

AMERICAN CHRONICLE

Life & Death in the U.S.A.

By Melvin Maddocks

"Mr Barlow, you are afraid of death." —
"No, I assure you."
"It is a natural instinct, Mr Barlow, to shrink from
the unknown."

EVELYN WAUGH, *The Loved One* (1948)



EVELYN WAUGH'S novella *The Loved One* seemed to crystallise the American posture towards death. Or rather, against death, for the posture surely was one of aversion. Death was judged to be an obscenity, and like all obscenities, required its fig leaves. One did not discuss death even at funerals—especially at funerals.

One spoke of "passing on" rather than dying. One spoke of the "leave-taking," not the burial. The corpse, or rather, the "loved one," was painted back to health by cosmetic applications that might make a street-walker blush. No matter how horribly or prematurely the "loved one" died, these iron-willed words summed up the subject: "It's for the best"—the signal for a general stampepe back to daily life on the part of the graveside survivors because: "He (she) would have wanted it that way."

Who could have predicted 20 years ago that the death-shy American (like the sex-shy American of 50 years ago) would metamorphose from one caricature into the opposite? As recently as 1967 that wise observer of native anxieties, Erik Erikson, listed only one index entry under "Death" in *Youth: Identity and Crisis*—and that referred to Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*. Yet today the fear that supposedly dared not speak its name is being discussed by the young, the middle-aged, and the old to the point of obsession.

IF DEATH WAS ONCE DISMISSED as un-American,

nothing could be more American than its sudden discovery. Death has grown into a knowledge industry with its own institutions (e.g., the Center for Thanatological Studies, University of Minnesota) and its own press (e.g., see "*Omega*, an international journal for the psychological study of dying, bereavement, suicide, and other lethal behaviors"). The "death course," as it is known, has become a glamorous elective in American college catalogues. A typical undergraduate listing reads:

"*Death: Events, Ritual, Decision.* Personal/professional/social decisions regarding life and death—abortion, capital punishment, suicide, war."

"Field assignments" are promised but not specified. A typical graduate course listing reads:

"*Death and Suicide.* Partial death; megadeath; lethality; the psychological autopsy."

Still another breed of specialist has appeared in the world of specialists: the death expert. What exquisitely cruel sport Waugh might have made of the American Association of Suicidology, whose members conducted their annual convention last year at a Texas motel, listening to papers with titles like '*Methodological Problems in the Development of a Post-Hospital Suicide Prediction Scale.*'

Nor has death become merely the latest sub-discipline of scholars. The fascination with death is broad and popular. A "death questionnaire" sponsored by the magazine *Psychology Today* elicited 30,000 responses from readers, as compared to 20,000 for the "sex questionnaire," the previous record-holder. Another general magazine, *Human Behavior*, has instituted a department called "Death." A whole genre has developed that might be dubbed DEATH LIT.; and here is the smallest random sampling of recent titles, with description by author or publisher.

The Art of Dying "introduces a series of mental exercises which help the individual face his own death with a sense of ease instead of panic, fear, or the thought of pain. To accept the death of others that we love as part of the rhythm of life."

Suicide: The Gamble with Death "reveals how such factors as age, sex, race, and alcohol and drug use affect suicide and actual completions"—not to mention correlations with marital status, the state of the economy, and the weather.

Deaths of Man "examines in detail, and from a number of points of view, what the actual dying process is like. Above all, it stresses the ways in which a person may be helped to die a more appropriate death."

The Immortality Factor reports that, "as fantastic as it seems, science is now at the threshold of achieving control over death" and asks: "What does this mean for life on earth as we know it?"

Last Rights: A Case for the Good Death "sets

forth the belief that every human being should be able to choose the manner of his dying: in dignity.”

WHAT DO THESE BOOKS and other DEATH LIT. books share in common? Judged by content, they have the sort of distant-cousin relationship that justifies (but barely) still another reader's packaging service—say, the Thanatology Book Club. The genre even spills across other publishing boundaries. For instance, books about abortion can be grouped as a Women's Liberation Lit. subdivision. Essays on cryogenics—the freeze-now, thaw-later programme of instalment mortality—constitute a kind of science non-fiction. Where DEATH LIT. books do resemble one another is in their approach.

Never has death been treated as so practical a matter. *Do something about it!* is the reflexive cry-from-the-heart. DEATH LIT. books qualify as manuals, handbooks, or the latest in *how-to* guides. (One such self-help text is devoted to How to be a Widow.) Americans have an impulse to politicise—as the modish verb has it—even the most philosophical issue, and death is no exception. At their most ambitious, DEATH LIT. books are manifestos: pamphlets for a movement that already exists or ought to. Death, to be a little crude, has become the radical's newest revolution, the reformer's ultimate civil rights cause.

THE POLITICS OF DEATH might be illustrated by the topics of abortion or suicide. But euthanasia, at the moment, appears to be *the* issue; and as a case study of that peculiarly native phenomenon—hard-sell idealism—euthanasia knows no peer. The Euthanasia Council (25,000 members) supplies “Right-to-Die” educational kits to schools, for children down to the age of 12. With death as with sex (as once with God), the theory is that one cannot indoctrinate too early. A 56-minute film depicting (in colour) the so-called “good death” may be rented for \$55.

The tenets of euthanasia are forever being stated and restated, as if for the pleasure of authors listening to the sounds of their own convictions. The most recent rehearsal of the credo was sponsored by the magazine *The Humanist*. The cover of the July–August issue is designed in the shape of a Declaration of Independence

¹ Dr Fletcher also seems to have a scale (“Indicators of Subversionhood” perhaps?) for those who oppose him: “I will wager any amount that the Wallaces and Maddoxes, who defended Lieutenant Calley and hail him as a hero, are devout and pious opponents of euthanasia and abortion probably.” In fairness to Dr Fletcher, his enemies are quite prepared to call him a neo-Nazi greasing the “slippery slope” to genocide. Understatement is no problem in the Great American Death Debate.

scroll, but the redundant heading reads: “*A Plea for Beneficent Euthanasia.*” “We, the undersigned . . .” the familiar rhetoric begins, going on to “appeal to an enlightened public opinion to transcend traditional taboos and to move in the direction of a compassionate view toward needless suffering in dying.” The signers endorse not only “passive euthanasia”—*i.e.*, “the withdrawal of extraordinary life-prolonging techniques, such as intravenous feeding and resuscitation.” They are also for “active euthanasia”—*i.e.*, “the administration of increasing dosages of drugs (such as morphine) to relieve suffering, until the dosage, of necessity, reaches the lethal stage.”

HOW DOES ONE RECOGNISE the precise point at which the “good death” becomes preferable to a “bad life” for this newly defined “loved one”: the patient *in extremis*? A professor of Bio-medical Ethics at the University of Virginia, Joseph Fletcher, has proposed “Indicators of Humanhood” as the criteria. Fetuses, comatose persons, and those scoring lower than a 40 I.Q. are among the candidates who fail to qualify for “humanhood” on the Fletcher scale.¹ The patient still passing his “humanhood” test but nervous about his grades may or may not be reassured by a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Western Maryland College, O. Ruth Russell, who is sure that a “comprehensive euthanasia law” would “meet a broad spectrum of needs and provide adequate safeguards for every case.” To guarantee himself a “good death,” however, the sensible “loved one” is advised to draw up a contract known as the “Living Will,” which has proved to be euthanasia's *pièce de résistance* with the public. When “*Dear Abby*,” the Miss Lonely-hearts columnist, printed a description of a “Living Will,” 50,000 readers wrote to the Euthanasia Council for copies. Marya Mannes, a novelist and essayist, has published her own “Living Will” with this uncompromising codicil:

“I do not wish to survive a stroke that impairs my ability to speak or move, nor any accident or disease resulting in vision too impaired to see or read or in total deafness.

“A world without beauty heard or seen is no world for me.

“A life without freedom and movement is no life for me.”

ALAS, THE POLITICS OF DEATH, like a lot of American politics, has a tendency to escalate into evangelism. If the dominant notion of the American used to be that death is non-existent, the *idée fixe* of the 1970s threatens to be that death can be beautiful—not merely a controlled disaster (how to say it?)—but a success story.

Consider just the subtopic of dying last-words. A grudging “So be it” might once have been about

the most that could be expected. Today serenity is the least that will be condoned; gusto is preferred. "My cup runneth over" may be the most enthusiastic quote recorded so far in DEATH LIT., but who knows what will follow? A scrutiny of texts discloses that death is counted upon to be not only "gentle and easy" but marked by "dignity" and the same sense of "purpose" required of life. One clergyman has declared that dying should be an "adventure." *The Art of Dying* assigns among its exercises for readers: "Write fifty words of wonder about your own death" and ends with the wish: "May you always be surprised by your own dying and living." Death, in fact, ought to be "beautiful," according to the Council for Christian Action of the United Church of Christ. In its policy statement on euthanasia, the Council affirm "Death for an older person should be a beautiful event", arguing "What's more beautiful than . . . the beautiful brightly colored autumn leaves gliding gracefully to the ground?" Dr Walter W. Sackett, Jr., a Florida legislator who sponsored a "*Death with Dignity*" statute, has promised: "Death, like birth, is glorious."

TO THE FAMILIAR American archetypes of the Death Pragmatist (*Do something about it*) and the Death Optimist (*It could be the best thing that ever happened to you*) must be added the Death Existentialist. Conspicuously neither a pragmatist nor an optimist, the Death Existentialist is recruited principally from the native anti-Americans known and feared as The Young. "Melancholy has been a privilege granted to 'solitary eminences,'" Günter Grass once observed. "As a social attitude, however, it has seldom been legalized"—least of all in the United States. There is one exception: American adolescents (who may be as near to "solitary eminences" as the United States can boast) are allowed, indeed expected to be melancholy; and in this particular they seldom let their elders down. There are no pessimists like the children of optimists.

Death and madness (see R. D. Laing) have become the high grounds on which the young stage their great refusal of the "plastic life" and "crazy normalcy" of late 20th-century America. Like volleys they hail down apt quotes from Albert Camus ("A mass death sentence defines the human condition"), Hermann Hesse ("The whole world seemed destroyed and poisoned; there seemed to be no joy, no more innocence, no more love on earth"), and Sylvia Plath ("Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well").

One honours suffering, case by case; one cannot help wondering about *The Sorrows of Werther* as a popular epidemic. According to one of those ubiquitous polls that topics like death

give steady employment to, no less than 50 per cent of the students at the University of Maine said they had "considered, threatened, or actually attempted suicide." Has death become the supreme authenticator for a generation that craves more than anything to be authenticated? In his superb black comedy *The Suicide Academy*, the novelist Daniel Stern formulates this logic for "the kind that all their lives would not take yes for an answer"—"I die, therefore I am."

There is even a suspicion that the new preoccupation with death may have originated with the first Nuclear Era children. Edwin Shneidman, director of the Laboratory for the Study of Life-Threatening Behavior at the University of California at Los Angeles, has wondered if "the current generation might not be termed psychological *Hibakusha* [the Japanese word for the "explosion-affected" survivors of Hiroshima]. At the least they are Atomic Bomb Age children." Dr Shneidman provides a collection of statements written by students in his "death courses." at UCLA and Harvard:

"I think my whole generation has grown up and been tremendously influenced by the imminent threat of death."

"Death is part of my life."

"The constant threat of nuclear war, the arms race, and the continual reminder of this threat on television makes me acutely aware that death could happen at any time."

Apocalypse is the operative word—or is it?

For a case may be submitted that Viet Nam rather than Hiroshima is the historical episode that spells "death" to a '70s American. "Megadeath," a term that seems to spread like a mushroom, conveys a Doomsday sense of quantity, of "body count." But "wasted," the term that came out of Viet Nam, carries an even more terrible message: meaninglessness; the bitter taste of power at its most destructive (and most impotent); first-hand, irrevocable knowledge of the word "defeat."

AMERICA'S YOUTHFULNESS is its oldest tradition, Oscar Wilde remarked—it's been going on for almost 300 years; and it went on for another half-century after Wilde's quip. In Viet Nam did America arrive at last at middle-age? These novel and dismaying sensations were experienced: a sudden faltering of the will, describable as Manifest-Destiny fatigue; an inclination to refer to the "American Dream" in quotes (and with sarcasm), followed by the unheard-of question, "Is it all worth it?"; an unprecedented attack of self-doubt about the purity of one's motives. *America can die*—the American has admitted this heresy to himself for the first time, and the traumatic effect has yet to be fully measured. But one thing is certain. Watergate, double-digit inflation—the catastrophes that have beset

the United States since Viet Nam—are now read in the perspective of potentially mortal symptoms.

DEATH, THEN, is not an arbitrary topic, confronted by '70s *avant-gardistes* in order to break a conspiracy of silence, “a stink of hypocrisy”, as one put it. Death has imposed itself upon the reluctant American with a painfulness, an *actuality* he could not ignore if he wanted to. An historical montage of the past decade or so seems to play through the collective American memory as a sequence of deaths: two Kennedys gunned down; the bodies of three civil rights workers buried in Mississippi; booby-trapped GI corpses in rice paddies; Marilyn Monroe. The Death Pragmatists and Optimists might like to reduce death to a managed event. The Death Existentialists might like to turn it into a trip, a mind-blowing *idea*. But already the subject of death is proving harder to contain than it used to be to overlook. Death is like Moby Dick: once one sticks in the harpoon, the quarry takes the initiative, and the presumed hunter becomes a passenger at the end of the line. Here are a couple of guesses as to where the white whale might tow Americans next.

SCENARIO NO. 1: *The Anti-Death Machine*. Five years ago the brilliant novelist and maverick philosopher Alan Harrington blurted out in a passionate, book-long diatribe, *The Immortalist*, the radical pragmatism, the all-or-nothing optimism that may still—even in post-Viet Nam middle age—be the only truth an American knows in his bones. “Death,” Harrington declared flatly, “is an imposition on the human race, and no longer acceptable.” (How languid the 19th-century liberalism of euthanasia propaganda sounds by comparison!) The modern soul’s final and absolute discontentment with mortality, Harrington submitted, was the malaise behind all the other discontentments of the 1960s: *Angst* and alienation; drugs and this-or-that revolution. “Good death” to Harrington was a contradiction in terms. He stood with Renan (“I find death loathsome, hateful, and senseless”) and Herbert Marcuse, who, in a comment on the “strange masochism” of death-welcoming, wrote indignantly: “A brute, biological fact, permeated with pain, horror, and despair, is transformed into an existential privilege.”

A new and bizarre little encyclopaedia called *The Best*, half put-on, half serious—the sort of book that could happen only in America—devotes one of its sections to “The Best Way to Stay Alive”, summing up: “It may be possible to finesse the whole problem [mortality] by growing whole new bodies, twins identical to the

originals save for memory, from the genetic information contained within single cells.” Something like this is what Harrington had in mind when he proposed that “an ‘Immortality Program’ would not be nearly as expensive as the atomic energy and space projects.”

The limited objective, the merely reasonable expectation, has never been the American style. Is Harrington—a spaced-out Job, asking his anguished “Why?”, then his desperately cocky “Why not?”—voicing what Americans still feel today but are too sophisticated or too tired to say? This scenario predicates that Americans might recover their notorious energy and their fine old touch of native fanaticism to go all-out—to play the Great Gatsby—one more time. “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us,” Scott Fitzgerald wrote of his American Everyman. “It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning . . .”—Immortality!

SCENARIO NO. 2: *The Age of Compassion*. If Waugh’s Mr Barlow were to return to America today, he would be pressed by a new question. At almost every turn of American life (and now death) a voice modulated to a perfect pitch of consideration asks: “Why must you suffer? Why must anybody suffer? Let me help you to exercise the latest amendment to the Bill of Rights: ‘Each man has a natural right to be treated kindly.’”

“Compassion” is replacing “competitiveness” as the American *beau idéal*. In the August issue of *Reader’s Digest* Mrs Norman Vincent Peale pronounced *Compassion* together with *Self-Confidence* and *Enthusiasm* to be the qualities Americans most desire in their children. But what exactly is this *caring*, a word that American writers so regularly italicise, as if to make it mean more than it means? Is compassion the descendant of “charity” of *I Corinthians*: 13—a habit of *Imitation of Christ* that post-Christians have inherited in spite of themselves, a matter of half-playing Jesus, half-playing a Good Joe? Is compassion the final proof to an American that he has ceased to be a puritan—has stopped believing at last that suffering and punishment build character?

Compassion, according to Scenario No. 2, will become the one virtue that can make an American feel in the right even when he is in the wrong. And without it, he will feel wrong even if he is right. Certainly compassion will be—if it is not already—the correct, the almost compulsory posture towards death, as diplomatic non-recognition once was. But this will not be death as one used to know it—a business of gasp, rattle, and agony: the enemy himself. This will be death surrounded by adjectives (“good,” “dignified,” “timely”) and

buried under statistics. This will be death hidden beneath new euphemisms like "terminal living" that seem no improvement over "passing on." This will be death as an abstraction, a mask of itself: as profound an evasion as reticence ever was.

A worthy but negative purpose—not to suffer—will become the primary purpose of life. Anger, humour, piety—the emotions that sprang from the heart of the race and once made dying a human experience of an inhumane event—will disappear into a general blandness. Death, if that is possible, will become banal. For compassion is a bureaucrat's emotion finally—duty aspiring to be love. As bureaucracy continues to grow, it will turn death into a social ill, like unemployment. There ought to be a government agency for this sort of death, and there probably will be.

INFACT, Scenario No. 2 may not be a scenario at all but a work-in-progress. The only obstacle to its fulfilment appears to lie in the answer to the question: How many Savages are left? If Waugh was the supreme commentator on death in the Age of the Great Ignoral, Aldous Huxley, surely, has been its prophet for the Age of Compassion, insisting more than 40 years ago that to discount what is intolerable about dying would mean to discount what is most precious about living. Here is the Controller, Mustapha Mond (talking to that vain, possibly fraudulent, yet curiously appealing romantic known as the Savage in *World*):

"We prefer to do things comfortably."

"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry. I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."

"In fact," said Mustapha Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."

"All right then," said the Savage defiantly, "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."

"Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind."

There was a long silence.

"I claim them all," said the Savage at last.

Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders. "You're welcome," he said.

THE AMERICAN SAVAGE, of course, has been the artist. One may even claim (like Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel*) that the native Muse is Death. For a sweeping generalisation, how specifically it proves itself! Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* literally begin in the graveyard. What are the works of America's best playwright (Eugene O'Neill) about, from start to finish, except death? From Hawthorne to Hemingway, from Poe to Faulkner, the grinning skull has been the imprimatur, as it were, of the American author, mocking the lives of the death-evading countrymen he has written about and for.

So the spectre has been at the back of the American mind since the beginning. The veritable babble about death today represents a frantic game of cultural catch-up—the children and grandchildren of Babbitt ready, at last, to learn what their benignly neglected poets could have told them all along. If we are diligent at our overdue homework, we may eventually know (Scenario No. 3?) what Emily Dickinson knew when she wrote:

*That short—potential stir
That each can make but once—
That Bustle so illustrious
'Tis almost Consequence—*

*Is the éclat of Death—
Oh, thou unknown Renown
That not a Beggar would accept
Had he the power to spurn—*

But now such merciless accuracy, such bitter intensity—such accustomed "quiet nonchalance of death"—are beyond our final comprehension as readers, to say nothing of our reach as writers. Late starters at a difficult calling, we can just about handle, it seems, the alphabet verses of *The New England Primer*—those elementary stark facts that every Puritan child knew as soon as he learned his X and Y:

*Xerxes the great did die
And so must you and I.*

*Youth forward slips,
Death soonest nips.*

Alan Brownjohn

Seven Old Men on an Inter-City Train: a Yeatsian Poem

- The First.* Is that a flood or a lake?
The Second. I saw a lake.
And were there flooding there would not be swans.
- The Third.* The swans could have come from a lake, with all this rain
A lake could overflow and spawn a flood,
And cast out swans on it.
- The Second.* Yet I look again,
And see they are not swans but clumps of suds
Engendered by detergent. Had you but looked
You would have seen all their necks were under water.
- The Fourth.* But it is unimaginable that suds
Should drift in wandering pairs as if designed
To have the look of swans. Now the train has passed,
I speak it with an old man's memory,
Yet say that nearly all of them were in pairs.
- The Second.* Why should not some base tycoon-man, who desired
The pride of an environmentalist,
Discharge the effluent of his factory
So that, upon a sudden dreaming glance,
It looked like swans?
- The Fifth.* That would enhance
A desolate, vulgar place, could it but have
Appearances of companionable swans.
- The Sixth.* The poet Yeats loved real swans on real lakes,
And had a penchant for using them as symbols.
- The Third.* And Yeats, I have heard tell, wrote of swans on floods.
- The Second.* But what would Yeats have thought of clumps of suds
Reclining ceremoniously on a foul scene?
To forge his symbols would be difficult.
Yeats was not of an age when factory waste
Was put on show as swans as a P.R. stunt.
- The Fourth.* But Yeats himself was a bit of an old . . . tycoon,
And symbol swans are just as shadowy
As foam that moves on a twilight flood.
- The Sixth.* Yet Yeats
Would not have cried the praise of effluent-swans
To sanctify some tycoon's greedy till.
Yeats was—
- The Seventh.* I think that Crewe is the next stop.