

## **“Your Holiest Inspiration”:**

### **Literature and the Experience of Death**

and your holiest inspiration  
is our intimate companion, Death.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ninth Duino Elegy*

In April 1975 I sat alone in my apartment in Gainesville, Florida, reading. I had asked my Introduction to Literature class to read for the following day a poem which I had myself never understood, Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” and it seemed only reasonable that before I taught it to them I should finally figure out what it said. As often happens with the most difficult poems, my knowledge of it had over the years increased incrementally with each reading until the day had finally arrived when the poem became transparent: words long opaque and obscure became clear and I heard the voice, experienced the mind beneath and behind.

I held in my hands a dialogue between a woman and the poet himself concerning faith and doubt, earth and heaven, life and death, a dialogue which comes down full square on the side of *this* world, that teaches that Earth may well be “all of paradise that we shall know.” And in its fourth and fifth stanza I discovered, overcome by that “felt change of consciousness” (the phrase is Owen Barfield’s) which poetry can deliver so powerfully, lines so mind-expanding that it seemed I could not possibly have read them before:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams  
And our desires. . . .

Death is the mother of beauty mystical  
In whose burning bosom we devise  
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

On my rented sofa, the Florida sun shining brightly through my open window, the word “death” in Stevens’ poem, so help me, became Death, became my death. I felt myself dying; my soul ebbed out of my body, and the cares and contingencies

and doubts and fears and ego mechanisms (I am the owner of a sizeable menagerie of such) dispersed, evaporated, and I glimpsed for a moment the “beauty mystical” of a world beyond the confines of the ego, a world—as virtually all religions had correctly identified it—of light. A knock on the door brought me out of it, a visitor from Porlock in the form of a newspaper boy collected his due.

The next day, I taught my class with a visionary gleam in my eye, but I must have sounded a little like the man who escapes from the cave in Plato’s allegory reporting back to those in love with shadows about the real world outside. I don’t think I was understood. But the memory stays with me to this day. My encounter with poetry as Near Death Experience will stay with me until the day I die.

**ARTISTS, SIGMUND FREUD ADMITTED,** discovered and colonized the unconscious mind, guided by the navigation of the creative imagination, long before psychoanalysis had even reached its shore.

After a century of charting the heights and depths of the unconscious, we have in its final decades now reached a peak in Darien from which we can espy yet another unexplored ocean at land’s end. Stopped in our tracks at the final frontier of death certain individuals among us—some of whom are assembled here tonight—have immersed themselves at least for a moment in the long-dreaded waters and returned to describe their baptism. Certain others—psychologists (and cartographers) like Dr. Moody and Dr. Quimby—have sought to record and to map these accounts. But, as in the discovery of the unconscious, artists—in particular the writers—have, it seems, been there first. For literature, I want to suggest, can itself offer a kind of Near-Death experience.

Literature has long been a form of vicarious experience. When the Athenian government required attendance at the performance of the great tragedies, it did so out of a profound understanding of art’s ability to train the mind and emotions in preparation for experiences still to come. Greek drama in general, it has been observed, was “a concerted attempt to elevate the consciousness of a whole community,” and tragedy in particular served as an

“early warning system,” a way of facing finiteness without neurotic repression, of losing your life in imagination in order to retain it longer in reality, and of studying the consequences of moral choices in dramatic simulation. Hence when the real crisis comes you are innured not to scientific

disapassion but to the emotional resilience and moral courage demanded by life.

We might call this the theory of “literature as immunization.”

Now among the “real crises” against which literature has inoculated us, death is, of course, the most prominent, and so it is not surprising that the literature of death is vast. (D.J. Enright’s wonderful, 350 page compendium, *The Oxford Book of Death*, only skims the cream.) If literature has provided (in Kenneth Burke’s precise term) “equipment for living,” it has likewise provided “equipment for dying,” equipment which we seem more and more to require.

‘A topic as well as a welcome thought of mortality’  
John Coyn (early 1600s)



“If you don’t know how to die, don’t worry,” Montaigne could state definitively in the sixteenth century. “Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job for you; don’t bother your head about it. . . .” But in the age of the self-help book such faith is seldom understood. Now we need

Edited by D. J. Enright

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s wise aid. Sixty years ago, the Austrian poet Rainier Maria Rilke could imagine the death of the Chamberlain in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* as being so loud, so profound and real that it could be heard and felt for miles around. Now we live in a time in which, if Ivan Illich’s—the sociologist, not Tolstoy’s character—prediction is correct, we may soon die in passive voice; our obituaries may one day announce that “David Lavery has been died today.” And yet a wide and wise reader would likely know much of what Kubler-Ross has had to remind us in our growing ignorance. They might well even find the insights of NDE’ers not completely new.

**THE DEAD, SO THE SAYING GOES**, tell no tales. But in literature the dead can speak from the grave. Consider, for example, Emily Dickinson’s “I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died” (1862). The poem’s speaker (I will assume for the sake of convenience that the speaker is a woman) is—as the title indicates—a recently deceased individual who describes for us, in poetic subjective camera, her last moments, her final perceptions.

In the nineteenth century, human beings seldom died alone; loved ones, relatives, friends, and neighbors surrounded the dying, not because of morbid

curiosity but in the hope that a person existing momentarily between two worlds—between the kingdoms of the living *and* the dead—might just bring back a message from the beyond before the end came.

“I heard a fly buzz—when I died—,” the poem begins, though we do not yet understand the significance of such an observation. Why should a meaningless image be her most vivid memory? Then we see the dying’s surroundings. We hear the hush, see the witnesses crying, feel the intake of breath as they await the final moment, the “last Onset.”

The stillness in the Room  
Was like the Stillness in Air—  
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For that last Onset—when the King  
Be witnessed—in the Room—

Having made her last will and testament, having “Signed away/What portion of me be/Assignable—,” the dying likewise awaits her end. And with the religious questioning so typical of Emily Dickinson, what she sees is hardly a divine vision. For as her eyes close on the world,

There interposed a Fly—  
  
With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—  
Between the light—and me—

Her audience had hoped “the King” would appear; but ironically the dying witnesses only a fly: instead of a vision of light, life everlasting, release, serenity, her dying moment—a second later, we are told, “the Windows failed—and then/I could not see to see—” — reveals only a figure of decay and corruption. As an imaginal death, Dickinson’s version—like that of an NDEer, a report of a subjective experience of being dead—is a truly bleak one.



Emily Dickinson, a daguerrotype by Arthur M. Lyell, 1845

**PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS, PERCEPTIVE,** and ruthlessly honest depiction of the



experience of death in western literature is Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886). The story of a minor Russian bureaucrat and judge who dies of the long term effects of a curtain rod accidentally jammed into his side, Tolstoy's novella meticulously traces the original denial, subsequent anger, rebellion, bargaining, and eventual resignation of Tolstoy's everyman in a story that, if Kubler-Ross's had not written over eighty years later, would seem to have been consciously

plotted in imitation of her five stage theory.

Like all of us, Ivan Ilyich *knows* that he will die, and yet, numbed by fear, he has never *realized* it. In a famous passage Tolstoy tells us that, as a schoolboy, Ivan had learned the standard syllogism "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal" without really grasping its significance. For the syllogism offends his subjectivity, his particularity.

It had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others.

Man, the existentialists have taught us, is "being toward death"; we are the species which knows that we mortal, creating whatever meaning we can find and leading as authentic a life as we are able in the face of impending death. But Ivan's sentimentalism, manifesting itself in a series of rhetorical questions which serve as a shield against the reality of his condition, makes him unable to understand that each individual—himself included—is likewise *a* being toward death.

He had been little Vanya, with a mamma and a papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse. . . . What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside at a session as he did?

“Caius,” Ivan manages to convince himself, “really was mortal, and it was right for him to die,” but *he* is an exception to the rule—the first in the history of the race:

but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with my thoughts and emotions, it’s altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible.

And yet on his death bed, Ivan Ilyich no longer sees through a glass darkly; taught by death, he sees death face-to-face. The last pages of Tolstoy’s tale, section XII, are an overpowering emotional experience. Tolstoy’s vivid imaginal rendering of Ivan’s final moments can itself become for the reader a kind of near-death experience and does in fact share much in common with a typical NDE.

“For three whole days,” Tolstoy tells us, “during which time did not exist for him,” Ivan finds himself struggling to escape from what he thinks of as a “black sack into which he was being thrust by an invisible resistless force.” (This “black sack” of course calls to mind the region of extreme darkness often mentioned in NDE accounts.) “He struggled,” we are told, “as a man condemned to death struggles in the hands of the executioner, knowing that he cannot save himself.” But the realization begins to dawn on him that, at his being’s core, he actually longs to enter into it.

He felt that his agony was due to his being thrust into that black hole and still more to his not being able to get right into it.

And he knows too what prevents him:

He was hindered from getting into it by his conviction that his life had been a good one. That very justification of his life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him the most torment of all.

His body, however, leaves him no choice which way to turn:

Suddenly some force struck him in the chest and side, making it still harder to breathe, and he fell through the hole and there at the bottom was a light.

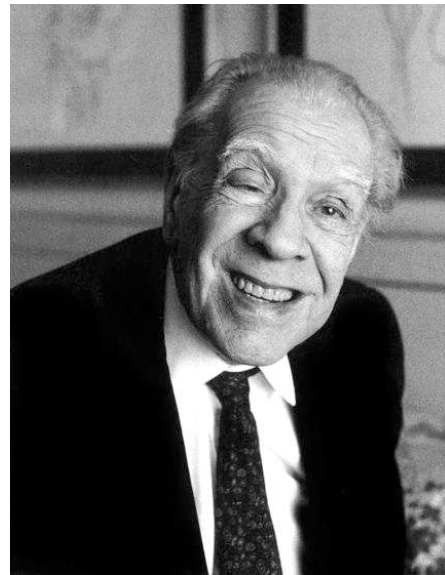
Like those NDE voyagers who have also seen this light, Ivan is attracted to it; he seeks to—he needs to—merge with it: “At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and caught sight of the light. . . .” Now *in* the light, Ivan discovers how to die. He comes to feel sorry for the living and no longer for himself. He feels a growing sense of peace:

And suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. . . . “How good and how simple!” he thought. “And the pain?” he asked himself. “What has become of it? Where are you, pain?”

Searching for his former fear of death, Ivan discovers that it simply does not exist; that death, as John Donne had likewise foreseen, can itself die.

**IN A SHORT STORY ENTITLED** “The Secret Miracle,” Jorge Luis Borges imagines a Jewish writer named Jarmomir Hladik, sentenced by the Nazis to face a firing squad in Prague, 1939, terrified in the face of death. “In vain,” Borges tells us,

he repeated to himself that the pure and general act of dying, not the concrete circumstances, was the dreadful fact. He did not grow weary of imagining these circumstances: he absurdly tried to exhaust all the variations. He infinitely anticipated the process, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. . . . he died hundreds of deaths, in courtyards whose shapes and angles defied geometry, shot down by changeable soldiers whose number varied and who sometimes put an end to him from close up and sometimes from far away. He faced these imaginary executions with true terror (perhaps with true courage).



What most dismays him as he imagines his end is, however, his failure as a writer. None of his works please him; none, he is convinced, will guarantee him literary immortality. At the time of sentencing, he had been at work on a play entitled *The Enemies*, but now he has no time to complete it.

The night before his death, Hladik prays to God that he might be granted the time to finish his work-in-progress: *"In order to bring this drama, which may serve to justify you,"* he pleads, *"I need one more year. Grant me that year, you to whom belong the centuries and all time."* In a Kabbalistic dream in which he searches through all the letters on all the pages in the Clementine library's 400,000 volumes, a "ubiquitous voice" announces that "The time for your work has been granted."

The next morning, as he faces the firing squad, his prayers are answered, his dreams come true; his bargaining achieves its end. As the rifles that are to slay him are lowered, "the physical universe stood still": German lead would kill him, at the determined hour, but in his mind a year would elapse between the command to fire and the execution." Hladik notices that "Upon a courtyard flagstone a bee cast a stationary shadow." His surroundings become very like a painted picture. A droop of rain water freezes on his cheek. In his mind, he finishes his play; he writes and rewrites and revises:

Meticulous, unmoving, secretive, he wove his lofty invisible labyrinth in time. He worked the third act over twice. He eliminated some rather-too-obvious symbols. . . . There were no circumstances to constrain him. He omitted, condensed, amplified. . . . He brought his drama to a conclusion: he lacked a single epithet. He found it: the drop of water slid down his cheek.

His work complete, the rifle blasts finally hit home. Hladik dies. Perhaps all of us, in the timelessness of our final moment, have a similar sense of infinite possibility, of creativity. Thanks to the imagination's ability to probe the Near Death Experience, Borges, too, has helped teach us how to die. For in his secret miracle, Hladik has come to realize with the philosopher Wittgenstein that

Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through. If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.

“The Secret Miracle” is a story about death’s creative possibilities.

**IN A POEM ENTITLED** “Couplets 20,” in lines which would appear to allude specifically to Dickinson’s poem and to answer her doubts, the contemporary poet Robert Mezey provides a kind of phenomenology of the dying process, cast in the form of a set of poetic instructions.

“Don’t be afraid of dying,” Mezey counsels, for the individual consciousness is always ready to return to consciousness-at-large; the particular soul gladly reunites with the Oversoul, once the ego is gone. “the glass of water,” Mezey explains, “is quickly poured into the waiting goblet.”

In death,

Your face that will be of no further use to mirrors  
Grows more and more transparent, nothing is hidden.

When “It’s night in the remotest provinces of the brain,” Mezey tells us, in imagery evocative of the NDE, “Seeing falls back into the great sea of light.” Even Dickinson’s ominous fly can bring no fear:

How strange to see that glittering green fly  
Walk into the eyeball, rubbing its hands and praying.

There is, in fact, no cause for fear; for death is an eternal return:

Don’t be afraid, you’re going to where you were  
Before birth pushed you into this cold light.

Death’s light, Mezey assures us, like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, like that of many who have undergone the NDE, is warm, welcoming and sheltering. It is the light of home.

**IT WAS THE ANNOUNCED GOAL, THE LIFE’S WORK**, of Rainier Maria Rilke (1875-1926) to speak the word “death” without negation.



In January, 1912, while sojourning at Duino Castle near Trieste on the Adriatic, Rilke walked out onto the castle's bastions into a howling wind and bright sunlight. Mentally fatigued from agonizing over an unfinished letter, he would not seem to have been in the proper mood for inspiration, and yet as he stood looking out at the sea he heard a voice speaking to him the words which would later become the first line of the *Duino Elegies*: "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angels'/hierarchies?"

Other verses followed, though not at Rilke's bidding, and he wrote them down, but then the voices stopped. Convinced that the dictated lines were fragments of a longer series of poems, perhaps a song-cycle, Rilke waited patiently for the voices' return, working sporadically and with limited success toward their forced completion until, nearly ten years later, at Chateau de Muzot in Switzerland in February, 1922, the voices began to speak again, dictating over a period of a few days in a "nameless storm, a hurricane in the spirit," the remainder of the poems that were to become the *Duino Elegies* and then, as a "forestorm" and an "afterbirth," the bulk of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke would later refer to these days—during which, he explained, "eating was not to be thought of, God knows who fed me"—as the "most enigmatic dictation I have ever held through and achieved" and "a single breathless act of obedience."

It had been "like a mutilation of [his] heart that the Elegies were not—here," Rilke wrote to his confidante Lou-Andreas Salome soon after the outburst. But thanks to this "irresistible act of creation which convulsed [him]," finally the sequence stood complete. "It was not mine ever," he wrote to Fra Wunderly. "I was never more humble, never more on my knees: oh infinitely!"

And at the end of the *Elegies*, he finds a way to say yes to death. In the closing lines of the Ninth Elegy, Rilke turns to the Earth itself in poetic direct address, and he knows at last what to say to her. In poetic direct address, he speaks to her as a being at once both lover and mother. He finds a way of saying yes to the world, of accepting at last the Earth's wooing of her prodigal son to return.

Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer need your springtimes to win me over—one of them, ah, even one, is already too much for my blood. Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first



An obedient son, he agrees to do what she says:

You were always right. . . .

And he recognizes at long last that

your holiest inspiration  
is our intimate companion, Death.

Three years after this astounding burst of creativity, Rilke discovered that he had leukemia after a cut caused by the prick of a rose thorn would not heal. As his condition deteriorated, during the whole of a long and difficult death, he refused much of the medical treatment that was offered him. He pleaded with his doctors not to explain his illness to him, preferring to believe that he was in the possession of a metaphysical and not a merely physiological process. "Help me to my own death," he told friends, "I don't want the doctor's death—I want my freedom." "Don't ever forget," he insisted near the end, that "life is a glory." And its "holiest inspiration," as both the NDE and the literary imagination of the end speak as if with one voice, "is our intimate companion death."

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