

THE FEAR OF DEATH (EXCERPT)

BY WILLIAM HAZLITT

Perhaps the best cure for the fear of death is to reflect that life has a beginning as well as an end. There was a time when we were not. This gives us no concern—why, then, should it trouble us that a time will come when we will cease to be? I have no wish to have been alive a hundred years ago, or in the reign of Queen Anne. Why should I regret and lay it so much to heart that I will not be alive a hundred years from now, in the reign of I cannot tell whom?

When Bickerstaff wrote his *Essays* I knew nothing of the subjects of them. No, much later, and but the other day, as it were, in the beginning of the reign of George III, when Goldsmith, Johnson, Burke, used to meet at the Globe, when Garrick¹ was in his glory, and Reynolds was over head and ears with his portraits, and Sterne brought out the volumes of *Tristram Shandy* year by year, it was without consulting me. I didn't have the slightest hint of what was going on. The debates in the House of Commons on the American War, or the firing at Bunker's Hill, disturbed not me, yet I thought this no evil. I neither ate, drank, nor was merry, yet I did not complain. I had not then looked out into this breathing world, yet I was well. And the world did quite as well without me as I did without it! Why, then, should I make all this outcry about parting with it, and being no worse off than I was before? There is nothing in the recollection that at a certain time we were not come into the world that "the gorge rises at."² Why should we revolt at the idea that we must one day go out of it? To die is only to be as we were before we were born, yet no one feels any remorse, or regret, or repugnance, in contemplating this last idea. It is rather a relief and disburdening of the mind. It seems to have been holiday time with us then. We were not called to appear upon the stage of life, to wear robes or tatters, to laugh or cry, be hooted or applauded. We had lain *perdus* all this while, snug, out of harm's way, and had slept out our thousands of centuries without wanting to be waked up, at peace and free from care, in a long nonage, in a sleep deeper and calmer than that of infancy, wrapped in the softest and finest dust. And the worst that we dread is, after a short, fretful, feverish being, after vain hopes and idle fears, to sink to final repose again, and

¹ *Oliver Goldsmith* (1730?–1774) was an 18th-century author, famous for various comedies and his one novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Celebrated in James Boswell's biography, *Samuel Johnson* (1729–1797) was famous for his literary criticism in such works as *Lives of the Poets* and having received the first highly reputed dictionary of the English language. *Edmund Burke* (1709–1784) was famous for his political essays and eloquence in the House of Commons during the American War for Independence. A manager of Drury Lane theater, *David Garrick* (1717–1779) was one of the greatest Shakespearean actors of all time and friend of both Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, and other personages who belonged to "The Club."

² *the gorge rises at* quotation from Hamlet, meaning "disgusts." The *gorge* is the throat, apparently related to the word *gorgeous*, referring to beautiful scarfs that were worn around the neck.

forget the troubled dream of life! . . . You armed men, knights templars, that sleep in the stone aisles of that old Temple church³, where all is silent above, and where a deeper silence reigns below (not broken by the pealing organ), are you not contented to be where you lie? Or would you come out of your long homes to go to the Holy War⁴? Or do you complain that pain no longer visits you, that sickness has done its worst, that you have paid the last debt to nature, that you hear no more of the thickening phalanx of the foe, or your lady's waning love, and that while this ball of earth rolls its eternal round, no sound shall ever pierce through to disturb your lasting repose, fixed as the marble over your tombs, breathless as the grave that holds you! And you, oh! you, to whom my heart turns, and will turn while it has feeling left, who loved in vain, and whose first was your last sigh, won't you, too, rest in peace, or will you cry to me complaining from your clay-cold bed when that sad heart is no longer sad, and that sorrow is dead which you were only called into the world to feel!

³ Located in London, the Temple Church was originally the headquarters of the Medieval Knights Templar, an order of the Roman Catholic Church that fought in the Crusades. During Hazlitt's own time period, the Temple was used as a church. Today the church remains with its organ still intact.

⁴ The Crusades were called the "Holy War."