CHAPTER TWELVE

The Death of a Loved One: Personal and Public Expressions

What I propose doing now takes as one point of departure the example of Donne’s turning from introspection to a liberating love for his dying neighbor. Instances of love for the person dead or dying introduce the wedge of a vast subject, love, into the vast subject of death. That the relations of the two open still another great territory is well known and much written on. I shall try not to stray from the older beaten path, which is not dull, both here and when I return to the subject in Part 4. Besides, the term “loved” as I have used it in the title above will also include, in the “public expressions,” persons for whom the engaged feelings of esteem and admiration are to be understood as a kind of love.

Among the fitful dreams and incoherent debates of the insomniac soul, the longing for death may be stimulated by the death of a beloved. The dead is, one is urged to believe, now in the embrace of immortality. All of the excesses of consolation imprint that message deeply and cannot avoid the implications, or the occasional direct candor of a problematic acknowledgment, that part of the surplus of grief is directed toward the self:

But live thou there, still happie, happie spirit,
And give us leave thee here thus to lament:
Not thee that doest thy heavens joy inherit,
But our owne selves that here in dole are drent.
Thus do we weep and waile, and wear our eies,
Mourning in others our owne miseries.¹

Sidney’s “pagan” laments carry the essential message, both personal and social. Many in the crowd of mourners vow to kill themselves at Basilius’ funeral (4:265). Such extremes of feeling in grief are a familiar part of the human record, and they are not usually submitted to a formal judgment. One does not expect anyone to isolate and hold up for literal questioning the line from Ben Jonson’s sober “Epitaph on Master Vincent Corbet”: “I feele, I’m rather dead then he!”² What is most rare is to find the extreme of feeling and the longing for death presented in a
ON THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE

form of neutral, even antiseptic, objectivity, as in Henry Wotton’s epitaph “Upon the Death of Sir Albert Morton’s Wife”:

He first deceased; she for a little tried
To live without him, lik’d it not, and died.  

(This deserves its niche in rooms containing modern statistics on the survival of widows and widowers.)

Henry King, Donne’s friend and executor, man of letters, accomplished poet, Bishop of Chichester, wrote “The Exequy” in retrospective lament for the death of his young wife, whom he was trying to live without. His longing for her passes into and mingles with his expectation of death, and the remarrying of “my body to that dust/It so much loves.” The time of his thoughts goes “Backward and most preposterous,” but his heart does not entirely follow and remains apologetically divided. For though his “Pulse like a soft Drum/Beats my approach, tells Thee I come,” his heart is also “content to live,” to “go on,/And wait my dissolution.” Nothing in the letter (construed as poetry) is “irreligious”; in the spirit, the most one could say is that the poem is not religious in its orientation. As for the tempered ending, its declaration of patient waiting in an equipoise of hope and comfort, it is Christian in form, but the turning toward death is Christian only so far as “we shall meet and never part.” The “crime” that asks to be forgiven is against her, his willingness to live at all, though “Divided, with but half a heart.” Christ is mentioned but once, a punctuating reference in the midst of a grotesque, relaxing flight of fancy, a lecturing oration to “earth.” And in the expected death that will remarry their dust, Providence remains neutral, as it were, but the Day of Judgment is celebrated as a cataclysm favorable to lovers:

our bodies shall aspire
To our soules blisse: then we shall rise,
And view our selves with cleerer eyes
In that calm Region, where no night
Can hide us from each others sight.

If any audience is imagined, other than self and the spirit of his dead wife, it is a literary audience of peers who will admire the writing, the quality of feeling, and the graceful inventions that develop the theme. King knew what he was doing: not wrestling with himself under the rules of belief, but entertaining a half-fiction to relieve the pain of longing. Though pain motivates the poem, it is not often an immediate subject or a difficulty that will be overcome in any way other than by hearing matters out until the desired feelings of comfort, hope, and
patience appear. When they do they are welcomed, not as a vision rising out of intense personal struggle, but as an everyday, livable mood of calm remaining after the stored-up moods of grief and longing have been drawn out of their silence. The equipoise reached is a humble one and welcomed with seemly modesty for what it is, more the signal of a place to end than the kind of ending from which one can see with astonishment the inevitable rightness of every searching movement from the beginning. Whatever “rage” is increased lies in a relaxed inclination to identify love of the dead with despising, not life and the world, but the disposition of one’s own life, and to give a poetic rationality to a limited affair with death.

Donne lost a beloved wife. He had his own practiced ways of considering death (of which the Anniversaries was but one unusual monument) and could not have been very susceptible to the stimulations King finds in his theme. “My good is dead,” Donne wrote in the second line of his sonnet:

Since she whome I lov’d, hath pay’d her last debt
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
And her soule early into heaven ravished,
Wholy in heavenly things my mind is sett.
Here the admiring her my mind did whett
To seeke thee God; so streames do shew the head,
But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,
A holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yett.
But why should I begg more love, when as thou
Dost wooe my soule for hers; offring all thine:
And dost not only feare least I allow
My love to saints and Angels, things divine,
But in thy tender jealosy dost doubt
Least the World, fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out.

“Hers” is the nature she inherited from Adam (and Eve), including the debt of death which nonhuman nature incidentally acquired at the same time. That other nature is politely mentioned as if separate, as if an agency administering a world in which bodies naturally wear out and women are worn out or die in childbearing. The good that is dead is the soul of everything in the natural world. Her soul “early” has been “ravished” into heaven, and his mind follows without ravishment, turning by its own motivating force on the bare pivots of a since and a concluded episode of time: “Since she whome I lov’d. . . .” “Admiring her,” he had sought God and found Him. Still, he yearns for “more love” from God, and asks, “But why should I begg?” We do not hear
him begging. That lies among other silences in the poem, like the felt
grief allowed no immediacy of expression but allowed only a bare,
absolute declaration and a few taut signs. God, who was unmentioned
in the death supervised by nature, has anticipated the increased desire
and the “begging”: “when as thou/Dost wooe my soule for hers; off­
ring all thine.”

The speech of the poem is unique and mysterious—its music and
movement, its ways of expressing the self to the self and to God, by
firm, brief affirmations (“my mind is sett”) and by almost inaudible
undertones. It is not a kind of speech one can characterize or translate
into a message without risking travesty. Ann Donne is only spoken of,
kept in a careful third person. No human audience is intimated. One
may feel the greatest difficulty in trying to distinguish among the re­
strained, the repressed, and the simplest urgency of passion. But the
main issues are probably clear enough, and what by one view represents
a severe repression of natural feeling and continued love for the dead
other, by a different view represents an exaltation of past love in present
love, disciplined by an ironic acting against the self. In the soul’s exercise
of strangeness to itself, it produces the stricture against loving lesser
“things divine,” as saints and angels. Donne acknowledges the wisdom
of God’s “feare,” with no more than a side glance, if that much, to the
normal practices of his Roman Catholic youth or to the hyperbolical
diction of his amorous poetry. The world of nature and the flesh of love
have not yet been “ravished” from him, though he affirms that “my
good is dead.” He does not seem anxious himself, but there is no point
in telling God of His “feare,” “tender jealosy,” and “doubt” except that
of repeating the elementary lessons to himself as confirmation. In doing
so he is acknowledging the general human record as personal confession
and as pledge of his own alert determination not to feel “secure.” Yet he
can himself make no pledge about the devil without and within. The
devil, “yea Devill,” represents a master spirit lurking in all human
exchanges and altering shapes in ways visible only to God. And the
devil’s classic maneuver is to convert love into the infidelity to God.

Nothing could be easier and readier for use than the basic religious
model. Death teaches the unreliability of human things and turns the
soul to God. Donne turns the ease into honest difficulty. For nothing
could be tougher and more individual than Donne’s expression of the
religious truth he accepts. In the world of nature the otherness of his
dead “good,” of “she whome I lovd,” cannot be translated in any way;
it is fixed and denies relationship. (There can be no recourse to the kind
of imaginative aid Marvell applied to the otherness of the dead Crom­
well.) But since her soul is not dead and not other, it does not deny
relationship. When he admired the woman, his mind turned toward the origin of her soul in God, and that action is further advanced when God translates her soul into a new relationship—a present courtship in which God fully participates, as He did not in her death, presided over by “Nature.” God woos Donne’s soul for the sake of Ann’s and offers all His three-personed love in anticipation of the final marriage.

This is the climax of the sonnet and includes a third-person celebration, as brief as great, of the woman he loved, whose soul by the action attributed to God participates in Donne’s compelled increase of “holy” desire. Though his personal grief is allowed no direct expression, and the poem is as remote as possible from a love sonnet, under the rigor he imposes on his feelings there is a most rare kind of tenderness which may be felt and deduced. The personal memory is transferred to God’s memory and refused first-person articulation. There is not the slightest suggestion that his dead “good” is or will be a sacrifice, or that the ravishment of her soul, “early,” is a fatherly affliction for his greater good, though these would have been easy and familiar transfers for Donne to have made. His feelings are, we may think, too deep and singular and precious for such intermediate handling. He moves directly to the ultimate marriage in heaven. He returns from his exalted glimpse of infinite love, where there are no others, to the prudence of religious man in the natural world. That his “good” is indeed dead requires of him an absolute return of all his feelings to their source. Yet, neither the moment of exaltation nor any random high spirits released by “setting” his mind in absoluteness can make him forget to recite the homely lessons of human weakness.

The irony of the recital, though retrospective in its implied moral movement, and though in form a colloquy with God, represents a return to the common time of an everyday present in which he must live with the problems and promises of past and future. Some easing of the tension is expressed in the wry humor, and a degree of detachment signals its presence in the restrained but suddenly new sense of personal relish displayed in his language. This is not ease but an easing, and hard-won.

So Donne accepts the otherness of his dead wife, accepts as completely finished that intimate mingling and mysterious touching of lives which the common word “lovd” expresses, and identifies himself with a reaching for the immortal source of that love which he seeks while feeling himself sought. Most of the doctrine is familiar; the history of advice, exhortation, and methodical exposition is long and full. If we were to take the sonnet as our touchstone, as the one answer to all questions, there might be nothing more to say. But there is always
something else to say about death, as about God’s “feare,” “doubt,” “tender jealousy,” and “this worlds sweet”:

From being anxious, or secure,
Dead clods of sadness, or light squibs of mirth,
From thinking, that great courts immure
All, or no happinesse, or that this earth
Is only for our prison fram’d,
Or that thou art covetous
To them whom thou lov’st, or that they are maim’d
From reaching this worlds sweet, who seek thee thus,
With all their might, Good Lord deliver us.

("A Litanie," lines 127–35)

The sonnet is, however, one kind of reliable touchstone. For though its basic doctrine evokes a standard response, that of surrendering the dead to the life of eternity and rededicating one’s own hope to that life, Donne’s poem could never serve as a textbook model of what to think or say. In its severity the statement echoes a Reformation emphasis but is distinctly his own. The transfer of love is austerely bare, reduced to an essential, the image of marriage in heaven. Personal feelings not expressed in response to the death are, one may conjecture, transferred in part, with no admission that any subject is in mind but the marriage in heaven, to considerations of the problems of how to live as a survivor. In any case, one is not likely to doubt the presence of a living person responding to a common human grief in some customary and in some unquestionably individual ways.

To illustrate a difference I quote from a letter that I shall refer to again. It is a personal letter of consolation to a friend by the Christian Platonist Ficino; its warmth is chiefly that of exhortation, and the engagement of the self of the writer is dominated by his loyalty to the doctrine he expresses. Granted, the resemblance between that doctrine and Donne’s is encumbered by divergences, and there is an unbridgeable difference between advising a mourner and writing a true poem on the death of one’s beloved wife. Still, the fluency of Ficino is (at least to me) dismaying, while on the contrary what Donne does not say is a strong part of what he says. But enough; here is the quotation from Ficino:

You will only cease to weep, Gismondo, when you cease looking for your Albiera degli Albizzi in her dark shadow and begin to follow her by her own clear light. For the further she is from that misshapen shadow the more beautiful will you find her, past all you have ever known. Withdraw into your
The Death of a Loved One: Personal and Public Expressions

soul, I beg you, where you will possess her soul which is so beautiful and dear to you; or rather, from your soul withdraw to God. There you will contemplate the beautiful idea through which the Divine Creator fashioned your Albiera; and as she is far more lovely in her Creator’s form than in her own, so you will embrace her there with far more joy.  

Where doctrine, or the relationship of self to the dead other, is less exacting, the subject remains more open and flexible—as in poems memorializing the death of public or private figures, or even friends. The necessary claims of lament, praise, and consolation must all be satisfied, but except in poems modeled on the pastoral elegy, lament and consolation tend to be subordinated to the memorializing by praise. Often, as in the example of Marvell in the presence of Cromwell’s dead body, ways are found to make the eulogistic assimilate and indirectly express the dues of grief and comfort. Such poems have their own problems, and their successes are usually relative to the expectations of their subgenre and to their occasion, which not many of them outlast very long or very well.

The chief problem was that over the centuries everything on the subject had been said, or so it seemed when the occasion was public. Though variations were always available, in emphasis and disposition, in the development or not of oblique suggestions, no major discoveries were likely to have been overlooked. Furthermore, some of the basic materials had achieved a kind of inevitability, and to have ignored them on certain appointed occasions would have seemed like an act of violence against the tried and true. For public occasions the indispensable topics were praise for the departed, lament for the loss, and consolation for the survivors gathered together and about to disperse to resume their individual schedules of dying.

For a different audience, not physically present but an audience of readers, an audience who will read in isolation as individuals but who may need to be imagined as gathered together, some of the potential divergences between oration and poetry were freer to develop. Like the orator and priest, the poet has a function to perform, that of presenting and representing to others what they will want to think and feel about the death. But in his role the poet is a volunteer, and self-appointed even when invited or expected to perform. He nevertheless assumes a public function, and he becomes answerable to the unwritten rules governing the particular occasion, and answerable to the traditional proprieties for discourses on death and to the general rules governing poetry and the specific genre he has undertaken. The impersonal aspects of the priest’s
function are not available in the same ways to the poet, who must
establish his motivations for thus appearing. To whatever is old in the
repeated messages of death he will usually feel obliged to bring forward
something new, immediate, and personal to justify his speaking pres-
ence. If the death is that of a monarch, or a prince, or a prince of poets,
or even that of an Edward King, the elegist will know in advance that his
poem will be one contribution among many. The other contributors
will surely look at what he has written, as will strangers and friends; and
the approval of some of these probable readers will be desired for its
own sake, an honorable value that does not preclude lesser and perhaps
more tangible values. Thoughts of such may be dispersed in dark cor-
ners and blanketed with serviceable cobwebs by the mind composing in
grief. Finally, the voluntariness of his act brings the poet into a personal
but publicly shared conjunction with the otherness of the dead, and into
a related but different conjunction with the otherness of the audience.
Since the poet’s connections are not strictly defined by office, they are
therefore less constrained but more subject to pressures from without
and from within. These problems do not apply in the same ways to
personal elegies.

Donne’s public elegies are among his less memorable work, but he
does address the problems in hand with a professional skill that is worth
observing. He makes very sparing use of the “I,” and thus with a single
stroke avoids the standard awkwardness of having to establish his pres-
ence and relationships in the poem. Instead, he assumes the function of
a meditative “we” honoring the occasion with an elevated discourse in
which praise of the dead is partly personal but more symbolic—chiefly
drawn in images and imagistic arguments that express what that life
meant and means. The sense of grief and the consolation are also charac-
teristically turned toward indirect expression; their presentation is re-
duced and their representative aspects developed. In the elegy on Prince
Henry the last sixteen lines are spoken by a passionate “I” who is the
poet testifying, though less as a person than as an inspired voice that
speaks for others. In that poem, while extravagantly praising a worthy
young prince (whose death ruined many hopes and plans), Donne does
not forget to praise the father in the son. But otherwise the audience
apparently consists of those for whom the poet may be thought to
speak and of those unseen admirers of wit before whom a virtuoso
performance has been presented. His best elegy of this kind, in my
view, is the “Obsequies to the Lord Harrington, Brother to the Lady
Lucy, Countess of Bedford.” The “I,” consistently used here, is that of a
courteous friend and admirer—not a rapt, inspired convert to mourn-
ing, but a serious volunteer composing at his best a meditative essay
worthy of Lucy’s young brother and of herself. Both poet and audience compliment each other by the warm impersonality of the discourse and by its intellectual dignity.

While fulfilling the general purpose of memorializing a death, Donne’s approach and method tend to be meditative and essayistic—further from the methods of oration, for instance, than in sermons that guide listeners to the consideration of a good death. At his best he makes his own path between epicedium and monody, speaking not quite to or for an audience consisting of one reader at a time, each of whom will find familiar and unfamiliar thoughts expressed in a voice and manner no reader could simply feel as his own or assent to without the conscious awareness of doing so. The restrictions placed upon the poet’s full personal presence are paralleled by the kind of attention directed toward the dead. Personal touches are consistently drawn toward an abstract representation signifying intellectual, moral, and spiritual qualities.

Ben Jonson, who seems to me the best poet in English when it comes to writing direct personal praise, seldom masters all the difficulties inherent in the public performance of the elegy. For the most part, unlike Donne, he does not often manage the difficulties or his own best talents without occasional embarrassing lapses. In a few poems, he strives to combine his own gifts for epigrammatic compression with Donneian wit and abstract representation—as for instance the epitaphs on Cecelia Boulstred and Henry L. La-ware, and those on the Countess of Shrewsbury and the Baroness Ogle. In his “An Elcgie on the Lady Jane Pawlet” (Underwood, 85) he gives himself more room in the general form of an oration, prefixed by a fable that hardly measures up to his standard of the fable as the soul of a poem. He tries to put himself squarely into the poem, but that trusted position does not easily fit the expansive form, and the master of plain, direct expression has to finger the trope of inexpressibility for a dozen lines. Lady Jane’s reported death scene is a roseate performance, her perfection sentimentalized, though in a manly style. (Jonson works as hard as Donne does in the sermon on Alderman Cokayne, but too fast and with less reserve.) Lady Jane addressed her torturing physicians and urged them on:

'Tis but a body which you can torment,
And I, into the world, all Soule, was sent!
(lines 55–56)

She comforted her husband, blessed her son, cheered her “faire sisters,” tempered with gladness the grief of her parents, made joys rise above the fears of her friends,
ON THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE

And, in her last act, taught the Standers-by,
With admiration, and applause to die!

(61–62)

It is a poem for family and friends; out of its occasion the faults are peculiar chiefly in bearing the blurred stamp of Jonson’s virtues. No one else, I think, could have written it with just those faults.

He writes a better elegy to celebrate the death of Lady Venetia Digby (Underwood, 86)—a full oration consisting of preface, a lament (brief and tempered), and a long consolation turning into a longer personal eulogy, which turns itself into an apotheosis. The fiction that she was his muse (a kind of feigning Jonson sometimes regards as compromising truth) authorizes the personal station he takes within the poem and works well enough in the poem and no doubt even better in the eyes of her husband, who was Jonson’s friend and benefactor. The poet’s “wounded mind” is free to “rage” and soar, but most of the time he can sound like himself, even if not as on subjects where he is at his best.

He is at one range of his very best in the third epitaph for the friend who died in his arms, Sir John Roe:

Ile not offend thee with a vaine teare more,
Glad-mention’d Roe: thou art but gone before,
Whither the world must follow. And I, now,
Breathe to expect my when, and make my how.
Which if most gracious heaven grant like thine,
Who wets my grave, can be no friend of mine.

(Epigrammes, 33)

There the tense relations between self and other are not mitigated by any contrived fictions, and the identification imagined imposes a touchingly unbelievable end to his own grief. Another range of his best is the ode “To the Immortall Memorie, and Friendship of that Noble Paire, Sir Lucius Cary, and Sir H. Morison” (Underwood, 72). There by a famous act of rhyming and timing he places himself in an unprecedented relationship with the dead other, while the old message, “all must die,” is redirected into a gay dance of death between dead and living friends:

Call, noble Lucius, then for Wine,
And let thy lookes with gladnesse shine:
Accept this garland, plant it on thy head,
And thinke, nay know, thy Morison’s not dead.
Hee leap’d the present age,
The Death of a Loved One: Personal and Public Expressions

Possest with holy rage,
To see that bright eternall Day:
Of which we Priests, and Poets say
Such truths, as we expect for happy men,
And there he lives with memorie; and Ben

Johnson, who sung this of him, e’re he went
Himselfe to rest,
Or taste a part of that full joy he meant
To have exprest.

(lines 75–88)

The great poem to Shakespeare (Uncollected, 42) shows Jonson at his best in praising the dead; because of the subject he can bring fully to bear his great power to praise the living. Mourning and consolation are excluded; the death of the poet is a matter of history to be mentioned only for contrast with the assured life of his book and the lineage of his mind. The fact of death permits one moment of longing nostalgia, the thought of Shakespeare’s appearing again, in verse, and helps conclude, on a light note, where many such poems heavily begin:

Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets, and with rage,
Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage;
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourn’d like night,
And despaires day, but for thy Volumes light.

(77–80)

In praise of living friends Jonson can love another like himself, inflecting the distinctions of gratitude, admiration, and respect into the syntax of shared values. Toward the dead who will not hear the good language his generosity reaches a little further, and the other poet becomes an image of himself, not only in the hopes expressed for the living book, but in the description of the art which makes books live:

And, that he,
Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
(such as thine are) and strike a second heat
Upon the Muses anvil: turne the same,
(And himselfe with it) that he thinkes to frame;
Or for the lawrell, he may gaine a scorne,
For a good Poet's made, as well as borne.
And such wert thou.

(58–65)
The praise rings with sincerity and counters the popular notion of Shakespeare’s natural and fluent ease, but it is pure Jonson.

Though he can praise attainments unlike his own, his free admiration gives him an honorable place in the worth of others; and though he can resourcefully despise the unworthy, or despise the world or the stage as world, and though he can mock himself or project inventive scorn that derives from the darker recesses of himself, he cannot or will not praise another by making the complimentary identification of writing like him. This last is admittedly a rare form of praise, and I mention it only because a brilliant minor poet, Thomas Carew, accomplishes the feat in one of the best elegies written for a poet, “Upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne.” (He also, with effective authority, writes a poem criticizing Jonson in the voice of Jonson.)

To speak in general: numerous public elegies of the time, including those for poets, were too much burdened with the necessities and manners of the occasion. Too many things had to be said and had already been said, and the poet had limited access to his own feelings while being pushed into an excessive dependence on professional will and skill. For the public occasion it seemed obligatory to say something new, if only to explain one’s entrance upon the scene, but as Jonson declared (a judge who sometimes found himself rubbing elbows with the criminals), “who doth praise a person by a new, / But a fain’d way, / doth rob it of the true” (Underwood, 85, 37–38). The unfeigned and true finds it difficult escaping from the trite but true. And therefore a small family of images gain credit as vehicles of safe conduct. Where the known facts do not embarrass it is well to hear that a good man’s life is his monument and the poet’s monument is his book. Such dependable figurative truths, besides their contributions to the necessities of praise and consolation, have a special value in a field where certain alternative thoughts are unthinkable, such as those of simple, blank extinction. But if in treading carefully the poet restricts his images and walls out all untested thoughts, his intellectual determination may seem to be only the other side of obtrusive fictionalizing. Or if he explains his entrance on the scene by cultivating the normal expressions of shocked disbelief and dismay at the dreadful news of ———’s death, his distraught writing and the irresistible drift toward expressing intimations of the end of time will produce the kind of beginning from which poems seldom fully recover.

The list could go on much longer. But I end by mentioning one practical matter in the management of tact. The variable distance between the writing self and the dead other must be negotiated with some careful awareness of the dues of courtesy. One cannot thrust into the
intimacies of grief without some risk of offending real mourners, and the safest compliment lies in being on the periphery as a compelled witness, an organ for producing reflections suitable to the dead and for testifying to the known repeatable truths. In a word, though the occasion is one of pain and difficulty, the imaginative exchanges and transfers, however labored the writing, tend to be too easy. Yet between the self writing and the dead other, pain and difficulty are the most believable, and certainly the most prevalent, credentials offered to an audience.

It was a piece of proverbial wisdom, and praise, to say that one regarded his own physical pain as if it were another's, in the body of someone else. Denham, among the hyperboles with which he studs his poem "On the Earl of Strafford's Trial and Death," arranges a still more strenuous exchange between the victim and the audience:

Each seemed to act that part he came to see
And none was more a looker-on than he.9

The effect of the figure depends, of course, on transferring the believed fact of pain from actor to audience. Here we can recognize a basis in experience and convention which supports the possibility and may enlist admiration. But the believed facts of pain and of death are not quite the same, and in the staging of death the otherness of the principal person makes all transfers perilously figurative, for the facts related to death are difficult to keep from drifting in the wrong direction. The dead feel no pain, we believe, but the general disposition of mourners to feel pain may resist being transferred like a sum to any mourner.

Let us return to examples of private expression. In a late letter Petrarch wrote of his grief at the death of his grandson (Bishop, pp. 274–76). He cites, for the record it seems, religious and practical reasons for not mourning and then goes on to speak more personally:

But I admit I was profoundly shaken to see the sweet promise of his life reft away at its beginning. . . . I tried then to fix my thoughts not on his age but on my own, for it is disgraceful for all men, and especially for the old, to bewail the human lot. . . . I have learned that complaints are useless, that nothing avails but patience, in the things we cannot change. . . .

Now—to let you know all my weakness—I have ordered a marble tomb in Pavia for my little boy. It is inscribed with six elegiac verses. I should hardly do this for anyone else, and I should be most unwilling that anyone else should do the same
for me. But suppressing my tears and lamentations, I was so overcome by my emotions that, having no other recourse, I did what I could. He is in heaven, beyond all earthly cares, and I could offer him nothing but this last vain kind of tribute. It is useless to him, it is some solace to me. And so I wanted to consecrate something, not to evoke tears, as Virgil says, but to preserve his memory—not in me, who have no need of stones or of poems, but in chance passersby, that they may learn how dear he was to all, from the very beginning of his life.

The document is remarkable for its candor in expressing, along with the halfhearted efforts to touch them up, the materials of the soul in crisis; it is an instructive example of Petrarch’s gift to Western civilization of what he learned from his discovery of Cicero’s letters to Atticus. His pain is real, and the difficulties of proper reasoning are chiefly bypassed by the confession of weakness and the seeking of personal comfort by making “this last vain kind of tribute.” He would not want anyone else to do the same for him; that would involve an act of judgment and subscribe to the vanity by directing it toward himself. Yet that involves him in denying to someone else the feelings he accepts in himself, and it exposes the ribbon edge of a smaller vanity, the distrust of other taste in the inscribing of “six elegiac verses.” The little boy “was the fourth Francesco, the solace of our lives, our hope, the joy of our house. And . . . chanced to possess unusual beauty and intelligence. . . . His only fault was to resemble me so much that one who did not know his mother [Petrarch’s illegitimate daughter, Francesca] would certainly have called me the father.”

The passion of identification is countered by prayers that deliver his repeated embraces of the child to the care of a loving God—a remedy of first and last resort, well recommended by the records of analytical reason and instinctive piety. Having taken this clear and definitive action, Petrarch adds a more lingering and intriguing surrender, or distribution, of the self transferring its sense of past and present identity with the beloved other. The act is individual and made particular, but is grounded on blind anonymity and unknown chance, which contribute their elements of obscure desire to the exchange between self and other. The avowed aim is to preserve “his memory—not in me . . . but in chance passersby.” The house of death that stands in two worlds may indeed “trouble a good man’s resolution,” and truth is honored, in part, by the ragged loose ends of the struggle. “I did what I could,” Petrarch says—a statement of fact that stands for a summary human cry. Did his “weakness” intend to preserve nothing of himself in that pure axis
The Death of a Loved One: Personal and Public Expressions

between the otherness of the inscribed tomb and the otherness of future witnesses who will chance to pass by? In such matters humane discretion may be the more honorable part of judgment.

Petrarch’s letter leads us to Jonson’s “On My First Sonne”:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
    My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov’d boy,
Seven yeeres tho’wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
    Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I loose all father now. For why
    Will man lament the state he should envie?
To have so soone scap’d worlds, and fleshes rage,
    And, if no other miserie, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask’d, say here doth lye
Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetrie.
For whose sake, hence-forth, all his vowes be such,
    As what he loves may never like too much.

(Epigrammes, 45)

The poem begins with a farewell repeated as in a formal conclusion, “Rest in soft peace,” uniting Benjamin, the “child of my right hand,” with “Ben. Jonson his best piece of poetrie.” But an epilogue has a further word to say. In between the two farewells, the struggle to accept the painful loss observes traditional forms of counseling acceptance and of retrieving, from the familiar history of life, reasons that may afford some relief. His voice is primarily that of natural, not religious or philosophical, man speaking with an anger carefully disengaged from both self and the boy—by expressing, with overtones, a standard content of moral and religious reasoning. A definition of sin is excess, and a son is also an earthly thing toward whom hope is conditional. The debt of the sin of Adam is paid on the due and therefore the “just day”—a blend of personal history and catechetical recital delivered with an expressive tonelessness. An abrupt parenthesis marks what will not be said: the desires of grief to revoke one’s fatherhood (lose), or the desires of grief to release the simple passions of a father (loose). The self then steps backward to ask questions in the name of “man,” questions breathing with conflict—though we might have to revise that impression if we knew the motives of the asker. But we do not know for sure, and Jonson is not going to tell us. We think him to be lamenting for himself, holding up for view an allowable expression of longing for death not absolutely inconsistent with the appointed ends of Providence. He names in their hated otherness present and anticipated miseries of life. It is a brief contemptus mundi, a kind of rage—namimg the
compulsions of the flesh that make a man a stranger to himself, and the alien state of age that becomes oneself. These are held up as the human lot, and his lot, and imagined as both immediate and encompassing—in a lament not acknowledged as lament, and the boy has escaped so early.

The outburst resembles Petrarch’s confessed entanglement in personal weakness. Jonson’s answer to the pain and difficulty is ornamented with a slight fictional design: if anyone asks, little Benjamin’s grave is authorized to answer, like an epitaph, Hic iacet, the “best piece of poetrie” of his father-maker. The poem is an epitaph, the child is now a poem, no longer a “thou” but a “here doth lye,” and the father stopped saying “I” in line five.

His last word is less “a piece of poetrie” than a charm, one that echoes in a kind of mutter overtones audible in the poem proper. Like other elegists he steps back from that special order of time concentrating on the loss to strike an attitude adjusted to the everyday time of ordinary life. Toward an open, uncharacterized, and gray-hued future the sensibilities draw themselves tighter, adapting a stoic cloak suitable for a time of less hope, less hurt. If he had written a letter to a friend, articulate with free details of self-explanation yet stumbling in the honest bafflement of the human situation, Jonson might have said like Petrarch, “I did what I could.” If the answer to the difficulties of the poem seems easy, it will not, I think, seem too easy, and the epilogue says in another voice that the answer does not fully speak to the pain.

His epitaph “On My First Daughter” (Epigrammes, 22) is not racked with pain or difficulty. From the beginning, voice and statement establish a quiet concord, which is an authentic but rare expression in lyrics on death. The calm ease requires no hidden fiction or open counterpoise to command belief, and the poem never strays into mere fluency. The child lived only six months, before human hope could turn the sense of divine gift into a divine debt, which, whenever called in, had to be acknowledged as “the just day.” The infant remains in the third person throughout, as do the parents, and in this poem there are two parents:

Here lyes to each her parents ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth:
Yet, all heavens gifts, being heavens due,
It makes the father, lesse, to rue.

In expressing his own tenderness and moderated grief, the father acts to set a guiding example for the mother, and in the next five lines he speaks for and to her in a gently consoling dialogue of one:
At sixe moneths end, shee parted hence
With safetie of her innocence;
Whose soule heavens Queene, (Whose name shee beares)
In comfort of her mothers teares,
Hath plac'd amongst her virgin-traine.

In the last three lines he speaks for both parents, touching on the hope of
the resurrection and turning from a musically damped austerity of
language to the only direct address in the poem:

Where, while that sever'd doth remaine,
This grave partakes the fleshly birth.
Which cover lightly, gentle earth.

After the gracious acquiescence of heaven, presented as free and certain,
the poet returns to time and place, burial, and the implied weight of
human feeling that yearns to be lightened in all turning away. And it is
lifted by a courteous invocation and by the delicately touched transfers
between earth and parental feeling, none of which distorts the pathos.

We come now to “Lycidas,” and I shall limit my brief comments to
topics that have already been introduced. First, the matter of pain and
difficulty is brought forward at once and both sustained and varied until
the moment of sudden release. The poet brings in expressive witnesses
to the grief, and it is now a commonplace of criticism that the primary
source of emotion in the poem is Milton’s own deep anxiety. Indeed,
modern recognition that Milton’s own hopes, fears, and doubts make
the conventions pulse with life, and that the poem is deeply imagined
and felt, coincides with the flow of critical attention which has elevated
the poem to a new height of reputation. I do not separate myself from
that general point of view but have some partly different interests to
emphasize.

The speaker of the poem wears a mask and can say everything he
wants through the formal gestures of the conventions. His mannered
initial reluctance is also personal expression transposed, and there is,
finally, a remarkable theatrical appearance. Since the dead friend was a
poet, that relationship can be stretched very far. Besides, the reluctant
monodist has his own autobiographical hesitations: a sense of potential
power and immature accomplishment, general unreadiness and person­
al doubts concerning career, massive preparations and the small, stub­
born problem of beginning. Before long one can see the scope of his
apprehensions, for the varied lament increases “rage” to a degree un­
matched by other elegists opening the recesses of their passions. The
ON THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE

issues deepen painfully as he calls into question the purposes of a serious life, and he does not have available the ready-made answer of rejecting in the name of spirit the world and everything in it. The stern answers that his dialogue produces come from external agents, and the answers are clarifying and accepted. Without its having to be said, however, the answers are felt to be not enough, and finally he must make his own answer, from within.

In the meantime, to narrow the focus, the dead friend appears and reappears. We never see him as he was, though we hear of him, but we do get strange glimpses, like images that flash compulsively out of a remembered dream and come in where they are not expected.

He knew
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
He must not float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear.
(lines 10–14)

Floating upon a “watery bier/Unwept” satisfies a ceremonious expectation and is one elegant way of saying it, no more intended to be directly visualized than “the meed of some melodious tear” is to be heard. But in between, for a moment, is that brief image that commands a different attention: “and welter to the parching wind.” Similarly, the dead friend going under in the very act of drowning is not quite disguised by the venerable routine of questioning the nymphs, or by the ornate and bookish diction of “remorseless,” in the etymology of which the violent metaphor crouches:

Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep
Closed o’er the head of your loved Lycidas?
(50–51)

Finally, the unrecovered body as it now is, dead and other to the imagination searching now:

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding seas
Wash far away, where’er thy bones are hurled,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit’st the bottom of the monstrous world.
(154–58)

One could not have anticipated that this would be the decisive searching of the poem. However different everything else may be, this,
The moment leading to release, comes as it did in Donne’s Devotion 17, when he turned toward the man for whom the bell was tolling and prayed for him. All the other mourning of the poem, like the strong answers from without, left the poet with one thing more to do. But the answer begins to come when he turns toward the imagined body and invokes aid for it in his own voice:

Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth.
And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

The answer comes more easily than Spenser’s “Dido nis dead, but into heaven hent.” It begins to come within a line, in a change of rhythm brought about by a simple repetition:

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more.

Here I borrow an observation made long ago by John Crowe Ransom—that the line is resolutely iambic and to be read so without inflicting upon it a dramatic speech rhythm. If we restrain our sophistication and hear “Weep nó more, woéful shephérds,” we hear all the resounding dolor of the poem recapitulated and cannot tell whether the reason to be offered will really counter the woe still expressed. But then the last three words will be caught in a meter that forces them to depart from the music of woe. The words are repeated but the stresses are different (“weep no more”), and it would, I believe, require a peculiar recalcitrance to keep the tempo from quickening in step. The technical device is radically simple, but so is the personal discovery of prayer in a poem of great artistic elaboration.

What the shepherds see and hear is a vision of Christian consolation, splendid and tender:

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walked the waves;
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,
In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love,
There entertain him all the saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.

(172–81)

It is a vision flowering with promise, without saying so or adding advice or invitation. Lycidas is no longer a dead other; that hateful
image has been obliterated by the vision (like the sea-bottom stain from his hair).

“Thus sang the uncouth swain. . . .” The poem begins to end with yet another scenic ceremony in which the poet himself now appears. He is not “speaking” now but is spoken of, in a third-person role and by a new voice that is a part of the scene it warmly describes but is neither located nor identified. The new voice speaks with a quality of calm, relaxed ease free of all the agitated searching and the exaltation as well. That voice disengages itself from the person and voice of the monodist—like a singer from the song he has sung, or an actor from the role he has been playing, or an actor dismissing his double, or anyone terminating the services of a vicarious self, Doppelgänger, etc. The “uncouth swain” has learned to sing from all the literary shepherds since Theocritus. And so, as if nothing unusual were happening, the new voice attributes the poem to the other voice, which sorted out and ordered the experience in that imagined interval of time and created what was not there before, new other, new self.

“Thus sang the uncouth swain,” and ordinary time overtakes the song during the interval in which the music—at once the song of “eager thought” and the metaphoric instrument, at once retrospective and concurrent—comes to a real ending:

And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
   And now the sun was dropped into the western bay:
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

In the last line of the epilogue there may be a coincidence of person and persona, or the two voices may be singing a replication in different octaves that signify different woods and pastures. What is entirely certain is that the last line names the radical word “Tomorrow.” The poem ends opening out into ordinary time, as in elegies that are otherwise various and different, such as Spenser’s “November,” King’s “The Exequy,” Donne’s sonnet on his dead wife, Jonson’s two poems on his children, and, though I did not follow it through, Marvell’s elegy on Cromwell.

Belief in life dies hard. The thought of “no more” tries to reject itself. The otherness in death becomes more endurable when it can be imagined as a figurative otherness—as living on, still in this world, in human memory, and better still if that life is renewed and altered by recognition and praise of the good or the many. So Lycidas is granted, in addition to bliss, and perhaps as direct compensation in kind for that time in the poem when he was seen perforce as a disturbing image of
dead otherness, the “life” of a tutelary “Genius of the shore,” one whose “large recompense” includes the privileged service of being “good/To all that wander in that perilous flood.” Milton is individual and surprising when he adds the figurative change directed toward a continued spiritual existence in this world after he has presented the great vision of faith, Lycidas at home in the life of immortality in the world of heaven. Marvell follows the same pattern in saying farewell to “O. C.” But he is more traditional than Milton in his making the vision of immortality the last word in the process of transformation. The heaven he presents, however, is novel, an Elysium of Old Testament heroes. And Marvell is aggressively realistic and rational in the evidence he deploys, both “modern” and “primitive” when he avers the renewed life of praise for Cromwell in this world after partisan envy subsides, and the service of his name to intimidate the enemy and to “inflame” the English soldier “ere he charge” (lines 276–80).

The facts of death are more consolable if they conform to the idea of a “good” death. But when that which we think difficult is presented as easy, we may acquire some retrospective doubts concerning the genuineness of professed pain and difficulty. When Jonson constructs a domestic scene for the death of Lady Jane Pawlett, he willfully strays into the bad taste of domestic idealization. The dying woman is too good in her performance, as busy as a perfect hostess as she comforts and cheers, and like a successful tragic actress as she wins admiring applause. She dies too much in earnest for any audience, except perhaps that of the first night, to read in earnest. In contrast, when Petrarch’s Laura responds to the monster Death, “Do thou unto me as thou dost to all men,” the triumph of time has had no effect on that answer. But strict idealization, especially when based upon the physical facts it intends to elevate, works for the desired appearance of ease but seldom conceals the evidence of strain.

The poet will not lack difficulties while seeking to reconcile the otherness of the dead to his own heightened sense of self, under the same sentence, and grieving for the loss while occupying an obligatory and privileged space of time from which the poem may need to make a decorous return to ordinary time. Another set of difficulties, those of addressing the search for reconciliation to an audience of others, can also be answered by diminishing the sense of self and its direct engagement with the otherness of the dead. In his public elegies when Donne strenuously substituted something other than his own feeling self, his professional judgment was good and the poems are not bad. They simply avoid difficulties he could avoid; other poets did not always have his talents to spare, or his prudence. But the feeling self, however handicapped by the general difficulties of the genre and special circum-
stances, was by no means incapable of making a worthy place for itself in the expression of a public elegy. There are admirable examples, but they are the exceptions, and I have chosen to dwell on the greater achievements of the personal poems. Poems that wrestle in earnest with the angel of grief, or intimate anxieties, or lesser "things divine," or perhaps the devil in disguise, show how indispensable the deeply engaged self is to the imaginative achievement of the work. Donne's sonnet "Since she whome I lovd" was not written to an audience; one cannot imagine the poem, or an adapted version of it, written to memorialize the death of someone else, or imagine the poem written for someone else to speak in order to express the spirit of an appropriate occasion. "Lycidas" is a public poem written to be printed in a volume of elegies for Edward King. If the search and the reconciliation move others and they feel addressed by the poem, they are part of a large, continuous audience that the first audience only represented. That first audience cast no shadow between the poet and his personal engagement.

Without a heightened sense of the self engaged, both the otherness of the dead and death itself easily become abstract ideas moved about by the leverage of tested precepts and ready images. Indeed, grief may be thought philosophically embarrassing and consolation insulting to intelligence and good taste. Or, if the discourse deals in solemn advice, it may be as fanciful as poetry but does not know that and therefore cannot hear its own words very well, and may naively interpolate when it meant only to interpret and pronounce. I am thinking of the letter by Ficino quoted as a postscript to the discussion of Donne's sonnet on his dead wife. One of the peculiarities of Ficino's design for consolation is that it exists cut off from any sense of time—intended as a transcendence, no doubt, but not unlike the forgetful disregard to which an excited, serious mind may be subject. In his idealization time does not exist, and death as a fact receives no attention, assigned as it is to the body, and the discourse is of the soul addressed to the soul.

Such abstractness is not limited to idealization, as we shall see in the following chapter. I turn now to the last example of the present discussion, Milton's sonnet on a dead wife.

Sonnet XXIII
Methought I saw my late espoused saint
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
Rescued from death by force, though pale and faint.
Mine, as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint
Purification in the old Law did save,
The Death of a Loved One: Personal and Public Expressions

And such as yet once more I trust to have
Full sight of her in heaven without restraint,
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind.
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight
Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined
So clear as in no face with more delight.
But O as to embrace me she inclined,
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

Greek myth, Old Testament law, and the Christian promise unroll with an ease that masters the great sweep of time. The ages have no leave to assert their separateness. And though there may be no resistance to the appearing of a vision, if it appears, there are, nevertheless, other intimations of strain—Alcestis, Hercules, “force,” and the “pale and faint,” which belongs to Alcestis, an affecting touch. But “pale and faint” may slip—no less easily than the ages of time into each other—into the beginning recognition by a blind poet of a “purified” wife he has never seen. (I believe her to be Katherine Woodcock.) “Full sight” he will hope to have; the face continues to be “veiled,” and in the meantime the veil answers a specific, unspoken, courteous, domestic arrangement between wife and husband. Yet her virtues are so clear and shining to his “fancied sight” that he “sees” her “in her person.” No face can give or has given or would have given more delight than what he “sees.” Pathos, delicacy, and the coded indirectness of a masterly diplomatic syntax express the private reciprocities between the dead other returning as a vision and the narrating self who tells what the mind’s eye sees. Out of respect for himself and for her he will not imagine a face he has not seen. He can see or feel, but does not tell us how, when she leans to embrace him, and we learn only then that he has been asleep and is telling a dream—though it emerges like a vision that moves forward from a stately background that seems itself to move. The dream is one in which the imagined presence of the dead brought calm joy, but the return to ordinary time and light brought a double loss, for they replace the light of vision and the sweep and intensity of imagined time in which the seeking and the being sought of love enjoyed a heightened sense of nearness. “My night” returns the particular pain of the blind man; the bare words say enough, and they are the last words. And yet, though dreams impose their special kind of passivity, and though the dreamer here receives the visit and almost receives the embrace of the other, the Miltonic self is hardly passive. We do not doubt the dream, and for most readers there is probably little incentive to make and search crevices between the dream and its telling. Its telling makes the dignity of the pain equal the dignity of the joy.