But he that sinneth against me [Wisdom] wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.

PROVERBS 8:36

For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.

ECCLESIASTES 9:5

In his history of death in Western civilization Philippe Ariès identifies a period of heightened, searching interest in the form and circumstances of the individual death. Most of my materials in Part 2 and Part 3 thus far have illustrated various ways in which literature concentrated on the individual death. I have also pointed out the occasional reappearance of earlier attitudes, some of them with a long history of existence.

One point of departure for what follows is that my examples indicate a kind of movement away from the concentration on personal death. The examples suggest patterns and relationships that resemble certain social and historical developments, but it is more accurate to say that what I present is an alternative way of writing on death, expressing an emphasis not generally available earlier but not itself a demonstration of historical development. Literature has its own history, and in partial compensation I shall try to show, in the case of Henry King’s “Sic Vita,” one kind of history which that poem illustrates in its particular combination of the old and the new.

To clarify a little further: the examples do not establish their psychological distance by treating death as if it were someone else’s concern. They do not correspond to, though they may anticipate, the excesses, deficiencies, and evasions that characterize modern attitudes. One motive may perhaps be that of a reaction against the highly rationalized drama of the individual death; these poems impose a kind of rationality different in emphasis and purpose. (I shall return to these matters in another context in Part 4.) The attitudes toward death which
these poems exemplify are those of indifference and abstractness, and they offer some aggressive exhibitions of intellectual domination, between jest and earnest. Death as a personified abstraction is part of an old story always capable of revival; death as a mere abstraction may be related to other abstractions (such as time) and can take on something of the stark otherness of a dead body, an anonymous force in opposition to life and knowable chiefly by what it is not—as “vanity” in its inherited and extended usage is a force opposed to meaning in life.

My second point of departure will serve as a continuously available reference throughout the following discourse. In St. Paul’s compelling pronouncement, “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26), the image of death as the last enemy is part of a compressed narrative, and the otherness of death is contained and subject to relationship because its absoluteness exists in time and will be abrogated by a deliberate act of eternity. There is no refuge for this image of death in thoughts of a primordial abyss of nothingness. St. Paul’s image, to state the bare facts of its influence, could authorize the felt realities of human fear and still subordinate fear to hope. The promise of death’s ultimate destruction could support faith and the strenuous efforts of reason to explain and systematize all contingencies, not omitting the predictable character of all resistance, faltering, and lapse, or the unique exaltation of reason clarified by effective faith. There could be no treaties with such an enemy whose alien nature could not be subverted or seriously compromised. Instead, the enemy had to be submitted to, but in particular ways and, as well as possible, in accordance with the reasoning that governed these ways, as the natural resistance and conflict were turned inward, transforming fear into hope. But I mention these familiar matters chiefly to indicate differences. For in the examples that follow, most of the traditional force in the image of death as the last enemy is, with interesting effects and side-effects, reduced or diverted.

When Donne wrote his famous sonnet beginning:

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Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soc,
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he rehearsed some familiar images of death, shrewdly observed a few apparent limitations of death’s power, and ended with a restatement of the promise which alone could validate his argument:

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One short sleeepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.
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The bravura of his rhetoric is impressive, and the more so because it is paired with a kind of cunning intimacy that reduces the size and re-
moteness of the foe. The sleep is called “short” because it will seem so by contrast when “wee wake eternally.” Death will simply not be there or anywhere, and the fact is not observed but announced in advance.

In effect, the otherness of death is whittled down small, by means of an oratorical position taken and the argument of a poetic brief based on sacred promise and rhetorical skills. On the one hand, death is externalized, examined in selective ways but held fixed and kept mute. Materials that elsewhere could create a spreading network of rooted connections felt within are made brusquely categorical. As part of the externalization, the evidence of illustrative proof is lined up to show death as an inferior agent of sleep and as the factor of pleasure. In addition, the status of death can be known by the wretched company it keeps—“poyson, warre, and sicknesse.” Whatever apparent power it may have is further limited by noting that it must wait upon the whims of “Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men.” On the other hand, death externalized is treated with familiar intimacy, of attitude and phrase. The manner is entirely condescending, like the ad hominem reasoning; the purpose is to separate death from any claim to direct and actual power, and to leave it as an abstract idea that is on the way out.

Within the sonnet death is cleverly attenuated and its otherness distributed. Death as an agent becomes a grotesquely hybrid idea, and is deprived both of its mystery and of its power to attract the mind. At the beginning of The Second Anniversary death is also an agent, now a groom that “must usher, and unlock the door.” The act of dying does, however, hold the attention, even when the phenomena are but described and rationally explained:

Or as sometimes in a beheaded man,
Though at those two Red seas, which freely ran,
One from the Trunke, another from the Head,
His soule he saild, to her eternall bed,
His eies will twinkle, and his tongue will roll,
As though he beckned, and cal’d backe his Soul,
He graspes his hands, and he puls up his feet,
And seemes to reach, and to step forth to meet
His soule; when all these motions which we saw,
Are but as Ice, which crackles at a thaw:
Or as a Lute, which in moist weather, rings
Her knell alone, by cracking at her strings.

(9–20)

Then Donne adopts a meditative mode to imagine a full scene of his own dying:
Episodes in the Progress of Death

Thinke then, my soule, that death is but a Groome,
Which brings a Taper to the outward roome,
Whence thou spiest first a little glimmering light,
And after brings it nearer to thy sight:
For such approches doth Heaven make in death.

(85–89)

The soul is instructed to think of the body as “laboring now with broken breath,” and the interpretation easily transfers the phenomena to their assigned significance, that of representing “thy happiest Harmonee.” The body laid conveniently on the deathbed “loose and slacke” has its provident function; it facilitates the “unpacking” of the soul, and the parching fever is “Physicke,” recognized as such and promptly chided for its slow pace. “Thinke that thou hearest thy knell,” and that it is the call of “the Triumphant Church” in heaven.

Thinke Satans Sergeants round about thee bee,
And thinke that but for Legacies they thrust.

The advice includes the interpretation: Give them back the sins they gave, “And trust th’immaculate blood, to wash thy score.”

Thinke thy frinds weeping round, and thinke that thay
Weepe but because they goe not yet thy way.
Thinke that they close thine eyes, and thinke in this,
That they confesse much in the world, amisse,
Who dare not trust a dead mans eye with that,
Which they from God, and Angels cover not.
Thinke that they shroud thee up, and thinke from thence
They reinvest thee in white innocence.
Thinke that thy body rots, and (if so lowe,
Thy soule exalted so, thy thoughts can goe,)
Thinke thee a Prince, who of themselves create
Wormes which insensibly devoure their state.
Thinke that they bury thee, and thinke that rite
Laiies thee to sleepe but a saint Lucies night.
Thinke these things cheerefully.

(107–21)

The injunction to “Thinke these things cheerefully” is either not quite obeyed or is a dramatic, or perhaps ironic, proposition; in any case, the governing purpose remains elusive or becomes blurred. The heaven to which these “approches” are attributed seems to answer a paradoxical and personal vision, reflecting such opportune images as that of the “happiest Harmonee” and authorizing a strong appetite for
vivid detail—hardly in accord with a prefatory declaration that this world is “fragmentary rubble” and “not worth a thought.” The life being left is almost without character, a meaningless waste of time—witness the weeping friends, “a dead man’s eye,” and the rotting body that looks back toward the “state” of kingdoms. Once the eyes are closed in death, the soul extends its license and initiates personal interpretations, and some of these have the effect of punishing the body’s natural hatred of death by transferring all enmity to life, as if life itself were the last enemy. Though the timing is eccentric and highly individual, the imaginative behavior does have the warrant of being a classic maneuver in the traditions of practical wisdom on how to die well. The purpose, which overrides other considerations, at least pre-mortem ones, can be understood as promoting the concentration necessary to get through a difficult moment that must exclude whatever thoughts may distract. Such concentration would also imply that the claims of life, now ignored, have had their extended opportunities and are now at once impotent to help and dangerous to remember. We shall not need to hear the old news that these claims are powerful.

In Donne, however, wit is allowed some remissions. The post-mortem joke on the dead man’s eye and the true state of the world is clearly an extravagant witticism—whether it is responded to as part of the set scene or felt as the extrinsic fingering of the narrator stretching his privilege, lecturing to his dead body as if it were still alive and dangerous, and lecturing over the heads of the weeping witnesses to attentive readers. His other witticism is more subtle, even when prefaced by a little apology—that of the politic worms which the prince, by the very nature of government, creates more easily than he can control. Both jokes contribute to the scene of departure by mocking the absurd deceptions in worthless life. But as in many enthusiastic detestations of the world, vividness and wit may blur the main point; as in the description of the beheaded man, the wit shows a vital interest in that old haunt, the worthless world.

In any case, death personified as a groom presents a serviceable other, one with impeccable credentials. We are told that he ushers, that he unlocks the door; like the perfect servant, he does not obtrude in his own person. He is known by the first “glimmering light” of the taper that appears in “the outward roome.” But then, tacitly as it were, the light is increased and held up to selected details of the death scene, so that their true meanings may be read out. A free element in the description is the poet’s evident pleasure in his performance, but we are not likely to find that his zest improves the credibility of the scene itself. On the one hand, there would seem to be no place for making separations
between poet and poem, or poem and reader, in that first apprehension of death moving with its “glimmering light” in “the outward roome.” The familiar simplicity of the image—transferred as it is to a context in which bare report may command instant belief and sweep away improbabilities—gains still further power from the capacity of the image to expand until it fills the mind of the reader. Can it, does it, will it come so? There is no leisure to determine our own positioning among the intentness of the viewer and his intuitive recognition, the light that implies a bearer, and the shadows that all may apprehend without any learned assistance of the author.

On the other hand, the death scene is an oratorical narration regulated by doctrine and illustrated by images intended to be striking. Both the desired effect and similar imagistic materials were familiar and available in the traditional repertories of the literature on death. To twentieth-century perceptions the fierceness of the scene exposes unresolved antagonisms, but they are ones that religious doctrine would have little trouble explaining, given time and space. These are not, however, given. By the end of the scene the fierceness has been distributed, transferred, expressed; it has not, however, been diminished or transformed into some new integrity. Whether seventeenth-century doctrine would nevertheless be satisfied is a question hard to prepare oneself to answer clearly. One can hesitate less in being disappointed by the artistic performance as a whole. But if “Death be not proud” is better poetry, we may still want to puzzle over the conviction that the sonnet skillfully risks less and reveals less.

The precognition of death in an image of light—that sudden beginning—remains, I believe, the great moment of the whole passage. “Thinke then, my soule, that . . .” Imagine it thus: an outward image to bear the inward message. The directions come from the mind and to the mind, as an instant act that omits all sense of process, or the history of personal thought on the subject, or the memory of bodily sensations, as the skip or stumble of organic rhythms that may follow or precede, the timing perhaps indistinct, something like an apparition, and which may have contributed to the mental formation of the image now assigned a recognizable shape and purpose. Death as “but a Groome” is indeed a serviceable other; the mystery is like something familiar, and the figure is also reduced as in “Death be not proud,” but without the direct address and the ingenious elaborations of contempt. Once he has been noticed, death as a groom disappears from attention. His duties of ushering and unlocking (which might have drawn deep and minute imagining) are displaced by the soul acting as master of ceremonies and official exegete. The light of attention is transferred to the body on its
deathbed; there the body serves, like the world, as an object from which a busy, meditative soul collects instructive meanings.

In this episode the soul of a witness outside the scene may detect signals which produce messages that are not altogether consonant in register. (For obvious reasons I do not include this passage among the examples in Part 2 where Donne writes with his own death in mind.) This is no account of a good death in which a formal valediction to the world might be made, not without regard for the last duties to family and friends. Other witnesses in Donne are permitted a more generous range of human feeling and religious dignity. But here the soul is merciless in its instruction to the end and beyond—a witty, conscious indecorum that takes advantage of its opportunity, though at some expense to the imaginative integrity of the scene.

If we adopt a seventeenth-century view, however, what seems to be the indulged pleasure of the soul, inspired to comment “cheerfully,” may be defended (with some sense of strain appropriate to the passage) as a dramatic response to the soul’s own imminent emancipation. For this episode will soon be followed by an injunction, “Thinke further of thy selfe, my Soule” (157). The thoughts then take the form of a reasoned catalogue of the soul’s indignities from the first onslaught of life in the body. In the deathbed scene, therefore, it is possible to find in the soul’s behavior a comic reprisal in advance. A similar device may be taken into account, that earlier illustrative image of the “beheaded man.” The point of connection would be Donne’s comment, “For there is motion in corruption” (22). The “beheaded man” is like “this dead world,” which has struggled through another year, and the poet says of himself, “Thou seest me strive for life” (31) by the act of writing his poem of praise. But this would make the soul’s striving a strange mimesis of the body in its throes. For the soul pauses to mock body and world after the eyelids have been closed, and outdoes the beheaded body’s performance by lingering, much longer, to pass a comment on one lesson of decay (the politic worms).

I do not think that these interpretations would rescue much worth saving; they make the conflict between body and soul even more dubious. In poetry one learns to expect the death of another to be felt by another, and the range of intricate feelings will often include some of the perplexities of fellow feeling. But in the imagined death of the self—at least here—fellow feeling takes the strenuous course of exulting in the otherness of the body exhibited for the soul’s delivery. Even those punctuating references to the “Triumphant Church” and the “immaculate blood” and the shroud that will “reinvest thee in white innocence” are made to seem nominal, something much less than the main purpose
of the discourse. To be sure, the traditional privileges of advice on how to die—authorized by the vast perils and the particular difficulties of individual circumstances—are not easily confined to normal standards and the discriminations of decorum. Nor is any excess discovered as late as the seventeenth century likely to prove unprecedented. And yet, after acknowledging that this is but one exuberant episode in a very long poem, one may still ask whether death looked at so, both underdeveloped and overdeveloped, does not resemble the subject of an imaginative game, not quite real and not quite felt. As in the sonnet, death becomes a kind of grotesquely hybrid idea, but its otherness is not reduced and put in place to the same degree, for it shares too much ambiguous attention both with the body and the world.

Hating oneself as another admits rigors and latitudes not always hard to come by but hard to sustain well. The body and the world are no doubt useful enemies to practice on, but they are at best substitutes that provide practitioners of mortality with favorable occasions for active training while waiting patiently until a force, to which they can presume to contribute nothing, gets ready to decide when “The last enemy . . . shall be destroyed.”

I turn now to a poem that contemplates a different figure for the otherness of death. In Edward Herbert’s “To his Watch, when he could not sleep,” we may recognize a formal conclusion that closely resembles that of Donne’s “Death be not proud,” but the method is radically different, and the otherness of death-as-time takes on the character of cold indifference.

Uncessant Minutes, whil’st you move you tell  
The time that tells our life, which though it run  
Never so fast or far, you’re new begun  
Short steps shall overtake; for though life well  
May scape his own Account, it shall not yours,  
You are Death’s Auditors, that both divide  
And summ what ere that life inspir’d endures  
Past a beginning, and through you we bide  
The doom of Fate, whose unrecall’d Decree  
You date, bring, execute; making what’s new  
Ill and good, old, for as we die in you,  
You die in Time, Time in Eternity.2

The poem sets and analyzes its problems as if its art of expression preferred to serve the present rule of insomnia rather than the traditional laws of eloquence. The detachment of the analysis makes no
ON THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE

claims on the assent of human feelings, which are treated like unimportant spectators of the demonstration. As the argument evolves, it turns on the nature of necessity. Since life may avoid its “own Account” (the self-knowledge of philosophical and religious tradition), then real necessity must exist in what cannot be avoided, and man has had no influence in the making of, or the subscribing to, those laws. The nature of time is that of a neutral force within an appointed function. Only the minutes receive direct address: “You are Death’s Auditors” and “divide/And summ”; “You date, bring, execute”; “you tell/The time that tells our life.” “You” are the dying agents of third-person time, which dies in eternity—whether as agent or not is unexpressed. And fate is a briefly personified force of individual “doom,” a small but necessary motion in a vast operation.

The poem stands against the traditions of eloquence and against the many heartfelt responses to time and mutability as the messengers of general and personal death. Death has no questionable shape in this poem and cannot be thought proud or an enemy. It is neither diminished nor enlarged in its recorded practice upon life and time. Though one may infer death to be a servant of eternity, details are lacking. But in regard to human life, death operates at one remove through the otherness of time, and here the appropriate human dimension is the moving minute. In comparison, my examples from Donne seem still to belong to an older age when one might reasonably strive to handle one’s own feelings and to move those of another.

In his “Nox nocti indicat scientiam,” William Habington also meditates on time. Unlike Herbert, he deploys time (and space) only in large dimensions. But Habington, in spite of an ancient message and a didactic purpose, resembles Herbert in the effects produced by transferring poetic attention from death to time. From the firmament his soul discerns “as in some holy book” the “heavenly knowledge” available to man’s spiritual education. The contemplative stance is not inspired by the new astronomy; looking down on the world from above affords the traditional perspective for discovering the primary law of impermanence, “The fallacy of our desires,” and the ruinous “pride of life.” All have the true ring of an old-fashioned meditation on sin and death. But the vision of time as an impersonal force doing its blind, repeated work presents the world with an image of itself that is deliberately modernized, like the cold elegance of the diction and rhythm. I quote, beginning with the fifth stanza:

But if we stedfast looke,
We shall discerne
In it as in some holy booke,
How man may heavenly knowledge learne.

It tells the Conqueror
    That farre-stretcht powre
Which his proud dangers traffique for,
Is but the triumph of an houre.

That from the farthest North
    Some Nation may,
Yet undiscovered issue forth,
and ore his new got conquest sway.

Some Nation yet shut in
    With hils of ice
May be let out to scourge his sinne
'Till they shall equall him in vice.

And then they likewise shall
    Their ruine have,
For as your selves your Empires fall,
And every Kingdome hath a grave.

Thus those Coelestiall fires,
    Though seeming mute
The fallacie of our desires
And all the pride of life confute.

For they have watcht since first
    The World had birth:
And found sinne in itself accurst,
And nothing permanent on earth. 3

The austerity of the poem is a remarkable fusion of old and new,
charged with a didactic purpose that nevertheless touches no possibility
of individual human action. Nations are man writ large, but there is no
human self guiding or sharing what is told as a detached soul reads out
an abstract of the history of the world from above. And the world has
not simply fallen into bad times, one kind of “modern” mood of de­
pression frequent enough in seventeenth-century poetry. What is un­
usual is to find a pessimistic judgment proclaimed with a deliberate and
effective impersonality, one assuming that the beholder’s eye is indeed
an unfeeling instrument for recording only what is there to be seen.
Habington’s world is presented as bound by the inexorable movements
of time as the agent of sin and death. Once it has been set in motion,
however, the curse operates as if autonomously, and time the agent acts like universal fate and necessity. As for the otherness of time, it is felt more as a principle than as an enemy and is known only by its effects as these are related in a remote, leisurely statement. If the poem is a memento mori it transcends all usual purposes; one would not know to whom it is addressed.

The old-fashioned and the fashionably modern can produce other effects. A poet putting himself at the center of the experience he relates may play his part like an actor whose virtuosity we admire while we observe that his excess of skill contributes to the deliberate unreality of certain aspects of his theme. In his poem “To his Mistress for her true Picture” (pp. 48–53), Edward Herbert treats death as a personified character, the invisible mistress of his life. Death as a body of principles (here not only of time and necessity) creates in the true suitor qualities of detachment that may deserve to court the otherness of death. He sets out to praise a mistress according to the rules governing that subject and a subtheme, that of begging a picture, the true one. She is

Death, my lifes Mistress, and the sovereign Queen
Of all that ever breath’d, though yet unseen.

He has viewed only false pictures (“you seem lean”), which do not correspond to the love in his heart or the picture nature drew—figured “by sleep . . . nurse of our life . . . the vision giver,” which permits souls to “go play” and recover original innocence. He invokes her to appear as she is, and he strikes a few high notes with witty echoes:

And if old Vertue’s way narrow were,
’Tis rugged now, having no passenger . . .
Shew me that Goodness which compounds the strife
’Twixt a long sickness and weary life.
Set forth that Justice which keeps all in awe,
Certain and equal more then any Law.
Figure that happy and eternal Rest.

(lines 47–61)

The encomium is carried through with fine verve and comic exploitation. Herbert not only inverts standard attitudes, he cleverly reasons through the potential similarities between what he professes and the orthodox reasonings on love and death. Death imagined as a woman opens unusual opportunities for the courtship of a beloved other, and the self is presented as militantly faithful. Though a mock encomium has its own eccentric freedom, the incongruous humor of this poem may suggest that it draws upon the old sources that treat the universality
of death as a liberating theme which moribund readers or listeners are invited to appreciate under the governing law that we all must die. As for the poet himself, he is at the center of the poem as its chief actor, but the self put on display is quite untouched by anything said, and that would seem to be part of the message and the sport. The otherness of death is not engaged, not brought into some bearable relationship with a reasoned process of human feeling and hope. Personified as the invisible beloved, the figure of death becomes the occasion for parading human ideas mischievously out of step, and the appointed function of death remains as vague as the universe she inhabits.

My concluding episode is the “Sic Vita” of Henry King, which makes an inventory of familiar images in a borrowed form. The familiar and borrowed may well mislead, and since we conclude here on a remarkable note, I shall undertake approaching the poem by first collecting some background materials. The immediate model was a stanza apparently invented by Francis Quarles:

Like to the damask rose you see,  
Or like the blossom on the tree,  
Or like the dainty flower of May,  
Or like the morning to the day,  
Or like the sun, or like the shade,  
Or like the gourd which Jonas had:  
Even such is man, whose thread is spun,  
Drawn out and out, and so is done.
   The rose withers, the blossom blasteth,  
   The flower fades, the morning hasteth,  
   The sun sets, the shadow flies,  
   The gourd consumes, and man he dies.  

The durability of the theme is not in question and could not become unfashionable because of dull verse, predictable progression, and stale examples. But Quarles makes too easy a victim looked at so; what surely gave the stanza its particular appeal was the promise of infinite variation, grounded on the placement of “Even such is man” and strengthened by the coda of tighter repetitions ticked off in the same order, concluding with man, who sums up the moral, which interprets itself.

Quarles may have invented the stanza, but he was tapping proved strengths. The conventionality of the images and the basic way they were lined up could be and were used for other purposes. For instance, Giles Fletcher the Elder, in the twenty-sixth sonnet of Licia (1593), makes an inventory of a rare, pleasant place, and in the sestet rejects the
first three items in order and the rest in a lump: Licia alone makes the only joyous place. Without the turning back on itself, Barnabe Barnes writes (Divine Century of Spiritual Sonnets, 1595) an inventory of ephemeral objects that becomes an emblematic definition when man, the last item, finally appears: “Soon born to die, soon flourishing to fade.” In the first sonnet of his “A Palinode” (Englands Helicon, 1600) Edmund Bolton seems determined to discourage all rivals. The first four lines lay out the system: As withereth/fadeth/vanisheth/melteth, which is followed by a reordering of the verbs while the subjects do not alter:

So melts, so vanisheth, so fades, so withers
The Rose, the shine, the bubble and the snow.

These are then translated without ornamentation, which is added only when the items begin to appear again:

Of praise, pompe, glorie, joy (which short life gathers,)
Faire praise, vaine pompe, sweet glory, brittle joy,
The withered Primrose by the mourning river. . . .

The concluding couplet reveals the secret that all items mentioned three times, and interpreted at least twice, really

Are Emblems that the treasures we up-lay,
Soon wither, vanish, fade, and melt away.

Alter perspective and the method might serve as well to compose an emblem of Narcissus courting himself. But though an emblematic foreconceit had a recognizable current value, such poems also resemble a familiar kind of riddle organized so that it gradually explains its intended meaning. This is the method of a splendidly intricate sonnet in The Phoenix Nest (1593), which may be Raleigh’s. “What else is hell, but losse of blis full heaven?” continues its questioning by the introduction of more paired antitheses: darkness, death, winter (played off against light, life, spring). Then the questions are expanded and the method varied in order to introduce two further terms, unrest and mishap. In the third quatrain, put in the subjunctive mood, the poet weaves a new, contracted pattern and order out of all his antithetical terms. He ends with a simple answer, how he feels now, by restating his enriched main terms in a final order:

But loe, I feele, by absence from your sight,
Mishap, unrest, death, winter, hell, darke night.

Technical grace employed in the service of exploring a labyrinth of pain imposed from without also represents an individual response to
the rule of fate (and to the other person who governs like fate). And yet the final turn manages to convey the delicately faint hope of a personal appeal to that mistress of destiny in whose will lies the power of solution and reversibility. “Death” is placed in the metrical center of the last line, and however one interprets the order one must begin by recognizing that “death” cannot be climactic. Nor is “winter” or “hell.” The controlling term is the apparently lesser one, “night,” reinforced by the only permitted epithet, “darke,” which is not redundant and, more to the point, echoes the character of possession in the pronoun of “your sight”—your power to restore the light, life, spring, heaven of seeing and being seen.

It is an impressive tour de force of the kind that began to go out with Elizabeth, but the expanding-contracting method of presenting a human problem, one that art can convey as feeling less completely solved than the poetic problems are—that message, and for good reason, has an old and renewable appeal in poetry. But beyond any purpose of negotiating across a gap by means of which the author may figure himself, whatever has been well compressed can be well expanded. The wisdom of sacred writ, wise sayings, proverbs, and images that struck the eye of the mind—these furnished plots for stories, examples, allegories, and arguments. The anonymous wit and wisdom of folk proverbs were remembered and collected. The pithy elegance of classical “sentences” and turns of phrase were treasured and recoinedit in modern languages. Epigram and paradox, myth, emblem, and hieroglyphic, the deeper tropes of rhetoric, conceit and foreconceit—all served to arouse lethargic thoughts to follow and follow up condensed or hidden meanings.

Fashions and techniques changed, but poets and their readers had been valuing the basic process for a long time, and prized that virtue of intensely focusing upon a part of life which in its vivid clarity could represent a larger part or even the whole. The general method would seem to have some relationship with the favorite trope of holding up a mirror, in which a large subject might be expounded, or a very limited one concentrated, like showing life small as at a view of the end. In the thirteenth-century lyric “Whanne mine eyhnen misten,” twelve symptoms of death are listed, but everything is too late when the bier is ready outside. Then the speaker continues with the future, imminent progress from bed to floor to shroud to grave to the covering of that. It is then more than too late when the house lies upon the nose and the world is not worth a pea to a dead man. The stark arrangement puts the reader/listener in a good position to figure out what the full moral of the scene probably is, but the poet’s efforts chiefly go into making the
scene powerful enough to evoke a response that will complete and bring home the known meaning.

Many set pieces in the drama, as for example “All the world’s a stage,” could not satisfy their scenic tasks if they did not hold the audience in alert attention, wondering how the imagistic parallels will be worked out, all the time feeling as an unstated question: What will come next, and how will it fit in? Raleigh’s poem “What is our life? a play of passion” signals everything in advance, except its art of choosing particular details and its incremental force. Its power to grip the reader partly depends upon an open, understood secret, as simple and true as the agreement in a child’s game that the game will always end with the same surprising climax. For the reader knows that life compared to “a play of passion” will surely move toward the end of the play, and that the poet will try to say something to honor his voluntary obligation and to reward the reader’s attention.

Henry King wrote a number of penitential meditations, one of which, “The Dirge,” begins each stanza with an image set up to represent man’s life. Then the stanza explores and disposes of the image. The underlying linear progress, the minimal expression of moral reasoning, and the open exploitation of well-known materials all resemble tried-and-true practices of the medieval epigram. The surface development, however, is modernized by collecting subsidiary images that make some flourish of minor variation but quickly yield their main effect to a cumulative repetition leading to the same end. In addition to the set problem of beginning each stanza with a dominant image, there is the general purpose of inventorying the sadnesses of life from the perspective of the inevitable ending, and doing so with a quality of mental detachment that is recognizably modern—on speaking terms, let us say, with Raleigh’s “What is our life? a play of passion” and with Edward Herbert’s “To his Watch.” Life is a war, and death signs the peace; a storm leading to the anchor in the grave; a flower that returns where it came from; a dream in which the dreamer vanishes; a sundial that marks the progression of shadows while the dial has light:

It is a weary enterlude
Which doth short joyes, long woes include.
The World the Stage, the Prologue tears,
The Acts vain hope, and vary’d fears:
The Scene shuts up with loss of breath,
And leaves no Epilogue but Death.

As this last stanza illustrates, the images constitute a selected inventory of life from a weary perspective for which there is no dearth of
precedents. Religious thought and feeling are simply excluded. The poem is not a testament, and not his only poem, but one that allows itself understood and accepted privileges of working out a particular view in a particular way. Familiar images are turned over with only an occasional touch of freshness: as the spring and fall of life which “faint seasons keep,” and the “dream” is fancifully “moraliz’d in age and youth.” But the steady effort is not to say, from the perspective of sunset, that there is anything new under the sun. Familiar images and their familiar meanings confirm the feelings. The six stanzas do not progress, do not reach for moments of intensity. Time inside the poem is—the illusion maintains—an accurate version of the time outside the poem. The stanzas keep saying the same thing, as a dirge is expected to do, but say it well, without flagging, or passivity, or mannered leisureliness.

“Sic Vita” is not a dirge but an expanding-contracting comparison that moves like a riddle toward its inevitable ending, the particular place of man in a world under the rule of time and inevitability. The set problem is Quarles’s stanza and theme, but the handling of these more nearly resembles King’s practices in “The Dirge”:

Like to the falling of a Starre;
Or as the flights of Eagles are;
Or like the fresh springs gawdy hew;
Or silver drops of morning dew;
Or like a wind that chafes the flood;
Or bubbles which on water stood;
Even such is man, whose borrow’d light
Is streight call’d in, and paid to night.

The Wind blowes out; the Bubble dies;
The Spring entomb’d in Autumn lies;
The Dew dries up; the Starre is shot;
The Flight is past; and Man forgot.

To begin with, King’s exploitation of Quarles’s stanza combines a strong epigrammatic concentration with strong but unobtrusive variations. (“What else is hell, but losse of blisfull heaven?” might have served as the inspiration for improving on Quarles.) In the first six lines each couplet presents two related examples, the second of which is lesser in a general order characterized by decreasing magnitude and duration. Power and movement are followed by beauty seen as motionless in its brief moment. The wind both moves and passes; the bubbles disappear in the movement of the line, making their point by
no longer being there: "stood." The fourth couplet relates all the comparisons to man and articulates a latent attribute shared by all the vis-ibilia, "borrow'd light." Then in the coda everything is abbreviated (except spring); the list suggests that all the actions occur within a single moment of time; there are no epithets or similes, and verbs help make the metaphors. Yet in the tightened form a significant reordering of all the paired items matches man and eagles, the only warm-blooded, soaring representatives of life. When things are spelled out so, they constitute an answer to, what is life like? But in the final repetition the last item, man, feels different and is different.

The answer may seem to be a kind of epitaph, a summation of the old message that all must die. And yet, though everything in the poem is oriented toward death, the analogies that compose the common destiny suggest no sense of a shared destiny. Man is not all men but summary man, as solitary as the falling star that begins the sequence. No lender of the "borrow'd light" may be inferred from the poem, though the phrase troubles; no rationalizable debt of Adam or nature. Instead, a traditional metaphor is applied without the traditional meanings, but with some barriers and gaps. The images of life in the poem are charged with their moment of intensity and reflect something of their nature as they reach toward the cessation of life. The images of death, all but one, are more perfunctory, and what they reflect is limited to something implicit in their kind of movement toward cessation.

Only "Man forgot" makes a new and unexpected turn. The natural things that march more briskly in their final review establish a tempo that leads to the sudden punctuating emphasis of "Man forgot." Man dies like everything else, but being forgotten is not quite like the other examples of evanescence. For though "borrow'd light" may come from an unknown, or unacknowledged, creditor, it is well known whom man is forgotten by—perhaps by God but certainly by fellow human beings. Man cannot be forgotten unless man forgets, and thus involves himself distinctly in the general failure. Man borrowed the light but not the forgetting—unless, by a dubious wrench of sentiment, the human forgetting is borrowed from the seasonal analogy, by which the forgetting of spring may be attributed to autumn, which does not know of its own impending "entombment" by winter.

In any case, the "Man forgot" does evoke a special concentration on man as individualized victim. When his light is peremptorily "call'd in, and paid to night," the human consciousness of time separates man from the other observed victims of time, and he becomes a brief center of pathos to which other human beings may respond and—at the very least—recognize the essential human link, their own ignorance of their
Episodes in the Progress of Death

individual schedules for dying. *Sic vita.* Man is the climax of all the images of ceasing life; they offer illustrative analogies leading to his “Even such.” But the connection is severely limited, and unlike the other examples man is granted no moment of characterizing intensity of his own—except that of the stringent reference to the mental life which separates him from the life and death of nature. His intensity is bare of any evocative sign of grandeur or beauty. It is an intensity of consciousness alone. The poem does not permit death to be felt as an enemy; it is imageless, a kind of nothing, though time and light make known its presence, and the pain of life is knowable to human beings, for they have learned to read the signs around them. Almost everything is summed up by that infallibly ordered drive toward conscious and unconscious extinction.

That observations directed toward the end of life are attracted by the lamentable has not escaped notice. What is new in this expression of dismay is the utter solitude of man surrounded by the busy emblems of dying but with no attachments to other lives or deaths, no enemies or friends, no struggle to resist or accept, no fear, hope, hate, or love. Only the muted anguish toward time and separateness—these and the horror of forgetting make the death human.

Still, one may propose ways by which the poem does maintain contact with traditional contemplations of death. A new reading of the Book of Nature, so many of the lessons of which were known by heart, might simply be read the old way according to the memory of lessons already in place. As for the learned, who have their own ways and may be no more movable than the unlearned: following good principles of moral reasoning, they might have thought, “Though life may be hostile to man’s wishes and finally appalling, man forgetting is, however wretched, still a rational and responsible culprit, agent as well as victim, a collaborator of the last enemy, betraying and validating a truth which no one could violate if it did not exist and were not confirmed by the human history of acknowledgment and betrayal.” If I may demur, not at the traditional argument but at a difficulty such an interpretation encounters: it seems to require an overgenerous concession to the “borrow’d light” of inherited rationalism and its optimistic adventures in self-containment. For the poem acts as if it were marshaling its familiar images toward a traditional resolution or warning and then seems to forget, as it were, and leaves the organized hopelessness pressing very hard against an open conclusion.

But there is yet another way of looking at the poem that would make a good old sense and most of its new sense. The message King contemplates may have a personal purpose. If we may judge from his
own record, man forgetting man would have provided an exemplum that made death meaningless except for its shamefulness. He did not himself forget but honored the memory of wife, father, friends, fellow poets, his martyred king, and heroic contemporaries. The life here contemplated may be recognized as an unusual memento mori that, however modernized, shocks and warns in the old-fashioned way. Like an epigram or dirge, a memento mori does not need to contemplate at large; it may concentrate the negative lessons by which death teaches how to live. Here the lessons review the old message that all must die, but there is a new message that juxtaposes for the summoned man an extreme of isolation, without a friend or an enemy to fix on, and the threat of the indifferent, forgotten death which makes all dying the deaths of anonymous others. The poet sings a traditional elegiac celebration of brevity in the objects of nature, but toward himself and his kind the voice pronounces the summons and the being forgot; the sense of human isolation overrides the bland “Even such is man,” and that sense is conveyed without direct statement. The being forgot is bleak and final if human life is ruled by blank, immutable law, and if consciousness can see only extinction everywhere it looks and can glimpse no meaning inside or outside life. But if being forgot is a human fault, or even a half-understood cry of alarm, the fault or the fear might mark a glimmer in the direction of hope.