The House of Death

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

The End

As a stream falls from a single crack in a glacier
and its taste has two faces, one forward
one backward, and one is sweet and one hard,
so I die for the last time through each moment of these days,
and one way the old sighing frees me no longer,
and the other way the goal can no longer be seen.

Osip Mandelstam, "Moscow: December 1933"

Who knows his own name at the last?
How shall he speak to a soul that has none?
"Tell me that name," I cried, "that I may speak
In a dire hour." The dire hour
Is the time when you must speak
To your naked self—never
Before seen, nor known.

Robert Penn Warren, "Sunset," Altitudes and Extensions

The imagistic exchanges between the experiences of life and the observations and imaginations of death are, one concludes, necessary and instructive. They tell us things we might not otherwise know, even if the knowledge becomes inert or restive. As we have had some occasions to witness, images are true, or true in their place, or no truer than they should be. They are also marvelously adaptable for all kinds of purposes, better and worse. They faithfully serve, and they may equally divert, insinuate, dominate, rampage. As Bacon declared, from the vantage ground of his time and wisdom, the imagination is not "simply and only a messenger." Nor is it only a Janus:

This Janus of Imagination hath differing faces; for the face towards Reason hath the print of Truth, but the face towards Action hath the print of Good; which nevertheless are faces.¹

We may read in David E. Stannard’s excellent book, The Puritan Way of Death, how New England Puritans of the earlier period were unable to reconcile the differences between their apprehensions of
dying and their concept of death. By the nineteenth century “the print of Good” on the Janus face turned toward “Action” was the one face in public view:

In large measure, if not entirely in response to the growing individual anonymity brought on by changes in their social world, Americans sought a return to their lost sense of community in the graveyard and the heavenly world of the dead; in the process, paradoxically, they effectively banished the reality of death from their lives by a spiritualistic and sentimentalized embracing of it. (p. 185)

Here the imagistic exchanges familiar in literature may be discovered by the historian in ways of life that characterize a whole society. The differences in our concentration make what I have learned from Stannard’s book most helpful in a few places where our interests converge. On the other hand, I have been deeply impressed by another work of history, the study of death in Western civilization by Philippe Ariès. Though I have made my basic acknowledgments earlier, I should like at this point to offer a brief critique of his book and to select from his magisterial work those thematic motives that illustrate and may help to focus the similar and different aims and interests of a book on literature.2

Two clearly articulated presuppositions direct the course of the study. The first is an anthropological insight: that the “tame death” is best, by which the social instincts and experience of human beings, “by prohibitions and concessions,” protected themselves “from the violent and unpredictable forces of nature” (p. 604). The controls of “ritualization” and “ceremony” prevented “natural extravagance” and “solitary adventure” while developing into a necessary “public phenomenon involving the whole community” (p. 604). The second presupposition is that the truest guide to the history of death is the collective unconscious—though the discoveries of individuals may intuit or recognize that force and its current tendencies. One infers that such individuals may also produce the models of expression that represent the consciousness of the times.

The basic model is that of the “tame death,” and a sturdy thread of his continuity is the demonstration of examples that express a characterizing abstract of their times and that exhibit suggestive currents and undercurrents of relationship to past and future examples and to the basic model. Each main phase of the history, besides its exemplary patterns, is augmented by a deliberate wealth of illustrative historical materials from a great variety of sources.
The End

To continue: In its second major phase death moves toward becoming individual, something apart from the continuity of life, and develops into a dramatic concentration on the death of the self. In its third phase death is thought of more as happening to someone else, part of "the idea of mortality in general" (p. 314), and characterized in the nineteenth century as the "beautiful" death of the loved one, and in the twentieth century by various forms of "invisibility."

The modern era is characterized by a collective "denial" of death, by unacknowledged evasion, silence, and suppression. Death becomes invisible and private, "medicalized" in hospitals, for which the most vivid example is the solitary death protracted by the determination and skills of technology. The extremes of history repeat themselves:

The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the transitory skeleton of macabre rhetoric. (p. 614)

That is the kind of irony which talented moralists have always been alert to discover. More to the point, however, the history of the collective unconscious records many examples of the return of the repressed, often in the shape of exchanges under disguise. For instance, in the twentieth century the liberation of sex coincides with the growth of taboos surrounding death. So children are shielded from direct knowledge of death, but sex education begins early. A trained observer may speak of the "pornography" of death. The "remoteness" of death "has aroused . . . strange curiosity . . . fantasies . . . perverse deviations and eroticism" (p. 608). Though for centuries the messages kept coming—as the personal warning by which one recognized, by some trusted signal, that death was at hand—these messages have now generally lapsed. The modern midlife crisis may, however, still be on the rise. Excessive attention to the soul of the dying person has been replaced by excessive attention to the body.

I now begin to work back toward the Renaissance again but pause on the "beautiful" death of the Romantic era. In the analysis by Ariès, fear, supplemented by the emotions of a new sensibility, was transferred from the self to the other and centered in the feelings of loss; these were transformed by a new pathos and by easy, domesticated thoughts of reunion in the next world.

The compromise of beauty was the last obstacle invented to channel an immoderate emotion that had swept away the old barriers. It was an obstacle that was also a concession, for it restored to this phenomenon that people had tried to diminish an extraordinary glamour. (p. 610)
Death was “exalted as a moment to be desired.” This last was of course not altogether new, but now the motives and the attendant feelings of the exaltation and desire were different, and in some ways new.

The death of the self of the earlier phase, in spite of the intensity of its highest development, is in Ariès’s historical perspective characterized by hidden motives and disguised exchanges. For instance:

In the spiritual treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the main purpose is no longer to prepare the dying for death but to teach the living to meditate on death. . . . in this new economy, death has become the pretext for a metaphysical meditation on the fragility of life that is intended to keep us from giving in to life’s illusions. Death is no more than a means of living well. It could be the invitation to pleasure of the Epicureans; actually, it is the rejection of this pleasure; yet the skeleton on the goblets of the pleasure-seeking Epicureans of Pompeii is the same as the one in the engravings of the Spiritual Exercises. (p. 301)

On the other hand, there is “a model of the good death” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “beautiful and edifying,” with no identified repressions or evasive exchanges, and up to a point resembling the old model of the “tame death.” Ariès describes and admires it but is unusually sparing of examples. He explains its existence from the rise of the value of moderation at a time when man accepted the responsibilities of living in the world, without either excessive attachment to the things of the world or total renunciation. Death can no longer “call everything into question when its shadow falls upon a life,” but is also “subject to the law of moderation”:

This is the death of the righteous man who thinks little about his own physical death when it comes, but has thought about it all his life. This death has neither the excitement nor the intensity of the death of the artes moriendi of the late Middle Ages. It is not exactly the death of Roland, La Fontaine’s laborer, or Tolstoi’s peasants, but it is not so unlike it either. It has their serenity and their public quality, whereas the death of the artes moriendi was dramatic and internalized. Everything happened out of sight of the circle of friends. (p. 310)

The emphasis on the “public quality” would seem to owe more to the original model in the author’s mind than to the volume of historical evidence. Yet this good death could at times be witnessed, and certainly heard of and read about. (Though not what Ariès intends to include,
there are some affinities between his model and the public deaths of More and Raleigh, and those of the Jesuit martyrs Campion and Southwell.) The kind of death Ariès seems to have in mind is examinable and so is "public" in the attributes demonstrated, but it is nevertheless an individual achievement, a death intended to reflect the control of reason and will. It is related to the death Milton's Michael teaches Adam to accept as a guide to living outside the Garden of Eden. Sir Henry Wotton's death as Walton describes it resembles the model. The calm summation of Herbert's poem, "Therefore we can go die as sleep," represents a workaday ideal available to the individual reader. With minor adjustments the model is applicable to Donne's "Hymne to God my God, in my sickness" and "A Hymne to God the Father," and even to Raleigh's "The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage."

One may note that the death of the righteous man expresses, in the efforts mastered and transformed into graceful serenity, a singular possession of personal freedom before death. The terms would seem to limit the number of successful candidates, with even more restricted availability to those in the midst of life—though a modern political hero who has learned not to desire what his masters have to offer may be fortified by the modest joy of that freedom. Some tragic heroes make the lights and shadows of the territory more knowable. The equipoise achieved by conscious refusals cannot be common to all, and the model is not one likely to be transmitted by social forces and their driving needs. Still, I want to enter the demurral: an achieved balance belongs to the history of death and continues, as consciousness does, though communal and other supports have dwindled.

In the model that Ariès admires, he nevertheless identifies a cause of its historical ineffectiveness and its contribution to a deteriorating change. Because the man "who thinks little about his own physical death when it comes, but who has thought about it all his life," by exhibiting a personal success helps increase that relative neglect of "the historical reality of the moment itself." As a result, the moment became "diluted and distributed over the whole of life and in this way lost all its intensity." The substituted "idea" was that of "mortality in general." He concludes: "This life in which death was removed to a prudent distance seems less loving of things and people than the life in which death was the center" (p. 315).

One of his approaches to his Renaissance model of the good death is by way of an example from Erasmus's Colloquies. In "The Shipwreck," an apparently simple person displays an exemplary calm in the face of imminent death. Amidst the competing voices raised to heaven in prayers and vows offering gifts and services, and these to be delivered
at specific holy places on earth, “a certain woman who was suckling a
baby. . . . was the only one who didn’t scream, weep, or make prom-
ises; she simply prayed in silence, clasping her little boy.” Later, when
she was lashed to a plank in a special way and given a small board and
pushed out clear of the ship, “Holding her baby with her left hand, she
paddled with the right” (p. 144). She made it safely to shore, the first
one to do so. Her practical action of resisting death (both arms doing
their proper work) is a piece of silent eloquence, a memorable image of
balance. The balance owes much to the skill and economy of Erasmus’s
narrative art, which creates, mostly out of what is not said amidst the
noise a certain sense of her mental preparation to accept the death she
effectively resists. For direct comments we may look to, and borrow
from, another colloquy, “The Godly Feast.” There one speaker asks:

What else does Christ proclaim to us than that we should live
and watch as though we were shortly to die, to exert ourselves
in good deeds as though we were to live forever? (p. 67)

Another speaker recites a list, too long, of Christian ceremonies (these
are approved of in spite of the way they are presented, but the spirit in
which they are performed is not approved of). He then concludes with a
grim travesty of the ceremonies that accompany, and often hasten, the
approach of death. Still, no criticism is intended of ceremonies “san-
tioned by ecclesiastical usage . . . yet there are also other, more interior
means of helping us to depart from this life with cheerfulness and
Christian trust” (p. 69).

Expecting death before long, but doing good as if we were to go on
forever and, whenever death comes, seeking to leave cheerfully, with
Christian trust: that is an interpretation of life, one man’s wisdom lifted
out of a couple of instructional exercises that have the character and
charm of good fiction. What Erasmus shows is not an interpretation of
history. But Aries insists on translating these views of Erasmus into
historical evidence, part of the case for showing that interest in death
chiefly served interest in life. And that program for wisdom seems to
lead toward a long, downward path, after “the historical reality of the
moment itself” (i.e., death) lost its place at the center of life, and a
process of deterioration became inevitable, and life became or “seems
less loving of things and people.” Though the statement comes as a
large interpretation of history, one recognizes that this too is an in-
terpretation of life, one man’s wisdom.

On the other hand, I find myself with little resistance to Arie’s’s
proposition that the idea of death was “replaced by the idea of mortality
in general.” Indeed, I have tried to follow some of the evidence in
poetry. But poetry has its own ways and rhythms of "replacing" the old with the new, and so does the history of one life, if it is thoughtful and imaginative. Approaching old age, Montaigne wrote (I quote again):

I saw death nonchalantly when I saw it universally, as the end of life. I dominate it in the mass; in detail it harasses me. (3.4.636)

The details are never "replaced," but whether or when or how they are thought of can influence both "the idea of death" and "the idea of mortality in general."

For example, Jeremy Taylor was a master of the "new" Protestant art of casuistry and of the Protestant art of dying. As part of his general approach to the problems of dying, he shifts the emphasis from the crisis of the last moment and treats many of the standard preparations with a sympathetic practicality. For instance, the likelihood of a last sickness and its unavoidable weakness: weakness opens the understanding to doubt, and then faith has to stand while lacking the old supports of health; therefore, "let the sick man fear a proposition, which his sickness hath put into him." It is good advice, though some Puritans would have regarded it as an impotent palliative. It is advice that owes something to rational analysis, but is also motivated by a practical kindness not unlike that which one admires in Tolstoi’s peasants. The example of Taylor would seem to have more roots in the history of critical rationalism than in the collective unconscious. When he reminds the healthy community of witnesses that what is happening is between the dying man and God, not "between him and the friends that stand by the bed-side" (3.2.81), he does not himself seem "less loving . . . of people."

To return to the matter of sickness: the casuist does not neglect the rational difficulties in a theoretical choice that may instruct one facing a decision that has been made elsewhere, and he offers alternatives that test and refine the answer, whichever it is. On the one hand, men dread a sudden death; on the other hand, "though a sickness tries our virtues, yet a sudden death is free from temptation: a sickness may be more glorious, and a sudden death more safe" (4.5.188). Then he turns to a troubling subject, the mockery of God in deathbed repentances. Though "sorrow for sins upon any motive may lead us to God by many intermediall passages," repentance is to be completed, not begun, on our death-bed (4.6.199). And yet, as in the relative safety of sudden death and the possible glory of a long sickness, he would weigh the alternatives in a rational balance. For there is also a "heroic action of vertue" to be recognized as possible in a late repentance; indeed, it is a
"huge compendium of religion." If sudden and true ("which is seldom scene"), it may jump the ordinary steps of virtue from inclination to act, to habit, to abode, to reigning, to perfect possession, to "extraordinary emanations." For "it is certain, that to some purposes God will account for our religion on our death-bed, not by the measures of our time, but the eminency of affection" (4. 6. 205).

Besides the kindness and the application of rational analysis intended not to increase the intensity of the last moment but to increase the possibility of a calm acceptance of death, he does not forget his regular spiritual obligations and purposes. These do not prevent him from giving dignified comfort and instruction. So on the major subject of fear he sorts out the kinds that are unreasonable if one believes in a merciful God. Fear and trembling are normal and to be expected, "parts of our duty," and not be diagnosed as symptoms of "our calamity."

The fearing man is the safest, and if he fears on his death-bed, it is but what happens to most considering men, and what was to be looked for all his life-time, he talked of the terrours of death, and death is the king of terrours: and therefore it is no strange thing if then he be hugely afraid: if he be not, it is either a great felicity, or a great presumption. (5. 5. 285–86)

My questioning of Ariès derives in part from the study of a different kind of literature which is less obedient to the methods of his own discipline. I am sympathetic with his enterprise and applaud the achievement, and being a fellow citizen of the present I have a share in some of his ways of seeing problems, the shadows they cast and the shapes they contain. On the other hand, I think it reasonable to note that Ariès does not grant religious traditions enough credit for their contribution to the history of disciplining resistance and fear. In any case, the smaller body of distinguished materials I have studied in my own way, asking other questions, yields some partly different answers and some irreducible half-answers.

I think of Montaigne, who is perhaps too sprawling and elusive to find any place in Ariès's book but keeps slipping into mine, though he is not an Englishman or only a Frenchman and does not quite represent his times by his peculiar combinations of material from ancient books, modern observations, and self-consultations. We find him returning persistently to Socrates as a true model in the significant agreement of his life and his thought. On the other hand, there are Montaigne's unembarrassed sidelong acknowledgments of his own disinclination or inability to measure up to that example of human perfection. He will die, we learn elsewhere, peacefully in bed listening to Mass—not at all
“hospice” and a practical means of recovering for some the benefits of the “tame death.” Social history in the making now has an increasing number of those striving to educate the collective unconscious, about which new knowledge has discovered an appropriate instrument of leverage and hope:

It belongs to the one and only Socrates to become acquainted with death with an ordinary countenance, to become familiar with it and play with it. He seeks no consolation outside the thing itself; dying seems to him a natural and indifferent incident. He fixes his gaze precisely on it, and makes up his mind to it, without looking elsewhere. . . . Our thoughts are always elsewhere; the hope of a better life stays and supports us, or the hope of our children’s worth, or the future glory of our name, or flight from the ills of this life, or the vengeance that threatens those who cause our death. (3.4.632–33)

He is candid about his personal inadequacies: changing the subject, resorting to diversionary interests, humorously embracing the excuse of an authoritative example; so if Caesar said that the quickest and least premeditated death is best, this cannot be cowardice in Montaigne to believe the same (2.13.460). He has the consolation of good company in the philosophers who produce their strained and inept arguments: “I love to see these leading souls unable to shake off our common lot” (3.4.634).

Not the idea of death but the personal details harass Montaigne. In the best Renaissance literature the details search, illuminate, and bring into forms of examinable meaning experiences that can be questioned or accepted, or that induce the further need and prospects for reconciliation. Shakespeare’s tragedies have their own ways of making the moment of death intense while not making it the center of life in the play. Lear’s death is “public,” surrounded by impotent friends who disagree; there is even a brief debate over the conduct of the last moment. Audiences and readers must disagree over details and their meaning. Many find that the death is bounded by a terrible solitude, and the hope that Lear expresses in his last words is either a discovery of hope or a diversion; neither is exempt from the likelihood of being simple illusion. Tichborne, Raleigh, Donne, Herbert, Jonson, Marvell, and Milton make their individual judgments of the problems of living-and-dying. Their idea of death has, at the least, a family resemblance, but details make the messages distinctive. In their poems we hear, see, feel, and renew our sense of the reality of life and the reality of death.

The idea of death has many messengers and other representatives. I
shall not undertake to choose among them for their truth or influence, but I single out once more qualifications that the evidence of Renaissance literature shows to have special value: a developed sense of self and the relationships between self and other which make talk about death worth hearing. I take it for granted that in literature the self must convince that it is sentient and there, not a figure of memory; the "other" may be more intellectualized, but the relationships must be felt. Without Cordelia, Lear’s death would be deprived of a telling dimension the community of attending friends could not supply. (In a different world, that of Socrates’ last day, the story would have been spoiled for all time if the wife and children had been allowed to remain.)

No one capable of love, or capable of ordinary thinking and feeling, can lack means and materials for communing with his own death. I forbear references to previous pages and seek elsewhere for fresh examples, and choose two. When another or others are involved, even those who are unknown strangers or the troops one commands, they help intensify, define, and place in perspective one’s own identity in death. I quote the prose translation of a Hebrew poem written in the eleventh century by Samuel Hanagid:

I billeted a strong force overnight in a citadel laid waste in former days by other generals. There we slept upon its back and flanks, while under us its landlords slept. And I said to my heart: Where are the many people who once lived here? Where are the builders and vandals, the rulers and paupers, the slaves and masters? Where are the begetters and the bereaved, the fathers and the sons, the mourners and the bridegrooms? And where are the many people born after the others had died, in days gone by, after other days and years? Once they lodged upon the earth; now they are lodged within it. They passed from the palaces to the grave, from pleasant courts to dust. Were they now to raise their heads and emerge, they would rob us of our lives and pleasures. Oh, it is true, my soul, most true: tomorrow I shall be like them, and all these troops as well!10

And now a small, firm item of convincing personal truth, an anonymous old woman’s discovery:

Since Penelope Noakes of Duppas Hill is gone, there is no one who will ever call me Nellie again.11

Under the change of times, the old subject changes and remains. The tide of human looking away causes the human invention of the
“hospice” and a practical means of recovering for some the benefits of the “tame death.” Social history in the making now has an increasing number of those striving to educate the collective unconscious, about which new knowledge has discovered an appropriate instrument of leverage and hope:

Perhaps public opinion will be aroused and will seize on the subject with the passion it has shown for other vital issues, notably abortion. (Ariès, p. 593)

From time to time catastrophes have provided unprecedented experiences and have exposed an edge of strange knowledge. For instance, among the complex tensions and exchanges between the dying and the witnesses the sense of guilt on both sides was often present but not developed into a distinct and recognizable category of response. The Nazi death camps, however, produced massive traumas of communicable guilt among many who were not chosen when others were, and special traumas that mark the early awareness of a new contagion. 12

It was an old and valued enterprise to offer rational arguments for the double purposes of making death a helpful servant of life and at the same time making the acceptance of death a conclusion supported by and supporting forms of conscious control. In the recent philosophy of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre, increasing the consciousness of death has been for the most part a side issue but one of considerable importance for approaching problems of existence. Nevertheless, such efforts share many of the standing problems of the old enterprise and make individual contributions to one’s understanding of the subject.

But I turn to poets and storytellers, who have their own ways, which I think I understand better. Besides, their examples lend themselves to the brief exhibition I intend. The new seldom is entirely new, not on this subject, but particular intensities and crucial details may quite dominate some of the standard parts of the inherited subject. One recognizes, as one may expect to, traces of an older idea of death, or older habits of thought and their characteristic images, often expressed in altered contexts where old and new confront each other.

Tolstoi was a great nineteenth-century master of the full death scene, with an authoritative power of grasp and a fine sureness of touch. In Anna Karenina Nikolay Levin’s premonitions and early tactics of evasion finally lead to the stage of the last bed, where the process of evasion intensifies almost as if it were possessed with a life of its own. The medical and clerical roles are at best minor but useful. They accomplish little of what they pretend, but their absence would probably
admit further stresses and impede the process that is in motion. They are part of an ambivalent ritual by means of which Nikolay keeps hoping for life while indirectly getting ready to stop hoping. The thoughtful and loving brother, Konstantin, is almost helpless, but his presence is important in ways that do not come under direct scrutiny. The temporary heroine is Konstantin's wife, Kitty, who has all the right instincts and skills. She makes the room, bed, and Nikolay himself comfortable; she chatters pleasantly and entertains him, anticipates and therefore understands his needs, ignores or diverts the disturbing, and makes her company felt. She quickly gets past his suspicious resentment of those well-possessed of life and provides basic human medicine: he likes her and feels himself liked. But her role is ended when internal evidence begins to turn the balance against hope for life. He identifies her cheerfulness with the brief upward swing of his spirits and rejects her when the futility of hope gains a crucial but still contested dominance. Her contribution of human kindness has been to help him through a very difficult stage. No one can help him as much again. Subsequent days of steady pain turn his apprehension, that death is in truth coming, toward a waiting, not without resentment and grumbling, which becomes only at the last a conscious desire for the moment of release. One might be visiting the scene of a "good death" of much earlier times—if one entered the scene very late, believing that the consummation was achieved by the old wisdom and its smoothly running apparatus of preparation. Tolstoi, however, records a sustained conflict between fear of death and hope of life in which the external assistance is chiefly that of practical human kindness to ease suffering and provide support, until nature and the body can teach the inner message, and the dying man acquire a singular kind of consciousness: knowing, resisting, and only at the end accepting, but doing so with a precision of deepened personal knowledge that, like threading a needle too small for others to see, turns into a last corridor of welcomed knowledge. The last two moments are ones of astonishing rightness:

"He is gone," said the priest, and would have moved away; but suddenly there was a faint stir in the mustaches of the dead man that seemed glued together, and quite distinctly in the hush they heard from the bottom of the chest the sharply defined sounds:

"Not quite . . . soon."

And a minute later the face brightened, a smile came out under the mustaches, and the women who had gathered round began carefully laying out the corpse.13
Writing about the actual moment of one's death is hard to do, and pretending to do so is encumbered by improbabilities. We have seen (in Chap. 4) some highly motivated but naive and self-betraying efforts. The deathbed scene Donne arranged for himself early in The Second Anniversary (discussed in Chap. 13) is not naive but goes to an opposite extreme of willful pretext. (There are brilliant passages in the approaches to and the death scene itself of Camus's abandoned novel, La mort heureuse [A Happy Death], but these avail themselves of the understood fictional privilege of a writer to enter and speak from the consciousness of his character.) One of Emily Dickinson's remarkable accomplishments was to make the reader willing to receive and enter into her first-person report of the experience of extinction. In “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—” after that opening line the scene being prepared makes no extreme demands on the reader. Though details and presentations are far from ordinary, the tableau of special waiting is familiar enough to accept while the promise of the mysterious moment collects intensity: the stillness, the tears already wept, the breaths of expectation “For that last Onset—when the King / Be witnessed—in the Room.” A brief step backward—that trusted delay of narrative truth—recalls the practical formalities of having already signed away the “Keepsakes” and all of the self that was “Assignable.” Then the fly at the window becomes the object of concentrated attention, a veritable Beelzebub of a fly, king and no king, familiar to all stages and corners of life, and after. These thoughts aside, to the speaker the fly becomes part of the external measure of light-and-life. She sees the fly between the light and herself and begins to distinguish the moments of recession in the last moment: the outward parts and then the inward part, the last verifying act of consciousness turning back on itself:

And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see.

In the great final story of Joyce's Dubliners, “The Dead,” a small, late episode, bringing to light a personal death years before, affects the disguised face of death represented by the layers of “inauthentic existence” that fill out the bulk of the story. The revealed death was a “beautiful” death of a young man seventeen years old, and Gabriel's wife, Gretta, says, “I think he died for me.” That death of another, which still is alive in the wife's feelings, renews in the disturbed husband the believability of the promises of life. Finally, however, the flow of Gabriel's aroused emotion turns his longing into elegiac lyricism, into a strange, compelled celebration of a visionary landscape, which
answers the blank futility of his inner life. The beautiful writing and the full measure of sentimentality recreate a *memento mori* of altered appearance. Another alteration is that the message does not come to a sensibility and way of thought trained to receive it as a warning; it comes like a personal last judgment.

To recall for a moment Ariès’s model of the Romantic “beautiful” death: its emotions are transferred from self to other and are centered in the feelings of loss while restoring, by the beauty that also controls dangerous emotions, “an extraordinary glamour” to the phenomenon of death. I think one may well be astonished by what Joyce’s “details” have done to the recognizable similarities. The “idea of mortality in general” has crept into the idea of life in general, and failures in one’s own life become inseparable from the failure of life itself underneath the plastered decorousness of a particular time and place. The older contempt for the illusions of life has been transformed; these are not illusions that may be resisted but are the vanities that we have ourselves become while losing the strength of both desire and hope. The one exception concerns love, which has its own enigmas. Joyce drapes with deliberate beauty the final vision of a darkened land on which the snow is falling, everywhere, and “upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. . . . His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.” We may notice both similarities and differences when Macbeth’s soul, unswooning, responds to a voice of judgment:

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Methought I heard a voice cry, “Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murther sleep”—the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleave of care,
The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
Chief nourisher in life’s feast.
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(2.2.32–37)

Macbeth also speaks a strange, compelled celebration, but it is the anguished praise of unacknowledged prayer and still has the strength of personal, uncrippled desire.

The poet Thomas Hardy abandoned his faith, but he could not forget many of the interests, images, habits of thought, and common resources laid down in his youth and drawn upon by his access to the long memory of the rural folk he knew. There is a great deal of imagined traffic at the grave, both coming and going. Those in residence have
individual voices and wonderful things to say when they are moved to
sing of present and past, sometimes “all day cheerily, / All night
eerily.” Revenants with messages or unsatisfied interests are frequent,
and they resemble, with some acquired differences, figures long passed
away in a literature reserved for antiquaries. My brief samples, howev­
er, are intended chiefly to illustrate how durable old attitudes can be in
altered contexts.

So in “Overlooking the River Stour”14 two stanzas of intense,
minute description record the life of movement above and on the river.
Then the description of an inert meadow takes up a potentiality of the
feeling suggested by the repeated lines in each stanza, which sing but
also, more to the point, turn back on themselves. The fourth stanza
comes to the grief of looking out the window and not turning into the
room, “To see the more behind my back.” A song of failed love thus
translates the innocence of nature into the occasion of a failure of spirit
by a rigid act (clearly not the first or the last) of evasion. Back of the
poem is a long history of accusing the things of this world of a sinister
allurement that misleads mankind and brings about the stupid, willful
neglect of the things of the spirit. Images are adaptable.

“During Wind and Rain,” a song of the passage of time, with
varied refrains, presents a clearly remembered individual scene in each
stanza—joyful, painful, the yes and no of it. The poem ends with a
standard object recording time more slowly in the present of the title. I
quote the last stanza:

    They change to a high new house,
    He, she, all of them—aye,
    Clocks and carpets and chairs
       On the lawn all day,
    And brightest things that are theirs. . . .
    Ah, no; the years, the years;
    Down their carved names the raindrop ploughs.

   (p. 496)

And last: in “Afterwards” Hardy composes a gentle version of his
personal immortality. That is, he asks whether any neighbors will re­
member, as they see and hear things, how “He was a man who used to
notice such things.” If he “passes” at a time when the hedgehog “travels
furtively over the lawn,”

    One may say, “He strove that such innocent creatures should come
to no harm,
    But he could do little for them; and now he is gone.”
The last stanza adds a further turn to the good-natured irony:

And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell’s boom,
“He hears it not now, but used to notice such things”?

(p. 553)

The death anticipated throughout Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* avoids the closure of human engagement. Dr. Elya Gruner, the dying man, centers his resistance on preventing such a family scene, and his calamitous children might be sufficient justification by themselves, but the motives reach beyond them. Gruner is in firm control of his death, as Nikolay Levin was not; so the evasions and contradictions are different and restrained at a deeper level, but they are there. As Mr. Sammler reflects after an intense conversation spoken “factually” and sounding “utterly level”:

Something very odd in Elya’s expression. There were tears about, somewhere, but dignity would not permit them. Perhaps it was self-severity, not dignity. But they did not come out. They were rerouted, absorbed into the system. They were subdued, converted into tones. They were present in the voice, in the color of the skin, in the lights of the eye. (p. 164)

In a long soliloquy that comes later, Mr. Sammler goes from trying to think of “mitigating things” to essentials. I quote with many omissions:

He loved his nephew, and he had something that Elya needed. . . . Elya was a physician and a businessman. . . . And business, in business America, was also a training system for souls. The fear of being unbusinesslike was very great. . . . But at the very end business would not do for Elya. . . . And compassionate utterance was a mortal necessity. Utterance, sounds of hope and desire, exclamations of grief. Such things were suppressed, as if illicit. . . . At this stage of things there was a terrible dumbness. About essentials, almost nothing could be said. Still, signs could be made, should be made, must be made. . . . Elya at this moment had a most particular need for a sign and he, Sammler, should be there to meet that need. (pp. 237–39)

This is followed by a telephone conversation in which Sammler says that he is coming to the hospital and in which all the “signs” are made by Gruner:

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"I may have to go down for tests." Elya’s voice was filled with unidentifiable tones. Sammler’s interpretive skill was insufficient. He was uneasy. “Why shouldn’t there be time?” Elya said. “There’s time enough for everything.” This had an odd ring, and the accents were strange.

“Yes?”

“Of course, yes.”...

Uneasiness somewhat interfered with Sammler’s breathing. Long and thin, he held the telephone, concentrating, aware of the anxious intensity gathered in his face. He was silent. Elya said, “Angela is on her way over.”

“I am coming too.”

“Yes.” Elya lingered somewhat on the shortest words.

“Well, Uncle?”

“Goodby, for now.”

“Goodby, Uncle Sammler.” (p. 240)

Later in the hospital Sammler receives a word of personal farewell transmitted by the attending physician. His own access to an act of farewell is gained by the threat of creating “a bad scene” if he is not taken at once to see his dead nephew. When he uncovers the face, “In the lips bitterness and an expression of obedience were combined.” In a “mental whisper” Sammler prays briefly, praises Elya’s kindness, and speaks of (“may I be forgiven for this”) Elya’s desire “to do what was required of him.” In the world Gruner and Sammler share, this too is a good death, because meeting “the terms” of one’s “contract” is good. We are witnesses to the reaching out indirectly, to the making of minimal “signs,” which are permitted as neither a bad scene nor a good one is. Fulfillment is missing and missed, felt in the tearlessness, the disciplined anguish, the deep ache of an orderly mutilation. At least there would be an autopsy: “Let’s find out what went wrong” (pp. 285–86).

Theodore Roethke’s death was sudden and mute, but he had prepared his last farewell to himself; a death of his own, and especially in the poems of “North American Sequence.” Their meditative ceremonies and celebrations are composed in solitude, making their peace out of the materials of personal and private memory, which has taken in what others have thought; but these are silent presences, a community from whom he has learned how to shape his own solitude. There are traceable affinities, among many differences, to the “tame death,” and to the tranquil death of the Renaissance man of good conscience and clear hope, and to the “beautiful death” of the nineteenth century, but like the religious faith the affinities have been transformed into something of his
own. We are probably too close to judge whether these poems represent
strand or cable, something conscious or unconscious in the spirit of the
age.

I seem to be engaging in a long story, but I still intend to be as brief
as possible. I settle on one poem, “The Far Field,” and single out for
special attention one line, an unmarked parenthesis in the final stanza:

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountainslope,
A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world. 16

All the descriptive details from nature compose the harmony of the
self changing from “An old man with his feet before the fire” into a
revelation of “infinitude.” He said, a few lines earlier, “I am renewed by
death, thought of my death.” The renewal points toward “infinitude,”
the continuity of life in death, and also toward the other source of the
same thought, love of the things of life in life:

What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.

The objects loved in the last stanza are, all but one, things that reveal
themselves in still moments of acute vision animated by light and shade,
or in movements that become a single movement. They are for the man
in love with them parts of the continuity of life in death. But “Odor of
basswood on a mountain-slope” has a different kind of animation,
marked by the momentary digression of love “near at hand,” which
expresses love of the things of life in life (“A scent beloved of bees”). The
line introducing the bees is mildly errant, moved by the man’s loving
knowledge a step backward from “infinitude,” a barely heard disso-
nance, a detail that strays, love-drawn, even in the embrace of a com-
manding vision. It is a marvelous validating touch and is one that
reminds me, picking my way through the differences, of what Roethke
would have been pleased to hear from me: that this delicate, unruly
assertion of self resembles Donne’s needing to speak out at the crucial
moment of “Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse” in his own voice
to God:
I trust that these retrospective examples have some use in reminding the reader of the fine differences in Renaissance poems on death and of the threads of continuity that persevere, however much seems changed. One last example, a Renaissance poem again, has something further to tell us about fine differences when a temporal perspective complicates the relations among things said. My example is the song from the fourth act of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, a dirge for the death (supposed) of Imogen (disguised). The poem begins:

> Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun,<br>  Nor the furious winter’s rages,<br>  Thou thy worldly task hast done,<br>  Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages.<br>  Golden lads and girls all must,<br>  As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.<br>  
> (4.2.258–63)

One advantage of quoting these lines after a group of modern examples is that the reader’s temporal perspective will already have had some useful exercise in making adjustments. One result, I believe, is that these lines will seem old-fashioned in a special way. They were old-fashioned when they were first heard on the stage about 1610. The basic ideas and general orientation are turned away from those “modern” kinds of attitude and emphasis that individualized death and dying. What we have now, rather, is a turning back toward the older wisdom derived from the knowledge, always at hand, that all must die, and seeming to hold that knowledge with the right kind of untensed readiness. As for the compulsory end, coming to dust: one thing to say is that so quiet an extreme may well call to mind available alternatives, such as a powerfully imagined Renaissance scene of Judgment Day or any assigned part in the crowded, busy spectacle of an ambitious Triumph of Death.

I quote the next two stanzas:

> Fear no more the frown o’ th’ great,<br>  Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke;<br>  Care no more to clothe and cat,<br>  To thee the reed is as the oak.<br>  The sceptre, learning, physic, must<br>  All follow this and come to dust.
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Fear no more the lightning-flash.
Nor th’ all-dreaded thunder-stone.
Fear not slander, censure rash.
Thou hast finish’d joy and moan.
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust.

The second stanza names other privileges of death to be added to the immunity from heat and cold. This last is now figured by the seasonal “rages” of social power; somewhat different is relief from the burden of daily necessities. Finally, a social grouping appears, “The sceptre, learning, physic.” Recognized at once, these figures act the part of a regularly constituted allegorical procession; they repeat, as if it were an obligatory ritual, the rule of necessity and thus provide the meager but desired reassurance that all indeed must die, including one’s betters as well as one’s juniors. Company in death may not be one of the most desired privileges of death, and, construed as a compensation for dying as one should, it may seem like an argument on the verge of bankruptcy—as though one should be promised as a privilege of death to receive from the great a frown turned into a gratifying smile and an arrested stroke turned into the tyrant’s companionable wave of hand. But who would argue against the unchallenged reputation of death as the great leveler?

What is effectively in place by the end of the second stanza is an array of old-fashioned responses to death, some of them having been repeated for centuries, on countless schedules and at great length. Still suspended and not aiming at the ready response are some other matters. The release of bodies takes place, but the poem seems unaware of the idea of souls. The representatives of royal power, learning, and the practice of medicine (a modern short list more than a cross-section)—like the “worldly task” and “home” of the first stanza and the “joy and moan” of the third stanza—all share the same habitation, this world. One world, one house of death.

The worst bad news of human certainty, the refrain of “come to dust,” is loosely paired with some common ills of life, a sampling from natural and social existence. The pairing is less exact and insistent than it might have been, as the record of some five earlier centuries makes plain. For one thing, none of the bad news encourages hatred of life, and standard opportunities for furthering that cause are ignored. Still, the true end is repeated three times; no alternative is mentioned or intimated; this world or stage seems to have none. All the materials of consolation are derived from the place where the “worldly task” is
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“done.” The consolation is restrained. “Golden lads and girls,” “All lovers young, all lovers”; these are the only clear candidates for “joy,” which is coupled with “moan.” Yet a special calm prevails in the graceful flow of energetic pronouncements, and one may remark on a general air of good humor not always found in agreeable messages of cheer. Montaigne’s praise of Socrates’ view of death seems to describe a quality of Shakespeare’s vision here: “He seeks no consolation outside the thing itself. . . . He fixes his gaze precisely . . . without looking elsewhere. . . . Our thoughts are always elsewhere” (3.4.632–33).

In the early seventeenth century many of the images and sentiments would have awakened trusted resonances, among which less familiar matters might have gone unnoticed, for much of the message was very old and had been heard often. Perhaps no one who was interested in poetry would have thought the language itself anything but perfectly current. But at least one part of the message was both old enough and unfamiliar enough to have seemed novel to some. For nothing is said of death that links it with divine punishment for Adam’s disobedience, and therefore this death in the poem must be that other kind, derived from pagan thought and explained as a universal law of nature. Like the elegies Shakespeare may well have read in Sidney’s Arcadia, his poem is based on the fictional privilege of expressing pregospel times. He stretches the privilege greatly when he makes past and present cross each other like fertile similarities and differences. The verses read over Imogen’s body create a particular order of imaginative innocence, enchantment, and truth.

As I leave these matters I want to suggest affinities between Shakespeare’s song and the modern examples I have offered. I think especially of the relations inherited and made between each past and each present.

In a traditional view frequently expressed in the past, death was imagined as a benevolent agent, a relieving and rewarding friend of the self, supervising the best interests of the self which the reluctant and disagreeing faculties were themselves incapable of deciding but might at last learn. (Though that view is forcefully revised by Tolstoi in the death of Nikolay Levin, it is not canceled.) In the well-remembered image of Aristotle (not unrecognizable still), “The soul rules the body with a despotical rule, whereas the intellect rules the appetites with a constitutional royal rule” (Politics 1254b). The recalcitrant, irrational parts of the self might therefore be persuaded or otherwise induced to accept what was in the best “public” interest and in accord with the judgment of royal benevolence. So they might consent to relax, let go, die. Scenarios
built on the image engaged standard difficulties with arguments that ran like reliable machinery. Some opportunities for dramatic conflict and hesitation were nevertheless discoverable and often made welcome. On the other hand, debates between the soul as despot and the body as slave required some tempering-tampering in order to make a respectable exhibition piece.

Champions of the body’s rights to persuade or command in this matter have been slow to develop the positive side of their arguments. Attacking the claims of mental dominance has been more congenial work. The modern attention to the body may, however, right that balance or come full circle. I quote a recent model by Lewis Thomas, very attractive in its imaginative correspondences between body and sophisticated machines with built-in controls and safety devices:

There is a pivotal movement at some stage in the body’s reaction to injury or disease, maybe in aging as well, when the organism concedes that it is finished and the time for dying is at hand, and at this moment the events that lead to death are launched, as a coordinated mechanism. Functions are then shut off in sequence, irreversibly, and, while this is going on, a neural mechanism, held ready for this occasion, is switched on.18

The attentive reader will remember the now quaint images of Ficino and Paracelsus (quoted in Chap. 15)—Ficino to explain why and how the sense of hearing “seizes, and claims as its own, man in his entirety”; and Paracelsus to show how motion, penetration, and celestial bodies cause birthmarks. Their procedures illustrate the Aristotelian rule that the mind is conscious of its thought “along with an image,” and they supplement their methods with a kind of narrative sequence for which the old term fable was considered appropriate. One can no longer use that term politely to describe serious imaginative efforts to present a conceptual grasp or theory of how important phenomena work, and so I have called Thomas’s very interesting account by its proper modern name, a model. It is one that turns away from the formerly believed correspondences between the terrestrial and the supernal worlds to a set of correspondences between the human body as presently understood and some new microcosms of intelligence now being discovered, explored, and invented.19

The Aristotelian rule may be pleasant to recognize—especially since here consciousness of thought, bearing and being borne by its image, is not merely an expedient device of rhetorical expression for others but is substantially related to the thought itself, whether or not
the thinker is fully aware of what he is doing, and whether he also recognizes that his example is making him an example. And yet, beyond Aristotle, the master spirit of Thomas’s model is the Plato of the *Timaeus*.

The machine of my mind, easily activated, calls up images of the urban runners crisscrossing path and pavement, their cardiovascular systems regulated by conscious decisions and sometimes checked, without breaking stride, by newly marketed miniature devices. And though the more graceless joggers produce a composite image I recognize as that of *memento mori*, I admire, as who would not, the strong and stylish runners who are killing time well as they achieve their slow, slow pulse rates.

The winner of the marathon race in the 1984 Olympics, the mature man Carlos Lopes, “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,” was asked by a television reporter, in a standard style of expensive time, whether he had prepared himself specially for the Los Angeles heat and whether he had expected to win. The answer, expressing the consciousness that real alternatives may still have something to say to each other, was that he came prepared to win and prepared to lose. None of the Renaissance writers taken up in these pages would have had any experience with the marathon as an actual event or with the imagistic language by which our present interest expresses itself. Yet all, I believe, would have responded to the words of Lopes, and would have admired their basic design, and would have thought about the meanings under compression.