A soldier on leave, I was in Paris the day the city mourned the death of Paul Valéry. I listened to the soliloquy of a great city remembering the honor of poets just after a long war lost and won. I was thirty years old and had become acquainted with battlefield death.

A few years later, in a world that paid special attention to important public funerals, usually preceded by carefully edited hospital bulletins and then coordinated with the publication of full obituaries, reviews, and feature articles, the products of foresight—in that world, entirely familiar to me, I was surprised to observe a very different order in the deaths of popes. My instructive examples were those of Pius XII and John XXIII, and these reminded me in part of some Renaissance deaths. It was plain that the dying, the daily reported “events” of the approaches to death, were themselves of considerable interest and were followed intently, at least in Italy, but elsewhere too. Each death had a shape of its own, a consciously ordered one, I thought, and wondered in passing how much was due to intermediaries. But however individual the deaths, as they seemed to answer in brief a purpose of representing the spiritual life by the arrangement of the extreme business of life, whatever else they were intended to express, these deaths mainly emphasized their thoughtful sameness within a clearly framed order.

Some interests have changed, others not, since I began to think that I might try to write this book. I remember the first question that fully gripped me: How, with what seemed to be a few prescriptive ways of regarding death, and on the other side much that was unsayable, perhaps unthinkable, did Renaissance writers manage to say such marvelous, unforgettable things?

The English writers most drawn upon come from a period of about one hundred years, from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century. During that time the life of the nation experienced more than usual conflict, violence, change, loss, and growth. To mention literature: one of the world’s great ages of drama came and went; other masterpieces of poetry and prose appeared. In religion conflicts smoldered and raged, but the ways of thinking and speaking of death were
for the most part spared the rancor of systematic public dispute. For instance, it was a common truth that death was feared; the answer least likely to stimulate troublesome questions was the master goal of turning fear of death into love of the divine. Similarly, a value that seemed to be inherent in the good death, trusted by pagan philosophers and articulate Christians, was the wisdom of reasoned and therefore peaceful and controlled acceptance of death. Admired and desired, it was another generally untroubled answer. Though a kind of tolerated stability of agreement concealed major changes beginning to take shape, these were not in doctrine itself.

There are several ways to tell the story. When I choose to do so from the evidence of serious imaginative literature, I find the poets conserving, remembering, restoring, even in the midst of change. The sameness of death and the unchallenged rules for thinking about death do not prevent good writers from discovering and showing, in any instance, what is distinct and individual—not through new ideas, principles, or methods, but through observed or imagined details that search, illuminate, question. As Montaigne testifies concerning one aspect of the relationship between the universal and the particular: “I saw death nonchalantly when I saw it universally, as the end of life. I dominate it in the mass; in detail it harasses me.”

After the introductory essays in background, the two central sections concentrate on poems anticipating the poet’s own death and poems responding to the death of another. The first of these (Part 2) develops its demonstrations from major examples and from interpretations of the individual practice of such figures as Raleigh, Donne, and Herbert. Much of Part 3 is developed through contrasting examples, such as Marvell’s lines on the execution of Charles and those in response to viewing the dead body of Cromwell; poems by Henry King and John Donne on a dead wife; Ben Jonson on the death of a first son and a first daughter. Some of the problems evident in the writing of public elegies contribute to a sense of the difference and advantage of the more personal poems. Throughout, as in Part 2 and again in Part 4, the imagination of time is a recurrent theme. Finally, there is a consideration of some efforts, in jest and earnest, to imagine death as a kind of abstract idea.

Part 4 concerns in various ways problems involving the expression of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in response to death. The path leads from Aristotle and thinking “along with an image” through human and “divine” rhetoric. This latter is illustrated by the exemplary expression of the Holy Spirit (as in Scripture); according to Donne, that language works directly upon the human soul and conscience but indirectly and
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figuratively upon the reason and understanding. My study takes me through some different kinds of images and into some particular characteristics of the language of devotion, and to a survey of three basic images related to death: sleep, time, and love.

A large chapter, “Intricacies,” looks for paths among complex relations. These paths will not always conclude as boulevards of triumphant connection. Some of the subjects explored are the ways of the certainty and uncertainty, the known and unknown, and the mysteries of death (with selected references to the same, of life). Other matters touched on include the charged spaces between memory and not-thinking, and include the kinds of self and other which make talk of death worth hearing. Toward the end of the chapter some connections are made with the present, and in the concluding chapter for purposes of comparison the perspective is consciously modern, and the author allows himself a different range of voice.

I began by remembering the death of Valéry in 1945. Forty years later I remember that it has been a long time since I saw quoted Valéry’s famous, haunting sentence after World War I, reminding France (and Western civilization) that now we too have glimpsed the mortality of our civilization. The confident grace of his writing cannot have yielded much to the passage of time; yet surely something has happened to the novelty of that first shiver of recognition many once felt. But then, for the past forty years it has begun to look possible, and to some observers probable or worse, that man might succeed in killing everything on earth. If it does not happen but still could happen, our responses to concepts of mortality are sure to reflect changes, and the present rules for contemplating the certainty and the uncertainties of death will need to accommodate some new relations. But at least some of that process will already be in motion, perhaps even along the edges of the present book, though it arrives late in the surge of modern attention and draws most of its material from literature written three or four centuries ago.

I began with a detail of personal history which was part of the remote beginning of this book. How past and present speak to each other is a question that a student of Renaissance literature lives with regularly. In any case, I have not tried to keep out of this book about the past everything learned from personal experience and from a normal interest in the present. My chief sources, however, and what I most value, are those that become the “messages” of individual poets as they express and renew some of our best knowledge and self-knowledge.