

Dying Well

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A talk given at *Dying Well*, an evening of readings performed by Paola Dionisotti and George Irving at the Wellcome Collection, 1st February 2013, to introduce the symposium *What Makes A Good Death?*

Philosophers from Plato onwards have sought to convince us that we should not fear something that cannot by definition concern us since, as Wittgenstein says, ‘death is not an event in life’. But we all know, as Wittgenstein must also have done perfectly well, that it is not death, but dying that we are most concerned with, and dying is very much an event in life.

‘Dying is an art, like everything else’, affirms the speaker of Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘Lady Lazarus’. Her words allude to the tradition, inherited from the classical world, and developed through medieval and early modern Europe, of the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. However, it has to be acknowledged that the speaker at this point in Plath’s poem is in fact concerned rather more with getting dead than with the manner or style of her dying. We in the modern world spend so long guarding against the ever-present danger of death – through food poisoning, plane crashes, electrocution in the bath – that when the time comes to seek it, we are puzzled and outraged by how difficult it can be to procure it at will. One’s death in a certain sense is still not one’s own.

Nowadays, we may look to medical support to ensure a good death for us, but, in previous eras, one would have been much more likely to have taken see the manner of one’s dying as one’s personal responsibility. Over the centuries, human beings have devoted a great deal of time to determining the manner of their deaths: the history of the *ars moriendi* reveals that there is an ethics of dying that is quite as demanding as the ethics of the good life. To style one’s manner of dying is to take responsibility for, and even to assert a kind of authorship over, an event that we customarily think of as happening to us.

There have been peoples, we are assured, for whom death is always regarded as an avoidable accident, rather than a general necessity. For such peoples, since something or someone must always be regarded as responsible in every case of fatality. every death is the occasion for an inquest, By contrast, to fashion and perfect the way in which one lives out one’s death is to refuse to regard death as a mere, vulgar accident, waiting lifelong to happen.

The most economical way of converting the accident of one’s death into an intention is through one’s last words. Dying well is in large part a rhetorical matter. Of course speaking and dying, like speaking and eating, cannot literally coincide, which gives the words spoken right up to the point of death a certain grandeur. Samuel Beckett’s

Malone, in his *Malone Dies*, attempts something like the exercise of carrying on writing right up to the point of death, while Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Facts in the Case of M Valdemar' imagines a man mesmerised in order to enable him to keep speaking even after the point of death. Words delivered 'in articulo mortis' were taken to be absolute truth, and could not be doubted in a court of law.

George V's advisors are said to have tried to cheer him up during his last illness with the prospect of visiting the resort of Bognor, his frequent visits to which meant that it was permitted the dignifying attachment 'Regis' in its name. 'Bugger Bognor' the dying king retorted, and promptly expired. Born as I was and, a little, bred in Bognor, I know what he may have meant. Most of us though still feel the desire to try to try to take some kind of ownership of our death. For dying seems to bring with it still a kind of responsibility. Those who, like Roger McGough in 'Let Me Die A Young Man's Death', seek a sudden blackout that will leave us no time for reflection or fine words, recognise this responsibility, that at this terminal stage in one's life, one is always on a kind of stage, required to act out a final scene without a script, and with no opportunity for retakes. For some of us, like George V, or like Byron's defiant rebel Manfred, death is a chance to tell the world to bugger off; but for many of us, there is still the more diffuse sense that dying is a ticklish proceeding, that we are at some risk of bugging up, like bungling the punchline of a long-drawn-out joke.

Ultimately, the art of dying well is an attempt to give meaning and significance to the thing that seems arbitrary and unpredictable. But it may also disclose the fact that our finitude is in fact the very thing that makes things meaningful. The hero of the final story in Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 Chapters* finds himself in a heaven of unobstructed bliss and gratification, in which beautiful women line up enthusiastically to sleep with him and his team Leicester City win the League and FA Cup every year. But after a while, he begins to yearn for the variety and texture that only disappointment and pain can bring. At length, he enquires whether there is a option to die in, or, so to speak, from heaven, and discovers that there is.

'And what percentage of people take up the option to die off?' She looked at me, her glance telling me to be calm. 'Oh, a hundred per cent, of course. Over many thousands of years, calculated by old time, of course. But yes, everyone takes the option, sooner or later.'

'So it's just like the first time round? You always die in the end?'

'Yes, except don't forget the quality of life here is much better. People die when they decide they've had enough, not before. The second time round it's altogether more satisfying because it's willed.' She paused, then added, 'As I say, we cater for what people want.'

Nature programmes us to see death as the greatest evil, to be feared and shunned at all costs, but, since ultimately it is death that gives purpose and preciousness to

everything we are and do, it is immortality, a world without the possibility of death that is the only absolute evil.

Literary representations of dying show that there are many different ways of dying well. One can die humbly and submissively; one can die in gladness and with the serene hope of going to a better place; one can die absent-mindedly (or at least attempt to), taking no account of one's death. From the seventeenth century onwards, literary representations of dying move from the idea of the exemplary death, the death that confirms us as an example of more general virtues, to dying as the assertion of the unexampled uniqueness of a particular life, asserted in the face of the vulgar common lot. If human beings are the animals who are most aware of the fact of their mortality, our continuous condition of 'being-towards-death' makes the manner of our dying something about which we have no choice but to make some kind of choice. Death is in fact the mediator between the singular and the universal. My death is the sign and enactment of my unshareable uniqueness: others may die, as we say, in my stead, in order that I may live; but nobody else can die my death for me. At the same time, it is the necessity to undergo this absolutely private experience that is the one absolute and universal feature of human life. Since we have no reliable reports from those who have passed beyond dying into death, our dying depends very much on the good or ill report of others. And this is perhaps a sign of the larger meaning of dying: that, in undergoing our own, absolutely solitary and unshareable personal dissolutions, we enter into the largest community of all, as we give ourselves over to others for whom we may continue to live on in the manner of our dying.

Readings:**The Death of Socrates**

Plato, *Phaedo* (c.330 BCE)

Let Death Take Me Planting My Cabbages

Michel de Montaigne, 'That to Study Philosophy Is to Learn to Die' (1580)

Immortal Longings: The Death of Cleopatra

William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607)

Holy Dying

Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651)

I Mount! I Fly!

Alexander Pope, 'The Dying Christian to His Soul' (1712)

How the Houyhnhnms Die

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Love in Death

Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (1771)

Death of an Atheist

James Boswell, *An Account of My last Interview with David Hume, Esq. Partly Recorded in my Journal, Partly Enlarged from My Memory, 3 March 1777*

Death of a Good Doctor

Samuel Johnson, 'On the Death of Mr Robert Levett, a Practiser in Physic' (1782)

Death in Defiance

George Gordon Byron, *Manfred* (1817)

Bored to Death

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1853)

Death as a Gentleman Caller

Emily Dickinson, 'Because I could not stop for Death' (1890)

Dying in Character

W B Yeats, 'Upon a Dying Lady' (1913, on the death of the actress Mabel Beardsley, sister of artist Aubrey Beardsley)

Sudden Death

Dylan Thomas, 'Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid Was a Man Aged A Hundred' (1946)

Dying Without Enthusiasm

Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (1951)

Burning and Raving

Dylan Thomas, 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night' (1951)

Going Out With a Bang

Roger McGough, 'Let Me Die a Youngman's Death' (1967)