Death, in All Its Glory

Topics: Scipio's Dream, porosity, *katabasis* (as dimension), between the two deaths, curtains.

The perplexity of Scipio the Younger, being taken in a dream by his deceased uncle, the famous Roman general, Scipio Africanus, to the ramparts of the Empyrean — in dream language, the threshold at which dead souls are able to gain a view, like an overlook on a mountain road, of the vast landscape below — is as good a place as any to start talking about the perplexities of boundaries that separate contingency from impossibility. The position is, after all, a frame — a *frame of frames*, so to speak. Invited by one's dead host to look back at the place from which one has been magically transported, the situation calls for some metaphor. There is little logically that can be said. In the timelessness of the dream, which is possibly the condition for matching dreams to death, "looking back" implies being in a future, but a kind of future in which everything but one thing has been done, and that one thing makes all the difference.

There is no reason to pretend that this is an odd situation. Who could fail but understand the simple intention of Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Future, in leading the initiate Scrooge to a point of radical reflection? The point is to do something before it is too late, and this kind of instruction gives an extreme twist to the phrase "too late." Isn't being dead a bit too late? The point perhaps is that one is alive at some minimal level while being substantially dead, a condition that is nearly indistinguishable from its opposite: being dead at some minimal level while being substantially alive. In the case of the Scipios, uncle and nephew, it seems that the host-guest situation provides the occasion for both sides of the equation. The uncle is substantially dead but nonetheless hosting the visit of his nephew. The nephew is alive, especially during the day, but in the sleep that is the "death of each day's life" he is allowed to conflate dreaming with travel through eternity. The two Scipios are a couple, a dance couple, each implying and requiring the other.

But, isn't the situation also a double, a mirror of sorts? Just as the Ghost of Christmas Future holds out the option of enlightenment by taking Scrooge to condition of his death, Scipio the Younger is given an option of enlightenment that is based on globalizing the condition he personally enjoys by dreaming of death. Looking down on the earth, where the living wander about unaware of their cosmic spectators, he sees sickness, unhappiness, cruelty — in short the miseries of the human condition. Comparing this view to the immediate surroundings of his Empyrean vantage point, where souls freed of the confinements of mortality seem to be healthy and happy — "suntanned and relaxed" one imagines — he sets his uncle up to deliver the punch-line of this anecdote: that, for the soul, what we normally call life is really death, and what we fear in death is, for the soul, a happy release into Real Life. What Scipio younger and elder are to each other — namely, representatives of the criss-cross conditions of life (with a minimum component of death) and death (with a minimum component of life) — is actually the template of the universal relation of life and death, earth and heaven, temporality and eternity.

This is a lot of revelation for one dream, where one might raise the question of Chuang Tzu, who dreamed he was a butterfly and then, upon waking, wondered if he might be, actually, a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu. The crisscross dilemma is answered directly by Jacques Lacan, who noted simply the condition that qualified this otherwise perfect symmetry of butterfly and man: that, when the butterfly was awake, it wasn't a butterfly for any Others in the way that Chuang Tzu was Chuang Tzu for his parents, children, friends, and colleagues. In other words, life is life because of the small element at the center of all we living beings, a center that is "immortal" in the sense that it exists before we are born and survives our death (Chuang Tzu's *name* and place in the network of symbolic relations that define him as a scholar and poet) but also "dead" in the sense that we, as subjects, have no control over it. Like a dark seed of fate, it is inside us yet inaccessible. It keeps us "at bay" from our own selves, a permanent hollowness.

What, then, is the a-symmetry that keeps this from being a mirror of the condition of the uncle, who though generally and officially dead, is able to give his nephew a tour of heaven?

This is not the usual "compare and contrast" assignment of college essays. This is, rather, a case of a negation of a negation, where the result is not a return to the positive. Even in languages, double negation is volatile, hard to manage, packed with conventions trying to keep it understandable. It is the inverse of having one's cake and eating it, too; it is not having the cake, and not eating it either! One has left one country's national boundary but not yet been admitted to the adjacent country. One is in a space made to appear to be between two frames but which is, in fact, inside the frame itself. There is no other side of the road to which a chicken may cross and raise the customary question. There are chickens, a road, but no other side; and an even more perplexing question.

The crisscross transformation from Alive/Dead to Alive, with a bit of dead at its middle, and Dead, with a residual element that remains alive, also at its middle (A/D → Ad/Da) suggest symmetry but it is their asymmetry that defines them. It's possibly the moment to consider how the kernels, existing as they do within the main frame of their opposite, constitute a radical and radically permanent imbalance, and that it is this imbalance the defines the frame's ability to double without creating a legitimate "third option" between the two spaces it separates. It's what answers Chuang Tzu's question, what provides Scipio with a dream interpretation beyond the conventional "what's death for the body is life for the soul." By shifting from the question of time travel to space travel, where the frame seems to offer an in-between condition but then withdraws the offer just as we have stepped inside, the issue of asymmetry has become one of a more portable phenomenon: *porosity*. This proposes that, within virtually anything, the conditions of Ad/Da prevent any "representational schema" from succeeding completely. When Uncle Africanus *shows* his nephew the spectacle of so-called life on earth, the projection screen, so to speak, has holes in it. Rather, it is the representation itself that has the holes, *through which we catch glimpses of a further-off Real*, suggesting that the reality we took for real was nothing more than a construct, a projection on a screen that we took for three-dimensional solid stuff.

We will quickly avoid the mistake of adding a "fourth dimension" to the three in order to turn the three into a screen effect. This would amount to extending the problem without solving it. This can still be useful for literary, film, and painting, where the fourth dimension will always enjoy a career by fleshing out paradox in terms of magic mirrors, hidden passageways, journeys to other time periods, etc. What else but the fourth dimension could be the basis for the classical literary motif of the *katabasis*, the descent into Hades? The fourth dimensions has a double function. First, as an "extra" spatial dimension, it is suited for going beyond realities as we conceive them in the "depth" of three dimensions. Second, as a sideways ally of time, which might be considered as a dimension in its own right, there are useful crossovers where time, in the metaphorical cloak of space, appears to offer hints about how to make the impossible work within art. To give life to a painted portrait, therefore, means stealing it away from the original subject. To take a mirror from one house to another means carrying along with it glimpses into the original scene it reflected. In such cases, it is not the *Unheimlich* effect alone, but the obligation to devote a narrative to a further cause. This does not mean shutting down the fantastic effect by explaining it as a crafty delusion or error of perception but, in the traditions of naturalistic religions everywhere, "laying the soul to rest" — placating an unhappy spirit or de-contaminating a space from haunting; in other words, practical benefits. If *katarsis* was the outcome of tragic drama in Aristotle's view, the idea was that this had to be done in public, with the aid of that supremely mysterious Other known as the *korus*, and mostly medical in nature. This combines the "mental" component of recognition (*anagnorisis*) with the "bodily" response of convulsion: crying or laughter, and thus the mind-body problem escapes its Enlightenment straight-jacket without adding on New Age baggage about spiritual healing.

Such was the goal of the common pilgrimage destinations of antiquity, where visitors would be purified, instructed, and transformed in exchange for a goat and other offerings. The famous Rites of Eleusis and Cave of Trophonius involved elaborate theatrics for the mass audience but never failed to please. All involved the thematics of *katabasis*: an artificial death as prerequisite to rebirth.