

W e have seen how Western civilization had adopted a sort of vulgate of death. Today we shall see that this vulgate was not abandoned or blotted out, but instead was partially altered during the second Middle Ages, that is to say beginning with the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I want to stress from the outset that this was not a matter of a new attitude which took the place of the preceding one, which we have just analyzed; but rather subtle modifications gradually gave a dramatic and personal meaning to man's traditional familiarity with death.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

In order to understand properly these phenomena we must keep in mind the fact that this traditional familiarity implied a collective notion of destiny. Men of that period were profoundly and rapidly socialized. The family did not intervene to delay the socialization of the child. Moreover, socialization did not separate man from nature, with which he could not interfere short of a miracle. Familiarity with death is a form of acceptance of the order of nature, an acceptance which can be both naive, in day-to-day affairs, and learned, in astrological speculations.

In death man encountered one of the great laws of the species, and he had no thought of escaping it or glorifying it. He merely accepted it with just the proper amount of solemnity due one of the important thresholds which each generation always had to cross.

This brings us to an analysis of a series of new phenomena which introduced the concern for the individuality of each person into the old idea of the collective destiny of the species. The phenomena we have selected are (1) the portrayal of the Last Judgment at the end of the world; (2) the displacing of this judgment to the end of each life, to the precise moment of death; (3) macabre themes and the interest shown in portrayals of physical decomposition; and (4) the return to fu-

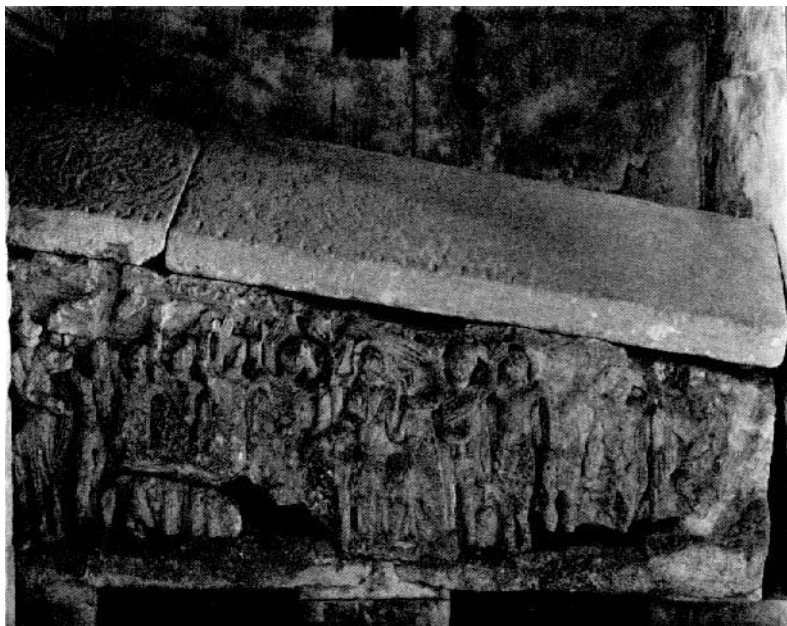
ONE'S OWN DEATH

neral inscriptions and to a certain personalization of tombs.

THE PORTRAYAL OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

In about 680 Bishop Agilbert was buried in the funeral chapel which he had had constructed adjacent to the monastery of Jouarre (Seine-et-Marne), to which he had retired and where he died. His tomb is still standing. What do we find there? On a small panel is the Christ in Majesty surrounded by the four Evangelists. This is the image inspired by the Apocalypse, of Christ returning at the end of the world. On the large panel adjoining it we find the resurrection of the dead on the last day. The elect, their arms upraised, acclaim the returning Christ, who holds in his hands a scroll, no doubt the Book of Life.¹ No judgment or condemnation is in evidence. This image is in keeping with the general eschatology of the early centuries of Christendom. The dead who belonged to the Church and who had entrusted their bodies to its care (that is to say to the care of the saints), went to sleep like the seven sleepers of Ephesus (*pausantes, in*

¹ J. Hubert, *Les cryptes de Jouarre* (IV^e Congrès de l'art du haut moyen-âge) (Melun: Imprimerie de la préfecture de Seine-et-Marne, 1952).



Tomb of the Venerable Agilbert, bishop of Dorchester and Paris, in the crypt of St. Paul's Church, Jouarre.
Photo Giraudon.

ONE'S OWN DEATH

somno pacis) and were at rest (*requiescant*) until the day of the Second Coming, of the great return, when they would awaken in the heavenly Jerusalem, in other words in Paradise. There was no place for individual responsibility, for a counting of good and bad deeds. The wicked, that is to say those who were not members of the Church, would doubtlessly not live after their death; they would not awaken and would be abandoned to a state of nonexistence. An entire quasi-biological population, the saintly population, thus would be granted a glorious afterlife following a long, expectant sleep.

But in the twelfth century the scene changed. In the sculptured tympana of the romanesque churches of Beaulieu or Conques the apocalyptic vision of the Majesty of Christ still predominates. But beneath the portrayal of Christ appears a new iconography, inspired this time by the book of Matthew: the resurrection of the dead, the separation of the just and the damned, the Last Judgment (at Conques, Christ's halo bears the word *Judex*), and the weighing of souls by the archangel Michael.²

In the thirteenth century³ the apocalyptic inspiration and the evocation of the Second Coming

²Tympana of Beaulieu, Conques, Autun.

³Tympana of the cathedrals of Paris, Bourges, Bordeaux, Amiens, etc.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

were almost blotted out. The idea of the judgment won out and the scene became a court of justice. Christ is shown seated upon the judgment throne surrounded by his court (the apostles). Two acts had become increasingly important: the weighing of souls and the intercession of the Virgin and St. John, who kneel, their hands clasped, on either side of Christ the Judge. Each man is to be judged according to the balance sheet of his life. Good and bad deeds are scrupulously separated and placed on the appropriate side of the scales. Moreover, these deeds have been inscribed in a book. In the magnificent strains of the *Dies irae* the Franciscan authors of the thirteenth century portrayed the book being brought before the judge on the last day, a book in which everything is inscribed and on the basis of which everyone will be judged.

*Liber scriptus proferetur
In quo totum continetur
Unde mundus judicetur.*

This book, the *liber vitae*, must first have been conceived of as a cosmic book, the formidable census of the universe. But at the end of the Middle Ages it became an individual account book. At Albi, in the vast fresco of the Last Judgment dating from the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of

ONE'S OWN DEATH

the sixteenth century,⁴ the risen wear this book about their necks, like a passport, or rather like a bank book to be presented at the gates of eternity. A very curious change has occurred. This "balance" (*balancia*) or balance sheet is closed not at the moment of death but on the *dies illa*, the last day of the world, at the end of time. Here we can see the deep-rooted refusal to link the end of physical being with physical decay. Men of the period believed in an existence after death which did not necessarily continue for infinite eternity, but which provided an extension between death and the end of the world.

Thus, the idea of the Last Judgment is linked with that of the individual biography, but this biography ends on the last day, and not at the hour of death.

IN THE BEDCHAMBER OF THE DYING

The second phenomenon consisted of suppressing the eschatological time between death and the end of the world, and of no longer situating the judgment in space at the Second Coming, but in the bedchamber, around the deathbed.

⁴At the rear of the apse.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

This new iconography is to be found in the woodcuts, spread by the new technique of printing, in books which are treatises on the proper manner of dying: the *artes moriendi* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁵ Nonetheless, this iconography brings us back to the traditional image of the deathbed which we studied in the first chapter.

The dying man is lying in bed surrounded by his friends and relations. He is in the process of carrying out the rituals which are now familiar to us. But something is happening which disturbs the simplicity of the ceremony and which those present do not see. It is a spectacle reserved for the dying man alone and one which he contemplates with a bit of anxiety and a great deal of indifference. Supernatural beings have invaded his chamber and cluster about the bed of the recumbent figure, the "gisant." On one side are the Trinity, the Virgin, and the celestial court; on the other, Satan and a monstrous army of demons. Thus the great gathering which in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had taken place on the last day, in the fifteenth century had moved to the sickroom.

How are we to interpret this scene?

⁵Texts and woodcuts of an *Ars moriendi* reproduced in A. Tenenti, *La vie et la mort à travers le XV^e siècle* (Paris, 1952), pp. 97-120.



“St. Sebastian Interceding for the Plague-stricken” (1497–99), by Josse Lieferinxe, in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Reproduced by permission of the Walters Art Gallery.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

Is it still really a judgment? Properly speaking, no. The scales in which good and evil are weighed no longer play a part. The book is still present, and all too frequently the demon has grabbed it with a triumphant gesture, because the account book and the person's life story are in his favor. But God no longer appears with the attributes of a judge. In the two possible interpretations, interpretations which probably can be superimposed, God is rather the arbiter or the observer.

The first interpretation is that of a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil who are fighting for possession of the dying man, and the dying man himself watches this battle as an impartial witness, though he is the prize.

This interpretation is suggested by the graphic composition of this scene in the woodcuts of the *artes moriendi*. But if one reads carefully the inscriptions that accompany these woodcuts one will see that they deal with a different matter, which is the second interpretation. God and his court are there to observe how the dying man conducts himself during this trial—a trial he must endure before he breathes his last and which will determine his fate in eternity. This test consists of a final temptation. The dying man will see his entire life as it is contained in the book, and he will be tempted either by despair over his sins, by the “vainglory”

ONE'S OWN DEATH

of his good deeds, or by the passionate love for things and persons. His attitude during this fleeting moment will erase at once all the sins of his life if he wards off temptation or, on the contrary, will cancel out all his good deeds if he gives way. The final test has replaced the Last Judgment.

Here we must make two important observations.

The first concerns the juxtaposition of the traditional portrayal of death in bed and that of the individual judgment of each life. Death in bed, as we have seen, was a calming rite which solemnized the necessary passing, the "*trépas*," and leveled the differences between individuals. No one worried about the fate of one particular dying man. Death would come to him as it did to all men, or rather to all Christians at peace with the Church. It was an essentially collective rite.

On the other hand, the judgment—even though it took place in a great cosmic activity at the end of the world—was peculiar to each individual, and no one knew his fate until the judge had weighed the souls, heard the pleas of intercessors, and made his decision.

Thus the iconography of the *artes moriendi* joins in a single scene the security of a collective rite and the anxiety of a personal interrogation.

My second observation concerns the increasingly close relationship established between death and

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

the biography of each individual life. It took time for this relationship to gain ascendancy. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it became firmly fixed, no doubt under the influence of the mendicant orders. From then on it was thought that each person's entire life flashed before his eyes at the moment of death. It was also believed that his attitude at that moment would give his biography its final meaning, its conclusion.

Thus we understand how the ritual solemnity of the deathbed, which persisted into the nineteenth century, by the end of the Middle Ages had assumed among the educated classes a dramatic character, an emotional burden which it had previously lacked.

We must, however, note that this evolution strengthened the role played by the dying man himself in the ceremonies surrounding his own death. He was still at the center of activity, presiding over the event as in the past, and determining the ritual as he saw fit.

These ideas were bound to change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Under the influence of the Counter Reformation, spiritual writers struggled against the popular belief that it was not necessary to take such pains to live virtuously, since a good death redeemed everything. However,

ONE'S OWN DEATH

they continued to acknowledge that there was a moral importance in the way the dying man behaved and in the circumstances surrounding his death. It was not until the twentieth century that this deeply rooted belief was cast off, at least in industrialized societies.

THE "TRANSI," OR WORM-RIDDEN CORPSE

The third phenomenon appears during the same period as the *artes moriendi*: this is the appearance in art and literature of the cadaver, called the "*transi*" (the perished one) or the "*charogne*" (the carrion).⁶

We must point out that in the art of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries the portrayal of death in the form of a mummy, of a partly decomposed cadaver, was less widespread than is thought. It is found chiefly in the fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts of the Service for the Dead, and in the decoration of churches and cemeteries (the Dance of Death). It is much rarer in funeral art. The sub-

⁶*Ibid.*; A. Tenenti, *Il senso della morte et l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento* (Turin, 1957), pp. 139-84; and J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1924), chap. XI, "The Vision of Death," pp. 138-50.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

stitution of a cadaver or *transi* for the recumbent figure or *gisant* was limited to certain regions such as eastern France and western Germany, and is rarely found in Italy and Spain. It was never really accepted as a common theme for funeral art. Later, in the seventeenth century, the skeleton or bones, and not the decomposing cadaver, were to be found on nearly every tomb and even found their way into houses, on fireplaces and furniture. But the vulgarization after the late sixteenth century of macabre objects, in the form of a skull or bones, has a meaning different from that of the putrified cadaver.

Historians have been struck by the appearance of the cadaver and the mummy in iconography. The great Huizinga saw it as a proof of his thesis about the moral crisis during the "waning of the Middle Ages." Today Tenenti sees instead in this horror of death the sign of the love of life ("*la vie pleine*") and of the overthrow of the Christian scheme of life. My interpretation would be in the direction of Tenenti's.

Before proceeding further, we must point out a significant omission in last wills and testaments of this period. Testators of the fifteenth century referred to their *charogne*, their "carriage," but the word disappeared in the sixteenth century. Never-

ONE'S OWN DEATH

theless, in general the death portrayed in wills was related to the peaceful conception of death in bed. The horror of physical death, of which the cadaver could be considered a sign, was completely absent, which leads us to assume that it was also absent from the common mentality.

On the other hand, and this is a very important observation, the horror of physical death and of decomposition is a familiar theme in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poetry. "*Sac à fiens*" (*fientes*), "bag of droppings," said P. de Nesson (1383-1442).

O carrion, who art no longer man,
Who will hence keep thee company?
Whatever issues from thy liquors,
Worms engendered by the stench
Of thy vile carrion flesh.⁷

But this horror was not restricted to *post-mortem* decomposition; it was *intra vitam*, in illness, in old age:

⁷"O charoigne, qui n'es mais hon,/Qui te tenra lors compaignée?/Ce qui istra [sortira] de ta liqueur,/Vers engendrés de la pueur/De ta vile chair encharoignée."

Pierre de Nesson, "Vigiles des morts: Paraphrase sur Job," quoted in *Anthologie poétique française, Moyen-Âge*, ed. Garnier (Paris, 1967), Vol. II, p. 184.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

I am nothing but bones, I seem a skeleton,
Fleshless, muscleless, pulpless . . .
My body is diminishing to the point where
everything becomes disjointed.⁸

Here we are not dealing with moralizing intentions, with the arguments of preachers. These poets are aware of the universal presence of corruption. It is present in cadavers but also in the midst of life, in "*les oeuvres naturelles*," the operations of nature. The worms which devour cadavers do not come from the earth but from within the body, from its natural "liquors."

Each conduit [of the body]
Constantly produces putrid matter
Out of the body.⁹

Decomposition is the sign of man's failure, and that is undoubtedly the underlying meaning of the

⁸"Je n'ay plus que les os, un squelette je semble/décharné, démusclé, dépoulté . . ./Mon corps s'en va descendre où tout se désassemble."

P. de Ronsard, "Derniers vers," Sonnet I, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. P. Laumonier (rev. ed.; Paris: Silver and Le Bègue, 1967), Vol. XVIII, Part 1, pp. 176-77.

⁹"Chascun conduit [du corps]/Puante matière produit/Hors du corps continuellement."

Pierre de Nesson, quoted in A. Tenenti, *Il senso della morte*, p. 147.



Detail from "St. George Fighting the Dragon," by Vittore Carpaccio, in Scuola de S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice. Photo Anderson-Giraudon, Rome.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

macabre, which turns this failure into a new and original phenomenon.

In order better to understand this phenomenon, we must cast aside the contemporary notion of failure which is, alas, very familiar to us in today's industrialized societies.

Today the adult experiences sooner or later—and increasingly it is sooner—the feeling that he has failed, that his adult life has failed to achieve any of the promises of his adolescence. This feeling is at the basis of the climate of depression which is spreading throughout the leisured classes of industrialized societies.

This feeling was completely foreign to the mentalities of traditional societies, those in which one died like Roland or Tolstoy's peasants. But it was no longer foreign to the rich, powerful, or learned man of the late Middle Ages. Nevertheless there is a very interesting difference between our contemporary feeling of personal failure and that found in the late Middle Ages. The certainty of death and the fragility of life are foreign to our existential pessimism.

On the contrary the man of the late Middle Ages was very acutely conscious that he had merely been granted a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one, and that death was always present within him, shattering his ambitions and

ONE'S OWN DEATH

poisoning his pleasures. And that man felt a love of life which we today can scarcely understand, perhaps because of our increased longevity.

"We must leave behind our house, our orchards, and our gardens, dishes and vessels which the artisan engraved," wrote Ronsard, reflecting upon death.¹⁰ Which of us faced with death would weep over a house in Florida or a farm in Virginia? In proto-capitalist eras—in other words, in periods when the capitalist and technological mentality was being developed, the process would not be completed until the eighteenth century—man had an unreasoning, visceral love for *temporalia*, which was a blanket word including things, men, and animals.

We now reach a point in our analysis where we can reach a general conclusion about these first few phenomena we have observed: the Last Judgment, the final trial of the *artes moriendi*, and the love of life evidenced in macabre themes. During the second half of the Middle Ages, from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, three categories of mental images were brought together: the image of death, that of the individual's knowledge of his

¹⁰"Il faut laisser maisons, et vergers, et jardins/Vaisselles et vaisseaux que l'artisan burine"

Ronsard, "Derniers vers," Sonnet XI, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. XVIII, Part 1, p. 180.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

own biography, and that of the passionate attachment for things and creatures possessed during one's lifetime. Death became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself.

TOMBS

The last phenomenon remaining to be studied confirms this general trend. It concerns the tombs, or to be more exact, the individualization of sepulchers.¹¹

We cannot be very much in error in saying that, in Ancient Rome, everyone, even the slaves, had a burial place, a *loculus*, and that this place was marked by an inscription. Countless funeral inscriptions have been uncovered. They were still numerous at the beginning of the Christian era, indicating the desire to preserve the identity of the tomb.

Beginning with the fifth century such inscriptions became rare and disappeared more or less rapidly according to the locality. In addition to the name of the deceased, stone sarcophagi had often included his portrait. The portraits disappeared in their turn so that the sepulchers became com-

¹¹ E. Panofski, *Tomb Sculpture* (London, 1964).

pletely anonymous. This evolution should not surprise us after my earlier discussion of burial *ad sanctos*: the dead person was given over to the Church, which took care of him until the Resurrection Day. The cemeteries of the first half of the Middle Ages, and even cemeteries of later times where older customs persisted, are accumulations of stone, sometimes sculptured, almost always anonymous, so that, unless funeral furnishings are to be found, it is difficult to date them.

However, beginning with the thirteenth century—and perhaps slightly earlier—we again find the funeral inscriptions which had all but disappeared during the previous eight or nine hundred years.

They reappeared first on the tombs of illustrious personages—that is to say of saints or those associated with the saints. These tombs, at first very rare, became more frequent as the thirteenth century progressed. The funeral slab of Queen Mathilda, the first queen of Norman England, bears a brief inscription.

With the inscription the effigy also reappeared, without being a true portrait. It evoked the beatified or elected person awaiting Paradise. However, during the reign of Louis IX of France it became increasingly realistic and attempted to reproduce the features of the living person. Finally, in the

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

fourteenth century, realism was carried to the point of reproducing a death mask. For a certain category of illustrious personages, both clergy and lay—the only persons to have great sculpted tombs—there was thus a development from complete anonymity, to a short inscription, and finally to a realistic portrait. The evolution in funeral art forms continued on the way to increased personalization until the early seventeenth century, and the dead person might be portrayed twice on the same tomb, both alive and dead.

These monumental tombs are very familiar to us, because they belong to the history of art and of sculpture. In reality they are not numerous enough to constitute a basic element of our civilization. But they provide us with a few indications that the general evolution followed the same direction.

Alongside the great monumental tombs we see in the thirteenth century an increase in little plaques about 30 to 40 centimeters wide which were affixed to interior or exterior walls of the church or to a pillar. These plaques are relatively unknown because they have been neglected by art historians. Most of them have disappeared. They are, however, very interesting to the historian of mentalities, for they were the most common form of funeral monuments until the eighteenth century. Some were simple inscriptions in Latin or

ONE'S OWN DEATH

French: "Here lies John Doe, who died on such and such a day," and then his occupation. Others, which were somewhat larger, included in addition to the inscription a scene in which the deceased person was portrayed either alone or most commonly before Christ or beside a religious scene. These wall plaques were very common in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. They reveal the desire to render the burial place individual and to perpetuate the memory of the deceased in that spot.¹²

In the eighteenth century, tombs with a simple inscription became increasingly numerous, at least in the cities, where artisans—the middle class of that period—were eager in their turn to leave anonymity behind and preserve their identity after death.¹³

Nevertheless, these tombstone plaques were not the only way nor perhaps the most widespread way of perpetuating the memory of the deceased. In their wills the deceased themselves provided for perpetual religious services for the salvation of their soul. Beginning with the thirteenth century and continuing until the eighteenth century, the

¹² Numerous "*tableaux*" or plaques exist in the chapel of St. Hilaire at Marville in the French Ardennes.

¹³ For example, at Toulouse in the cloister of the Jacobins: the tomb of X, master cooper, and his family.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

testators or their heirs would have the terms of their donation and the obligations of the *curé* and the parish engraved on a stone plaque. These donation plaques were at least as important as those bearing a "Here lies." Sometimes both elements were present. Sometimes the donation plaque was considered sufficient and the "Here lies" was omitted. The important element was the calling to mind of the deceased's identity, and not the remembrance of the exact place where the body had been placed.¹⁴

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The study of tombs confirms what we have learned from the Last Judgments, the *artes*

¹⁴For example, a "*tableau*" serving as a reminder of a bequest in the church of Andrésey, near Pontoise. At the top are the donor's arms, followed by the inscription:

"À la gloire de Dieu, à la mémoire des cinq playes de N[ostre] S[eigneur] J[ésus] C[hrist].

"Claude Le Page, escuyer, sieur de la Chapelle, ancien conducteur de la Haquenée, chef du gobelet du Roi, ancien valet de chambre garde robe de feu Monsieur, frère unique de S[a] M[ajesté] Louis 14, lequel il a servi quatre huit années, jusqu'à son deceds et a depuis continué le même service près monsaigneur le Duc d'Orléans son fils, a fondé à perpétuité pour le repos de son âme, de ses parens et amis, tous les mois de l'année une messe le 6 de chaque mois en la chapelle de Saint Jean dont l'une sera haute, le jour de S[t.] Claude, auxquelles assisteront 5 pauvres et un garçon pour répondre aux dites messes, à qui les Margailliers donneront à chacun des six 5 liards dont ils en porteront un à l'offrande.

moriendi, and the macabre themes: Beginning with the eleventh century a formerly unknown relationship developed between the death of each individual and his awareness of being an individual. Today it is agreed that between the year 1000 and the middle of the thirteenth century "a very important historical mutation occurred," as a contemporary medievalist, Pacault, expressed it. "The manner in which men applied their thoughts to their surroundings and to their concerns underwent a profound transformation, while the mental processes—the manner of reasoning, of perceiving concrete or abstract realities, and of conceiving ideas—evolved radically."¹⁵

Here we can grasp this change in the mirror of death or, in the words of the old authors, in the *speculum mortis*. In the mirror of his own death each man would discover the secret of his indi-

"Le tout accordé par Messieurs les curés, marguilliers en charge et anciens de la paroisse S[t.] Germain d'Andrésy, ce qui est plus amplement expliqué par le contrat passé le 27 janvier 1703 par devant M^e [maîtres] Bailly et Desfforges, notaires au Châtelet de Paris.

"Cette épitaphe a esté placée par le soin du fondateur, aagé de soixante dix-neuf ans le 24 janvier 1704."

A different hand subsequently engraved: "et décédé le 24 décembre de la même année."

¹⁵ M. Pacault, "De l'aberration à la logique: essai sur les mutations de quelques structures ecclésiastiques," *Revue historique*, Vol. CCXXXII (1972), p. 313.

WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

viduality. And this relationship—which Greco-Roman Antiquity, and especially Epicurianism, had glimpsed briefly and had then lost—has from that time on never ceased to make an impression on our Western civilization. With little difficulty the man of traditional societies, the man of the first Middle Ages which we studied in our preceding lecture, became resigned to the idea that we are all mortal. Since the Early Middle Ages Western man has come to see himself in his own death: he has discovered *la mort de soi*, one's own death.

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Thy Death