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0521460182 - From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain

Carlos M. N. Eire

Excerpt

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PROLOGUE

 Death and the sun

Death and the sun cannot be stared at.

– La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* (1665)¹

In the cheapest seats at a Spanish bullring, two things are unavoidable: death and the sun. Yet Spaniards have been flocking to such seats for centuries, week after week, year after year, down to the present, staring down the unavoidable and the unendurable. What does this mean, aside from suggesting that the sixth duke of La Rochefoucauld failed to consider customs beyond the Pyrenees? Certainly it cannot mean that the Spanish are immune to mortal fright and retinal damage; no, for they have long admitted that the bullfight is itself a ritual theater of the deepest human fear, and they also know that seats in the shade command a higher admission price. What it means is that Spanish culture has long confronted mortality in its own ways and that, contrary to the advice proffered in La Rochefoucauld's maxim, it has even fixed its gaze on discomforting realities, with unique results.²

A striking example of this Spanish propensity for gazing at death in

¹ François VI, duc de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes et réflexions diverses* (Paris, 1975), maxim 26, p. 28.

² Ernest Hemingway's eloquent appreciation of this fact might have further popularized the notion that Spain is more at home with death than other cultures: "They think a great deal about death," he wrote of Castilian peasants, "and when they have a religion they have one which believes that life is much shorter than death. Having this feeling, they take an intelligent interest in death and when they can see it being given, avoided, refused, and accepted in the afternoon for a nominal price of admission they pay their money and go to the bullring." *Death in the Afternoon* (New York, 1953), p. 266.

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the full light of day – and therefore also an apt illustration with which to begin this book – is Francis Borgia, a man who had his own peculiar encounter with death and the sun. In May 1539, Francis unexpectedly lost one of his dearest friends to death: the Empress Isabel, wife of Emperor Charles V and mother to the future King Philip II. Francis joined the cortege that ferried Isabel's remains from Toledo, where she had died, to Granada, where she was to be buried with Charles's grandparents at the royal chapel. One of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Spain and Europe, scion of the notorious Italian Borgias, Marquis of Lombay, Duke of Gandía, Viceroy of Catalonia, close friend of the emperor, Francis would relinquish his titles and vast fortune and become a Jesuit because of his involvement in this funeral. When the cortege reached Granada after a fifteen-day journey in the blazing Spanish sun, Isabel's lead coffin had to be opened so that, according to law and custom, her remains could be identified by some witnesses. This task proved to be the undoing of Francis, who was very fond of the empress, and already had been deeply affected by her death. The corpse was a horrific sight and an assault upon the senses, for the heat of the sun-baked coffin had hastened its putrefaction; the witnesses fell back, nauseated, except for Francis, who remained composed. For him, the dissolving tissues of Isabel were as much an epiphany as a horror: "Are you really my Lady the Empress?" he asked himself. Francis's hagiography would later seize on this moment as the most pivotal in his life:

He was illumined by a divine light in such a way, that in that brief instant he was given to behold the wretched result of our first parents' disobedience upon the human race, and the severe punishment of God on all their descendants, along with the vanity of all that can be gained and esteemed by human beings. At that moment he apprehended what deceit and disillusionment lay in the allure of the flesh; there he saw clearly the full horror and grief of hell. . . . This same light stamped upon his heart disdain and loathing for everything that could estrange him from God, and a powerful, vibrant desire to know and love eternal and divine things, which are not subject to death or corruption.³

³ Juan Eusebio Nierenberg, S. J., *Hechos políticos y religiosos del que fué Duque Quarto de Gandía, Virey de Cataluña y despues tercero General de la Compañía de Jesús, el Beato Francisco de Borgia* (1643). Later edition (Barcelona, 1882), 2 vols., vol. 1, p. 61. Pedro Suau, S. J., disputes tradition, arguing that Francis's conversion occurred at the moment of Isabel's death rather than at the burial in Granada. See *Historia de San*

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Back in his lodgings a few hours later, overcome by a fit of weeping, Francis threw himself on the ground and asked: "What are we doing, my soul? What are we searching for? How long shall we continue to chase shadows?" Sighing, groaning, meditating on death, he arrived at a melancholy awareness of his own need to prepare for the inevitable:

If this is how death deals with earthly majesty and power, what army shall we send to contend with it?, what authority shall challenge it?, who shall be able to resist it? This same death which struck the Imperial Crown now bends its bow and aims its arrow at me. . . . Would it not be better to die to the world while living, in order to live with God after death? . . . Grant me my Lord, grant me my God, your light, your spirit, and your assistance. . . . I vow that if you do so, I shall never again serve a Lord who can die.⁴

Though it took him nearly eleven years from the time of this vow to disentangle himself from worldly affairs and to apportion his estate among his eight sons, he finally abandoned all titles and property and entered the Society of Jesus in 1550. That he again rose to prominence and power when he was named general of the Jesuits is immaterial: As far as he and his contemporaries were concerned, he had died to the world and had done so with heroic virtue.

Surely, St. Francis Borgia had somehow been conditioned to react in a particular way to this traumatic experience, for the language of his conversion mirrors that of much of the devotional literature of his day and shares common points of reference with it. His conversion might have been sudden, but it was not as a bolt out of the blue; on the contrary, it was the culmination of a long process of introspection, the logical endpoint for a mentality that had been shaped by certain aspects of Spanish culture. But Francis did more than mirror certain paradigms. He embodied them. He verified their significance. Francis himself, in turn, became a paradigm and a mirror for others, including his close friend Emperor Charles V, who appointed him co-executor of his will, along with the heir to the throne, Philip II. It is no mere coincidence that when the world-weary Charles abdicated in 1556, he retired to a monastery to contemplate his own death and that, as tradition has it, he re-

Francisco de Borja, tercer General de la Compañía de Jesús (Zaragoza, 1963), esp. pp. 59–65.

⁴ Nierenberg, *Borgia*, p. 62.

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hearsed his own funeral, all under the bright, blinding sunlight of Extremadura: Francis and Charles both partook of a certain mentality and also contributed to it.⁵

This book analyzes the attitudes toward death shared by St. Francis and the Emperor Charles, the mentality that compelled them to fix their stare upon death. Like Francis looking back upon Empress Isabel's sun-baked coffin, but with a much lighter heart, I too can recall the moment when I decided to gaze upon death. It began with my reading *The Hour of Our Death* by Philippe Ariès, a work that introduced me to the history of mentalities and thrust my mind into a peculiar dialectic. Inspired and irritated, challenged by his insights and generalizations, I found myself drawn to the subject but also opposed to much of what he had to say. About midway through the book, one generalization in particular captured my attention. Purgatory, he claimed, was

a dogma that was long limited to a small elite of theologians such as Saint Thomas Aquinas or philosophical writers such as Dante . . . [it] rarely appears in popular writing before the middle of the seventeenth century; one seldom finds references to it in Parisian wills before 1640.⁶

It was a bold assertion, and it irked me. So much of what I had read before that summer of 1981 pointed toward the opposite conclusion: Purgatory had not been a trivial elitist concept in the age of the Reformation but, rather, one of the chief focal points of popular religion. Above all, it was Ariès's sanguine reductionism that prompted me to linger over the theme of death and to ponder the meaning of the history

⁵ For a description of the funeral rehearsal see José de Sigüenza, *Historia de la Orden de San Jerónimo* (1605), Bk I, chap. 39; modern edition: *Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, 8 and 12 (Madrid, 1907), p. 158. The bibliography on the emperor's final days is quite lengthy. The most significant studies are: Francisco de Irarrázabal y Andia, Marqués de Valparaiso, *El perfecto desengaño. Relación de la abdicación de Carlos V y sus últimos días en Yuste* (Madrid, 1638); Louis-Prosper Gachard, *Sur le séjour de Charles Quint au Monastère de Yuste* (Brussels, 1843); William Stirling Maxwell, *The Cloister Life of the Emperor Charles V* (London, 1853); François A. A. Mignet, *Charles Quint, son abdication, son séjour, et sa mort au monastère de Yuste* (Paris, 1854); Adolf Poschman, *Kaiser Karl V in Yuste* (Leppstadt, 1960); Felipe Jimenez Vasco, *Como nace un monasterio y muere un César* (Caceres, 1969).

⁶ Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977), trans. Helen Weaver, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York, 1981), p. 306. For a more detailed critique see my review in *Catholic Historical Review* 69 (1983): 3.

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of mentalities, for his sundering of society into the two self-contained worlds of the elite and nonelite struck me as a wrongheaded approach to history and religion.

Attracted to the topic but piqued by his methodology and conclusions, I set out to survey a much smaller portion of the same terrain as Ariès, with an eye toward integrating what he had bifurcated, that is, the attitudes of the elites and the nonelites. Once this project began to take shape, its scope and content made Ariès recede into a distant horizon; nonetheless, as is the case with most sources of inspiration, that faraway speck remained a constant point of reference.

The more I read in the history of death, the more I was drawn to the subject. I was soon convinced that attitudes toward death and the after-life are indeed a barometer of faith and piety, and a unique manifestation of the interrelationship between belief and behavior, between the abstract world of theology and the practical world of deeds and gestures. For death is not only a universal phenomenon common to all human beings; it is also that crucial moment when the here and the hereafter supposedly intersect for every human being. In the case of Catholic Europe before the Enlightenment, death was the moment when salvation was decided, the instant when the soul began its journey into the unseen spiritual realm that was the church's special dominion. Hence, death was the unique moment, common to all, when the church could make the ultimate claim over each individual and over society as a whole; it was arguably the consummate Catholic experience, the ultimate expression of a society's beliefs, and also the ultimate opportunity for shaping and controlling a society's behavior.

Also, I was especially captivated by the way in which historians of death questioned their own enterprise and acknowledged its difficulties and shortcomings. Michel Vovelle, for instance, admitted after having researched the subject himself, that the study of collective attitudes toward death had become one of the greatest problems faced by the history of mentalities, for its scope and methodology remained indeterminate.⁷ Joachim Whaley, also drawn to the subject, confessed it was

⁷ Michel Vovelle, "Les attitudes devant la mort: Problèmes de méthode, approches et lectures différentes," *Annales, E.S.C.* (1976): 120. See also his essay, "L'histoire des hommes au miroir de la mort," in *Death in the Middle Ages*, ed. Herman Braet and Werner Verbrücke (Louvain, 1983), pp. 1–18.

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“bedeviled by obscurity and confusion.”⁸ Their intellectual honesty not only convinced me that this field of inquiry was still wide open and much more than simply “à la mode” but also gave me a sense of direction.⁹

Once I had decided to pursue the history of death, my first challenge was how to improve upon its scope and methodology. In regard to scope, the challenge was greater, for death is a truly boundless subject that touches upon nearly all aspects of human existence. Because any human activity connected with death was open to investigation, no exhaustive list could ever be drawn up. Moreover, the central claim made by the historians of death was itself an obstacle: the proposition that the study of attitudes toward death is one of the best means – perhaps even the best way – to judge the character of civilizations. The immensity of such a claim seemed to undermine any attempt to delimit either the range of questions one could pose or the material one could examine. As far as methodology was concerned, I needed to resolve what Vovelle had seen as an unfortunate divorce between the study of infrastructural problems (i.e., demography, economics, social structures) and ideological superstructures (i.e., theology, philosophy, political theory).

I began to narrow my focus by choosing the sixteenth century, a period dismissed by Ariès as having scant bearing on attitudes toward death, and Spain, a region largely overlooked by him. But why Spain? And why the sixteenth century? Convinced that attitudes toward death and the afterlife must have been a major divergence between Protestants and Catholics in the Reformation, I settled on Spain, the staunchest defender of the Catholic faith in the sixteenth century, because I had read enough Spanish devotional literature to know that heaven, hell, and purgatory were as much a part of that nation’s topography as Madrid, Gibraltar, and the Pyrenees. Spanish ascetics from this time, I knew, had fused self-denial with a desire for death to a degree unseen elsewhere in Europe. This apparent fascination with death was evident not only in mystics who explicitly linked spiritual ecstasy to death but also

⁸ Joachim Whaley, ed., in his introduction to *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London, 1981), p. 3.

⁹ A decade ago Jacques Le Goff declared “la mort est à la mode,” in his foreword to Jacques Chiffolleau, *La comptabilité de l’au delà: Les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d’Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Rome, 1980).

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among artists, writers, theologians, and monarchs. While Teresa of Avila exclaimed, “*Me muero porque no me muero*” (I am dying to die), El Greco dispensed with boundaries when painting scenes that included the hereafter, and King Philip II built the great palace of the Escorial with a floor plan based on the outline of the grill on which the martyr St. Lawrence had been roasted alive. The Escorial was to serve as a combined residence, monastery, and family mausoleum, and Philip spent his final days much as had his father Charles, contemplating death with his own coffin at his bedside. I also suspected that this apparent fascination with death and the hereafter drew upon the collective psychology of the nation, for I knew that at this same time popular demand for devotional manuals on the art of dying was increasing in Spain. Furthermore, I knew of the reputation that Spain had in popular and learned circles as a nation obsessed with death. The closer I looked at Spain, the more aware I became of the pervasiveness of this notion, even among the Spanish themselves. Américo Castro, for one, had trumpeted the notion that the Spanish had a lust for life – a *vivir desviviéndose* – that encompassed death as well.¹⁰ Federico Garcia Lorca had been more dramatic:

In all countries death is the end. It arrives and the curtain falls. Not so in Spain. In Spain, on the contrary, the curtain only rises at that moment, and in many Spanish poems there is a ramp of flowers of saltpeter over which lean a people who contemplate death.¹¹

Whether it was Hemingway musing on the rituals of the bullring in *Death in the Afternoon*, or Miguel de Unamuno philosophizing about mortality in *The Tragic Sense of Life*, or Bartolomé Bennassar analyzing

¹⁰ “Vivir Desviviéndose,” Américo Castro, *España en su historia: Cristianos, moros y judíos* (Buenos Aires, 1948), pp. 25–45. In “The Meaning of Spanish Civilization,” his inaugural lecture at Princeton University (1940), Castro said: “For a Spaniard, living is always an open problem, and not a solution, to be confined in a slogan. To live or to die are for him equivalent points of departure, which today, less than ever, cannot be considered an impertinence.” *An Idea of History, Selected Essays of Américo Castro*, ed. S. Gilman and E. L. King (Columbus, OH, 1977), p. 159.

¹¹ Cited by Bartolomé Bennassar, *L’Homme Espagnol: Attitudes et mentalités du XVIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1975), trans. Benjamin Keen, *The Spanish Character* (Berkeley, CA, 1979), p. 237.

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the significance of the “good death” for the Spanish character, the commentary pointed toward some unique relation between death and Spanish culture.¹²

Having chosen a time and place, I gradually developed a sharper focus in regard to the topic and my methodology. This process of narrowing does not now need describing; what needs to be explained is the end result. On an analytical level, this is a history of mentalities that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, what Michel Vovelle has called *approches qualitatives* and *approches srielles*.¹³ It is a study that juxtaposes the actual and the ideal and analyzes the way in which belief shapes society and culture and how in turn society and culture define and express belief. Though I draw upon the pioneering work of French historians of death, I have not limited myself to their methodology and have eschewed their dichotomizing of elite and popular mentalities.¹⁴ Eager to fuse social and intellectual history, and guided by some approaches in the social-scientific study of religion, I have written a history of mentalities in which apparent dichotomies in faith and piety are viewed as dynamically interrelated rather than as diametrically opposed.

This is a study of the relation between the *art* of dying well and the actual *craft* of dying, between elite theology and popular piety, between paradigms and deeds, between myth and ritual, between the sacred and the profane: It is an attempt to plumb the social, political, and cultural functions of Catholic theology in the Counter-Reformation Spain. In it I analyze the model “good” deaths of the two chief social types, the monarch and the saint – King Philip II as the apex of secular authority and St. Teresa of Avila as the apex of sacred power – and juxtapose these paradigms with the attitudes of more mundane social types as revealed in last wills and testaments from sixteenth-century Madrid.

But why this particular triad of testament, king, and saint? The use of

¹² “It would be absurd to deny that Spaniards over the centuries have been preoccupied with the thought of death.” Bartolomé Bennassar, *The Spanish Character*, chap. 9, “Mourir bien,” p. 237.

¹³ Vovelle, “Problèmes,” *Annales* (1976): 124. See also the essay by Jacques Le Goff, “Les mentalités, une histoire ambiguë,” in *Faire de l’histoire: nouveaux problèmes*, ed. J. Le Goff and P. Nora (Paris, 1974), pt. 3, pp. 76–94.

¹⁴ For a synopsis of this historical genre see Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality*, especially the introduction by Whaley, pp. 1–14; and “Death and the French Historians” by John McManners, pp. 106–30. Also by McManners: “The history of death,” review article, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 December 1979, p. 111.

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testaments was a given, dictated by necessity and precedent, for, as the French historians had proven, these documents were indispensable for the study of popular attitudes.¹⁵ To set these mundane popular attitudes in context, as related to more abstract beliefs, I turned to the mythopoeic process whereby models of faith and behavior are constructed and affirmed. As anthropologists have known for some time, paradigms offer unparalleled access to the study of mentalities. Victor Turner has claimed, for instance, that paradigms not only have reference to the ever-fluid social relations of people but also to “the cultural goals, means, ideas, outlooks, currents of thought, patterns of belief” that determine and interpret those relationships and incline them toward cohesiveness or divisiveness. Paradigms are not, he says, “precision tools of thought” but, rather, a means of intuiting and apprehending axiomatic values, mostly through myth and symbol. As such, they can influence the vital actions of societies more profoundly than logically arrayed ethical guidelines.¹⁶ But where does one look for the paradigmatic “good” death?

The paradigmatic cases of the king and the saint seemed obvious choices as points of reference in the bipolar social structure of early modern Spain, that nation where church and state worked hand in hand to control thought and behavior: the king as the summit of secular authority, the saint as the apex of sacred power.¹⁷ Kings represent law and authority. They are the ultimate earthly power, the apex of temporal lay society. To study the myth of the “good” death of the king, I thought, would be to peer into the ultimate lay paradigm. Saints represent holiness and spiritual authority. Though saints are not always necessarily at the summit of the church hierarchy, their alleged nearness to God enables them to embody that sacred power from which the church itself

¹⁵ Using wills as a gauge of a community’s mentality was suggested principally by the following works: Pierre Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris, XVIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1981); Jacques Chiffolleau, *La comptabilité de l’au delà: Les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d’Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Rome, 1980); and Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973), and (with Gaby Vovelle), *Vision de la mort et l’au-delà en Provence du XVe au XXe siècle*, (Paris, 1970).

¹⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca NY/London, 1974), pp. 64, 96.

¹⁷ The idea of focusing on models was suggested to me by R. C. Finucane’s essay, “Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion: Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages,” in Whaley, *Mirrors of Mortality*, pp. 40–60.

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claims to derive its authority. They are the ultimate confirmation of divine power on earth, the very apex of sacred ecclesiastical society. To study the myth of the “excellent” death of the saint, I thought, would be to examine the ultimate ecclesiastical paradigm. Myths, after all, derive from transitions such as death: They are “liminal” phenomena told at a time of passage.¹⁸ In speaking of myth, I am speaking of sacred narrative, of myth as a historical construct. I am not speaking of fictions or legends (though myths can contain invented and imagined elements and can be narrated as legends) but of culturally conditioned core beliefs imbued with profound social, political, and religious significance: myth as the symbolic synthesis of a people’s ethos at a specific time and place and as the conceptual foundation of their major social institutions.¹⁹

But even if the prototypical “good” deaths of King Philip and Saint Teresa do reveal to us the ideals of their society, what kind of correlation can one seek between the elite mythopoeic literature that idealizes them and the gritty, mundane requests left behind by dying testators in Madrid? Is this juxtaposition of paradigmatic myths and notarial records perhaps a comparison of apples and oranges? In response, I shall first allude to the medieval tradition of the *danse macabre*, or Dance of Death, that artistic genre that delighted in representing the Grim Reaper as the great leveler, snatching away the entire spectrum of unwilling social types into the great beyond. Insofar as death is the great leveler, the common fate of all human beings from kings to paupers, it offers the historian a unique opportunity. Kings and paupers may share no common experiences throughout life, but they will inexorably be drawn toward the common predicament of death. The moral axiom of the *danse macabre* – that all people are equal in the face of death – also pertains to the structure of this study. Although it is true that I have chosen two very different types of documentation and that they highlight distinct aspects of attitudes toward death, it is also true that they are concerned with the

¹⁸ The concept of myth is central to the socioscientific study of religion and is interpreted in various ways. For an overview that stresses the understanding of myths as liminal phenomena see Victor Turner, “Myth and Symbol,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. D. L. Sills (New York, 1968), vol. 10, pp. 576–82.

¹⁹ The notion that myth is “not merely a story told but a reality lived . . . not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force” is in Bronislaw Malinowski’s “Magic, Science, and Religion” (1925), in *Magic, Science, and Religion, and Other Essays* (Glencoe IL, 1948), pp. 100–1.