

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the  
Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*

*Political Shakespeare*  
(editor, with Alan Sinfield)

*Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*

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Death, Desire and Loss  
in Western Culture

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#### Introduction

Hugo, the protagonist of Oscar Moore’s 1991 novel *A Matter of Life and Sex*, initially promises to be the horny adolescent so desirable in modern culture: knowing and streetwise, yet innocently narcissistic too – the ‘sassy street urchin who knew what he wanted and wanted it now’; the ‘flouting, flaunting rudeboy’ who doesn’t come into tissues, preferring instead ‘to see his sperm fly’. Full of life, and the more so for being wildly dissident. But in this narrative he is also the boy who courts death through sex and who dies of AIDS. Eventually, in the midst of anarchic sexual yearning in a Paris bathhouse, death is entertained with a strange calm amid the desperate urgency of it all. ‘With sex choking his throat and thumping against his chest’, Hugo throws himself

into the clinch of sex with the smile of one preparing his last fix. There, in the stream of sweat and hallucination of amyl . . . as the man’s penis swelled and loomed . . . and Hugo’s mouth and eyes drooled in one gasping hunger, a quiet voice whispered – this could be the boy that kills you. And a quiet voice answered back – so then, this is the way to die. (pp. 29, 39, 116, 49, 146)<sup>1</sup>

Compare that with a reviewer of James Miller’s controversial 1993 biography of Michel Foucault, whom some regard as the most significant philosopher of the late twentieth century:

In the autumn of 1983, after he had already collapsed and less than a year before his own death, [Foucault] could still be found in the baths and bars. He laughed at talk of ‘safe-sex’ and reportedly said [to D. A. Miller] ‘to die for the love of boys: what could be more beautiful?’ (Lilla, p. 4)

Miller takes this as evidence of Foucault's attraction to death – suicide especially – and reminds us that, in Foucault's immensely influential *History of Sexuality*, the philosopher speaks of 'the individual driven, in spite of himself, by the sombre madness of sex' (*History*, I.39). For his part, the reviewer remarks solemnly that Foucault 'remained a glutton for sexual danger and excess' (p. 4).

To die for the love of boys is one thing. But what about killing them? In 1983 a rumour was circulating alleging that Foucault, in James Miller's words, 'knowing he was dying of AIDS . . . deliberately tried to infect other people with the disease' (p. 375). The supposed link between homosexuality and death is often imagined to include both impulses: the suicidal and the murderous. This too has a parallel in Moore's novel,<sup>2</sup> where, some one hundred pages on, we read of the same or another Parisian bathhouse in which Hugo 'fucked a man in the backroom . . . and released jets of poisoned spunk into his bowels' (p. 255).

Moore's is a novel in which sex and death, desire and disease, weld together in lurid deathbed dreams which have significant cultural precedents; they invoke, for instance, the medieval or Jacobean obsession with death as somehow the motor of life:

In this light people changed all the time. One moment they were pristine youth, the next a skull peered through the dark and cavities replaced the eyes. (p. 137)

Jacobean too is the way in which age is read back into youth; future death, and the decline that leads ineluctably to it, is vividly imaged as the truth of the here and now:

The dark was never dark enough in the bathhouse. Light played tricks, switching the pretty boy of one minute into a skeleton the next, the lissom youth suddenly chomping toothlessly on his dick, a body muscled and rippling in the spotlight that sagged and collapsed in the harsher light of the showers . . . He didn't know anymore whether he was standing or lying, whether this was sex or death. (p. 304)<sup>3</sup>

*A Matter of Life and Sex* is emphatically not a text from the punitive moral right in which AIDS is a punishment for promiscuity, the wages of sin. Hugo lives and dies according to the creed of a guiltless and

even blameless fatalism; even at his most compulsive and driven he seems to refuse all the old moralizing mystifications. Simply, 'sex has been his making and his undoing', something he regarded as at once addictive and absurd and which, indulged, kills him as surely as would abstinence (p. 145).

But if Hugo remains mostly free of guilt, remorse, reproach, or the desire for redemption – all attitudes of earlier times, and returning in our own – it is the more significant that much of the past is echoed in this fatalistic binding together of sex and death. From the outset, Hugo's fate (death) seems to be latent in his desire. AIDS is not so much a punishment for promiscuity – the wages of sin – as a brutal material proof of something known but never quite comprehended, namely that death inhabits sexuality: perversely, lethally, ecstatically. And this has led some to regard the vision of this novel as almost as offensive as the homophobia of the moral right, just as others have denounced Miller's biography of Foucault.<sup>4</sup> Yet Oscar Moore remained unrepentant; in one of the last pieces he wrote before he died of AIDS-related illnesses at the age of thirty-six in September 1996, he reiterated the view which seems to have inspired his novel: 'sex and sexual knowledge have always been inextricably bound in an embrace with death' ('Rites', p. 16).<sup>5</sup>

Moore draws on a death/desire connection which perhaps found its most extreme statement in the Renaissance, but which is endemic to Western culture more generally and, in recent times, has been revived in relation to male homosexuality. In certain hostile representations of AIDS, homosexuality and death have been made to imply each other: homosexuality is seen as death-driven, death-desiring and thereby death-dealing.<sup>6</sup> As Moore's novel makes clear, contesting these negative representatives (homosexuality = pathology = death) could never be just a question of substituting positive ones (homosexuality = health = life). Male homosexual desire has been regarded in diverse ways by gay people themselves – as death-driven, as revolutionary, as benign, as redemptive, as self-shattering, as impossible of fulfilment, to name but some. Several of these ways of thinking about it clearly disturb those striving to establish an affirmative gay identity politics. And not surprisingly: on the one hand, this connection of homosexual desire and death has been made by those who want homosexuals

literally to die; on the other, it is also part of homosexual history, as it is part of a more general cultural history. But with a difference: the sexually dissident have sometimes known more about this connection, confronting and exploring what the sexually conventional may share yet disavow. In particular, the sexually dissident have known that the strange dynamic which, in Western culture, binds death into desire is not the product of a marginal pathological imagination, but crucial in the formation of that culture. That is one argument of this book.

### *Loss and desire*

That there are connections between death and desire is a commonplace, but a perplexing one; after all, desire is on the side of life, life is opposed to death, therefore desire also must be opposed to death. Thom Gunn writes:

My thoughts are crowded with death  
and it draws so oddly on the sexual  
that I am confused  
confused to be attracted  
by, in effect, my own annihilation.  
(‘In Time of Plague’)

Gunn is right: although manifest and pervasive in Western culture, especially its art, this age-old connection of death and sexuality does become confusing when we stop to think about it. Mostly we don’t think about it – especially when we think we know about it. What this suggests is that here the commonplace works as a kind of disavowal, allowing us to see and not see at the same time.<sup>7</sup> We recognize and register the sex/death connection, but in a way which precisely allows us not to ‘see’ it. By acknowledging an ‘obvious’ connection between desire and death, the commonplace encourages us to forgo thought about it. Some things remain unknown not because they are occluded or unspoken, but because they circulate constantly and visibly as commonplaces. As I write, a radio arts programme previews a new production of John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612). We are told that the commonplace theme of this and other Jacobean tragedies,

namely the connection of sex and death, has renewed relevance in our own AIDS-inflicted age. The urbane chatter of the culture journalist quietly keeps at bay the questions that form: *Why* were the Jacobean obsessed with this connection? *Does* AIDS really make it a renewed obsession for us, and if so how?

For the Jacobean, as for us, what connects death with desire is mutability – the sense that all being is governed by a ceaseless process of change inseparable from *an inconsolable sense of loss somehow always in excess of the loss of anything in particular*. W. B. Yeats put it succinctly enough: ‘Man is in love and loves what vanishes, / What more is there to say?’ (‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’). The experience of change and loss exerts an incalculable influence on the development of our culture. Western metaphysics and Western religion derive from that experience, especially as it led to repeated attempts to distinguish between appearance and reality. Broadly speaking, the world we experience was said to be the world of appearances, the domain of unreality, deception, loss, transience and death – to be contrasted with an ultimate, changeless reality which was either deeper within or entirely beyond the world of appearance. This immanent or transcendent reality was also said to be the source of absolute, as distinct from relative, truth, and even of eternal life. Some of the greatest literature in the West derives from the tension between the desire for that ultimate reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, and the conviction that, in reality, it does not.

Typically, the process of change and decline *in time* is more disturbing than the idea of not being at all; as Sir Walter Raleigh put it some 400 years ago, under the sway of time ‘all is dissolved, our labours come to nought’; mutability destroys not only living things, but all human endeavour:

all droops, all dies, all trodden under dust;  
the person, place, and passages forgotten;  
the hardest steel eaten with softest rust,  
the firm and solid tree both rent and rotten . . .

(‘The Ocean to Scinthia’, ll. 235, 253–6)

Raleigh here takes the omniscient overview, the long, solitary perspective across time and loss. Others realize the effects of mutability

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in the fleeting, transient moment; future loss, change and ultimately death are felt as somehow always discernible in the here and now – in the silence of a room recently inhabited, or the sound of the wind in one not yet occupied:

Now first, as I shut the door,  
I was alone  
In the new house; and the wind  
Began to moan.

Old at once was the house,  
And I was old;  
My ears were teased with the dread  
Of what was foretold,

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;  
Sad days when the sun  
Shone in vain; old griefs and griefs  
Not yet begun . . .

. . . I learned how the wind would sound  
After these things should be.  
(Edward Thomas, 'The New House')

In his poem 'Logs on the Hearth' (1915) Thomas Hardy writes not of future loss, but of loss already incurred. He recalls a childhood moment when he and his sister were climbing a tree. She is now dead, the tree has been felled, and the poet is watching a log from it burning in the grate:

The fire advances along the log  
Of the tree we felled,  
Which bloomed and bore striped apples by the peck  
Till its last hour of bearing knelled.

The fork that first my hand would reach  
And then my foot  
In climbing upward inch by inch, lies now  
Sawn, sapless, darkening with soot.

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Where the bark chars is where, one year,  
It was pruned, and bled –  
Then overgrew the wound. But now, at last,  
Its growings all have stagnated.

My fellow-climber rises dim  
From her chilly grave –  
Just as she was, her foot near mine on the bending limb,  
Laughing, her young brown hand awake.

Being unselfconsciously alive is conveyed in a precise image of something ordinary: the movement of 'climbing upward inch by inch'. The fork 'that first my hand would reach / And then my foot' (and this was a tree climbed many times) is really seen only now; or rather, seeing it again in the grate – 'Sawn, sapless, darkening with soot' – is to remember the familiar feel of it, while seeing it for the first time in the fuller, but never complete, perspective of time. The sense of loss is most intense in the visual detail ('Where the bark chars'), and in the longer history which the detail evokes: the bark was pruned, bled, recovered, became the stronger for it, only *then* to die. Hardy's sister is recalled in a moment of unselfconscious happiness now frozen for ever in the haunting immobility of the photographic image: 'Just as she was, her foot near mine on the bending limb, / Laughing, her young brown hand awake.' We grieve because someone loved is lost for ever. But there is another aspect to the experiencing of a loss which is inconsolable and somehow in excess of any specific grief: images like those in Hardy's poem register a happiness somehow only known in retrospect, when it is irretrievable. Happiness is somehow never fully knowable in the flux of time: *then* it was experienced as inconsequential, *now* as irrevocably gone. Happiness is always in a past where it never quite existed at the time.

If, in the tradition of *carpe diem* ('seize the day'), knowledge of mutability and loss tends to intensify rather than diminish the existential value of the transient moment, it is also true that an easy, unqualified celebration of that moment is rare; many poems in the *carpe diem* tradition register not just the desire to capture the moment, but the existential difficulty of doing so. We need to stop, and yet we cannot. In one of the most famous of all *carpe diem* poems, 'To His Coy

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Mistress', Andrew Marvell (1621-78) describes being chased by time towards oblivion:

But at my back I always hear  
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.

The very passing of time, which makes us so keen to seize the day, is also what somehow prevents us doing so; the day slips ineluctably through our hands.

Such verse is rarely if ever about simply seizing the day; it is also about how time and change, driving us towards a horizon of oblivion, make it hard to seize anything, let alone the day, which, after all, is itself a measure of time.<sup>8</sup> And if we do manage to halt time imaginatively, isolating the moment, it is often then only to encounter within it the haunting stillness of non-being. The so-called spots of time in Wordsworth's *Prelude* come to mind, or this, from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage  
Quick now, here, now, always –  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after. (p. 20)

This inability to seize the day is more fundamentally an inability to realize our desires in a world governed and destroyed by time, and it points to a further, even more disturbing and paradoxical, dimension of desire itself. Mutability is the stuff of life; without it, life literally would not be possible. If, with regard to the natural world, this truth is accepted with a wise-sad equanimity, in relation to human life it is more usually regarded as traumatic, and in relation to human desire as an intolerable contradiction.

Here is one of the most significant factors of all in the connection of desire and death. On the one hand, mutability is the ineluctable enemy of desire because it ceaselessly thwarts it: 'Man is in love and

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loves what vanishes.' In another poem, 'The Definition of Love', Marvell describes a love subjected to time and change as 'begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility'. On the other hand, movement, motion, change, inconstancy are the very stuff not just of life but also of desire; that is to say, *mutability is also the inner dynamic of desire*. As T. S. Eliot put it, 'Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable' (p. 20); or, in the words of Shelley, desire is 'that unrest which men miscall delight' (*Adonais*, XL). In other words, mutability animates desire even as it thwarts it. Put slightly differently, the very nature of desire is what prevents its fulfilment, what makes it 'impossible'.

I shall argue that this contradiction becomes profoundly important in the formation of identity and gender in Western culture, not least in the way it renders desire seemingly impossible, or at least futile and self-defeating. It is an overriding reason why the lack which *is* desire comes to be regarded as inherently incapable of satisfaction and linked to death. Thus apparently always defeating itself, desire comes to seem destructively insatiable, a permanent lack whose attempted fulfilment is at once the destiny of the self and what destroys it, leading the poet to cry, in Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, 'I desperate now approve / Desire is death'.<sup>9</sup>

Those lines of Eliot's just quoted perfectly conjoin the ambivalent attitudes in Western culture towards both desire and movement: desire as undesirable movement. Illicit desire is especially prone to being conceptualized as aberrant movement. For example, the idea of deviation – itself the conceptual heart of the idea of perversion – is about a movement which is dangerous or subversive: to deviate = to go astray. Conversely, the good, the safe and the true are about not deviating (sticking to the straight and narrow), while related virtues like order, stability and harmony presuppose restricted, limited or controlled movement, often echoing the ultimate metaphysical ideal of fixity, predetermination or stasis: the fixed origin, fixed destiny, fixed identity, and so on. And yet, as we shall see, even as it idealizes the predetermined and the static, no culture has a more significant history of obsessive, expansive, restless movement.

*The death of man?*

I explore the history of this movement in a way which leads to a questioning of some of the emerging orthodoxies of contemporary thought, especially in relation to the so-called 'death' of man. Briefly, this is the argument that there has occurred, relatively recently and somewhat momentarily, the collapse of a Western humanist ideology of individualism. Whereas once the Western expansionist project (for example in the spheres of religious domination, cultural imperialism, colonization or the formation of empire) was underpinned by a powerful and confident sense of individual selfhood, in our own time – and corresponding to the crisis if not the collapse of that expansionist era – we have witnessed the death of this individual and 'his' universal counterpart, 'man'.

For several decades now, if not longer, the humanities have been dominated by this claim. But, as we shall see, in the Western tradition the individual has always been in crisis, energized and driven forward by the same forces of mutability and death which destabilize and fragment. That passage from Marvell's poem cited earlier is interesting in this context too, describing as it does being driven from behind by time into a future of non-being, the deserts of a vast eternity. And those like John Donne (below, Chapter 5) find it easy to make the perverse imaginative leap whereby the real material energies of the universe seemingly reside not in the generative life-force but in the disintegrative potency of death. Even more perversely, the disintegrative power of death is found at the heart of generation. And time and again this most pessimistic of visions, even as it renounced the world, remained an indispensable component of a culture of ceaseless activity whose 'agent' was, precisely, the individual in crisis.

Much of this is half-sanctioned in the most revered of all Western aesthetic genres, tragedy, as it rehearses one of the more enduring paradoxes animating the energies which have 'made' Western culture: even as we are driven forward by a secular fear of failure, we resort to the metaphysical reassurance that such failure is ultimately inevitable. And if that reassurance sometimes invites renunciation and withdrawal, it rather more often redoubles the secular effort by imparting to it a fatalistic 'lift'. After all, Enoch Powell's famous observation

that 'All political lives . . . end in failure because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs' (p. 151) may well have become a truism, but it does not deter politicians, whose actions often imply sympathy with Macbeth's reflection on his own increasingly murderous and self-defeating attempt to hang on to power: 'I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (III.iv.135–7). A truism of the modern world it may be, but it took a classical scholar to come up with it.

The 'crisis' of the individual is less a crisis than a recurring instability deriving from the theological obsession with death, loss and failure. And it does not set in only at the point when the expansionist tendencies of Western culture falter; on the contrary, it has always been an integral, facilitating aspect of those tendencies. Like the expansionist project, if less obviously, that crisis and the theology from which it derives both have a history and have made history, especially at the point where they intersect as the conviction that death and loss simultaneously drive and frustrate desire. While it would be wrong to regard this conviction as unique to Western culture – Buddhism, after all, regards desire or craving as the source of all suffering – the forms it has taken in the West have been distinctive. I have in mind especially those intellectual and aesthetic developments across the last two millennia which have driven death ever further into desire – from the Christian belief that man, through transgressive desire, brought death into the world, with the consequence that henceforth it would haunt desire as the source of all suffering (e.g. Romans 5:12, 6:23), to the psychoanalytic theory of the death drive, whereby, as Freud put it, "the aim of all life is death" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 311).<sup>10</sup>

Developing the Christian narrative into one of its more agonized and radical theological formulations, Augustine contended that a death-infected mutability pervades desire, and is transmitted from one generation to the next via semen and the 'unclean motion' of the sexual act (below, Chapter 3). This means that mutability is also experientially ever-present as the anarchy of a desire always potentially out of control (even down to the unruly 'motions' of erection) and always threatening to undo the self. And when, much later, Donne or any one of a number of his contemporaries describes man as a fragile *being* all the time *being* disintegrated by aberrant desire ('I

find myself scattered, melted', *Selected Prose*, p. 114) he is making mutability even more central to both individual identity and desire.

Such earlier accounts of desire as the radical undoing of the virtuous self may seem of little interest today, especially if we assume them to be no less obsolete than they are objectionable. On the other hand, we might listen closely when our psychoanalyst tells us that unconscious desire, permanently at odds with the demands of civilization, is what will always wreck the ego's attempt to forge a coherent sense of self. In certain respects only the terminology is different, and Freud, in founding psychoanalysis, certainly drew on a theological past.

Further, the considerable intellectual and political influence of Augustine focuses a paradox which came to fascinate Freud: even as it preaches the inherent instability, futility and misery of mortal existence, this theology of death keeps its adherents reluctantly future-directed – savaged internally by death and change, they are also driven forward by them. Religiously, the desire for eternity would be expressed in life as a conflict between the need to struggle forward and the yearning to return, both paths leading to a divine death – that peace that passes all understanding. If theology intensifies, thwarts, deflects and exploits a desire for death, Freud's theory of the death drive (below, Chapter 14) is at once a brilliant reworking of that theology and a devastating challenge to it.

### *Eroticizing death*

Well before Freud, there were those who entertained the attraction of death almost as scandalously as he did. They did not need a theory of the death drive to know that if death both drives and frustrates desire it is also what desire may seek in order to be free of itself. As Hamlet famously meditated, to die is a consummation devoutly to be wished. From the earliest times, death has held out the promise of a release not just from desire but from something inseparable from it, namely the pain of being individuated (separate, differentiated, alone) and the form of self-consciousness which goes with that – what philosophers like Schopenhauer call the principle of individuation (*principium individuationis*). In other words, death holds out the

promise of a release from the very individuality whose formation would have been unthinkable without it.

Identity is experienced ambivalently, and the urge to consolidate it is complicated by the wish to relinquish it. The seductiveness of the idea of this death of the self has always been a part of Western individualism. And, with that energetic, perverse hubris so characteristic of this individualism, there will be those who seek death not only as the release from desire, but also as its object; from the earliest times, but later increasingly, death becomes eroticized; already for Hamlet it was a 'consummation'. In context (*Hamlet* III.i.63) the word is precisely significant, meaning both satisfying climax and being consumed or vanishing into nothing. (It is sometimes said that Hamlet's problem is that he cannot or will not act, suffering as he does from an inertia of the will. Actually, Hamlet is the epitome of the individual 'in crisis' racked with desire, obsessed with death, and thereby driven to act.)

If death is most famously eroticized by Wagner in *Tristan and Isolde*, many others have done it no less memorably, including Keats in 'Ode to a Nightingale':

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou amongst the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs

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... for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!



Keats's letter to Fanny Brawne of 25 June 1819, written just weeks after this ode, says something similar, and rather directly:

I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. From no others would I take it. (*Letters*, p. 271)

Desire, the source of so much pain, also holds out the promise of the pleasurable death of the self – or at the very least of what I call 'self-disidentification'. And here we confront just some of the various ways in which the distinction between literal and metaphoric death is so obvious, yet always being confused: why does the weave of Western aesthetic culture owe as much to the confusion, endlessly rehearsed in 'fantasy', as to the distinction itself, equally insistently rehearsed in 'reality'?

If God always held out the promise of death – the peace that passes all understanding – then, as we see in later chapters, when humanists like Feuerbach took God back into man they took back death too. Influential developments in modern thought internalize death as never before. This is true of writers as diverse as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Freud, Bataille and Kojève, all of whom contribute to one of the most fascinating paradoxes of modern philosophies of human identity: death is taken into consciousness in a way which is at once an expansion and a nullification of consciousness (below, Parts IV–V). Perhaps it has always been the case that the radical elements in humanism have included a strain of anti-humanism whereby consciousness identifies with what threatens it, and especially with what it submits to, thereby empowering and destabilizing itself both at once.

It is certainly the case that in the West submission to death is never quite what it seems. Alongside or inside an abject submission to death there is often an arrogant identification with it. Similarly, while the instabilities, anxieties and contradictions to be found in subjectivity can be truly self-destructive, they are also the precondition, and the incentive, for such an identification. As we shall see, from Christian theology to post-modernism, a desiring identification with death is

one of the most remarkable aspects of our culture. Some post-modernists seek empowerment in a quest for perpetual instability – hence in part their preoccupation with the death of man, the death of the author, the death of the subject. (By replacing 'individual' with the more technical term 'subject', cultural theorists are conveying the idea that our subjectivity, far from being autonomous, is 'subjected' to the historical and social structures which determine it.) Far from being radically innovative, as their adherents claim, such recent ideas are mutations of older ones. Devotees of post-modern theory, often ignorant of intellectual history, remain unaware of the extent to which earlier ways of thinking which it claims to have entirely superseded remain obscurely active within it.

### *Sexual/gender differences*

It has been said that the 'man' who has recently died was indeed exclusively male, and the ideologies he served quintessentially masculinist. It will be clear in what follows that the Western preoccupation with death, desire and loss is also significantly gendered. In one respect it could hardly be otherwise, given that the vast majority of the writers who appear here are male (and quite a few conspicuously misogynist as well – Schopenhauer and Nietzsche included). Even when (like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) they are hostile to Christianity, it is that religion which remains the most significant precedent for their misogyny – especially the narrative of the Fall, which resonates powerfully in our culture to this day. It was or is a narrative in which woman is held responsible for bringing death and mutability into the world. As might be expected, there is no dearth of psychoanalytic explanations for this association of women with death, ranging from chronic unconscious male fear of engulfment or even castration in sexual intercourse, to the difficulty of the boy child leaving the mother for another woman. It has also been suggested that there might be a deep envy of women's procreative ability (womb envy).

Recently Camille Paglia had gone rather further, arguing that men's fear of women is natural, even rational, and biologically (anatomically) grounded. And she does so in the context of a larger argument which

also associates women with death and which revives the idea that nature is most fundamentally a force of degeneration. For Paglia human history is a struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. By the latter she means not a tame, humanized liveliness, but an instinctual and amoral life-force rooted in competition: 'we are only for something by being *against* something else'. More fundamentally still, the life-force is also a force of death, dissolution and destruction; nature itself operates according to the principle of the 'chthonian', which means 'of the earth' – 'but earth's bowels, not its surface . . . the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze' (pp. 5–6). And if we have an evolutionary revulsion from slime, it is precisely because it is the site of our origin.

All culture, says Paglia in an argument which resembles that of Georges Bataille (below, Chapter 17), including aesthetics and science, is built on the repression or evasion of the chthonian, and of the fact that there are no stable objects in nature, only the erosion of natural force, reducing everything to fluid, the primal soup from which new life struggles into being:

Everything is melting in nature . . . An apple tree laden with fruit: how peaceful, how picturesque. But remove the rosy filter of humanism from our gaze and look again. See nature spurning and frothing, its mad spermatid bubbles endlessly spilling out and smashing in that inhuman round of waste, rot, and carnage . . . Nature is the seething excess of being. (pp. 1–6, 41–2)

Men create culture as a defence against nature, and, since women are identified with nature, culture is also a defence against female nature, which is, Paglia insists, essentially chthonian – nature is a 'miasmatic swamp whose prototype is the still pond of the womb'. Furthermore, 'Feminism has been simplistic in arguing that female archetypes were politically motivated falsehoods by men. The historical repugnance to woman has a rational basis: disgust is reason's proper response to the grossness of procreative nature' (p. 12).<sup>11</sup>

It follows, for Paglia, that all relationships are necessarily exploitative, and there is a radical disjunction between the sexes which begins and ends in the body. Sex is unfree, inhumane, compulsive and aggressive, characterized by a 'daemonic instability' (p. 13). It is also regressive, a ritualistic acting out of past histories – biological and

social – with the result that 'every orgasm is shaped by psychic shadows' (p. 4). More elementally still, in sex we are caught up in a 'backward movement towards primeval dissolution'; sex threatens annihilation. This, says Paglia, is why so many men turn away or flee after sex: 'they have sensed the annihilation of the daemonic' (pp. 4–5). Male sexuality is especially and inherently insecure, always haunted by the prospect of failure and humiliation ('a flop is a flop'), and even when apparently successful it is inherently mutable, going from erection through orgasm to detumescence: 'Men enter in triumph but withdraw in decrepitude. The sex act cruelly mimics history's decline and fall' (p. 20). Which also means that male sexuality is inherently manic-depressive and always driven beyond and haunted by its own impossibility of fulfilment: 'Men know they are sexual exiles. They wander the earth seeking satisfaction, craving and despising, never content. There is nothing in that anguished motion for women to envy' (p. 19). For everyone, she says, the only perfect freedom is death (p. 3).

Unsurprisingly, it is in the feminism which Paglia repeatedly attacks that we find an opposing perspective to hers. Most feminists would reject the way in which Paglia associates female sexuality with death, seeing death as much more a concern of male sexuality, but even then making the connection historically contingent rather than naturally necessary.

Simone de Beauvoir was the author of *The Second Sex*, crucially formative for modern feminism. It was a book which not only changed the lives of thousands of women, but, according to Toril Moi, 'posed every one of the problems feminists today are working to solve' (p. 3).<sup>12</sup> So it is instructive to learn that Beauvoir's intellectual and cultural achievements were inextricably bound up with death. She wrote tirelessly; Moi observes that her autobiographies and letters alone run to well over a million words (p. 4). In this writing, ageing and death are recurring themes, even obsessions. At the end of *The Prime of Life* she writes, 'One night in June 1944, I tried to exorcize death with words. I excerpt some of my notes here . . .'; to write at all becomes 'my last and greatest recourse against death' (pp. 475–6). In *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death*, Elaine Marks contends that all Beauvoir's writings may be seen as desperate efforts to exorcize death with words (p. 11). Put another way, it was death which drove her

to write. Death was both a violation of her being and what imparted to it an anguished energy (Marks, *passim*; Moi, pp. 236–52).

For Beauvoir death is ever-present as mutability – a profound sense of loss arising from but always exceeding the realization of one's own physical decline: 'The ephemeral was my lot. And down the stream of Time, history bore its vast jumble of incurable ills, its brief moments of glory' (p. 473). And yet for Beauvoir death is about terror rather than the seduction of non-being: 'I could not bear to think of myself as finite and ephemeral, a drop of water in the ocean; at times all my endeavours seemed vanity, happiness became a false lure, and the world wore the mocking, illusory mask of Nothingness' (p. 475). Men have, of course, written about the terror of non-being. But, from the history which I explore in this book, I hazard the generalization that it is men more than women who experience the seduction of non-being.

Feminist writers who draw on philosophy and psychoanalysis are inclined to regard the gendering of death as complex. Although, as we've seen, psychoanalysis provides many models for explaining a male fear of female sexuality – and especially a male association of female sexuality and death – it is also the case that women psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva and Juliet Mitchell do not locate the convergence of sexuality and death within the male psyche alone.

In her predominantly psychoanalytic study *Over Her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that gender constructions are 'supplementary to the division between life and death' (p. 266). Bronfen's theme is the pervasive aesthetic connection between death and femininity, themselves the two central enigmas of Western discourse. She shows how the image of the dead or dying woman is so pervasive in our culture that we often fail to see it. Edgar Allan Poe once said, 'The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world' (Bronfen, pp. 59–60). For some feminists, such a remark epitomizes the hatefulness of patriarchal society in aesthetic disguise – a kind of necrophilic misogyny. For Bronfen, such a response to Poe's remark involves the erroneous assumption of a straightforward connection between cultural image and experienced reality – an assumption 'which defuses both the real violence of political domination and the power of representations' (p. 59). It also ignores the

multiplicity of themes which are condensed and displaced in the image, and its ambivalent fusion of subversive as well as conservative drives, all of which lead Bronfen not simply to reject Poe's remark, but to question it psychoanalytically. Why a *dead* woman? Equally important, why a *beautiful* woman? And, above all, 'why the unconditioned "unquestionably", why the superlative "most poetical"?' What emerges from Poe's remark are some enduring paradoxes and contradictions in our culture. For instance, beauty is found to be not the life-affirming opposite of death, but its mask – a mask allowing for an insecure translation of anxiety into desire. Further, Bronfen argues that aesthetics and femininity stand in an analogous relation to death, in that both, by giving the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable extent of lack, deficiency and transiency in life itself.<sup>13</sup>

If writers as different as Paglia and Bronfen confirm the sense that the Western preoccupation with desire's relations to death is undoubtedly gendered, as are the forms this preoccupation takes, they also suggest the inadequacy of simplistic or reductive accounts as to how or why. We do not have to accept their own perspectives to share with them the conviction that this is something that crucially involves, but goes beyond, gender. My own response to the claim that this preoccupation is essentially and only the preserve of men is simply to recall that we have been here before: feminists have contended that certain kinds of reprehensible behaviour are confined to men, just as lesbians and gays have contended that other kinds of behaviour are confined to heterosexuals, only to then have other feminists, lesbians and gays lay claim to precisely the behaviours denied to them, and, in the process, revalue those behaviours as more than simply reprehensible.

### *Social death*

In the last century fears of failure have intensified in proportion to the conviction that the social order can or should be engineered. These fears have been expressed as a heightened concern about the threat of social death – the fear that society is endangered, even to the point

of possible extinction, by forces intrinsic to it, as distinct from external agents. This fear has included the conviction that contemporary society, and probably the entire civilization, is being threatened by degenerating life-forms – the racial other, the sexual deviant, the urban poor, to name but some. The most elaborated account of this idea was provided by degeneration theory (below, Part III).

Degeneration theorists did not invent the idea of social death, but they refined and evolved it enormously, and the murdering, annihilating strains of Stalinism, Nazism and fascism borrowed from them. What we discover (Part VI) is that revolutionary movements also find the rhetoric of social death useful as a way of conceptualizing those elements within the social which prove recalcitrant. Fears of social death are partly a consequence of enormous cultural changes from the Enlightenment onwards, but they also incorporate modern mutations of older anxieties about (uncontrollable) change and death. In some ways the conviction that the social can or should be controlled intensifies these older anxieties but changes them too: now the mutable social deviant – shifting and degenerating and full of aberrant desire – becomes both a justification of social engineering and a scapegoat for its failures.

Social historians speak of an increasing denial of death in modern times (Part III). But in the writing which this book examines there is, rather, a continuing and intensifying preoccupation with death in this period. Philosophically, aesthetically and erotically, modernity now intensifies and refines, now struggles against, now seeks to nullify that merciless immanence of death discerned by a formative earlier tradition. But there is at least one profoundly influential area of modern thought where something like a denial of death does seem to occur. It derives from the belief that change – or at least social change – can be controlled through praxis (Part VI). The seminal figure here is Marx, and the crucial idea (by no means his alone) is that we can master change and not merely be helplessly subject to it. As Marx would put it in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can only be grasped and rationally understood as revolutionary practice. (Bottomore and Rubel, p. 83)

This represented a momentous shift in thinking, for reasons which are well-known. Once the vehicle of death, change is now harnessed into the service of life, becoming both the route to a different and better existence – via revolution, or at very least social transformation – and the essence of what it is to be human. In other words, we realize our potential to change the world by simultaneously recognizing that change and potentiality (rather than metaphysical fixity) are the grounds of what it is to be human; as Marx puts it in the passage just cited, in revolutionary praxis the changing of society and of the self coincide. This is why revolutionary fervour either ignores the question of death (Marx hardly mentions it) or scorns what it regards as the mystifying quietism of the traditional preoccupation with change as the grounds of death. But when revolution fails, even when more moderate aspirations for social improvement are frustrated, the preoccupation with death returns. In retrospect we can see that it was never far away – not least in the way that for intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse (Part VI) political radicalism is at some level an attempt to sublimate the melancholy that haunts them.

It was sometimes claimed that praxis abolished the philosophical need for renunciation, and even abolished if not death itself then at least what Marcuse derides as 'the ideology of death'. But this overlooked the fact that for Stoics like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (Part I), and in a different way later Christian writers like Sir Walter Raleigh (Part II), the metaphysics of death was never dissociated from, or intended to pre-empt, worldly engagement; nor did it derive only from the direct experience of the failure of such engagement – on the contrary, the obsession with death was involved in the effort of engagement from the start, and it strangely intensified human endeavour. But for the philosophical advocates of a *social* praxis it seems necessary to ignore, reduce and even repress the significance of death. The case of Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the most politically involved philosopher of the postwar era, is especially significant (Part IV).

*The aesthetics of energy*

Another movement in modern thought involves a conception of change which is different again. Now it is the belief that Western decadence can be overcome only through a non-rational, self-risking immersion in change (Part VII). Represented most brilliantly by Friedrich Nietzsche, the concern is less to control change than to identify with it – ecstatically, sacrificially and even masochistically.

Nietzsche (below, Chapter 16) reacted violently against a metaphysics of death which he believed had been undermining Western culture at least since Socrates and was manifested as world-weariness, an incapacity for struggle and resistance, ‘*a yearning for extinction, cessation of all effort*’ (*Birth*, p. 11): in brief, a wish to die. Nietzsche came to believe that this decadence found its most refined expression in Schopenhauer and Wagner, both of whom he had earlier revered but now vehemently repudiated. Wagner had himself been profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer – most especially by his philosophical vindication of death. This is Wagner writing about what he had found in Schopenhauer:

the genuine ardent longing for death, for absolute unconsciousness, total non-existence. Freedom from all dreams is our only final salvation. (*Wagner on Music and Drama*, p. 270)

This is exactly the world-weariness Nietzsche came to despise. He insisted that, rather than escaping the world of change by succumbing to the death-wish, or by seeking to transcend it metaphysically (in practice much the same thing), one had to enter into a Dionysiac identification with it, thereby serving and exemplifying the will to power, even to the point of welcoming destruction and the shattering of self. So in his identification with change there remains an embrace of death – an urgent need simultaneously to energize and to annihilate selfhood.

This further shift in the conception of mutability resonates through modernity, and if anything becomes even more significant for the post-modern, albeit in an attenuated form. Compared to it, the famous pronouncement of Nietzsche’s madman (‘God is dead’) seems deriva-

tive. But, like many radical breaks, it both disguises and facilitates equally ‘radical’ continuities – not least because, as I argue, what Nietzsche calls the decadent tradition represents not a faltering of the Western expansionist enterprise (of, in his terms, its will to power), but a significant strand of it. So this tradition is not the antithesis of the will to power but its precursor, and the Nietzschean embrace of change is in certain respects a mutation of its way of thinking, not a breaking with it. This is one reason why Nietzsche remains intensely concerned with the necessity of combating the tendency towards social death consequent upon the perceived decline of Western culture.

Bataille (Chapter 17) is different again, and is particularly influential in taking the idea of the self-annihilating excess of desire to its limits, such that in ecstasy the distinction between death and desire almost ceases to signify. And D. H. Lawrence (Chapter 18) exemplifies a fascinating and recurring contradiction in modernity – now seduced by death as release, now obsessed with a radical individualism as an escape from the social death which is destroying Western culture. What makes Lawrence of the utmost significance still is that he exemplifies the extreme crisis of a modern philosophy of individualism that professes to be life-affirming yet is beleaguered by virtually every death-obsession in the Western tradition.

It is also via Lawrence that I return in Part VIII to the importance of homosexuality, now invested with extraordinary redemptive potential, even as it is also the focus of intense cultural, psychic and political anxieties about degeneration and death.

In this book I have wanted to reach non-specialist readers without making the patronizing assumption that they will be alienated by all but the superficial. I have not just summarized texts from afar, but have preferred instead to explore them close-up in the hope of getting inside a writer’s mood, language, sensibility and philosophy. But I have only included material which I regard as potentially interesting and accessible to any thoughtful reader.

To say I’ve ranged widely is only another way of saying I’ve left out a great deal. I hope my subject exonerates me from the task of trying to be exhaustive. Certainly as I wrote it this book became a daily *memento mori*. I even came to see books themselves differently,

#### INTRODUCTION

especially in the remoter parts of libraries and second-hand bookshops. The title of a forgotten book and the dust it collects have a stillness which conveys that sense of past activity and present absence for which death is another word. Without death there would be no philosophy. So said Schopenhauer, Montaigne and many others. In fact without death there would be nothing – least of all books.

#### I

### THE ANCIENT WORLD

## Notes

### Introduction

1 Death or at least decay is there from the start. Anonymous old men encountered in public toilets are like 'insects crawling out from behind the stained tiles . . . limed with the damp stench of the soggy bogroll world' (p. 44). What is seemingly most disturbing about these old men is not so much their decaying bodies but the fact that, in this decayed state and so close to death, *they still desire*. Almost literally embodying desire as death, they bear silent witness to this dreadful proximity, and in the same moment also bear witness to the intolerable desirability of the young. One old man, allowed to watch Hugo fuck another young man, 'winked and gasped, watched as his dick dribbled white spots onto the carpet and, rubbing them in with his slipper, left the room' (p. 45). Repelled by these old men, Hugo nevertheless cannot or does not avoid them. Sometimes he performs before them: 'straining for the relief of an orgasm which, when it came, was only a spasm without the shudder, an anti-climax that offered no feeling of relief. Just a small grey wave of depression' (p. 39).

2 Or Cyril Collard's autobiographical novel, *Savage Nights*, which became the basis of a controversial film of the same name with Collard as lead and director.

3 Compare, from a decade earlier, Andrew Holleran's *Dancer From the Dance*: ' . . . five feet away from the corpse, people lay taking the sun and admiring a man who had just given the kiss of life to a young boy. Death and desire, death and desire' (pp. 30-31).

4 See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, esp. pp. 126-85.

5 Moore also wrote a widely admired column in the *Guardian* newspaper on living with AIDS. These pieces have been collected in *PWA: Looking AIDS in the Face*.

6 Ellis Hanson reminds us that this association is not new: notions of death have been at the heart of nearly every historical construction of same-sex desire. Recently, in the media, people living with AIDS have been made vampire-like, 'the dead who dare to speak and sin and walk abroad, the undead with AIDS' (Fuss, *Inside/Out*, pp. 324-5). In another article in the same book, Jeff Nunokawa shows that this connection between homosexuality and death is not just something

done to gay culture by a homophobic dominant culture; within gay culture too, homosexuality has been regarded fatalistically, morbidly, and as somehow doomed of its very nature. Nunokawa identifies texts as different as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* and James Merrill's *The Inner Room* as inclined to 'cultivate the confusion of gay identity with a death-driven narrative', and representing 'doom as the specific fate of gay men' (p. 317).

7 In an important essay of 1930, Thomas Mann realized that to comprehend the paradoxical interanimation of love and death one has first to get beyond its commonplace representations – 'piquant, half-playful, half-macabre . . . externally and sentimentally romantic', especially facile in the mouths of 'wits and romantics' (*Essays*, p. 261).

8 Writing perceptively of modernist philosophy, Simon Critchley argues that, because finitude always remains beyond our grasp, we will never be able to comprehend death in a way which renders it life-enabling and life-affirming. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is precisely that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment within it (*Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, esp. pp. 24-7).

9 Compare Shakespeare's Antony, who, hearing that his wife is dead, reflects on the vicissitudes of desire:

Thus did I desire it:

What our contempts doth often hurl from us,  
We wish it ours again. The present pleasure,  
By revolution low'ring, does become  
The opposite of itself: she's good, being gone;  
The hand could pluck her back that shoved her on.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, l.ii.115-20)

10 Unless indicated to the contrary, all italics in quotations are those of the original source.

11 Paglia takes the view of Sade rather than Rousseau, Hobbes rather than Locke, Nietzsche and Freud rather than Marx (p. 2). Which means she is sceptical of ameliorative politics, progressivism and emancipation movements – especially feminism.

12 It has also recently been argued that the major ideas behind Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* came from Beauvoir; see Kate and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, esp. p. 3.

13 But such representations are always misrepresentations, inasmuch as 'they repress what they purport to reveal and they articulate what they hope to conceal'. Femininity and death point to a reality or an excess which is beyond, yet disruptive of, all systems of language (Bronfen, pp. xi-xii). So potentially dangerous is this disruption that the conjoining of femininity and death in representation is already a reaffirmation of the stability which they threaten. However, this is an unstable containment; in particular, it harbours and even intensifies a fascination with

precisely what has been repressed. It is also violently voyeuristic, in the sense that all representations of dying are voyeuristic (by virtue of implying the safe position of the spectator), and fetishistic, in that it separates the body from its real materiality and its historical context.

### Chapter 1

1 Compare the following, from centuries later:

For mortals, mortal things. And all things leave us.  
Or if they do not, then we leave them.

(Lucian, c. AD 115-80; in Jay, p. 279)

Everything's laughter  
everything dust  
everything nothing.

(Glykon, in Jay, p. 319)

2 Unless otherwise stated, the translations are from the edition by Charles H. Kahn.

3 Kahn (pp. 288-9) questions the authenticity of this fragment.

4 Modern commentators go to great lengths to harmonize Heraclitus' thought with our own; some fragments get pages of commentary to this end. But it is salutary to recall again that we come up against beliefs which are not only paradoxical but irreducibly alien: in fragment xlvii he declares that the sun is the size of a human foot, and in xlviia that it is relit every day. We also encounter a strange (and disputed) way of dying: according to Diogenes Laertius, when Heraclitus was dying he buried himself in manure and was devoured by dogs (Heraclitus, pp. 5-6).

5 Cf. Marcuse, 'The Ideology of Death', pp. 67-8, and below, Chapter 15.

6 See Jennifer Wallace, 'Shelley, Plato and the Political Imagination'.

7 Shelley used a free translation of the following epigram, sometimes attributed to Plato, as the epigraph for *Adonais*:

You were the morning star among the living;  
But now in death your evening lights the dead.

(Aster, in Jay, p. 45)

8 These three themes – violence, exhaustion/expenditure and death – can be found in other times, places and creeds; Foucault also remarks, via the work of R. Van Gulik, their presence in ancient Chinese culture (*History*, II.137). Even if Foucault's discussion of this aspect of Greek experience adds little that is new, his devoting of a chapter to the topic is significant of the renewed interest in this aspect of Greek culture.

9 Anne Carson puts it like this: