

the deadline. Certain only that the cause of my death is one that I can neither foresee nor forestall, I'm content to let the sleeping dog lie.

If the attitude is maybe nothing other than a new sophistry designed to excuse my refusal to quit smoking, one of Critchley's proofs of the believing blindly in a magical form of salvation, it is also the refusal to inject myself with the fear of death that sells the financial, pharmaceutical, and political products guaranteed to restore the youthful bloom of immortality. I came

of age during a decade when the answer to the question, "Why do I have to die?" was still being looked for in the laboratories of literature, the cutting-edge R&D to be found in the experiments conducted by Shakespeare, Dickens, Auden, and Yeats translating Sophocles. Over the course of the past fifty years the question has been referred to the cosmetic surgeons, the arms manufacturers, and the hedge-fund wizards, but I haven't found my way to Jesus or lost the habit of reading the ancient writers unfamiliar

with the modernized systems of risk-free metaphysics.

I know that dying is un-American, nowhere mentioned in our contractual agreement with providence, but to regard the mere fact of longevity as the supreme good—without asking why or to what end—strikes me as foolish, a misappropriation of time, thought, sentiment, electricity, and frequent-flier miles. Of the \$2.4 trillion assigned last year to the care and feeding of our health-care apparatus, a substantial fraction paid the expenses of citizens in the last, often wretched, years of their lives. Who benefits from the inventory of suffering gathered in the Florida storage facilities? Seldom the corpses in waiting that serve as profit centers for the insurance companies; usually not the heirs of the estate placed as a burnt offering on the altar of Mammon in the temples of medical science.

Where then is the blessing to be found in the wish to live forever? Never before in the history of the world have so many people lived as long, as safely, or as freely as those of us now living in the United States. Never before in the history of the world have so many of those same people made themselves sick with the fears of an imaginary future. We magnify the threat in all the ills the flesh is heir to, surround ourselves with surveillance cameras, declare the war on terror against an unknown enemy and an abstract noun, buy from Bernie Madoff the elixirs of life everlasting. And what is it that we accomplish other than the destruction of our happiness as well as any hope of some sort of sustainable balancing of our account with nature, which, unlike the Obama Administration, isn't in the business of arranging bailouts?

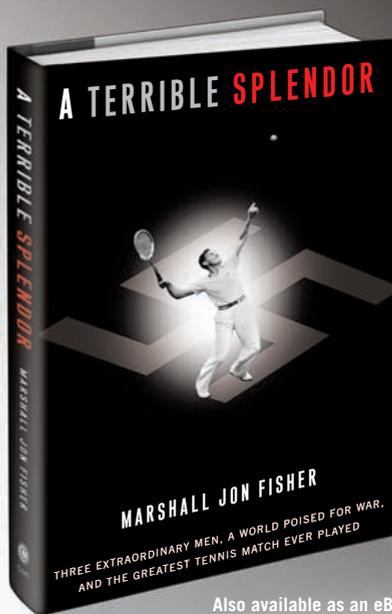
Absent a coming to terms with death, how do we address the questions of environmental degradation and social injustice certain to denigrate the misfortunes of the twenty-first century? Our technologists provide us with new and improved weapons and information systems, our politicians with digitally enhanced sophistry and superstition, but it is from Critchley's council of dead philosophers that we're more likely to learn how not to murder ourselves with our fear of the dark. ■

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