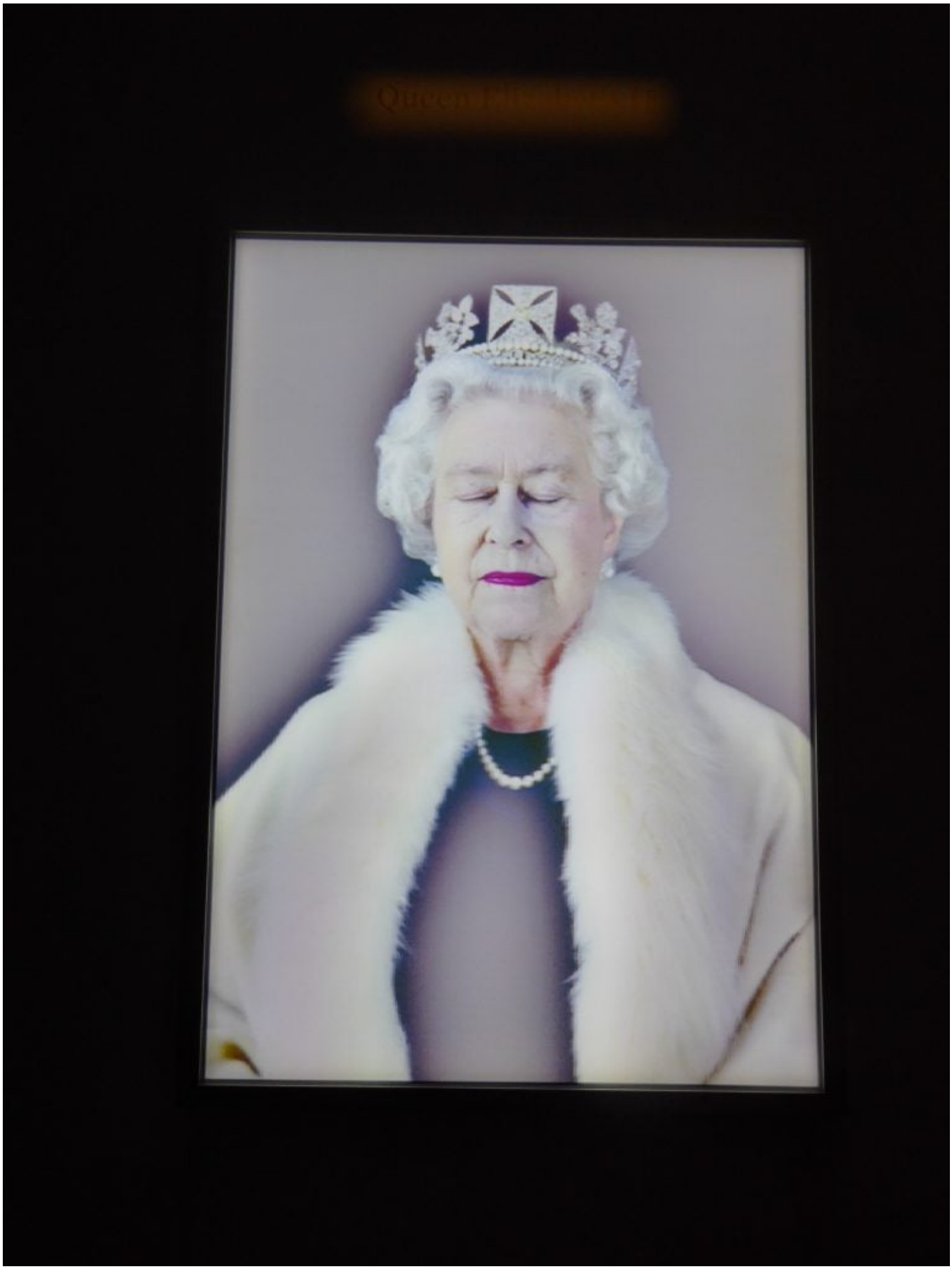
The Queen’s Virtues and Ours



by Theodore Dalrymple

Although I was born before Elizabeth II ascended the throne, I had until a few days ago lived all my conscious existence under a single head of state, who came therefore to seem almost like an immoveable natural phenomenon, a fact of life. Of course, I knew that all men are mortal, etc., and therefore (if I had been asked) that the Queen would one day die, but I still entertained the faint and absurd hope than an exception would be made in her case. A locus of stability in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world, at least one thing was beyond contention except by a few professional malcontents. That is why her death came as a shock, though in the abstract it is not so very surprising that a ninety-six-year-old lady should die.

For someone in office for seventy years to remain as popular at the end as at the beginning, while also being an immensely privileged person, is surely a most remarkable feat, and a tribute both to that person's combined sense of duty and psychological canniness. Of course, it helped that she was a figurehead, at most someone with influence behind the scenes, rather than someone who exercised real political power, such exercisers of power retaining their popularity for a few months if even that. But the iron self-control she exercised in the performance of her duties—many of which must have bored her, and some of which, such as meeting and being polite to odious or even evil heads of states or governments, must have repelled her—was testimony to her sense of duty and her determination to keep her vow, made when she was twenty-one, to devote her life to service.

Another cause for astonishment, especially in the present day, is that she survived her seventy years of office, during which she was adulated, deferred to, and so forth, without becoming a monster of egotism. This was attributable, surely, to an existential modesty—an awareness that she received such deference and adulation not through any exceptional qualities,

gifts, or virtues of her own, but by sheer accident of birth. Such modesty in celebrity is not exactly the characteristic of our age, to put it mildly.

Without doubt, she was the scion of a different age. When she ascended the throne, the second most popular woman in the kingdom was probably Kathleen Ferrier, the great contralto, by then world famous but also retaining, as the Queen was to do, a modesty of demeanour, as if always intensely aware that her great gift was from God, even if she had cultivated it to the maximum of its potential. Her celebrity neither turned her head nor made her a fortune but was the consequence of her real worth.

In Elizabeth's reign of seventy years, the country changed as much as it had during the reign of the previously longest reigning monarch, Queen Victoria. In many respects, especially measurable ones, the changes were for the better. The infant mortality rate, for example, declined by nearly ninety per cent. The kind of poverty in which millions of people had no indoor bathrooms has been eliminated. Comforts that were once the perquisite only of the better off have come to achieve the status almost of unalienable human rights. When Elizabeth ascended the throne, rationing of some items was still in force, the legacy not so much of the war as of the economic policies pursued after it, though with the excuse of war indebtedness—levels of which we may soon approach without having had a war to account for them. Elizabeth's grandiose coronation was in part a relief, or symbolic release, from the greyness of existence in Britain during the post-war years. For the great majority of people, there has been a welcome increase in disposable income.

During her reign, money ceased to be a reliable store of wealth. In nominal terms, for example, it now costs eighty-eight times what it did in 1952 to post a letter. Many things that did not exist then are now deemed indispensable (invention being the mother of much necessity). Other things

have become more expensive in nominal terms, but not by so much as postage. In terms of the labour necessary to pay for it, a house takes probably five or ten times as long to buy as it then did.

In intangible ways, the quality of life has deteriorated. At the beginning of her reign, Britain had a low rate of crime, but by its end it was among the most crime-ridden countries in the West. In the sixth year of her reign, as a small boy, I was allowed to go to the park, walk my dog after dark and cross London by public transport on my own, without anyone thinking for a moment that I was in any way a neglected child.

The aesthetic fabric of cities, towns, and even villages has been systematically destroyed by a rampant, half-ideological, half-financially corrupt modernism (the city council once planned to pull down all the eighteenth-century buildings and replace them with what were then modern tower blocks). At the start of the Queen's reign, the general culture had not coarsened to such an extent that decorum and seemliness meant nothing: they had not yet been mocked to death, with the result that coarseness and vulgarity have become marks almost of political virtue.

The Queen was responsible for none of this, of course. She was in no sense an intellectual, and even appeared to have no intellectual interests apart from her formal duties in affairs of state, and this saved her from subscribing to some of the idiocies subversive of conduct and culture that have resulted in the sheer ugliness, physical, spiritual and cultural, of modern Britain.

So why, then, the grief at her passing, she who was separated from the new culture of those grieving? I turn to Gerard Manley Hopkins for an explanation. The poem *Spring and Fall* begins:

> *Margaret are you grieving*

Over Goldengrove unleaving?

It ends:

It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

It is for their own lost virtues, exemplified by the Queen, that the people mourn, not least their distinctive understated humour and irony, now replaced almost entirely by crudity. The Queen was walking near Balmoral with only her bodyguard. A couple of American tourists approached her and asked, “Have you seen the Queen?” “No,” she replied, and pointed to the bodyguard. “But *he* has.”

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