CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Intricacies

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas’d, till he be eas’d
With being nothing.

SHAKESPEARE, Richard II

And if you, at the youthful age of fifty-four, can’t help thinking so often of death, are you surprised that at 80 1/2 I keep brooding on whether I shall reach the age of my father and brother, or even that of my mother, tortured as I am by the conflict between the desire for rest, the dread of renewed suffering (which a prolonged life would mean), and by the anticipation of sorrow at being separated from everything to which I am still attached?

FREUD, Letters

Dear Madam (or Miss?)
Your mysterious and beautiful book has pleased me to an extent that makes me unsure of my judgment . . . And with it such a diffident letter! Can it be that your modesty causes you to underrate your own value? Who are you? Where did you acquire all the knowledge expressed in your book? Judging by the priority you grant to death, one is led to conclude that you are very young.
Won’t you give me the pleasure of paying me a visit one day? I have time in the mornings.

FREUD, Letters

Death is certain, but almost everything related to its advent, especially the when and the how, is uncertain. These are truths everyone can understand, but it is the kind of knowledge that bristles and swarms with human efforts to gain and to hold a reasonable control over the certainty and the uncertainties. That too is a common truth, of immense bulk in its known history of manifestation, to which we can add the private histories we know; there are also innumerable lost and undisclosed private histories. The record of human response, whatever else one may say of it, and its venturing to explain other matters important to human life and death would appear to be the kind of truth that
Intricacies

depends upon an earlier discovery and derives from the original certainty and (at least in more advanced societies) the secondary uncertainties.

The purpose of beginning so platitudinously is to center attention on the uncertainties, for these are shared by life, which provides indispensable materials by which and against which most of the uncertainties (and the unknowns) of death are to be explained. Why we die and the significance of our deaths are subjects religion has both embraced and inherited—so too, therefore, the responsibility of preparing individuals for death and setting the forms and limits of grief and consolation. Grief has its practical necessities rooted in human nature, learned by experience and observation, and respected by those who have the cure of souls. The needs of consolation are partly similar but are more capable of listening to intellectual and spiritual persuasion. The records of consolation are more ancient than writing and speak to archeologists. Though the nature of consolation may have changed very little, the terms, like the objects and subjects, have changed many times.

I mention these matters with some abruptness, for though they are an inextricable part of my general subject, grief and consolation are central only to the experience of survivors and mourners. To grief uncertainty can have little real interest until grief has lapsed into sadness or melancholy. Consolation has already turned to thoughts of deaths still to come before it can make out, with any usefulness, murmuring about the uncertainty of life; all such thoughts must be kept safely distinct from thoughts of the certain rest, peace, and salvation of the dead. In the following discourse I look at topics and examples that illustrate the presence and something of the character of uncertainties as they are expressed in the language of those who write about dying and death to those who will have in mind their own death.

I return to a passage that furnished an example for another context,2 Donne’s powerful description of how rhetoric works upon the weak:

The way of Rhetorique in working upon weake men, is first to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgement, to smother and bury in it, or to empty it of former apprehensions and opinions, and to shake that believe, with which it had possessed it self before, and then when it is thus melted, to powre it into new molds, when it is thus mollified, to stamp and imprint new formes, new images, new opinions in it. (Sermons, 2:282)

The account is remarkably full in its compressed, imagistic brevity when it tells how men are taken apart; how they are put together again is
more general: when they are ready they are stamped with “new formes, new images, new opinions.” Let me add two other remarks by Donne also quoted in the previous context: “The Echo returnes the last syllables; The heart concludes with his conclusions, whom we have been willing to hearken unto” (7:408); and “It is not the depth, nor the wit, nor the eloquence of the Preacher that pierces us, but his nearenesse, that he speaks to my conscience . . . as though he had read the book of the day of Judgement already” (3:142). The preacher who “pierces” by his “nearenesse” resembles the Holy Ghost who works directly “upon the soule and conscience” but is “a Metaphoricall, and Figurative expresser of himselfe, to the reason, and understanding of man” (9:328). (The preacher who makes one think “he had read the book of the day of Judgement already” is also figurative to the mind.)

The description of rhetoric need not be limited to its effects on “weake men,” for it applies well enough to all sinners and in particular to those whom God or His servants convert from old ways to new. As for those “whom we have been willing to hearken unto,” though Donne does not mention it, they may echo the heart’s desire for good as well as ill; for they may also speak to the conscience by means of a more intimate “nearenesse” that may not pierce but still may, as consciousness discovers the truth of its real desire, draw the heart’s “conclusions.” The passage describing the way of rhetoric does not include an image of piercing; its way is one that first disorders and then undoes thoroughly in order to recreate as it wills material as pliable as the clay out of which God made Adam. The last step is brief and general. The power as described lies in the destructive process, which is both systematic and cumulative. Both are necessary, but it is the cumulative that takes control of the power. Piercing nearness can act at once, and the willing heart, which has listened for an indeterminate length of time, can conclude with no more delay than the return of an echo. But in the paradigm of rhetoric, acts of psychical force repeated like blows gradually reduce the listener to the condition of complete receptivity. If the subject is death, strong men may turn weak under the weight.

If the work is to strengthen readers against the anxieties and disasters of life and death, or to reconcile them to a great personal loss, the way of rhetoric (and philosophy) will also be systematic and cumulative in assembling the arguments that heal and renew the order of life. After the death of Beatrice, Dante turned to Cicero’s De Amicitia and Boethius’s The Consolation of Philosophy. In Canto X of Paradiso, Boethius is “l’anima santa” of the eighth light: “through seeing every good, the sainted soul rejoices who makes the fallacious world manifest to any who listen well to him.”3 If the reader of Boethius is to see every good,
he must listen well to arguments that repeatedly dismantle false thoughts in a dialogue that leads error into chosen positions and then silences it by the privileged intensity of rebuttal. Even in the best of consolations the fixed purpose cannot permit much lingering on alternative views, and the purpose cannot be achieved without accumulating a considerable pressure of evidence leading in a single direction.

For more than five centuries the *contemptus mundi* was a favorite topic for earnestly piling up all the evidence against the worth of life in this world. Being more than loosely systematic was less important than being thorough in collecting quotations, commonplaces, clichés—whatever had been thought and written. A new example, or turn of argument, or phrase, was likely to be incorporated in subsequent collections, but novelty was no more than a minor, random grace in a subject that maintained its steady appeal long after it had been effectively ransacked. The most successful work, judged by its popularity, was *De Miseria Humane Conditionis*, written in 1195 by Cardinal Lotario dei Segni who would become the respected Pope Innocent III. It was, though relatively short, an encyclopedia that included the best and much of the rest that had been said: (1) on the more repulsive miseries of life from conception to old age; (2) on the vanity of human desires for riches, pleasures, and honors; (3) on the decay of the body, the pains of hell, and the coming of the Day of Judgment.

That so much could be said on the subject, and that it could be repeated with satisfaction, certainly contributed to its settled authority. But one cannot ignore the enduring appeal of the thesis itself. It provided a single answer to everything that seemed wrong and could go wrong in the experiences of life and fitted smoothly into other systematic arguments that explained the prominent problems of life and death. In the early seventeenth century, writing on the death of his first son, Ben Jonson reached out to touch the theme. Fifty years later, contemplating the “leaden slumber” of Cromwell’s dead body, in a moment unlike anything else in his long “Poem upon the Death of O. C.,” Marvell burst out:

Oh! humane glory, vaine, oh! death, oh! wings,
Oh! worthlesse world! oh transitory things!
(lines 255–56)

In his *Flores Solitudinis* of 1654 Henry Vaughan, writing in “sicknesse and retirement,” published his translations of two treatises on the subject; for “we live in an age, which hath made this very Proposition (though suspected of Melancholie,) mighty pleasing, and even meane witts begin to like it; the wiser sort alwaies did.” In his “Advertisement”
to the translation of Eucherius, whose arguments rendered riches and honors “not only contemptible, but odious,” he concludes by defending the relative brevity: “Much more might have been spoken against them, but (seeing the Age we live in hath made all his Arguments, Demonstrations) he hath in my judgement spoken enough.”

In Measure for Measure the Duke delivers a thirty-five-line lecture to Claudio on the theme, “Be absolute for death.” It is a compendium of the main traditional argument, long enough to make Claudio reply, “I humbly thank you. . . . Let it come on”; and long enough to fill and prepare the stage time before Isabella’s entrance. But this is drama, and the privileged argument is opposed by other forces. When Claudio catches a glimpse of hope in Isabella’s clumsy exposition of what Angelo has offered, the repressed fear of death pours out with the eloquence and convincing originality of a true nightmare. He ends:

The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

(3.1.128–31)

The potential for complexity when there is conflict shows a different side when Uncle Claudius, in the second scene of Hamlet, goes to work upon the unreasonably extended “mourning duties,” as Claudius calls them, of Hamlet for his father. It is not a long speech but it seems very long, for Claudius lays on Hamlet an unbroken succession of the appropriate reasons and well-established wise thoughts for setting a “term” to “sorrow.” He calls in other arguments to prove the grief “unmanly” and “unschool’d,” perilously tending toward impiety. The cumulative effect produces growing discomfort as the rhetoric of the speech turns us into strong and unwilling listeners. The use of personal prerogative, the exhibition before a public audience, and the motives—all are lightly concealed under the thin veil of power administering benevolent correction. The tone is self-congratulatory, the adornments are crude; though almost everything is repeated wisdom intended to be systematic and cumulative, the man in the speech keeps edging toward personal emergence. He comes closest when the rhetoric of his “common theme,” the “death of fathers,” leads him to cite the doctrine of necessity as the operative law of reason “From the first corse till he that dies today.” He is covered by a slight error: Abel was not a father.

In his Anniversaries Donne tries hard to be systematic and to cover all the old topics but not in the old ways, and he certainly aims at a cumulative effect. But I want to turn to a related effect that depends on
Intricacies

one's awareness of the familiar arguments concerning the miseries of life that lead to death. This awareness gives unexpected body to the opportune image entering into a traditional way of thinking and its familiar images, a way that has gained a special authority augmented by an unchallenged continuity of repetition. Life is a journey, we know, and the end is rest and salvation for the faithful:

This unspeakable, this unimaginable happiness is this Salvation, and therefore let us be glad when this is brought neer us. And this is brought neerer and neerer unto us, as we come neerer and neerer to our end. As he that travaileth weary, and late towards a great City, is glad when he comes to a place of execution, because he knows that is neer the town; so when thou comest to the gate of death, be glad of that, for it is but one step from that to thy Jerusalem. (Sermons, 2:266)

It may be hard "to repress a shudder," as a recent critic has written, but that personal experience cannot be trusted as if it were sufficient evidence for pronouncing a literary (or psychological) judgment. The peculiar discovery of "a place of execution" (recognized by a gibbet, perhaps, and other signs that do not require much light to be known?) and what it signifies would make a welcome example and a convenient argument for a contemptus mundi. The old context brings to the new context an image of the uncertainty of living, and by a single turn recalls to memory the old inevitable grinding forward of the argument that life in this world is full of deception, change, pain, and painful surprises. All of these contribute to the new context as the certainty of death and the desire of the weary traveler for rest find in the "place of execution" a fixed sign of death; yet the traveler's own spontaneous feeling of gladness (and relief and hope) translates a symbol of death in life into the nearness and accessibility of life in death. In the strange paths along such borders, certainties and uncertainties may interchange, and the traveler, "weary, and late," may hardly notice the difference. The same cannot be said for the listener/reader, who is not this traveler, and though he may not be able to make a good account of what has happened to him as he heard or read, he should feel no mental weariness.

Not the place but the act of execution furnishes Donne with an image that brings the certainties and uncertainties of death directly together. The context concerns the Resurrection, in which the damned will also be immortal (Lucifer no less than Michael, Judas than St. Peter) but in a state of "continuall dying." Therefore, "it is impossible to separate the consideration of the Resurrection, from the consideration
of the Judgement; and the terrors of that may abate the joy of the other. . . . If I can put off all feare of that Judgement, I have put off all imagination, that any such Judgement shall be.” The image I have in mind concerns the wicked and their immortality:

But the wicked begin this feare, when the Trumpet sounds to the Resurrection, and then shall never end it; but, as a man condemned to be halfe hang’d, and then quartered, hath a fearfull addition in his quartering after, and yet had no ease in his hanging before. . . . That which we call immortality in the damned, is but a continuall dying; howsoever it must be called life, it hath all the qualities of death, saving the ease, and the end, which death hath, and damnation hath not. They must come forth; they that have done evill, must do so too: Neither can stay in their house, their grave; for, their house (though that house should be the sea) shall be burnt downe; all the world dissolv’d with fire. But then, They who have done evill, shall passe from that fire, into a farther heat, without light, They who have done good, into a farther light, without heat. . . . Remember with thankfulnesse the severall resurrections that he hath given you; from superstition and ignorance, in which, you, in your Fathers lay dead; from sin, and a love of sin, in which, you, in the dayes of your youth, lay dead; from sadnesse, and dejection of spirit, in which, you, in your worldly crosses, or spirituall tentations, lay dead; And assure your self, that that God that loves to perfect his own works, when you shall lye dead in your graves, will give you that Resurrection to life, which he hath promised to all them that do good, and will extend to all them, who having done evill, do yet truly repent the evill they have done. (Sermons, 6:277–79)

The wicked who are “halfe hang’d” represent the certainty but also the uncertainty of death itself. Their brief reprieve represents the final judgment to come. But the process of being quartered, which might or might not be efficient in protracting life while still being unspeakably inefficient, does not quite correspond to the certainty of judgment or the uncertainties of how infinity will be spent. Death is like going to the house of the grave or being “halfe hang’d,” except for “the ease, and the end.” “They must come forth”: which brings into death some of the “qualities” of life, as the apprehension of uncertainties.

I have quoted more of the passage that follows the image than was needed to make my modest point. I did so because it is a convenient
place to illustrate that inherited love for the piling up, the rhetorical way of reducing resistance by the cumulative effect of a series of blows that makes the willing listener fully receptive to the alternative, which then can be “imprinted” with a gentler application of force. But this too need not come all at once, for hope also needs the process of repetition, to be tempered and strengthened, and to be remembered by the application of “sensible” images of the kind that, as Aquinas wrote, the soul may be “held by” and may “cleave with affection to.” Donne inherited that love for the cumulative effect and a taste for the vivid example, but he was not one to imitate the more naive aspects of the earlier art, though he knew their uses in the pulpit. The “several resurrections” available to individual memory are a bridge to the final Resurrection, and God “will give you” what he has promised “to all them that do good, and will extend to all them, who having done evil, do yet truly repent the evil they have done.” This is handsomely precise in its discriminating emphasis. But what he does with the “halfe hang’d” and the weary traveler is to coordinate closely the certainties and uncertainties of death and life and the intricacies that bind and separate them.

In seventeenth-century England one could separate reason and revelation in the traditional manner of a philosophical Christian trying his hand, with proper acknowledgment and deference, at a limited experiment of explaining by analytical reason alone how to organize the practical knowledge of nature. Bacon’s The Advancement of Learning is a diplomatic, statesmanlike book that promotes an intellectual revolution already in the making. One could separate the business of life from revelation so, but not the business of death. Few would have listened; most of those who heard of the proposition by report would have been incredulous at the novelty and would have suspected atheism. Besides, analytical reason, directed toward the materials of recently acquired knowledge and ways of regarding that knowledge, had little new to offer on the subject of death, and what was on record in earlier thought was either opposed to revelation or had been absorbed into Christian thinking. Accepting death as a part of life may have been the resigned attitude of whole societies in the Middle Ages and may have continued to persist, as in Montaigne’s country folk and Tolstoi’s peasants, but it was an acceptance gained like a habit without much formal thinking. It could not have defended itself against the standing array of powerful arguments. Even the church, whatever its contribution to that simple acceptance, was committed to treating death as related to life chiefly in special ways; death was made to seem both separate and more important.
To think of death in ways that further increased its separateness from life required thinking of life in ways that increased its separateness from death. The early Montaigne avers: “Our religion has no surer human foundation than contempt for life” (1.20.64). The late Montaigne advances his personal opinion that the measure of human felicity is “living happily,” not “dying happily” (3.2.619). And further: that there is “no knowledge so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live this life well and naturally; and the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being” (3.13.852). It would have been still harder to acquire the knowledge of how to defend the knowledge of living well against the tested arguments on the side of death. As the value of living well began to gain some purchase in the world, the new absolute primacy of faith to salvation found it necessary to separate itself emphatically from the traditional importance of “good works,” while of course making formal acknowledgments that good works were still good in their place. Late in Paradise Lost Milton’s careful phrase is “faith, not void of works” (12.427), which resembles his “love with fear the only God” (12.562).

There were acknowledged and unacknowledged unknowns in death, some of them locked up in mysteries attributed to God’s will. Yet the literature on death offered reasoned answers in an unhesitating flow and with the air of comprehensiveness, by means of arguments privileged to explain all apparent contradictions, to ignore all omissions, and to treat like laws the established habits of selecting only certain kinds of evidence and proof. Anomalies could be attributed to official mysteries or to the faulty performance of the living person who was dying. To be “Absolute for death” one needed only to “Reason thus with life,” and so forth. If the will, that acknowledged theater of moral action, faltered, it was immediately subject to demotion or exclusion as a recreant or enemy of the rational soul. In Measure for Measure Claudio’s fearful imagining of the condition of being dead would make a clear case. Yet Shakespeare’s Juliet hesitating over the Friar’s sleeping potion and swept into waves of fear, hysteria, and hallucination still does what she decided to do, with no visible help from reason but only from a love remembered at the lucky worst moment, a love stronger than the fear of death or madness. She presents a difficult case, but thinkers from Plotinus into the seventeenth century do not hesitate to deprive the recreant will of its freedom, or its name and place in the psyche, if it departs from the regulated precincts of the rational.

I cannot solve these problems, but I can review them and go on. A serious work of the imagination can juxtapose arguments without using one side as a foil to set off the convincing reasons of the other. In
Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* Samson refuses his father’s proposal of seeking by ransom to gain his release from prison and hard labor. Samson prefers his deserved punishment, and to “expiate, if possible, my crime.” He implores God’s pardon, “but as for life, / To what end should I seek it?” He can see no hope of recovering the lost purpose of his life:

Here rather let me drudge and earn my bread,
Till vermin or the druff of servile food
Consume me, and oft-invocated death
Hasten the welcome end of all my pains.

(lines 573–76)

Manoa’s answers to that dangerous admission of desiring death are of a practical sort and superficial; he seems to have intuited that desire already when he presented his strongest argument:

Be penitent and for thy fault contrite,
But act not in thy own affliction, son;
Repent the sin, but if the punishment
Thou canst avoid, self-preservation bids;
Or th’ execution leave to high disposal,
And let another hand, not thine, exact
Thy penal forfeit from thyself; perhaps
God will relent, and quit thee all his debt;
Who ever more approves and more accepts
(Best pleased with humble and filial submission)
Him who imploring mercy sues for life,
Than who self-rigorous chooses death as due;
Which argues over-just, and self-displeased
For self-offense, more than for God offended.

(lines 502–15)

The heart of Manoa’s argument poses pride against piety, death against life, self-judgment against trust in God’s mercy. Samson does not answer these arguments directly; either he cannot or chooses not to, a classic ambiguity that defies resolution. We recognize that Manoa’s arguments offer a plausible but not an authoritative explanation of Samson’s behavior, and that in general they have the authority they bring from the history of human experience in its relations with the divine. That authority, however, is subject to doubts when it is represented by a spokesman whose own thoughts and feelings we do not trust to be represented fully by what he chooses to say. But a good argument may have its own integrity, weakened in a particular context but not dis-
solved by our perception of the questionable motives of the speaker. As for Samson: the prospects of release cannot answer the depths of his feelings; these we cannot know, and Samson cannot know where outraged pride passes into an authentic conviction that his penitence for the betrayal of God still is incomplete. The verbal arguments are inadequate on both sides; what they say is what may be said, but they are no direct guide to the truth, which will come in a form beyond the reach of their arguments. There can be no meeting of minds between a tragic sinner refusing to act before his will recognizes the right signs, by which it will be proved rational and a father who is being true to his obligations as he understands them. Milton gives us in a story what arguments cannot: a view, from the human and the divine perspectives, into a corner of the untabulated mysteries of death. Again we may acknowledge the advantages of dramatic writing, which has its own special relations with the inevitable and no need to present a mimesis of the comprehensive, and which enjoys a different range of freedom in choosing and ordering questions.

In the didacticism of sermon or argument the need to explain will often suppress any sense of alternative or the possibility of a more complex or a deeper view. For example, Donne illustrates the reckless indifference to life in a “picture” of one who dies “upon the wrack of a distracted conscience”:

When the devil imprints in a man . . . I care not though I were dead, it were but a candle blown out, and there were an end of all: where the Devil imprints that imagination, God will imprint an Emori nolo, a loathness to die, and fearful apprehension at his transmigration. (Sermons, 8:188)

A long passage of description follows, more than proving what his listeners well knew, that even if death ended there, to escape “that manner of death were worthy a Religious life.” One would not guess from this account that the writer could support a different view of “a loathness to die,” or that such reluctance could be anything but a sign of the wicked. But there was, always to be remembered but not always adduced, the example of Christ’s death, his “colluctations with death, and a sadness even in his soule to death, and an agony even to a bloody sweate in his body, and expostulations with God, and exclamations upon the crosse.” The day Hilarion died he said: “Hast thou served a good master threescore and ten yeares, and now art thou loath to goe into his presence? Yet Hilarion was loath. He was a devout man.” Donne’s message is: “Make no ill conclusions upon any mans loathness to dye.” This is true of malefactors too, for Christ was reputed and executed as such, “and no doubt many of
In the second part of the sermon quoted above, Donne’s last, he is intent on undermining human presumption in trying to understand death and to turn examples into rules for private purposes. Donne’s message is that to God alone “belong the issues of death.” Conformity to and dependence on Christ is the one answer. Still, a significant part of undermining presumption concerns the ambiguity of reluctance to die, elsewhere castigated; and Donne with unexpected and touching generosity enters a defense of human passion and “distempers” even when they speak, against the sacred reason of faith, in the language of diffidence and distrust. Usually we must encounter the other side of an opinion or emphasis in another, more hospitable place—as in the righteousness, but “agony,” “vehemence,” and “bitterness” of the passion of the Widow of Zarephatha who importunes the prophet to restore her dead son: “A storme of affections in nature, and yet a settled calme, and a fast anchorage in grace, a suspicion, and a jealousy, and yet an assurance, and a confidence in God, may well consist together” (Sermons, 7:383). But even here the context clearly safeguards the essential piety, though it significantly enlarges the decorum usually expected of piety and does something to temper the habits of rational suspicion and to make the easy impulses of illiberality a little harder to indulge.

In imaginative literature the uncertainties of death not tied to the when and the how, and not tied to any of the usual relationships between questions and answers, can say unprecedented things. The odd imaginations that sport or stray across the mind under stress may startle and give strange pleasure. Their intimations of source and motivation may forestall their being censored as fantastic nonsense. They may, rather, be accepted as legitimate surprise, demonstrating a recognizable aptness in the circumstances, which nevertheless remain open-ended and cut off from any established pattern to which they might be re-
ferred. We are finally unable to settle these odd imaginations into a reassuring position, or blunt their point, or forget their "wayward" interest, or develop their implications into a compelling argument. The best, though still inadequate, description I know is what Enobarbus in an aside to Cleopatra says in answering her question, "What means this?" The occasion is Antony’s preparing for “one other gaudy night” but falling into the language and behavior of a last farewell. Enobarbus answers, “‘Tis one of those odd tricks which sorrow shoots / Out of the mind’ (4.2.14–15). The fourth act of Shakespeare’s play has many such, as part of a discontinuous process of the soul and body, which “rive” in parting before death but secretly anticipate death. Other statements are single, isolated—such as, in the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth’s “Hell is murky.” When Lear’s death arrives, his last words are terribly related and unrelated to everything else in the play. Edmund, half-forgiven by his half-brother (“The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes”), produces a mysterious toy to clutch and wonder at: “Yet Edmund was belov’d!” (5.3.240).

Nor are poems, in spite of their smaller range of multiple actions, without similar moments. I think of Tichborne’s dark speaking, “My tale was heard, and yet it was not told,” and of Donne’s precognition of death caught sight of in an image of light:

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.

(The Second Anniversarie, lines 85–88)

This is indeed strange, like directions to a baroque painter; or Donne may have derived the image from a painting he saw. In any case, the imaginative impulse stands by itself; however it came, this image has nothing further to do or say. A less portentous (and final) example is Jonson’s eleventh “Epigram,” “On Some-thing, that Walkes Somewhere.” This is a brief, sketchy narrative on an “it” encountered at court. The clothes, looks, and adjustment of countenance are all pretentious; the speech goes further:

It made me a great face, I asked the name.
A lord, it cryed, buried in flesh, and blood,
And such from whom let no man hope least good,
For I will doe none: and as little ill,
For I will dare none. Good Lord, walke dead still.
Jonson’s wit has managed to extract from the mixture of spiritual affection and true confession a new, dehumanized meaning to go with the usually painful idea of death in life. But his is different from the preceding examples. Its surprising uniqueness is based on known distinctions; once these are put together by Jonson’s summary definition, any loitering interest we might have in the eccentricity of person and motives is turned to the definition, which is not open-ended.

In the Expostulation of Devotion 17, the echo of the bell tolling for an unknown dying man continues in Donne’s thought. If God wills, any sounds may convey His music, and Donne declares, “Thy voice, thy hand is in this sound, and in this one sound, I heare this whole Consort.” He hears Jacob prophesying to his sons when it was time for him to die. He hears Moses blessing his people before his death; this too is part of God’s music, “within the compasse of this sound.” And Isaiah to Hezekia: “Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.” (“Hee makes us of his familie.”) He hears the apostle Peter stirring up remembrance when he knows that he must soon “put off this my tabernacle.” And he hears God’s Son saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled.” Then Donne expostulates with God:

The legacies in thy first will, in thy old Testament were plentie and victorie; Wine and Oile, Milke and Honie, alliances of friends, ruine of enemies, peacefull hearts, & cheerefull countenances, and by these galleries thou broughtest them into thy bed-chamber, by these glories and joies, to the joies and glories of heaven. Why hast thou changed thine old way, and carried us, by the waies of discipline and mortification, by the waies of mourning and lamentation, by the waies of miserable ends, and miserable anticipations of those miseries, in appropriating the exemplar miseries of others to our selves, and usurping upon their miseries, as our owne, to owne prejudice?

He then asks why the absolute joy and glory of heaven have no counterpart here but only contrast, and answers that there the joy and glory are real and owe nothing to comparison and contrast. The only true comparison is with the being of God: “Essentiaall joy, and glory Essentiall.” Then he concludes:

But why then, my God, wilt thou not beginne them here? pardon, O God this unthankfull rashnesse; I that aske why thou doest not, finde even now in my selfe, that thou doest; such joy, such glory, as that I conclude upon my selfe, upon all, They that
finde not joy in their sorrowes, glory in their dejections in this world, are in a fcarfieull danger of missing both in the next.

That Donne elsewhere calls death in the Old Testament a threat but a promise in the New Testament is not to my purpose here; nor that he obtrudes upon all these Old Testament deaths the later pedagogy of reminding witnesses to think upon their own deaths. (He attributes to Jacob a “prophetic” version of the popular gnome, more suitable to decaying or skeletal remains: What you are I was, what I am you will be.) And we may also disregard the fact that Jacob’s prophecy was not all milk and honey, or that Hezekia heard some bad news along with the good. Up to a point Donne’s main intention is to identify the tolling bell with God’s music; all the deaths referred to are “within the compasse of this sound”; both testaments contribute to a single harmony. But this intention is broken off, and two testaments are aligned in contrast, though moments later even the conceivability of comparison and contrast will need to be rejected when he moves to his own personally anguished questions of why earthly and heavenly joy and glory have no relationship. One may sense but cannot be sure that a reflexive action has occurred and that an invalid effort to apply the reasoning of comparison (earthly and heavenly rewards) to one manifestation of God’s will has weakened or disabled the personal expression of eloquent certainty in comparing the old and new ways of death. No connection is acknowledged, but human certainty arguing with God acts against the background of authoritative precedents on record, and these do not need to be cited for their influence to be felt. The new development begins with a contrast between Christ’s saying, “I goe to prepare a place for you,” and the voice in the tolling bell, “this man in this sound saies, I send to prepare you for a place, for a grave.” In his own voice Donne then speaks the warm praise of the old way of death with something of the special tone of celebrating pastoral innocence in a remote Golden Age, in contrast to the new ways, not all of them God’s doing, for there is the human contribution of borrowing miseries from others. The main link is shifted from the binding metaphor of music to the passage from life to death to heaven, from the rewards of the “first “will,” which led and induced us to heaven by “glorious and joyfull things,” to the new ways of the Christian life. Like the Widow of Zareptha and others, Donne speaks with “vehemence” and “bitterness”: “A storme of affections in nature . . . and a confidence in God, may well consist together.”

But the outburst of natural passion, however justified, cannot restore the formal unity of the discourse. Nor would it help if we borrowed from our next example, the preceding, sixteenth Expostulation.
There Donne thanks God for permitting Christians to remember that they were “naturall men before” and for permitting the church “to have taken in from Jew or Gentile.” But in the present Expostulation he has done something else. He is not demonstrating an assimilative unity attributed to God, nor demonstrating that any “harshness” or “hoarseness” (like that of his protesting voice) may become musical if God “set” His voice to the sound. This last is, I think, too fine a thread and too remote from the entrance of joy at the end; one may, however, hesitate to exclude that tenuous connection absolutely. Still, the character of the change is sudden, and so much something in itself, that it demands to be recognized as an event that is not merely serving or concluding a process. We have to take his word for the joy; he does not discuss the details of its arrival or analyze its contents. That such an occurrence is most rare in his book does not lessen our willingness to believe him now. We may want the personal satisfaction of explaining his joy as part of the impulse that will cause him in the next part of this Devotion to pray for the soul of the man for whom the bell has been tolling. If the Holy Ghost is the enabling agent, it would be hard to decide which causes which, in the matter of the joy and the subsequent prayer. Donne says nothing to the point. We may well be reluctant, however, to accept as given the moral lesson of his last sentence, that those who do not find joy and glory in the antithetical experiences of this world are in danger of missing joy and glory in the next world. The application seems easy and opportune, like an afterthought presented by a self-conscious teacher as if it were the conclusion toward which everything else had been pointing.

But the joy remains a thing apart, and precious. The interrupted continuity of intention and the loosening of the unity, common faults in writing, here seem to do homage to the joy. In sum, the expostulation with God is transposed by God and heard by God as a prayer; the feeling of joy is the answer that identifies the prayer. 

My second example from the Devotions I have already introduced, and it will require no fine labor to present. Though it strays a modest distance from my subject and does not touch death directly, the sixteenth Expostulation is instructive in its presenting a moment of certainty while Donne makes his way through materials that have been and are controversial and uncertain. His interpretive exposition is carefully pitched and paced. It begins with announcing that his argument is with men who “dare expostulate” with God over the ceremonial use of bells at funerals. He continues reviewing and defending Christian practices that have a pre-Christian history and then returns to his own case, cut off as he is from the full church service he hears only in brief and
fragmented form. In his own voice, and in the special circumstances of dangerous illness, he cries out, “We cannot, we cannot, O my God, take in too many helps for religious duties.” Then he confesses to God and thanks God for a personal practice of his own, followed by a general and diplomatic comment on God’s purposes as he understands them:

I know I cannot have any better Image of thee, than thy Sonne, nor any better Image of him, than his Gospell: yet must not I, with thanks, confesse to thee, that some historicall pictures of his, have sometimes put mee upon better Meditations than otherwise I should have fallen upon? I know thy Church needed not to have taken in from Jew or Gentile, any supplies for the exaltation of thy glory, or our devotion; of absolute necessitie I know shee needed not; But yet wee owe thee our thanks, that thou hast given her leave to doe so, and that as in making us Christians, thou diddest not destroy that which wee were before, naturall men, so in the exalting of our religious devotions now we are Christians, thou has beene pleased to continue to us those assistances which did worke upon the affections of naturall men before: for thou lovest a good man, as thou lovest a good Christian: and though Grace bee meerely from thee, yet thou dost not plant Grace but in good natures.

His reasoning attributes God’s permission to things the church has admitted and seals that matter by acknowledging to fellow churchmen that nothing really needed to be “taken in,” and seals the matter again by thanking God again for the gifts received. At the end, good men, good Christians, and good natures are linked together as objects of God’s love. His personal confession of having been moved by “historical pictures” of Jesus receives its justification indirectly. It comes under the general permission but is acknowledged by a separate thanks to God for the good he has received. The effect of improved devotion is as real to him as the sudden exaltation of joy in the Expostulation that follows. I think we may conclude that his general argument would not be affected by the omission of his personal evidence, but that he has felt a personal desire to include this, perhaps intending to produce a favorable context for its expression. He is quite silent about Puritan and other hatred of any form of devotion associated with Roman Catholic practices, as in the use of images to promote devotion. Donne does, however, carefully use a technical term of art, “historical pictures,” widely current since the eighteenth century but not so in the 1620s: the first use recorded by the OED is 1658.

By most standards, the rhetorical diplomacy is superior to the
reasoning, but this is religious reasoning into which Providence must be coordinated. Still, the personal experience, in spite of the graceful writing, stands apart in a special position, like the joy of my previous example. On the other hand, this personal experience is not advanced as the climax of the discourse but is placed in a guarded position. Donne knew that some readers would respond with aroused suspicion. In other respects the private experience resembles the announcement of joy, a personal certainty arising from conditions subject to further arguments and uncertainties but stated briefly. It is a truth that does not require an explanation that will satisfy all: it is what it is.

I end this part of the discussion by returning briefly to the more familiar way that the preacher changes the thought of an image, not suddenly or by unexpected juxtapositions more at home in imaginative literature, but by changing what he actually says in different places.

Donne’s “house of death that stands in two worlds, may trouble a good man’s resolution,” not only the mental firmness of the dying person, but his physical termination, in the medical sense of “resolution,” and his spiritual passing from dissonant to consonant, in the musical sense. Those who attend the death may also be troubled. They may see a spectacle ranging from visible struggle and compulsive pain to lethargy or coma; the arrival of death may appear as a steady, swift, or abruptly neutral closing down, or a calm, masked neutrality, or a scene of ecstasy, or quiet, peaceful arrest, or gradual dimming. What the witnesses see and what they remember will be affected by what they think of that life and its loss, and by how they are affected by the particular accouterments and ceremonies, domestic and public, that attend the disposal of the body. What they see will also be troubled by their thoughts of human and divine justice, human and divine mercy.

Donne frequently uses imagistic properties of “house”; it is a convenient figure for purposes of organization, and at the same time will help the attention and memory of listeners. He can divide the country into the houses of state government, the church, the place of the family, and the individual, for whom the body is the house of the soul and the grave house of the body. The image has other uses, too, for houses have grounds, foundations, rooms, roofs, furniture, inhabitants; and the person as house has “bodily” and other “endowments.” The sermon speaking of the house in two worlds was probably delivered in 1626/7. What it says and releases for imaginative response has an indisputable force, but it is a force involved in questioning. It cannot be regarded as an indisputable answer; and it will not be adequate to many occasions of grief or faith. If the sermon was delivered a month after the sudden death of his eighteen-year-old daughter Lucy, my commentary might
find itself composing a story that could not ignore that dangerous "long gazing upon so narrow a bridge [to heaven], and over so deep and roaring waters, and desperate whirlpools, as this world abounds with" (7:359). But since the date is only "probable" and I have another story to tell, I note indispensable items of the plot and pass on.

In a sermon of 1622, a confirmed date, Donne had already written, "For we know, that they which are gone, are gone but into another room of the same house, (this world, and the next, do but make up God a house) they are gone but into another Pue of the same Church (the Militant and the Triumphant do but make up God a Church)" (4:63). In an undated sermon assigned by the editors to the most probable date of 1626/7, Donne writes a firm revision of his house of death in two worlds (and of the seventeenth Expostulation):

The pure in heart are blessed already, not onely comparatively, that they are in a better way of Blessednesse, then others are, but actually in a present possession of it: for this world and the next world, are not, to the pure in heart, two houses, but two rooms, a Gallery to passe thorough, and a Lodging to rest in, in the same House, which are both under one rooffe, Christ Jesus . . . so the Joy, and the sense of Salvation, which the pure in heart have here, is not a joy severed from the Joy of Heaven, but a Joy that begins in us here, and continues, and accompanies us thither, and there flowes on, and dilates it selfe to an infinite expansion. (7:340)

In his Easter day sermon of 1627, a confirmed date, Donne makes another revision of the image of the house of death in two worlds:

That if the dead, and we, be not upon one floore, nor under one story, yet we are under one rooffe. We think not a friend lost, because he is gone into another roome, nor because he is gone into another Land; And into another world, no man is gone; for that Heaven, which God created, and this world, is all one world. . . . This is the faith that sustaines me, when I lose by the death of others, or when I suffer by living in misery my selfe, That the dead, and we, are now all in one Church, and at the resurrection, shall be all in one Quire. (7:384)

I think we may decide that this change is not a binding article of doctrine or faith, arrived at and to be defended by an open consideration of evidence and analysis. I mention this inapplicable extreme in order to say that the statement here is closer to and resembles more the ex-postulation with God that discovers itself to have been a prayer that has
The image is a vehicle that is capable of representing intellectual conception and intuition, but is also an expressive instrument of immediate desire and has no means of examining the durable truth of that desire and its image. The arbitrariness is not like that used in arguments designed to sway others—as, say, when Lotario dei Segni in *De Miseria* cites John 11:35, “Jesus wept,” and acknowledges the obvious pity for the suffering of those who grieved for Lazarus but prefers to single out the odd but serviceable interpretation: “troubled himself, and wept, but more for the reason that he called a dead man back to the miseries of life.”¹¹ Insofar as Donne is “arguing,” it is with himself, and whether he has changed his opinion or admitted a flaw of inconsistency into his thought would be a trifle. He confesses to his hearers: “This is the faith that sustaines me.” The “death of others” and “living in misery my selfe” are not two distinct categories, though Donne makes a gesture in that direction and writes “or”—“or when I suffer by living in misery my selfe.” By the death of others one loses and suffers to be “living,” and “my selfe” is more than a grammatical reflexive; it intensifies the solitude of suffering and loss. Donne shared the admiration and reverence of his age for the Psalms, and there he would have found the authority and example for the expression of immediate feelings true to their circumstances, a divine poetry not composed to satisfy the clenched fist of logic as taught in the schools.

The death of others, not only considered but deeply felt, may make the image of the house of death in two worlds appear to be a kind of intellectual luxury, better suited for considering the uncertainties of death, and one’s own death, than for responding to the death of another, a beloved other. If indeed there is only one house of the world, one is relieved of troubled “resolution” and double justice, and of the problems of despising the world and human life in accord with one set of reasons and of defending them by a carefully selected different set of reasons. A few casualties may have to be put out of mind, such as the discomfort of “a good mans resolution,” who is only a good man and does not, as do “the pure in heart,” travel the felicitous path from beginning to end. Faith in the Resurrection is a single answer to the misery of loss, and it does enable grief to accept limits and turn its passion into something else.

Mourning for the dead is also inherited from the affections of “natural man.” Beyond its due season of time, inconsolable grief for the dead is mingled with the misery of one’s own life and involved in the certain uncertainties of one’s own death; and would have no answer to the accusation that faith in the resurrection of the dead beloved has been proved to be deficient. An even bleaker thought, one that is more
possible to keep out of sight, for it does not challenge faith and is already shrouded in the mysteries of God's will, is that one can hope but not know that the salvation of another is assured. (Resurrection without salvation is not to be thought of in the house of the family; it is for designated times of warning the wicked.) Faith can believe it is difficult but possible to receive assurances of one's own salvation. One may continue to hope to know oneself and to discipline the raw desire for assurance, but the secret inclinations of others will be less well known, and how God may act on His knowledge it would be arrant presumption to entertain. Hope is more proper than faith, prayer than any reasoned weighing of evidence.

The natural franchise of consolation liberates the mind from the disturbance of unwanted thoughts, and so the unity of the world of one house opens love's doors on death but silently closes other doors; the architect's plans do not mention windows. God's love for the world is magnified, and life in the world will be relieved of conflicting purposes. The human expressions of love for the divine will be concentrated in the "faith that sustains," directed toward the Resurrection. Many of the uncertainties of life may thus be set aside or suspended. But once we step back from the special dues of consolation, the intricate relationships of self and other will again have to find their own ways of trying to think-and-not-think of the unknowns and mysteries of life that touch on death but do not belong to death alone.

In other parts of this book I have gone over some of these grounds with various other tasks in mind. Now it is time to look again.

If the sensitive balance that exists when the house of death stands in two worlds can be put out of mind when there is only one world, the fixed orientation toward death can also be reversed, and the witty pursuit of pleasure, the love of life and love in the world, can turn old objects of anxiety and complex reference upside down, if only in the freedom of play. So Suckling manipulates his wonder at the death of love as he examines a former source of disturbance:

She every day her Man doth kill, 
and I as often die; 
Neither her power then, nor my will 
can question'd be, 
what is the mystery? 
Sure Beauties Empires, like to greater States 
Have certain periods set, and hidden fates.\textsuperscript{12}

Whether the death of love is referred to the lightly contradicting evidence of daily episodes of sexual consummation or to the awesome
Intricacies

episodes involved in the fate and fall of empires, the comparisons are trivializing and intended to demystify both love and the death of love. Thomas Carew varies the method and the subject when in “A Rapture” he prepares a new paradise for a new innocence. There famous victims of “cancell’d laws” are making up “for their time mispent.” History rewritten also demystifies, perhaps with more surprise or shock when the private lives of individuals are revealed in their new freedom. Tarquin’s Lucretia studies Aretino’s “lectures,” and in knowledge and performance she is the equal of Laïs, who needs no second chance. Penelope has given up weaving and unraveling, “And th’amorous sport of gamesome nights prefer, / Before dull dreames of the lost Traveller” (lines 129–30).

To make a parallel step before circling back: Carew, refusing the invitation of Aurelian Townshend to write an elegy on the death of Gustavus Adolphus, deftly puts his refusal through some elegant paces. He writes an elegy while protesting his unfitness for so high a subject and then turns to praise his friend and encourage him to undertake “subjects proper” to the England of “Our Halcyon dayes”:

Of peace and plenty, which the blessed hand
Of our good King gives this obdurate Land.
Let us of Revels sing.

(p. 75, lines 47–49)

The sweet of life is not Henry King’s only true subject. When he first hears the bad news, his thoughts hang on him “Like a cold fatal sweat which ushers death.” When he praises the dead hero of Protestant Europe, he matches him not only against Caesar but against his own urgent yearning for a hero he can honor properly. These are not good times, and that news is not altogether recent. His elegy for Sir Walter Raleigh spares lament and makes the praise effectively brief. It is the scandalous behavior of Raleigh’s political enemies that provides the foil and “made thy ag’d fame / Appear more white and fair, then foul their shame.” When he comes to write on the death of Charles I, he casts aside all restraints, and Charles is memorialized against a “foil” several hundred lines in length. King’s excess tells the other side of Carew’s story.

Carew is not without the suggestions of a darker side, and he can praise Sandys’s translation of the Psalms with some sense of being touched by personal perplexity; skill comes to his aid, however, and he defends his inclinations by translating the language of religious aspiration into his own amorous idiom. It is a witty exhibition of winning words, a moderated penitential psalm directed toward a possible future, “Who knowes . . . may . . . may . . . may” (p. 94).
Cowley is a professed adherent to the new age of reason: “Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,” and Hobbes is praised as “Thou great Columbus of the golden lands of new philosophies.” But there is also a side of skeptical diffidence: “neither ought any man to envy Poets this posthumous and imaginary happiness, since they finde commonly so little in present. . . . a warlike, various, and a tragical age is best to write of, but worst to write in.” And there is a part of him that longs for his friend Crashaw’s faith, though he holds his opposing position very well in their joint poem, “On Hope.” His elegy “On the Death of Mr. Crashaw” calls him “Poet and saint. . . . The two most sacred names of earth and heaven.” Crashaw’s Muse, “like Mary, did contain / The boundless Godhead,” and he died at Loreto, “In thy great Mistress’ arms.” Elsewhere in “Christian land” idols persist, and we “the monster woman deify”; our Muses are variously corrupted: “Wanton as girls, as old wives fabulous.” As the religious praise crosses doctrinal boundaries, he asks pardon of his own Church, but continues:

Ah, mighty God, with shame I speak’t, and grief,  
Ah, that our greatest faults were in belief!  
And our weak reason were ev’n weaker yet,  
Rather than thus our wills too strong for it.  
His faith perhaps in some nice tenets might  
Be wrong; his life, I’m sure, was in the right.  
And I myself a Catholic will be,  
So far at least, great saint, to pray to thee.

Though the tendency may have its fashionable aspects, Cowley is for personal reasons attracted by the Horatian ideal of the simple life; he also professes the desire for a less fashionable retreat:

to retire my self to some of our American Plantations, not to seek for Gold or enrich my self with the traffique of those parts. . . . But to forsake this world for ever, with all the vanities and Vexations of it, and to bury my self in some obscure retreat there (but not without the consolation of Letters and Philosophy). . . . As this therefore is in a true sense a kind of Death to the Muses, and a real literal quitting of this World: So, methinks, I may make a just claim to the undoubted priviledge of Deceased Poets, which is to be read with more favor then the Living. (2:82)

Under the pose and the witty turn at the end (he is writing a preface to the 1656 volume), there is a strain of mid-seventeenth-century Christian melancholy in the half-serious cultivation of death.
I pause to borrow for comparison a casual sketch by a nineteenth-century writer of a fifteenth-century king trying to avoid death in earnest. Measured by time, Cowley is almost midway between them, and all the outward actions are different when Stendahl describes Louis XI in his fortified castle of Plessis-lez-Tours:

Hidden in the palace, this melancholy Louis XI had all those he was afraid of hung from the nearby trees. There he died in 1483, sighing and trembling at the idea of death like the last man in the world, making his doctor rich and summoning a saint from the depths of Calabria. To me, this king was Tiberius with the fear of hell added.\textsuperscript{15}

But even the differences make the comparison worth a moment's consideration. Louis is a terrified monster, Cowley a civilized poet entertaining the thought of an \textit{image} of death, with all the advantages of peace and uninterrupted contemplation, to which may be added the companionship of books. There is no acknowledged fear of death or fear of isolation; one may, though, surmise that his chosen image of death reflects, if not fear, at least some disaffection with life and some proclivity toward isolation, or at least an intermittent inner sense of being a stranger to the world and cut off from the reinforcing relationship with others. There is no hint that he will contemplate death and the other world in the old-fashioned way; his way is new and cast in an aesthetic attitude. Though he will die to the world, as the phrase went, it is the world and life out there that will die to him. Interest in the quality of life leads him to imitate the selected parts of death in life that offer attractive present advantages.

The performance and its staging are mannered and play with the recognizable exploitations of a commonplace of thought. That he can do so is more significant than what he says, for his process of selectivity, whatever the mixture of his motives, is in the mainstream of writing about death. In the worst moments, which are many, one encounters in that specialized literature a rigorously disciplined orgy of remembering everything that can add to the argument of one side, and a different kind of orgy of forgetting anything that might be thought on the other side.

The fear of hell had been in steady decline for some time.\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{logos} of Christianity was still in place and would remain so, but the capacious entirety of the \textit{mythos} (many houses, many rooms and passageways) had begun to waver under a change of times and the irreconcilable hostilities of sectarian forces. As for death, it ceased to be thought of regularly as the last enemy to be destroyed; the drama of the deathbed was gradually changing some of its character and getting

\textit{Intricacies}
ready to accommodate new sensibilities. The fear of death was what it had long been, but some of the *dicta* and some of the folklore commanded less belief, and the expression of the fear made adjustments to the altering ways in which death could be regarded. One symptom was the tendency, discussed earlier, to think of death as an "idea," or a kind of image that represented all that was other to the sentient self and its desires. But these changes do not proceed systematically in a fixed order; old ideas, attitudes, and images keep reappearing in new contexts.

For example, I single out Waller's "Of the Last Verses in the Book" to illustrate the minute changes that compose the large difference between, say, Tichborne, Raleigh, Donne, Herbert, Nashe's "Adieu! Farewell Earth's Bliss," Shakespeare's "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," Milton's "Lycidas," and the Waller of 1686. Granted, as always, there are differences in imaginative endowment, art, and the hold of the subject on heart and mind; still, a new form of sentimentality has now appeared on the scene. Without either conflict or celebration, the house of pessimism is reduced to a nominal existence like a forgiven because mostly forgotten error of youth; the house of optimism leaves the other house in shadow while not gathering much light itself:

   Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
   That stand upon the threshold of the new.

But the reader must unaided imagine both, for in the world of the poem old age serves as an image of death, but not in a traditional way. It is a cheerful old age well furnished with remembered aphorisms from good books. Purged of passion, it sees "that emptiness" concealed from younger eyes, and the decayed house of the soul "Lets in new light through chinks that time has made"—presumably the better to review the emptiness of the old world and to preview the glory of the new. The faith that is required to see this must be content with the intimacy of a sentimental image in an appropriate rhythm. As a figure of death old age talks like an imaginary companion who is both faintly self and faintly other, a wise, kindly, fading friend. If there are touches of senility, one cannot be sure whether they are indebted to art, nature, or the times.

In the optimistic tradition of Neoplatonism the rational soul was capable of judging the part of reason against other claimants from within or without. Those more impressed by human fallibility and weakness, at least during times of stress and doubt, advised seeking the counsel and trusted judgment of another. Yet as the new age evolved, for which Bacon was a significant spokesman, the traditions of Neo-
platonism declined in effective influence. To turn the attention more toward living well in the world (though not therefore to be indifferent to the aim of dying well) was to admit the value of intuitions and other knowledge derived from life in the world as capable of contributing to human wisdom and one’s own wisdom. Direct observation of experience, and knowledge gained from the writings of other keen observers not repeating each other and not engaged in composing a *summa*, vastly increased the available knowledge of the diversity of human life. If knowledge of diversity added some finer precision to the knowledge of uncertainty, that was part of another question, whether new knowledge was indeed better knowledge. The old answer of the old knowledge was not forgotten. How could it be? But the recovery of neglected knowledge and the pursuit of new learning did not have as their purpose the composing of an improved argument to demonstrate the essential fallacy of studying the world and human life, and to do so in order to conclude with a new unanswerableness that such knowledge was the insidious merchandise of death in the world and that it was leading away from the one true human knowledge. “Worldly” wisdom and “carnal” thought continued as terms of opprobrium, but they were on the way to having their confident and coercive usage become limited to a specialized vocabulary.

I have been offering some comments and illustrations of certainty, uncertainty, and their ways when brought up against the subject of death. For the next few pages I turn to some of the relations between self and others when death is involved. (I shall not enter into modern explorations of the subject, which would require setting up an apparatus and a vocabulary and would require a high level of initial and continuous belief if one is to profit from their subtleties.)

“Others” may represent the community: the house of the family and its extensions and of the state and the church. Of this last there is the visible militant church and the invisible triumphant church in heaven. The loss of a living member of a church necessitates stirring the memory of mourners and their hope in the communion that will at last reunify all the dead and all the living. During his lifetime the individual has various obligations to his communities, and these are thought of as reciprocal. Afterwards, it is the religious community that will pray for him and identify his hope for salvation with theirs. Some individuals, perhaps many, must have been aware that personal death contained the possible consequence of personal annihilation. But such a thought seems to have been well repressed. Still, the forbidden thought of annihilation makes an occasional appearance in literature: it is implicit in
some of Hamlet’s grotesque jokes in the graveyard, in Claudio’s ecstasy of fear, and in “man forgot” as the last words of King’s “Sic Vita”; it is explicit in the oration of Milton’s Belial (PL 2.145–51), a vivid hypothesis intended to frighten listeners who might be resisting his eloquence. From one point of view, the community was there to witness against the image of annihilation implicit in being forgotten and to affirm the impossibility that God would forget. The religious community must have nevertheless felt, without needing to form the thought or voice it, the threat of its own annihilation among rivals and enemies.  

Witnesses also represent the community; the dying person, by his life, by the circumstances of his death, may act as witness to the values of the large or small community that claims him. He may also bring scandal, to increase the number of the diffident and to encourage the boldness of the wicked. In the traditions of law and oratory, witnesses and their varying rights to authority were well established; the religious witness testifies by deed and word, by the life and by the death. Those intimates who gathered around the deathbed were to some degree witnesses. They were also mourners feeling what they imagined the dying person to be feeling; without needing instruction, they would imagine their own death and improve their sense of certainty or discover new materials for uncertainty. Those attending public executions or, as in eighteenth-century France, crowding into an “open house” where someone was known to be dying, were also to some degree witnesses. For the intimate group at the deathbed, their obligations and benefits were obvious, though their individual experience might vary widely. The obligations and benefits of the dying person were too variable to be obvious and did not lend themselves to effective analysis and codification.  

As for the self, the individual, the death that is only and all one’s own, we have the oral and written reports, and we may have had personal messages ourselves to help collate what we have heard and read, the better to interpret these or our own messages. Whether any individual experience of death can free itself from acquired knowledge, no one can say; or whether finally knowledge, as we understand it, is an applicable concept. In any event, it seems probable that almost no one dying, and certainly no one reporting, could entirely escape the influence of acquired knowledge, a large part of which consists in what one ought to think and feel.  

Death is always the same: “eadem sunt omnia semper.” But to whom? The religious moment of the departing soul resembles, at least in its tangle of potential questions, those raised concerning when the soul is first infused along with its normal blemish of original sin, and how, and whether it is a newly created soul for each individual or some
other kind. But the moment of the departing soul awaiting judgment had a practical urgency for definite answers, and these were forthcoming. Doctrinal differences were not unimportant, but they were perhaps less moved to be speculative than in other matters.

Death, or what we can see of it, was not always the same, and it is useful to be reminded of a few singularities. In his funeral sermon Jeremy Taylor reported of Lady Carbery, “She feared not death, but she feared the sharp pains of death.” Montaigne observes that some people at their execution are obviously in a hurry, “hastening and urging the carrying out of the sentence.” This resembles but is not an act of resolution: “They want to deprive themselves of the time to consider it. Being dead does not trouble them, but dying does indeed” (2.13.460).

In his last sermon Donne rigorously excludes friends and witnesses from the most important communications between the dying person and God. He offers almost no comfort to mitigate the recognition of that silent, closed place into which witnesses cannot enter. Facing the mystery of a sacred place, they may feel themselves to be outsiders, forbidden and profane intruders even by the desire of their love, but these feelings are their own personal problems. Donne allows only an austere article of faith, that God’s mercies are invisible but are known to the dying person. The unspoken advice of the exclusion is that one must practice waiting. For his own death we have to depend on Walton’s story, but Donne took the trouble of making a public preface and postscript. He delivered his last sermon while already in the visible grip of his final sickness; it was “stiled the Authors owne funeral Sermon.” And it was published after his death with an epigraph and frontispiece, an engraving based upon the drawing Donne himself had arranged, the shroud opened to frame his face, eyes closed—a drawing, not a death mask, and the expression of voluntary repose was assured by the intention of the subject and the skill of the artist. I agree with Helen Gardner’s “suggestion”

that Donne’s last sermon, with its splendid title: Deaths Duell, or a Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living death of the Body, and with this striking frontispiece prefixed, was published in accordance with instructions which he himself gave; and that we should add to his activities in his last illness, the arrangements for the publication of his last sermon and the composition of this epigraph. He wished that, being dead, he might yet speak.20

Raleigh, in the verses on time left at the Gatehouse the day of his execution, would have had the same wish, however different the circumstances and the divergent strands of motive.
Related to the desire to speak after death, there would seem to be as well a particular desire to create the sense that this expression is a last statement, and as such it creates an image of the death, both picture and frame. To speak of Raleigh and Donne: each participated in the shaping of his death and the image it would leave, and in doing so they presented themselves as voluntary participants in what was happening to them. So far as the parallel goes, we may think that both were also shaping themselves, which can seldom be done without at least mental rehearsal if one is to act in a single command performance. But their expression was directed toward others, perhaps as witnesses, perhaps as audiences. None of the central expression was directed toward God, for obvious reasons, and yet one characteristic of the expression, at least in the case of Donne, would have been a prominent part of his preparations for death—that is, the desire to exercise his own will as a participant in the waiting and the dying.

Willing one’s own death was perilous, and Donne had a professional interest in the problems of suicide. The resolution of acceptance was the trusted right way; when that was achieved and death was coming unwilled, then the acceptance might express joy in which the individual will was allowed its place. (Saints and martyrs might die by their own rules.) Sir Thomas More had a lawyer’s competence in these delicate matters:

It was also said unto me that if I had as lief be out of the world as in it, as I had there said, why did I not speak even out plain against the statute. It appeared well I was not content to die though I said so. Whereto I answered as the truth is, that I have not been a man of such holy living as I might be bold to offer myself to death, lest God for my presumption might suffer me to fall, and therefore I put not myself forward, but draw back. Howbeit if God draw me to it himself, then trust I in his great mercy, that he shall not fail to give me grace and strength.

If Walton’s story is true, or true enough, that Donne closed his own eyes at the moment of death, that is an astonishing act of will, a virtuoso performance that could not possibly impress God but could prove something to oneself. The acceptance of the dying man was then translated into a self-initiating act assenting to death. He was the actor-witness, himself and another and at one edge of the moment a dead man.

Montaigne preferred it to happen without much ado, while setting out cabbages, or on horseback, or among strangers, without a framed moment of time. “Dying is not a role for society; it is an act for one
Intricacies

single character. Let us live and laugh among our friends, let us go die and look sour among strangers” (3. 9. 748). He mocks the vanity of preferences in part by exhibiting his own; he always knows which, if not why, one of two choices seems less bad to him. “It is only an instant; but it is of such gravity that I would willingly give several days of my life to go through it in my own way” (3. 9. 752).

The sameness and the singularities of death are the purview of others, witnesses and observers, many of whom tell different stories in the same way and the same story differently. As for the death that belongs to the individual person, too many of the certainties and uncertainties become unclear and wander. The uncertainties have their own ways of appearing and shifting. We may be tempted to substitute our own rigid explanation for their stubborn states and predicaments of recurrence. We are at the mercy of the truth in reports, autobiographical accounts and essays, stories, poems; or, of late, the conclusions of medical and psychological research, or the shape certain facts assume when gathered from the observations of clinical practice. I find myself believing most in the messages of poetry, but that belief is not identical with one’s belief in facts or in a master truth that the workaday world honors and dishonors as best it can with intermittent attention. My belief in poetry does not depend upon and is not identical with the truth of my own interpretation.

Some of the vagueness that creeps into a discussion of the death that belongs to the self is relieved if we add someone else, another. In Part 3 of this book the poets writing on the death of someone else illustrated many different kinds of relationship between the self of the poet and the dead other. I do not propose a review, but within the general terms and focus of a chapter entitled “Intricacies” I have a few last points to bring forward. They are not intended to simplify the intricacies.

Freud’s insight is very hard to resist, that no one can imagine his own death, “and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.”23 His insight comes in support of a larger statement, that the unconscious is convinced of its immortality, but it is the spectator as other that interests me now. Freud seems to have in mind a fantasy scene, a visualized inner narrative, but the poets who furnished my main examples of writing on one’s own death did not center their material on the physical event. Whatever the motivating force of responding to the certainty of their death, the most deeply imagined moments were centered in a past or future, or in a present this side of the threshold. (As partial exceptions I note the extraordinary moment of his own beheading in Raleigh’s “The Passionate Man’s
EXPRESSION

Pilgrimage” and the exuberant fantasy of the celebration in which Herrick himself participates at the close of the last act in “Plaudite.” Poets are trained and gifted spectators who are used to moving from one presence to another when composing a poem. They may have more than one kind or degree of presence or detachment even in a single word or pause. There was, however, the example of Donne’s fantastic staging of his own death early in The Second Anniversarie. There the soul was an active and hostile spectator of the dying and then of the dead body, with some overt coaching by the poet and other use of a heavy hand. The weeping friends were also spectators, but organized like a claque, and the poet was busily present conspicuously interpreting the death and the scene. I do not take the scene seriously for what it pretends to be but regard it rather as an example of manhandling death as if it were an object existing in, and subject to, the familiarities of the mind.

The poets show how the simple or extraordinary other can move into or out of the self. (At the simplest they, like us, can always produce a speaker or listener if necessary, as the “you” commonly invoked and answered in the course of an internal monologue.) Ben Jonson the grieving father speaks to his dead son so that he can listen to himself expressing the double vision of early death and protracted life, the pains of loss, the pains and perils of living and loving. Donne writing on his wife’s death presents his one true, soaring answer, the remarriage in heaven, and then begins a “dialogue of one” on the elementary problems of spiritual infidelity. At the end of “Lycidas” a new speaker seems to emerge from the monody; until he says it we do not realize, among other things, how justified he is in speaking that boldest of words, “Tomorrow.”

The poets of the best poems were often actors and spectators. There are many other kinds of spectators, such as those identifying their own divided responses and desires with the spectacle they witness:

The people, which what most they fear esteem,
Death, when more horrid so more noble deem;
And blame the last Act, like Spectators vain,
Unless the Prince whom they applaud be slain.24

Ben Jonson, who distrusted audiences, longed for “judging spectators,” whom he distinguished from both actors and ordinary audiences. Like other masters of illusion, he has moments when the basis of his art seems to pose an uncontrollable threat: “I have considered, our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another.” It is our nature to imitate, and so we may lose our ability to “returne to our selves.” On the other hand there are
Intricacies

the master spirits of their times who “look’d downe on the Stage of the world, and contemned the Play of Fortune. For though the most be Players, some must be Spectators.”25 Ambivalences aside, the idea he has in mind is that traditional figure of unmoved contemplative wisdom who understands the causes of things. Here for the moment he parts company with his hero Bacon and his fixed principle: “But men must know, that in this theatre of man’s life it is reserved only for God and Angels to be lookers on” (Selected Writings, p. 321). Nor would Jonson have been comfortable with Dr. Johnson’s application of the aloof concept to the metaphysical poets, who “wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature; as Beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure.”26 In his elegy on Shakespeare, Jonson wrote what he himself practiced: “To write a living line” the poet must hammer it out “Upon the Muses anvil: turne the same / (And himselfe with it).”

All good writers moving others are in the words they write and have written, but some part of them will always have separate work to do in examining, encouraging, and controlling the sources of the words, and the flow and shape of the words, and the rejections and selections made before and after the words were first written. We are not privileged to observe much of this creative spectatorship, and poets do not always remember well their own side-glances and half-perceptions of rapid activity, shifting its centers of location, concentrated within, but also receiving messages that may deliver themselves from somewhere else. The house of art, if it is one house, stands in several figurative worlds endowed with marvelous systems of communication; those parts that have been brought to their highest phase of perfection find themselves in a state of comparative disuse, while the most ambitious development is directed toward those parts that appear to have been neglected.

This last is familiar, perhaps a hard fact, perhaps wholly understandable. But a touch of wholesome absurdity may help remind us of what we all know. The good writer who is in the words moving others has not pledged all the rest of his life to maintaining the sincerity and truth of a convincing scene or moment he composed. According to report, Robert Parsons, the great Jesuit master of the didactic exhortative death scene, died quietly, “in the midst of work,”27 as if he were the unexpected beneficiary of one of Montaigne’s expressed options.

When Montaigne wrote about friendship he drew from the life, or the former life, of his one great friend, La Boëtie. The efforts at description are consciously extreme and inadequate, for good reason: “Our friendship has no other model than itself, and can be compared only
with itself” (1.28.139). But he can compare the rest of his life with that four years of friendship ending in death: “There is no action or thought in which I do not miss him, as indeed he would have missed me” (1.28.143). In old age he returns to the subject and reveals by implication something latent in the passage of time:

In true friendship, in which I am expert, I give myself to my friend more than I draw him to me. . . . And if absence is pleasant or useful to him, it is much sweeter to me than his presence; and it is not really absence when we have means of communication. In other days I made use and advantage of our separation. We filled and extended our possession of life better by separating; he lived, he enjoyed, he saw for me, and I for him, as fully as if he had been there. One part of us remained idle when we were together; we were fused into one. Separation in space made the conjunction of our wills richer. This insatiable hunger for bodily presence betrays a certain weakness in the enjoyment of souls. (3.9.746–47)

The paragraph is a stray reflection in an essay on many things, “Of Vanity,” and the paragraph is notable for its retrospective omissions. It is filled with the certainties of friendship in life and is silent on the personal uncertainties discovered in the friendship after death. The brief “In other days” keeps the focus on past “separation,” in the days of reciprocal life, which he has chosen to write on. A few pages later he breaks out, “And if I had not supported with all my strength a friend that I lost, they would have torn him into a thousand contrasting appearances” (p. 752). Another detached thought is limited to the subject of traveling alone, with chance companions, or with someone you like and who likes you: “I have missed such a man extremely on all my travels. . . . No pleasure has any savor for me without communication” (p. 754). We knew this last of the author of the Essays but are reminded of La Boétie again, to whose absence not a few of the personal bypaths discovered and followed in the act of writing may perhaps be attributed. He hopes that “some worthy man” pleased by his writings will try to meet him before he dies. Such a person could gain in three days of reading the equivalent of “long acquaintance and familiarity.” And if the signs were right, “I would go very far to find him. . . . Oh, a friend!” In between the being sought and the seeking he inserted a later thought: “Amusing notion: many things that I would not want to tell anyone, I tell the public; and for my most secret knowledge and thoughts I send my most faithful friends to a bookseller’s shop” (pp. 749–50).
Intricacies

For Montaigne or anyone in his position, there was no replacing of what the other “saw for me, and I for him.” Without the reciprocity, the self had only its own resources; Montaigne would never know the “extended . . . possession of life” he had been deprived of by the loss of the other self. La Boétie, however immediate his presence, would remain the young friend of a man steadily growing older. If one cannot imagine one’s own death, as Freud declared, without imagining someone else as acting the part, is it more probable that one could seriously construct the changes and developments in one’s own future and then trust the authenticity of one’s particular responses to imagined circumstances? Could one do this for another? But even if one could see with the eyes of the other and overcome for both all the obstacles created by the passage of time, how could one imagine his seeing “for me”? Where and how does one accommodate in the psyche the inescapable burden of conscious failure to see and to communicate the experience of two separated by the death of one? An oblique remark in another place admits the plain answer:

For time . . . furnishing our imagination with other and ever other business, it dissolves and breaks up that first sensation, however strong it may be.

A wise man sees his dying friend hardly less vividly after twenty-five years than in the first year; and according to Epicurus, no less vividly; for he attributed no alleviation of affictions either to their anticipation or to their old age. But so many other thoughts traverse this one that in the end it languishes and tires. (3.4.635)

The kind of certainty and uncertainty isolated here may be glimpsed by grief and its anticipations but realized only through experience examined and reflected upon.28 The example here is one more special case both like and unlike other intricacies considered in these pages. I am not bold enough to say with Montaigne, “It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I,” but I should like to think so. If we assume a more modern stance, the example of Montaigne and La Boétie may make it easier to measure the relative superficiality (however intimidating) of unmentioned instances that need only to be mentioned. I have in mind the otherness that is a contrived inversion of self, a holiday spree to experiment or purge; or the intermittent impersonation of an imaginary other (as in lending or borrowing voice); or the assuming of various disguises to mislead death, or to warm the hands at the sacrificial deaths that may add a moment of reassurance to the private person’s, the tyrant’s, or the crowd’s immortality.
Expression has been the general subject, and I conclude: To express a reasonable acceptance of one’s own death and life, one will need to consider the ways in which the experience and imagination of life affect our thoughts of death, and the ways in which the knowledge and imagination of death affect our thoughts of life. One will need to draw on the available thoughts and their language. One probably must, aware or not, include some discreet choices between thinking and not thinking, as in the instances of Montaigne and La Boétie or of Donne on the house of death in two worlds or one world. And one must reckon with the fortune or fate of the times one lives in and through, and what the house of art then makes available, or possible, or necessary.