

CHAPTER XI

THE VISION OF DEATH

No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death. An everlasting call of *memento mori* resounds through life. Denis the Carthusian, in his *Directory of the Life of Nobles*, exhorts them: "And when going to bed at night, he should consider how, just as he now lies down himself, soon strange hands will lay his body in the grave." In earlier times, too, religion had insisted on the constant thought of death, but the pious treatises of these ages only reached those who had already turned away from the world. Since the thirteenth century, the popular preaching of the mendicant orders had made the eternal admonition to remember death swell into a sombre chorus ringing throughout the world. Towards the fifteenth century, a new means of inculcating the awful thought into all minds was added to the words of the preacher, namely, the popular woodcut. Now these two means of expression, sermons and woodcuts, both addressing themselves to the multitude and limited to crude effects, could only represent death in a simple and striking form. All that the meditations on death of the monks of yore had produced, was now condensed into a very primitive image. This vivid image, continually impressed upon all minds, had hardly assimilated more than a single element of the great complex of ideas relating to death, namely, the sense of the perishable nature of all things. It would seem, at times, as if the soul of the declining Middle Ages only succeeded in seeing death under this aspect.

The endless complaint of the frailty of all earthly glory was sung to various melodies. Three motifs may be distinguished. The first is expressed by the question: where are now all those who once filled the world with their splendour?

The second motif dwells on the frightful spectacle of human beauty gone to decay. The third is the death-dance: death dragging along men of all conditions and ages.

Compared with the two others, the first of these themes is but a graceful and elegiac sigh. After having taken shape in Greek poetry, it was adopted by the Fathers, and pervaded the literature of all Christendom, and that of Islam also. Byron, too, used it in *Don Juan*. The Middle Ages cultivated it with special predilection. We find it in the heavy rhythm of the erudite poetry of the twelfth century:

"Est ubi gloria nunc Babylonia? nunc ubi dirus
Nabugodonosor, et Darii vigor, illeque Cyrus? . . .
Nunc ubi Regulus? aut ubi Romulus, aut ubi Remus?
Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus." ¹

Franciscan poetry of the thirteenth century (if the following lines are not of an older date) still preserves an echo of these rhyming hexameters:

"Dic ubi Salomon, olim tam nobilis
Vel Sampson ubi est, dux invincibilis,
Et pulcher Absalon, vultu mirabilis,
Aut dulcis Jonathas, multum amabilis?" ²

Deschamps composed at least four of his ballads on this theme. Gerson worked it out in a sermon; Denis the Carthusian in his treatise, *De quatuor hominum novissimis* (on the four last things of man); Chastellain in a long poem entitled *Le Pas de la Mort*. Olivier de la Marche, in his *Parement et Triumphe des Dames* composed on it a lament over all the princesses who died in his time. Villon gives it a new accent of soft tenderness in his *Ballade des Dames du Temps jadis*, with the refrain:

"Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?"

And then he sprinkles it with irony in the *Ballad of the*

¹ Where is now your glory, Babylon, where is now the terrible Nebuchadnezzar, and strong Darius and the famous Cyrus? Where is now Regulus, or where Romulus, or where Remus? The rose of yore is but a name, mere names are left to us.

² Say where is Solomon, once so noble, Or Samson where is he, the invincible chief, And fair Absalom of the wonderful face, Or sweet Jonathan, the most amiable?

Lords by adding to the series of kings, popes and princes of his time the words:

"Helas! et le bon roy d'Espagne
Duquel je ne sçay pas le nom."¹

* However, the wistfulness of remembrance and the thought of frailty in itself do not satisfy the need of expressing, with violence, the shudder caused by death. The medieval soul demands a more concrete embodiment of the perishable: that of the putrefying corpse.

Ascetic meditation had, in all ages, dwelt on dust and worms. The treatises on the contempt of the world had, long since, evoked all the horrors of decomposition, but it is only towards the end of the fourteenth century that pictorial art, in its turn, seizes upon this motif. To render the horrible details of decomposition, a realistic force of expression was required, to which painting and sculpture only attained towards 1400. At the same time, the motif spread from ecclesiastical to popular literature. Until far into the sixteenth century, tombs are adorned with hideous images of a naked corpse with clenched hands and rigid feet, gaping mouth and bowels crawling with worms. The imagination of those times relished these horrors, without ever looking one stage further, to see how corruption perishes in its turn, and flowers grow where it lay.

A thought which so strongly attaches to the earthly side of death can hardly be called truly pious. It would rather seem a kind of (spasmodic reaction against an excessive sensuality.) In exhibiting the horrors awaiting all human beauty, already lurking below the surface of corporeal charms, these preachers of contempt for the world express, indeed, a very materialistic sentiment, namely, that all beauty and all happiness are worthless *because* they are bound to end soon. Renunciation founded on disgust does not spring from Christian wisdom.

It is noteworthy that the pious exhortations to think of death and the profane exhortations to make the most of youth almost meet. A painting in the monastery of the Celestines at Avignon, now destroyed, attributed by tradition

¹ Alas! and the good king of Spain, Whose name I do not know.

to the founder, King René himself, represented the body of a dead woman, standing, enveloped in a shroud, with her head dressed and worms gnawing her bowels. In the inscription at the foot of the picture the first lines read:

"Une fois sur toute femme belle
Mais par la mort suis devenu telle,
Ma chair estoit très belle, fraîche et tendre,
Or, est-elle toute tournée en cendre.
Mon corps estoit très plaisant et très gent,¹
Je me souloye souvent vestir de soye,
Or en droict fault que toute nue je soys.
Fourrée estois de gris et de menu vair,
En grand palais me logeois à mon vueil,
Or suis logée en ce petit cercueil.
Ma chambre estoit de beaux tapis ornée,
Or est d'aragnes ma fosse environnée."²

Here the *memento mori* still predominates. It tends imperceptibly to change into the quite worldly complaint of the woman who sees her charms fade, as in the following lines of the *Parement et Triumphe des Dames* by Olivier de la Marche.

"Ces doulx regards, ces yeulx faiz pour plaisance,
Pensez y bien, ilz perdront leur clarté,
Nez et sourcilz, la bouche d'eloquence
Se pourriront . . .
Se vous vivez le droit cours de nature
Dont LX ans est pour ung bien grant nombre,
Vostre beaulté changera en laydure,
Vostre santé en maladie obscure,
Et ne ferez en ce monde que encombre.
Se fille avez, vous luy serez ung ombre,
Celle sera requise et demandée,
Et de chacun la mère habandonnée."³

¹ It seems that two lines are missing after the lines 5 and 8.

² Once I was beautiful above all women But by death I became like this, My flesh was very beautiful, fresh and soft, Now it is altogether turned to ashes. My body was very pleasing and very pretty, I used frequently to dress in silk, Now I must rightly be quite nude. I was dressed in grey fur and miniver, I lived in a great palace as I wished, Now I am lodged in this little coffin. My room was adorned with fine tapestry, Now my grave is enveloped by cobwebs.

³ These sweet looks, these eyes made for pleasanee, Remember, they will lose their lustre, Nose and eyelashes, the eloquent mouth Will putrefy. . . . If you live your natural lifetime, Of which sixty years is a great

All pious purpose has disappeared in the ballads of Villon, where the old courtesan, "la belle heaulmière," calls to mind her irresistible beauty of former times and is deeply grieved at its sad decline.

"Qu'est devenu ce front poly,
Ces cheveux blons, sourcils voutliz,
Grant entœil, le regart joly,
Dont prenoie les plus soubtilz;
Ce beau nez droit, grant ne petiz,
Ces petites jointes oreilles,
Menton fourchu, cler vis traictiz
Et ces belles levres vermeilles ?

Le front ridé, les cheveux gris,
Les sourcilz cheuz, les yeuls estains. . . ."¹

This inability to free oneself from the attachment to matter manifests itself in yet other forms. A result of the same sentiment is to be found in the extreme importance ascribed in the Middle Ages to the fact that the bodies of certain saints * had never decayed—that of Saint Rosa of Viterbo, for example. The Assumption of the Holy Virgin exempting her body from earthly corruption was on that account regarded as the most precious of all graces. On various occasions attempts were made to retard decomposition. The features of the corpse of Pierre de Luxembourg were touched up with paint to preserve them intact until the burial. The body of a heretic preacher of the sect of the Turlupins, who died in prison, before sentence was passed, was preserved in lime for a fortnight, that it might be burned at the same time with a living heretical woman.

The importance attached to being buried in the soil of one's own country gave rise to usages which the Church had to

deal, Your beauty will change into ugliness, Your health into obscure malady, And you will only be in the way here below. If you have a daughter, you will be a shadow to her, She will be in request and asked for, And the mother will be abandoned by all.

¹ What has become of this smooth forehead, Fair hair, curving eyelashes, Large space between the eyes, pretty looks, Wherewith I caught the most subtle ones That fine straight nose, neither large nor small, These tiny ears close to the head, The dimpled chin, well-shaped bright face, And those beautiful vermilion lips ? . . . The forehead wrinkled, hair grey, The eyelashes come off, lack-lustre eyes. . . .

interdict strictly as being contrary to the Christian religion. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when a prince or a person of rank died far from his country, the body was often cut up and boiled so as to extract the bones, which were sent home in a chest, whereas the rest was interred, not without ceremony, however, on the spot. Emperors, kings and bishops have undergone this strange operation. Pope Boniface VIII forbade it as *detestandae feritatis abusus, quam ex quodam more horribili nonnulli fideles improvide proseguuntur*.¹ Yet his successors sometimes granted dispensations. Numbers of Englishmen who fell in France in the Hundred Years' War enjoyed this privilege, notably Edward of York and the earl of Suffolk, who died at Agincourt; Henry V himself; William Glasdale, who perished at Orleans at the time of its relief; a nephew of Sir John Fastolfe, and others.

At the close of the Middle Ages the whole vision of death may be summed up in the word *macabre*, in its modern meaning. Of course, this meaning is the outcome of a long process. But the sentiment it embodies, of something gruesome and dismal, is precisely the conception of death which arose during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. This bizarre word appeared in French in the fourteenth century, under the form *macabré*, and, whatever may be its etymology, as a proper name. A line of the poet Jean Le Fèvre, "Je fis de Macabré la dance," which may be dated 1376, remains the birth-certificate of the word for us.

Towards 1400 the conception of death in art and literature took a spectral and fantastic shape. A new and vivid shudder was added to the great primitive horror of death. The macabre vision arose from deep psychological strata of fear; religious thought at once reduced it to a means of moral exhortation. As such it was a great cultural idea, till in its turn it went out of fashion, lingering on in epitaphs and symbols in village cemeteries.

The idea of the death-dance is the central point of a whole group of connected conceptions. The priority belongs to the motif of the three dead and three living men, which is found

¹ An abuse of abominable savagery, practised by some of the faithful in a horrible way and inconsiderately.

in French literature from the thirteenth century onward. Three young noblemen suddenly meet three hideous dead men, who tell them of their past grandeur and warn them of their own near end. Art soon took hold of this suggestive theme. We can see it still in the striking frescoes of the *Campo santo* of Pisa. The sculpture of the portal of the church of the Innocents at Paris, which the duke of Berry had carved in 1408, but which has not been preserved, represented the same subject. Miniature painting and woodcuts spread it broadcast.

The theme of the three dead and three living men connects the horrible motif of putrefaction with that of the death-dance. This theme, too, seems to have originated in France, but it is unknown whether the pictorial representation preceded the scenic or the reverse. The thesis of Monsieur Emile Mâle, according to which the sculptural and pictorial motifs of the fifteenth century were supposed as a rule to be derived from dramatic representations, has not been able to keep its ground, on critical examination. It may be, however, that we should make an exception in favour of the death-dance. Anyhow, the Dance of the Dead has been acted as well as painted and engraved. The duke of Burgundy had it performed in his mansion at Bruges in 1449. If we could form an idea of the effect produced by such a dance, with vague lights and shadows gliding over the moving figures, we should no doubt be better able to understand the horror inspired by the subject, than we are by the aid of the pictures of Guyot Marchant or Holbein.

The woodcuts with which the Parisian printer, Guyot Marchant, ornamented the first edition of the *Danse Macabré* in 1485 were, very probably, imitated from the most celebrated of these painted death-dances, namely, that which, since 1424, covered the walls of the cloister of the churchyard of the Innocents at Paris. The stanzas printed by Marchant were those written under these mural paintings; perhaps they even hail back to the lost poetry of Jean Le Fèvre, who in his turn seems to have followed a Latin model. The woodcuts of 1485 can give but a feeble impression of the paintings of the Innocents, of which they are not exact copies, as the costumes prove. To have a notion of the effect of these

frescoes, one should rather look at the mural paintings of the church of La Chaise-Dieu, where the unfinished condition of the work heightens the spectral effect.

The dancing person whom we see coming back forty times to lead away the living, originally does not represent Death itself, but a corpse: the living man such as he will presently be. In the stanzas the dancer is called "the dead man" or "the dead woman." It is a dance of the dead and not of Death; the researches of Monsieur Gédéon Huet have made it probable that the primitive subject was a roundabout dance of dead people, come forth from their graves, a theme which Goethe revived in his *Totentanz*. The indefatigable dancer is the living man himself in his future shape, a frightful double of his person. "It is yourself," said the horrible vision to each of the spectators. It is only towards the end of the century that the figure of the great dancer, of a corpse with hollow and fleshless body, becomes a skeleton, as Holbein depicts it. Death in person has then replaced the individual dead man.

While it reminded the spectators of the frailty and the vanity of earthly things, the death-dance at the same time preached social equality as the Middle Ages understood it, Death levelling the various ranks and professions. At first only men appeared in the picture. The success of his publication, however, suggested to Guyot the idea of a dance macabre of women. Martial d'Auvergne wrote the poetry; an unknown artist, without equalling his model, completed the pictures by a series of feminine figures dragged along by a corpse. Now it was impossible to enumerate forty dignities and professions of women. After the queen, the abbess, the nun, the saleswoman, the nurse, and a few others, it was necessary to fall back on the different states of feminine life: the virgin, the beloved, the bride, the woman newly married, the woman with child. And here the sensual note reappears, to which we referred above. In lamenting the frailty of the lives of women, it is still the briefness of joy that is deplored, and with the grave tone of the *memento mori* is mixed the regret for lost beauty.

Nothing betrays more clearly the excessive fear of death felt in the Middle Ages than the popular belief, then widely

spread, according to which Lazarus, after his resurrection, lived in continual misery and horror at the thought that he should have again to pass through the gate of death. If the just had so much to fear, how could the sinner soothe himself? And then what motif was more poignant than the calling up of the agony of death? It appeared under two traditional forms: the *Ars moriendi* and the *Quator hominum novissima*, that is, the four last experiences awaiting man, of which death was the first. These two subjects were largely propagated in the fifteenth century by the printing-press and by engravings. The Art of Dying, as well as the Last Four Things, comprised a description of the agony of death, in which it is easy to recognize a model supplied by the ecclesiastical literature of former centuries.

Chastellain, in a long-winded poem, *Le Pas de la Mort*, has assembled all the above motifs; he gives successively the image of putrefaction—the lament: Where are the great ones of the earth?—an outline of a death-dance—and the art of dying. Being prolix and heavy, he needs a great many lines to express what Villon presents in half a stanza. But in comparing them we recognize their common model. Chastellain writes:

"Il n'a membre ne facture
Qui ne sente sa pourriture.
Avant que l'esperit soit hors,
Le cœur qui veult crevier au corps
Haulce et souliève la poitrine
Qui se veult joindre à son eschine.
—La face est tainte et apalie,
Et les yeux treilliés en la teste.
La parole luy est faillie,
Car la langue au palais se lie.
Le poulx tressault et sy halette.

Les os desjoignent à tous lez;
Il n'a nerf qu'au rompre ne tende." ¹

¹ There is not a limb nor a form, Which does not smell of putrefaction. Before the soul is outside, The heart which wants to burst in the body Raises and lifts the chest Which nearly touches the backbone.—The face is discoloured and pale, And the eyes veiled in the head. Speech fails him, For the tongue cleaves to the palate. The pulse trembles and he pants. . . . The bones are disjointed on all sides; There is not a tendon which does not stretch as to burst.

And Villon:

"La mort le fait fremir, pallir,
Le nez courber, les vaines tendre,
Le col enfier, la chair mollir,
Joinctes et nerfs croistre et estendre. . . ." ¹

And again the sensual thought mingles with it:

"Corps féminin, qui tant es tendre,
Poly, souef, si précieux,
Te faudra il ces maux attendre?
Oy, ou tout vif aller es cieulx." ²

Nowhere else were all the images tending to evoke the horror of death assembled so strikingly as in the churchyard of the Innocents at Paris. There the medieval soul, fond of a religious shudder, could take its fill of the horrible. Above all other saints, the remembrance of the saints of that spot, and of their bloody and pitiful martyrdom, was fitted to awake the crude compassion which was dear to the epoch. The fifteenth century honoured the Holy Innocents with special veneration. Louis XI presented to the church "a whole Innocent," encased in a crystal shrine. The cemetery was preferred to every other place of burial. A bishop of Paris had a little of the earth of the churchyard of the Innocents put into his grave, as he could not be laid there. The poor and the rich were interred without distinction. They did not rest there long, for the cemetery was used so much, twenty parishes having a right of burial there, that it was necessary, in order to make room, to dig up the bones and sell the tombstones after a very short time. It was believed that in this earth a human body was decomposed to the bone in nine days. Skulls and bones were heaped up in charnel-houses along the cloisters enclosing the ground on three sides, and lay there open to the eye by thousands, preaching to all the lesson of equality. The noble Boucicaut, among others, had contributed to the construction of these "fine charnel-houses." Under the cloisters the death-dance exhibited its

¹ Death makes him shudder and turn pale, The nose to curve, the veins to swell, The neck to inflate, the flesh to soften, Joints and tendons to grow and swell.

² O female body, which is so soft, Smooth, suave, precious, Do these evils await you? Yes, or you must go to heaven quite alive.

images and its stanzas. No place was better suited to the simian figure of grinning death, dragging along pope and emperor, monk and fool. The duke of Berry, who wished to be buried there, had the history of the three dead and the three living men carved at the portal of the church. A century later, this exhibition of funeral symbols was completed by a large statue of Death, now in the Louvre, and the only remnant of it all.

Such was the place which the Parisians of the fifteenth century frequented as a sort of lugubrious counterpart of the Palais Royal of 1789. Day after day, crowds of people walked under the cloisters, looking at the figures and reading the simple verses, which reminded them of the approaching end. In spite of the incessant burials and exhumations going on there, it was a public lounge and a rendezvous. Shops were established before the charnel-houses and prostitutes strolled under the cloisters. A female recluse was immured on one of the sides of the church. Friars came to preach and processions were drawn up there. A procession of children only (12,500 strong, thinks the Burgher of Paris) assembled there, with tapers in their hands, to carry an Innocent to Notre Dame and back to the churchyard. Even feasts were given there. To such an extent had the horrible become familiar.

X The desire to invent a visible image of all that appertained to death entailed the neglecting of all those aspects of it which were not suited to direct representation. Thus the cruder conceptions of death, and these only, impressed themselves continually on the minds. The macabre vision does not represent the emotions of tenderness or of consolation. The elegiac note is wanting altogether. At bottom the macabre sentiment is self-seeking and earthly. It is hardly the absence of the departed dear ones that is deplored; it is the fear of one's own death, and this only seen as the worst of evils. Neither the conception of death the consoler, nor that of rest long wished for, of the end of suffering, of the task performed or interrupted, have a share in the funeral sentiment of that epoch. The soul of the Middle Ages did not know the "divine depth of sorrow." Or, rather, it knew it only in connection with the Passion of Christ.)

In all these sombre lamentations about death the accents of true tenderness are extremely rare. They could, however, hardly be wanting in relation to the death of children. And, indeed, Martial d'Auvergne, in his death-dance of women, makes the little girl, when led away by death, say to her mother: "Take good care of my doll, my knuckle-bones and my fine dress." But this touching note is only heard exceptionally. The literature of the epoch knew child-life so little! When Antoine de la Salle, in *Le Reconfort de Madame du Fresne*, wishes to console a mother for the death of her twelve-years-old son, he can think of nothing better than citing a still more cruel loss: the heart-rending case of a boy given as a hostage and put to death. To overcome grief, the only advice he can offer is to abstain from all earthly attachments. A doctrinaire and dry consolation! La Salle, however, adds a second short story. It is a version of the popular tale of the dead child, who came back to beg its mother to weep no more, that its shroud might dry. And here suddenly from this simple story—not of his own invention—there arises a poetical tenderness and beneficent wisdom, which we look for in vain in the thousands of voices repeating in various tones the awful *memento mori*. Folk-tale and folk-song, no doubt, in these ages preserved many sentiments which higher literature hardly knew.

The dominant thought, as expressed in the literature, both ecclesiastical and lay, of that period, hardly knew anything with regard to death but these two extremes: lamentation about the briefness of all earthly glory, and jubilation over the salvation of the soul. All that lay between—pity, resignation, longing, consolation—remained unexpressed and was, so to say, absorbed by the too much accentuated and too vivid representation of Death hideous and threatening. Living emotion stiffens amid the abused imagery of skeletons and worms.