People think about death and their own death, and they necessarily use familiar materials and habits of thinking on the subject. This truism is a foundation of everything that will follow. In Renaissance England, original ways of thinking about death, even if they had been forthcoming, were hardly suitable for the many occasions that required public expression. And even personal expression responding to the unique experience of irrecoverable loss might well have found itself repeating the familiar lessons that come to mind when the rawest feelings and the thoughts they release prove inadequate. Death was a frequent, expected, and familiar experience; the general and particular aspects of the subject were thought of in advance by means of private and public exercises of meditative anticipations and retrospections. By the sixteenth century poets had available, from the history of thinking about death, a rich vocabulary of feeling and representation and an extensive literature to draw from.

Death spoken of in a crisis of feeling, as that of a lyric occasion, will necessarily traverse familiar grounds but will not therefore be predictable or trite. For example, Macbeth’s “Out, out, brief candle” is and is not the light of Othello’s “Put out the light, and then put out the light.”

Macbeth’s contemptuous judgment of life—“a walking shadow . . . a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing”—differs from what a theologian might have said chiefly in being more vivid and precisely timed and in being final rather than a threatening alternative, a judgment resembling a curse, the poetry of a self-characterizing tragic figure caught in the last stages of an action. The difference is terrible, and the power of the tragic statement continues unabated, though subsequent audiences will have lost touch with some of its tortured but customary usage.

Our understanding will be improved if we are able to recognize that which is traditional and how it is used. In imaginative expression the unprecedented is not limited to identifiable “thoughts.” We may be faced with apparently spontaneous or apparently deliberate selections made from or omitted from traditional materials. Even a highly literate
citizen of an age may respect the difficulties in comprehending the subtle juxtapositions of the spontaneous and the deliberate, and their timing and relationship to each other and to the whole discourse. What has been omitted, and is noticed, is always a special problem. The same literate reader must pause, as we must do, over materials that are made prominent or inconspicuous and must emphasize, or not, the significance of their relative excesses and deficiencies. These are frequent features of imaginative expression, baffling if one does not know the language and the habits of thought from which they derive. The difficulties are such that we may reasonably doubt that all effects are thoroughly understood by able contemporaries.

These observations are intended to suggest conditions that neither stifle nor overdetermine individual responses by good poets. The subject is one that I shall return to for special and general illumination. In the meantime, I wish to emphasize the existence of certain ways of thinking about death which are characteristic of an age and will therefore shape what can be said. What cannot be said has a different kind of existence, useful in the study of this subject mostly as a defining limit, a kind of boundary and barrier which makes it own contributions to the shape of what can be said. The more elusive parts of what cannot be said may require extraordinary alertness and some intricate apparatus to detect and explain them. The subject is attractive, but I am now chiefly concerned with the discovery of what can be said, for it has been said, though one perhaps did not realize that it could be said.

Some modern examples illustrate briefly how circumstances and time affect what can be said of death. Pope John XXIII, late in his preparations for dying, was reported as saying, "My bags are all packed." The common image of life as a journey provided the secondary image by which John concisely expressed the individual style of his own life and death. His wry displacement glanced at the familiar knowledge that there were nothings to pack for this trip; all one could take to the point of the departure was the proper state of spiritual readiness. On the other side of his expression, but effectively canceled by it, was the state of imminent death haunted by a long history of troubled apprehensions. The good humor, insofar as it entered the public record, added a comment to his own personal example of how to die. One cannot conceive of Pius XII saying these words, or if by some miracle he had, of their appearing in newsprint, for the shape and style of his death (at least as I read the daily official reports) was carefully composed to represent his own life and concept of office. My point is a simple one to illustrate the difference in time as well as person. For by the end of
What Renaissance Poets Would Have Known

John’s pontificate a new age had begun, and the pope understood himself as well as his own position in time.

Not long ago, in the *Times* of London, I saw the quoted words of a dying person which were most unusual even if the thought behind the words cannot be imagined as entirely novel. At least it is certain that the *Times* would not have printed “the last words” a little while ago. The account marked the occasion of Marilyn French’s second novel, *The Bleeding Heart*, which was reviewed in connection with a promotional interview granted by the visiting author:

> Recently, men have taken to writing her. “Their letters fall,” says Dr. French, “into two categories. There are those who say, ‘My wife got me to read your book and now I understand much more.’ The worst was when a man wrote and said that his wife had just died, and that her last words to him were: ‘Gee whizz Tom, 30 years bullshit.’ Then he had heard a voice guiding him to the bookstore to buy my book.”

We seem to be invited to recognize in “Tom’s” letter the modern subgenre of hoax. We may also observe an interesting verisimilitude of stunted growth or regression conveyed by the passive echo of a juvenile euphemism for the name of Jesus; at the same time there is an active assertiveness in the emancipated argot which offers a pronouncement on the worthlessness and illusionary nature of life, in this case a particular married life. In their way the attitudes back of the expression are as traditional as Macbeth’s speech on the death of his wife. As “Tom’s” wife puts it, her existence is to be despised; it has been full of show and contrived illusion, and at the last the speaker can no longer keep up the efforts to deceive and to be deceived. The stripped stage reveals the inept actors, one of whom has also been an uncritical spectator. The example is a convenient if unusual example of how traditional attitudes can be reworked into the individual expression of a person and a time. Even the exaggerations of a probable hoax are supported by present conventions and their acceptability, including the come-on of a revelation leading the way to personal salvation by purchase. What is new we may acknowledge as not likely to have been said so under other conditions, in another time.

These examples, and even the triviality, are reminders that responses to death are not without limits and not without a history that influences what can and cannot be said.

What would Renaissance poets have known of the thinking about death? The main ideas were few, but in their implications, when
brought to bear upon individual experience, they were of inexhaustible interest. The records are voluminous, and the history of circumstances, issues, and their potential meaning is a proper subject for many branches of specialized knowledge. I shall need to return to certain items more than once in later discussions and also to remark upon the existence of historical changes. For the most part, however, the knowledge of poets and their readers was a present knowledge, possessed by historical process and repetition but in general acquired without the conscious historical study that is a normal way by which we expect to learn from the past. The Renaissance could assume that, except for a few changes made by the Reformation, the most important knowledge concerning the subject of death had already been collected and systematically organized. Studious theologians, to be sure, would have been more interested in selected issues involving historical knowledge, and some of them were poets, but I shall make no effort to give them special consideration in what follows.

Much of the basic knowledge could have been learned without reading—by word-of-mouth instruction, attending church services, being present at the deathbed, witnessing some scenes in the public theaters, looking at pictures. The educated had the Bible, commentaries, treatises, books of devotion. There were also the sources in classical literature and philosophy, important bits and pieces that had been quoted for centuries, and now whole texts edited in print. What would have been current knowledge included the wisdom literature recorded in arguments of grief and consolation, in which the ancients had said almost everything that could be said on the subject. The greatest personal example from the pagan world was that of Socrates, and especially the moral optimism of his reasoned acceptance of death. Theologians would not forget to annotate the commanding advice of Ecclesiasticus 7:40 ("In everything you do, remember your end and you will never sin") with Socrates' definition of the philosopher's life as a rehearsal for death. The general bent of Platonic dualism, the fruitful antagonism between appearances in this world and the truth of supernatural reality, became a permanent part of Christian thought. The image of God in which man was made became the endowment of reason and the power to know and apply the laws of reason. Plato's doctrine that held memory to be immortal could be transformed, and then largely forgotten, in Christian thoughts of the life of eternity and the Communion of Saints, and in the practical exercises by which the individual helped prepare himself for salvation.

The Stoics both repeated and altered some aspects of Platonic thought, but they were also the great practical schoolmasters in furnish-
ing lessons that fortunately accorded with many inclinations of Christian moral thought. They acquired the authority of ready usefulness by their shrewd observations on the uncertainty and brevity of life, by their insistence on the necessity of controlling one’s own life upon the pivot of consciously remembering death, and by their many portable *sententiae*. To live “as though every hour the last” could be regarded as a useful supplementary means of avoiding sin and of applying moral reason to the practical decisions of life. Seneca, like Cicero, acquired great personal authority; the moving eloquence of both could be regarded as a book of natural man’s wisdom, a reassuring phenomenon of Providence that validated odd and detached contributions by various pagan figures, including poets whose moral integrity and stature did not need to be judged if the particular quotation was apt: as, for instance, Catullus, Propertius, Ovid, Martial.

Though Christian philosophy could handle or assimilate parts of the pagan tradition while consciously rejecting other parts, the providential meanings of Christ’s death introduced some radical differences in the orientation toward death as a final test of life. The test now involved salvation or damnation in the life of eternity and required effective penitence for sins and effective faith in Christ as Redeemer. Faith and reason made certain accommodations: for instance, if the whole design of salvation required using some of the attributes of a cyclical concept of history, this was not allowed to intrude upon the commitment to thinking of Christ’s death as an actual, unique event in a linear conception of history. Furthermore, the new orientation toward death, as if responding to some latent necessity that could be answered only by the mental work of a special joy, sought full and clear explanations of why everything that had to be so was so.

The durable phenomenon of human fear is an instructive example and one I shall return to in later pages. Aristotle had described the fear of death as the greatest of human fears (*Ethics* 3.6.1115a), and that quotable judgment was supplemented by a psychological observation made in his *Rhetoric*: “We do not fear things that are a very long way off: for instance, we all know we shall die, but we are not troubled thereby, because death is not close at hand” (2.5.1382a). Donne illustrates a typical application when he attributes “the first accesses” of sickness to God’s reminder “that I must die” and then adds the personal apprehension, “By this further proceeding therein, that I may die now.” Death, which pagans could endeavor to understand as a law of nature, Christians interpreted as a direct punishment for Adam’s disobedience. Since the punishment was imposed by God, it could not be explained by reasoning based upon the natural order of things; furthermore, the
pains were believed to be unique, appropriately exceeding all other natural experiences. In Augustine’s influential expression, death was “a sharp, unnatural experience” (City of God 13.2). *Timor mortis* was then a natural response to a divinely ordained “unnatural experience,” and religious instructors did not neglect stimulating the fear of imminent death while balancing that personal fear, variously, with doctrines intended to provide the support of reason and faith, and finally to transform the fear into acceptance and the purified desire of eternal good.

Not to experience fear was to risk depriving oneself of the full advantages of penitence. Since fear was a stage that existed for the purposes of transition and change, it also provided an opposing element for dialectical conversion. If death was a punishment and not a law of nature, it was nevertheless a punishment for breaking divine law, and the case could be argued with all the resources developed in legal practices—not with the thought of winning the case, but in order to explore all contingencies so that the case could be lost with dignity and full awareness. Peter Lombard could praise fear as one of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, a means of turning the sinner toward the noble fear of losing eternal good. The opposite direction for fear to take led in the direction of despair. But the human endowment of fear, though linked in simple ways to the nature of moral being, retained some intricate, ultimately mysterious affinities with God’s providential purposes. Keen observers had noted, at least since Origen, that in spite of the acknowledged rules of rational order conversions often came when the excesses of sin reached a sudden climax, the progress of which was not discernible by the rules of reason.

Though in Stoic thought the last hour was installed as an authoritative measure of life, it was a moral measure that did not subdue the nature of life to the nature of death. Instead, the relationship preserved a kind of openness in which the claims of life were disciplined by the necessity of death but were not diminished in importance or dignity. By constant reference to a fixed standard of judgment, the Stoics heightened the stress on personal responsibility for shaping one’s life according to the laws of reason. One consequence was the accepted duty of living well; dying well was not so much a purposive climax as a natural conclusion of reason. The stress on free will—in the service of reason was admired by Christians, but not the relative autonomy that allowed no room for human weakness and little need for God. Though attractive, the doctrine was plainly not an adequate substitute for Christian ways of dying. But since thinking about death inevitably faced the necessity of trying to explain what could not be known by reason,
What Renaissance Poets Would Have Known

though never to the point of demonstrating why human beings no longer had reason to think of the subject, good minds continued to be attracted by the implications of the Stoic concept, and in the Renaissance the problems of living well raised questions that began to require special attention, most pronouncedly after the Reformation.

Centuries of Christian thought based on the warnings and promises of Scripture, and also based on the observation of human nature, developed a great body of knowledge, ordering sins and their classes, characteristics, dynamic interrelations, and resourceful vitality. To see these from the perspective of the connections between sin and death was to acquire the means of new insights and the means of bringing these insights into a rational organization. For example, lust, the natural sin of youth, could not be expected to terminate naturally; rather, in later life the depleted energies of sexual desire renewed themselves in the dominant sin of age, avarice. (By their emphasis, medieval preachers and poets seem to be expressing, not a detached doctrinal point, but a lesson based upon the observation of contemporary behavior, and recognizing that loss of possessions was in a particular way a chief impediment to the final letting go of life.)

Remembering death was a practical instrument of control, and its larger purposes licensed the effective means and rhetoric for developing the subject of death in ways that would cancel its imagined remoteness and would bring it home to the individual in all the feeling immediacy that art and spiritual conviction could command. Any excess might be justifiable because of the stubborn cunning of the enemy within. Remembering death included remembering its unpredictability, the human certainty of uncertainty, which had its communications with the secret maneuverings of sin and the fallibilities of conscience. Thought of uncertainty could loosen related uncertainties and quicken conscientious doubts behind the rational assurances of personal salvation. The duty of training people how to die always ran some risk of overtraining them.

“Remember your end and you will never sin” seemed to offer an answer that oversimplified the better knowledge of theology and to the less well educated was directed toward a single stage of prevention. The maxim worked best as a training device that sharpened one edge of thought while blunting another. For example, all minute consideration of death and of the sins to be prevented or repented served to intensify conflicts—as between the idea of death as “unnatural” and the rhetoric of warning which exploited both natural and supernatural terrors in picturing punishments and in expounding the loathsomeness but insidious power of sin. Fighting fear with fear authorized the dangers of
excess within a restrictive narrowness and often ignored, postponed, or slighted the higher goal of turning fear into the calm peace of faith and love of God. But the effectiveness and memorability of “Remember your end” were beyond dispute.

Many texts from Scripture supplied lessons that answered the purposes of elevated and less excitable contemplation—for instance, the words of Psalm 39:4–7: “Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. . . . And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee.” The concluding petition of verse 13 is to “recover strength before I go hence, and be no more.” The way to that strength is the knowledge of the brevity of life, the acknowledgment of human vanity as a law of being, and the expression of dependence on God. The implied fear of natural reluctance (“what wait I for?”) is subdued in expressed humility and is followed at once (as if a set form of religious reasoning were now fulfilled) by the affirmation of hope “in thee.” The words present a religious paradigm in which the knowledge of death leads to the felt knowledge of humility and ends in the renewal of faith before death.

The most authoritative pattern for Christian death was the history of Christ’s death, the first formal stage of which could be interpreted as beginning with the agony in the garden, where he prayed, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me! nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). This could be taken as representing the exemplary human experience of hesitation before the knowledge of death. The loud voice that cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” could signify all the human fears of abandonment by God—as part of the established laws of dying, all of them fulfilled by the sinless Redeemer, including the climax of a human struggle, dark before dawn, death becoming a second birth, and perhaps expressing the pain of the “sharp, unnatural experience.” Clearly, both of these events required and lent themselves to exegesis, both for Christology and for the purpose of instructing Christians in what to expect and imitate in their own deaths. Only the last words, as reported by Luke 24:46 (“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”), expressed the unquestionable assurance of faith, and these entered the prescribed ritual of Christian dying. The essential design became a settled part of the thinking about death and authorized the expectations of reluctance and fear on the way to the final peace of overcoming all uncertainties.

Familiar rules prescribed the right way to die and anticipated and corrected individual errors likely to be discovered on the way, but they could not prevent, cure, or fully understand manifestations that seemed
to lie outside or would not respond to established methods. In the fifteenth century the phenomenon of the dance of death released a range of expression that ecclesiastical authorities could not have anticipated or directed. A new art form satisfied particular desires and flourished at once: a dance in which living figures represented surprise and reluctance while their partners, decaying corpses, showed an extreme liveliness. I want to emphasize chiefly the limited, and obvious, point that the new artistic invention, and the astonishing success that greeted its appearance, reveal the existence of feelings that were not being contained by the acknowledged methods of handling fear, penitence, and faith. Some of the grotesque elements extended in their own ways the familiar lessons taught in the numerous discourses arguing the case for rejecting the world and the things of the world (contemptus mundi). One may also recognize features related to the common advice, memento mori, and its many elaborations and to the less common subgenre, the “triumph of death.” Perhaps there was an oral or visual tradition surviving in ways we cannot follow from a strain of pagan humor that provided messages from the tomb, salutations and reminders to passersby, to which might be added the Socratic advice askew, “Know thyself.” In any case, the wit and wisdom of personal messages from a corpse or ghost, frequent in medieval writing and slow to lose their appeal and bite for purposes of satire in later writing, reached one fruition in the widely popular aphorism from the grave, “What you are I was, what I am you will be.”

Perhaps these feelings, at least in their demonstrated character, belonged chiefly to one period of time, the fifteenth century, which was also notable for its increased interest in depicting the details of bodily putrefaction. But though the strange intensity and relish might never reappear on a similar scale, the effects on the imagination and memory of others would not disappear. Sir Thomas More did not forget the pictures of the dance of death he saw in the north cloister of St. Paul’s, and John Donne’s imagination of death certainly was influenced by late medieval developments. In brief, to the established ways of thinking about death something was added that might need to be resisted or taken into account.

A related phenomenon was the sudden rise of a new genre, the ars moriendi, which commanded instant attention and created a lasting influence of considerable power. The systematic concentration on one period of time, the final getting ready for death, was new and provided the sense of a structured scene and design. Because of the concentration, the systematizing, and the potentialities of the form, much of the counsel and wisdom, though collected from familiar sources, could produce
effects not quite like those available from advice offered in other circumstances and arranged more casually, according to different principles of selection. As the genre developed, its affinities to a dramatic action brought into use other potentialities. Those assisting the protagonist, moriens—his friends, counselors, and witnesses—took part in dialogues and were alternately an immediate audience who could also represent a larger audience of readers. The sequence of conflicts and temptations instructed the living, added suspense to the plot, and could furnish vivid scenes. Within the familiar rules for understanding the physical and spiritual process of dying, the analytical dramatizing of an imagined situation discovered new kinds of flexibility in the distribution of emphasis. At the right time in the right form, old knowledge becomes the presage, forerunner, grounds of new knowledge. In fact, the popular genre proved capable of reflecting shifts in the approach to live theological issues and could explain in its handling of details many shades of post-Reformation emphasis and doctrine.

From one point of view it may appear that the ars moriendi provided a soberly entertaining substitute for the stronger excitements of the dance of death. Centering the scene on the deathbed and its fascinations would probably have engaged some of the interests satisfied by the dance of death but would have brought them into an aesthetic and rational order capable of internal development and closure. For the dance of death created and remained a memorable image drawn from the traditions of threat and instructive fear, while the ars moriendi became a literary genre and entered a period of growth. The image of the dance represented communal participation by the living of all social classes and by the classless dead. Whatever its darker side, the image was wryly celebratory and offered a strange expression of the spirit of Christian triumph over death, a triumph resembling something of the spirit of those ancient eccentrics who mourned birth and celebrated death. But the ars moriendi was a literary form that moved with varied rhythms through episodes, some of which were expected and could therefore evoke the peculiar effects of partly reluctant, partly relieved recognition, with room for other feelings as well. The dramatic elements produced their own sense of participation, but the form also kept and exploited the dramatic advantage of being able to move readers attending an imagined action that threatened with strange pleasure their own conscious sense of personal separation. The most memorable part of its image was that protracted concentration on moriens, the center of intent spectators. The fully shared message was the old one, that all must die, but the protagonist was the person acting out the story, and he was set apart. From that image and from the individual experience of
the story in which he figured, every reader might receive his own personal message.

No doubt the rapid spread of editions and translations and a continuing stream of new books on "the art of dying well" answered a deep, emerging need that signaled a change in the response to death. That the need and the change did not require a definitive clarity of recognition we may take for granted. The privilege of a historical perspective may also acknowledge that "recognition" for contemporaries may express itself, and perhaps do so best, without the kind of reasoned awareness justly esteemed in other intellectual enterprises. Besides, the privilege of historical perspective is better able to observe need and change than to distinguish with assurance between the relations of cause and effect in those difficult areas where change may produce the recognition of need by increasing it, and where successful expression becomes an effect that also acts as a cause.

In part the popularity of the subgenre resembles that of works advocating contemptus mundi, though the ars moriendi lasted less than half as long in a vital tradition before dwindling into the reduced existence of a practical manual for those who wanted to know more about how to do it. Unlike the contemptus mundi, however, the ars moriendi attracted new feeling and art that were sensitive to changing conditions—economic and social in the larger sense—and to the particular influences of Reformation and Counter Reformation and the new humanism.

The major change in the response to death, a constant among other changes brought on by the crises of the religious struggles, was general acceptance, in spite of differences in doctrine, that the individual death was a subject worthy of close attention. It would be absurd to think that the interest was altogether new, but something happened when the interest was discovered and spread. The available records would seem to say that for centuries the individual death, once it was about to happen, was governed by a set of rules ready for the occasion, and these took over the act of dying without encouraging any scrutiny of the process that might detect individual and distinctive features. The center of interest shifted in a normal way to hope in the Resurrection; anxieties concerning personal salvation did not thrust themselves into the moment of death, but the dying were content to wait with optimistic faith in the Day of Judgment. One could die well enough without worrying whether one was dying as well as possible. When Sir Thomas Browne wrote that he would be satisfied to bring up the rear and be the last person admitted to heaven, he was whimsically recovering part of the spirit of an age long departed.10 Or, to cite a modern instance that may speak more directly to a modern reader's recognition, in some recent
THREE ESSAYS IN BACKGROUND

candid words about the fear of death, Irving Howe darts across the intervening centuries to illustrate the calm force of a promise that can move from life to life without fixing on death itself as a heightened episode one must imagine and experience fully:

I think about death because I fear extinction, total and endless. . . . no one would mind a thousand-year sleep if at the end . . . there were a prospect of waking.  

Concentration on the individual death became a fact of history and an emphatic departure from the subdued emphasis that had lasted for many centuries. I am not equipped to untie the historical knots with expert knowledge of the order and patterns in which they were made, but it may be enough to observe that the growing emphasis on the individuality of death was reinforced by a growing belief that a kind of preliminary judgment concerning salvation occurred at the time of death. If salvation was not exactly dependent upon or determined by the quality of the individual death, still there might be an omen at the least, and at the best a personal message of encouragement or approval communicated to the dying person. For Protestants committed to the primacy of faith, death was a crucial moment for testing the efficacy of a lifetime of faith; they were of course indignant at the easier techniques of warranting salvation ratified by Roman practice. The Counter Reformation, while sharing the increased emphasis on individual death, could in its artes moriendi draw with renewed energy upon its own traditions of renouncing the world, seeking penitence, and affirming faith. If candidates for immortality could be made to raise their own standards by instruction in the art of dying well, the old wisdom (most of which it was unthinkable to tamper with anyway) could continue with all its authority. In addition, hostile arguments against the interpretations of “good works” and against the validity of uncritical absolution would be reduced to annoying impertinence. The Roman church had never minimized the importance of death, and without altering anything but the emphasis it could employ its rich traditions to meet the changing interest in the individuality of death.

Freely moving across the drawn lines of Reformation and Counter Reformation, certain other currents of shared interest appeared on both sides and have some bearing on the new emphasis given the individual death. A new literature of meditation sprang up, Jesuit in origin and applied purpose but quietly adapting successful methods from other traditions of thought and expression. The genre proved itself adaptable to changes in doctrine, emphasis, and religious sensibility. Many of the
topics and effective methods of meditation led outward, the mind disciplining itself to gain a desired end of devotion. But though the Jesuit handbooks prescribed the content and goals of meditation, they also deliberately left room for individual application of details, and however closely the routines were followed, success or failure could be felt as a personal experience. The Ignatian model emphasized a rigorous mode of analytical reasoning; Calvinists would not find themselves wholly unprepared or uncritical, and in practice Protestants had small difficulty in adjusting and redirecting the congenial parts of the Ignatian discipline. In the seventeenth century, Protestant meditation was an individual and inward act characteristically given a public hearing. While the process of meditation expressed the movement of a single guiding religious conscience, it could in printed or spoken words draw an audience to participate in a course of mental and spiritual experience which moved them as individuals, with their own souls to save, but also as members of a community.12

Moral theology awakened to a neglected and timely branch of its learning, the detailed and practical problems of casuistry, that reasoning upon moral problems discoverable in daily life but too particular in their circumstances to be treated well by the direct application of the larger moral laws. Again the Reformation side was late in starting but soon discovered that casuistry filled a gap left by the decline (which was to be applauded) of speculative theology, and that Protestants had inexhaustible resources for cases of conscience.13

In another development, the ancient system of typology was given a new and practical emphasis. As the New Testament revealed and realized the meanings obscurely anticipated in the Old Testament, the newer times saw themselves as part of the continuing story, now consciously reliving the history of salvation. A dying person and the assistants, revising and modernizing the old, smoothly running mental machinery, could discover and interpret many comforting parallels to give assurance that this death conformed with the true history of God’s will. Protestants introduced their own interpretations, carefully pruned of the excesses and outmoded habits of mind which could be identified and disliked in medieval traditions, but did not feel it necessary to justify their own efforts by the practices of the primitive church. The new typology was not brought under formal rule, de jure, but expressed a distinctly Protestant piety, giving the individual faith and death the right kind of emphasis: not a binding tradition imposed by authority, but rather a de facto practice that grew by agreement. The reformed typology contributed to the individuality of death while assisting the
candidate to join, not the all of the standard medieval emphasis, an indiscriminate throng under a compulsion leveled upon them, but a select community of the faithful.  

The most instructive historical study of death in Western civilization is that of Philippe Ariès.  

Though I began writing before I became acquainted with his work, I have been influenced by his demonstrations and have made specific use of one basic pattern that he identifies and traces. In brief: the medieval centuries develop their acceptance of death in ways that do not self-consciously intensify and explore the passage from life to death; the characterizing expression is that you/we/all must die. The break occurs when death becomes more dramatic, an episode of heightened experience, the death of an individual, a self. In my last chapter I undertake a brief critique of Ariès’ book in order to clarify some of the differences that emerge from a study of literary evidence. 

When observing the work of imaginative writers, including their use of the old pattern “all must die” and the new scene of the individual death, one notices differences that are characteristic of literary tradition, which has a long memory. One may also observe that individual writers have their own ways of responding to the old and the new. What to the historian is an attitude irreversibly in decline, as the various and cumulative evidence demonstrates, may possess another life in literature, where the old and the new may combine in irreducible ways. For the old may not only be unforgettable, it may continue to speak with and against the new and the newer and prevent the mind from closing its books on what has been and can be convincingly felt.