THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH

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Conclusion

Five Variations on Four Themes

In the preface, I explained how I was gradually led to select certain kinds of documentation: literary, liturgical, testamentary, epigraphic, and iconographic. I did not study these documents separately or in any particular order. I studied them simultaneously, in the light of a question that arose in the course of my first explorations. My hypothesis, which had already been proposed by Edgar Morin, was that there was a relationship between man's attitude toward death and his awareness of self, of his degree of existence, or simply of his individuality. This is the thread that has guided me through a dense and confusing mass of documents; this is the idea that has determined the itinerary that I have followed to the end. It is in terms of these questions that the information contained in the documents has taken on a form and a meaning, a continuity and a logic. This has been the key that has helped me to decipher facts otherwise unintelligible or unrelated.

In *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort*, I held to this system of analysis and interpretation. I have also used it in the general organization of the present work. It has inspired the titles of three of the five parts: “The Tame Death,” “The Death of the Self,” and “The Death of the Other.” These titles were also suggested by Vladimir Jankélévitch in his book on death.

But my research for that gave me a greater familiarity with the facts, which slightly altered my original hypothesis, raised other questions, and opened up other perspectives. Awareness of one's self or one's destiny was no longer the only possible point of departure. Other systems of analysis and interpretation appeared along the way, systems that were just as important as the one I had chosen to guide me and that would have served just as well to give some order to the formless mass of documentation. I have allowed them to take shape in my text as I discovered them in the docu-

ments, while I continued my research and reflection. I hope that the reader has noticed them in passing.

Today, at the end of this seemingly endless itinerary, the assumptions I started out with are no longer exclusive. Having abandoned my preconceived ideas along the way, I turn and cast my eye over this thousand-year landscape like an astronaut looking down at the distant earth. This vast space seems to me to be organized around the simple variations of four psychological themes. The first is the one that guided my investigation, awareness of the individual. The others are: the defense of society against untamed nature, belief in an afterlife, and belief in the existence of evil.

By way of conclusion I shall try to show how the various models defined in the course of this book (the tame death, the death of the self, remote and imminent death, the death of the other, and the invisible death) can be explained in terms of variations on these four themes.

The Tame Death

All four themes appear in the first model of the tame death, and all are of equal importance in defining it.

Death is not a purely individual act, any more than life is. Like every great milestone in life, death is celebrated by a ceremony that is always more or less solemn and whose purpose is to express the individual's solidarity with his family and community.

The three most important moments of this ceremony are the dying man's acceptance of his active role, the scene of the farewells, and the scene of mourning. The rites in the bedroom or those of the oldest liturgy express the conviction that the life of a man is not an individual destiny but a link in an unbroken chain, the biological continuation of a family or a line that begins with Adam and includes the whole human race.

One kind of solidarity subordinated the individual to the past and future of the species. Another kind made him an integral part of his community. This community was gathered around the bed where he lay; later, in its rites of mourning, it expressed the anxiety caused by the passage of death. The community was weakened by the loss of one of its members. It expressed the danger it felt; it had to recover its strength and unity by means of ceremonies the last of which always had the quality of a holiday, even a joyous one. Thus, death was not a personal drama but an ordeal for the community, which was responsible for maintaining the continuity of the race.

If the community feared the passage of death and felt the need to recover itself, this was not only because it was weakened by the loss of one
of its members. It was also because death—the death of an individual or the repeated deaths caused by an epidemic—opened a breach in the defense system erected against the savagery of nature.

From the earliest times man has refused to accept either sex or death as crude facts of nature. The necessity of organizing work and maintaining order and morality in order to have a peaceful life in common led society to protect itself from the violent and unpredictable forces of nature. These included both external nature, with its tempestuous seasons and sudden accidents, and the internal world of the human psyche, which resembles nature in its suddenness and irregularity, the world of the ecstasy of love and the agony of death. A state of equipoise was achieved and maintained by means of a conscious strategy to contain and channel the unknown and formidable forces of nature. Death and sex were the weak points in the defense system, because there was no clear break in continuity between culture and nature. So these activities had to be carefully controlled. The ritualization of death is a special aspect of the total strategy of man against nature, a strategy of prohibitions and concessions. This is why death has not been permitted its natural extravagance but has been imprisoned in ceremony, transformed into spectacle. This is also why it could not be a solitary adventure but had to be a public phenomenon involving the whole community.

The fact that life has an end is not overlooked, but this end never coincides with physical death. It depends on the unknown state of the beyond, the solidity or ephemerality of survival, the persistence of memory, the erosion of fame, and the intervention of supernatural beings. Between the moment of death and the end of survival there is an interval that Christianity, like the other religions of salvation, has extended to eternity. But in the popular mind the idea of infinite immortality is less important than the idea of an extension. In our first model, the afterlife is essentially a period of waiting characterized by peace and repose. In this state the dead wait, according to the promise of the Church, for what will be the true end of life, the glorious resurrection and the life of the world to come.

The dead live a diminished life in which the most desirable state is sleep, the sleep of the future blessed who have taken the precaution of being buried near the saints. Their sleep may be troubled owing to their own past impiety, the stupidity or treachery of survivors, or the mysterious laws of nature. In this case they cannot rest; they wander and return. The living do not mind being close to the dead in churches, parks, and markets, provided they remain asleep. But it is impossible to forbid these returns; so they must be regulated, channelled. Society permits the dead to return only on certain days set aside by custom, such as carnivals; then it can control their presence and ward off its effects. The Latin Christianity of the early Middle Ages reduced the ancient risk of their return by installing them among the living, at the center of public life. The gray ghosts of paganism became the peaceful recumbent figures, whose sleep was likely to remain untroubled thanks to the protection of the Church and the saints; later, thanks to the Masses and prayers said in their behalf.

This conception of life after death as a state of repose or peaceful sleep lasted much longer than one might believe. It is surely one of the most tenacious forms of the old attitude toward death.

Death may be tamed, divested of the blind violence of natural forces, and ritualized, but it is never experienced as a neutral phenomenon. It always remains a misfortune, a malheur. It is remarkable that in the old Romance languages physical pain, psychological suffering, grief, crime, punishment, and the reverses of fortune were all expressed by the same word, derived from malum, either alone or in combination with other words: in French, malheur, maladie, malchance, le malin (misfortune, illness, mishap, the devil). It was not until later that an attempt was made to distinguish the various meanings. In the beginning there was only one evil that had various aspects: suffering, sin, and death. Christianity explained all of these aspects at once by the doctrine of original sin. There is probably no other myth that has such profound roots in the collective unconscious. It expressed a universal sense of the constant presence of evil. Resignation was not, therefore, submission to a benevolent nature, or a biological necessity, as it is today, as it was no doubt among the Epicureans or Stoics; rather it is the recognition of an evil inseparable from man.

The Death of the Self

Such is the original situation, as defined by the relationship of our four themes. Later, as one or more of these fundamental elements varied, the situation changed.

The second model, the death of the self, is obtained quite simply by a shift of the sense of destiny toward the individual.

We recall that the model was originally limited to an elite of rich, educated, and powerful persons in the eleventh century, and still earlier to the isolated, organized, and exemplary world of monks and canons. It was in this milieu that the traditional relationship between self and other was first overthrown, and the sense of one's own identity prevailed over submission to the collective destiny. Everyone became separated from the community and the species by his growing awareness of himself. The individual insisted on assembling the molecules of his own biography, but only the spark of death enabled him to fuse them into a whole. A life thus unified
acquired an autonomy that placed it apart; its relations with others and with society were transformed. Friends came to be possessed like objects, while inanimate objects were desired like living beings. No doubt the balance sheet of the biography should have been closed at the formidable hour of death, but soon it was carried beyond, under the pressure of a desire to be more—something death could not touch. These determined men colonized the beyond like some new continent, by means of Masses and pious endowments. The chief instrument of their enterprise, their guarantee of continuity between this world and the next, was the will. The will served both to justify the love of earth and to make an investment in heaven, thanks to the transition of a good death.

Individualism triumphed in an age of conversions, spectacular penitences, and prodigious patronage, but also of profitable businesses; an age of unprecedented and immediate pleasures and of immoderate love of life.

So much for awareness of the individual. It was inevitable that such an exaltation of the individual, even if it was more empirical than doctrinal, would cause some changes in the third theme, the nature of the afterlife. The passion for being oneself and for being more than was manifested during a single lifetime spread by contagion to the afterlife. The strong individual of the later Middle Ages could not be satisfied with the peaceful but passive conception of requies. He ceased to be the surviving but subdued homo totus. He split into two parts: a body that experienced pleasure or pain and an immortal soul that was released by death. The body disappeared, pending a resurrection that was accepted as a dogma but never really assimilated at the popular level. However, the idea of an immortal soul, the seat of individuality, which had long been cultivated in the world of clergymen, gradually spread, from the eleventh to the seventeenth century, until eventually it gained almost universal acceptance. This new eschatology caused the word death to be replaced by trite circumlocutions such as “he gave up the ghost” or “God has his soul.”

This fully conscious soul was no longer content to sleep the sleep of expectation like the homo totus of old—or like the poor. Its immortal existence, or rather its immaterial activity, expressed the individual’s desire to assert his creative identity in this world and the next, his refusal to let it dissolve into some biological or social anonymity. It was a transformation of the nature of human existence that may well explain the cultural advance of the Latin West at this time.

So the model of the death of the self differs from the older model of the same death with respect to two of our themes, that of the individual and that of the afterlife. The second and fourth parameters, on the other hand, have hardly moved. Their relative immobility protected the model from too sudden a change. It gave it a centuries-old stability that can be deceptive and that can give the impression that things had not changed at all.

Our fourth theme, belief in evil, remained virtually unchanged. It was necessary to the economy of the will and to the maintenance of a love of life that was based partly on an awareness of its fragility. It is obviously an essential element of permanence.

The second, defense against nature, might have been affected by the changes in the sense of the individual and of the afterlife. It was certainly threatened, but its equilibrium was restored.

The desire to assert one’s identity and to come to terms with the pleasures of life gave a new and formidable importance to the hour of death mentioned in the Ave Maria, a prayer for a good death that dates from the end of this period. This could very well have upset the relationship of the dying man to his survivors or to society, making death pathetic, as in the romantic era, or solitary, like the death of the hermit, and abolishing the calming ritual that men had created as a defense against natural death. Death might then have become wild and terrifying, because of the force of emotion and the fear of hell. But this did not happen, because a new and totally opposite ceremony took the place of what had been threatened by individualism and its agonies.

The deathbed scene, which had once been the most important part of the ceremony, persisted, sometimes with just a touch more pathos, until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the pathetic element declined under the influence of an attitude of mingled acceptance and indifference. A series of ceremonies was inserted between death and burial: the funeral procession, which became eccentric in character, and the service at the church in the presence of the body, which was the work of the urban reform movement of the late Middle Ages and the mendicant orders. Death was not abandoned to nature, from which the ancients had claimed it in order to tame it. On the contrary, death was more concealed than ever, for the new rites also included a fact that may seem negligible but that is highly significant. The face of the cadaver, which had been exposed to the eyes of the community and which continued to be for a long time in Mediterranean countries and still is today in Byzantine cultures, was covered by the successive masks of the sewn shroud, the coffin, and the catafalque or representation. After the fourteenth century, the material covering of the deceased became a theatrical monument such as was erected for the decor of mystery plays or for grand entrances.

The phenomenon of the concealment of the body and face of the deceased is contemporaneous with the attempts we find in the macabre arts to represent the underground decay of bodies, the underside of life, which was all the more bitter because this life was so well loved. This interest was
transitory, but the concealment of the body was permanent. The features of the deceased, once calmly accepted, were henceforth covered because they might be upsetting, that is, frightening. The defense against untamed nature was invaded by a new fear, but this fear was immediately overcome by the taboo to which it gave rise. Once the body was conjured away by the catafalque or representation, the old familiarity with death was restored and everything returned to normal.

The definitive concealment of the body and the prolonged use of the will are the two most significant elements of the model of the death of the self. The first balances the second, maintaining the traditional order of death against the pathos and nostalgia of the individualism illustrated by the will.

Remote and Imminent Death

This model of the death of the self, with all that it preserved in the way of traditional defenses and a sense of evil, influenced customs until the eighteenth century. However, profound changes were beginning to take place by the end of the sixteenth century, to some extent in actual customs and conscious ideas, but more especially in the secret world of the imagination. These changes, although barely perceptible, are very important. A vast transformation of sensibility was under way. The beginning of a reversal—a remote and imperfect adumbration of the great reversal of today—was starting to appear in representations of death.

Where death had once been immediate, familiar, and tame, it gradually began to be surreptitious, violent, and savage. Already, as we have seen, the old familiarity had been maintained only by means of the artifices of the later Middle Ages: more solemn rites and the camouflage of the body under the representation.

In the modern era, death, by its very remoteness, has become fascinating; it aroused the same strange curiosity, the same fantasies, the same perverse deviations and eroticism, which is why this model of death is called "remote and imminent death."

What was stirring in the depths of the collective unconscious is something that had hardly moved at all for thousands of years, our second theme, the defense against nature. Death, once tame, was now preparing its return to the savage state. It was a discontinuous movement, made up of violent jolts, long imperceptible advances, and real or apparent retreats.

At first sight it may seem surprising that this period of returning savagery was also characterized by the rise of rationalism, the rise of science and technology, and by faith in progress and its triumph over nature.

But it was at this time that the barriers patiently maintained for thousands of years in order to contain nature gave way at two points that are similar and often confused: love and death. Beyond a certain threshold, pain and pleasure, agony and orgasm are one, as illustrated by the myth of the erection of the hanged man. These emotions associated with the edge of the abyss inspire desire and fear. An early manifestation of the great modern fear of death now appears for the first time: the fear of being buried alive, which implies the conviction that there is an impure and reversible state that partakes of both life and death.

This fear might have developed and spread and, combined with other effects of the civilization of the Enlightenment, given birth (over a century ahead of time) to our culture. This is not the first time that the late eighteenth century seems to lead directly into the twentieth. But instead, something happened that could not have been foreseen and that restored the actual chronology.

The Death of the Other

If the momentum really did carry from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, it hardly seems that way to the unsophisticated observer. The continuity exists on deeper levels, but only rarely does it show above the surface. This is because in the nineteenth century, which saw the triumph of the industrial and agricultural techniques born of the scientific thought of the previous period, romanticism (the word is convenient) gave birth to a sensibility characterized by passions without limit or reason. A revolution in feeling seized the West and shook it to its foundation. All four of our themes were transformed.

The determining factor was the change in the first theme, the sense of the individual. Up to now this theme had alternated between two extremes: the sense of a universal and common destiny and the sense of a personal and specific biography. In the nineteenth century both of these declined in favor of a third sense, formerly confused with the first two: the sense of the other. But this was not just any other. Affectivity, formerly diffuse, was henceforth concentrated on a few rare beings whose disappearance could no longer be tolerated and caused a dramatic crisis: the death of the other. It was a revolution in feeling that was just as important to history as the related revolutions in ideas, politics, industry, socioeconomic conditions, or demography.

An original type of sensibility now came to dominate all others, a type that is well expressed by the English word privacy. It found its place in the nuclear family, remodeled by its new function of absolute affectivity. The
family replaced both the traditional community and the individual of the late Middle Ages and early modern times. Privacy is distinguished both from individualism and from the sense of community, and expresses a mode of relating to others that is quite specific and original.

Under these conditions, the death of the self had lost its meaning. The fear of death, born of the fantasies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was transferred from the self to the other, the loved one. The death of the other aroused a pathos that had once been repressed. The ceremonies of the bedroom or of mourning, which had once been used as a barrier to counteract excess emotion—or indifference—were deritualized and presented as the spontaneous expression of the grief of the survivors. But what the survivors mourned was no longer the fact of dying but the physical separation from the deceased. On the contrary, death now ceased to be sad. It was exalted as a moment to be desired. Untamed nature invaded the stronghold of culture, where it encountered humanized nature and merged with it in the compromise of "beauty." Death was no longer familiar and tame, as in traditional societies, but neither was it absolutely wild. It had become moving and beautiful like nature, like the immensity of nature, the sea or the moors. 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.

But death could not have appeared in the guise of the highest beauty if it had not ceased to be associated with evil. The ancient and intimate relationship between death and physical illness, psychic pain, and sin was beginning to break down. Our fourth theme, the belief in evil, which had long been stationary, was preparing to withdraw, and the first stronghold it deserted was the heart and the mind of man, which was believed to be its original and impregnable seat. What a revolution in thought! It is a phenomenon as important as the return of untamed nature within the human psyche, and indeed, the two are related; it is as if evil and nature had changed places.

The first barrier that fell in the eighteenth century—perhaps as early as the seventeenth in England—was belief in hell and in the connection between death and sin or spiritual punishment. (The necessity of physical illness was not yet questioned.) Scholarly thought and theology raised the problem as early as the eighteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the debate in Catholic and Puritan cultures was over; belief in hell had disappeared. It was no longer conceivable that the dead departed could run such a risk. At most, among Catholics, there still existed a method of purification: time in purgatory, shortened by the pious solicitude of survivors. No sense of guilt, no fear of the beyond remained to counteract the fascination of death, transformed into the highest beauty.

If hell is gone, heaven has changed too; this is our third theme, the afterlife. We have followed the slow transition from the sleep of the homo totus to the glory of the immortal soul. The nineteenth century saw the triumph of another image of the beyond. The next world becomes the scene of the reunion of those whom death has separated but who have never accepted this separation: a re-creation of the affections of earth, purged of their dross, assured of eternity. It is the paradise of Christians or the astral world of spiritualists and psychics. But it is also the world of the memories of nonbelievers and freethinkers who deny the reality of a life after death. In the piety of their love, they preserve the memories of their departed with an intensity equal to the realistic afterlife of Christians or psychics. The difference in doctrine between these two groups may be great, but it becomes negligible in the practice of what may be called the cult of the dead. They have all built the same castle, in the image of earthly homes, where they will be reunited—in dream or in reality, who knows?—with those whom they have never ceased to love.

The Invisible Death

In the nineteenth century the psychological landscape was completely transformed. Neither the nature of the four themes nor the relationships among them were the same. The situation that resulted did not last more than a century and a half. But the model of death that came next, our model, which I have called the invisible death, does not challenge the underlying tendency or the structural character of the changes of nineteenth century. It continues them, even if it seems to contradict them in its most spectacular effects. It is as if beyond a certain threshold, these tendencies produced the opposite effects.

Our contemporary model of death is still determined by the sense of privacy, but it has become more rigorous, more demanding. It is often said that the sense of privacy is declining. This is because today we demand the perfection of the absolute; we tolerate none of the compromises that romantic society still accepted beneath its rhetoric—or beneath its hypocrisy, as we would say. Intimacy must be either total or nonexistent. There is no middle ground between success and failure. It is possible that our attitude toward life is dominated by the certainty of failure. On the other hand, our attitude toward death is defined by the impossible hypothesis of success. That is why it makes no sense.

The modern attitude toward death is an extension of the affectivity
of the nineteenth century. The last inspiration of this inventive affectivity was to protect the dying or the invalid from his own emotions by concealing the seriousness of his condition until the end. When the dying man discovered the pious game, he lent himself to it so as not to disappoint the other's solicitude. The dying man's relations with those around him were now determined by a respect for this loving lie.

In order for the dying man, his entourage, and the society that observed them to consent to this situation, the protection of the patient had to outweigh the joys of a last communion with him. Let us not forget that in the nineteenth century, death, by virtue of its beauty, had become an occasion for the most perfect union between the one leaving and those remaining behind. The last communion with God and/or with others was the great privilege of the dying. For centuries there was no question of depriving them of this privilege. But when the lie was maintained to the end, it eliminated this communion and its joys. Even when it was reciprocal and conspiratorial, the lie destroyed the spontaneity and pathos of the last moments.

Actually, the intimacy of these final exchanges had already been poisoned, first by the ugliness of disease, and later by the transfer to the hospital. Death became dirty, and then it became medicalized. The horror and fascination of death had fixed themselves for a moment on the apparent death and had then been sublimated by the beauty of the Last Communion. But the horror returned, without the fascination, in the repellent form of the serious illness and the care it required.

When the last of the traditional defenses against death and sex gave way, the medical profession could have taken over the role of the community. It did so in the case of sex, as is attested by the medical literature on masturbation. It tried to do so in the case of death by isolating it in the scientific laboratory and the hospital, from which the emotions would be banished. Under these conditions it was better to communicate silently in the complicity of a mutual lie.

It is obvious that the sense of the individual and his identity, what we mean when we speak of "possessing one's own death," has been overcome by the solicitude of the family.

But how are we to explain the abdication of the community? How has the community come to reverse its role and to forbid the mourning which it was responsible for imposing until the twentieth century? The answer is that the community feels less and less involved in the death of one of its members. First, because it no longer thinks it necessary to defend itself against a nature which has been domesticated once and for all by the advance of technology, especially medical technology. Next, because it no longer has a sufficient sense of solidarity; it has actually abandoned responsi-

bility for the organization of collective life. The community in the traditional sense of the word no longer exists. It has been replaced by an enormous mass of atomized individuals.

But if this disappearance explains one abdication, it does not explain the powerful resurgence of other prohibitions. This vast and formless mass that we call society is, as we know, maintained and motivated by a new system of constraints and controls. It is also subject to irresistible movements that put it in a state of crisis and impose a transitory unity of aggression or denial. One of these movements has unified mass society against death. More precisely, it has led society to be ashamed of death, more ashamed than afraid, to behave as if death did not exist. If the sense of the other, which is a form of the sense of the self taken to its logical conclusion, is the first cause of the present state of death, then shame—and the resulting taboo—is the second.

But this shame is a direct consequence of the definitive retreat of evil. As early as the eighteenth century, man had begun to reduce the power of the devil, to question his reality. Hell was abandoned, at least in the case of relatives and dear friends, the only people who counted. Along with hell went sin and all the varieties of spiritual and moral evil. They were no longer regarded as part of human nature but as social problems that could be eliminated by a good system of supervision and punishment. The general advance of science, morality, and organization would lead quite easily to happiness. But in the middle of the nineteenth century, there was still the obstacle of physical illness and death. There was no question of eliminating that. The romantics circumvented or assimilated it. They beautified death, the gateway to an anthropomorphic beyond. They preserved its immemorial association with illness, pain, and agony; these things aroused pity rather than distaste. The trouble began with distaste: Before people thought of abolishing physical illness, they ceased to tolerate its sight, sounds, and smells.

Medicine reduced pain; it even succeeded in eliminating it altogether. The goal glimpsed in the eighteenth century had almost been reached. Evil was no longer part of human nature, as the religions, especially Christianity, believed. It still existed, of course, but outside of man, in certain marginal spaces that morality and politics had not yet colonized, in certain deviant behaviors such as war, crime, and nonconformity, which had not yet been corrected but which would one day be eliminated by society just as illness and pain had been eliminated by medicine.

But if there is no more evil, what do we do about death? To this question modern society offers two answers.

The first is a massive admission of defeat. We ignore the existence of a scandal that we have been unable to prevent; we act as if it did not exist,
and thus mercilessly force the bereaved to say nothing. A heavy silence has fallen over the subject of death. When this silence is broken, as it sometimes is in America today, it is to reduce death to the insignificance of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned indifference. Either way, the result is the same: Neither the individual nor the community is strong enough to recognize the existence of death.

And yet this attitude has not annihilated death or the fear of death. On the contrary, it has allowed the old savagery to creep back under the mask of medical technology. The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the transi or skeleton of macabre rhetoric. There seems to be a correlation between the "evacuation" of death, the last refuge of evil, and the return of this same death, no longer tame. This should not surprise us. The belief in evil was necessary to the taming of death; the disappearance of the belief has restored death to its savage state.

A small elite of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists has been struck by this contradiction. They propose not so much to "evacuate" death as to humanize it. They acknowledge the necessity of death, but they want it to be accepted and no longer shameful. Although they may consult the ancient wisdom, there is no question of turning back or of rediscovering the evil that has been abolished. They propose to reconcile death with happiness. Death must simply become the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society that is not torn, not even overly upset by the idea of a biological transition without significance, without pain or suffering, and ultimately without fear.