

James Hervey, *Meditations Among the Tombs. In a Letter to a Lady* (excerpts)

Madam,

Travelling lately into Cornwall, I happened to alight at a considerable village in that country: where, finding myself under an unexpected necessity of staying a little, I took a walk to the church.¹ The doors, like the heaven to which they lead, were wide open, and readily admitted an unworthy stranger. Pleased with the opportunity, I resolved to spend a few minutes under the sacred roof.

In a situation so retired and awful,² I could not avoid falling into a train of meditations, serious and mournfully pleasing. Which I trust, were in some degree profitable to me, while they possessed and warmed my thoughts; and if they may administer any satisfaction to you, Madam, now they are recollected, and committed to writing, I shall receive a fresh pleasure from them.

It was an ancient pile, reared by hands, that, ages ago, were mouldered into dust; situate in the centre of a large burial ground; remote from all the noise and hurry of tumultuous life. The body spacious; the structure lofty; the whole magnificently plain. A row of regular pillars extended themselves through the midst, supporting the roof with simplicity, and with dignity. The light, that passed through the windows, seemed to shed a kind of luminous obscurity, which gave every object a grave and venerable air. The deep silence added to the gloomy aspect, and, both heightened by the loneliness of the place, greatly increased the solemnity of the scene. A sort of religious dread stole insensibly on my mind while I advanced, all pensive and thoughtful, along the inmost aisle. Such a dread, as hushed every ruder passion, and dissipated all the gay images of an alluring world.

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The next thing which engaged my attention, was the lettered floor. The pavement, somewhat like Ezekiel's roll, was written over from one end to the other. I soon perceived the comparison to hold good in another respect, and the inscriptions to be matter of "mourning, lamentation, and woe."³ They seemed to court my observation, silently inviting me to read them. And what would these dumb monitors inform me of? "That, beneath their little circumferences, were deposited such and such pieces of clay, which once lived, and moved, and talked: that they had received a charge to preserve their names, and were the remaining trustees of their memory."

Ah! said I, is such my situation? The adorable Creator around me, and the bones of my fellow-creatures under me! Surely, then, I have great reason to cry out, with the revering patriarch, How dreadful is this place!⁴ Seriousness and devotion become this house forever. May I never enter it lightly or irreverently, but with profound awe, and godly fear!

O! that they were wise! said the inspired penman.⁵ It was his last wish for his dear people. He breathed it out, and gave up the ghost. But what is wisdom? It consists not in refined speculations, accurate researches into nature, or an universal acquaintance with history. The divine lawgiver settles this important point in his next aspiration: o! that they understood this! That they had right apprehensions of their spiritual

¹ "I had named, in some former editions, a particular church, viz. Kilkhampton; where several of the monuments, described in the following pages, really exist. But as I thought it convenient to mention some cases here, which are not, according to the best of my remembrance, referred to in any inscriptions there, I have now omitted the name. That imagination might operate more freely, and the improvement of the reader be consulted, without any thing that should look like a variation from truth and fact." [Hervey's note] Kilkhampton is one of the northernmost towns in Cornwall.

² awe-inspiring, moving

³ Ezekiel 2.10 [Hervey's note] "And when I looked, behold, an hand was sent unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein; And he spread it before me; and it was written within and without: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe." Ezekiel 2.9-10.

⁴ Genesis 28.17 [Hervey's note]

⁵ Deuteronomy 32.29 [Hervey's note]

interests, and eternal concerns! That they had eyes to discern, and inclinations to pursue, the things which belong to their peace! But how shall they attain this valuable knowledge? I send them not, adds the illustrious teacher, to turn over all the volumes of literature: they may acquire, and much more expeditiously, this science of life, by considering their latter end. This spark of heaven is often lost under the glitter of pompous erudition, but shines clearly in the gloomy mansions of the tomb. Drowned is this gentle whisper amidst the noise of secular affairs, but speaks distinctly in the retirements of serious contemplation. Behold! how providentially I am brought to the school of wisdom!⁶ The grave is the most faithful master,⁷ and these instances of mortality the most instructive lessons. Come then, calm attention, and compose my thoughts; come, thou celestial Spirit, and enlighten my mind; that I may so peruse these awful pages as to “become wise unto salvation.”⁸

Examining the records of mortality, I found the memorials of a promiscuous multitude.⁹ They were huddled, at least they rested together, without any regard to rank or seniority. None were ambitious of the uppermost rooms, or chief seats in this house of mourning. None entertained fond and eager expectations of being honourably greeted in their darksome cells. The man of years and experience, reputed as an oracle in his generation, was content to lie down at the feet of a babe. In this house appointed for all living, the servant was equally accommodated, and lodged in the same story with his master. The poor indigent lay as softly, and slept as soundly, as the most opulent possessor. All the distinction that subsisted, was a grassy hillock, bound with osiers,¹⁰ or a sepulchral stone ornamented with imagery.

Why then, said my working thoughts, O! why should we raise such a mighty stir about superiority and precedence, when the next remove will reduce us all to a state of equal meanness? Why should we exalt ourselves, or debase others, since we must all one day be upon a common level, and blended together in the same undistinguished dust? O! that this consideration might humble my own and others' pride, and sink our imaginations as low as our habitation will shortly be?

Among these confused relics of humanity, there are, without doubt, persons of contrary interests, and contradicting sentiments. But death, like some able days-man,¹¹ has laid his hand on the contending parties, and brought all their differences to an amicable conclusion.¹² Here enemies, sworn enemies, dwell together in unity. They drop every embittered thought, and forget that they once were foes. Perhaps their crumbling bones mix, as they moulder, and those who, while they lived, stood aloof in irreconcilable variance, here fall into mutual embraces, and even incorporate with each other in the grave. O! that we might learn from these friendly ashes, not to perpetuate the memory of injuries, not to foment the fever of resentment, nor cherish the turbulence of passion. That there may be as little animosity and disagreement in the land of the living, as there is in the congregation of the dead! But I suspend for a while such general observations, and address myself to a more particular inquiry.

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⁶ The man how bless'd, who, sick of gaudy scenes, / Is led by choice to take his favourite walk / Beneath Death's gloomy, silent, cypress shades, / Unpierced by Vanity's fantastic ray; / To read his monuments, to weigh his dust, / Visit his vaults, and dwell among the tombs! *Night Thoughts* [Hervey's note] From Book V, lines 310ff.

⁷ Wait the great teacher death. [Hervey's note] This edition omits the attribution, “Pope”; the reference is to Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, line 88: “Wait the great teacher, Death, and God adore!”

⁸ “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 3.14-15.

⁹ Mista senum ac juvenum densentur funera. Horace [Hervey's note] “Youth jostles age in funeral obsequies.” From Horace's *Odes*, 1.28, line 19 (John Conington's translation).

¹⁰ Osiers: willow branches.

¹¹ A day-laborer.

¹² Hi motus animorum atque haec certamina tanta pulveris exigui iactu compressa quiescent. Virgil [Hervey's note] From Virgil's *Georgics* IV, lines 86-87: “These fiery passions and fierce attacks / Are controlled and quieted by a little scattered dust.” In this passage Virgil is talking about ending conflict between bees.

Yonder entrance leads, I suppose, to the vault. Let me turn aside, and take one view of the habitation, and its tenants. The sullen door grates upon its hinges: not used to receive many visitants, it admits me with reluctance and murmurs. What meaneth this sudden trepidation, while I descend the steps, and am visiting the pale nations of the dead? Be composed, my spirits: there is nothing to fear in these quiet chambers. "Here, even the wicked cease from troubling."¹³

Good Heavens! what a solemn scene! how dismal the gloom! Here is perpetual darkness, and night even at noon-day. How doleful the solitude! Not one trace of cheerful society, but sorrow and terror seem to have made this their dreaded abode. Hark! how the hollow dome resounds, at every tread. The echoes, that long have slept, are awakened; and lament, and sigh, along the walls.

A beam or two finds its way through the grates, and reflects a feebler glimmer from the nails of the coffins. So many of those sad spectacles, half concealed in shades, half seen dimly by the baleful twilight, add a deep horror to these gloomy mansions. I pore upon the inscriptions, and am just able to pick out, that these are the remains of the rich and renowned. No vulgar dead are deposited here. The most illustrious and right honourable, have claimed this for their last retreat. And, indeed, they retain somewhat of a shadowy pre-eminence. They lie, ranged in a mournful order, and in a sort of silent pomp, under the arches of an ample sepulchre, while meaner corpses, without much ceremony, "go down to the stones of the pit."¹⁴

My apprehensions recover from their surprise. I find, here are no phantoms, but such as fear raises. However, it still amazes me, to observe the wonders of this nether world. Those who received vast revenues, and called whole lordships their own, are here reduced to half a dozen feet of earth, or confined in a few sheets of lead. Rooms of state and sumptuous furniture are resigned for no other ornament than the shroud, for no other apartment than the darksome niche. Where is the star, that blazed upon the breast; or coronet, that glittered round the temples? The only remains of departed dignity are the weather-beaten hatchment,¹⁵ and the tattered escutcheon.¹⁶ I see no splendid retinue surrounding this solitary dwelling. The lordly equipage hovers no longer about the lifeless matter. He has no other attendant than a dusty statue, which, while the regardless world is as gay as ever, the sculptor's hand has taught to weep.

Those who gloried in high-born ancestors and noble pedigree here drop their lofty pretensions. They acknowledge kindred with creeping things, and quarter arms with the meanest reptiles.¹⁷ They say to corruption, thou art my father; and to the worm, thou art my mother, and my sister. Or, should they still assume the style of distinction, ah! how impotent were the claim! how apparent the ostentation! It is said by their monument, Here lies the great! How easily is it replied by the spectator!

———— False marble! Where?
Nothing but poor and sordid dust lies here.¹⁸

Mortifying truth! Sufficient, one would think, to wean the most sanguine appetite from this transitory state of things, from its sickly satisfactions, its fading glories, its vanishing treasures.

For now, ye *lying vanities* of life!
Ye ever tempting, ever-cheating train!
Where are ye now? and what is your amount?¹⁹

¹³ From Job 3.17: "There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest." Job is cursing the day of his birth and longing for the peace of death.

¹⁴ From Isaiah 14.19: "But thou art cast out of thy grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the pit; as a carcase trodden under feet."

¹⁵ "a square or lozenge-shaped tablet exhibiting the armorial bearings of a deceased person, which is affixed to the front of his dwelling-place" (OED)

¹⁶ "The shield or shield-shaped surface on which a coat of arms is depicted; also in wider sense, the shield with the armorial bearings; a sculptured or painted representation of this." (OED)

¹⁷ To "quarter arms" with someone is to include that person's coat of arms, or some element of their coat of arms, on one section (or quarter) of one's own heraldic shield — in other words, an acknowledgment of kinship or close alliance.

¹⁸ From "Pindarique Ode, X" by the English poet and courtier Abraham Cowley (1618 – 1667): "Here lies the Great – False Marble, where? / Nothing but small and sordid Dust lies there." (20-21)

What is all the world, to these poor breathless beings? What are their pleasures? A bubble broke. What their honours? A dream that is forgotten. What the sum-total of their enjoyments below? Once, perhaps, it appeared to inexperienced and fond desire, something considerable. But now death hath measured it with his line, and weighed it in his scale,²⁰ what is the upshot? Alas! it is shorter than a span, lighter than the dancing spark, and driven away like the dissolving smoke.

Indulge, my soul, a serious pause. Recollect all the gay things, that were wont to dazzle thy eyes, and inveigle thy affections. Here, examine those baits of sense. Here, form an estimate of their real value. Suppose thyself first among the favourites of fortune, who revel in the lap of pleasure, who shine in the robes of honour; and swim in tides of inexhausted riches. Yet, how soon would the passing-bell proclaim thy exit! And, when once that iron call has summoned thee to thy future reckoning, where would all these gratifications be? At that period, how will all the pageantry of the most affluent, splendid, or luxurious circumstances, vanish into empty air! And is this a happiness so passionately to be coveted?

I thank you, ye relics of sounding titles, and magnificent names. Ye have taught me more of the littleness of the world than all the volumes of my library. Your nobility arrayed in a winding-sheet, your grandeur mouldering in an urn, are the most indisputable proofs of the nothingness of created things. Never, surely, did Providence write this important point in such legible characters, as in the ashes of my lord, or on the corpse of his grace.²¹ Let others, if they please, pay their obsequious court to your wealthy sons, and ignobly fawn, or anxiously sue, for preferements; my thoughts shall often resort, in pensive contemplation, to the sepulchres of their sires, and learn, from their sleeping dust, to moderate my expectations from mortals, to stand disengaged from every undue attachment to the little interests of time, to get above the delusive amusements of honour, the gaudy tinsels of wealth, and all the empty shadows of a perishing world.

Hark! what sound is that! In such a situation, every noise alarms. Solemn and slow it breaks again upon the silent air! 'Tis the striking of the clock. Designed, one would imagine, to ratify all my serious meditations. Methinks, it says Amen, and sets a seal, to every improving hint. It tells me, that another portion of my appointed time is elapsed. One calls it, "the knell of my departed hours."²² 'Tis the watch-word to vigilance and activity. It cries in the ear of reason, "Redeem the time. Catch the favourable gales of opportunity: O! catch them, while they breathe, before they are irrecoverably lost. The span of life shortens continually. Thy minutes are all upon the wing, and hastening to be gone. Thou art a borderer upon eternity, and making incessant advances to the state thou art contemplating." May the admonition sink deep, into an attentive and obedient mind! May it teach me that heavenly arithmetic, "of numbering my days, and applying my heart unto wisdom."²³

I have often walked beneath the impending promontory's craggy cliff; I have sometimes trod the vast spaces of the lonely desert, and penetrated the inmost recesses of the dreary cavern; but never, never beheld nature louting, with so tremendous a form, never felt such impressions of awe striking cold on my heart, as under these black-browed arches, amidst these mouldy walls, and surrounded by such rueful objects. Where melancholy, deepest melancholy, for ever spreads her raven wings. Let me now emerge from the damp and dreadful obscurity. Farewell, ye seats of desolation, and shades of death! Gladly I revisit the realms of day.

Having cast a superficial view upon these receptacles of the dead, curiosity prompts my inquiry to a more intimate survey. Could we draw back the covering of the tomb; could we discern what those are now,

¹⁹ From James Thomson's "Winter: A Poem," published in 1726, lines 201-203. The phrase "lying vanities" occurs twice in the Bible: in Psalm 31 ("I have hated them that regard lying vanities: but I trust in the Lord" [31:6]) and in Jonah ("They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy" [2:8]).

²⁰ Another instance of Hervey's biblical diction. See, for example, 2 Samuel 8.2 ("And he smote Moab, and measured them with a line, casting them down to the ground") and Isaiah 40.12 ("Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?").

²¹ ----- Mors sola fatetur / Quantula sint hominum corpuscula. Juvenal [Hervey's note] "Death alone reveals how insignificant are the little bodies of men." From Juvenal's *Satire X*, lines 172-173.

²² From Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742), Night I, line 58.

²³ Psalm 90.12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

who once were mortals – O! how would it surprise and grieve us! Surprise us, to behold the prodigious transformation which has taken place on every individual; grieve us, to observe the dishonor done to our nature in general, within these subterraneous lodgments!

Here, the sweet and winning aspect, that were perpetually an attractive smile, grins horribly a naked, ghastly skull. The eye that outshone the diamond's brilliancy, and glanced its lovely lightning into the most guarded heart: alas! where is it? Where shall we find the rolling sparkler? How are all its sprightly beams eclipsed! totally eclipsed! The tongue, that once commanded all the sweetness of harmony, and all the power of eloquence, in this strange land has "forgot its cunning."²⁴ Where are now those strains of melody, which ravished our ears? Where is that flow of persuasion, which carried captive our judgments? The great master of language, and of song, is become silent as the night that surrounds him. The pampered flesh, so lately clothed in purple and fine linen, how is it covered rudely with clods of clay. There was a time, when the timorously nice creature would scarce "adventure to set a foot upon the ground, for delicateness and tenderness;"²⁵ but is now enwrapped in clammy earth, and sleeps on no softer a pillow than the ragged gravel-stones. Here, "the strong men bow themselves."²⁶ The nervous arm²⁷ is unstrung; the brawny sinews are relaxed; the limbs, not long ago the seats of vigour and activity, lie down motionless; and the bones, which were as bars of iron, are crumbled into dust.

Here, the man of business forgets all his favourite schemes, and discontinues the pursuit of gain. Here, is a total stand²⁸ to the circulation of merchandise, and the hurry of trade. In these solitary recesses, as in the building of Solomon's temple,²⁹ is heard no sound of the hammer and ax. The winding-sheet, and the coffin, are the utmost bound of all earthly devices. "Hitherto may they go, but no farther."³⁰ Here the sons of pleasure take a final farewell of their dear delights. No more is the sensualist annointed with oil, or crowned with rose-buds. He chants no more to the melody of the viol, nor revels any longer, at the banquet of wine. Instead of sumptuous tables, and delicious treats, the poor voluptuary is himself a feast for fattened insects; the reptile riots in his flesh; "the worm feeds sweetly on him."³¹ Here also, beauty fails; bright beauty drops her lustre here. O! how her roses fade, and her lilies languish, in this bleak soil! How does the grand leveller pour contempt, upon the charmer of our hearts! how turn to deformity, what captivated the world before!

Could the lover have a sight of his once enchanting fair one, what a startling astonishment would seize him! "Is this the object I not long ago so passionately admired! I said, she was divinely fair, and thought her somewhat more than mortal. Her form was symmetry itself; every elegance breathed in her air; and all the graces waited on her motions. It was music when she spoke: but, when she spoke encouragement, it was little less than rapture. How my heart danced, to those charming accents! And can that, which some weeks ago was to admiration lovely, be now so unsufferably loathsome? Where are those blushing cheeks? Where the coral lips? Where that ivory neck, on which the curling jet, in such glossy ringlets, flowed? With a thousand other beauties of person, and ten thousand delicacies of action?³² Amazing alteration! Delusory

²⁴ Psalm 137.5: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning."

²⁵ Deuteronomy 28.56 [Hervey's note] "The tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, her eye shall be evil toward the husband of her bosom, and toward her son, and toward her daughter."

²⁶ Ecclesiastes 12.3.

²⁷ "Nervous" not in the modern sense of the word but meaning "sinewy, muscular, strong; vigorous, energetic" (OED).

²⁸ That is, a stop, a cessation.

²⁹ Solomon's temple, the "house of the Lord," was built without the usual noise of craftsmen according to I Kings 6.7: "And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building."

³⁰ Job 38.11, spoken by Jehovah to the sea as a demonstration of his power: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."

³¹ Job 24.20 [Hervey's note] "The womb shall forget him; the worm shall feed sweetly on him; he shall be no more remembered; and wickedness shall be broken as a tree."

³² "Quo fugit Venus? Heu! Quoue color! decens / Quo motus? Quid habis illius, illius, / Quæ spirabat amores, / Quæ me surperat mihi?" Horace [Hervey's note] From Horace, *Odes* IV, stanza 13: "Where has Venus gone? Alas! Where that color? Where the graceful motion? what is left of her, of her who, breathing the spirit of love, robbed me of myself?"

bliss! Fondly I gazed upon the glittering meteor. It shone brightly, and I mistook it for a star, for a permanent and substantial good. But how is it fallen! fallen from an orb not its own! And all that I can trace on earth, is but a putrid mass.”³³

Lie, poor Florella!³⁴ lie deep, as thou dost, in obscure darkness. Let night with her impenetrable shades always conceal thee. May no prying eye be witness to thy disgrace; but let thy surviving sisters think upon thy state, when they contemplate the idol in the glass. When the pleasing image rises gracefully to view, surrounded with a world of charms, and flushed with joy at the consciousness of them all, then, in those minutes of temptation and dangers, when vanity used to steal into the thoughts, then let them remember what a veil of horror is drawn over a face which was once beautiful and brilliant as theirs. Such a seasonable reflection might regulate the labours of the toilet, and create a more earnest solicitude to polish the jewels than to varnish the casket. It might then become their highest ambition to have the mind decked with divine virtues, and dressed after the amiable pattern of their Redeemer’s holiness.

And would this prejudice their persons, or depreciate their charms? Quite the reverse! It would spread a sort of heavenly glory over the finest set of features, and heighten the loveliness of every other engaging accomplishment. What is yet a more inviting consideration, these flowers would not wither with nature, nor be tarnished by time, but would open continually into richer beauties, and flourish even in the winter of age. But the most incomparable recommendation of these noble qualities is, that from their hallowed relics, as from the fragrant ashes of the phoenix, will ere long arise an illustrious form, bright as the wings of angels, lasting as the light of the new Jerusalem.

³³ This passage in the *Meditations* also recalls, generally, Hamlet’s contemplation of Yorick’s skull.

³⁴ Poetic name for a beautiful and beloved woman (from the Latin for “blooming” or “flowering”).