
Epilogue

Some Last Words and a Last Play

IN A BOOK LIKE THIS ONE, it is difficult to draw precise lines of demarcation between periods of thought, or even to make generalizations that are not open to exception and modification. The one generalization that we can make is simply that each age finds its own way of dealing with the universal necessity of death, usually rejecting most of the symbology of its predecessors and using old methods to new ends. To some extent, the process is cyclical: the mixed nature of the soul and the admission of fear are common to the Middle Ages and the Shakespearean period, while the bifurcation of man and the denial of fear (even to the extent of death-longing) recur in the early Tudor and the New Wave periods. To another extent, the process is linear: we begin with a centralized system of belief, progress to a period of religious controversy, finally develop the Anglican settlement of religious compromise, and then split up into religious controversy again—this time in an increasingly pluralistic society; in each case, we must deal with a new system of fears and comforts, and can never completely go back to an older society or to symbols that have lost their original force. If there are any constants in these changing equations, they are the need, first, to take control of the nightmare, to use the very fears against themselves; and second, to absorb the fact of dying into the rationale for living.

To be sure, there are paradoxes and contradictions in every age: dissenting opinions, failures to practice what we preach, and mutually contradictory traditions existing side by side. Even in our own age, as D. J. Enright points out in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Death*,¹ we seem unable to make up our minds about what we are afraid of or what will comfort us. On one hand, there is a growing fascination with death and dying, beginning with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "thanatology" and the hospice movement, and continuing with a spate of articles and books on dying, including *The Hour of Our Death*, *The Oxford Book of Death*, and this book itself. On the other hand, a plethora of health advice articles and appeals for research contributions imply that if we do all the right things, we shall never die.

Shortly after I began the research for this book, a friend, the manager of a cemetery, showed me the new sales-presentation book prepared for his salespeople, and I was amused and delighted to see that the cycle of death literature never stops turning. On one page was an oddly euphemistic memento mori:

We Cannot:

Predict IT.
 Prevent IT.
 Evade IT.
 Avoid IT.

Or Even:

Postpone IT.

Therefore—it is better to:

Prepare For IT.

Now! Today! The RIGHT Way!²

On the next several pages were descriptions of cemetery plots and mausoleums that should be purchased immediately—or, as the trade jargon says, "pre-need." One wonders what the *Everyman* playwright, Wager, Shakespeare, and Donne would say about this "right way" of preparing for death. But then, buying a cemetery plot may be as valid a preparation for some as sacramental or predestinarian theology, or checkmate to tyrants or emotional

death-longing, may be for others. The readiness, as Hamlet would say, is all.

But to bring this study to a close, I should like to present one more play, a play that also uses old methodology to new purposes, and yet contradicts its own age as well as all the others. *The Tragedy of Nero* (ca. 1624), although written in the midst of the New Wave, is a remarkable compendium of ways of dying, both old and new, and combines the mad intensity of *Pride of Life* and the Dances of Death with the unanswered and unanswerable questions of the seventeenth century. Nero himself, a comic grotesque worthy of Webster or Tourneur, may also be considered almost a perverted anti-type of the fourteenth-century King of Life. But although he is the visible villain-hero of the play, Death is the invisible one. At first it may seem that the two are one, that Nero, who issues all the death warrants, is the Summons, portrayed as a monster in the old style. He conducts a Dance of Death in act 3, playing his timbrel over burning Rome while a mother enters with her dead child and a son with his dead father; and as the two victims mourn in alternate strophes, Nero sings and congratulates himself on the symmetry and excellence of his pageant. He orders the execution of all who defy him: conspirators, rivals, and disgruntled audiences at his plays. And when his wife, Poppea, seems to be flirting with a young man, he throws her to the ground and kicks her to death. But in this last act of violence, we begin to see that Nero is at the mercy of the very Death that he imagines himself to represent. He cannot bring the dead back to life again, and is reduced by the death of a loved one (even though he has caused the death himself) to denial, empty raging, and fetishistic destruction:

Nero: Fetch her again; she shall not die.

I'll ope the iron gates of hell,

And break the imprison'd shadows of the deep,

And force from death this far too worthy prey.

She is not dead. . . .

[To Poppea's body:] [D]o not with wry aspect

Look on your Nero, who in blood shall mourn

Your luckless fate, and many a breathing soul
 Send after you to wait upon their Queen.
 This shall begin, the rest shall follow after
 And fill the streets with outcries and with slaughter.

(4.5.65-69; 84-89)³

Finally, it is time for Nero to die. He has been overthrown and sentenced by the Senate to a felon's execution: to be stripped naked and whipped to death. In his hiding place, he agonizes over his fate, first in terms of the pain and ignominy of the sentence—the private aspect of death—and then in terms of the universal Summons, the annihilation of self, the death of all the world:

Nero: Alas, how sharp and terrible is death!
 O, must I die, must now my senses close,
 Forever die, and ne'er return again,
 Nevermore see the sun, nor heaven, nor earth?
 Whither go I? What shall I be anon?
 What horrid journey wanderest thou, my soul,
 Under th' earth, in dark, damp, dusky vaults?
 Or shall I now to nothing be resolv'd?
 My fears become my hopes—O, would I might!
 Methinks I see the boiling Phlegethon. . . .

(5.3.73-82)

Nero's cry of anguish echoes all the cries that we have heard since the earliest Mystery plays. It is the "too late" of the damned souls, the "Whither shall I fly?" of *Everyman*, the "Is there no remedy?" of *Worldly Man*, the "Let me breathe awhile" of *Faustus*, the "Ah, but to die and go we know not where" of *Claudio*, the journeys into darkness taken by the villains of *Webster*, *Tourneur*, and *Shirley* alike. It is the fear that all will end—followed by the more horrible fear that all will *not* end, that even annihilation is preferable to the "something after death."

Nero is comforted by two Roman citizens who serve as the wise deathbed counselors. Even in the Tudor tradition, where the reprobate rejects such counsel, the counselors themselves must

speak with the voice of rectitude; but in *Nero*, this rectitude is the voice of Selimus, scoffing at the punishing gods:

- 1 *Roman*: These are the idle terrors of the night,
Which wise men, though they teach, do not believe,
To curb our peasures fain, and aid the weak. . . .
- 2 *Roman*: Why should our faults fear punishment from
[the gods]?
What do the actions of this life concern
The other world, with which is no commerce?

(5.3.91-93; 99-101)

The important thing to note in this remarkable piece of deathbed comfort is the complete inversion of the Arts of Dying: a sermon against rather than for repentance, the offer of a soulless universe as a universal good—and yet, the Romans' genuine concern for Nero, and Nero's genuine need for such comfort. He is faced with the choice between a quick, honorable death at his own hand and a lingering, ignominious one at the hands of the Senate. He *must* be encouraged to do the better thing; but the better thing, here, is couched in precisely the terms that seventeenth-century audiences would think atheistic.

Nor does the paradox end here. Nero, wanting to believe his comforters but still trembling in terror of death, begs them to help him. If what they say is true, he pleads, will they not accompany him on his journey? "Will you, by dying, teach me to bear death / With courage?" (5.3.111-12). Poor Emperor Everyman. He receives the same reply that his fifteenth-century predecessor did: "No necessity of death / Hangs o'er *our* heads" (5.3.112-13). And the Romans, both true and false friends, leave Nero to make the journey alone, saying, like the old Summons, "there is no remedy." The soldiers approach, and Nero, with a wail of despair, takes—the correct way out of life.

Paradox upon paradox: we, the audience, are forced to choose between two evils as though they were two goods. And even if we accept the counsel of the comforters while rejecting their philosophy, we must still acknowledge that they, like the "wise men" whom they mock, are preaching what they do not believe.

Still, given time, we may untangle the knots of paradox—except that Nero's is not the only paradoxical death in the play.

When the anti-Nero conspiracy is first discovered, Piso, the leader, commits suicide rather than be captured by the Imperial Guard. His rationale is cool and logical, combining the Stoic's free acceptance of death and the leader's sense of cause—and, perhaps, a touch of New Wave reluctance to grow old:

Piso: O, friends, I would not die
 When I can live no longer. 'Tis my glory
 That free and willing I give up this breath. . . .
 By this you shall my quiet thoughts intend;
 I blame nor earth nor heaven for my end.

(4.2.68-75)

While he speaks, it is easy for us to think of all the heroic deaths in lost causes: the men and women who gave checkmate to the foul tyrant. But when he is dead, his fellow conspirators seem less impressed than we are. They argue—and, we realize with a shock, they are right—that Piso's death leaves them leaderless and scattered, that they are now one fewer against the enemy, and that in fact Piso has taken the easy way out, leaving the rest of them to face the torture chamber alone. What before seemed like strength now seems like weakness, summed up by Lucan's rueful farewell to Piso's body: "O, that this noble courage had been shown / Rather on enemies' breasts than on thy own" (4.2.76-77).

However, if we are now vaguely uneasy about Piso's heroic stoicism, we may yet look forward to the great Seneca's death. We see him among his students, comforting them against his imminent execution, much like any teacher down through the ages who tries to make his students apply their learning to their lives. They cannot be consoled, however; they cannot bear to part with a loved one, or to be left along mindful of their own mortality. Finally, Seneca reminds them of the afterlife, a return of the soul to the Ideal Form, in which are to be found the secrets of the universe. For the scholar, Seneca's may be the best comfort. And yet, we must ask ourselves, why are his students not comforted? Just as the conversion of a skeptic is a dramatic means

of convincing a skeptical audience, so the doubts of the convinced must cause us to doubt. And before we have a chance to settle the upheaval in our minds, we are shown still another way of dying: the death of Petronius, the hedonist.

Before Petronius's entrance, his friends Antonius and Enanthe voice great concern over how he will react to his death warrant. He has been so fond of his pleasures, they reason, that for him death will be more horrible than for men less attached to the world. It is easy enough, says Antonius, for "Seneca and such sour fellows" to part with what they never had or wanted in the first place (4.7.7-8), but how will Petronius bear the separation from all that he has held dear? They are astounded, then, when Petronius enters joyfully and tells them that he can hardly wait to die so he can begin to taste the delights of heaven:

Petronius: Death, the grim knave, but leads you to the door,
Where, enter'd once, all curious pleasures come
To meet and welcome you.

(4.7.33-35)

Petronius then goes on to describe these "curious pleasures," envisioning the Elysian fields as a garden of sensual delights. But his friends, who before have feared for him and hoped to comfort him, now perversely try to pick apart the web of comfort that he has spun for himself:

Antonius: What? be not ravish'd with thy fancies, do not
Court nothing, nor make love unto our fears.

Petronius: Is't nothing that I say?

Antonius: But empty words.

(4.7.64-66)

The roles are now completely reversed. In order to face with equanimity the loss of this world, Petronius must convince himself that the next world is better; but in doing so, he must denigrate this world to throw the contrast into sharper relief. Antonius and Enanthe, then, see his paean to death as a betrayal of their epicurean philosophy, and to stave off despair must force Petronius to reject death and return to the praise of life. The irony, of course,

is that Petronius has no choice; he is under sentence of execution and must stave off a different type of despair.

Finally, Petronius invites his friends to go with him to the happy land that he envisions, slyly intimating that since they live by the senses only the act of dying will give them tangible proofs and settle the argument. But Antonius is not persuaded; lapsing into the hostility common to all such invited companions, he replies:

Antonius: Nay, I had rather far believe thee here.
 Others' ambition such discoveries seek;
 Faith, I am satisfied with the base delights
 Of common men.

(4.7.71-74)

The two sides of the argument are now committed to an ever-increasing battle of mutual rejection; and what began for Petronius as a simple effort to die well has become a need to repudiate life. He responds to Antonius's defense of living with a warning that begins like that of the old Legend but ends like the New Wave fear of decay:

Petronius: Perhaps thou thinkst to live yet twenty years,
 Which may unlook'd for be cut off, as mine,
 If not, to endless time compar'd, is nothing;
 What you endure must ever, endure now;
 Nor stay not to be last at table set;
 Each best day our life at first doth go,
 To them succeeds diseased age and woe.

(4.7.88-94)

Antonius and Enanthe remain unconvinced, however, and hold firmly to their allegiance to life while Petronius goes off to die gladly. All the conspirators are now gone, and the only death remaining is Nero's. Virtually half the play has been given over to the art of dying, but what is noteworthy about all these deaths is that none of them can be viewed as completely exemplary or completely cautionary. Piso, Seneca, and Petronius die bravely and joyfully; but their followers think them victims of self-deception. Nero dies correctly; but he has had to become an

atheist to keep from dying fearfully and clumsily. Furthermore, each of the four *Morientes* has advanced a different view of and rationale for death: Piso, honor and earthly fame; Seneca, the progress into the Ideal Intellect; Petronius, the reward of a sensual paradise; and Nero, total annihilation or eternal pain. They cannot all be right—and they may all be wrong.

One would think that such a mass of paradoxes, such an inconclusive gloss on the ways men die, would make *The Tragedy of Nero* a frightening play, a play that demolishes all the comforts that humankind has ever erected against death. But curiously, it does not. What we see instead is a record of human striving after the eternal, the last great Dance of Death in which any of us may see himself or herself responding to the touch of the skeletal hand. Like *Everyman*, *Petronius*, and *Nero*, we want company in the Dance, and the skill of the dancers is immaterial as long as they are simply there.

