

THE DANCE OF DEATH

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I suppose that the oldest, the most persistent, and the most searching question that has haunted the minds of men since the dawn of life on this planet is this: "If a man die, shall he live again?" It is a question that men of every age have attempted to answer in their own way, from the groping superstitions of primitive man to the agnostic reasoning of the men of science of today. It is one of those sovereign questions that lie at the heart of religion and poetry and music and of all the written and animate records of man. It colours man's view of death in every age of recorded history.

Now it is not the function of the historical observer to moralize or even to philosophize. It is only seemly that, when he comes to examine some of the phases of man's reaction to death, he approach such a study with humility, and, like Montaigne, bear himself "quietly and constantly" in the presence of one of the high themes of human life. He should at the outset remind himself that modern science and all the advances that it has brought with it have not opened any of the great seals of human destiny. We human beings of the modern world are still surrounded by dark mysteries. Strange ancestral influences move about and within us, and none more so than those that concern the impenetrable mystery of death and what may lie beyond its dark threshold. Men still beat upon the closed door, and then endeavour in their poor way to reconcile themselves to the echoes of their unanswered knocking. The secret remains sealed, the question remains. Here it is a final truth that,

What a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life.

La Rochefoucauld said that man can no more look steadily at death than at the sun. Renan expressed the same thought in another way: "If we could have the meaning of death explained to us, only the pure in heart could stand it." Man may, however, without harm to himself, examine the way in which death and the ideas of death have been reflected in writings and on monuments and in works of art. I know of no more worthy mood in which the observer may come to the study of such records than that conveyed in the answer of Anatole France who, when he was asked why he, an atheist, removed his hat while a funeral procession passed by, replied, "I am saluting my own destiny." That is the spirit in which we may proceed to examine the great folk-drama of the *Dance of Death*.

Man has been defined as the one animal who knows that he must die. The reaction to this knowledge has varied from age to age, depending upon circumstances of life, the mood of the time, and the current views and hopes of man regarding the nature of death and the human soul. The period of recorded history that reacted most violently to the idea of death was the Middle Ages. Life in those centuries was spent in the shadow of continuous war and pestilence. Men felt the primitive horror of death, dwelt upon its gruesome aspects, and developed a state of fear that expressed itself in superstitions, witchcraft, and a thousand other morbid customs. The Church endeavoured to resolve such moods of despair and fear by holding out the offer of salvation through righteous living, and in order to enforce its teachings of a moral life, it laid chief emphasis upon the "four last things" — Death, the Last Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. These were portrayed in sermons and other media. Gradually, in dramatic and pictorial forms, death became personified as a skeleton accompanying the individual, and in some way, out of the mass of superstitious exercises, death became associated with a dance and music. In this way there evolved the *Dance of Death* or the *Totentanz* or *Danse Macabre* motive that for nearly six hundred years has persisted in the art and literature of Europe.

As a background and setting for the study of the origin and development of the *Dance of Death* legend, we should glance at the ideas of death which prevailed in earlier times. It may be said that among the earlier civilizations the dominating viewpoint was that of the *carpe diem* philosophy. Death was regarded as the necessary converse of birth and consequently held no great terror. The Egyptians believed in an existence after death; in fact, so unquestioning was their belief that often when a king died his whole household died with him. For most primitive peoples, death and conceptions of life after death were wrapped in superstition and magic, and so gave rise to ideas of ghosts and evil spirits, black magic, and the most varying and bizarre imagery turning about a hereafter. The Chinese, however, while they have never denied the idea of a personal immortality, have never been very much preoccupied with it. For them a man is part of the great family — a stream of life flowing on forever — and a man's immortality is made visible in his grandchild. They have always been possessed more with the belief that the individual is mortal; that life, which has a fleeting, dream-like quality, should be enjoyed to the full; and that the equality of all in death

is the very heart of the comedy of life and of philosophy. We find Too-Chien writing these lines while the hosts of the Vandals were pouring into Rome:

When you must go, then go,
And make as little fuss as you can.

Such an expression is characteristic of the quiet, half-humorous, half-ironical common-sense of his people.

To the Greeks death was a natural law and held no terror. There were many degrees of belief in immortality. Plato believed that the soul is immortal, but with his usual clarity and honesty he adds: "Considering the feebleness of the human faculties and the uncertainty of the subject, we are inclined to believe that the fewer our words the better." In the *Apology* of Plato there is the account of Socrates addressing the judges before and after sentence. His words are probably the finest Greek expression on death:

For to fear death, sirs, is simply to think we are wise when we are not so. No one knows whether death is not the greatest of all goods that can come to man; and yet men fear it as though they knew it was the greatest of all ills Death must be one of two things: either it is to have no consciousness at all of anything whatever, or else, as some say, it is a kind of change and migration of the soul from this world to another. [In either event, he adds, there is nothing to fear] And you, too, my judges, must think of death with hope, and remember this at least is true — that no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death. He and his are not forgotten by the gods.

The same calm and lofty sentiments are to be found in the epitaphs of the *Greek Anthology* and in the monuments raised over the dead, whether of low or high estate. Of this classical dignity and reserve F. L. Lucas writes:

Death wrings from men, it may be, more sincerity and more insincerity than anything else in their lives; never have they more, and never less, sense of reality, than face to face with annihilation. Alike in the art of their monuments and the poetry of their epitaphs, the Greek race came triumphantly through this ordeal, where even the good sense of the eighteenth century often failed. They had the calm sanity to see Death himself, not as the grimacing demon with skull and crossbones of Etruscan or medieval art, but as the lovely and immortal youth, brother of Sleep, who bears Homer's Sarpedon home to his grave in Lycia, or on a column of a temple at Ephesus gently leads Alceestis to her rest.

Anyone who has seen the funeral monuments in the National Museum in Athens must have been moved by their noble reticence. A slave puts on his mistress's sandals for the last journey; a woman dons her jewels for the last time; a boy stands beside

his dog; a father gazes intensely at the son who passes before him while a little slave weeps in the background. Here are the quiet dignity of sorrow, the beauty and poetry of the simplest gestures of daily life.

It should be noted that the Greek word *skeleton* from which our word is derived meant a shrivelled body or mummy rather than the bony structure in the sense that we now use the word. Similarly for the Greeks death, *thanatos*, was not personified by a skeleton. As we shall see, this idea is a creation of early Christian times. Then, too, one remembers the Greeks' mythical personification of Death in the figure of Charon, the grey old ferryman conveying the departed over the river Styx.

The Romans frequently adopted Homer's definition of Death as the eldest brother of Sleep. They sometimes symbolized the human soul by the figure of a butterfly or bird hovering over the body. Certainly the greatest of the Romans were stoical about death, although usually their stoicism was mixed with a quiet irony. In a Roman lamp of the earlier period there is portrayed a philosopher lecturing on life and death. He is pointing at a skeleton, while below there lies a babe in swaddling clothes. Romans would interpret this as meaning: What does all this speculation about the riddle of life and death amount to? One practical conclusion which the skeleton gives us is, "*Edite! bibite! post mortem nulla voluptas.*" (*Eat! drink! after death no pleasure.*)

The Emperor Hadrian on his death-bed wrote or dictated an address to his soul — lines in which the felicity of Latin in diminutives is shown:

*Animula, vagula, blandula,
Hospes, comesque corporis,
Quae nunc abibis in loca?
Pallidula, rigida, nudula—
Nec, ut soles, dabis jocos.*

English translation of these lines is difficult; the best I have found is this:

Little soul, wavering one, gentle one,
My body's long companion,
What habitation waits for you?
My pallid, shivering, naked one,
No more to jest as you used to do.

Another emperor, Augustus Caesar, in his last hour is said to have asked, "Do you think I have played my part pretty well through the farce of life?" And one of the noblest figures in history, Marcus Aurelius, told himself with hard common-sense that fear of death is unwarranted. Nature, who brings man into

the world, sends him away, and he concluded with these words: "Depart then satisfied, for he also who releases thee is satisfied."

A curious custom at banquets in Roman times was the passing around among the guests of miniature jointed skeletons or little mannikins, the guests being charged to enjoy themselves, because after death they would be like these little images. Petronius mentions this custom in his description of the feast of Trimalchio. The custom was probably much older, as Herodotus tells of a similar ceremony among the Egyptians.

Of course, the philosophy of classical times about which we hear the most is that of Epicurus, stated in the familiar sentence: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The popular interpretation of this saying, regarding it as urging license and a pursuit of pleasure, not only does injustice to the real ideas of Epicurus but completely misses the mark of the spirit of his philosophy. The words really urge a noble acceptance of life because death ends all. This old Epicurean doctrine has had its re-statement in every age. It surges in the most famous of all student drinking songs:

*Gaudeamus igitur
Juvencs dum sumus.*

This song was written in the thirteenth century and had an ecclesiastical background. It is the burden of Robert Herrick's verse of the seventeenth century:

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying.

There were, of course, other views of death in the ancient world. Death, the necessary end of life, was the theme of many pictorial devices which go back to the pre-Christian era — the picture of a skull and crossed bones, a skull and an hour-glass, and urn, and — a more moving device — the effigy of a child lying on its side with its head resting on the skull, representing the allegory of life. On an early Italian statuette of this type there is this inscription below: "Time passes; death comes." All such symbols were in reality variations on the *memento mori* theme which later became so popular in the mediæval period. They were frankly designed to remind people constantly of their mortality and frailty, and they must have produced reactions of mind ranging from remorse to a dull resignation. Death as the threshold of a future existence was to be seen in the design of a phoenix rising from the flames, or in the picture showing corn springing up around a skull. In early Christian times the pelican was regarded and used as an emblem of resurrection. This belief was based on the fable that

the female pelican wounded her breast and revived her apparently dead young ones with her blood. And finally, as an eternal theme running through the writings about death, there was a recognition that from the inexorable fact of death, life draws its final sweetness, and that death is the greatest of all incentives to diligence and right living: "Teach us to remember that we must die, so that we may become wise" (*Psalms* 90: 12). And in *Ecclesiastes* (9:10) there is the great injunction: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." This was a conception of life which appealed to Doctor Samuel Johnson, for in his watch he had engraved the motto "For the night cometh."

During the early Christian centuries the rather noble *carpe diem* philosophy of the ancient world gradually gave way to the Christian *memento mori* — "remember death." Belief in the nobility of man and faith in his destiny lapsed into superstition and a contempt for the physical body. To the ancients the symbols of the skull and crossed bones and the little mannikins meant that they should enjoy themselves in this life, for it might be the only life they would know; to the medieval people these symbols meant something very different. To the ancients the little skeletons passed about at banquets were at best *larvæ* or ghosts; the medieval men turned these *larvæ* to gaunt skeletons. Under the authority of the church, which in those centuries held the keys of knowledge and salvation, man was represented as surrounded from his birth by legions of demons, and the grinning skeletons were made to inspire fear and to represent the universal power of death over all classes.

Indeed, the smell of the charnel house hangs about the earlier centuries of the medieval period. The ravages of epidemic disease and famine, the illiteracy of the public (high and low), the constant wars, and the inevitable hard lot of the common people produced a miasma of fear and a dull acceptance of the vanity of all earthly things. This spirit of the Middle Ages has been well reconstructed in the closing chorus of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The time is the twelfth century, the scene the murder of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury; the refrain is "fear":

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as types of the common
man,
Of the men and women who shut the door and sit by the fire;
Who fear the blessing of God, the loneliness of the night
of God, the surrender required, the deprivation inflicted;

Who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God;
 Who fear the hand at the window, the fire in the thatch,
 the fist in the tavern, the push in the canal,
 Less than we fear the love of God.

We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we
 acknowledge

That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the blood of the
 martyrs and the agony of saints

Is upon our heads.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Death became a frightful reality to these people in the ravages of successive outbreaks of the plague, commonly known as "the Black Death," and it is interesting to note that it was at such times that the *Dance of Death* theme gained its greatest force. At such seasons of the plague doctors attended patients clothed in leather and wearing masks that completely covered the head and were provided with glass eye-pieces and long bird-like beaks filled with antiseptic spices — apparitions that can hardly have made the patients feel at all happier.

As the social misery increased in these centuries, fear inevitably played an increasing part in the Church's teaching and symbolism of worship. In particular, a final judgment of all mankind was preached, and in pictures of this last judgment hell took on terrifying form; a favourite representation showed hell as the open throat of a monster into which men and women, masters and servants, priests and people, were thrust. The pervading refrain was the vast, reverberating, and gloomy *Dies irae* (Day of wrath).

Now while life was stern enough in the Middle Ages, and while actual fears and those conjured up by religion played hardly upon the minds of men, there was a characteristic of the times which tempered life and made it bearable — humour. It was humour of a sort that reached its high point in Rabelais. The very incongruity of these two things — fear of death and humour — produced many of the strange aspects of the Middle Ages that we find so difficult to understand. In art it produced a type of composition to which we apply the term *macabre*. It is a strain that runs through all subsequent literature, art, and music: Hamlet jesting over Yorick's skull in the graveyard; Tam o' Shanter watching the dance of the witches in Alloway Kirk; the well-known *Danse Macabre* of Saint-Saens portraying in music the midnight dance of the spirits which hurry back to their graves as the cock crows. This macabre strain finds its most complete expression in the *Dance of Death* theme. Here the repulsive and terrifying features of death were portrayed with

sarcastic mockery in an allegorical pageant that also stressed the theme of death as levelling all distinctions — an overtone of the faintly stirring concept of democracy. The wall paintings, which were the most vivid representation of the theme, showed the panorama of human life — all ranks and degrees of society from the Pope and the King down to the peasant, the fool, and the little child — called together in the common equality of death. The *Dance of Death* is thus an expression of the tortured soul of the Middle Ages and a great cultural index of several centuries of human life.

The custom and legend stemmed in part from the old morality plays that were performed either in the church or in the churchyard in the early fourteenth century. Such ceremonies usually opened with a sermon on death by a monk. Then there came forth from the charnel house of the churchyard a series of figures dressed in the traditional mask of death, a close-fitting yellowish linen suit painted to resemble a skeleton. One of the figures would address his victim who was to accompany him to the grave. There was a remonstrance on the part of the individual, but he was led away. The individuals were dressed to represent the various classes of society. At first Death and his victims moved at a slow, measured pace. Later Death as a messenger became associated with fiddles and the music of the time, and in this way a dance resulted. As the painter's art developed, the dance theme was painted on the walls of cemeteries, charnel houses, churches, and cloisters, and such paintings were to be found in practically all the European countries in the fifteenth century. The same motive appeared in tapestries, sculpture, stained-glass windows, and drinking cups. It formed the theme of verses and was especially popular in woodcuts, engravings, and in the decoration of manuscripts and illuminated books. These designs were in a sense all *memento mori* to which there is a reference in *The Merchant of Venice* (II: 2) where Portia says:

I had rather be married to a death's head
With a bone in his mouth than to either of these.

It should be pointed out that the word *dance* must not be taken too literally. While in some instances the representation is that of a dance in the accepted sense, more often it is a procession, and presently the conception and the term *Dance of Death* came to be used in a figurative sense, the whole a symbol portraying the inevitability and the equality of all men in death. As the fifteenth-century English poet, John Lydgate, put it in his *Dance of Death* verse, it was the purpose "to shew this world is but a pilgrimage."

The oldest *Dance of Death* to which an exact date can be given is the *Danse Macabre* of the cloisters of the Churchyard of the Innocents in Paris, a work completed in 1425. The paintings were arranged in ten arcades facing the cemetery. These were notable works of art, and in 1485 they were reproduced in woodcuts together with verses in French and were printed by the priest-printer, Guy de Marchand, to make one of the first books printed in Paris and one that was immensely popular for over a century. The order of the figures followed the traditional medieval hierarchy from the Pope down to the poor commoners. The physician is among the lower social orders in the succession. He wears a long gown and skull cap, and his hair is long and curled at the end. He is holding aloft a flask of urine, for the two professional poses of the physician of the medieval period were taking the pulse and "urine-gazing," the latter practice a legacy of Arabic medicine. There was another famous series of paintings of the same period in the Kermaria Parish Church in Brittany, that province of the macabre.

One of the most celebrated of these medieval wall paintings was the Gross Basel painted on the churchyard wall of a Dominican cloister, dating from 1480 and finally destroyed in 1805. The physician of the group wears cloak and cap, his face is tense and worried, and he has dropped the urine bottle. Death is represented as a true skeleton, but the hands are not skeletonized. Beneath these paintings there are rhymed dialogues with the invitation of Death and the reply of the victim. Another was the painting at Berne on the garden wall of a Dominican cloister, destroyed in 1660 but preserved in water-colour copies. Death with a grin comes up behind the physician and is about to break the urine bottle.

The verses and pictures of the Paris *Danse Macabre* were taken to England as early as 1430, and in the reign of Henry VI a *Dance of Death* was painted on the north wall of the cloister of old St. Paul's. It represented all estates, with the speeches of Death and the answers of the various figures. The cloister was pulled down in 1559, and no copy of the painting is preserved. The English verses accompanying it were written by the celebrated monk of Bury, John Lydgate, and published in London in 1554. *Dance of Death* paintings were also found in the Tower of London, in the Bishop's Palace at Croydon, at Salisbury, Stratford, and at Hexham Priory. In a painting at Nürnberg (1493) the skeletons portraying Death are dancing wildly. The more sepulchral note was occasionally varied by representing Death as conqueror. The most celebrated fresco in this style is the "Triumph of Death" at Pisa.

Even from this brief recital it is apparent that in the fifteenth century *Dance Macabre* themes were everywhere and immensely popular. As Aldous Huxley remarks, "To the fifteenth-century artist a good death-appeal was as sure a key to popularity as a good sex-appeal at the present time." The mood and the motif are to be found in the writings of fifteenth-century writers, notably François Villon (1431-1489). In the vigor and surge, the acrid jesting and bitter realism of Villon's ballads there is the spirit of medieval Paris, its sinners and saints, its mocking laughter, its flashes of beauty, its strange pathos and preoccupation with death, its tumultuous life.

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, however, there was a gradual breaking away from the old *Dance of Death* theme that had expressed such a grotesque view of death. The motive became more dramatic and the art incomparably better. The old stereotyped parade of various classes of society became less evident. The best representations of this period are the work of one of the great masters of art, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg (1471-1528). Probably the finest is one of the best known of Dürer's engravings, *Ritter, Tod und Teufel* (The Knight or Rider, Death and the Devil), 1513. This is a masterpiece that represents an ideal of life — the knight fearing neither death nor the devil, but riding on his quest through the world.

We now come to the work in which the *Dance of Death* motive reached the highest point of its development — that of Hans Holbein, the greatest master of this genre of art. The woodcuts of his cycle of the *Imagines Mortis* constitute one of the world's great masterpieces of pictorial art. Holbein, who was born at Augsburg about 1497, had Erasmus as one of his first patrons, did his first major work in Basel, and later went to England where, under the patronage of Henry VIII, he rose to fame and became one of the most prolific painters of any age. He died of the plague in 1554. Henry VIII once said of him, "I can if I please make seven lords of seven ploughmen, but I cannot make one Holbein out of seven lords." The subject of the *Dance of Death* had an intriguing interest for Holbein. His first work of this kind concerns the drawings of the death theme for the sheath of a dagger. Twelve figures are arranged in separate pairs, expressing a balanced and rhythmic unit.

The alphabet of the *Totentanz* is the second work. Twenty-four letters of the alphabet were designed, each with a *Dance of Death* scene, and were intended as a collection of initial letters to be used in book printing. The physician is portrayed in the

letter M. He is dressed in a long robe and is examining the urine against the light of a candle. Death has his hand on the physician's left shoulder.

The third work is the so-called *Great Dance of Death*. The earliest complete edition was published in French at Lyons in 1538 by the Trechels, printers of German origin. After a verbose preface there follow forty-one woodcuts, each having its text from the Latin Bible above it and below a quatrain in French by Corrozet. The designs are by Holbein and the woodcuts are presumed to have been done by the great engraver, Hans Lutzelburger. The book was anonymous. It is now known that the cuts were made eleven years before, but why they were not published until 1538 and why Holbein's name was withheld are questions still unexplained.

The illustration on the title page is of great interest. At the side of a stone table placed vertically, Holbein appears under a curtain which Death is in the act of raising in order to show him the scenes of human life that Death is going to commission him to sketch. On seeing the dreadful spectacle, an expression of astonishment, horror, and dismay spreads over the artist's face. Scattered about on the ground are many representations of grandeur, rank, riches, art, and science which Death is trampling under foot. On the top of the table there is a portrait of Holbein, also three nymphs signifying the vanity of human life.

Plate XXVI of the series represents the physician. This is a very human picture and one of the best plates in the cycle. The physician is sitting in his study with his dog asleep on the floor. Into this retreat Death comes, leading a sick old man who is wasted with disease. The scene is really a consultation between Death and the doctor as to the fate of the patient. The verse below the plate, however, seems to indicate that the death of the physician, and not that of the old man, is at hand. The English translation is as follows:

Well knowest thou the malady
In order to succour the patient,
And yet knoweth not, addle-pate,
The disease by which thou, thyself
are about to die.

Over the plate is the quotation from Luke IV, 23, "Physician, heal thyself." It should be pointed out in passing that this saying, which has become a proverb used to poke fun at the physician, is inaccurately translated. The original Greek which was translated into the Vulgate version as '*medica, cura te ipsum*' meant, "Physician, treat thyself," something quite different from the accepted version.

The escutcheon at the end of the book shows a shield fractured in several places. On it is a skull and at the top a crest in the form of a helmet surmounted by two arm bones, the hands of which are holding a ragged piece of stone, and between them an hour glass. In one of the modern editions of this book Austin Dobson prefixes verses in which the last line of each stanza is "There is no king more terrible than Death."

Holbein's *Dance of Death* is less a dance than a series of charming groups of persons of various classes of his time, among whom Death is introduced as an emblem of man's mortality. It is a comedy of life. The old horror and sin motive have gone. It is a product of the Renaissance period. Holbein's effective classification of human types probably contributed much to the widespread popularity of the theme in the Renaissance. Certainly Holbein secularized the old myth. Moreover, his handling of the theme was the artistic equivalent of the growing social consciousness that had expressed itself in the rhyme of Jack Cade's rebellion:

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

For nearly three hundred years the *Dance of Death* theme consisted mainly in imitations of Holbein, for with the upward surge of the human spirit that we call the Renaissance, the mediaeval tone was altered. As Stevenson has said, "It is all very well to believe in immortality, but one must first believe in life." Renaissance man was still half in love with death, but he exulted in life. The image of death evoked the fatalism as of old, but it was not a bitter or diabolical fatalism but rather a melancholy emotion in the presence of the fragility and transience of the things and creatures of this world. This mood persisted. It was customary, for example, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for emblems of man's mortality to be displayed on every occasion and in all sorts of places. Philosophical discussions on death were introduced at anatomy lectures. In anatomical theatres, students and the attending public present at dissections were reminded of their frailty by banners hung about the room on which were such legends as: *Pulvis et umbra sumus*. The edification was probably shared by the visitors, not by the students.

How completely the ideas about death had changed by the seventeenth century may be illustrated by the following passage from *Pilgrim's Progress*. John Bunyan (1628-1688) in his younger days was tormented by the grim thoughts of death and

judgment as much as any man who has lived. But he went through the deep waters of religious doubt and terror to emerge with a faith in God and man that seems centuries removed from the ugly fears of the medieval period. This passage describing the death of Mr. Valiant-for-truth is not only one of the finest pieces of prose in our language, but is, I think, the noblest passage on death that has been written by a man of our race. Its appeal is universal:

Mr. Valiant-for-truth was taken with a summons. . . . Then said he: 'I am going to my Father's . . . yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who now will be my rewarder' So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

The theme continued to turn up on playing cards and in that curious miscellany, the almanac. It appeared in art works of Rembrandt, Tiepolo, and other painters. In literature it found expression notably in the eighteenth-century poets of the 'graveyard' school, in the *Night Thoughts* of Edward Young (1681-1765), and in *The Elegy in a Country Churchyard* of Thomas Gray (1716-1765), whose lines still echo down to our own day.

In the early nineteenth century the idea was also taken up by the caricaturists, notably Rowlandson. Works of this period show death for the most part in broad satire as the punishment for a life of vice. The most notable example is the *English Dance of Death* from the designs of Thomas Rowlandson. Some of the plates concern the medical profession. One of them, *The Quack Doctor*, shows Death as the quack's assistant. Below the plate the text reads:

Thus, as the pious Churchman prayed,
The doctor in a whisper said,
'My skill in vain its power applies,
'Tis Fate commands: the patient dies.
No call requires me now to stay:
I've something else to do than pray,
I feel my Fee.' 'Then hold it fast,'
Said grinning Death, — 'for 'tis your last.'

Three other interesting plates are *The Good Man*, *Death and the Doctor*, and *Doctors Three*. In the third plate three big-bellied physicians are staging a free-for-all with a nurse, the legend reading:

When doctors three, the labour share,
No wonder Death attends them there.

An interesting example of the satirical note in the early nineteenth century is the design of George Cruikshank (1792-1878) for a Bank of England bill (1818). About this time many one and two pound notes were issued and were forged widely. At the time forgery was punished by death or by transportation for life. Between 1805 and 1818 there were 207 executions in England for forgery. The last forgery execution was in 1829, somewhat more than a century ago. Cruikshank protested against this penalty, and his bank-note design created a sensation. It undoubtedly assisted in abolishing the death penalty for forgery.

Another plate of this time is that of Granville, a Frenchman, showing Death in the disguise of an undertaker at the cemetery gate, shaking hands with the old, bald, spectacled, thin-shanked doctor, and telling him that for a consultation he is always at his service.

As time went on the treatment of the death motive entirely changed as death lost the horror with which the people of the Middle Ages had invested it. This transition may be seen very well in the inscriptions on sundials. Formerly there appeared the gloomy warning: "This is the last hour for many, and may be your last hour." In later times the inscription was apt to run: "I'll only count your sunny hours." Indeed, almost the only echo of the old medieval mood may still be seen today in the appearance on buildings or sign-boards of the legend: "Prepare to meet thy God."

In the mid-nineteenth century Alfred Rethel (1816-1859) was the greatest artist to treat the theme. His two magnificent woodcuts, which might have been done by Dürer himself, *Der Tod als Erwurger* and *Der Tod als Freund*, are not only contrasting studies, but they fuse the medieval and modern spirit in a most impressive way. The first, showing the terror of sudden death, pictures Death appearing at a masked ball, playing upon the cross-bones while the mummy figure of pestilence sits on the throne. The other shows Death as a friend, bringing release to the weary soul. The scene is the bell-ringer's room in a cathedral tower. In the distance is the broad valley of the Rhine at the hour of sunset. A little bird sits on the window-sill. The old bell-ringer sits in his armchair in his last sleep, his keys at his side. It is the hour for vespers. Death in a pilgrim's dress performs for him the friendly service of ringing the vesper bell. This is one of the most beautiful woodcuts that I know of.

This conception of death as a friend has taken many forms of expression. Death is thought of as terminating the endless pain

and toil of life in Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine*:

From too much love of living,
 From hope and fear set free,
 We thank with brief thanksgiving
 Whatever gods may be
 That no life lives forever;
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Sometimes death is conceived as sleep. The favorite inscription on tombstones in the Victorian period was "He giveth his beloved sleep." It may be pointed out that this analogy between death and sleep has long been questioned. In reality, sleep is the preserver of life and not the brother of death. Edward Gibbon, on being asked shortly before he died if the idea of death as a long sleep were desirable, answered: "Yes, provided one could be sure — of one's dreams." Earlier Shakespeare had expressed the same idea. Hamlet, contemplating death, muses:

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,
 Must give us pause.

Echoes and variants of the *Danse Macabre* theme appeared in other forms in the nineteenth century: in music a *Totentanz* for piano and orchestra by Franz Liszt; in several French novels and in stories by Edgar Allen Poe; in poems of Longfellow, Goethe, Scott, Browning, Baudelaire, Gautier, and Anatole France. In all these works the vision of man's dark destiny is conceived in more romantic and symbolical terms. Death is not the horror represented by grinning skeletons but something desirable, an image of tranquility, a peaceful harbour. Even the bizarre and the macabre are shot through with gleams of beauty.

The modern *Dance of Death* works reflect the complexity of our world and are for the most part catalogues of the different forms in which death waits for his victims — in poverty, and in the train, motor car, and airplane. Some of the more notable works are these: '*Pest — cholera — typhus*,' representing skulls thrown from a giant dice-box; '*Cholera*' (Munich, 1893); *Death the Apothecary* (1904) with its modern touch, jars labelled 'poverty' and 'tuberculosis'; *Death the Leech*; *The Doctor and Death* (a French print).

With the World War (1914-1918), the *Dance of Death* motive received new life. The 'death as glory' phase soon passed, and once more something of the medieval horror of death returned to the world, as man's courage pitted itself against the shambles of modern war. Three drawings of these years may be mentioned. The first is entitled *La Gloire*. A young French soldier standing in the mud of a trench and holding a hand-grenade is staring into the face of Death, who, lying beneath the barbed wire, leers at the young soldier. The second, *Death Aiding the Young Wounded Soldier* (a German print of 1918) shows Death in a monastic hood and robe lifting a boy's head and holding to his mouth a canteen. The third, one of the most inspired works of the war, is an etching by Percy Smith dated 1919 and entitled *Death Awe'd*, from his cycle *The Dance of Death* (1914-1918). The shrouded figure of Death stands alone on the abandoned, trench-scarred battlefield. He gazes with shocked face and uplifted hand at a pair of boots from which project the broken leg bones.

There have been several *Dance of Death* studies since the First Great War, both in art and literature. One of interest is *Ein Totentanz*, by Draesner (Berlin, 1922), which uses the silhouette and shows an anatomist strangled by one of his own skeletons. The tense, determined cruelty of the skeleton's face is cleverly portrayed. In a play published in 1933 and called *The Dance of Death*, W. H. Auden bitterly satirizes the idiotic ways of men. Death is a dancer who leads people in various dances expressing modern movements that are looking for a new way of life — sun-bathing, absolute government, return to nature, and gross materialism in the pursuit of wealth and pleasure.

We began this recital of the *Dance of Death* theme as it had its origin in France in the fourteenth century. We may fittingly end in the same country. A notable expression of the modern attitude to death is to be seen in the magnificent monument and sculpture known as *Aux Morts* in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. The emotion it evokes has been beautifully put into words by Christopher Morley:

That noble *Aux Morts*, unspeakably beautiful tableau of human grief and courage, sends one away with the thoughts 'of things that thoughts but tenderly touch.' What a thrilling suggestion it gives of our poor final dignity! You see the dying as they approach the end; they come crouching, haggard, stooped in weakness and fear; but at the sill they straighten, shakingly brave, to face that shut door. The man, more sullen or more fearful, still hangs his head. But the woman's face is lifted, and her hand is gently on his shoulder.

We have watched the play of man's imagination on the riddle of death over a period of two thousand years. In the chronicle we have had a bizarre glimpse of the pageant of life, a part only of the vast curtain of historical events "broidered with prince and pope, baron and bishop, physician and plebeian." We have seen only that catastrophic part of the masque of human life in which the great chess-board of Life is periodically tilted and upset by Death. It is possible that by this time the reader is satiated with this venture into the borderland between pathology and theology, that he is tired of looking at the gargoyles of the edifice of history, and that he is ready to remind me that I am a doctor of medicine, not a doctor of divinity.

Our theme is not pleasant. It may even be repellent. But I would point out that this discussion is not as remote as one might think in this comfortable fastness of a prosperous continent. It still haunts civilization. This sinister *Dance of Death* theme that seems to mock man's spiritual ideals and aspirations is more than a perversion of the men of the Middle Ages. It is rather a phenomenon — a psychopathic outburst, if you will — which erupts in unsettled times of fear and frustration and vast epidemic disease. Surely even the most credulous among us cannot any longer think in terms of the old straight-line view of history, which assumes that human passions and human motives change and improve as material conditions improve. Rather we must believe that civilization carries forward its innate tendencies and emotions, smouldering a little below the surface but always ready to erupt in outbursts of collective madness, ever ready to find an outlet in some self-destructing movement if they are given the proper incubating conditions. We cannot still be certain whether men today under the disintegrating influences of a score of forces will not lapse into violence or into some horror of collective insanity far more destructive than the *Dance of Death* strain or the delusions of religious mania. If the events of the last twenty-five years have taught us anything, surely they have taught us that. Without benefit of psychological theory or deep philosophical probing, this discussion should quicken our memories and remind us that the German madness of our time had deeper and more widespread roots in the past than we had realized.

More than that, today we do not need to look on the walls of cloisters for sober paintings of the *Dance of Death*. The theme is all about us. At the moment the world is witnessing a cosmic *Dance of Death* on a scale greater than any since the *Totentanz* theme was born in the ages of the Black Death and the Thirty

Years War. Violent death to a degree unparalleled in human history, wars, revolutions, concentration camps, universal pre-occupation with atomic-warfare devices to the extent of using the language of madmen in calling hydrogen bombs "clean" — these are the modern demons grinning at us on every side, ten thousand times more deadly than the spectral demons which troubled men's souls in the Middle Ages. The front page of your newspaper is the libretto of a high tragedy. It only requires a writer or painter of genius to make it more articulate to our dulled and drugged senses.

There are other aspects of the modern scene as they relate to death that I can do no more than mention. Many of us must often have wondered at a curious paradox in our society — that at a time when the world's potential for destruction has increased to nightmare proportions and when, in the view of Freud, Spengler, and Toynbee, ours is a society with a marked orientation towards death, there should at the same time be such a remarkable prudery concerning the fact of individual death and the emotions and trappings surrounding it. In times past death was dealt with in a matter-of-fact if glowering or (in the Victorian age) sentimental way, whereas today it is almost as if people endeavored in a timid gesture to surround it with a taboo, smothering it in the muted respectability of funeral rites that have been practically transformed into an art of complete denial.

Part of the explanation of this attitude may be in the altered conditions of existence in the stable societies of our world. We live more than twice as long as persons did in the fifteenth century. In our society death is less savage and brutal for the majority; the image of death has softened, the music of the dance has turned sweeter. We have nearly abolished the power of the old Captains of the men of Death — typhoid, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and the scourges of infancy. Man is now marching up closer to the ultimate barrier of age. To return to our symbol, a new *Dance of Death* has emerged in which, more and more, Death wears the trappings of senility. The problem now is not how to live long but how to live well.

Since about 1914 a revolution unprecedented in force and extent has been going on in the world and in the minds of men. This chaotic age is reflected in modern man's viewpoint on death. It would seem that the Christian hope of immortality burns very faintly among us. Some few are hopelessly pessimistic about it all. Like Macbeth, they say that

All our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

Others, in the mood of disillusion and despair bred by two consuming wars, echo the words of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*:

Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water

And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Still others, and among them brave souls who have been bruised hard against life, fear death all their lives long. They cannot lay the spectre that terrified Claudio:

. 'tis too horrible!
 The weariest and most loathed earthly life
 That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
 Can lay on nature, is a paradise
 To what we fear of death.

There are others who are indifferent for, they say, the majority of people die as they were born — oblivious. Shelley's description fits nearly all:

Mild is the slow necessity of death;
 The tranquil spirit fails beneath its grasp,
 Without a groan, almost without a fear,
 Resigned in peace to the necessity.
 Calm as a voyager to some distant land,
 And full of wonder, full of hope, as he.

There are other moods. Doctor Oliver Gogarty expresses one in his memorable sentence: "Death is life's astringent." The knowledge of life's mortality keeps us humble and urges us to achievement. But the majority in this age, it seems to me, have lost their fear of death and meet it with a resignation that is not unlike that of the spirit of the Greeks. Their attitude is like that of Rabelais who is said to have remarked on his death-bed (I always like to think that it was a physician who uttered these words), "*Je vais chercher un grand peut-être.*" Then, too, our scientific age has prompted a point of view which is probably best expressed in the words of a distinguished medical writer, Sir Walter Langdon-Brown:

An inexorable limit is set to man's egoism; only if blended with another personality can he go on and renew his youth. The individual who would live alone shall surely die. Nature has devised a more excellent way, conserving individuality by handing it on, as we

can clearly see in a gallery of family portraits. We may say then that death has been evolved for the good of the race, to retire worn-out structures in favour of more active ones. And death being thus merely the servant of life, life ultimately attains the mastery over death.

Here is the closest that science can come to expressing something of what the last generation called "the larger hope."

I suggest to the man of today, in all humility, that he can make no better gesture towards the subject which we have been discussing than by using the words the old knight used in *Don Quixote* when he found death upon him. Incidentally, these words are what is to me one of the finest endings of any book ever written:

Good sirs, I perceive and feel death to follow me at my heels. Let us leave off and quit all merriment and jesting, and let me have a confessor to shrift me, and a notary to draw my last will and testament. In the extremity whereunto I now find and feel myself, a man must not make a jest of his soul.

But life goes on. For each of us "Time's winged chariot is hurrying near," and ever at our back urging us on. There is still courage in men, and faith and vision. The strains of the *Dance of Death* which have sounded like a lament over the fortunes of man on this planet for the past six hundred years are only one expression — and that a poor one — of man's spirit facing his last great adversary. Man will continue to challenge his fate and the "dance" theme will take on new forms in years to come.