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# Death as Metaphor

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Death As Metaphor

Lawrence Kimmel

Oh when I was young and easy under the apple boughs ... Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea.

■ D. Thomas

Think. I think we are in rats' alley, where the dead men lost their bones.

■ T.S. Eliot

## I

What remains to be said about the question and problem of death that has not been repeated a thousand times in the history of human thought and culture? Philosophers in the Western tradition have seemingly argued every nuance of the name, nature, causes, and consequences of death since Plato first took up the death of Socrates as the founding occasion of his philosophical life and thinking. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers subsequently framed the basic arguments that are still with us, directed to three basic questions concerning death: What *is* it? Is it good or bad? Should we fear it?

To the first question, arguments differ with respect to whether death is referenced as a *state*, a *process*, or an *event*—which is to say that the concept itself is ambiguous, so any discursive analysis must first settle the question of reference. But it may be philosophically important to raise an additional and prior question about the meaning, hence nature of death just here: since the meaning of death is not limited to the domain of *reference*, inquiry into its nature and

meaning remains open to the full range of its *contextual use* in the shared language and life of human beings.

We are inclined to preference the referentially obvious: death does occur, and we are likely to experience anxiety when our own lives are threatened with the prospect of becoming the subject of its reference. There is an obvious and objective reference to the *state* of death as well—the dead in the morgue, soldiers brought home in the body bags of war—and, *ceteris paribus*, we are thankful not to be among them. However, it is a case in point to note the contextual extension of referential meaning of death and dead, for example, in the Irish ballad, “The minstrel boy to the war is gone/ in the ranks of death you’ll find him...” (Moore, 1859); or again, in the now familiar death-row declaration that accompanies the short walk to execution, “Dead Man Walking!” Objective reference in each case is to the dead still living. One might respond that they are not *literally* dead; but surely they are not *figuratively* dead either. In brief, the sense of reference requires elaboration.

Death as *process* is also a common reference in critical discussion, although as process it is better referenced as *dying*; death itself then references the termination of the process (this is the same grammatical point as saying that running is a process, winning is not). But in any event the process is neither simple, nor easy. Arguing in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is learning how to die, Socrates acknowledged this as the same task as learning how to live: the learning process is critical; it takes time, effort, and thought—it is the undertaking of a lifetime. The process of living and dying and their relational meaning is intimately connected. It is equally true to say either that you are now in the process of living, and/or in the process of dying (that, from the moment you are born you are dying, and that until the moment of death you are living). It makes a considerable difference, of course, which description fits your disposition

(as in “half empty/half full”). Confronted with a diagnosis of “terminal illness” one may choose the description and comportment “I am dying”; but it is equally a fact and arguably preferable to choose the alternative expression “I am living.” The larger point within all of these seemingly obvious and preferred referential uses is that the concept of death remains ambiguous.

Answers to the second and third questions common to critical discussions of death cited above (Is it good or bad? Is it something we should fear or not?) clearly depend on how we come to understand the *nature* and *meaning* of death. The procedural point is that the meaning of *both* life and death is ambiguous. And if we conceive meaning to be more critically extensive than that of objective reference, a better way of addressing the issue of the nature and meaning of death may be to acknowledge that an understanding of life and death requires or invites the use of metaphor. This, in any event, is the direction our discussion will take in the remarks that follow.

It is obvious, of course, that death can be *used* as a metaphor in the description of other things. “Sudden death overtime” is a familiar mundane sports expression that adds little to further our understanding of death as a terminus. But other metaphorical uses are more reflective of the range of consciousness concerning life and death. *Death at an Early Age* for example, is a book written about the educational life and destiny of the inner-city ghetto child. Think of other familiar titles that disclose domain and dimensions of meaning: *Death in Venice* about spiritual decay; *The Naked and the Dead*, about the visceral commonplaces of war. But more generally, the meaning of both death and life are *themselves* embodied in metaphors. We might say of death, what Wittgenstein remarked about pain: it is not something; but it is not nothing, either. People do die; in fact, it is in the nature of all living things that they die, so death is not

*nothing*. On the other hand, to say what death *is*, we must and do have recourse to metaphor in the narratives of life. Death is no more a thing than the mind or spirit is a thing, notwithstanding we change our minds and raise our spirits. So how are we to proceed?

A basic intuition is that, like any other concept, to understand the depth and dimensions of the meaning of death—its nature—we must surround the concept with its essential and relational expressions in contexts of use. For example, we can, for specific purposes, referentially fix “the moment of death”—currently preferred is the diagnostic test of “brain dead.” But this is only one functional notion of death, and it is a mistake to think this reference is somehow definitive or the root of all intelligible discussions of the nature of death.

It might be useful to distinguish two kinds of reality in this connection: fictive and factive reality. The boundary between the two is not always definite or clear. Death is a terminal condition of life: this is a fact (a truth of factive reality). But cowards die many times before their death, while the valiant taste of death but once, which is at the very least a different kind of fact (what I rather here will call a truth of fictive reality). There is an obvious philosophical hurdle—not, I think, dead end—that I will bypass in this essay. For our purposes it is enough to concede that there are truths about life disclosed in fictive contexts—often cited as paradigms are the great soliloquies in the tragic drama of Shakespeare, not a few having to do with the boundaries of life and death, some of which we will reference as our inquiry proceeds. In any event, both factive and fictive contexts figure significantly in our understanding of the human condition—the condition under which life is given to human beings, which includes natality and mortality. Together, they provide venues of expression for existential

truths of consciousness in the phenomenology of shared experience.

## II

Man is a creature that knows he is going to die. It is this fact of human existence that arguably accounts for the depth of human consciousness and the scope of human culture. In any event, this situation is a compelling reason to appeal to literature as a philosophical resource for understanding death as defining feature of human life.

Plato set a limiting frame for the philosophical discussion of death in his account of the last days of Socrates, and there is a serious question whether we have progressed beyond Socrates' counsel to his interlocutors at his execution that to consider death an evil to be feared is presumptive. His argument is that genuine *knowledge* of death—of what it is to die—is not available to us in principle. While Socrates does go on to claim that death properly understood is a good, the tenor of his argument is morally persuasive, intended to remind his friends to discover in themselves the virtue of courage that life requires. His dying words to Crito—that he owes a cock to Aesclepius—is a parting metaphor of acknowledgement that death is part of the process of healing in and of a good life; that is, death is the making whole of a complete life well lived.

Apart from the metaphysics of this puzzle, it may be instructive to note a parallel lesson that physicians have discovered whose patients are all terminal: where curing is not possible, there is an alternative of healing. One who cannot be cured of an illness may still be healed—that is, made whole in the acceptance of the conditions of her life, indeed of the conditions of life itself. This has an effect of shifting the medical paradigm toward a broader conception of health, and of patient as person. In terms of our present

interest, it also marks a different conception of the relation of living and dying. It has been observed by those treating the terminally ill, that at a certain point, a patient shifts from deciding to live, to deciding to die. The general point is that living and dying are of a piece, and that meaning plays a significant role even in the treatment of illness in the face of death.

Modern philosophical discussions tend not to draw on Plato's metaphysical and moral discussion of death, but rather on Epicurean and Stoic texts that shift the focus to an aesthetics of pleasure, and to happiness in life. On this latter view, death, conceived as annihilation or non-life, tends to be dismissively treated as irrelevant to positive discourse and concern. The simple logic of this scheme is both clever and persuasive on its surface: As I am, death is not; as death is, I am not. This mantra of dismissal is neat, and perhaps will suffice if we remain locked into a referential definition of death as a state or event. But we are haunted in life by the *spectre* of death, and the dimensions of its meaning pervade too much of our lives to accept the simple reassurance of Epicurean reduction.

The domain of discourse of and about death is broad and varied in the life of culture, and this seems reason enough to extend philosophical inquiry and analysis to the full range of its metaphorical expression. Of particular interest in the complex phenomena of consciousness is the *ineffable*, whose referential meaning is typically a boundary concept (life, death, absolute, infinite, God). In this and related instances, indirect discourse and the ordinary and extraordinary contexts of literature become important resources of understanding. Poetic expressions typically capture some image and aspect of common dread and wonder about death—images of final places, of sleep, of stillness, of darkness, of silence, of loss, of isolation, of release, of peace, in which death has currency as a summons, a judgment, a

journey. The most well known of all literary references for every school child is probably Hamlet's soliloquy, contemplating suicide, in which death is a consummation devoutly to be wished:

...To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil...  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will...

■ Shakespeare (Shakespeare, 1929, Act III)

Drawing back from the sharp edge of decision, Hamlet remarks on the general feeling that in the presence of death, "...conscience doth make cowards of us all" (Shakespeare, 1929, Act III). In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare provides a different and larger picture, in Prospero's metaphor of the world as a stage, and the end of the play of life is a striking of the set, where not a rack is left behind. The image here of death is romantically benign, in which our little lives are rounded with a sleep.

A different but common theme of realism is struck in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in the contemptuous announcement by a servant "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (1971). This scathing contempt reflects the crude and brutal facticity of living to dead. The monstrous figure of Kurtz, who a short time before had been adored as a god, becomes a useless and offensive thing that is buried in a muddy hole the following day. The *heart of darkness* metaphor in Conrad's story has indefinite references—to the savage passion at the heart of civilized life as well as the primitive depth of the human soul. But at the heart of these images is a common idea in life and literature of *death* as a devouring darkness, the shroud that awaits the remains of a life, from Macbeth's



weary resignation and acceptance of the waiting darkness “...Out, out brief candle...” (Shakespeare, 1963, Act V) to Thomas’ rage against the consuming darkness and the dying of that very light. Whatever awaits, there is a deep and common resonance in the ominous summons of John Donne’s “For Whom the bell tolls”: *Nunc Lento Sonitu Dicunt, Morieris* - Now, this bell tolling softly for another, says to me: Thou must die (1972).

The many different images of death in literature bring into question again the complementary difference between sense and reference. Consider the philosophical distinction between death, and its meaning—*what it is* / and *what it means*. We want to say that a *death* in the family is *real*, whatever the *meaning* of the *concept*. Death is final, whether welcome or terrifying, whether we understand it or not. That raw fact of our mortality is something that *happens* with or without our acceptance. But it is in the language of addressing even this bare fact that metaphor arises—that death comes to us, that we give in to it, accede finally to a recognition that whatever the wages of sin, death is the wage of life. Whether in the case of an athlete dying young, the clever lad slips away betimes, or is cut down in his prime, or another runs the good race of long life and slips quietly into everlasting rest, there is in every case dominion, disinvestment and devastation that requires the account of metaphor.

The reference of inquiry can be broadened by reviewing some of the familiar contexts and expressions in literature that inform our understanding of the enigmatic presence of death in life and human consciousness. If we take the primal relation of natality and mortality as given: then what? “Earth to earth, dust to dust...” (Revised English Bible, 1989,3:19) this is the reality; but already in this expression the reality of death is brought in fuller meaning to consciousness. The image of grains of sand draining away is

a familiar reference to time, to life, and to death. The force of this image attests to the fact that life, in its rudimentary expression *is* time; death simply means that time runs out. The natural life of creatures other than Man is simply life and death in time—the whole of existence is framed in the exclusive metaphor of time. *Human* life, in contrast, is a convergence of *time* and *place* such that the natural configuration of life and death is transformed. World literature is full of memorable reference to the brief transience of place and to the furtive and insecure impermanence of hopeful moments in life. It would be difficult to find better or more troubling expressions for the assimilation of life and death in terms of time and place than two classic literary indices of Hebraic and Hellenic cultures:

As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.

■ The Bible (Old Testament, Psalm 103)

As is the life of the leaves, so is that of men. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground: the vigorous forest puts forth others, and they grow in the spring season. Soon one generation of men comes and another ceases.

■ Homer (Iliad, Book VI)

Whether lament or simple acknowledgement, death brings a depth of recognition to the continuing gift of life. That organic life feeds only on itself, that life comes from death is a staple imperative of both jungle and garden as well as a theme of literature. But the human mind seems incapable of simple acceptance, and fashions instead a tragic culture. Rilke provides a modern expression of the same issue that confronted the Psalmist and the Epic poet:

Who'll show a child just as he is? Who'll set him in his constellation and put the measure of distance in his hand? Who'll make the death of a child out of gray bread growing dark—or leave it there in his round mouth like the core of a sweet apple? Murderers are easily understood. But this: to hold death, the whole of death, so gently even before life's begun, and not be mad—that's beyond description. (1961)

The conception of the cycle of life and death invites a wide range of descriptive images. Comparing the graceful expression of Tennyson's distanced acceptance with that of Samuel Beckett's acute discharge, one may wonder whether they are speaking of the same creature, the same sense of life and death. In Tennyson's expression, the familiar process is given depth and beauty:

The woods decay; the woods decay and fall; the vapors weep their burden to the ground. Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath...and after many a summer dies the swan. (1941b, p. 61)

Beckett's stark description of the same fact, "...they give birth astride a grave..." (1954, p.58) is brutal in its brevity; but if it fails in grace of expression, it loses no gravity of truth in its reference to the human condition.

### III

The stoic idea that death is nothing—that while I am, it is not, and when it is, I am not—reflects a distinctive Western bias of individuation. When autonomy loosens into self-absorption, the reductive rule becomes: 'If it be not so to me...what care I how it may be?'—whatever does not affect me is of no consequence. What on this view is precious and

alone of absolute worth is my own life. Such a view in the end reduces life and death to the bare contingency of personal survival; the logic of that reduction can make of living an avoidance of death, so that survival becomes a desperate treading to keep one's head above water. The moral life and world of human beings embodies more than self-interest and the logistics of individual survival, however, and this makes more of death as well.

The basic and prior question in all this is why we continue to have such a strong philosophical interest in death. The simple answer, I think, is because we are interested in understanding the gift of life. As an existential issue, death prompts more than idle curiosity. But if we concern ourselves only with the narrow fact of our own life and death, obsess with the contingency and imperative of mere survival, we will come to understand little about even our own individual lives, and nothing at all of the role that death plays in our collective lives. More simply, philosophical inquiry reasonably addresses the pair or relatedness of the concepts life and death. While we don't necessarily understand one in terms of the other, it is doubtful we can understand either exclusive of the other.

In a debunking age of irony, wit is exercised to show that death, which traditionally has been a fascination and concern to peasant and poet alike, is a simple if not trivial fact; that while it may or may not be something to fret about, it is certainly not worth spilling philosophical ink. In light of the declinations of Socratic ignorance and Stoic prudence, the question of death generally has been deferred to relatively idle speculation in clerical circles and spiritual cults. However, the issue and theme of death has remained a vital and imaginative impulse in the creative arts, and our critical understanding of the idea (word, concept) of death is indebted and indentured to the world of literature, and to the

full range and articulation of consciousness that is the field of literary expression.

Arguing against limiting philosophical analysis to referential meaning is intended to displace the bias of individuated consciousness under which the question of death is dismissed as moot. A broadened notion of experience and extended domain of consciousness opens the question of death to a greater field of imaginative inquiry. Recall, in this connection, Wittgenstein's remark that what cannot be said (discursive matters of referential fact) may still be shown, through other forms of expression. This is not a particularly modern insight; the idea is central to Plato's project and conception of the *Dialogues*, in his use of metaphor, myth, and allegory. Even in the dialogue on death to which we have been referring, Plato does not let the matter rest with rejecting claims to knowledge, and he returns again to the question of death at the end of the *Republic* in the "Vision of Er." Rejecting Plato's idealism does not diminish the critical insights of metaphor in the *Dialogues*.

Plato's yoking of critical analysis to the literary resource of dramatic context, narrative story, and imaginative language remains a philosophical model for understanding the life of the mind. An additional appeal to broaden the domain of philosophical analysis to fictive literature is derived from the nature of human beings as storytelling animals. We live in and through the stories we tell and share. Our individual and collective identities are framed within the stories we tell, whether narratives of history, scriptures of religion, or theories of science. There is no specifically privileged meaning, just as there are no clear limits to the meaningful stories of life and death, in any particular field. Whether or not great literature has only two themes—love and death—it is true enough to insist that death is an abiding passion in the life-world of human beings. This fact, in turn, argues that

we should resist any impulse to dismiss the importance of metaphor on the presumption that it confuses the reality of factual annihilation with the romance of poetic conceit.

We come again and again to the central question of meaning in philosophical discourse. From the first impulse of critical philosophy, conceptually and historically, the interest and task is to say *what something is*, to address the thing itself, to discover its nature or essence. In developing a method of analysis Plato contrasts merely giving an *example* with providing a *definition* of it. Even granting the informative usefulness of an example, we have still to see what it is in the example that distinguishes the thing in question. In providing an exact definition we search for the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the concept—and so the essence and nature of the thing itself: “An object is a triangle, if and only if....”

Not all concepts, however, can be given exact definitions, as Aristotle noted, and we must be satisfied with the precision allowed within a given form of discourse. It has seemed to some that the concept death can be given a definition—definite boundaries of reference, and so we can in this case have knowledge of the thing itself. Common to every example of death is that it marks the end of life, which, in human life can be recorded by the flat reading of an electro-encephalogram—exact, as well as regrettable—but surely this doesn’t say much.

It may be helpful to our analysis to return to the closely related but separate questions of *what something is*, and *what something means*. In the context of inquiry we want *to know* what something *is*, but we want also *to understand* what it *means*. Clearly to know and to understand are connected, but I want to keep to the distinction for the moment. The claim that death is nothing results from denying its possibility as an experience of consciousness; but this

introduces a basic philosophical puzzle that invariably links procedural and substantive questions. Every substantive claim of what something is or is not, carries with it the procedural questions: how do you know and how could you find out? Our earlier reference to a parallel instance of the ‘nothing’ of death, in Wittgenstein’s grammatical reminder that pain is nothing (no thing), does nothing to dispel the fact that pain is undeniably *real*: we can and do *experience* pain. There are likely medical descriptions and explanations of the physiology of pain—mechanics and dynamics of sense receptors, electrical impulse, nerve ends, brain stem connections—but the *pain itself*, we want to say, is what we *feel*, what we *experience*. The paradigm of experience—the reality—is of a different order from that of explanation.

It is a slightly different task but a parallel procedure, for example, with the concept of *mind*. The mind is not a thing, either, in the sense that the brain is a thing. Reference is objectively clear in one case, not the other. Even so, we do have minds and use them, we make up and change our minds; we judge that a person has a good mind, far superior to that of another person. In this light, a good deal of philosophical effort is exercised in trying to say what the mind is—is it a function, or a process, or a structure...?—the current preference seems to fix its reference on analogy with computer software. Once again, however, apart from theoretical constructs of mind, there is an ordinary and continuing *experience* that informs our understanding of the life of the mind. The mind—what it is and what it means—requires an analysis of the various and variable uses of the concept in both theory and the language of ordinary experience.

Is it the same with death as with pain and mind? Can we say what death is—the thing itself? There are paradigm uses in each of these cases: If you want to know what pain is...here, let me hit your thumb with a hammer. If you wish

to know what mind is...think of a number between one and ten. And if you want to know what death is...(?) The unusual thing in this latter case is, as the stoics pointed out, whatever death is or is not, it is not open to the report of personal experience, and so the paradigm of meaning must be one of description or explanation—hence the usual focus on instruments that record the cessation of brain activity. Poets on the other hand, like the rest of us, continue to have a concern and wonderment about the phenomenology as well as the related phenomena of pain, and mind, and of the possible if unreportable experience of death.

Whatever form of analysis is used to account for the phenomenon and phenomena of death—whether the technical language of physiology, or the poetic language of tragic drama—the natural language of ordinary and shared life is the basic resource of every possible description, explanation and expression. If we are interested in understanding the meaning of death—the He and the She of it all—then the only boundaries to philosophical inquiry are the linguistic limits of sense, which change with the ebb and flow of culture, no less than the progressive exactness of scientific discovery.

What we are trying to understand here, however, is more than an isolated phenomenon or experience. Our cultural interest is engaged to understand the *relation* of life and death—life in death, death in life, the stuff that pervades consciousness and frames the boundaries of life and mind. Figurative language and fictive literature become critical in providing a contextual ground for inquiry into the drama of this relationship.

#### IV

Whether our informed discourse is about identity or ideology, mind or madness, there is a fund of human



understanding that draws on many different kinds of accounts in literature and the arts, no less than the biological, psychological and social sciences. In addition to contributing to the ordinary discourse about our lives, literature gives expression to the ineffable, and so provides access to the sense and significance of the extraordinary and uncanny. Illness, for example, may be clinically catalogued and medically diagnosed for treatment, but if we want to understand it, we must somehow get inside the experience itself. There is a strong current of feeling about certain illnesses, for example cancer, that regards a diagnosis itself as a “death sentence.” Susan Sontag, diagnosed with cancer, in her book *Illness as Metaphor* examines metaphors ostensibly used to support the will to resist cancer, in which she noted that they do both good and harm. Metaphors of illness as punitive, as a curse, as an embarrassment, may well add to the devastation of the disease itself, and those burdened with the disease may be better advised that cancer is none of those things, that it is “simply, a disease, and nothing more” (Sontag, 1978). This abridgment may indeed help to disengage the patient from the crippling effects of “giving in to the disease” (and in turn enable her to turn over her body and problem to a physician), but it also leaves aside the significance of the phenomenon itself, as well as its extended meaning in the lives and relations of human beings. What indeed is the reference in the expression “just a disease”, and what is the metaphorical import of the counsel to “not give in”? In the case of cancer, even at the biological level, clinical descriptions have recourse to metaphors of “invasive” cancer cells, “feeding on” other cells. How much more is metaphor required in cases that extend diagnosis and dis/ ease to depression, grief, withdrawal, and anxiety? That use may involve abuse does not lessen the need for metaphor in understanding the complexities of human experience.

Reference to death in literature is sometimes ambiguous and abstract, sometimes particular and visceral. James

Joyce's story "The Dead" opens onto a festive affair of the Misses Morkan's annual dance, but also onto events and images of memory and time such that the shadow of death fully comprehends the living gathered there. Metaphors of love and death contend in Joyce's portrait of Ireland as a country of the dead, in which memories seem more alive than anything in its present existence; a nation and culture in which the dead exert leverage over the living. This story in the *Dubliners* carries a vague but insistent cultural finality, only less visceral than a familiar final image in Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*, in which, in the festive ballroom of a thousand revelers, "...Death holds illimitable dominion over all" (1924, p. 186). In such literary works, as in life, death makes its presence felt in the haunting of memory and culture as well as the ravages of epidemic and disease. There is no argument in either for a definitive cast of the human condition, only a reminder of our terms of engagement.

In very rare cases, we have documents of poetic voices of the dying, speaking about their own death in terms that draw each reader into the orbit of that life and death. Ted Rosenthal died at the age of 34 of leukemia in 1972. The following are a few lines from his poem "How Could I Not Be Among You":

...I live as a man who knows death:  
It is not aimed at anyone  
But it will come your way  
The wind sweeps over everyone  
...You will feel so all alone, abandoned,  
And you will cry, "No, it cannot be so!"  
But nothing will avail you.  
It's a circle in the round.  
No wings, backstage, leading act.  
A center stage for all of us.  
(1973, p.66)

There is no room here to detail the crystallized pain that expresses the essence of Rosenthal's experience of dying. It is a testimony we may or may not trust, but it opens sensibility to an acute awareness of a common fate. Tolstoy's familiar story, *The Death of Ivan Illich*, similarly draws us into the interstices of a mind and spirit caught up in the painful and eroding detail and gradual realization of death, trying to discover cognitive and emotional strategies of accommodation that only make matters worse.

... all the while here is death! Can it really be death?" Again terror seized him...he tried to drive this morbid thought away and to replace it by healthy thoughts. But death, and not the thought only but the reality itself, seemed to come and confront him.... He tried to get back into the former current of thoughts that had once screened the thought of death from him. But strange to say, all that had formerly shut off, hidden, and destroyed his consciousness of death, no longer had that effect. Ivan Ilych now spent most of his time in attempting to re-establish that old current.  
(1886)

In Tolstoy's description, the "current of life," that conscious if vague awareness that sustains Ivan's sense of identity and wellness, is disrupted by the relentless foreboding of death. Ordinarily the consciousness of life is automatic and simply accompanies us in our routine activities; life in its essential phenomenological duality with death, is not something we think about. The pain that began for Ivan with a bump against the knob of a door, gradually becomes an awareness of death that tears away the thoughtless comfort of the current of life, so that death—the thought, the reality—pervades consciousness and finally

nothing will help to reconnect him to the ease of that sustaining impulse.

## V

Despite, or perhaps because of the obvious characteristics of the certainty and finality of death, there is an endless discussion of their implications at various levels of analysis. Hamlet's parting words "The rest is silence" is understood as a remark not only about an individual's life, but about death itself. The familiar quip that the only things certain in this life are death and taxes, serves to align the unwanted, inevitable, and invasive intrusions of god and government in our lives. Particularly interesting is the metaphorical reminder that death is the exacting tax levied on life. If death is inevitable and mortality is given as a condition of life, then it would seem natural as well as reasonable simply to accept it, to integrate this fact into the story of our lives in such a way that there is unanimity to life and death. Major theories of culture and human development suggest, on the contrary, that the whole history of human activity is to be understood as a *reaction against* the finality and certainty of death. This suggests further that *natural* and *rational* responses to death may be at odds. Natural life is simply at one with living and dying; but life and death which form a unity at an organic level in lower forms of animal life become separated into conflicting opposites at the human level.

In philosophical psychology as well as the philosophy of history, theorists have argued that the response of human beings to mortality defines the very structure of consciousness and the purposive activity of culture. Freud's familiar claim that the goal of all life is death—that the ultimate logic of biological *homeostasis* in human consciousness is embodied in a death instinct (*Thanatos*)—has a parallel construction in Hegelian dialectics. In Hegel's account, man is a unique species which has a history—an

animal whose essence is a function of dialectical development in time. At a biological level organisms have no history because living and dying are one; the defining activity of human culture can be understood in contrast as life against death, as attempts to contest death. In separating the natural unity of life and death, cultural history becomes a response to the conceived alienation of death.

Comportment toward death, whether individual or cultural, must still contend with the organic fact of mortality, of course. But the fact embodies a question mark: what is to be *made* of the fact? Hegel, in *The Science of Logic*, cryptically remarks that the nature of finite things as such is to have the seed of passing away as their essential being, that the hour of their birth is the hour of their death. Dylan Thomas gives a lyrical expression to this very experience in *Fern Hill*, which we cited at the beginning of this essay—that even while I am young and easy in the mercy of his means Time holds me, green and dying. The same equation of life and death is expressed in the familiar metaphor that Time is the fire in which we burn. The bifurcation of life and death sets the relation as one of conflict, and taxes the living with resistance and opposition. It was this opposition and conflict, of course, that was the presenting problem of Stoic and Epicurean strategies of resolution; but a simpler alternative is to accept the natural unity of life and death reconciled to species life.

The essential role that death plays in the development of culture reflects the peculiar nature of the human creature. Miguel Unamuno has suggested that a concern for the dead sets man apart from all other animals; that we go to such lengths to protect and store up the dead from an elemental dread of annihilation. The conception of death as alien is arguably a factor in accounting for the activity of culture as a flight from death in the studied construction of a stable environment and permanent community, which in turn make

possible an enduring memory: a creative cultural frame of history and immortality. If the essence of human being is discovered in desire no less than reason, then, once again, an understanding of death in human life must reach the deeper soundings of art and literature.

The literature of death comprehends several genres in resonance with spiritual life and religious ritual. Along with tragic and elegiac literature, which focus on death and the dead, there are celebrations of death in the ordinary mass, and the requiem, in the Kaddish, at wakes, and memorials of every description. World literature traces a broad spectrum of the shadow culture of human imagination from classical accounts, in Homer's epic of mass slaughter and the burning of Ilium and the journey of Odysseus to Hades, (where he discovers that one can speak only individually with the dead), to the public orations of death in Perikles' commemoration of the Peloponnesian war dead. Poetic expression varies from elegy to dirge; Tennyson's poignant lament for his friend in the long poem *In Memoriam*, that "Death has made his darkness beautiful with thee" (1941, p.356) is characteristic of mourning in response to grief. The persistence unto death of Antigone's determination to bury her brother against the prohibition of the state, speaks as well to the rule of war in every age to retrieve the dead. The Walkuries riding out to claim the heroic dead fallen on the field of battle is a familiar figure in art that testifies to the ubiquitous presence of death that accompanies human aspiration.

What does this extension of inquiry into the fictive contexts and expressions of death contribute to the substantive and procedural insights of traditional philosophy? Most importantly, the idea that the phenomenon of death is a pervasive feature embodied in every aspect of human understanding and concern, and that it is a mistake to

insist on a reductive analysis that would fix the boundaries of meaning to an objective and literal reference.

Death can indeed be many things—and by this I mean that it means many things to human beings individually and collectively. Does it stalk the lonely, and come like a thief in the night? Sometimes; but Emily Dickenson’s expression “Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me...” (1960, p. 350) suggests a different aspect of death, courteous in its manner of address. John Keats, who lived not long enough, and who admitted at times to be half in love with easeful death, wrote of a longing ‘to cease upon the midnight with no pain’ (1993, p. 106).

The seductiveness of death is a familiar theme, quite apart from Freud’s assimilation of *Thanatos* into the dynamic of human life. Toward the end of Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel, a passage begins: “I knew just how I would do it”; (1996) in retrospect of Plath’s own suicide, this situation takes on an acute pain of disclosure about the appeal of ending one’s life, shutting out the pain, the worry, expectations, demands, anxiety, the whole bother of world and other. In this simple narrative, the character waits until she is alone in the house, puts on a nice dress, writes a note that she is going out for a while, climbs on a chair to get her mother’s pills hidden in a box high in the closet, puts on a raincoat, goes down into the cellar and into a crawlspace under the porch, pulls a log in after to conceal her presence. This is how it ends:

Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one.

At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom of the bottle, red and blue lights began to

flash before my eyes. The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down. The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep.  
(Plath, 1996)

However alien death may seem, our recognition of its presence in the life of this young woman makes clear its intimate relation to ordinary consciousness. If we are to understand the reach of its shadow into the light of our continuance, we must come to see death through the eyes of a poet writing about her own life, and more generally through the words of poets who search out the sounds of its variegated expression in life and literature.

The task of philosophy is not to solve the riddle of death, or put an end to the question of what death is by a definitive answer to its own question. Rather, the task before us, here as elsewhere, is to open up the range of intelligible discourse to the full meaning of its expression.

Marlowe's familiar soliloquy on life and death in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, is perhaps where we can leave off (as well as take up) the matter. Marlowe refers to his own near death on a remote jungle river in the heart of the Dark Continent that had stripped away the conceits of civilized European culture. Remembering the gnawing presence in his mind, he later reflects on the experience:

Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place



in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamor, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say.

(1971)

Perhaps the most important philosophical insight, coming full circle, is to acknowledge the obvious: the riddle of life and death remains after everything else has been said. Shakespeare's conclusive remark in *Hamlet* that the rest is silence is not the last word, even for him. In passage after passage in the *corpus* of his work he investigates the depth of the question and experience of death, and offers a fictive world of imaginative space for investigation. Whether man is a poor player that frets and struts his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more, or whether at the end of our revels we are spirits and are melted into air; whether we are such stuff as dreams are made of and like the fabric of the vision before us we dissolve and leave not a rack behind, literature embodies a rich store of metaphor in the narratives of life unto death that invites philosophical interest and analysis.

Wittgenstein's limiting rule in the *Tractatus* for rational discourse may be appropriate to review, in closing. His dictum that "of what we cannot speak, we must remain silent" (1974, #7) has appealed strongly to the literal biases of empirical science. But the rule itself refers only to the objective domain of factive discourse, or more narrowly to

propositional claims appropriate to science. As Wittgenstein's later work makes clear, a good deal remains to be said about the silence itself, and all that remains in the fullness of meaning within the life world of experience.

If indeed, the rest is silence, it is, for purposes of philosophical inquiry, a very full and meaningful silence, and we should continue to pursue the ghost threads of insight into death wherever they lead.

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