

speech, privacy and scholarship; even if sworn enemies of these abstractions (quite often wearing the disguise of their friends) seem unduly numerous in contemporary society.

In Webster's *The White Devil* a character is mentioned who 'prepared a deadly vapour in a Spaniard's fart that should have poisoned all Dublin'. It appears from other 17th century plays (a fact to which Kingsley Amis drew my attention) that in Ireland to break wind was a recognized insult. The invention would find a welcome, morally and physically, among many disturbers of the world today. Indeed this ambitious project seems to have been largely realized on an international scale, fumes extruded from uncounted human organs rather than one solely Spanish individual outlet; so much that one's own inward conviction begins to increase that retirement from such an ambience might not be too bad.

Even after reaching one's early sixties letters start to arrive from insurance firms and the like opening with the words: 'You will soon be sixty-five, etc., etc.', causing the recipient to reflect: 'Well, it's been kind to allow me to stay so long.' As the eighth decade gradually consumes itself, shadows lengthen, a masked and muffled figure loiters persistently at the back of every room as if waiting for a word at the most tactful moment; a presence more easily discernible than heretofore that exhales undoubted menace yet also extends persuasive charm of an enigmatic kind.

Death is the mother of beauty, hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment of our dreams
And our desires

Anyway that was what Wallace Stevens thought; others too. Again – as with loudly decrying the world and its ways – a tranquil approach is probably to be preferred, rather than accept too readily either Death's attractions or repulsions (contrasted with each other like Durga's attributes); better that the dual countenances of the ubiquitous visitant should not cause too prolonged musings on either the potential relief or potential afflictions of departure. Better, certainly, not to bore other people with the subject.

All the same the presence in the corner – whose mask and domino never quite manage to keep out of sight the ivory glint of skull and bones beneath – seems to imply, even if silently, something of that once familiar cadence, harsh authoritarian knell of the drinker's passing day, to which Bobby Roberts used to attach such mystic significance: 'Last orders, please – time, gentlemen, time', in this case the unspoken sanction: 'Last conclusions, please.'

Henry Adams – 'Little Adams' as Henry James called him a trifle

defensively – remarks that 'only on the edge of the grave can a man conclude anything'. Even when the graveyard, if perhaps not the grave itself, must be admitted to have moved closer into the foreground of one's local landscape I do not find conclusions at all easy to formulate; certainly not rules for life. By no means everybody takes that view. For many years now acquaintances have been standing conclusions generously in the all too crowded bar of this masquerade; a bar made warm by argument like that warmed by the Blessed Damozel's bosom pictured in the imagination of Rossetti; a bar by now attended so long that to offer a final round of conclusions at one's own expense seems almost superfluous. It would be easy to pass out simply from a surplus of conclusions. Hesitation in paying one's round is not due to parsimony so much as a sense of my own conclusions seeming to sound too humdrum a note; when not humdrum, pretentious; sometimes both.

For instance there seems a lot to be said for that mystic precept of the 19th-century magician Éliphas Lévi (quoted more than once in *Dance*): 'To know, to will, to dare, to be silent'; but I'm not sure the Mage's words make a very refreshing draught at so late an hour. It can be said for his recommendations, however, that they leave options wide open; are certainly not to be taken as aiming at a mere success story. Again, one might offer (Bowra would not in principle have refused) a double Kipling's *If* on the rocks without soda. Once more those daunting prerequisites are more likely to be an embarrassment than a restorative; especially if topped up with a dash of Apollinaire's *Marizibill*, the closing lines of which are worth bearing in mind in most human dealings:

Je connais gens de toutes sortes
Ils n'égalent pas leurs destins
Indécis comme feuilles mortes
Leurs yeux sont des feux mal éteints
Leurs coeurs bougent comme leurs portes

I'm never quite sure whether this final stanza of the poem is spoken by the little Cologne tart – 'offerte à tous en tout mignonne' – or the poet himself is asserting that her nightly experience parallels his own in life. I suppose the former. It doesn't much matter. In either case such raw spirits are rough on the palate as a nightcap. In fact, if procurable at the bar, a packet of literary prejudice however dry might be preferable to general conclusions; possibly even more revealing.

How, for example, should I rightly have answered the Japanese professor's question: 'What do you think of Shakespeare?'; bearing in mind that, even if one manages to remain the right side of sanity, Shake-