Introduction

Death and taxes, as American folk wisdom has it, are the immutable certainties of human existence. This adage implies nostalgia for transcendental signifiers, even unpleasant ones, in a world otherwise bereft of enduring truths and deities. Michel Foucault has shown that sex and madness, both read at times as natural, as anterior to their expressive forms, represent culturally contingent modes of discourse, concatenations of local factors, a semiotics of hierarchy and authority. Taxes, too, are multiply signified. More an imposition of social and political philosophy and power than of economic policy, they are direct or indirect, overt or covert, discriminatory rather than equitable, manipulated and evaded: never the stable, universal signifier of popular lore.

And what of death? Surely its substance, meaning, and inevitability are undeniable and fixed? Death comes to all; death waits for no one; death defines life from the moment it begins. Yet the same may be said of death as of sex and madness, and taxes. We seek to tame, control, order, evade, attain, summon, and dismiss death in as many ways, and with as varied success, as there are cultures and people, and thereby define death as it defines us. Death's innumerable vehicles – disease, famine, accident, old age, murder, suicide, execution, sacrifice, warfare – render a single model of dying, even so valuable a one as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross', reductive and false when applied as a rule rather than a tool.

The anthropocentrism and artifice of death are vividest in terminal visions and last words. Shakespeare's dying John of Gaunt evokes their power and appeal: "O, but they say the tongues of dying men / Enforce attention like deep harmony" (*Richard II* 2.1.5–6). The literature of last words represents appropriately idiosyncratic final self-projections. Though his letters speak of death as extinction, Henry James supposedly greeted its arrival with: "So

here it is at last, the distinguished thing."[1] James' "at last" can be read variously: as the ultimate surrender, with relief, anxiety, or pride, to what can no longer be forestalled or evaded, or as the successful evocation of something long sought, a ritual completed. However read, James' salutation culminates a tradition in which nineteenth-century agnostics like John Stuart Mill saw death, of which the dying person should be fully cognizant, as life's climax.[2] If reports can be believed, appropriate dramatic final words include Goethe's "More light! More light!"; Hegel's "Only one man ever understood me . . . And he didn't understand me"; Heine's "God will forgive me; it is His trade"; Thoreau's "One world at a time" (in response to "How does the opposite shore appear?"); Oscar Wilde's "I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means"; Gertrude Stein's "What *is* the answer? . . . In that case, what is the question?"

Such utterances seem *too* good, too apposite, mythic closure for the life such dying retrospectively reconfigures. The notion of final words, in fact, seems more fictive and ritualistic than mimetic. Goethe's supposed final cry for light, for example, has a dubious pedigree. An alternative tradition, of equally uncertain authenticity, makes Wilde's final words an aesthetic judgment on his French hotel's execrable wallpaper: "One of us has got to go."[3] And James, according to Edith Wharton, was behaving like one of his fictional interpreting consciousnesses: quoting "a voice distinctly not his own" that he heard in his room.[4] Whatever the imaginative projection at work here, it is unsurprising that death, for James, would "speak" with Jamesian rhetoric and sentiment. For James' "distinguished thing" is also the distinctive thing, not only transcending all else but different at each occurrence and requiring an appropriate acknowledgment and response.

Edwin Shneidman, a pioneer in thanatology, which derived from the work of Kübler-Ross and Geoffrey Gorer, writes that "Death is oxymoronic, a paradox made up of contrasting values, opposite trends, and even contradictory facts."[5] Ian Wilson tells of an Englishman and a Chinese visiting their deceased loved ones. The Englishman has brought flowers, the Chinese food. "Appalled at the apparent waste, the Englishman asks of the Chinese: 'When do your dead come to eat all this food.' 'When your dead come to smell your flowers,' replies the Chinese."[6] Frederick Hoffman writes, "Mortality attracts to itself all of the major images and metaphors of any culture . . . Death has a special influence upon literary manners."[7]

For death, as Philippe Ariès and others have shown, is not only a biological occurrence but a complex of historically specific and materially determined events: a set of attitudes and a matter of perspective; a drama performed by and for the participants and their community; an experience created by and during its enactment; a determinant of narrative and ritual expression. It is in this sense that, as Yeats proclaims, "Man has created death."[8]

Why *fictional* death? Because death is central to representation and because it is represented as central in fictional texts. "Storytelling," as Hillis Miller writes, "is always after the fact, and it is always constructed over a loss."[9] A text, Walter Ong maintains, "is so much a thing of the past that it carries with it necessarily an aura of accomplished death."[10] Unless and until it touches someone near and dear or great and good, death is fictive for most of us during most of our lives: distant, other, abstract, a mythical construct. And unlike other experiences, death is fictional even when closest because it is always vicarious, never truly our own. As Kübler-Ross says, "death is never possible in regard to ourselves," never something lived through.[11] Our experience of death, then, lies between these two extremes, and in the mediated constructs through which we know it.

And why modernist death? Like Ariès, I acknowledge the difficulty (even arbitrariness) of dating cultural trends, of defining when dominant attitudes or practices end or begin. With Thomas Kuhn, I acknowledge that conflicting paradigms may coexist peacefully.[12] Literary periods, like Einstein's "fundamentals of scientific theory," are convenient fictions, retrospective narratives of shaping authority that serve the definer's purposes. They overlap: new ones begin before earlier ones end; trends continue even as they are superseded. Modernism's beginnings are located in the Renaissance (or "early modern period"); in the eighteenth century (with the rise of the middle class and mass literacy and communication); between 1815 and 1830;[13] in the Victorian period with the industrial revolution, Marx, Darwin, and the death of God; in 1900 with "the sudden irruption of forces totally new"[14] or with Victoria's death in 1901; with the outbreak of World War One, or with England's first conscript army in 1916.[15]

Literary modernism, conventionally dated 1890–1930, is commonly seen as beginning by rejecting the dead end of naturalism, with its pseudo-scientific emphasis on reportage. For Arthur

Symons, modernism was a "revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition," a spiritual liberation that assumed "the duties and responsibilities of ... sacred ritual,"[16] and it climaxed in the triumphant "blend of realism and symbolism pioneered by James and Conrad."[17] I have no quarrel with literary modernism's common dates and definitions, though I consider them convenient rather than "true" and often range beyond them. I will, for example, argue at times that modernism is bracketed by the two world wars – what Ford Madox Ford, describing the first, calls "this crack across the table of History" (*Parade's End* 510), a phrase equally applicable to the second: apocalypse then, and then again.

In this "century of death," as Gil Elliot and others have called it, death presses in "from all sides" and "the best way to distinguish the two or three literary generations of our century is in their manner of responding to the fact of death – that is, in their manner of somehow getting beyond it."[18] During the modernist period, death in Western culture and literature differs radically from what it was before and after. *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* investigates how modernist texts (and, concomitantly, pre- and post-modernist ones as well) reflect and challenge extra-literary explorations and expectations of death, how culture and literature create and read each other.

CHAPTER I

Fictional death and the modernist enterprise

Every story continued far enough ends in death;[1] yet every recounting suspends finality. In the paradigmatic *Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade's narrative simultaneously foregrounds and forestalls the death that inspires and requires it, and thereby exercises shaping authority that exceeds ordinary mortal limits.[2] Fictive titles often proclaim death's centrality in storytelling: Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych," Mann's "Death in Venice," Joyce's "The Dead" and *Finnegans Wake*, Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *Requiem for a Nun*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Beckett's *Malone Dies*, for example. Other titles – Forster's *The Longest Journey* and *A Passage to India*, Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away," Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, Ford's *The Rash Act*, Beckett's *The Unnamable* – reveal their thanatological significance only after we have read the texts they subtend. Like history, death is narrative as well as event: a process created, ordered, and performed by survivors, or sometimes non-survivors.

In "Four Quartets" T.S. Eliot writes, "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality."[3] But we can and we do: only reality must be sanctioned, "naturalized," by history and culture. For Gil Elliot, "The manner in which people die reflects more than any other fact the value of a society."[4] Concurring, the anthropologists Huntington and Metcalf maintain that in all societies "Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed."[5] More than any other manifestation, narratives of death and dying reflect a culture's symbolic and mythic truths. Artifacts of death – rituals of dying and funeral, graveyards and tombs, wills and death certificates, the corpse itself – are as much communal constructs, dramatic and narrative performance, as are the texts that contain them.

For all its haphazardness, death long seemed an ordering prin-

ciple, a force and form of moral and aesthetic meaning; in turn, it lent itself to appropriation by ritual and narrative, in which it served a climactic, shaping function. Ariès views medieval death as integral to everyday experience: in literature and in society death and dying were foreknown, expected, and accepted;[6] or so the record suggests, since those who "foresaw" deaths but did not die were unlikely to document the mistake. Much evidence supports Ariès' historiographical reconstruction, yet it is unlikely to be a full account of the past. Because I find his work stimulating and important, I want to consider its strengths and weaknesses.

Ariès' eclectic historiography has been challenged on grounds that period and cultural distinctions are matters of degree rather than absolute, and that histories of ideas make the past seem tidier than it was. Though admiring Ariès' capacious sweep, Robert Darnton warns that "Shifts in world view normally occur at a glacial pace, unmarked by events and without visible turning points." Noting the "heterogeneity and sparseness" of Ariès' documentation, Darnton argues that other evidence might tell a different, perhaps less astounding story. He ambiguously concludes: "The audacity of the undertaking must be admired, even if it bears no more relation to reality than the cartography of Amerigo Vespucci."[7]

Ariès himself, who calls his method "intuitive and subjective" (*Hour* xvii), first noted its limitations: he wrote mostly within and about a particular Catholic country with a unique history, and from his own cultural circumstances. Nonetheless, what Ian Morris calls Ariès' "great achievement" has been fruitful for historians, many of whom accept and deepen his insights.[8] Ariès' brilliance lies in his narrative power and aperçus, his opening of inquiry, rather than his historiography's tidy conclusiveness. Such inductive thinking now characterizes the work of anthropologists and ethnographers, who prefer the messy specifics of particular times and places to the tidy universals of paradigmatic templates. Ariès has aided the reenvisioning of cultures as unique rather than exemplary, an approach that empowers materialist investigations into the Western family and sexuality like those of Lawrence Stone, Michel Foucault, and Stephen Heath. It also grounds pioneering studies of death by Geoffrey Gorer, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Robert Kastenbaum, Avery Weisman, Edwin Shneidman, and many others. Such investigations convincingly argue that there is nothing "natural" about

how a people tell their stories of sex or death. Both are products of culture: mediated, made, symbolic.

The major figures associated with the onset of European modernism – Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard in the latter part of the nineteenth century; Einstein, van Gennep, and Freud after the turn of the century – produced radical reformulations of earlier paradigms of humankind and the universe, and thus of the meaning of death. Reorientations in physics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis provided cultural and historical contexts for modernist death. As Heisenberg comments, "Changes in the foundations of modern science may perhaps be viewed as symptoms of shifts in the fundamentals of our existence which then express themselves simultaneously in many places, be it in changes in our way of life or in our usual thought forms."[9] Each of these figures subverted the inherited cultural paradigms; yet in retrospect each seems more equivocal and less radical. Kuhn argues that scientific paradigms overlap, and what once seemed revolutionary may seem evolutionary a generation hence: it may even become reactionary by establishing a site of resistance to the *next* radical shift. In this, scientific revolutions parallel other cultural changes: literary modernism, for example, now often seems more conservative than innovative.

A second paradigm shift, toward the end of the modern period, had a similar impact. The 1920s saw reactions against the innovations of Einstein, van Gennep, and Freud. They led to quantum mechanics and then to chaos theory, to the kind of cultural studies associated with anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, and to post-Freudian psychoanalysis and literary postmodernism. Just as modernism both continued and reacted against Victorian paradigms, postmodernism rejects and extends modernism. Modernism's roots lie in the late nineteenth century, though its beginning may be said to climax with the Great War; postmodernism's roots lie in World War Two. Attitudes toward death also changed radically at the beginning and again at the end of the modern period. I will discuss these cultural transformations in order to distinguish modernist death from what preceded and what followed.

Enlightenment faith in progress and in our increasing comprehension of life and death retained potency throughout the nineteenth century. According to Habermas, Enlightenment thinkers expected "that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of

the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings."[10] The Newtonian Pierre Laplace (1749–1827) conflated theology, philosophy, and mathematics when he posited a powerful intelligence capable of embracing "in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes."[11] Laplace, who supposedly told Napoleon "Give me the initial details and I will tell you the whole story of the world," maintained that all events follow nature's laws as necessarily as the sun's revolutions.[12]

Nearly a hundred years after Laplace, and as Einstein was beginning his work in relativity, Lord Kelvin (1824–1907) declared that scientists like himself would soon have nothing to do because physics, a coherent system, a closed set, was about to be totally understood. Only two major areas of exploration remained: the Michelson–Morley experiment concerning the existence of the ether, and blackbody radiation.[13] The results of these explorations, however, were astonishing and problematic rather than conclusive: the Michelson–Morley experiment led to special relativity; blackbody radiation to quantum mechanics. (Chaos theory or complexity seems likely to have as great an impact; see chapter 13 below.)

According to Abraham Pais, Einstein's biographer, "In all the history of physics, there has never been a period of transition as abrupt, as unanticipated, and over as wide a front as the decade 1895–1905."[14] The Harvard physicist Gerald Holton describes the predominant scientific (and cultural) worldview until the mid-nineteenth century as

> a static, homocentric, hierarchically ordered, harmoniously arranged cosmos . . . a finite universe in time and space; a divine temple, God-given, God-expressing, God-penetrated, knowable . . . This representation was gradually supplanted by another, particularly in the last half of the nineteenth century. The universe became unbounded, "restless," . . . a weakly coupled ensemble of infinitely many separate, individually sovereign parts and events. Though evolving, it is continually interrupted by random discontinuities on the cosmological scale as well as on the submicroscopic scale.[15]

What had seemed solidly anchored was suddenly cast adrift: nothing, it seemed, was possible without God and God was impossible.

Kuhn argues that a scientific revolution occurs when a once-honored theory is rejected in favor of another incompatible with it,[16] yet the extraordinary breakthroughs of this period, like literary modernism, affirmed received modes of apprehension even while innovating new ones. Inheriting a physics dominated by belief that both knowledge and the universe were finite and increasingly within our grasp, Einstein endorsed that belief. Relativity challenged Newtonian physics in certain fundamental ways; for example, by undermining the principle of simultaneity: "under relativity, as soon as either the particle or the scientist begins to move, the whole scheme of simultaneity becomes warped."[17] Yet Newtonian mechanics explained macrocosmic actions so well that the universe seemed manageable, comprehensible, divinely ordered.[18] According to Einstein, the enormous practical success of Newton's theory "may well have prevented him and the physicists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from recognizing the fictitious character of the principles of his system." But by "fictitious" Einstein did not mean false; Newtonian principles were, rather, "free inventions of the human mind,"[19] and therefore as true in their way as relativity. Holton argues, in fact, that Einstein's special theory of relativity, like most scientific "revolutions," was fundamentally reactionary, a return to classical purity like that of the *Principia*.[20] Einstein considered relativity a natural development rather than a revolutionary act.[21] As Hans Mark has said, "Einstein was a Newtonian to the core."[22]

Einstein posited an equivalence and harmony between science and religion: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind"; but religion had priority for him as it had for Newton.[23] Though he maintained that the mysterious is the "most beautiful experience we can have,"[24] Einstein echoes Laplace and Kelvin when he says, "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible." Einstein saw modern physics, for all its revolutionary impact, as compatible with both Newtonian mechanics and faith in progress: relativity altered not the world but our perception of it. Like Laplace, Einstein spent much of his life on a theological quest for "that grail of science, the Grand Unified Theory or 'theory of everything.'"[25] The narrator of Salman Rushdie's postmodernist *Satanic Verses* mocks scientists like Einstein for seeking to resuscitate the God that Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche had killed: "once they had proved the existence of a single unified

force of which electromagnetism, gravity and the strong and weak forces of the new physics were all merely aspects, avatars, one might say, or angels, then what would we have but the oldest thing of all, a supreme entity controlling all creation" (81–2). Rushdie is right: Einstein's quarrel was not with those who preceded him, or with God, but with successors like Bohr and Heisenberg. He maintained a profound skepticism toward quantum mechanics because it relied on probabilistic uncertainty,[26] which he could not reconcile with a divine Creator or the traditional view of death as life's meaningful culmination.

Curiously, Einstein's antipathy toward quantum mechanics, which he first saw as logically inconsistent and then as an incomplete description of nature, was only strengthened by his inability to substantiate his opposition. In 1912 Einstein wrote, "The more success the quantum theory has, the sillier it looks"; and he never wavered from or succeeded in his quest for "a model of reality which shall represent events themselves and not merely the probability of their occurrence."[27] He maintained faith in what he called objective reality "although, up to now, *success* is against it."[28] He was especially upset because quantum mechanics rested on his own work, and it was as revolutionary *and* as conservative as relativity. Ironically, Steven Weinberg argues in *Dreams of a Final Theory*, it was Einstein's rejection of quantum mechanics that doomed his quest.

Modern science was most revolutionary in its subversion of faith in a finite, knowable universe. It is increasingly a matter of scientific, as well as literary, knowledge that what we "know" largely depends on where we stand; that some things are unknowable; and that much of the rest, like light, accords with self-contradictory principles. As early as 1924 Einstein wrote unhappily that there are "now two theories of light, both indispensable, and – as one must admit today despite twenty years of tremendous effort on the part of theoretical physicists – without any logical connection."[29] Depending on the measuring equipment, light proves to be a wave phenomenon or a stream of particles or, somehow, both. As if discussing a Jamesian interpreting consciousness or Yeats' dancer and dance, Holton writes that at the atomic level the system being observed and the measuring instruments form a single whole with the results depending heavily on the apparatus: "The study of nature is a study of artifacts that appear during an engagement between the scientist