tenth Elegy separates these characters. See Komar, Transcending Angels, 182. In defense of their position, one might propose that this latter mention of “der Jüngling” actually refers to one of the young dead. But that would require an explanation for why Rilke would have used the same term as before. This may seem like splitting philological hairs, but the point has great significance for the poem’s interpretation and how we may think constructively with it, as I show below.

328 X.62–63. “die hohen Tränenbäume und Felder blühender Wehmut.”

329 X.81–82. “Nicht erfaßt es sein Blick, im Früh Tod / schwindelnd.”
just as we might have looked for him to take up residence somewhere on that landscape, we find that he has come to another threshold, signaled by the remark, “Doch der Tote muß fort […]” (The dead one must go on.)330 As before, the threshold comes with a change in the protagonist’s designation—now no longer “young,” just “dead.” The threshold appears at the foot of a gorge, shimmering in moonlight, on the far side of the land of Lament. It turns out that the old Lament can take the dead only that far, and a gloss from a speaker suggests why: the gorge is the source of joy. Of all places, we certainly would not expect to find a Lament hanging around there. But she recognizes how well-suited it can be for human beings, noting that it is, for us, “ein tragender Strom” (a carrying torrent).331 The protagonist’s destiny, we learn, is a solitary ascent in the mountains of primal pain that form the gorge. And with the beginning of that ascent, the narration comes to an end, as though the speaker’s limits coincide with the Lament’s. Perhaps that gorge is the entryway to afterlife. But if so, we are given nothing else to know of it: “nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los.” (Not once does his step resound from the soundless fate.)332

Presented with the gorge as a figure for the destiny of the dead, we must return to the first threshold, the city limit, to reconsider the significance of the young dead. The first articulations of invisible transformation in VII and IX suggested a two-sided world, the visible or external (which you inhabit while living) and the invisible or internal (which you might inhabit once dead). As I already mentioned, Rilke’s letters state this quite explicitly by comparing the invisible to the dark side of the moon, death as the side of life permanently turned away. But the young dead’s

330 X.97.
331 X.101–2.
332 X.106.
journey through the land of Lament presents a subtler configuration than even Rilke the commentator realizes. It suggests what I would call an intermediate zone between life and death, a zone in which they blur together, with death taking hold but still incomplete. Unlike the second threshold at the gorge, the poem’s imagery casts this one as highly artificial, marked as it is by an array of cheap billboards that one could stumble past unwittingly.

The notion of “intermediate zone” could conjure topographies of limbo or purgatory, but I have something different in mind. Think of this zone instead as an afterlife before death. When the poem blurs two characters at this threshold, the young dead and the young man, we could simply take that as a new piece of information that tells us the young man had been dead all along, or perhaps died in passing by the billboards of deathlessness—as indeed my reading thus far suggested. But we could just as well read this as a zone that we could inhabit with a beating heart. The designation “young dead,” in other words, may be somewhat figurative here, denoting a shift in attitude more than fundamental being. After all, the poem’s only explicit distinction between the two characters is an act of will to continue following the Lament. It is at that point that the young man acquires the designation “young dead,” and even then, the speaker continues to refer to him as a young man immediately afterward.

Earlier, I proposed that the Tenth Elegy provides a supplement to the mythological lisps that Freud’s essay on humor cannot voice full-throatedly, and this figure of the young dead, traversing an intermediate zone of life and death, constitutes one of its most crucial aspects. In the initial discussion of transience, I noted that vivid anticipation of death can cultivate a sense of being dead already, which may in turn undermine our sense of love’s open-endedness and with it, the vigor of love itself. This figure provides a way of reframing that anticipation. Breaking through our presumptions of deathlessness may instill a sense of being dead already, landing us in a condition of lament. But by following lament unreservedly, you may find your anticipation
transfigured—finding that even if you are dead, you have been plunged at the same time into a different register of life. You both have and have not died, and realizing this, you may have some of that “timeless equanimity” attributed to the dead.

The complexity of this attitude is important. It accepts, as radically as can be, the inevitability of death while still rebelling from the putative finality of that condition. It elevates the bifocal perspective upon our lives and deaths that Freud characterizes as part of the ordinary split in our psyche between ego and super-ego to the level of conscious meditation.

To count yourself among the young dead would consummate your identification with your beloveds who have died. Dead already yet living still—as Rilke puts it in one of his sonnets to Orpheus, “ahead of all departure…a ringing glass that, in its ringing, already shattered itself.” Their death being a figure for your own, so may your ongoing life be a figure for theirs. This space beyond a simple opposition of life and death may be the product of capable imagination, a reality that exists for us only as a lively figure in our minds, but that could nonetheless help us to sustain love against the dissipations of transience.

Counting yourself among the young dead may also serve as a rehearsal for what you will be for those you love after your own, quite actual, death. As such, it would offer another type of practice in thinking a coincidence of death and presence. But we must take care in how we articulate this, because like I also mentioned earlier, a serious problem still lingers from the previous discussion of invisible transformation. The problem is this: we who transform our beloveds are also transient, and this makes transformation, in the long view, look rather like mere deferral.

\[\text{Sonette an Orpheus, 2.13.} \text{ “Sei allem Abschied voran…Sei ein klingendes Glas, dass sich im Klang schon zerschlug.”}\]
On first glance, the closing moment of the poem’s narrative, in which the protagonist ascends the mountains of primal pain alone and soundlessly, provides little guidance for how to approach this problem. Indeed, it could supply further difficulty. The poem’s language, in keeping with the established pattern, marks the threshold by changing the protagonist’s designation one final time. In the end, he is not just dead, but classed among the “endlessly dead” (die unendlich Toten). And the narration stops with an abruptness that could suggest, after having exhausted the make-believe of labelling ourselves “young dead,” a final descent into nothing. Touring the land of Lament would seem to be part of the weaning that the young dead must undergo, raising the prospect of an invisible life only to show that this was an illusion with which we might sustain ourselves on the way to utter dissolution, something that, when it comes to ourselves at least, we would do well simply to face and accept.334

In this gesture of apparent challenge to the project of transformation, the Tenth Elegy strongly resembles a critical voice that presses through strongly in the Eighth. Commentators like Heidegger have gravitated to this poem in their accounts of the Elegies and the cycle’s attempt to limn a union between life and death, focusing on its figure of the Open in particular.335 But the poem introduces such figures wistfully, as that which we cannot attain: “We never have, not one single day, / the pure space before us, in which flowers / endlessly blossom.”336 Among living creatures only animals live with their deaths behind them, moving as though in eternity.337

334 This is the basic argument in Pettersson, “Internalization and Death,” 741–43. Similarly, see Paul De Man, Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 52–56.

335 This appears throughout the essay “Wozu Dichter?” See, for examples, Poetry, Language, Thought, 106.


Coming between the Seventh and Ninth—with their rollicking over the possibility of transforming everything transient—this reads as a swing toward uncertainty. More than uncertainty, even: chastisement. By leading the protagonist of the Tenth through a landscape of transformed objects, only to be taken into a lonely departure from them all, the cycle would seem to swing back to that same voice of negation, concluding not with a grand vision of invisible transformation, as it would with a finale in the Ninth, but a sober acknowledgement that such visions are just that, nothing more.

We should not stop with this apparent conflict, however. One of the broad lessons I suggested we take from Freud’s humor essay was the possibility of reconciling conflictual aspects of ourselves, without necessarily harmonizing them. In that moment of reconciliation, voices that may otherwise conflict come together to help us to flourish under the press of death’s anticipation. So may it be on the level of this poetic work. It would be a mistake to cast this tension as a forced choice between viewing either VII and IX or VIII and X as the poem’s definitive voice. Both tendencies exist within the final stretch of the cycle, as indeed they likely do for anyone facing their own end, and it would be presumptuous to suppose that the final note determines the meaning of the whole. We might rather train our thoughts upon how this polyvocality works together to achieve something that neither voice could alone.

As it happens, the final notes of the cycle, when considered more deeply, themselves soften the choice, performing a further way in which these ostensibly conflicting voices may combine.

That silent scene at the final threshold does not stand alone; it recalls some significant moments from earlier in the Elegies. The torrent, you may remember, also appeared in the First Elegy as a figure for the union between the realms of the living and dead, and again in the Seventh with the speaker’s insistence that his own voice—the voice of one who could accomplish
in invisible transformation of transient phenomena—is a torrent against which the angel could not advance.\textsuperscript{338} The Seventh also points toward the significance of the gorge. Recall that the speaker realized the folly of trying to secure himself through wooing a single lover, because the call could not be limited; it would also summon the dead.\textsuperscript{339} The same sort of suggestion actually appears in the Third, presenting a gorge as the place from which the dead would come: “Loving, / he climbed down into the older blood, in the gorges, / where the frightful lay, still belly-full on the fathers.”\textsuperscript{340} These two figures, torrent and gorge, come together in the Sixth Elegy with an additional figure, the mothers of heroes. The speaker addresses them, “O source / of ripping torrents! You gorges, into which / high from the heart’s rim, wailing, / have young women already plunged, prospective the sacrifice to the son.”\textsuperscript{341} These connections make it highly significant that in the final moments of the old Lament’s tour for the young-dead, just before he approaches the gorge, she surveys the stars that hang over that pained landscape, concluding with a constellation of a shining “M,” which she says stands for “Mothers.”\textsuperscript{342}

The cumulative suggestion of this symbolic web is that the Tenth Elegy does indeed sketch a journey into the invisible, the place from which the dead rise within us in our loving. The narrative breaks off not to indicate a descent into nothingness, about which nothing more can be said, but because what there is to say has, in the previous poems, been said already. The

\textsuperscript{338} VII.89.

\textsuperscript{339} VII.30–33.

\textsuperscript{340} III.57–59. Liebend / stieg er hinab in das ältere Blut, in die Schluchten, / wo das Furchtbare lag, noch satt von den Vätern.

\textsuperscript{341} VI.39–42. “o Ursprung / reißender Ströme! Ihr Schluchten, in die sich / hoch von dem Herzen, klagend, / schon die Mädchen gestürzt, künftig die Opfer dem Sohn.” It is worth noting that the action of “reiß” was also attributed to the torrent at I.84.

\textsuperscript{342} X.94–96.
The protagonist’s next steps would be in the journey of those who come after him. The reference to mothers suggests, in fact, that passing into the ranks of the endlessly dead may be gathered under a rubric of *birth*. What looked like an outer limit from within Pain-City turns out to be just one moment in an ongoing cycle of natality, not an end full stop but a next step continuous with what has gone before. That helps to explain why neither of the threshold moments say anything about when and how death happens for the protagonist; doing so would frame the matter incorrectly, focusing on its least relevant features.

To read the protagonist’s journey from young man, to young dead, to dead, to endlessly dead, to transformed invisibly in those who live on afterwards, admittedly, requires some imagination, for that journey is quite lonely; no one appears on the scene in whom the protagonist will be transformed. But the penultimate stanza, just after the narrative breaks off, shows that they are implied:

Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis,
siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren
Hasel, die hängenden, oder
meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im Frühjahr. —

( - - -
look, they would perhaps show catkins in the empty
hasels, those hanging, or
they would refer to the rain, which falls on dark earth in springtime.)

I left the first line momentarily untranslated because one must select from a number of possibilities it creates through impacted syntax. Not uncommonly, translators have rendered it

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343 This seems to put Rilke in line with feminist critics of Heidegger who emphasize natality over mortality. Much of this work has been informed by Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality, questioning philosophical preoccupation with mortality to the exclusion of the fact of being born. See especially Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, 3 vols. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004–10) and Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Gillian Rose is also a critic of Heidegger and Blanchot who draws upon some of these possibilities in Rilke’s *Sonneten an Orpheus* but generally leaves the *Elegies* alone. See *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 145–46.
like this: “But if they, the endlessly dead, were to awaken a parable in us.” The subsequent lines encourage this, since they invoke two memorable images that the dead might indeed awaken. But that does not exhaust the line. Note the placement of the two pairings (they–us; the endlessly dead–a parable) side by side. This syntax makes their grammatical relation unclear. Plausibly, the second pair may be an apposition to specify the first: “But if they, the endlessly dead, were to awaken in us, a parable…” And reading the grammatical relation in this way brings out a resonance of the verb that is somewhat muted in the more straightforward approach. What many translate as “to awaken” can also mean, more distantly, “to resurrect.” As the site of resurrection, we would see our own lives as a parable for the ongoing life of the dead. I noted in the second section that there is some tension in Rilke as to whether invisible transformation happens through verbalization or through the embodied work of love, and this line provides one way of including verbalization within love. We ourselves would be the living words that speak the dead and continue their life in ours.

The two images highlight something important about anticipating death with what I have called formative memory. Neither image is comprehensible apart from its falling; even before the catkin loses its fibrillar hold on the hazel, its hanging posture alerts us to its fate. Yet in their falling is their fruitfulness. The catkin relinquishes itself to become a sapling; the sapling grows by rain vanishing into the thirsty ground. Neither can remain, but their dying is a dying into the other. The turn toward inward transformation in the Elegies marks a change in the speaker, as I

344 Here I roughly follow Poulin’s version: “Yet, if those forever dead were waking an image / in us.” Gass basically reproduces this interpretation: “Yet if the eternal dead were to wake an image in us.” As my alterations suggest, “image” is a lousy translation for “Gleichnis.” For that meaning, Rilke could have used “Bild” and even preserved the line’s meter.

345 We might hear in these images a biblical allegory of resurrection: “Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it can bear no fruit,” Jn 12:24.
noted in the second section, from a posture of seeking rescue from his own transience to one of rescuing his beloveds in their passing. Although the reciprocal possibility of this transformation suggests that the speaker might actually realize his erstwhile hope for rescue, no mention is ever made of this. The reason, if we take these images as a guide, may be that contributing to the formative memory of another through love involves a willingness not to be preserved, at least not archivally. In contributing to the formative memory of another, the point is not to have them remember this or that detail about you, not even your name. It is to love them, and so shape their very being. The emphasis is on their life, not yours. By giving up the hope of preservation, you might be freed to focus on the work of love, and thereby attain the only preservation within your reach.

That asymmetry between transformation of oneself and another, however, could seem to ratchet up that lingering problem with the transience of transformation itself. Try as we might to cultivate a willingness not to be preserved ourselves, that may be difficult if we regard ourselves as the site of our lost beloveds’ resurrection. Would giving up hope for your own preservation mean that you give up hope, in the long run, for theirs?

In a way, yes. Our lost beloveds could not mean to others in the future, who will never have met them, what they have meant to us. Formative memory happens in a relationship with another, most paradigmatically in sharing embodied presence for some period of time. This implies that, unlike promises of heaven, the revised sense of afterlife that comes through inner transformation may last for a generation or two and then vanish entirely, if not into nothingness then into an invisibility deeper than we can reliably access. As we go down, we go down together. Part of the challenge in this may be to adopt the perspective of your lost beloveds even more radically, to realize that if you have been formed by them, it may well have been through their own willingness not to be preserved, and in letting them go through your own passing, you
continue them until the last flourish. But make no mistake: approaching afterlife in this way stirs an irreducible sadness.

We must keep in mind, however, that the problem with transience is not our inability to preserve our beloveds or ourselves for all time. It is how anticipation of inevitable passing can undermine the open-endedness of our love. What inner transformation affords us is an ability to affirm that our love—mine for you, yours for me—can last as long as we do. We may desire more, surely. But to flicker until snuffed, love may require nothing more.

Should we call this consolation? The final quatrain of the cycle leads toward this question and then taunts with its coy refusal of definition:

Und wir, die an steigendes Glück
denken, empfanden die Rührung,
die uns beinahe bestürzt,
wenn ein Glückliches fällt. 346

(And we, who think of rising happiness,
would feel the emotion,
which nearly dismays us,
when a happy-thing falls.)

The first and fourth lines set up a contrast for two different ways of thinking about happiness, as rising or falling. Conspicuously, the very term “happiness/happy” sets up its own threshold, with rising on the left and falling on the right, as though the indeterminate emotion gestured to here were on the other side of happiness, distant from customary ways of thinking about it. By the contrast between the first and second lines, with their use of “happiness” and “emotion” each in the emphatic position of the final word, it seems that whatever this undefined emotion may be, happiness it is not. “Dismay” in the same position of the third line helps to reinforce this contrast, while also qualifying it somewhat with “nearly”; the fall of a happy thing need not dismay, even

346 X.111–14
though it will come close. And if it comes close, it may be because the fall stands at a transition point between two ways of thinking, one, on the near side of the threshold, that lends to dismay and another you find to be different, if unnamable, after the threshold.

Consolation, on the account I have been developing, is about helping us to flourish as we live up to anticipated ends. This may help to assuage our sadness, but it may not. Assuagement is not the foremost consideration. Indeed, as I suggested indirectly in the discussion of Freud, the consolation that emerges through formative memory would come, paradoxically, through one’s very resistance to consolation, an insistence upon having a loss, whether actual or anticipated, impress itself upon you indelibly. This recalls how the term appeared in the First Elegy’s final line, where the speaker alluded to a possible coincidence of lamentation and consolation—the possibility that lamentation may in fact be a condition of consolation.347 To leave the emotion unnamed at the close of the cycle may not be due to a refusal of consolation or even a loss for words, but rather a strategy of concentrating upon the formative impression of a fall, resisting the ways in which names might distract.348 To be consoled, in this case, would be to find oneself able to make a full-throated affirmation that our love may indeed be eternal, while we last.

I have insisted on being frank about the sadness that may be an irreducible element of this consolation, sharing Freud and Rilke’s worry about the pernicious effects of trying to insulate ourselves from the shadow sides of our experience. But it would also be worth considering the possibility that formative memory would not necessarily be so limited as I suggested above. Given that invisible transformation of your beloved involves seeing yourself as them, continuing the chain by being transformed yourself may nonetheless instill a sense that your beloved is being

347 I.91–95

348 Recall Stevens’s line from the previous chapter: “The consolations of space are nameless things.” Reference page.
transformed again with you, as you. On the flip side of this, when we allow another to impress themselves into us, the imaginative task, in part, may be to see them as a conglomerate of selves, a condensation of loves that stretches back farther than we could trace. With the transformation of one would be an implicit transformation of all the others. At the start of this chapter, I suggested that consolation may involve challenging the notion that the continuity of life is required to think the continuity of love. The initial scope of this was quite limited—pertaining only to my particular life and yours, and the particular love we share. But the importance of continuity may extend to love as such. Knowing that our love shall inevitably end, concurrent with the end of us, we may find our investment in this particular love emboldened further by the thought that our love, passing though it may be, contributes to a chain of transformation that will exceed us, as it always has.

Formative memory may not even be limited to adjacent links on the chain. Recall how the speaker of the Seventh Elegy realized that his call to a particular lover could not be limited, because it would imply the dead. And the dead who respond would not just be those the speaker had loved once and then lost; some would reach him for the first time from the grave. Whatever else this image holds, I take it to imply that we may have relationships with the dead spanning great temporal distance—that there is no telling with whom and how and when formative memory may take hold.

Barring unexpected visitations from a nimbus, the principal vehicle of this relationship may actually be archival memory. I wrote this off earlier as irrelevant to love’s open-endedness, but that was mostly to concentrate our attention on a less familiar way in which the dead may live on, not to convey a firm split between the formative and the archival. Though it would be mistaken to seek archival preservation to uphold the open-endedness of particular loves, we could nonetheless treat archives like love letters awaiting future persons whom their authors could
never know personally. In treating them as such, archival memory may shade into formative. What the dead have contributed to their archives may shape us so profoundly that we undergo a process in the neighborhood of inner transformation—seeing them as inhabiting us, in a present they never foresaw. The voices love implants within us ever proliferate.

There is much to commend thinking expansively enough about formative memory to include the archival. Not least, it may attune us more fully to how writing fits into the account of consolation that I have been developing. In resisting an interpretation of Rilke that would locate his inner transformation in verbalization, I followed his lead in treating the poetry as an exalted form of testimony about an extra-textual reality. But surely more can be said about the role of writing—poetic writing particularly—in consolation before death. Beyond exalted words-about, surely the words themselves can be the thing, the consoling act. The presence of a distant other through archival memory, their companionship in your trial, may be one important form of this. What further nuances might this add to the attitude of consolation? Might our concern for distant others create further problems for consolation as well, ones that exceed the Freudian critique? In pursuing these questions we must leave off from country walks and plunge instead into far less idyllic territory.
Chapter Four: Love Archival, Across the Gaps

Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,
Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
That due of many now is thine alone.\(^{349}\)

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Consolation, on the account I have been developing, is about flourishing as we live up to anticipated ends. And throughout this study, I have emphasized that how we anticipate death has much to do with imagination and memory. Because it can be so hard to imagine our own death, the deaths of others whom we remember give imaginative shape to what we anticipate for ourselves. In the previous chapter, I considered how one important aspect of flourishing before death is affirming the possible open-endedness of our loves despite vividly imagining our own end—affirming, in a sense, that the continuation of our lives may not be required for the continuation of our loves. What I called the formative memory of our beloveds can instill confidence that our love with them may be eternal, while we last. Contrary to the way “consolation” often appears in ordinary speech, this is not about assuaging sadness. Given that melancholia serves as one banner instance of formative memory, I suggested indirectly that the consolation I am talking about may come, paradoxically, through resistance to consolation—consolation in the ordinary sense, that is—letting loss, whether actual or anticipated, impress itself upon you indelibly.

I concluded with a few broad suggestions that this chapter will develop.

Although my account of formative memory was fairly limited, concerned only with my particular life and yours and the particular love we share, I suggested that it need not be so

\(^{349}\) William Shakespeare, Sonnet 31.
limited. Since formative memory of your beloved stretches into what Rilke called inner transformation, seeing yourself as your beloved, the next moment in a temporal chain of transformation—in which you yourself are formed into another who sees themselves as you—may instill a sense that your beloved is being transformed again with you, as you. Awareness of this kind of chain may have allayed Augustine’s fear, articulated in the chapter’s epigraph, that by dying his lost love may die again. On the flip side, when we allow another to impress themselves into us, our imaginative task, in part, may be to see them as a condensation of loves that stretch back farther than we could trace. Transform one, and you implicitly transform many others.

Formative memory may not even be limited to adjacent links on the chain—that is, lives that overlap in time.

Recall that I developed my account of formative memory by distinguishing it from what I called archival memory. Formative memory concerns the incorporation of another into your very character, the ways in which you not only regard yourself as your beloved, but also develop habits or aptitudes that may be traced back to them. As I noted before, this is the mode of memory at work when you surprise yourself on a walk alone in noticing a particular shade-loving flower that your beloved always had to point out for you. Archival memory’s paradigmatic case is the preservation of artefacts and various remains, transcriptions of a particular time that may sustain a sense, however illusory, of the way things once were. Whereas formative memory embodies another in yourself, archival memory seems one step removed—memory about the person, various details of their life, pictures, things they wrote or built that remain.350 I finessed

350 The archival mode may not only trade in memory-about. The allure of an archive may stem from the impression that objects associated with someone bring you closer them. Indeed, by magical thinking one might treat the object as if it were actually the person.
this distinction into an opposition because discussions of how the dead “live on through memory” too often focus on the archival mode, when the more or less static nature of archives, devoid of the growth and change that characterizes ongoing relationships, may not help the problem of love’s open-endedness.

But this formative-archival distinction is at best relative and mobile; it cannot be sustained absolutely. Formative memory may require some support from an archive, and archival memory may itself become formative. On that latter possibility, just consider the influence that your favorite authors have exercised over you. Encountering the archives of their lives and works, you may experience them—I do, at any rate—as so many love letters awaiting future persons whom their progenitors could never know. What the dead have contributed to their archives can shape us so profoundly that we undergo a process much like Rilkean inner transformation, seeing them as inhabiting us in a present they never foresaw.

The voices love implants within us ever proliferate.

Softening the distinction between memory’s formative and archival modes may attune us more fully to consolation’s relationship to writing. In the previous chapter, I resisted an interpretation of Rilke that would locate inner transformation in the act of verbalization—taking cues from Rilke’s own self-understanding of his project—and that resulted in treating the Elegies as an exalted form of testimony about an extra-textual reality. But surely more can be said about the role of writing, poetic writing particularly, in consolation before death.

Beyond exalted words-about, writing may help to constitute the thing itself, not least by allowing distant others to accompany and guide us in times of trial. Indeed, among the things

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351 Here I am assuming that your favorite author is not someone you happen to know personally, but someone who is likely to be at a distance, perhaps even dead. In this I may be projecting my own tastes for volumes that have begun to yellow at least a little.
that could be classified under archival memory, writing may be uniquely formative. \textsuperscript{352} Sit for hours at someone’s desk, contemplate their fixed gazed in a photograph perched on the corner, and you may gain a vague sense of proximity and inspiration; sit for hours with what they wrote at that desk, and you find yourself thinking their thoughts after them. Thoughts that, despite their age, may arrive within you glisteningly fresh, and reorder your ingrained patterns of inhabiting the world—your very notions of the world itself. Language is never ahistorical, of course. Diction, syntax, grammar, and the like all bear the mark of particular times and places, often conspicuously different from our own, and for that reason, the memory carried in writing has an irreducibly archival quality. It is memory about someone, a step removed from them, sometimes too far removed to come under their sway. Yet in strong writing—writing that attempts to grab its readers by the collar and lead them this way or that, the writing we find most consistently in poems—formative memory may always lie in wait. \textsuperscript{353} There is no telling in advance what sort of text, however alien, may insinuate itself into your life. We might say, then, that between archival and formative memory, language stands as a \textit{tertium quid}, allowing us to bridge across gaps of time and form a communion between the living and the dead that extends well beyond our fleshly associates.

\textsuperscript{352} Let me emphasize “may be.” Other kinds of works that reach us through archival memory can also have formative effects, like how a painter or photographer teaches us to see, or a composer teaches us to hear. I have no intention to make exclusive claims about the memory work of writing. Yet I find myself among those who consider language a constitutive aspect of humanity, such that our character has much to do with the language(s) we inhabit.

\textsuperscript{353} By “strong writing” I do not simply mean “good writing.” Most basically, I have in mind a quality of profound persuasion that is not present in, say, a grocery list or the operation manual for your internet router. Although poetry often exemplifies this, it may not always, and other forms of writing may have it as well. The category is admittedly squishy and hard to apply with consistency. It may work more like a retrospective claim, a report on how some piece of writing, whatever the genre, has affected you.
But just as the overlap of archival and formative memory creates possibilities, it also creates problems for anticipation of death, and the chief task of this chapter will be to work through them. In my erstwhile focus on the problem of love’s open-endedness, you may have gotten the impression that memory should be taken as a straightforward source of consolation, at least in relation to our beloveds, for it keeps alive our sense of the love between us. But memory may not be so straightforward. Archival memory’s concern with the particular details of another’s life, the things we remember about them, may in certain cases upset whatever consolation we gain in our awareness of mutual formation. For the particular details we remember, even about good people we love, may rightly unsettle or even horrify.

Thus far in the study, I have approached questions about anticipation of death somewhat abstractly, as anticipation of the mere fact that someday, somehow, we will die. That is, I have framed death in terms of mortality. But archival memory’s concern with particular details presses for a long-overdue refinement in that approach: to concern ourselves not just with the fact that someone will die or has died, but also how—the conditions of dying that lead to death. If consolation is about flourishing as we live up to anticipated ends, our reflections need to encompass the full scope of that interim.

You and your beloveds, of course, may have been fortunate enough never to have met with horrifying conditions of dying. Plenty of people go peacefully, comfortably, dignified (fill in your own ideal of a good death). But the potential scope of archival memory, encompassing people we did not know and events we did not experience ourselves, ensures that horrifying conditions of dying can occupy our memory and anticipation even amid good fortune. In fact, attending with any thoroughness to the archives of collective memory as we now have them may ensure that such conditions not only can but will occupy our memory. As scholars of memory studies have noted, there was a veritable “memory boom”—a widespread practice of preserving
the past through museums, memorials, historical programming, and so on—that began in the early twentieth century, rapidly accelerated in its second half, and continues in our own time, made possible by new archival technologies, and motivated by how that century’s industrial-scale wars and atrocities produced corpses beyond accurate measure, in previously undreamt and ghastly manner.354 Amid the memory boom, one event that has received special attention is the Shoah; this attempted erasure of an entire people, many have argued, generated an imperative remember so sweeping that the historian Pierre Nora could remark, “whoever says memory, says Shoah.”355 Scholars debate the extent to which recent cultural obsessions with memory stem entirely from this particular atrocity, but that is not my concern here. Nora’s point seems more basic, and yet more poignant for the question of consolation through archival memory. I take him to mean that past events, the Shoah especially, can loom in the mind like a monstrous building aflame in the night, such that they jut into view through merely glancing in their general direction. After enough time has passed, of course, such events may but flicker faintly on the horizon for many people, prompting questions of their contemporary relevance. But it is hardly clear that we have moved on from the social systems that made the Shoah possible.356 Even if we had, the testimonies that ever reach us through archival memory, testimonies shaped in language that shape us in turn, would still place us on the threshold of the gates, puzzling over how on earth “work makes free.”


For the purposes of this chapter, I am going to assume that Nora and others who insist on the ongoing relevance of the Shoah are basically correct. What concerns me will be a challenge that comes along with this assumption for any proposal about consolation through poetic writing. Among reflections on the legacy of the Shoah, one of the most famous statements is Theodor Adorno’s dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” What exactly Adorno meant has long been debated; the dictum is enigmatic even in original context. However understood, it places a general burden on any postwar claim for poetry’s consolation to show how it is not blind to the wreckage around it, not ultimately barbaric.

Material for doing just that, as well as for refining our sense of the problems that archival memory of the Shoah creates for consolation, comes in how Adorno revisits the dictum in his late work *Negative Dialectics* (1966).

In his own paraphrase, Adorno sides with interpreters who read the dictum as a direct prohibition on writing any more poems. And on that he admits to having overstepped. Indeed, he even takes the prohibition back. However, this is the sort of concession one makes only to double down on the spirit of an initial claim. People can go on writing poems after Auschwitz, he says, because suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured person to their scream. In

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358 The dictum seems mostly to encapsulate a meditation on the inability of culture, and poetry as culture’s paragon, to transcend barbarism any longer, but it could also read as an outright ban on writing any more poems. At minimum, we could understand it as a salubrious check on the strange tendency people have after devastating events to bleed verse, especially when at comfortable remove.

359 This does not necessarily resolve the interpretive debate about “Cultural Criticism and Society.” In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno could be just seizing on how the dictum had entered into postwar conversations, rather than making a statement about what he originally meant.

other words, poetry can have a place only after we reduce our understanding of it to a mere expression of suffering, only by giving up claims for a vision of order despite the wreckage, healing despite the wound. This conception of poetry, we might note, actually keeps with the etymological sense of “barbarism,” which comes from an ancient Greek epithet that parodies the sound of foreigners’ incomprehensible, gibberish-like speech—sound that has definite shape, without a bridge into sense.\(^{361}\) And by making this backhanded concession, Adorno can then pivot to an even weightier claim that bears on consolation: regardless of whether we can go on writing poems, we still ought to wonder, with the memory of catastrophe before us, whether we can go on living.\(^{362}\)

To understand the nature of this problem, it helps to first consider whom Adorno includes in this “we.” In his words, the problem falls to those who escaped by chance, who would have had to be killed.\(^{363}\) This pertains most obviously Jewish émigrés like himself who fled Nazi Germany before getting caught in its spiraling death machine, or those who were caught but somehow survived. But Adorno seems to have a more expansive vision of who may count as a chance escapee. At times he drifts into speaking of a problem for “the living” pure and simple, as though it befalls even those who were safe from the catastrophe.\(^{364}\)

Chance escape can indeed be an expansive category. Like the previous chapter’s guiding problem, it encourages a sort of counterfactual imagination that brings death vividly to mind even when it may be distant.


\(^{363}\) Ibid.: “wer zufällig entrann und rechtens hätte umbegracht werden müssen.”

\(^{364}\) GS 6:356.
An escapee’s basic thought runs something like this: *Were circumstances otherwise, circumstances that were beyond your control, it could have been you who had that fate.* Actual survivorship—having been one of the few selected for a travel visa, say—undoubtedly activates this thought in the most vivid possible way. Still, the counterfactual could lead our imagination into more distant, yet no less relevant circumstances that also could have been otherwise: geographic location, for instance, or perhaps even racial identification. Were you in a different place, it could have been you. Born to different parents, it could have been you. As temporal distance between us and the catastrophe grows, archival memory brings elements of the past into the present in ways that could press the counterfactual imagination of chance escape even further, into considerations about our location in time. Had you been born in 1925 instead of 1985, it could have been you.

To think this way might be philosophically dubious. For if things had been so radically otherwise, it may not have been you at all, properly speaking, to suffer that fate. “You” would have been a different person entirely. But philosophical propriety may not diminish the affective punch of the counterfactual. It would stem from a well-founded appreciation of how our selves as we know them are constituted through innumerable contingencies, just like the selves who were extinguished, and this appreciation creates the possibility of seizing upon any shared contingency to build an imaginative bridge between their selves and ours. Something like this appears in the British poet Geoffrey Hill’s short “September Song,” a meditation on the death of a child deportee who shared his birthday. Spliced into the meditation is this parenthetical remark: “(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true.)”

Hill implies that vivid awareness of a shared contingency in their birth helps him to imagine their sharing contingent conditions of dying—

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forcefully enough to write an elegy for both of them together, as if when one went down, both
did, or at least may have.

You may or may not feel the affective punch of this counterfactual in your everyday
routine. With temporal distance comes the possibility of engrossing ourselves in other concerns.
But it lies dormant, just waiting to be stirred, in the imagination of everyone at this point in
history. We are all chance escapees. This is the wisdom that underlies Adorno’s insistence on a
problem of living for “the living” pure and simple. To be sure, those who actually escaped
underwent a singular experience that we latecomers of good fortune cannot just think our way
into, and acknowledging as much may be the other side of wisdom here. But that does not
diminish the possibility of a problem that boils over from the confines of that experience. The
more distant sense of chance escape becomes especially salient when approaching the
catastrophe through archival memory—as we increasingly must, now that the last survivors are
well into senescence.366

Why would chance escape force a question of whether we can go on living? Would not a
better response be exuberant gratitude at the fact that we are living at all? Adorno offers three
suggestions in response, and following them will help us better to understand the challenges for
any post-Auschwitz turn to poetry for consolation.

First of all, imagining the counterfactual vividly enough could give life an insubstantial
quality. Adorno muses, as one who speaks from experience, that people aware of their chance
escape may occasionally dream that they were in fact killed in 1944 and have only been living as

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366 On the archival imperative that senescence has brought to efforts to remember the Shoah, see “Digital
Immortality for the Holocaust’s Last Survivors,” The Economist, accessed March 7, 2017,
a wish-fulfilling imagination of people killed decades before.\textsuperscript{367} Compare this with the problem that animated the previous chapter. If the poet on Freud’s country walk was haunted by an anticipatory image of the death that someday \textit{will have been}, Adorno encourages us to be haunted by an image of the corpse we \textit{might have been}. The counterfactual is oriented differently in time, but it produces roughly the same result: an interruption in one’s present—a sense, rooted in imagination of another time, that one is now not quite alive. Its challenge to consolation also follows the same basic outline. Whatever else flourishing up to death may mean, it surely includes living, in a way recognizable to us as living, until we live no more. But by pressing the question of whether we can go on living, Adorno seems to confront the possibility that chance escape could corrode “living” as a meaningful category.

His second suggestion is of a piece with the first. The problem of living does not consist entirely of an unsettling retrospect, for that retrospect may project itself forward and reshape anticipation of our own manner of dying. On the heels of thinking you could have suffered that fate, a corollary may follow: \textit{who can say it never will}? Even if structural conditions of your location in time make it highly doubtful that the calamity, in exact detail, would be repeated for you, remembering like a chance escapee would make it difficult to bracket the possibility from your future altogether. At minimum, the memory would attune you to variations on the theme. The philosopher Susan Brison calls these “post-memories” of other people’s suffering that shade into “pre-memories” of your own, memories that constitute a lens through which you interpret suffering when it actually occurs.\textsuperscript{368}

\textsuperscript{367} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 363. GS 6:356.

\textsuperscript{368} Brison develops the point with regard to women and sexual violence, but she adopts it from earlier work on writings after the Shoah. See Susan J. Brison, \textit{Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 86–87. For the concept of postmemory, see for example Marianne Hirsch, \textit{The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust}, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press,
On first blush, post-memory may not seem to present a problem for living so much as a practical imperative to ensure that the remembered suffering never repeats itself. Adorno himself notes that Hitler imposed a new categorical imperative on humanity, namely, not to let anything like Auschwitz ever happen again.\textsuperscript{369} At the same time, his meditations—grouped under the capacious title “Dying Today”—insist that what happened in the Shoah can now affect the dying of everyone, whether or not similar circumstances ever again obtain. Just as transience is the basic background condition for all our loves, Auschwitz threw open further background conditions for thinking modern death specifically, giving a shape to anticipation marred by our location in history.

In Auschwitz, Adorno claims, death became something different, something one never before had to fear. Or rather, it redirected our fear of death to something worse than death, something that he calls, a bit abstractly, the decline of “continuous experience.” By continuous experience he means the notion that human beings have a stable core of their existence, which some might be more accustomed to designating as “soul.” With that notion one may have confidence that whatever happens to a person, including death, their personhood continues on unfazed. In the camps, however, one could witness deprivations that slowly put the entire person to death, such that no part of them remained transcendent, no part was not dying. Though occupying the withered husk of a former self, one would simply be gone.\textsuperscript{370}

\textsuperscript{369} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 365. GS 6:358. A similar sentiment appears in the report titled \textit{Nunca Más (Never Again)} authored by the Argentine Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, the group that investigated the fates of the desaparecidos under the military junta.

\textsuperscript{370} Ibid., 370–71; GS 6:363–65. Adorno’s language here is very spare and allusive, as though he counts on readers to recognize what he means by their own repositories of images and descriptions. In particular, he seems especially to have in mind the figure of the Muselmann—a term from camp slang for someone who is not quite dead but no longer alive, shuffling about in resigned listlessness, almost unrecognizable as a human being. This figure gets extensive
The decline of continuous experience, Adorno insists, undercuts the possibility of consolation. This could seem like a rehearsal of the widespread idea that consolation requires a literal expectation of life after death, given how he describes continuous experience in terms of a stable core of human beings. And there is something to that, because Adorno situates the decline of continuous experience as the last and decisive blow in a longer process of religious decline. Yet his inflection of the issue is appreciably different. Consolation, as some have understood it, relies on death’s “epic unity with a full life,” something that was always an illusion, but one that people in former days could sustain. No longer. Forget about what may come after death. The decline of continuous experience means that we vividly appreciate how life can be undermined before death, how death may come before dying.

This new face of death reshapes anticipation because it could be read onto more mundane processes of bodily decline. There is a chilling parity, Adorno claims, between a socially determined death and a biologically determined one, witnessed especially in the old


371 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 370. GS 6:363.

372 And this allows his meditations to remain relevant despite being couched in a now-outdated story of secularization as the mere retraction of religion.

373 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 369. GS 6:362. The statement is worth quoting in full: "Our current death metaphysics is nothing but society’s impotent solace [Trost] for the fact that social change has robbed men of what was once said to make death bearable for them, of the feeling of its epic unity with a full life." "Die gängige Todesmetaphysik ist nichts als der ohnmächtige Trost der Gesellschaft darüber, daß durch gesellschaftliche Veränderungen den Menschen abhanden kam, was ihnen einmal den Tod erträglich gemacht haben soll, das Gefühl einer epischen Einheit mit dem gerundeten Leben." Adorno clearly stops short of committing himself to the idea, even as he acknowledges its prevalence. One possible source of the view could be Max Weber's essay "Science as a Vocation," whose account of modern disenchantment includes a remark that people now have difficulty with dying because, unlike their forbears, they approach their end with little sense of rounding out a full life. See From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 139–40.
people we love. Their ailing bodies suffer the fate of the condemned. They slacken, droop, and crumble, all of their own accord, and yet this comes as through some slow-motion, invisible assault, whose chief instruments of destruction are their own ponderous years. Such a connection between socially and biologically determined death might seem unfamiliar, but Adorno is not alone in making it. Jean Améry, a survivor of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen, published a group of essays on aging immediately after writing a book on his experiences with detention and torture in the camps. Those essays explicitly reject the typical consolations invoked for the aging, on the grounds that in aging one becomes a stranger to oneself. Independently of these conversations, similar analogies appear in accounts by escapees of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, who have found the ordeal of dying in western hospitals analogous to what would have befallen them back home.

Of course, one would not have needed these atrocities to appreciate the pain of bodily decline, or even to see it as an interruption of “continuous experience.” Scholars who work on questions of death and dying have observed that death’s perceived unity with a full life had been on the wane for some time. Yet for those who regard themselves as chance escapees, the post-memory of these atrocities creates a sort of mnemonic paradigm, a reference point that alters subsequent encounters with death by attuning us to the subtle similarities between them. Indeed,

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374 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 371; GS 6:364. Adorno’s phrasing makes this parallel between the social and biological clear: “Was der Tod gesellschaftlich Gerichteten antut, ist biologisch zu antezipieren an geliebten Menschen hohen Alters.”


377 Drew Gilpin Faust shows how the American Civil War did a great deal to complicate erstwhile practices of consolation on this side of the Atlantic. See *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009); Sandra M. Gilbert, in *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve*, 1st ed. (New York: WWNorton, 2006), traces some of these issues in nineteenth century poetry.
that paradigm might aid us in recognizing how difficult it has become to distinguish between social and biological determination in dying. For all the disanalogies between the camps and modern hospitals, they have in common a deeply bureaucratic management of life and death, and in many cases, that management is what turns ordinary bodily decline into a decline of continuous experience.  

The third way Adorno suspects that chance escape calls living into question is by guilt. Here again, this seems most pertinent to those who actually escaped the machine, who might suffer from the phenomenon commonly known as “survivor's guilt.” But as before, Adorno has something more sweeping in mind. For any chance escapee, the condition of going on living requires a certain coldness, and without such coldness “there could have been no Auschwitz.” The drift of his language suggests that anyone who adopts this coldness, having a disposition that would make Auschwitz possible, really is guilty—perhaps, though he does not say this, by failing the new categorical imperative to make sure it never happens again. But I would prefer to suspend judgment on that. We can have subjective feelings of guilt that haunt us irrespective of our objective guilt, and when thinking about the question of whether we can go on living, the former would be trouble enough.

What exactly Adorno means by this coldness is unclear. One plausible way of understanding it would be as an attempt to go on living by turning away, to avoid the unavoidable memory or just to remember incompletely. Survivors have commonly felt an

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378 On this point, see Agamben, Sovereign Power and Bare Life, 160–80. Bureaucratic management of life and death cannot be blamed for every contemporary decline of continuous experience. Alzheimer’s disease represents one way in which we lose ourselves on the way to death. But even then, such management, by the all-things-being-equal positive effect of extending average lifespans, helps to create the conditions under which the scourge of such a loss may be felt throughout the population.

379 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 363. GS 6:356–57
imperative to remember, not least because the entire catastrophe could be seen as a sweeping
war on memory, most obviously on the memory of its victims but also on that of its
perpetrators.\footnote{Primo Levi, \textit{The Drowned and the Saved} (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 31.} It is so much easier to sleep at night after a hard day of killing when you retain
only the vaguest sense of what you have done—or what has been done on your behalf. And yet
some survivors have noted a keen sense of tension between their projects of remembering and
going on living.\footnote{Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Living up to Death} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23–30.} In part, the memory can just be too much to bear, such that one feels pressed
to choose between the two. Adorno’s language of coldness could imply this kind of volitional
dilemma. But one might also feel a tension between remembering and living in the recognition,
developed insightfully by writers like Primo Levi, that despite our best effort to maintain
memory, it is as frail and transient as our very bodies.\footnote{Primo Levi, \textit{The Drowned and the Saved}, 23–35.} Living brings at least some forgetting.\footnote{For a different take on this point, see Jennifer R. Rapp, \textit{Ordinary Oblivion and the Self Unmoored: Reading Plato’s Phaedrus and Writing the Soul}, First edition. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).} And even if memory would not crumble, we would still have limits on how many lost souls we
could hold in mind, a vanishingly small number by any comparison with the losses.

Making good on an imperative to remember, in short, proves exceptionally difficult.

One might attempt a way out of this difficulty by appealing to a more purely archival
memory. Memorials and museums have been built, records sought and preserved, and this helps
to compensate for our individual frailties—to ensure, despite them, an ongoing remembrance not
only of the fact that this happened, but also how, when, and to whom.

That is indeed a noble response, one worth maintaining. But it does not obviously slacken
the difficulty. For one thing, archives may but partly satisfy an imperative to remember. While
they allow us to affirm that “it is remembered,” the felt imperative may be more about affirming that “I remember.” In fact, resting content with “it is remembered,” by the somewhat depersonalized attitude it implies, could fall into another version of the coldness Adorno describes. For another thing, our archives are incomplete and may always be; the war on memory was effective enough that we can only estimate the number of the dead. Where we would look back in history and attempt to remember all those who were taken under, we find a caesura, an irreparable gap, where we imagine the faces that would have been there, the names we would have pronounced, and strain with futility against the everblank. Just as Auschwitz established a mnemonic paradigm of decline in continuous experience for individuals, it also severed the continuity of generations.

The problem with living—and consolation—that Adorno identifies for chance escapees could be summarized as a double bind of remembrance. We remember at once too much and too little: too much, in finding a decline of continuous experience even in the process of ordinary bodily decline; too little, in the discrepancy between our memory and all that is to be remembered. This puts any claim for consolation before death, through poetry or any other means, in a difficult position. But a way toward its recovery peeks open in how Adorno describes the decline of continuous experience.

Amid that decline, there emerges what I would call a paradox of discontinuity.

Consider this first in the case of remembering too much. Adorno presents the analogy between socially and biologically determined death with special reference to the old people we

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love, and this detail holds much greater importance than his breezy mention of it would suggest.

In the previous chapter, I discussed affirmations of love in terms of how they reach toward an open-ended future with your beloved. Here, a different orientation in time appears: a love that not only looks ahead, but that also surveys a history of togetherness, in which expectations of open-endedness have, thus far, been realized. From that orientation, suppose your beloved indeed suffers some breach of continuous experience. They seem to die before their body does, becoming unrecognizable as themselves, perhaps unrecognizable as a person at all. This discontinuity would no doubt inflict great pain. But the pain—inasmuch as it exceeds the sorrow we feel for any creature having to suffer such a fate—would grip you only because a deep continuity actually persists amid the discontinuity, namely, your memory of them. The pain would spring from the gap between what has been and what now is, a gap that opens like a wound.385 In such a moment, that continuity amid discontinuity may help to uphold your love. It may help you to reach across the gap, and affirm that this is the person love, even as, in another sense, they are not that person at all.

Something similar may apply on the level of archival memory. As with a beloved enmired in late unrecognition, the gaps opened through historical calamity may or may not be traversable. Yet love may guide you to reach across the gaps—toward where memory would have been, had the remains of these lost others not suffered erasure. The discontinuity may be nearly too much to bear for the very reason that we can at least imagine some continuity between us.

The case of remembering too little reinforces this paradox, even though Adorno’s meditations on guilt initially read as though they float free from the matter of discontinuity. To

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see how, consider a question that his allegations of guilt may prompt: before whom or what would we be—or just feel—guilty? I suggested that on Adorno’s account, the so-called new categorical imperative may be the clearest contender. In remembering too little, we would assume the coldness without which Auschwitz could not have happened and thus conduce, however indirectly, toward its repetition. While this has some prima facie plausibility, surely the guilt of chance escapees can be more complex, more personal. In remembering too little, we might feel guilty before everyone whom we have failed to remember. We might even feel guilty before those absent others whom we could not hope to recall from erasure. Unknown, but known to be absent, they stand as indeterminate petitioners in the dark, echoey halls of our mind. Whether this forgetfulness conduces toward a second catastrophe may seem like a distant concern compared with the thought that, in failing to recall these lost souls, we abet the first.

But to maintain a sense of guilt before those forgotten ones might cultivate a certain tie to them, even amid that discontinuity. Absent the ability to remember them specifically, the guilt may be a placeholder for a continuity we will never stop awaiting, an affirmation that despite the failures of memory, a certain continuity persists between us all the same.

The recovery of consolation made possible through this paradox of discontinuity may hinge on a practice of writing, which seizes on its bridge between archival and formative memory. Recall that Adorno framed this entire discussion with a particular conception of poetry. It only has a place after the catastrophe when conceived as like a tortured person’s scream—brutely expressive of pain, bereft and alone, without direction except toward the futile hope that sometime, maybe, it will stop. So much more is at stake than poetry in the legacy of the Shoah, but it comes up here, like it has throughout this study, as a flash point for working through larger issues around consolation before death. The fates of poetry and consolation seem mutually entangled. In response to Adorno, I would like to ask whether the problems he finds with living
might have something to do with the problem of writing. Could we find a way of living with the problems that he describes by recourse to another poetics?

To consider these questions, let us return to Geoffrey Hill, the poet I mentioned above as someone especially haunted by the thought of chance escape. Toward the end of his book-length poem *The Triumph of Love* (1996), a work just as obsessed with remembering the twentieth century’s horrors as Adorno, the speaker offers a sharply different vision of poetry:

\[
\text{I ask you:} \\
\text{what are poems for? They are to console us} \\
\text{with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.} \\
\text{Let us commit that to our dust. What} \\
\text{ought a poem to be? Answer, a sad} \\
\text{\textit{and angry consolation. What is}} \\
\text{the poem? What figures? Say,} \\
\text{\textit{a sad and angry consolation. That’s}} \\
\text{beautiful. Once more? A sad and angry} \\
\text{\textit{consolation.}}^{386}
\]

Hill’s obsessions are worth noting from the outset so that we do not receive these lines as the putrid fruit of a culpably untroubled mind. Still, on what basis, given the challenges Adorno has articulated, can this poem claim a consoling role for poetry? What would be the promise of a sad and angry consolation? The rest of this chapter will press more deeply into these lines with an eye to such questions.

Comparing the poetics of Adorno and Hill will obviously differ from the previous chapter’s conversation between Freud and Rilke. Only by spinning my own fiction could I depict a conversation whose central tension gets addressed in their subsequent work; this work arrives well after Adorno’s death, and it is not even clear that Hill ever read him. Then again, every

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386 Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, 285–86. CXLVIII. I will follow Hill’s convention of labeling the sections with Roman numerals, frustrating as it can sometimes be for just looking for a quick reference. As I discuss below, the willful difficulty that the poem embodies is a nontrivial element of its consolation. Further references to the poem will, for simplicity, cite the section number only. Section numbers will appear in text when the quoted text begins a section.
comparison has a fictive element. It forges a conversation in our own readerly imaginations, one that could have happened but never did before, seizing upon a shared field of concern, shared terminology even, in pursuit of insight that neither conversation partner could offer on their own.\footnote{I am by no means the first to notice an affinity between the Adorno’s concerns with postwar poetry and the writings of Hill, though no one, so far as I can tell, has pursued it at length, much less with specific reference to the problems around consolation. See Romana Huk, “Poetry of the Committed Individual: Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, and the Poets of Postwar Leeds,” in James Acheson and Romana Huk, eds. Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); David-Antoine Williams, Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 4; Antony Rowland, Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-Century Poems (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8 and 29; and Andrew Zawacki, “Review: The Triumph of Love,” Boston Review, February 1, 1999, http://bostonreview.net/poetry/andrew-zawacki-review-triumph-love.} Hill’s \textit{Triumph} is especially apt for an investigation of archival memory’s role in consolation for the very reason of its late arrival. It presents us with a poetic case study of what it would be like to reach across the gaps of time and memory inflicted by atrocity, in pursuit of something like restored connection.\footnote{It may be somewhat stretched to speak of a gap in time between them, since their lives overlapped for roughly thirty-seven years (Hill was born in 1932 and Adorno died in 1969). But the works I consider here are separated by nearly as much time.}

What it means for a poem to be a sad and angry consolation can only emerge through a close reading of this poem, but I can preview the gist of my argument here. Writing is hardly ever brutally expressive, especially when dealing with the past. It also constructs memory. In particular, working with guilt through attunement to history may work against the decline of continuous experience, supplementing the bodily limitations of formative memory, and sustaining a sense of connection that is important for the continuity of love. \textit{Triumph} enacts this through its distinctive literary form, a kaleidoscopic array of compacted allusions delivered in lines severely enjambed. Those allusions and enjambments offer a parable for re-establishing continuity across historical breaks, which, with the Shoah being the most exemplary of many other cases, may provide consolation amid the anticipation of breaks in the continuity of one’s
own experience. Such consolation may be sad, it may be angry, it could not pretend to substitute for what has been lost: and yet amid the devastations that haunt memory, it may also instill a sense of ongoing possibilities for connection, born of love.

2.

When a poem avers what poems in general are for, you could do worse than to approach it with an eye for how that poem fulfills—or indirectly qualifies—the purpose. And when its statement of the purpose is not immediately clear, as with *Triumph*, we should look for clarity in the wider context of the poem. However, any consideration of context will have to be selective here, because *Triumph* is considerably longer, not to mention more formally irregular, than the sequences by Stevens and Rilke. Much is happening alongside the notion of a sad and angry consolation—indeed, previous scholarship on the poem has neglected this feature almost entirely in favor of other matters—so I will exclude a great deal in focusing on contextual elements that help to elucidate it.389 But that choosiness will not lead to a lopsided encounter. As you may have gathered from the consolation passage already, this moment has outsize importance for the poem as a whole.

Let us first survey the whole at a glance. *Triumph* is a free-verse poem with one hundred and fifty sections of varying length. That number seems deliberate. It primes the reader for Hill’s obsessions with the Shoah and the political role of poetry by evoking the biblical book of Psalms, the songbook of ancient Israel, whose canonical version has the same number of discrete poems,

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and *Triumph* is very much in that modernist vein which generates meaning through dense layers of allusion—some explicit, some discernible only to a few with the right library of cross-references at hand.\(^{390}\) Perhaps we are to take this as a modern-day Psalter, a guide for worship by an undefined political community. It certainly shares with its biblical analogue a penchant for swinging wildly in mood from one section to the next, at times sweet-spirited, at others contrite, at others downright wrathful.

But the analogy goes only so far. The Psalter is a collection of standalone poems, and while the sections of *Triumph* often depart radically from each other in theme as well as mood, they clearly comprise just one variegated poem in their mutual reliance and repetitions.

This comes through clearly in the further numerology of the opening five sections:

I.
Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp.

II.
Guilts were incurred in that place, now I am convinced:
self-molestation of the child-soul, would that be it?

III.
Petronius Arbiter, take us in charge;
carry us with you to the house of correction.
Angelus Silesius, guard us while we are there.

IV.
Ever more protracted foreplay,
ever ending—*o Ewigkeit*—no act
the act of oblivion, the blown
aorta pelting out blood.

V.
Obstinate old man—*senex
sapiens* it is not. What is he saying;
why is he still so angry? He says, I cannot
forgive myself. We are immortal.

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\(^{390}\) The canonical count follows the Masoretic text. The Septuagint actually has one hundred fifty-one, but even then, its appearance is supernumerary; it is introduced by a note saying it is “outside the number.”
Where was I? Prick him.

By stacking lines that correspond in number to their section, the poem all but begs us to consider their relation. This is quite easy in some cases, like seeing how “that place” in which guilts were incurred (II) refers to the livid rain-scarp (I). Indeed, the guilts incurred trickle into the other sections, as in the “house of correction” (III) and the old man’s difficulty in forgiving himself (V). Altogether, the sections conjure an historically fraught landscape, revolving less around a surface of carefree undulance than the sedimented layers of deeds that form it, seen through the scarp’s cross-sectional gash. Less clear, however, are the relations among the voices in V. The one that begins the section seems not to belong in the larger sequence. Indeed, it enters as what Hill would call in a subsequent interview the voice of a heckler, who introduces self-critique into the heart of the poem.391 At this point, the heckler helps us to learn that the main speaker is a guilt-ridden, angry old man who has some vague notion of his immortality. But then, how do the old man’s ravings relate to IV? Could that protracted foreplay, seemingly unto eternity (Ewigkeit), be a sort of interminable anticipation of death, shaped by memory?

The poem’s most salient repetition ensures that readers leave with that question firmly in mind. In the final two sections, the first and fifth return with minor variations, in reverse order:

CXLIX.
Obstinate old man—senex
sapiens it is not. Is he still
writing? What is he writing now? He
has just written: I find it hard
to forgive myself. We are immortal. Where
was I?—

CL.
Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp.

Note the em-dash with which CXLIX breaks off. We could see this as a cue to remember and mentally insert the sections that originally came between these two, a compressed form that trains us to perceive absent members of a sequence in the citation of a few. Absence would actually turn out to be implicitness. Just how important this formal device is for the poem’s consolation will become clear in the next section. For now, just notice how this repetition constitutes the poem, on the level of gross structure, as an epanalepsis, a statement that begins and ends with the same word.\textsuperscript{392} In fact, the speaker prepares us to see the poem in such terms by naming this rhetorical figure early in the poem. But he does so through suggesting how the figure can reduce to political cant, the sort on display in Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement strategy toward Hitler and the phrase, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation.”\textsuperscript{393} Does the poem thereby incriminate itself, ironically, by its own use of the figure? Perhaps. This would be a way of reinforcing, on the formal level, the polyvocality of self-critique already built in with the heckler. But as with the epanalepsis cited in the poem, a frame of repetition may also be a vehicle for drawing attention to what lies between.

The consolation passage I am seeking to unpack concludes the poem’s antepenultimate section, the last bit of unique text before these closing repetitions. By that position, it acquires a

\textsuperscript{392} The repetition is not exact, of course. Between the first section and the last “a livid rain-scarp” has changed to “the livid rain-scarp.” Moving from an indefinite to definite article seems significant for a poem concerned with memory. It marks the remembered object as more distinct, perhaps even more personally significant to the one who remembers. Going into detail about what these subtle variations might contribute to the poem could be rewarding but would distract from the main line of reflection here. For our purposes, it suffices to recognize the basic repetition on the level of gross structure.

\textsuperscript{393} X. Hill quotes here from Isaiah 2:4 of the King James Version. With the devilish verve that appears at times throughout the poem, the speaker follows, “or ‘nation shall rise up against nation’ (a later / much-revised draft of the treaty).” That revision comes in each of the synoptic New Testament Gospels, Mark 13:8, Matthew 24:7, and Luke 21:10. Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister from May 1937 to May 1940, became infamous for his appeasement strategy toward Hitler.
formal prominence as great as its thematic interest. The difficulty of self-forgiveness and thoughts on immortality press even more deeply into what it would mean to be poetically consoled.

These are not the only formal considerations that may assist us. While the genre of this poem does not announce itself so immediately as a cycle with “elegies” in the title, we can still look there for clues. Indeed, with a title like *The Triumph of Love*, it may be hard to look anywhere else. Before opening the book, it would likely prime you to expect the sort of treacle on offer in the checkout line at your local Hallmark store: love faces hardships and setbacks, but come what may, it overcomes them in the end. How sweet! But even from the brief selections I have given, it quickly becomes clear that the title’s most obvious sense raises false expectations. Nowhere does the poem actually proclaim love’s triumph. If anything, love seems to be trounced. Subsequent sections unfold images of political intrigue and recollections of its victims, spliced into an overarching preoccupation with the Second World War’s murderous rampages. Appreciating this frustration of expectations, we might be tempted to conclude that the title must be ironic.

That conclusion would have merit. Well into the poem’s survey of the disasters of history, the speaker notes that all these abused figures have been drawn together as an offering “to the presiding / judge of our art, self-pleasured *Ironia.*” Indeed, the poem identifies itself at several points as a sort of political satire, one that trades in the art of *laus et vituperatio*, praise and blame. Whatever else it satirizes, the notion that love provides any easy assuagement for the deaths amassed in the political turmoil of history comes in for special abuse.

The title may be a pun, however, whose most important irony draws on a less obvious sense of “triumph.” Though now unfamiliar, the triumph of love was a once-common (if minor)

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394 CIII.

395 See sections XI, XXIII, XXVI, I, LXXXVIII, XCIII, and CXLII.
genre of literature and painting that, as far as I can tell, began in the Renaissance with the Italian poet Petrarch’s *Trionfo d’Amore*. Keep in mind that Hill’s poem is saturated with literary allusions. Although a great number of works bear the same title, I take Petrarch’s to be the primary reference because of other allusions to him, tacit and explicit, including one that casts *Triumph* as joining in the “struggle / for a noble vernacular: this / did not end with Petrarch.”396 If Hill’s poem works with a Petrarchan vision of the triumph of love, we should be surprised to find any claims for consolation at all. “Triumph” there evokes the *triumphus*, the victory march of the ancient Romans, when vanquished enemies would be paraded in line before a conquering general in a show of his power. The conquering love in Petrarch’s poem is not the sweet and sentimental figure of condolence cards but the raging god Cupid, who leads a cavalcade of the living and the dead, princes and paupers alike, who have been murdered or even brought about their own demise through acting on passion elevated into a semblance of moral imperative. Love’s triumph is their downfall. It would be the spur toward consolation, rather than its source.

Hill makes one significant departure from the Petrarchan form that furthers the impression that consolation would be out of place. Petrarch’s *Trionfo d’Amore* is just the first poem in a series of triumphs, each one overcoming the last: cupidity triumphed over by chastity, which is triumphed over by death, then death by fame, fame by time, and finally, in the end, all by eternity. The endpoint of these poetic marches is a vision of stillness and changelessness that resolves the ills they each detail. But despite the initial overture of *Ewigkeit* in IV, Hill promises no such end. The prospect of immortality, as we saw in the old man’s remarks from section V, seems

396 LXX. Here I differ with Zawacki, whose “Review” identifies the reference as Pierre Carlin de Chamblain de Marivaux's play *Triomphe de l'amour*, first performed in 1732. This is a strange place to stop, given the significant references to Petrarch, and the possibility that Marivaux was a latecomer to a genre already well under way. A recurrent feature of *Triumph* is a prayer to “Virgine bella,” with those words beginning the sections in which it appears. This is the first phrase in the final poem of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Wainwright shares my view on the allusion (*Acceptable Words*, 73).
only to promise more of the same. Later, the speaker plays on the idea of resurrection as well, alleging that we will “rise again, clutching our wounds.” This calls to mind images of the risen Jesus inviting his disciples to inspect the wounds that remained from his crucifixion, but “clutching” tilts these images toward an overriding theme of pain. Whatever immortality may do for us, it would include neither resolution of guilt nor healing, certainly not consolation. The only hope for assuagement may be in forgetfulness, suggested by the old man’s question, “Where was I?” But even that could—perhaps should—produce a second-order worry about reneging on whatever is owed through an affective semblance of fulfillment.

Nevertheless, thinking of the poem as a sort of Petrarchan parade does reinforce the formal prominence of the consolation passage. In the *Trionfo*, Cupid rolls up toward the end. And as the last bit of unique text before the epanalepsis, the passage could seem like the figure for which everything before was prefatory.

Additionally, other allusions seem to place the poem in a relationship—however strained—to a long tradition of consolatory writing. Some of its most well-known practitioners appear in this reverse chronological survey: “No way, Jane Grey, uncrowned bright / humanist: Boethius, Tully; Seneca, ‘the old / moral man’; no way.” All these were condemned by violent despots, and relied on their humanistic learning in preparation for their death. Others who faced a similar fate appear earlier:

XLI.
It is believed—argued—they offered him

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397 The image of a parade of sorts is suggested at another moment within the poem when the speaker asks: “is this a dead / march or a death march? It is a dead march.”

398 Jane Grey was a highly educated English noblewoman executed in a political intrigue over succession to the throne in 1554. Boethius wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*. “Tully” is an old nickname of Marcus Tullius Cicero, who wrote several consolatory texts, the best extant exemplar of which may be *Tusculan Disputations*. Seneca was a master of the ancient consolation genre, and composed several epistolary essays in that vein.
some kind of painkiller, which
is plausible. In any event
he would not touch it.
Morus, humble and witty at the end,
glad of a clean death;
[...] I lose
courage but courage is not lost.

Morus refers to Thomas More, author of *A Dialogue of Comfort in Tribulation*, an early modern instance of the consolation tradition that takes cues from Boethius. The unnamed “he” standing as the exemplar of this passage might be another oblique reference to Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Gospels recount as refusing a soldier’s offer of wine on the cross.

The speaker of *Triumph*, old man that he is, reveals here that although he faces no threat from a despot, he is piquantly aware of his own imminent fate and looks to these past exemplars of consolation for guidance. If *Triumph* really does perform some kind of consolation, it deliberately resists the anesthetics that would turn one from the realities of death. But what sort of consolation does it actually offer amid this formal resistance to consolation? Might there be a way of turning the *triumphus* toward a triumph in earnest?

Given the poem’s insistence on creating meaning by pointing beyond itself, it may not be out of place to pursue these questions and continue my bird’s-eye circling of the passage by a brief turn to Hill’s critical writings, which shed light on what it has at stake. Two of his essays suggest that

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400 Hill seems to be drawing upon a suggestion by More’s biographer that he cracked a joke with the executioner on his way up to the scaffold.

401 “He” could also be a reference to Thomas More, given its placement immediately before. But because the passage refers, in serializing fashion, to two other persons—Robert Southwell and an unnamed person who lived fifty years without limbs—I read the “he” as a discrete character, in which case the reference to the painkiller would conjure the Gospel story.

402 At another moment, the speaker frames the poem as an anticipation of death through these lines: “I am not too far from the end / [of the sequence—ED]. It may indeed be my last / occasion for approaching you in modes / of rhetoric to which I have addressed myself / throughout the course of this discourse.” CXXV.
Hill writes with a complex understanding of consolation, and that he develops it in conversation with the other poets considered already in this study.

Hill’s first published essay, “Poetry as Menace and Atonement,” mentions his attraction to an aphorism from Wallace Stevens’s *Adagia* that we considered in the second chapter: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.”403 Indeed, it may be hard not to hear this aphorism behind the statement that poems “are to console us with their own gift.” What attracts Hill to this idea, he says, is its affinity with his belief that the technical perfecting of a poem can be an act of atonement, “in the radical etymological sense—an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony.”404 This at-one-ment pertains not just to the inner dynamics of words on the page, but also to us readers, who may find that a poem effects a newfound union in our discordant selves.

And yet despite this attraction to Stevens and his quasi-theological view of literature, Hill admits that he would rather be repelled. For he suspects that such a view often just reduces to a “neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery,” a reverential awe toward “lordship over language.”405 He cites a few well-known modernist works that to him exemplify this mystique, among which are Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. It is unclear in the essay what exactly bothers him about these poems, but we can get a better idea by following this reference back into *Triumph* and

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404 Ibid., 4.

405 Ibid., 19.
noticing how Hill’s struggle with the modernist retrieval of consolation subtly finds its way into
the poem:

XCV.
This is not Duino. I have found no sign
that you are visited by any angel
of suffering creation. Violent
sensitivity is not vision, nor is vision
itself order. […]

With a close reading of the Elegies now behind us, we can see that the speaker gets Rilke wrong,
in a way. An agonizing lack of angelic visitation was the very spur to poetic invention. Yet Rilke’s
account of inner transformation was indeed self-consciously visionary. If there is to be
consolation, the speaker of _Triumph_ suggests, we will need something more than a vision,
conveyed through lordship over language. The distinctions between violent sensitivity and vision,
vision and order, seem to demand that any consolation be rooted not just in the vagaries of
artistic insight but in a reality that stands, in some sense, outside it. But what would that order
be?

Some guidance on that question comes in Hill’s explanation of why he finds the mystique
of lordly language repellent. It is because we are not lordly beings. We are subject to what he
calls “empirical guilt,” to be distinguished from the more generalized sense of anxiety and guilt _en
vogue_ among existentialist theologians writing around the same time.⁴⁰⁶ Empirical guilt, for Hill,
comes not from a generalized state of our being, but from discrete acts that cannot easily be
undone. His chief example—“upsetting the soup”—is homely, though it comes with a serious

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⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 7–8. He has in mind the “theology and literature” movement based at the University of Chicago Divinity
School, especially Nathan A. Scott, and his sources in Jacques Maritain and Paul Tillich.
point. Such acts attest to an inveterate fallibility in our nature, a certain heaviness or gravity that could topple the edifices of which we are most proud.\footnote{407}

Instead of celebrating mastery of language, Hill writes, a better course would be to consider how a poem might affect us like a moral ideal. While it might produce admiration, it might also arouse “blame, shame and despair” at ourselves, a grandeur all the grander for the weakness we feel in its presence.\footnote{408} This effect would not be because the poem is itself a source of normativity, or even because it recites a moral ideal with which we are already familiar. The speaker of \textit{Triumph} claims that “shaping, / voicing, are types of civic action,”\footnote{409} and if we read that in conjunction with the essay, civic action would be a witness to our affliction with empirical guilt, embodying the guilt in its own fallible language, while also pursuing the proper voicing that would at-one our unruly selves, not papering over it through pretensions of mastery.

This brings us further in understanding the counter-intuitive quality of the sad and angry consolation announced in \textit{Triumph}, but how a poem is to achieve this remains unclear. The closest thing to an explanation lies in how the speaker likens the gift of poems to “perfect pitch.”

Taken on its own, the simile might conjure a recollection of the standout kid you always wished you could be in music class, who could produce or identify a note with exactitude, without leaning on any external cross-reference—pattering fingers up and down the piano, say, until you land on the right key. Perfectly pitched, you yourself become a measure of musical standards. For thinking about how this compares to a poem’s gift we might start with its truthfulness, in the sense of accuracy, an ability to hit the right note at the right time. If this

\footnote{407 Ibid., 8.}
\footnote{408 Ibid., 19.}
\footnote{409 LXX.}
truthfulness consoles, it may be that discomfiture attends us more in a muddle, however difficult the truth about ourselves and the world may be. Further, perfect pitch may help others less gifted attune themselves to that correct note. Disconsolation here would trade less on a model of sadness—or a minor scale, if you will—than a model of being out of tune, an inability to harmonize with oneself, with others, with that which is right.

But the simile’s significance extends beyond these immediate resonances. “Pitch” also animates the second of Hill’s essays that I would like to consider, “Dividing Legacies,” which was published just before Triumph. While most basically a book review of T. S. Eliot’s then-recently published Clark lectures of 1926 on the metaphysical poets, the essay unfolds a pointed critique of Eliot’s entire late work. What bothers Hill about these lectures is that they exemplify a careerist tendency he sees in the poet, present throughout his life but especially in its latter stages. That tendency led him, Hill thinks, to seek his audience’s pleasure above all else, at the expense of the task of analytical criticism. The contrast between that task and Eliot’s manner, he says, can be likened to pitch versus tone:

Tone is what people expect and suppose themselves familiar with. It was the pitch of Prufrock and other Observations that disturbed and alienated readers; it was the tone of Four Quartets that assuaged and consoled them. That is to say, Eliot’s poetry declines over thirty years from pitch into tone.\footnote{CCW, 377.}

Tone here concerns the quality or color of a sound, not the accuracy of the note it strikes. And this allows for one to appeal to an audience by keeping them at ease, working with the quality of sound they expect. The problem with this, Hill claims, is that it cultivates a sort of apathy toward whatever text or subject lies at hand, an apathy “more flagitious than abuse.”\footnote{Hill, Collected Critical Writings. He concludes the essay on these pages with a barbed hypothetical lineage: “The residual beneficiaries of Four Quartets have been Larkin and Anglican literary ‘spirituality’, two seeming incompatibles fostered by a common species of torpor.”} Pitch, by
contrast, concerns not just the accuracy of a note in its relative height or depth, but also its relation to a wide field of resonances that confer significance. In analytical criticism of poetry, this would mean recognizing the ways in which a work relies on its antecedents, and how any word conveys multiple layers of sense.412

Hill does not say what makes poems themselves into exemplars of pitch, but we can extrapolate by analogy with analytical criticism. At bottom, pitch draws out a work’s complex memory which, conveyed rightly, lends itself to great difficulty—difficulty in its language, to be sure, which presents difficulties of understanding, but also perhaps an affective difficulty along the lines of what he described in the “Atonement” essay.

Note that the relationship of pitch to tone has much to do with consolation. This claim for pitch as the standard of poetic excellence fits perfectly with the ideal articulated in the antepenultimate section of Triumph, although it does not share, curiously, the link between pitch and consolation. The two actually stand in opposition here.

This could suggest that when the word “pitch” appears so prominently in Triumph, its significance resides only in the musical metaphor, not the sense of pitch that Hill develops in the essay. But the contemporaneity of these works disinclines me from that view. The conjunction of pitch and consolation in Triumph may just as well suggest that the poem deploys “consolation” in a novel sense. The consolation he finds in Four Quartets seems very much like the old variety of consolation that worried Nietzsche, the one that comes by too great an acceptance of our fate, that assuages by depressing the value with which we regard our lives. Any consolation worthy of

412 What bothers Hill specifically about Eliot’s lectures is his failure to account for Thomas Hooker’s importance to the metaphysical poets. To Hill, Hooker’s writing embodies concern with pitch. CCW 375.
the name may be one that does not satisfy our expectations, but that rather challenges and redirects them—much as we have already seen in the poem’s ironic title.

This struggle with Eliot over the nature of consolation spills over into *Triumph*. For instance, recall the poem’s first explicit allusion in III, the invocation of Petronius Arbiter, whom the speaker urges to “take us in charge / carry us with you to the house of correction.” If you have read Eliot’s monumental early work *The Waste Land*, you may recall that it begins with an unattributed quote from Petronius’ *Satyrica*, and then collates throughout the poem an array of historical voices as though they washed up from the shipwreck of culture that was the First World War.\footnote{The quote itself has deep significance for the themes of *Triumph*. It is taken from a moment when the bombastic freedman Trimalchio—who also gets mentioned a few times in Hill’s poem—describes a visit to the Cumean Sibyl: “I myself saw the Cumean Sybil hanging there in a jar, and when the boys asked her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ She said, ‘I want to die.’” According to legend, the Sibyl had asked the gods for immortality without thinking also to ask for enduring youth, and so withered away with age into nothing but a disembodied voice. Eliot, of course, leaves the quote in Latin and Greek, untranslated even in his footnotes.} By that invocation, Hill seems to demand that we go deeper in that earlier poetic strain, to the point of starting over with Eliot’s scene of a torn landscape. Then consider this line from the speaker, which concludes section cxxv: “All / things are eternally present in time and nature.” It grates directly against Eliot’s *Quartets*, whose opening includes these lines: “If all time is eternally present / all time is unredeemable.”\footnote{Lines 4–5 of *Burnt Norton*} The eternal presence of things in time and nature may be what motivates his attention to pitch, a sense that more is always present than what merely floats before us on the surface of things. The *Quartets*, by contrast, attempt to conjure a stillness bred of memory’s expiation, an attitude of letting time pass rather than accumulate. For Hill—writing at the turn of a new century, with an even greater accumulation of wreckage at his feet—that option seems hermetically closed. I suggested above that Hill’s take on the triumph of love motif revises the Petrarchan form in stopping at the first, most destitute of triumphs, well

413 The quote itself has deep significance for the themes of *Triumph*. It is taken from a moment when the bombastic freedman Trimalchio—who also gets mentioned a few times in Hill’s poem—describes a visit to the Cumean Sibyl: “I myself saw the Cumean Sybil hanging there in a jar, and when the boys asked her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ She said, ‘I want to die.’” According to legend, the Sibyl had asked the gods for immortality without thinking also to ask for enduring youth, and so withered away with age into nothing but a disembodied voice. Eliot, of course, leaves the quote in Latin and Greek, untranslated even in his footnotes.

414 Lines 4–5 of *Burnt Norton*
short eternity. But we see here that he actually does include a sense of eternity, albeit one that deepens the sense of catastrophe. The past stays ever present. In theological writing since Augustine, memory has often served as an analogy to eternity, gathering different times together in one contained act of recollection. But the jagged edges of what may now be remembered assure that shocking attunement, not lulling assuagement, will be its keynote.

3.

Earlier, I suggested that love does not obviously triumph in this poem, at least not the sort of love that would console. Keeping with the Petrarchan motif, the triumph most on display in the poem’s archival memory of the last hundred years is a disastrous triumph of cupidity. But given Hill’s understanding of pitch as something that challenges and redirects expectations, we should consider that triumph more closely. Just as there may be a distinct sense of “consolation” in Triumph’s final moments, there may also be a subtle variation on love.

Consider the lines that immediately precede the consolation passage in the poem’s antepenultimate section:

Pride is our crux: be angry, but not proud
where that means vainglorious. Take Leopardi’s
words or—to be accurate—BV’s English
cast of them: when he found Tasso’s poor
scratch of a memorial barely showing
among the cold slabs of defunct pomp. It
seemed a sad and angry consolation.
So—Croker, MacSikker, O’Shem—I ask you:
what are poems for? […]

We see here that “sad and angry consolation” is not Hill’s invention. It is Leopardi’s. And what Hill takes as an apt statement of something poems are to do more generally, he finds in a scene of one great Italian poet visiting the grave of another. Although there is no talk of love here, a decisive shift from a frame of cupidity seems to happen in the first line. Cupidity and pride go
hand in hand, after all. And by calling pride “our crux,” the speaker does more than just name it as the hinge point of love’s triumph. The literal sense of this Latin word is “cross,” whose most familiar resonance—especially in context, where just two sections before the speaker mentioned the Christian theological concept of kenosis, the self-emptying of God in being made human—is that of an instrument for tortured execution. This cross of pride here receives no pious veneration, no altars. It just marks our possible end, in the triumph of love as cupidity. Having recognized that, perhaps having been brought near that end by cupidity, it may be possible to approach love differently.

Leopardi comes into the frame as an exemplar of anger without pride. And it is not hard to see how. A “poor scratch of a memorial barely showing” for Tasso would have checked any cherished notions about the place famous writers occupy in posterity. This direction of thought has much in common with the western memento mori tradition, especially its motif of ubi sunt—where are they now?—which aimed to dethrone pride by analogical reference to those who have gone before. As these departed ones were, you now are. And as they are now, crumbled into dust and spirited away on the slightest breeze, you soon will be. Beyond humility, however, witnessing the neglect of someone you care about among these departed—in effect, seeing them fade for others before they have faded for you—may prompt a feeling of injustice. That which dethrones your pride may also arouse your anger. But with pride dethroned, that anger may be on behalf of another, out of concern that they get their due even in death.

Making Leopardi an exemplar of humble anger is one thing. But making him the exemplar of a consolation proclaimed in earnest could seem flat confused. You might recall Leopardi’s initial appearance in chapter two of this study, when Nietzsche pointed to him as the

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quintessentially disconsolate figure, weary in spirit from considering all his future possibilities from a perspective of anticipatory retrospect. Triumph actually reinforces that impression. This culminating allusion in the poem comes after three more oblique references to him or his short poem “A se stesso” (“To Himself”), a self-address whose point of departure is the end of the speaker’s last illusion (l’inganno estremo). Its tone is gentle, almost coaxing, but it merely turns his attention to the grave as the one blessing afforded to creatures like ourselves. Such disillusionment may even reside in the neighborhood of Adorno’s decline of continuous experience, a break with oneself as one has been, an almost-death condition that alters the quality of whatever remains.

Yet there is a crucial difference between that poem and the scene at Tasso’s grave. No longer is it just Leopardi talking to himself; he stands in relation to another, someone he cares about. Indeed, we might even see Tasso as a silent contributor. What exactly happens in this scene is hard to discern in the dense compression of Hill’s lines, but as I have already shown, Triumph invites readers to look beyond it, to follow its forking path of literary allusions and thereby gain a fuller sense of their significance.

The full scene appears in a letter translated by the Scottish poet James Thomson, better known by his pen name, Bysshe Vanolis (or “B.V.” for short). Thomson embeds the letter in his essay, “Memoir of Leopardi,” a biographical introduction of the poet through his correspondence, which opens a volume of his collected essays, letters, and other prose works.

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417 The other references come at LXI, CXII, and CXL.

Dated February 20, 1823, and addressed to his younger brother Carlo, the letter recounts part of Leopardi’s visit to Rome:

You conceive the tumult of emotions that swells from the consideration of the contrast between the grandeur of Tasso and the humility of his sepulture [sic]. But you cannot have an idea of another contrast, of that which strikes an eye used to the infinite magnificence and vastness of Roman monuments, comparing them with the smallness and nakedness of this tomb. One feels a sad and angry consolation in reflecting that this poverty is yet sufficient to interest and excite posterity, while the most superb mausoleums which Rome contains are regarded with complete indifference for the persons to whom they were erected, of whom one does not even ask the name, or if one asks, it is not as the name of the person but of the monument.419

It is a scene of contrasts. And the particular sort of contrast is that of incongruity. The small, naked tomb is incongruous with Tasso’s “grandeur,” as well as with the “magnificence and vastness” of the monuments that typically attract visitors to the ancient city. Though Leopardi distinguishes between these contrasts, together they seem to comprise a frustrated expectation that grandeur would be reflected in monumental magnificence. Further incongruity appears in the attitude of visitors. While the meager tomb of Tasso attracts interest and excitement, Rome’s hulking monuments prompt relative indifference once checked off a must-see list. The implication here is that care for a memorial stems in large part from care for the persons memorialized. And this is what brings Leopardi to feel the contrast of greatest interest here, the sad and angry consolation. It is sad and angry because of his desire for parity between personal grandeur and monumental magnificence; consolation, because he realizes that memory may not obey a logic of literal representation: a monument may serve, at best, to aid whatever interest initially draws a visitor. Poor memorialization can do nothing to diminish that.

Aside from the ongoing reputation Tasso may have had in Italian literary tradition, perhaps being memorialized in even better ways than a tomb through his inclusion in poetic anthologies and school books, the “grandeur” that Leopardi ascribes to him seems to register a certain love for the poet. Tasso was grand to him, irrespective of whether he was grand enough to anyone else to earn a better place among the memorialized. And this grandeur points back to the start of this chapter, when I proposed a possible overlap, a blur even, between formative and archival memory.

Because Tasso died several years before Leopardi was even born, archival memory was the only way for Leopardi to encounter his predecessor. He found what remained of Tasso, before visiting the grave, through his works. Yet the contrasting attitudes he describes in how people visit a memorial show how language may cultivate a memory that is more than merely archival. On the surface, it could seem that this memory just bears a bit of preferential care—being fonder of this section of history’s archives rather than that, and thus being willing to shore them up against decay and disarray. But Leopardi’s case seems to go much further. His ascription of “grandeur” to Tasso may register the fact that his preferential care for the poet had become something like formative memory. However unjust Tasso’s meager memorial may have seemed, Leopardi did not need that memorial to remember him; Tasso had already touched him so deeply that, in a sense, Leopardi himself had become the poet’s living memorial.

Considering this scene in its original setting helps us to have a more vivid appreciation of those final moments in *Triumph*, but it also creates an interpretive complication. Hill lifts the statement, “It / seemed a sad and angry consolation,” into an aspirational claim about poems, but the antecedent of “It” is unclear. Based on Hill’s rendering, a good candidate would be the “poor / scratch of a memorial.” But Leopardi does not phrase the matter like this. For him, the sad and angry consolation is what one feels in reflecting on the contrast between the poor
memorial and the attraction it nevertheless holds because of the person memorialized. The consolation is an emergent feature of the graveside visit. And seeing this in Leopardi’s letter, we could return to *Triumph* and see a subtle nod to this as well, in the simple fact that “he found Tasso’s poor / scratch of a memorial.” So, are poems, in being a sad and angry consolation, supposed to be somehow a poor memorial, susceptible of being overlooked by those who go in for eye-swelling grandeur? Or are they something akin to the visitation thereof? Or both? Are poems to be archival sites of formative memory? And as we generalize the idea from the scene of Leopardi at Tasso’s graveside, especially in conjunction with the concerns about the horrors of recent history, the decline of continuous experience, and archival gaps, how exactly should we understand the nature of this consolation?

Earlier moments of *Triumph* offer material for answers to these questions, although subtly, in ways that might have escaped notice before appreciating the background of the consolation passage.

Seeing how archival and formative memory overlap in Leopardi and the tertium quid of language could press us toward other sorts of distinctions in how we remember the dead. One notable possibility appears just after the poem’s halfway point:

Ingratitude
still gets to me, the unfairness
and waste of survival; a nation
with so many memorials but no memory.420

Like we saw with Leopardi, a memorial is a banner instance of archival memory, but by itself, it guarantees memory in only a collective, abstract sense. It can only ever be an aide-mémoire, for it is we, not etched stone, who must remember. We could daily pass the most prominent memorial

420 LXXVI.
with utter indifference. Thus the speaker reserves “memory” for that more intimate acquaintance with the dead that would stir gratitude, an acquaintance I have previously mapped in terms of formative memory.

What nation, and what sort of survival, the speaker has in mind is never specified. From the general context, one could surmise that he specially evokes Britain and the massive efforts at memorializing its dead from the First World War and subsequent conflicts. But in poetry, lack of specificity may be a crucial feature, rather than a flaw we must correct through analysis of such a statement. In this case, it widens the statement’s reach to encompass a variety of events to remember, a variety of survivals, all of which may be susceptible to the same impetus to memorialize at the expense of memory. As we already saw with Adorno, the very category of survival relies on memory. To regard yourself as a chance escapee, you must recollect something vividly enough to imagine that it could have befallen you. The “waste of survival” may occur when, through failure to remember, we no longer see ourselves as survivors at all. At stake here is not just awareness of our common vulnerability to whatever befell the dead, as important as that may be. Also at stake is our sense of ties to the dead, through which we can regard ourselves as their survivors, who live now only insofar as we live on after them.

The memorial-memory distinction helps to support another that comes later in the poem. Confining our relationship with the dead to memorialization lends itself to what the speaker calls a “desolation of learning: / Scientia that enabled, if it did not secure, / forms of understanding.” Learning that is not understanding: the distinction calls to mind a schoolroom scene, a stiff-legged student reciting, mindlessly, the words of a memorized poem, only to blank when the


422 CXIX.
teacher invites him to explain their meaning. This has a formal affinity with the earlier
distinctions. “Learning,” like archival memory or memorials, can help to support the more
intimate sort of contact with the past, but cannot by itself get us there. It holds the periphery, and
insofar as we remain there, we may be worse off than not having approached at all.
“Understanding” holds the place of the memory ideal, with further dynamics that the speaker
soon clarifies:

   By understanding I understand diligence
   and attention, appropriately understood
   as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement
   of what is owed the dead.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

Playing on these lexical variations of “understand” creates a chain of tautologies, each term
equivalent to the one before, such that “understanding” comes, in the end, to mean
acknowledgement. But each link in the chain is important for the cumulative impression,
especially diligence and attention.

   A new sense of love sneaks into the poem through them. “Diligence” derives from a Latin
verb, \textit{diligere}, which conveys a sense of love that was never carried over in the word’s
Anglicization.\footnote{Or so one could surmise from its absence in the OED.} In our everyday use, diligence just conveys a sense of careful and persistent
labor, but in Latin, the word also conveyed a sense of prizing, esteeming highly, the affection that
made the labor seem worthwhile. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux’s treatise \textit{De diligendo deo} is
usually (and rightly) translated, “On Loving God.” The word’s root, \textit{ligo}, means to tie or bind
elements together, we could say that this love sustains an ear for pitch, in Hill’s poetic sense, a love that hangs with the difficulties of understanding so as to bind together that which might otherwise come apart.

To add weight to this understanding of diligence, consider how he defines it in conjunction with attention. One of Hill’s sources on the concept of attention, Simone Weil—unnamed here but a recurrent figure in his other work—considers attention in much the same way as the Latin sense of diligence.426 In an essay on the proper use of schooling, she argues that its sole purpose is to cultivate our capacity for attention, and attention ultimately resolves into a capacity for love. Attending to a text, the proper parsing of a word, the process of calculating a figure—these are of a piece with attending to another.427 They initiate you in the difficult labor of diverting focus away from yourself and opening profoundly to the other’s presence, an exercise that slowly chips away at pride. When Hill carries on about the importance of diligence and attention to pitch, one could get the impression that he only cares about the textual aspect of this, the rather elite concern with allusions and literary forbears. But if this fuller sense of attention is in play, there may be something else at work: attending to the archives of the dead may be a way of loving them. What we see in Leopardi’s visit to Tasso may be an exemplary form of this.

To understand diligence as love more deeply, let us delve further into the tautologies. Diligence comes to actuated self-knowledge, and this self-knowledge comes to acknowledgement of what is owed the dead. That last link may be the strongest of them all, since it comes not by

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some lexical variant of “understand” but by simple apposition. But what do we owe the dead?

What would we hope to accomplish by our diligence?

There are two common senses of owing the dead, and both appear in the poem’s guiding imagery of landscape.

Recall the opening line, “Sun blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain scarp.” This image of a scarp, an eroded slope that reveals layers of time, is present in the first, most basic sense of owing the dead. Whatever shape life now has, we owe to those who came before. Such owing does not necessarily imply a debt that we must repay, but instead concentrates on the causal tie between them and the present shape of our lives. Without the past they inhabited and shaped, our world would be constitutively otherwise. In a momentary respite from the sharp-edged recollections of the poem, the speaker touchingly deepens this image:

Whatever may be meant by moral landscape,
it is for me increasingly a terrain
seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary,
conglomerate, metamorphic rock-strata, in which particular grace,
individual love, decency, endurance,
are traceable across the faults.\(^{428}\)

A landscape seen in cross-section gathers time into a glance, layers stacked together that include slow and subtle shapings of the land, as well as violent upheavals that may fissure anything solid. To see in cross-section is to see beyond the surface appearances, into that which has been buried by the churn of time, to see how one layer supports the next. The qualities traceable across the faults—love, decency, endurance—seem, then, to run against the sedimentation of time, belonging not simply to one epoch or another but rather subsisting across them. Untimely in the Nietzschean sense, they signal the possibility of connection between firmly striated layers. Even

\(^{428}\) LI.
though this lexical sense of owing does not immediately convey a sense of debt, because this passage suggests that the shape of life is infused with something good, even if nearly overwhelmed by its environs, it might also imply a claim to gratitude. Remembering our past in the manner of a moral landscape, seeing what we owe to the dead, could very well shade into that more familiar sense of owing as a claim upon something from us.

Before moving into that sense of owing, however, note first that “our” past becomes fairly expansive in this landscape image, much like Adorno expanded the ranks of chance escapees. The image’s simultaneous vision of deep time and contemporary loves suggests the possibility of cultivating gratitude toward people you could never have met. Indeed, the speaker follows that image with an exposition of these forged ties across time:

Portrait of mourning’s autodidact: proud, not willing to drop the increasingly evident burden of shamed gratitude: to his own dead, and to those not his own—Pandora Barraclough, for instance; his desire to keep alive recollection of what they were put to, though not for his sake, not for this future, and not ‘rooted’, God help us; they were as he now is[...]429

That surprising phrase, “mourning’s autodidact,” sketches a fuller picture of the poem’s memory ideal, inasmuch as it maintains the gratitude that the speaker found absent in mere memorialization. The phrase could surprise because mourning, ordinarily, need not be learned or taught. We think of it as following loss as a matter of course—unpredictable in its exact trajectory, to be sure, but following all the same unless mitigating circumstances (like tending to business left undone by the dead) stall its onset.

429 LVIII.
The idea of self-taught mourning might initially conjure an inability to mourn, but that
would not capture the spirit of this portrait. Think instead about how mourning someone
presupposes prior love for them. We tend to mourn “our own dead,” those who have impressed
themselves upon us in our love. To teach ourselves mourning might mean to teach ourselves love
for the dead “not our own,” to feel their death as a loss for us personally, even if we never knew
them. This would be the sort of diligence on display in Leopardi, as well as attention to poetic
pitch. And the vehicle of this autodidacticism might be the gratitude that recognizes how we owe
our lives as we know them to such unknown benefactors.

The final lines of this selection also point toward that second sense of owing the dead that
I gestured toward above, the sense that we ought to do something for them. The desire to keep
alive a recollection of what they “were put to” seems motivated by a desire not to compound
their sufferings by letting them go unrecognized, to occur and then drift into oblivion. What we
owe them would be a recollection that keeps those sufferings alive and thus, we might say,
incomplete.430 Conspicuously, the speaker invokes the analogical thinking—“they were as he /
now is,” made even stronger by the enjambment—that haunts the chance escapee. Here, that
analogy seems to deepen the sense of connection between the speaker and the dead whom he
tries to keep alive, and with that connection comes a sense of debts unpaid, of guilt. For as the

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430 Here I have in mind a memorable statement by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), Convolute N8,1. He states that “the corrective to this line of thinking [i.e., that the positive character of all justices tends to be negated by the transience of things] is also and not least a form of remembrance [Eindunken]. What science has ‘determined,’” remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.”
speaker of *Triumph* notes: “It now appears / too much is owed, impossible to repay: / *Memoria*, the loan-shark.”

Another landscape image reinforces this connection, although this time with a change of tone. Tacitly conceding that moral landscapes are about as rare as openings where the layers of time may be inspected with loving care, the speaker angrily asks:

XIII.
Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose?
Who can now tell what was taken, or where,
or how, or whether it was received:
how ditched, divested, clamped, sifted over-
laid, raked over, grassed over, spread around,
rotted down with leafmould, accepted
as civic concrete, reinforceable
base cinderblocks:
tipped into Danube, Rhine, Vistula, dredged up
with the Baltic and the Pontic sludge[...]

The frenetic parataxis of these verbs conveys a spiraling descent into unrecognizability for those who have died. The sudden switch from the personal “whose lives” to the impersonal “what was taken”, which then moves into a supply-chain sequence of transformation, suggests a sense of violence even more intense for only being alluded to obliquely. Looking around on a map of Europe, you could surmise that Hill means to conjure the Shoah by invoking these places. Auschwitz was located near the Vistula, and the ashes from its crematoria routinely were dumped into it.

This passage darkly subverts old theological notions of afterlife. The first line evokes Colossians 3:3, in which Paul the Apostle writes: “You have died, and your life is hidden with
Christ in God.” The biblical passage emphasizes how Christians, before their own deaths, mystically partake of Christ’s death and resurrection, and hiddenness here (literally, in Greek, en-crypt-ion) stands as a symbol of the new life, alien to this world, that becomes possible through those events. But the speaker reveals how hiddenness takes on such a different meaning after the catastrophe that its very mention should arouse the sort of anger signaled by the repeated question. (As Adorno wrote in those closing meditations of Negative Dialectics, no word could be uttered after Auschwitz without undergoing transformation.) Hiddenness implies not divine embrace, but obscurity, erasure. This dismal inversion continues later in the poem when the speaker introduces yet another, more muted take on the memorial-memory distinction:

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Suppose I cannot
unearth what it was they buried: research
is not anamnesis.
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These lines distinguish between two further sorts of recollection, which arise under the challenge of this overfilled landscape. “Anamnesis” is a Greek word that, in Plato, refers to the deep remembrance of what the soul had learned in its pre-embodied existence, a discussion most poignant in the Phaedo, on the cusp of Socrates’ death. In Christian Eucharistic ritual, it designates the moment when the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ are made present to participants such that, by taking of bread and wine, they may partake of the events through the recollection.

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433 NRSV. check wording reference

434 The Greek word is kekruptai.

435 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 367.

436 LXVII.

437 Phaedo, 72e, 92d. Also in Philebus, 32c.
The opposition between anamnesis and research clarifies the difficulty implied by the metaphor “unearth what they buried.” It is not just a matter of bringing to light an object obscured. Research might discover some details, but the resonances of “anamnesis” give the task of unearthing a more literal sense of recalling the dead—not just exhuming them but bringing them out to stand again. Can any memory achieve this?

Whether or not the victims turn out to be hidden in God, their material erasure into hiddenness makes the notion of that divine keeping incapable of consoling. The caesura would not constitute an argument against afterlife so much as an experience-based block upon its very conceivability. Even the omniscience of God could not substitute for our intimate knowledge of the dead, especially when their death was intended to be such an erasure. And yet it is an erasure that continues to haunt us, in the knowledge that we do not know these who are buried: “This, and this, / the unique face, indistinguishable, this, these, / choked in a cess-pit of leaking Sheol” (XCVII). To know that the ground you tread has been shaped by these lives hardly stirs up warm gratitude. The dominant feeling may rather be horror, and a creeping suspicion that you participate in their loss by taking your own survival for granted, in the forgetfulness of daily routine.

The obstinate old man who speaks throughout this poem cannot forgive himself as he anticipates his own death. What he needs forgiveness for, it seems, is just this sort of forgetfulness. His question, “Where was I?” shows that even the guilt of forgetfulness is susceptible of being forgotten, although by repeating his statement at the poem’s end, we get the impression that the guilt may come in anguished waves—not unlike the contemplation of mortality itself.

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For someone in his position, especially someone who takes themselves to be a survivor at a distance, we might in kindness encourage him to feel less guilty. *Ought implies can*, we might chime. And as I already noted in the first section, there is only so much remembering we can do. The archives are limited, as is our individual capacity for archival uptake. Besides, no record of the horror could ever be complete. As Levi has argued about the constraints of testimony, those who underwent the full horror were necessarily incapable of sharing their stories. More deeply, one might suppose that because the evils of an event like the Shoah were carried out on entire peoples, by population-level systems, an appropriate response of individual remembrance need not be the intricate detail of a chronicler like Levi; a broader response in the form of memorials may actually be the core approach that is needed.\footnote{See Tracy Lynn Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 3.} Memorials would anchor the most basic item of memory—namely, *that* it happened—and perhaps serve as a sort of symbol to represent the unrepresentable, to stand for that which necessarily exceeds any contained remembrance. Indeed, given how important memorials of all kinds have shown themselves to be for survivors, it would be mistaken to write them off, among other edifices of archival memory, as so many excuses to unburden oneself of memory.

Still, we must be careful not to decline from pitch into lulling tone. For someone who becomes “mourning’s autodidact,” caring for the dead who are not their own as though they were, there may be no straightforward way of limiting a felt imperative to expand “it is remembered” into “I remember.” You behold a wall of faces, a registry of names. You pace the quiet hall for hours, trying to take them in. A few make special impressions upon you, perhaps because they resemble your cousin, a neighbor, an old friend, and you make sure to take them with you. As your eyes readjust to the light outside, it may be only the hard consonant of a first
name, the shape of a hairstyle that sticks with you. And yet you have made a space within yourself for them. It goes on awaiting their arrival, however long it is deferred.

The imperative yet futile attempt to fill our inner space for the dead may lie behind two items from the chain of tautologies for “understanding” that I have left alone until now, self-knowledge and acknowledgement. If diligence, that love which sustains an ear for pitch and our relations to the dead, amounts to the same thing as actuated self-knowledge, the poem nudges us toward the conclusion that we do not know ourselves apart from our dead. And we do not know them, not fully. We are something between a moral landscape and an indistinct “cess-pit of leaking Sheol.” Even so, the chain of tautologies concludes with an important possibility. When it comes to what is owed the dead, the impossibility of perfect fulfillment does not mean that we must simply sigh with guilty resignation and thereby shut down further engagement with what we owe. Absent the possibility of fulfillment, our task may morph into acknowledgement. That does not get us off the hook, to be sure; *Triumph* continues to display the old man’s sense of guilt.

But acknowledgement opens the possibility of a kind of halfway fulfillment. It maintains what I called earlier a continuity amid discontinuity, an ongoing tie to those from whom we have been severed, holding open the space that the dead would occupy, if only we could welcome them. While mere acknowledgement might fall short of the poem’s memory ideal, it would nonetheless encourage a disposition that is on the doorstep of its fulfillment. Such acknowledgement, in advance of any foreseeable fulfillment, may actually motivate what eventually do become successful attempts at unearthing things buried, building new archival connections between us and those who were lost. But even when acknowledgement does not culminate in such retrievals, it makes a start at repairing historical discontinuity by helping us to imagine, however vaguely, that something still ties us together, that as long as we persist in our acknowledgement, no severance can be complete.
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We are now in a better position to reflect on what *Triumph* means by claiming that poems ought to be a sad and angry consolation. But after considering the problems that prompt this poem to resort to mere acknowledgement of what is owed the dead, you may be even more puzzled about Hill’s choice to anchor that claim in Leopardi’s visit to Rome. While Tasso indeed suffered a degree of posthumous obscurity, at least his memorial could be located. He seems far more fortunate than those who have been left to sink, stink, burn, scatter, or be ditched over with anonymous earth. Given *Triumph*’s preoccupations, we might have expected that the anchoring image instead would be a former crematorium, an un-earthed mass grave, a safe house with a hidden cellar door—something besides a moment of hero worship toward someone who does not exactly need help being remembered.

But Hill creates a form for this scene that could be instructive for those more obviously relevant cases. Through the compression of poetic line and enjambment, *Triumph* models how one act of memorialization can imply a telescopic memory. In our focus on how Leopardi remembers Tasso, it would be easy to lose sight of how Thomson (b. 1834) is also memorializing Leopardi (d. 1837), not to mention how Hill (b. 1934) is ever so subtly memorializing Thomson (d. 1882). Each line presents one name in this telescoping: “Take Leopardi’s / words or—to be accurate—BV’s English / cast of them: when he found Tasso’s poor / scratch of a memorial […].” With the names in roughly the same end position and the lines so heavily enjambed—such that readers are forced down to subsequent lines for the completion of both sense and syntax—there is a nesting effect. Each name is formally bound to the other. None can be understood apart from the other. They come to us in sequence, although that sequence is not strictly chronological. Rather, it figures a temporally back-and-forth circuit through which memory
reaches into a deep past, starting with Leopardi and jumping ahead to BV, through whose memory alone we have this moment with Tasso, perhaps also (unless you happened to be a connoisseur of sixteenth-century Italian poetry) memory of Tasso himself. The sequence thus complicates, as memory so often does, the linearity of time. It shows time folding back upon itself.

In each step of this sequence, the characters’ memory develops archivally, through reading the works of whomever they remember; their lives do not overlap such in a way that bodily presence could have been formative. And yet in each case an intimacy attends the memorialization, an intimacy that Hill reserves for the overlapping categories of memory, understanding, diligence, and pitch. It seems here that memorialization—archival memory—through language can habituate us into that imaginative task of formative memory which I described at the end of last chapter: to see the beloveds we internalize as a condensation of prior loves, such that by bearing one in yourself, you bear many others. This telescopic memory works like a synecdoche, whereby a whole community of the dead tags along in the memorialization of a single member—a minor act of language that gathers distant times into a constellation.

In *Triumph*, the links of archival memory are quite clear even in compression, and that may raise questions about its relevance to cases of archival obscurity, which is where it really counts. But think of this as a pedagogical technique, using an accessible case to introduce a habit of mind that can guide us equally well in more difficult ones. Every chain eventually clanks into a foggy past, where its links vanish. Whom might have Tasso cared for? And who preceded them? Although we cannot say, the proximate and accessible figures in the chain, linked by a sequence of enjambments that formally enact continuity and a refusal to end, give some basis for trusting that it continues whether we trace it or not.

Illusion, a category muted thus far in this chapter, is crucial to telescopic memory. Recall my argument from previous chapters that sometimes, especially with poetry, illusion may best be
understood as an act of reframing reality. It seizes upon aspects of reality whose meaning is underdetermined and, through the guidance of imagination, nudges our relationship to them in new directions. Contrary to everyday senses of the word—mistaken perception or wish-driven avoidance of difficult facts—illusion may actually deepen our acquaintance with reality. In telescopic memory, the illusion is like a painter’s use of perspective to create an impression of space. Supply a few proximate items that imply an ordered series, and our expectation of what comes next will make mentally present all that is literally absent. Of course, we do not know for certain what comes next. Expectation can lead us astray, as we learn from the perspectival play of masters like M. C. Escher. But this illusion is not about knowing completely or for certain. It is about working with what little we know—our loves, found in archives or bodily encounter—to transform our relationship to all that is absent, to make of absence something more than merely negative space, something rather full and fraught.

Such absence may be the heart of a poem’s sad and angry consolation. Even when poetry can name your beloved, describe the waves of their hair, the curve in the small of their back—especially then perhaps—it attests that they are somewhere else. It actually stands in their place in occupying your attention. Language may imply displacement as much as it constructs memory. Yet it can never take their place, never substitute for the absent beloved. Here too, the poem’s enjambed form trains our thinking, since by that form the poetic language itself becomes non-substitutable, resistant to summary. At best, the poem points you to where they may be found, just as Triumph nudges us towards its own archival sources.

If the poem is a poor scratch of a memorial, it may be less a tomb than a cenotaph, a site that remembers through witness to an absent body. Indeed, the heckler of Triumph at one point

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declares that the poem is full of “salutes and cenotaphs, / and vessels moving seaward” (XCVII). This constitutive absence may be especially apt for the vacant stretch toward those you cannot even name, whose bodies are indeed absent. The poetic cenotaph could never replace them, never patch over the caesura in history opened by their absence. And yet by marking a space for their absence, the cenotaph in a limited way reclaims them from erasure, for erasure would be complete when it is no longer even recognized as such.

In keeping Hill’s concept of pitch, take cenotaph here in its radical etymology of “empty tomb.” The nearest resonance draws us toward a memorial practice that became especially prevalent after the First World War, when nations had lost so many people, irrecoverably, that they erected monuments for them all, inscribing names whenever possible, letting names stand in for bodies that they would clutch if only they could. Or alternatively, they filled a tomb with a nameless body, a figural absence that made the tomb a container, on the level of meaning, replete with the bodies of all.\textsuperscript{441} The empty tomb forever awaits its proper inhabitants, even when we know that they will never arrive.

On the other hand, in a more distant resonance of empty tomb, it may not just be a space of awaited arrival, but also of declared departure. This is a theological sense of empty tomb, which comes to us through the archival-formative memory enabled by the language of story. The tomb was filled with the crucified object of political abuse but became empty. And it became empty by its occupant’s resurrection.

It would be easy to lean upon familiar notions of memory in describing the significance of this emptying: resurrection happens through an act of remembrance; as long as this lost body is held in memory, its killing remains incomplete. The view has merit. It may even seem consonant

with the argument I have been developing thus far. But let us not become overly triumphalistic with our notions of memory even as we look toward a triumph of love. The poem stands as a cenotaph for all whom we wish to remember, including those we cannot, whose loss enacts a decline of continuous experience.

A better expansion on the cenotaph figure would recall a version of that story in which memory seems more troubled: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (Jn. 20:1). The Greek word I translate as tomb, mnêmeion, belongs to a broader semantic field of memory. Other possible meanings include “remembrance” or “memorial.” Taking some liberty with the text, we could say that on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to her remembrance of Jesus and found it vacant. It was bad enough that Jesus was killed. But his missing body, the disturbed remembrance, effects a double loss. If you have read the story, you know that subsequent moments reinforce this idea; Mary does not even recognize her beloved when he first appears to her, and when she does finally recognize him, he eludes her touch. Resurrection here is not straightforwardly a function of remembrance. Indeed, the two seem to work contrariwise. Mary did have the benefit (according to the story) of recognizing the lost body of her beloved eventually, something that does not apply for the archival caesuras that occupy Triumph as a cenotaph. But there may be parallels that we can draw by symbolic affinity. To construct—and not just discover—an empty tomb is to make a claim about its would-be occupants. It claims that they are elsewhere. That claim could imply that their elsewhere ness is wrongful or at least unfortunate, something inflicted by evil or fate. For archival caesuras, such is

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442 I originally came across this connection in a book by the French poet George Haldas, Mémoire et résurrection: chronique extravagante (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1991), 11. Other words in this semantic field, mnêmé and anamnêsis, have important resonances in both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology.
an appropriate use of emptiness. But on top of this plaint, the claim of elsewhereness can layer a note, however muted, of triumph, a sense that this grave could not contain them, even if their bodies could be found. Amid the mourning of broken continuity this note could ring false, to be sure. Those who have been divested and ditched over did not attain resurrection simply by their hiddenness in death; suggesting as much risks valorizing the manner of their end. But by making a space for them in stone or text, we can make a space for them in ourselves, and that space allows us to reclaim them from utter erasure. In being claimed as elsewhere, they are no longer nowhere.

The memory involved in this claim may be formative in a distinctive way.

Earlier, I suggested that Leopardi felt a sad and angry consolation at the meager grave of Tasso because he realized that he himself had become Tasso’s living memorial. Through love, and the formative memory it cultivated, he bridged the archival gap. This offers a parable for the interplay between formative and archival memory. Even as the latter can be a staging ground for the former, such that the two eventually blur together, they remain distinct modes of memory. Formative memory preserves our beloveds only by incorporating them into ourselves, whereas archival memory concerns itself with the traces of them that remain. Those traces belong to times now gone, and if memory is to become formative and thereby encourage a sense of open-endedness in love, of ongoing growth and change, we may have to place a check on our concern with the archival mode.443 In the Leopardi story, Tasso’s poor scratch of a memorial would present an opportunity as much as an outrage. While this check on archival memory would by no means require outright abstention, such a check may, to those fixated on this mode, appear dangerously close to forgetting.

443 By “check”, I do not mean simply doing without. Rather, it has to do with the concentration of focus.
Again drawing a parallel by affinity with archival caesuras, we might reframe the blank spaces of memory in terms of that necessary check in pursuit of formative memory. A similar sort of blank may have emerged under the best of circumstances. Of course, archival caesuras complicate the pursuit of formative memory, since we have little idea as to whom we should be formed by. But this is where we glimpse the distinctively formative memory involved in a cenotaph’s claim of elsewhereness. Absent definite beloveds on whom to focus our memory, the form of remembrance in the poem as cenotaph itself becomes formative. What is formed into us is an emptiness that, by taking form, is not nothingness. An emptiness that awaits its proper inhabitants, and perhaps entertains the thought that they could not be contained in any resting place, that they have perhaps gone ahead to meet us where our own journey will conclude. Such emptiness could never satisfy. It may always involve sadness and anger. Yet insofar as it begins to reclaim our would-be beloveds from their attempted erasure, to bridge the archival gaps and restore something like continuity, it may also afford a certain consolation.

There is admittedly moral danger in this approach to remembering those who have suffered attempted erasure. It could potentially lump them all together in an indistinct mass, treating them as essentially interchangeable—replicating, in short, the treatment that contributed to their deaths. So we must constantly bear in mind that this cenotaphic form is not a successful act of remembrance, but a mere acknowledgement of what is owed the dead. It holds open a site in which you would remember, if only you could. Such acknowledgement is not the connection we seek. At best, it offers a second-order connection as a poor substitute, sad and angry. Or rather, it checks the push of standard consolation for substitutes, and remains sad and angry precisely because it insists on the body of the lost beloved. And yet as this hurt persists, it may echo through our emptiness with a perfection of pitch.
How might this cenotaphic form shape our own anticipation of death? How might its attempts to bridge the gaps of historical continuity intervene in what Adorno called the decline of continuous experience? Throughout this study, I have argued that how we remember the dead affects the way we anticipate our own end, and these reflections would be incomplete without considering how they might affect this central preoccupation.

Before doing so, a qualification is in order. What Adorno has in mind when he extends the decline of continuous experience to the elderly may, in certain cases, be a problem that stems from the structures of modern medical care. A life can quickly become unrecognizable when subjected to regimes of treatment focused solely on the preservation of biological functioning, and despite a great deal of reflection in the medical community about how to make a place for human dignity in clinical spaces, well-meaning people can still land themselves and others in such horrifying situations.444 It is hardly obvious that the best intervention in the decline of continuous experience brought about by such a milieu would be poetic. Better, more thoughtful care and not better poetry may have to be our primary focus, lest our poetics become susceptible to the Marxian critique of consolation as an assuaging diversion from the real issue.

That said, the “real” issue with our dying is never limited to such considerations. Even under ideal conditions of care, our lives can become unrecognizable and a gap may open between who we have been and whoever—or whatever—we shall be in the time that remains. Moreover, the problem of consolation, conceived in terms of flourishing amid anticipation, arises before we reach that point. It becomes a problem because death encroaches upon us through anticipatory imagination. And whatever else we might mean by “continuous experience,” it

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pertains to our enmeshment in links between past, present, and their continuance into the future, links both forged and found in the same mental space of imagination that is the province of poetry.

In anticipating a decline of continuous experience for yourself, the habits of mind nurtured by cenotaphic form and its attempt to retrieve those lost in archival caesuras may help to imagine a richer version of formative memory in your beloveds than what we considered in the previous chapter. The form attempts to bridge gaps of time, to provide a supplemental continuity when there is little or none. As we saw with the telescoping between Leopardi, BV, Tasso, and Hill, this sort of memory may not necessarily follow a linear model of time; formative memory need not be limited to adjacent links on a chronological chain. So when anticipating your own decline, you may cling to the thought that the un-self you will become need not be the ultimate memory formed into your beloveds. They can rely on your archival remains as they live with your absent presence—effectively remembering you as you have been and not as you are—and thereby bridge the gap in your experience. Perhaps this would not assuage you in the midst of that decline, supposing that it came about through dementia or something of the sort that ravaged your repositories of memory. Or perhaps it would, at least insofar as you could feel yourself surrounded by people who recognize you lovingly, even as you do not recognize them. At any rate, the most relevant contact point of this consolation would be anticipatory imagination, the breath we hold before undergoing whatever we must. Just as I previously articulated how formative memory provides a basis for expecting a continuation of our loves after we are dead and gone, here too we may find ourselves upheld in the thought that a similar process could be at work in any agonizing interim that ends us before our end. Our bodies may be frailer than our loves.
As we live in anticipation, the most practical upshot of Hill’s sad and angry consolation may be to write—and write with abandon. The reason Leopardi found such consolation at Tasso’s graveside may have been, in part, because he realized that just as he had been shaped through the former poet’s works, others in the future (such as BV or Hill) may be shaped by his. What memory through the written word lacks in broad appeal—such that no monument may be erected in one’s honor—it amply supplements in formative depth. In anticipating a decline of continuous experience, writing may help to instill confidence that your beloveds will indeed have rich archival remains to help them bridge the gaps in yourself. And that confidence can extend to your beloveds to come. Just as you encounter others’ works as love letters to future persons whom their authors could never know, you may do your writing with an imagination of those who may happen upon it, and craft each expression as you would for someone dear to you. Open-ended love reaches into the obscurity of an indeterminate future. This imagination would, most basically, spur you to write worthily of your future beloveds.

Here you might think of a lonely scribbler slaving away in obscurity, dying alone in some dusty garret with the hopeful thought that someone in posterity, after a period of long neglect, might take up those forlorn pages and be moved. That association would not be completely misguided, especially since, in the paradigm of Hill’s sad and angry consolation, your writing would be involved in an effort to continue an archival chronicle of others who ever await rediscovery.

But we must take care that such imagination not drift into hackneyed notions of literary immortality. The archival love that prompts us to write the poem as cenotaph involves a posture of holding oneself open, awaiting those who are to come but may never, and this is an act of attention, in the full sense that Hill uses the term. Such attention suspends concern with oneself. Indeed, keeping with the theme of an empty tomb, we might see it as a form of self-emptying.
Remember that attention comes to acknowledgement of what is owed to the dead, and
acknowledgement is a form of actuated self-knowledge—a knowledge of oneself completed only
through the recollection of the other. Something similar may be at work when we turn from
recollection to anticipation, and write for those who are to come but may never. Each word may
achieve something less like successful preservation than stepwise surrender of oneself.

As may have happened with your nearest lost beloveds, a diligent practice of
remembering those in the far past—or at least holding open the site where you would remember,
if only you could—provides some experiential basis for imagining the formative effects your work
could have on others. But the vulnerability of archives to neglect or outright destruction should
check any naïve expectations of this, just as the decline of continuous experience checks
triumphalism about unbroken personality. Memory of any sort, formative memory especially,
may always be uncertain and where achieved, hard won, ever in need of renewal. Imagining an
afterlife for ourselves and for those we memorialize in our writing may be even more difficult
than imagining our own death. And to hold these possible ruptures of continuity in mind is a
gelid undertaking. Yet the task may be warmed by reframing any rupture as a space of
anticipation, one in which we give ourselves over to those who are to come, not in the form of a
demand but in the open-handedness of love, making of pride—whose last bastion may be a
confident sense of continuity—a crux. The chance to give ourselves over in love, rather than
simply being taken through blind processes of fate: this is not much, but it may be just enough to
help us flourish on the way to whatever we must undergo. May it be.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

This study has challenged a prevalent way of thinking about the ethics of anticipating death. In medical settings and beyond, an attitude of acceptance—contrasted antithetically to denial—is often taken for granted as the ideal. While certain ways of understanding acceptance may indeed be apt in certain cases, its binary opposition to denial is not only simplistic, but potentially harmful. What we need to flourish as we live up to anticipated ends may actually be a complex attitude that involves something like denial. To challenge this binary, however, we cannot just valorize its other half. That would leave the binary intact. Instead, we need to enrich our vocabulary of attitudinal ideals.

Hence my turn to consolation. Reframing the discussion around this term conduces to more intricate thinking about how to posture ourselves toward death, while also allowing us to challenge the acceptance-denial binary at its root. As I showed in the first chapter, this binary grows out of the critique of consolation developed by Sigmund Freud. When Elizabeth Kübler-Ross speaks of denial versus acceptance, she merely transposes what Freud calls illusion and reality. Differences between their accounts notwithstanding, the basic movement they commend is the same: we are to overcome our avoidance or occlusion of difficult facts and face them squarely, chin up, even going so far as to embrace them.

Challenging this view becomes somewhat messier by reframing the discussion around consolation. For Freud is hardly alone in his critique. He participates in what I called a critical ferment with regard to consolation, a chorus of different views of various provenance that converge on the position that consolation has become unavailable to people in the modern
west—or if available, irresponsible. In this ferment, consolation’s decline is tied closely to a story of religion’s, tied so closely that consolation and religion seem to be defined in terms of each other. Once upon a time, people faced death with expectations of a blissful hereafter, expectations that afforded them some consolation, but those expectations have, for many, withered. The story embodies a secularization theory that regards religion as a receding tide. Subtraction theories of this kind have largely been falsified, but the basic point has some merit when it comes to afterlife expectations; where they remain, they may be like forlorn tide pools or, rather, once-stalwart seaside edifices crumbling in an unsettled churn. If we are to expand our vocabulary of attitudinal ideals by reframing discussions of death around consolation, we must respond in some way to this critical ferment.

My strategy has been to concede the premise that literal afterlife is unavailable (whether descriptively or just normatively) while arguing that the conclusion does not follow. Consolation itself has had an afterlife. Its “death” by critique does not remove it from our repertoire of possible responses to mortality so much as prompt an imaginative reconsideration of what consolation could mean.

To show this, I have performed extensive readings of three twentieth-century poets who articulate a rich understanding of death and consolation in direct response to Freud and other critics. While they are hardly of one voice—indeed, their visions at times clash—they all work from the conviction that consolation is not only possible, but vital. Few scholars of twentieth-century theory and poetry have appreciated this. Indeed, few have attempted to study modern consolation at all. That may just stem from the received wisdom regarding its unavailability. Still, given the centrality of consolation to critical theory of religion, this lacuna is curious. Not that the academy needs a new field of “consolation studies” (any more than its needs other sub-sub-fields), but this particular study reaches beyond the highly-focused question of how we ought to
anticipate death and attempts to enrich consolation’s wider field of thematic connections, especially theory of religion.

Throughout, I treat the work of these poets not as curiosities to be described but as conversation partners to think with. The result is that the account of consolation offered here is as much my own construction as theirs. Good readings, faithful to poetic contours, have been foundational for that, but approaching them with my own questions, weaving the poems into a dialog with each other, presses us toward something more. Thus far, my “account” of consolation has mostly been an emergent feature of the readings, brought out sometimes clearly in an aside, sometimes obliquely in working through interpretive puzzles. And if you have followed me thus far, you are acquainted with my resistance to pithy summaries abstracted from context. But it may be helpful at this point to draw the various strands of this account into a more compact synthesis.

Critics like Freud construe consolation as evasion by illusion, a sort of anesthetizing drapery that we place between ourselves and difficult realities, giving us peace of mind on the cheap. But consolation may also be understood as an attitudinal excellence that helps us to flourish as we live in anticipation of death. By extended analogy with courage, which is often understood in relation to an imminent and contingent threat of death like what soldiers face in battle, consolation may be a virtue for the more distant yet necessary menace of mortality as such.\textsuperscript{445} Living in anticipation is largely a challenge of imagination. It is a challenge even to conceive our future death, and once we have undertaken (or undergone) whatever it takes to call death to mind, a further challenge is to conceive it rightly, in a way that does not sap what time remains. For these reasons, illusion is indeed involved in consolation—just not how Freud

\textsuperscript{445} On the paradigm of courage as facing death in battle, see Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} (1115b5–1117b20).
supposes. Rather than simple evasion of reality, illusion can be a reframing of reality, an adjustment in our relationship to reality that denies none of its features. As Wallace Stevens helpfully nudges us to consider, reality always comes to us through imagination, as a thing “seen by the mind.” The point is basic but matters a great deal for our attitude toward death. Accepting reality in the manner of Freud and Kübler-Ross implies an attitude of passive receptivity to the given, whereas a drive to reframe reality in a way that supports our flourishing implies a playful rebelliousness that meets the given and attempts to shape it. Given the role of imagination in mediating reality, seeking to maintain salubrious illusions could actually be seen as a more faithful commitment to reality itself than anything Freud offers.

What does it mean to flourish in anticipation of death? In a way, the idea could seem misplaced, because a paradigmatic scene for anticipating death is one’s own sickbed, where calls to flourish could seem burdensome or even callous to the situation. But what I have in mind belongs to a category that care professionals sometimes call healing without a cure—a category that could be relevant even if anticipation bites us in the summer of youth and good health, for there is indeed no cure (despite the aspirations of some posthumanists) for our mortal condition. Put somewhat gnomically, flourishing means not succumbing to death before actually dying. This is harder than it sounds. For anticipation plays upon different ways we can imagine our selves in time. Most crucially, it can encourage a perspective that I called anticipatory retrospect, in which we dwell in the grammatical future perfect and regard ourselves as the corpse we someday will have become. Imagining our future end vividly enough can instill a feeling that, in effect, our end may as well have come already. Consolation means resisting that, in part by holding together the different perspectives with which we imagine ourselves in time, not allowing the future perfect to overshadow the present.
But flourishing does not just mean resistance to the pull of grim thoughts. One of the most important—and, to me, surprising—insights from this study is that what is stake in anticipating death is the integrity of love. Dwelling in anticipatory retrospect can sap our present because it can corrupt love’s open-endedness, the continuity we expect when committing ourselves to another. When those expectations are undermined, love and all else we otherwise would have valued could seem a sham. What we need to flourish in this case are ways of imagining that the continuity of life is unnecessary for the continuity of love. And this led me to consider a version of afterlife rooted in what I called the formative memory of our beloveds, which in turn offers a further refinement in our understanding of consolation. Commonly, people understand consolation to involve some notion of “feeling better” about a loss, but as I developed my account of formative memory in conjunction with Freud’s ideas about melancholic incorporation, it became clear that consolation may actually be made possible through having loss impress itself upon you indelibly, for the ordinary process of identifying with another in love may become most radical through that experience. This version of afterlife neighbors the trite notion that our dead beloveds “live on” in memory. But formative memory is not about holding another in mind. It is about having your way of inhabiting the world so shaped by another that even if they die, they continue on in you, as you.

I developed my argument by contrasting this deep identification with what I called archival memory, a memory-about that attempts to collect and preserve fragments of another. But this is a non-negligible consideration for flourishing in anticipation of death. Formative and archival memory cannot be maintained absolutely, not least because archival memory can itself become formative. And from the very beginning of the study, I considered how our anticipation of death has much to do with how we remember death, given that intimations of our mortality come most readily through encountering or learning about the death of others. My discussion of
formative memory could give the impression that memory is a relatively straightforward source of consolation, but when we approach memory archivally, this seems far less straightforward, given that what we remember from the archives of death may resist consolation of any sort, revised or not. Another way in which anticipation plays upon how we imagine our selves in time is by what I called mnemonic paradigms, through which we see ourselves not as the corpse we will have become but rather might have been, had we been situated similarly to persons we recollect from the past. In turn, this shapes how we imagine our own eventual fate. A particular problem here is what Theodor Adorno called the “decline of continuous experience” revealed in concentration camps, the ways in which bodies can become husks of the persons they once were. Meeting this problem requires recognizing a paradox in this discontinuity. It causes such pain because some continuity persists even in the hollowing out of life. And as before, consolation might be made possible through insisting upon a memory that upholds continuity, even if memory here consists only of reaching futilely into and across archival gaps, caesuras that bear the mark of erasure, holding open the place where we would remember, if only we could. Where the formative memory of our beloveds allows us to stand, in a sense, as their new body, this kind of archival memory makes us into a cenotaph, a marker for bodies that are absent, but that in being claimed as elsewhere, are no longer nowhere.

Where does religion come into this? You may have noticed that I have said little more about the matter thus far, a silence that has been deliberate. Challenging the critical ferment’s construal of consolation has also meant challenging its presumed reliance on religion. Something that emerged in the second chapter was the possibility, illustrated vividly in the image of a dilapidated statue of Jove being blown up, that the death of gods hardly undermines consolation. It may actually afford a kind of consolation hitherto unavailable. That death, as Stevens describes it, would amount to the displacement of our ossified names for that which could never be named,
opening a space for something new, a fertile engagement between imagination and reality. What jeopardizes consolation may not be the decline of religion per se so much as the decline of illusion. Recall Stevens’s observation that the Freudian critique of religion also implies hostility toward poetry, since illusion is the warp and woof of both. Provided that we maintain the kind of illusions I have examined here, forms of life recognizable as religion could vanish entirely while leaving consolation intact. This is why Stevens, like other poets in the Romantic legacy, have suggested poetry as a substitute for religion. Whole-cloth substitution may be far-fetched, even for the most ambitious poetry, but when focused more narrowly on the task of consolation, it may well be feasible.

But a broader lesson we could take from reframing the issue of consolation around illusion would be to soften our sense of the distinction, such that the viability of substitution becomes a moot point. If we inhabit vital illusions that support flourishing, we may be dwelling in a space where religion and poetry converge, not in their entirety, but in a nexus of practical concern whose successful undertaking would be our consolation. Throughout this study, I have quietly noted how each of these writers, post-Christian in their own ways, nonetheless carries forward theological tropes in their poetry, putting them to new use despite attempts to distance themselves from the traditions of their origin. If consolation has passed through death by critique and had a sort of afterlife, perhaps religion may, too. Theological writers have been thinking about this for a long time, of course, and it would not do, at this point in the study, to essay my own take on the prospect. Perhaps another time. But it is worth noting that the appreciation of illusion may offer a back door into a range of theological possibilities.

Having set out to challenge a prevalent way of thinking about the ethics of anticipating death, you may wonder how I would recommend you go about being consoled, given all I have outlined above. It is obviously more involved than “accept your mortality” (which may have
given consolation a branding disadvantage). Reading Stevens, Rilke, or Hill would not be a bad place to start. As I have tried to suggest by my example of close readings throughout this study, illusion does not come to us cheaply. The only way to bring ourselves into an imaginative vision that would support consolation is by the protracted work of attention. As it is with love for another that develops formative memory, so it is with texts. But I have chosen these writers merely as exemplars helpful to think with. Their pages are by no means the gates through which any attempt to be consoled must pass. The broader point is to have one’s imagination stirred in ways that support perspectival integrity and the continuity of love, and an array of possible aids for that are available. Even better may be to try your own hand at writing into consolation. What we have considered here are but “the edgings and inching of final form,” hardly a definitive statement—as though anything of the sort could be possible here—and the surest way of immersing yourself in vital illusion may be to create it for yourself.

Better still: to be drawn by words into the loving presence with others (or if not presence, memory-rich separation) that makes consolation possible, a kind of relation through which we ourselves become the fleshy words proclaiming love’s persistence through death. If we are to flourish in our anticipation of death, we need to throw ourselves all the more deeply into love, which may come to the same thing as throwing ourselves into life itself. I have focused this study on the perspective of an individual anticipating their own death, engaged in self-consolation. But sometimes, it is another in our care who stares into the everblank. A fuller study of consolation would extend into the relational practices that belong in such a scene, from attentive presence to the ancient consolatory art of letter writing. The substance of those practices, however, would be much the same. Preparation for death, if consoling, means preparation for life—not necessarily the life we have known but the life to which we have aspired in self-emptying love for those who will live on after us, as us. This consolation lacks the certainty of an eternal hereafter, to be sure.
But it also lacks the cold certainty of a reality indifferent to all we hold dear, just waiting to undo us. It holds open the possibility of a love stronger than death, and that possibility, while being all we can ask for, may be all we need.
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