

OUR STRUGGLES

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It comes as no surprise that Zadie Smith’s essay, “Man vs. Corpse”—ostensibly a review of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s autobiography *My Struggle*—documents her *own* struggle to make sense of life. Renaissance artist Luca Signorelli’s charcoal drawing *Man Carrying Corpse on His Shoulders* abruptly awakens her. The arresting juxtaposition between the live figure and the limp body he carries overshadows the vibrant colors, beautiful renderings of architecture, and subtle detail of all the other paintings in the Renaissance textbook Smith looks through. For Smith, the drawing provokes a “thought experiment”—one that serves as the *donnée* of her essay. Initially, she attempts to identify with the corpse in Signorelli’s piece; yet, her “imagination quail[s]” at the thought of her own mortality. Smith is instead distracted, intrigued by the “monumental vigor” of the man carrying the corpse—her response revealing how inherently inclined we are to prettify thoughts about death, if we choose to entertain them at all. Ultimately, Smith argues that our unwillingness to accept death—and, in turn, our desperate attempts to embrace the joyful aspects of life—has thrust us into a “world of illusion,” a “demented and difficult place in which to live.” She suggests that this jarring dysphemism is a palliative for our own self-deception in the face of death. Would imagining ourselves as the smoldering corpses that constitute most of our natural future lead us toward a more useful perspective of reality? Although this shock treatment certainly gets our attention, one cannot help but wonder if picturing ourselves as corpses is *really* the most effective way to securely place ourselves back into the *real* world. What role, then, can the wretched reality and melancholy of death have in contributing to a fruitful and fulfilling life?

Smith, as a “sentimental humanist,” recoils from her own shock treatment but discovers art as an alternative approach, claiming that the “replication of nature at its most beautiful” empowers our imaginative and salutary embrace of death. She turns to Titian’s *Ranuccio Farnese*, a portrait of a young

aristocrat who, even though endowed with a powerful heritage and robust health, could not be afforded immunity to death. Smith initially succeeds in empathizing with the young aristocrat. But then she realizes that the technical skill—the “perfected illusion”—of Titian’s masterpiece is a mere distraction from the emotional connection she seeks with the subject, and the despondency she feels about the inescapability of death. Yet the kind of empathy that Smith advocates for does have its limits. The portraits of lives from hundreds of years ago—snapshots of “eternal” youth—may keep the discomfort we should seek to confront and understand at a comfortable distance. In order to truly live fulfilling lives, we may need to have a more direct involvement and personal connection with death.

Even though we are separated from the losses and plights implicit in the images that Smith considers, we may actually live in closer proximity to death than we readily acknowledge. Smith considers Andy Warhol’s *White Burning Car III*—a photographic collage depicting a fatal car crash made up of stark, black-and-white images, looking as though they were taken out of a flipbook. The image shows us the dead driver while another man inattentively strolls by the ghastly immolation. The bystander doesn’t turn around, doesn’t stop, doesn’t pause. He moves on without a care. Warhol’s “unbearabl[e]” repetition of this image forces us to realize the cold indifference of the world in which we live, as Smith suggests. Even while immersed in a scene riven by death and destruction, we viewers and the bystander lose the ability to be affected; in our indifference, we have dehumanized ourselves. But this “uncomfortable numb[ness]” surely *can’t* be how we would hope to engage with death. While we attempt—by way of artistic representation—to draw ourselves closer to death, it is, ironically, through images like Warhol’s that we can find a convenient escape from such brutal realities.

Is it at all possible, by way of art, to find a kind of solace in—and ultimately gain a deeper awareness of—our inescapable fates? Can we reimagine Warhol’s numbing yet evocative “corpse art” so as to evoke a true, visceral confrontation with death (Smith)? Mark Doty would think so. In his essay, “Souls on Ice,” the author looks beyond the painterly perfection of Smith’s “golden yellows and eggshell blues, silken folds of red and green” to consider a visual metaphor in quotidian life, one that conjoins death and beauty. Staring at a shimmering supermarket display of mackerel, he’s “snagged,” mesmerized by their “glistening” scales, “shining” eyes, and “prismed sheen” (Smith; Doty 92). He notes the beauty of the display in the fish’s “collectivity”; seen as a whole, the fish form an entity whose emotional power transcends anything offered by an individual mackerel. Had one been removed

from the display, the group would still retain its integral energy and beauty. So powerful is the collective force of the mackerel. This organized array of mackerel is reminiscent of Warhol's repetitive snapshots. Yet, the "mechanical" interminability of the mackerel does not denote the hopelessness and emptiness of *White Burning Car III*; rather, the mackerel's collective energy is precisely what makes the image glow with life (Smith). Doty's metaphor transforms the mackerel into more than an image or object, bringing us to the "shock[ing]" realization that the significance of each individual human is a mere illusion—that, with or without any one person, the human race will continue to endure (Doty 94). Perhaps we can find a sense of beauty in the continuous cycle of human life and death, just as Doty is able to see the "collective momentum of the fish" (94). The world no longer seems to be hopelessly turning round and round, stuck in a cyclic stasis; it now appears to have forward-moving momentum.

Doty uses this thought to ease the "overwhelming emotional force" of his partner's death. He is "consol[ed]" by the realization that, despite that death, the human species will nevertheless survive (94). Although Doty admits that the mackerel's ability to comfort him is somewhat artificial, he argues that, "[a]ll attempts to console ourselves . . . will fail, but it is our human work to make them" (95). Yet, is Doty succumbing to one of Smith's "perfected illusion[s]?" Through sentimental images of beauty he may be denying the forcefulness of death, but he is finally able to ease the constant heartache surrounding the loss of his partner. By broadening his perspective to include the collective force of humankind, Doty is able to descry a larger sense of survival, and, in turn, to gain a genuine sense of comfort.

In his essay "Hotel Kitchens," George Orwell employs a very different use of metaphor. Orwell recounts his strenuous experience working in a Parisian hotel, where he submits himself to brutal labor for long hours under horrendous conditions. This subterranean kitchen, with its "red glare of fire" and "nauseating" heat, is described as somewhat of a Dantean inferno (634, 637). Workers "drenched [in] sweat" rush around in a helpless state of "delirium," gasping for a breath of fresh air (635, 637). Here, readers may recall their own experience of dining at an elegant restaurant, ignoring the door that separates the kitchen from the posh dining room, thus preserving the opacity of this paltry social screen. This submission to Smith's "perfected illusion[s]" is a vain attempt to fashion a more pleasant reality. Yet, to Orwell, these ironic juxtapositions of luxury and misery are so apparent that they become "amusing" (639). Leaving this misery behind during a midday break, Orwell becomes a "free" man, at once enthralled by the "blindingly clear" air,

the chilling weather, and the “sweet” smell of gasoline (637). Was Orwell’s decision to work in the service world voluntary, an experiment undertaken by a curious writer who sought to see the “underworld” in a different light? If so, it worked. By coming face-to-face with human misery, Orwell gains a fuller appreciation of his privileged world. Proximity to a metaphoric hell gave him the kind of insight he had sought.

Acts of embracing death and misery, as well as life and fulfillment, then, are not mutually exclusive. If we seek to transcend social screens—to cross the threshold separating the kitchen from the dining room—must we really crawl “deep underground,” into a “rat-hole,” as Orwell does, to gain empathy (634)? David Foster Wallace presents us with a different, perhaps more moderate, solution. In his commencement address at Kenyon College, entitled “This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life,” he points out that “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see.” The laborers of the service world aren’t the only ones living in a kind of hell; successful professionals and white collar workers are also trapped in a world of misery—early mornings, long hours, and the banal routines of home and office life (Wallace). Wallace gives the example of a worker en route to the supermarket, stuck in the middle of a traffic jam, and cursing her fate as she rushes home to be in bed early. Workers like this one—and ultimately, as Wallace points out, all of us—easily succumb to routine. Instead, we might consider the lives of those we encounter on this road. By choosing to think differently about our surroundings, we can turn a mere errand into a “sacred” moment—a moment in which we find ourselves hopelessly trapped in a crowded, aggravating setting, yet have the ability to recognize that we are merely one small part in a beautifully mesmerizing collective. Perhaps, this is the only true way to set ourselves free from our misery (Wallace).

But death and misery can, in fact, enlighten and assuage us in unexpected ways. Death affords us a new perspective on the value of our lives, and on the imperturbable, inscrutable immensity of what lies beyond each of our individual fates. The extremity of death offers a backdrop against which to brace ourselves as we attempt to endure the seemingly unendurable in life. Death’s shadow sets off the subtly illuminated beauty of the quotidian that is all too often unappreciated or overlooked. The alluring, bright parts of a painting are, after all, all the brighter in contrast to the dark ones.

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