CHAPTER THREE
THE MACABRE

The culture of the macabre which arose in late-medieval, and especially northern, Europe is one of the oddest and most compelling phenomena in the history of contemporary representation. For cultural historians like Johan Huizinga, the macabre stood as a metaphor of change in an entire culture: the imagery of death and decay represented a deeper decline, the 'waning of the Middle Ages', set against the healthy optimism, scepticism, egotism and fundamental modernity of the Italian Renaissance, as presented (and created) by Jacob Burckhardt in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). The influence of these broad, nineteenth-century canvasses is profound, even unshakable, and the antinomies which they have constructed between one culture and another, between fascinating decadence and authoritative, and authoritarian, rebirth, are useful precisely because they can be annexed in a number of competing ways. In this chapter, I will address only in passing the most obvious contrast between the culture of the north and that of Italy especially: that fifteenth-century Italy, unlike the north, appears not to have deployed the representation of the macabre with anything like the allegorical force, the universal force, with which it was used north of the Alps. Here I will suggest that the reason for this may lie not so much in alternative cultural visions, but rather in somewhat older social and representational practices; and to understand them we must return first to religion.

The Christian notion of the body as a sign is deeply implicated in the emergence of the macabre. Christianity, as we have seen, was the first exclusive universal religion to mark out the body as an object of veneration, both in its central sign, the Crucifixion, and in its pantheon of witnesses, the saints. The Christian holy body is as fragrant and as incorrupt as Paradise: 'Thou wilt not suffer thy Holy One to see corruption' (Psalm 16). Though body and soul were in some sense incommensurate (the soul was in a sense a body, and to many commentators represented the form of the body), the body became a central means by which late-medieval religion articulated many of its most important ideas: late-medieval religion is, paradoxically, at once deeply interiorized, immaterial and transcendant, and yet also somatic, body-centred and material, in its imagery.

In this respect the art of the Latin West was changing in the Middle Ages. By the Carolingian period a line of demarcation had opened up between the Western cult of relics, centred principally upon the cults of Christian martyrs, and the Eastern Church's emphasis on images. In the Greek Church, images could

function in the same way as the Western relic: they were a means of directly accessing the holy in Paradise, and like relics were potential objects of pilgrimage. The icons of the Greek Church were often regarded as not having been made by human hands, but by angels: like the holy body, they were not man's works, but represented the *opus Dei*. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, several factors were working to draw together these two separate attitudes to bodies and images. Among the most important of these were the spread of new images, usually icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary associated with liturgical and meditative practices, from the Greek Church to the West; and after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 by Western crusaders, the spread of increasingly large numbers of new relics into Latin hands. Some of these were important because they represented not the local relics of the venerated saints, but rather the universal relics of Christ and the Virgin Mary, like the Crown of Thorns or the True Cross. Western monasticism and new devotional practices also encouraged a new stress, from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, on the humanity of Christ and His mother, and especially upon the intercessory role of Mary.

The product of this was in effect a synthesis of the relic and the image into the 'image-relic'. The power of the image-relic was based upon its authenticity in recording the bodily likenesses of Christ or Mary (for example the Veronica, or image of the Holy Face, to be found in Rome but widely copied) and also upon its role in obtaining intercession through the indulgencing of images of this type, a process which had begun by the early thirteenth century. The image-relic arose as an important and complex instrument in the service of the doctrine of Purgatory. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, this trend was exemplified by the absolutely central role that visualizing Christ's own body played in religious experience. As we have seen (p. 14), the saints, as witnesses to the power of the Christian body and the doctrine of the Resurrection, were routinely fragmented and scattered; the synecdochal relationship, where part of the body stood for the whole, ensured that the saints were universally present through the traces of their earthly form. To gain access to them the pilgrim had to travel to the relic site. Christ's body, though gloriously resurrected, could be submitted to this same process of fragmentation and contemplation, first ritually (at Mass) and then imaginatively. Here of course there were complexities. So-called contact relics that had touched His body – especially the Crown, Nails, Cross-wood and Spear of the Passion – were unproblematical except in their multiplication. Actual bodily relics like the Holy Blood and Foreskin were however problematical; if the resurrection of Christ was perfect, why had these too not ascended? Christ's own bodily history, a history of redemptive suffering, offered up the paradox that, as traces of His physical remains served to substantiate and authorize the Christian imagination, and literally to flesh out the Gospel text, so those relics also threatened central doctrinal tenets.

For this reason the sphere of representation, rather than actual physical evidence, offered a vital arena of imaginative liberation. Images could promote a mobility of mind in the contemplation of Christ's body which created no awkward conflicts of actual evidence. His body could be surreally deconstituted and reconstituted at will. Late-medieval, Passion-derived images like the *Arma Christi* (PL. VI) and the Man of Sorrows are for this reason free-floating syntheses, answering less to specific texts, or even liturgical practices (though they have ritual relevance), than to a kind of internalized pilgrimage of the mind. Where pilgrims had previously to travel to the relic, the image-relic now travelled to them; and so religious experience could withdraw from the world. Images of this type were affective, even magical, in import. Christ's body is mentally fragmented in illustrations which scrambled the historically sanctioned body and reprojected it in the form of small, and individually truthful, foci of devotion (PL. VII), which serve, as it were, to fill the imaginative gaps left by texts. The *Arma Christi*, popular in the fifteenth century, thus represent the individual motifs of Christ's Passion – the Nails, Crown of Thorns, Spear and so on, all technically relics – as well as close-up images of His wounds. Late-medieval images which answer to the textual omissions in the main readings of Christianity possess their own logic, the logic of the reordered Passion narratives of Books of Hours, or the shuffling-about of butchered images of Christ's body, his wounds and attributes of suffering in the *Arma Christi*; and it is part of their logic that they should serve to reorder religious experience itself. For this reason their presence as illuminations in devotional manuscripts or Books of Hours was fundamental to late-medieval spirituality. The private devotion acted as a microcosm of the older and larger order of pilgrimage.

I shall suggest that this deconstructive trait in attitudes to the body, based upon the cult of relics and upon the body of Christ Himself, is fundamental to the spirit of the macabre. For as Christ's body was broken up and reconstructed imaginatively, as it was subjected to critical rethinking, so too it was fetishized: it witnessed the transference of religious responses to isolated parts of the body, which had previously been presented intact in the conventional narrative iconography of the life of Christ which viewed him as a whole person. The facts and products of Christ's death were detached from the circumstances of His death. And with this fetishizing of what Lacan calls the *corps morcelé* came anxiety. Christianity, though premised upon a teleological notion of salvation and time, is fundamentally a religion of cyclical repetition and recollection; the religious year is divided according to this cycle, and at the centre of religious worship lay the regular commemoration, at Mass, of Christ's sacrifice and, in the temporal calendar of the year, of the lives of the saints. Within this broad ritualized time-frame developed the smaller, more interiorized cycles of repetition of private devotion: the saying of the liturgical Hours, and the repetition of prayers to gain inter-

cession for all and sundry. This compulsion to repeat is a hallmark of what has been described as the late-medieval obsession with 'quantitative piety': that actions are marked by their quantity as much as by their quality. The inflationary economy of Purgatorial indulgence was based upon this quantitative attitude to good work. But obsessive repetition is also a feature of neurosis; it marks an inability, at the most profound level, to assimilate experience. And there is something neurotic in the fetishizing scrutiny of Christ's body in late-medieval images; the history of Passion painting in this period is partly one of sophisticated, obsessive-compulsive voyeurism.

Repetition, trauma and voyeurism are central features of macabre images, and, like devotional art, they are involved also in the creation of normative responses. Images are a way of constituting experience: they can help to codify, if not determine, religious gestures of prayer and response, and they can validate whole spheres of conduct. Mystical imagery in literary form is frequently responsive to prior artistic image-making of a somatic type. Late-medieval texts are often marked by fantasies of incorporation and of wholeness; hence the force of St Francis' reception of the stigmata, the bodily impress of those things which ordinary Christians could only assimilate visually, if at all. By the same token, normative late-medieval religion was one centred upon quantifiable, and mnemonically valuable, categories of doctrine and devotion. The will of John of Gaunt of 1399 stated that around the hearse at his funeral should be candles symbolizing the Ten Commandments, the Seven Works of Mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins and, predictably, the Five Wounds of Christ.

The Macabre, the Black Death and Cultural 'Causation'

The macabre, then, marks the body as a site of anxiety quite as much as the inhibitions about bodily division for the purposes of burial discussed in the first chapter. But the macabre is different in that it offered a means, a vehicle, by which otherwise inarticulate ideas could be expressed. Its nature was essentially allegorical; it was another, better way of saying things. The macabre arose in a period when the symbolism and transformation of the body, especially the redemptive body of Christ, marked a positive means to salvation; but the macabre offered a negative mirror image to this symbolism of transformation. In it, the art of death became a new form of disclosure.

Conventionally speaking, there have been two routes to explaining this new allegorical understanding of death as a means of organizing belief. We can describe these as 'exogenous' and 'endogenous' routes, the first laying stress upon causes external to the culture of late-medieval society, the second stressing causes internal to that culture.

The most influential exogenous theory holds that the macabre was reinforced

by late-medieval demographic disaster, most especially the Black Death of 1347–51 (the dates vary according to region) and subsequent recurrences of the plague. The most concerted effort to trace the direct cultural impact of the Black Death – an unpredictable and exterior 'cause' – is represented by Millard Meiss's study *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, published in 1951. In essence, Meiss argued that the impact of the plague upon Italian civic and artistic life marked a watershed. He was able to argue this because Italian city life of the period is relatively well documented, and because it produced, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a high literary validation of the idea that the plague was in some sense a cultural 'event'; that its devastating effects served to force out otherwise concealed ways of thinking. The plague, borne by fleas on rats, had entered the Mediterranean, and especially Sicily and Italy, in around 1347, and spread thence to infect much of north-west Europe. Though statistics vary, there is agreement that the plague at its most intense carried off between one- and two-thirds of the population in the areas affected. Worse, it recurred, in 1361, 1363, 1369 and 1374, and periodically thereafter. According to Giovanni Villani, half the population of Florence died in the summer of 1348. Florence, according to Boccaccio, was a giant sepulchre: at the start of the Decameron he notes '. . . they dug for each graveyard a huge trench, in which they laid the corpses as they arrived by hundreds at a time'. This was a disaster of biblical proportions, a punishment of an entire culture as effective as the chastizement of the world of Babel by the Flood. Images of the period depict the visitation of the plague in Apocalyptic terms, as a shower of malevolent, retributive darts from Heaven. Few literary responses measure up to Boccaccio's own, though even the English *Piers Plowman* said that 'these pestilences were for pure sin'.

The practical consequences of the plague were marked: mass population falls led to a drop in agricultural prices, to a rapid rise in wages, and to an unprecedented redistribution of wealth. Contemporary shifts and realignments in Italian urban oligarchies were noted with disapproval by Matteo Villani. Art production, like any industrial output, suffered a clear and obvious breach in continuity, with long-established masters like the Sienese Lorenzetti brothers almost certainly perishing in the main outbreak of the plague in the late 1340s. But to Meiss, Italian art itself changed after, and as a result of, the plague, and changed essentially rather than circumstantially. The post-plague malaise brought with it adjustments in the visual language of Florentine and Sienese painting: styles became perceptibly more abstract, even old-fashioned, in conscious reaction to the forces of innovation of the first half of the fourteenth century; images, too, took on an atavistic guise, moving away from the humane values of earlier fourteenth-century religious imagery towards subject-matter that was more austere, and which appeared to distance God from the world. Post-plague Italian art was one of awestruck transcendentalism, as represented in Florence by Orcagna's

formidable Strozzi altarpiece (1357), with its equally forbidding representations of Dominican intellectualism and the Godhead.

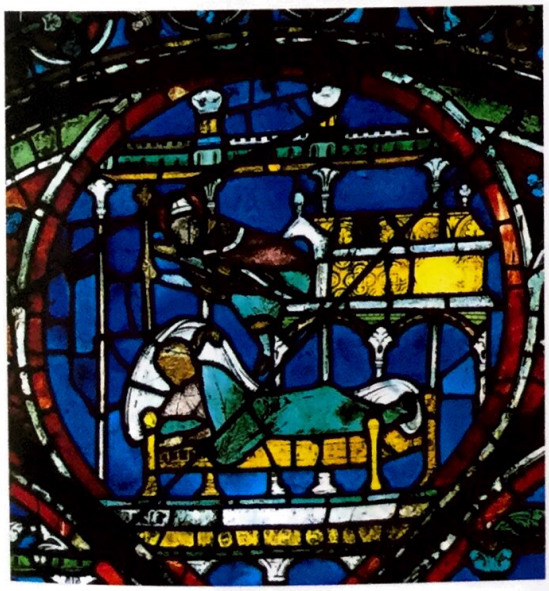
Meiss's view is not altogether isolated, since the literature on death and the macabre in the late Middle Ages regularly, even habitually, makes play with the Black Death as the single most striking event of a period frought with anxieties of many types, social, religious, economic and political. But for all its coherence, Meiss's view, as the most clearly-articulated and ambitious statement of its type, is not without its critics. Debate centres upon the exact extent of Black Death mortality and, more pertinently for representation, upon the vexing issues of chronology and causation. It has been pointed out that, as with the macabre, the ethos of crisis of the fourteenth century was established before, and not as a result of, the plague, and that some of the images which Meiss adduced as evidence for the impact of post-plague thinking, like the tremendous images in the Camposanto at Pisa depicting the Triumph of Death and the Last Judgement, may actually have been painted before 1347. Nor did Meiss demonstrate that specifically macabre genres of representation actually stemmed from this phase of crisis, though this was not really his aim; in fact his post-plague transcendentalism is in some ways antithetical to the bodily imagery of the macabre. As Henk van Os has suggested, Meiss may in fact have been engaging upon a project which can only be understood by placing Meiss himself in context. Meiss was a Jewish scholar writing in the immediate aftermath of another world disaster, the Second World War and the Holocaust. The analogy between the mid-fourteenth and mid-twentieth century situations was not lost on him: the accounts by Villani and Boccaccio of mass extinction and burial were, according to Meiss, 'sights not unfamiliar to modern eyes'. In short, Meiss's response was at a related level to Boccaccio's; but whereas for Boccaccio the plague was a pretext for the recitation of narratives of sin and guilt in medieval society, for Meiss the plague was a pretext for art history itself. Both were formulating narratives of cultural alienation in the wake of disaster; and, as van Os notes, Meiss's vision of post-plague art as one of transcendental rethinking bears as much relationship to the crisis of Abstract Expressionism in the aftermath of the Second World War, as it does to the actualities of later fourteenth-century Italian painting. Both were 'cultural events' which spiritualized art as a result of exogenous shocks to the system.

For van Os, the changes which Meiss recognized were in part a product of the plague, but their character was circumstantial and not essential: art, and especially painting, looked different because its production was reassumed by new circles of painters working for new patrons within a context of wealth distribution. Artistic conservatism was, in other words, the product of a profoundly novel set of social circumstances rather than cultural reconditioning. Social studies of Siena have shown that though one-half of the population died in the Black Death, the city saw a rapid recovery of its financial and administrative

I *Right*
Hieronymus Bosch, Death of a Miser, *c.*1510. Compare illustration on p. 41 (right). As with the Three Living and the Three Dead (compare PL. VIII), the image concerns a moment of moral hesitation.



II *Below*
St Thomas of Canterbury emerges from his raised shrine at Canterbury in a vision to one of his hagiographers, as depicted on a stained-glass window placed near the saint's real shrine around 1200. Images like this could stand as evidence for the power of saints to intervene beneficially in the affairs of the living; visions formed a legitimate part of the dossier of sanctity. Compare illustration on p. 79.





III *Above*
Requiem Mass (left) and Souls in Purgatory inside the 'D' of *Dilexi* (right), from a Dutch Book of Hours, *c.*1435–40.



IV *Left*
The *Commendatio animae*, from the Office of the Dead in the early 15th-century French Rohan Hours.



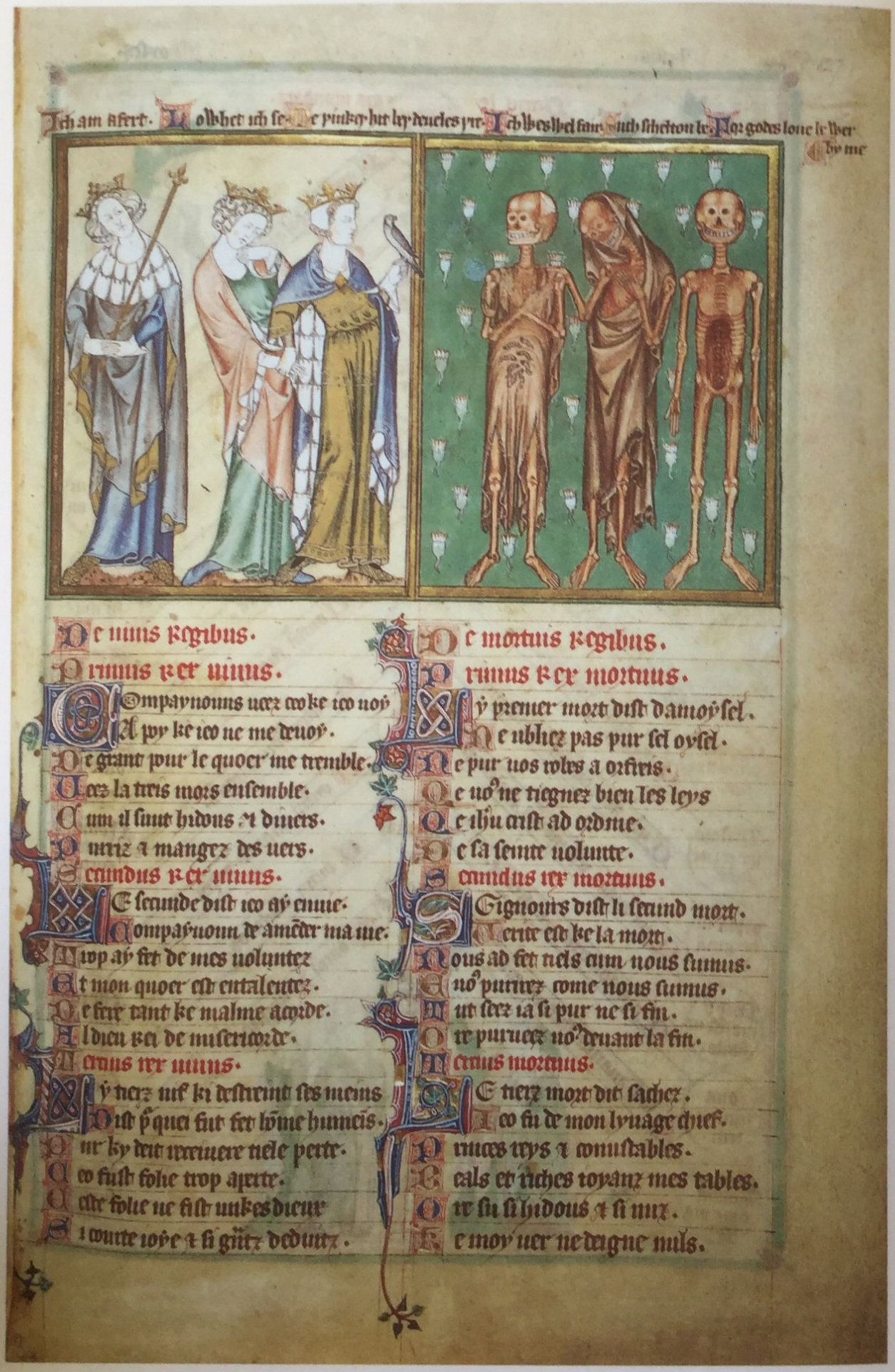
V The service of burial with border vignettes showing, clockwise from top left, death, enshrouding, coffining, the vigil and the procession to the churchyard. Note that the corpse is not buried in the coffin and is asperged by the priest in its shroud. The building at the back of the procession vignette is probably a charnel-house. From a French Book of Hours, *c.*1470.



VI *Arma Christi* from the English Bohun Psalter Hours, *c.*1380.



VII The radiant Five Wounds of Christ are surrealistically represented in this image on the outside of a Flemish diptych of 1523 made for a Carthusian abbot, Willem van Bibaut. Note the amputee-like section across the ankles.



VIII The legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, *c.*1310.

IX *Right*
Hell's jaws locked, from the mid-12th-century Winchester Psalter.



X *Below*
Two historiated letter Bs for parallel texts of Psalm 1, from the 12th-century Winchester Bible. The first shows David releasing a lamb from the jaws of a lion, the second Christ casting out demons and delivering souls at the Harrowing of Hell.





XI Death, bearing a dart and rising from a pink marble tomb, appears to mimic the Man of Sorrows (compare the centre of the illustration on p. 161), from the Office of the Dead in the *Hours of Anne of France*, c.1470, illustrated by Jean Colombe.



The Triumph of Death, Camposanto, Pisa. Painted in the 1340s, this celebrated image shows (to the left) the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead and (to the right) the Triumph of Death, bearing a scythe.

structures, and the rise in effect of a class of *nouveau riche* patrons whose taste and ideals were now the primary considerations in the formation of art. What is at issue, then, is not the fact of change, but rather the nature of its causality. It is extremely hard to believe that the recurrent character of the plague and the generally unfavourable effects of the prevalence of disease in late-medieval societies did not have consequences, and I have already adduced factors of this type in considering the commodification of children in memorial art from the fourteenth century on. But the plague was a pan-European event, and the obvious riposte to theories which adduce it as the single most important factor conditioning culture of the period, is to ask why the plague should not therefore have had pan-European consequences. No-one has replicated Meiss's findings for other areas of mid-fourteenth-century European art, and the reason for this is that, at heart, his account offers no theory of cultural causation itself: why, and whether, people respond at all to exogenous events. To put it another way: the impact of exogenous shocks to a culture or an economy is linked inexorably to endogenous response – cultures respond in certain ways to events because they are already predisposed to do so.

To understand this, we need to consider briefly the conventional ways of arguing about the macabre which do not lay special emphasis on an external

shock like the Black Death, before we turn to look at macabre representations themselves. In doing this we must remain aware of the cultural and ideological diversity of the Middle Ages: responses to death, especially in the later Middle Ages, were more various than simple models of cultural explanation can admit. Here two, related strands of thought seem especially important. The first connects the macabre to such ideas as period psychology, secular individualism and hedonism, and owes its nature to ideas about history developed by German Romanticism. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), Huizinga stated that

> 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 . . . The medieval soul demands the concrete embodiment of the perishable: that of the putrefying corpse.

Huizinga's cultural history is shaped by a biological metaphor, that of birth and death: '. . . in history, as in nature, birth and death are equally balanced'. Thus the late Middle Ages were a 'perfecting and concluding of the old' in the process of 'expiring'. To Huizinga, this waning involved a culture of extremes, of violence, of sophistication, of love of life and fear of death, and of elaborate refinement in all spheres of human conduct: late-medieval northern European culture was one of anxiety. At no point does Huizinga trace this stance to the impact of the Black Death. It had a character, a psychology even, but no specific exogenous cause. Its character was rather that of a collective cultural instinct, contrasting to the positive life-affirming values of the Italian Renaissance. We might recall that in 1920 Freud had published one of the most fundamental texts on death, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which asserted that organisms have a dualistic instinctual drive both to death and to life, and that (echoing Schopenhauer) death is the fundamental aim of life. Huizinga's account provides a generalized cultural commentary on this split between the lust for life and for death, *Eros* and *Thanatos*. To Huizinga, the culture of the fifteenth century in the north was as valid as that of Renaissance Italy, but its validity and appeal was that of decadence, of introspection and ingrowth; this was the true age of chivalry and of courtly love, of hierarchy and high formality, and of deadly conservatism. But it was also an age of fear, and the macabre was the product of a generalized sensibility. It was 'a great cultural idea'. At its most profound level, so the argument runs, the fifteenth century was, like the nineteenth century, an age of romanticism and heightened feeling, an age of individualism, and of a romantic sense of loss, apparent in the greatest French poetry of the period by Deschamps and Villon.

So influential is this metaphorical reading of the times, which stresses especially individual subjectivism at the expense of collective representation, that we hear an echo of it in Philippe Ariès. As I suggested earlier in this book, Ariès' model of understanding death is centred upon the relationship of the individual to the collective; the individual in the course of the Middle Ages emerges from,

and defines himself in relation to, the collective, and it is this emergence which conditions the new subjectivism of late-medieval death culture and religion. To Ariès, 'Huizinga clearly understood the relationship between the passionate love of life and the images of death ... "the sense of disillusionment and discouragement" ' at the heart of the macabre. For Ariès, like Tenenti, the macabre was a matter of period psychology, but one devoted, paradoxically, to hedonism, to what Nietzsche called the 'pessimism of strength.' To Ariès, late-medieval culture is inseparable from individualism, and hence from the nascent modernity that Burckhardt had attributed to Renaissance man: 'Man was conscious of himself ... only through some general category.' Ariès was more inclined to see this as a common attribute of northern as well as Italian fifteenth-century life. With the rise of the individual came a renewed sense of the individual in history, of the individual in life; and with that realization came its correlate, the sense of loss, of failure in death. Death becomes 'an awareness and desperate love of this life. The art of the macabre can only be understood as the final phase in the relationship between death and individualism, a gradual process that began in the twelfth century and that arrived in the fifteenth century at a summit never to be reached again.' According to this view, changes in religious and moral thinking were profoundly connected to desire.

Ariès' view is one congenial to a late twentieth-century perspective, in which an essentially hedonistic and death-denying culture is linked inextricably to the culture of the video nasty. And of course its presumption about the nature of individuality and the collective is problematic: does the 'rise of the individual' construct an individualistic culture, or does the emergence of this culture construct the idea of the individual? This issue (perhaps rendered most clear in the idea of the 'sinner' as a figure of the individual seeking salvation) brings us to the second line of argument.

The second important approach to the issue of the macabre sees it as a manifestation of a highly-developed guilt culture, within which the individual moved and responded, and within which hedonism was framed, but also criticized. This viewpoint was based upon the conventional Christian (and ultimately Platonic) reading of the body as a sign which expresses spirituality. In keeping with the thesis that the macabre is related to secular individualism, the proponents of guilt culture, most notably Delumeau, also take the long view: just as the twelfth century saw a return to the notion of the biography as the means whereby the individual was constructed, so it saw the fruition, in a culture of fear, of an ultimately monastic notion of Christian–moral penitential thinking. These traits were in place long before the demographic shifts of the fourteenth century. And like individualism, their cultural origins were pre-Christian. Roman moralists had developed the notion of a classless afterlife, the democratic Hades of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* and of an inscription on a mosaic at Pompeii: *Mors omnia*

aequat (Death levels all). The theme of the passage into oblivion of the mighty, *Ubi sunt?* (Where are they now?), originated in Greek poetry. Horace's Odes contain the famous phrase, *Pallido Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas, regumque turris* (Pale death boots the enpubbed peasant as much as the entowered monarch). Status was a matter for men and not the gods.

The Middle Ages inherited and redeployed these versatile formulations in its art and literature, submitting ancient themes to Christian ethical scrutiny. The theme of the transience of the world was of course deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition; it is to Ecclesiasticus 10 that we turn for the idea that today's king is tomorrow's corpse: 'For when a man dies he shall inherit creeping things, beasts and worms.' The thirteenth-century English jurist Bracton said that God was no respecter of persons. But it was especially the heirs of Christian Platonic thinking, the Cistercians, and later the Franciscans, who developed this penitential mode of thinking to its fullest. By the twelfth century monasticism, under the influence of thinkers like St Augustine, had developed a powerful and conventional model of contempt for the world, and withdrawal from it into the angelic life: as we noted earlier (p. 58), monks were a form of living dead. This was also a period which saw a renewed interest in classical texts like those of Horace whose rhetoric of death was congenial to Christian penitential thinking. St Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) marks one of the earliest medieval usages of the theme, 'What I am, they were, and what they are, I will be', common on macabre tombs in the fifteenth century, and derived from Roman funerary epitaphs. Jacopone da Todi (d. 1306), the Franciscan author of the *Dies Irae*, left us a poem called 'On the contemplation of death and the grave to counter pride'. Mendicant preaching of the fourteenth century encapsulates for us the paradox of penitential thought: that it is in the world, but against it, and that the individual is subjected to the inevitability of the larger, and ineluctable, order of mortality. The same paradox is apparent in contemporary attitudes to the body, for it was precisely this Christian Platonic tradition of asceticism, which ordinarily we would associate with denial of the body, that most keenly promoted somatic imagery as a common-sense form of religious understanding.

The step from this ascetic and moralizing viewpoint to the highly cultivated lay self-abnegation found in the poetry of Deschamps, Chastellain and Villon was a small one. Hatred of the body, and of the fleeting character of worldy values, is apparent in Francois Villon's *Testament*:

> Where is the wise Heloïse
> The queen who was white as a lily
> Who sang with the voice of a siren
> Where are the snows of yesteryear?

The passage of this value system from the enclosed world of monasticism to the lay world marks what Delumeau calls 'culpabilization': the spread of a coherent

and aesthetically sophisticated culture of guilt. The development of the *Ars moriendi*, which we reviewed in the first chapter, is an example of this lay appropriation of older penitential systems of thought. So too was the construction of the sinner as a literary type. Forms of ritual self-mortification were cultivated at various social levels. As we saw earlier, St Louis had himself laid out on ashes at his death in 1270: ashes are a mark of the penitent and are associated with the Lenten phrase, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Genesis 3:19), and the sentiment, 'They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them' (Job 21:26). Cardinal Philip Repingdon (d. 1424) requested that he should be buried naked in a shroud and on the darker northern side of a church; Philippe de Mézières (d. 1405) asked to have an iron chain placed around his neck at the hour of his death, and that he should be dragged by his feet naked into church, tied by ropes to a plank, and then thrown like carrion into a grave. Procedures of this type were no more than the inversion of those norms of high artifice and cultivated ritualism which, for Huizinga, marked the demise of the Middle Ages; a masochistic reversed decorum by which courtly norms of behaviour could be exposed in all their elegant vacuity.

Secular individualism and guilt culture therefore represent two sides of the same coin. But located within guilt culture especially was something of relevance to the macabre: a sense of irony, and with it, wit. The textual and visual culture of the macabre is one of telling antithesis, of structural opposition: it is a culture of refined bathos, of self-reproach. Thus, the Christian soul reproaches its body in the fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine* of the Cistercian Guillaume de Diguileville. A northern English monk, perhaps a Carthusian, composed the fifteenth-century *Disputacione betwyx the Body and Wormes*. In Villon's *Debat du couer et du corps*, the soul is presented as the human conscience, the body as a kind of carnivalesque fool, on the model of the dialogue of King Solomon and the jester Marculph. Ironic and self-reflective mechanisms of this type are not provoked externally; they are fundamental to the ways a culture thinks, and to the way it allegorizes meaning. And they are fundamental to the shaping of moral and spiritual self-reflection between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.

What is so curious, then, is that despite the structural similarities between these forms and the art of the macabre, that art should have been so postponed. In his account of the guilt culture, Delumeau very fairly observes that the central period of macabre art was no more than a parenthesis in the time-scale of European thought, lasting no more than about three hundred years from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. This fact alone may have prompted the belief that its character was owed to a specific exogenous cause, like the Black Death. Here I shall suggest instead that this periodicity of the macabre – which anyway precedes in important respects the Black Death – can only be understood by seeing it as an internal development of medieval visual culture itself; that to

understand macabre images we must see them not just as by-products of individualism or guilt, but as constitutive representations which enjoyed their own cultural space, autonomy, impact and process of development. And to do this we must turn to their most characteristic forms.

Encountering the Macabre: The Three Living and the Three Dead

The legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead is essentially that of three young men who went down to the woods yesterday and got a big surprise: while out in their finery, hunting and hawking, either mounted or on foot, these three lads, gaily displaying by their splendour the signs of their social station, meet three cadavers in various stages of decomposition. A dialogue ensues in which the living express mortification, while the mortified admonish them to improve their ways, and to ponder the transience and essential baseness of the human condition. This tableau encapsulates for us some of the most important structural features of the macabre image: such images are 'split', employing dialogic interchanges between two partners or two social or moral types, and representing such dialogue by means of the doubled self as 'Other'. They are thus encounters. They also entail reversals or ambiguities of time – the dead illustrate death as a state beyond human experience by exhibiting the by-products of death, namely the human embodiment of decay, the effect illustrating the cause of the moral predicament. And they also entail decisive reversals of initiative – the hunting motif is important, because it is the living hunters who are now brought to bay by death, the hunter of all men, a theme apparent in many renditions of death as an equestrian cadaver after its mortal prey. This theme of the hunt is made explicit in a border accompanying a deathbed scene in the Grimani Breviary.

The legend also presents us with the Christian dilemma of choice and future contingency: in pondering the collapse of our mortal station, we are invited to mend our ways by means of a penitential injunction familiar from Christ's repeated admonition to sin no more. What is interesting here is partly the ambivalence of these figures, these revenants (who are they?), but also the ambivalence of the subject. At first it looks simply like a macabre tableau which plays on the themes of shock, fascination, self-realization and so on. But, more deeply, the subject, through its liminal and uncanny nature, concerns a moment of intellectual hesitation: the quick are provoked to think both about the consequence of death for the vanity of the self – which is in a sense the 'false' outcome of death, since it concerns the end of that which does not matter anyway – but also of the true end of the contemplation of death, namely the amending of life. Though uncanny, the image has a certain canniness.

In visual form the subject is a demotic one, traceable in many parish church wall paintings, and popular as a high-class representation in the characteristic genres of illuminated book of the late-medieval period, the Psalter, Book of Hours and so on: the image is one aimed at and conceived for laypeople whose initiative in sponsoring devotional and moralizing images in the period was burgeoning. But as with many such themes the initial occurrences were (as far as we know) literary. The roots of the legend may lie in the tale of Barlaam and Josephat, a Greco-Christian novel distantly related to the story of Buddha, translated into Provençal in the thirteenth century and installed thereafter in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. A hermit, Barlaam, told the young man Josephat a parable about the emptiness of the world: a man fleeing from a unicorn (signifying death) fell down a precipice (the world) and tried to rescue himself by clinging onto a tree (life); but when he looked down he saw two mice gnawing away at the tree. However, he was distracted by honey (the illusory pleasure of the world) dripping from the tree's branches, and forgot the threat. Josephat's predicament is illustrated on the retrospective sculpted tomb of Adelais de Champagne, of *c.*1260, at Saint-Jean at Joigny. This shows that legends cognate with the Three Living and the Three Dead were associated with French funerary art by the later thirteenth century.

Geographically the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead was fairly widespread in the thirteenth century, known in the Mediterranean and especially in Italy, where it appears to have been the only significant theme of the macabre, and where it often includes a representation of a hermit. Of the sixty-odd versions of the tale, the best known were produced in France and England, with French poems such as that by Baudouin de Condé appearing first; and by about 1300 the subject seems to have attained popularity as a pictorial conceit. In 1302–3, Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, purchased two panels, some kind of diptych, of the scene of the Three Living and the Three Dead in London for 40s. 6d., and it is in exactly this form, as a kind of diptych, that the subject appears amongst the remarkable display of Gospel narrative pictures, theologically inspired didactic diagrams and quasi-autonomous genre images in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (PL. VIII), died 1344.

The devotional context of Robert's Psalter reminds us of the eremitical slant of the story itself. Robert had strong Franciscan leanings, and many of the subjects in those parts of his Psalter executed *c.*1310 exemplify a specifically Mendicant spirituality. The de Lisle Psalter illustration marks one of those evocative moments when a fashionably French-looking Gothic image breaks out into the English vernacular: the Three Living exclaim 'I am afraid', 'Lo, what I see' and 'Methinks these be devils three', while the Dead reply 'I was well fair', 'Such shall you be' and 'For God's love beware by me'. The dialogue then continues in French, in an abridged version of the poem *Le dit des trois morts et trois vifs.*

The First Living King:

Friends, look what I see:
Unless I have gone quite mad
My heart shakes with great fear:
See there three shades together,
How ugly and strange they are
Rotten and worm-eaten.

The First Dead King:

The first shade said: Lord,
Do not forget because of this bird
Nor for your bejewelled robes,
That you are not obeying well the laws
That Jesus Christ has commanded
By his holy will.

The Second Living King:

The second said: I desire,
Friend, to amend my life:
I have over-indulged my whims
And my heart is eager
To do, as much as my soul submits
To God the King of Pity.

The Second Dead King:

Gentlemen, said the second shade,
The truth is that death
Had made us such as we are
And you will rot as we are now;
Until now you were so pure and perfect
However you will rot before the end.

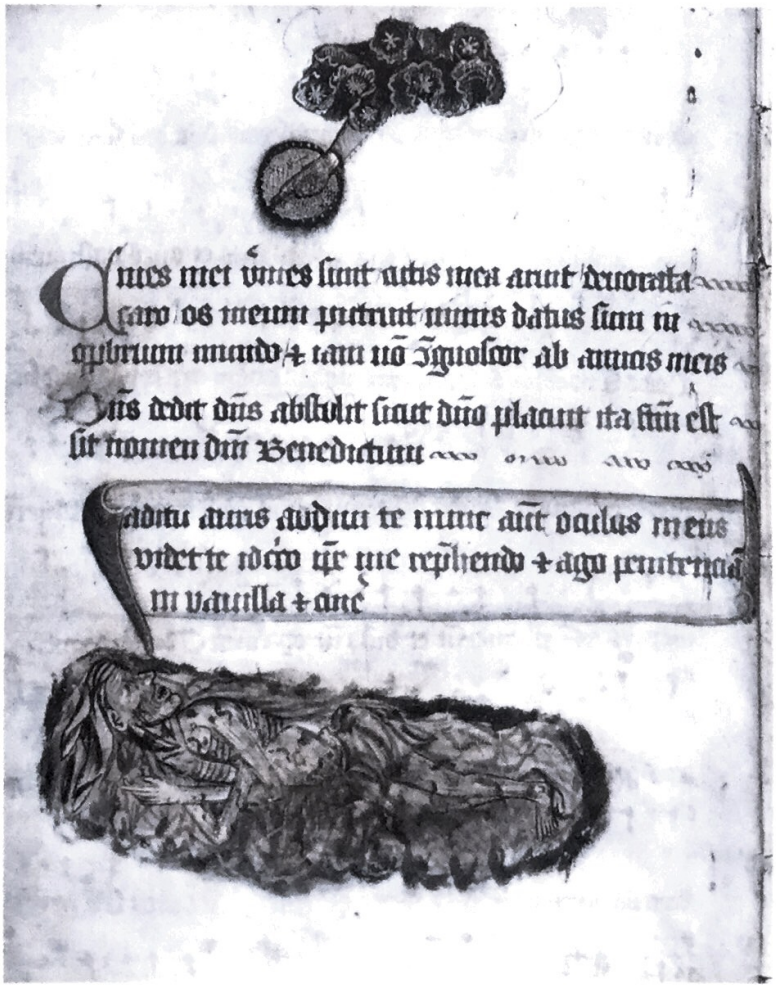
The Third Living King:

The third living, who wrings his hands,
Said, why was man made so lowly
That he must receive such an end;
This was too evident a folly.
God would never perpetrate this madness
So brief a joy and such great pleasures.

The Third Dead King:

The third shade says: know
That I was head of my line;
Princes, kings and nobles
Royal and rich, rejoicing in my wealth;
But now I am so hideous and bare
That even the worms disdain me.

What of course is so telling in the language and construction of image is the way it charts response. Here we have three fay and resourceless products of youth culture – prototypes of Dorian Gray – exposed to the naked truth of time. In this sense the representation is the outcome of numerous strands of development which characterize late-medieval religious art as a whole, namely that it itself depicts and so validates the character of reactions to it; the legend becomes a drama of reaction increasingly typical of the Christian image. We can chart this rhetorical language in thirteenth-century representations of the Crucifixion, where the onlookers faint (like the Virgin Mary) and wring their hands (like St John), or in such moments of high drama as Giotto's tremendous representation of the Raising of Lazarus in the Arena Chapel at Padua, where the stench of Lazarus's three-day old remains is made manifest to the nose, by means of the eyes contemplating the gestures of disgust of the witnesses. And it is exactly this rhetoric of response that marks out the most impressive of all representations of the legend, that of the mid-fourteenth century in the Camposanto at Pisa, where the horses upon which the living are mounted shy and recoil at the sight and stink of the bloated purulent flesh of the dead.



A corpse possessed of its senses hears and sees the approach of God, and responds with a sentiment from the Book of Job, from a 15th-century German Office of the Dead. Compare PL. IV.

This reflexivity, born of the divided character of macabre representations, reminds us of the way such images engage the human sensorium: death, as patristic literature argued, here enters in through the eyes, and spreads a kind of visual contamination or contagion. The dead are shunned, according to the de Lisle text, even by the worms. The dead, who mimic or parody the living but do not extend out to them except as images, are a new class of marginalized untouchables, like lepers, a class forced in life to go through special rites of separation and to relinquish their property much as the dead in the poem have lost their signs of earthly station. Here the dead act to mirror the living by the signs of sense-possession, for they too look back and respond, like the sinister little shrouded corpse in a fifteenth-century German Office of the Dead which emits a speech scroll saying: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eyes seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:5–6.) The macabre thus lends the dead a voice.

The reason this type of image of death is so powerful – in the same way as the related genres of the Dance of Death and of Death personified – is that it is intimately linked to the psychology of anxiety. In the legend we have a classic instance of a moment of instability between two temporal realms, a sudden breach of existential boundaries between two worlds, which confuses the animate and the inanimate. The confusion brought about by the use of the *doppelgänger,* or 'double', motif is related to the notion of the uncanny, simultaneously denying and affirming mortality in an experience which, because of its inner contradictions, can never be quite assimilated, and which through its repression repeatedly throws out the same circular oppositions of dead and living. By means of doubling or repetition, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar in a daemonic experience of estrangement. In psychoanalytical terms death, like love, is linked to repetition and to the uncanniness of the doubled image that repeats, but does not reflect, its model. The image represents a future state – what the subject will become – and so contributes to the construction of the subject's sense of self. In this case the thing that is constructed (recalling the earlier discussion of late-medieval penitential culture on p. 37) is the notion of the sinner. But the image too is a thing returned to the spectator; the corpse, as image, stands for the absence that is death, returning to rebuke both the imaged living, and also ourselves as onlookers. The macabre implicates us in a *mise-en-abyme*, a hall of mirrors. And by means of its use of defamiliarization, it offers the capacity for self-examination. The organization of the macabre image is thus not just binary (playing on antitheses), but ternary (implicating the third-party viewer). We will be considering the emergence of ternary models of this type when we turn to the construction of Purgatory later on.

Transi Tombs

The subject of the revenant (that which returns uncannily) was of course to form an important component of folkloric thinking, especially with respect to the legend of the vampire. The heretical inhabitants of early fourteenth-century Montaillou thought of the spirits of the dead as *doubles* lurking around the living, and graveyards especially, before being quietened by Masses for the Dead. This idea of the dead as the temporarily homeless may have related to a deeper belief about the state of the soul reflecting the state of the body, the soul wandering only during the corpse's transitory or liminal stage of decomposition.

But the notion of the *double* also linked images like those of the Three Living and the Three Dead to other high cultural Gothic representations, especially the so-called double *transi* tomb (*transi* meaning 'gone over' or, perhaps more appositely 'gone off'). In such tombs, which came into being around 1400, a dichotomy is commonly, though not universally, established between the representation of the dead in their full social station, as complete, perfected representatives of a particular class or group in a state of timeless repose, and their representation as a corpse, naked or shrouded, in various stages of decomposition. Corpse or shroud effigies also existed on their own, as a sub-group of this genre. Earlier we saw that the notion of the double-effigy tomb had developed by the fourteenth century to represent the state of marriage. The double-decker transi tomb took this coupling in a different direction; instead of displaying the character of the family, it displayed the character of the body as a mirror of the soul. As with the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, tombs of this type at their most elaborate possess the structural character of division and confrontation – between the social and the natural, between the timeless and the time-bound, between the perfect and the fallen, and so on: again the body is deployed as a sign, and the themes of the uncanny (such as repetition and doubling) are equally present.

As the products of a specific medium, sculpture, transi tombs bear comparison with earlier three-dimensional manifestations of the notion of the decay or torment of the body as a sign of its inner sinfulness (and decay was thought of in a pre-modern sense as something intrinsic to the body and not extrinsically induced). Monastic culture was naturally inclined to this view of the body; the grandiloquent early twelfth-century sculptures in the porch of the Cluniac Priory at Moissac in France show the punishment of *Luxuria* (unchastity) in the form of a naked woman tormented by toads and snakes. And the same theme, unselfconsciously misogynistic, recurs later in the more demotic context of the secular church, in the image of *Frau Welt* as a human equivalent to Eve's rotten apple, superficially plausible and tempting but eaten from behind and from within by worms, as at Worms Cathedral in the fourteenth century. The two-faced

character of the world was, as we have already seen in citing Master Rypon on make-up (p. 88), a theme for sermons. Female *vanitas* concealed death: 'More bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets' (Ecclesiastes 7:26). It may have been statements of such frankness that encouraged Jean, Duc de Berry, to commission images of the Three Living and the Three Dead for the portal of the church of the Innocents in Paris, a celebrated burial-place, in 1408, a unique occurrence of the subject in sculpture.

But the transi tomb cannot simply be seen as the outcome of the admission of these themes, already pretty long-standing, into the sphere of a specific medium, sculpture. Historically there is no evidence for the execution of transi tombs before the late fourteenth century, and accordingly they have been positioned as one of the natural outcomes of the late-medieval, plague-motivated culture of the macabre. But their occurrence is, in a sense, culturally even more specific. In the first place, tombs of this type were virtually exclusively northern European occurrences, being largely absent from Spain, Mediterranean France and Italy; and, secondly, the patronage which brought them into being was originally almost exclusively clerical, and only later lay. They represent the kind of phenomenon whose initial reasons for existence may have differed from those of their later spread and validation, and in this sense there cannot have been a single 'cause' of the transi tomb. Italy, though itself known for tremendous representations of the Three Living and Three Dead from the thirteenth century onwards, is devoid of such memorials for reasons which are obscure, but which may lie in the spheres of cultural practice by which attitudes to the body itself were negotiated. Philippe Ariès notes, for example, that the geographic distribution of transi tombs coincides with the practice of covering the dead in funerary ritual; macabre iconography occurs in those places where the corpse's face was concealed. The use of the coffin in northern Europe from around the thirteenth century effectively concealed the body in its entirety, prompting the use of simulacrum wooden or waxen effigies in its place for the duration of the ritual, effigies whose appearance resembles that of the permanent tomb effigy. Fourteenth-century examples of such effigies survive at Westminster Abbey, probably because they were hauled out later to mark the anniversaries of the royal dead. In the Mediterranean sphere it remained (and remains) normal for at least the head of the corpse to be exposed for the funeral, and the corpse was taken out by members of the family to be ritually cleansed, as in present-day Naples – entirely different cultural forms of attention to the body from those prevalent further north, where concealment became the norm. There were of course regional variations which suggest that the north–south distinction cannot be pressed too far. The Mediterranean practice is illustrated by the eleventh-century tomb slab of Abbot Isarnus from Saint-Victor at Marseilles. But some provincial thirteenth-century English tomb slabs like that of Emma, wife of Fulk, at Stow in Lincolnshire (whose



The back side of *Frau Welt* (Lady World) at Worms Cathedral, *c.*1310.

epitaph was noted earlier), show a coffin-shaped slab with a roundel exposing the dead woman's face, more in keeping with southern European practice. But these may be exceptions.

To be sure, as we have seen, Italian tomb designers established a conventional and very effective range of rhetorical motifs in the later Middle Ages. But what is interesting here is the exclusion of positive time-bound mortality embodied in the frank display of decomposition. One exception, Masaccio's Trinity fresco at Sta Maria Novella in Florence, of about 1425, with its exposed skeleton of Adam beneath the figure of the second person of the Trinity crucified, proves the rule. Delumeau rather unsatisfactorily explains this absence of the portrayal of decay by suggesting that the 'forms of fear' in Italian guilt culture differed from those in north-western Europe. Ariès also misunderstands the phenomenon in suggesting that the southern type of tomb, showing the effigy in death, laid the way open for the transi tomb. The reverse is exactly the case: the transi emerged only in those areas where the alert effigy remained the norm. The transi was quite as much a problem of representation and substitution: what was concealed by social practice in the north was revealed through art; what was revealed by social practice in the south was concealed, or even repressed, by art. Though, as Peter Burke has suggested, this absence of the macabre in Italian art may have been true only of elite circles, it remains to be explained why the macabre was developed by precisely the same elites north of the Alps.

The dialectic between bodily customs and art stresses for us the need to see transi tombs in the first instance as representations. Authorities have sought out complex literary and visual sources for transi tombs, in order to create a kind of textual genealogy of descent for them; but the underlying ideas were both so deeply embedded in conventional Christian thinking about the body, and so nearly universal in Western Christendom, that mapping a specific genealogy is probably not terribly helpful. The transi tomb embodied a specifically Gothic representational feeling for the threatening and the grotesque. Of about 270 corpse tombs which survive from northern Europe in this period, under half a dozen date to the fourteenth century, seventy-five or so to the fifteenth, and over one hundred to the sixteenth century. The genre gained in popularity. Early examples of true transi tombs include that of Cardinal Jean de Lagrange (d. 1402) at S. Martial, Avignon; Archbishop Henry Chichele (d. 1443), erected *c.*1424–6, at Canterbury Cathedral; Archbishop Richard Fleming (d. 1431) at Lincoln Cathedral; Archbishop Johan von Sierck (d. 1456) at Trier Cathedral; and also the tomb of the French physician Guillaume de Harcigny at Laon (d. 1393). Cardinal Lagrange's tomb, now fragmented, was certainly the most spectacular, employing a colossal reredos-like arrangement of ten registers 17 m high, with scenes concerning the Virgin Mary and the Nativity of Christ, with the Cardinal as a votive figure: this was a tableau whose roots lay in the multiple self-

representation of tombs of a century or more earlier, with correspondingly multiplied focuses of devotion and interest. Lagrange was himself dismembered: formerly a bishop of Amiens, his body was given to the cathedral there, but his entrails were buried at the papal curia at Avignon with his transi. The strange beauty of the Cardinal's cadaver is glossed by the following inscription:

> We have been made a spectacle for the world so that the older and the younger may look clearly upon us, in order that they might see to what state they will be reduced. No-one is excluded regardless of estate, sex or age; therefore, miserable one, why are you proud? You are only ash, and you will revert, as we have done, to a fetid cadaver, food and titbits for worms and ashes.

Archbishop Chichele's polychromed tomb of a generation later possesses a more characteristically English restraint and polish, though it may reflect a French model like Lagrange's. It was erected well before his death, and is positioned opposite the archiepiscopal seat in such a way that Chichele could have pondered his own tomb in life as a *memento mori*, a self address. Chichele's upper effigy is shown in full pontificals. The tomb's epitaph reads in part:

> I was a pauper born, then to primate here raised, now I am cut down and served up for worms . . . behold my grave. Whoever you may be who will pass by, I ask for your remembrance, you who will be like me after you die: horrible in all things, dust, worms, vile flesh.

It isn't hard to trace the obvious points of intersection between this type of admonitory sentiment which, like Lagrange's, plays on the themes of beholding and transience, and the sentiments of the Three Living and the Three Dead. Employing a variant of the ancient *Siste viator* theme addressing the bystander, the spectator is not in the first instance admonished to prayer, but rather to a kind of abject self-contemplation: the epitaph's leonine rhyme plays with the idea



Transi effigy of Cardinal Jean de Lagrange (d. 1402), Saint-Martial, Avignon.



of the *cursus vitae* – born (*natus*), raised (*elevatus*), cut down (*prostratus*) and dished up (*paratus*) which sums up life's lot rather succinctly. It also employs the mirror-motif so common in late medieval imagery: *cerne tuum speculum* (behold your mirror). If Chichele contemplated his own effigy, he would have witnessed, like the lads in the Legend of the Three Living, his own outcome: by approaching his own tomb, he would have emerged eerily as his own revenant. To envisage Chichele pondering his own multiple representation in death is to open out a *mise-en-abyme* worthy of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. The same self-contemplation and temporal paradox seems to have occurred with the tomb of Bishop Beckington at Wells. Beckington, who was known to Chichele, had his chantry and transi tomb erected in 1451, thirteen years before he died, granted forty days indulgence to those praying at his tomb from the city of Wells, and said Mass for his own soul in 1452. The interaction between image, text and spectator is taken a further stage. That this interplay formed a contemporary part of the culture and reception of the macabre tomb is indicated by the mid-fifteenth-century northern English poem *Disputacione betwyx the Body and Wormes*. The poet enters a church in a 'season of huge mortality' and sees a 'tomb or sepulture full freshly forged', sculpted and coloured. The accompanying illustrations show a pair of royal tombs, one male, one female, beneath which are displayed the maggoty contents of the grave. The image is equivalent conceptually to a double-decker transi tomb. Beneath the female tomb is the text:



Left Tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele (d. 1443), Canterbury Cathedral. Note the long epitaphs.

Right Folio showing a royal tomb in the *Disputacione betwyx the Body and Wormes*, mid-15th century.

Take heed unto my figure here above
And see how sometimes I was fresh and gay
Now turned to worm's meat and corruption
Both foul earth and stinking slime and clay
Attend therefore to this disputacion written here . . .
To see what thou art and hereafter shall be . . .

The disputacious element between Body and Worms which emerges in the poem, concerning the role of worms in the consumption of flesh, is, as we have seen, a standard structural feature of these split images and texts. But of course the poem, like the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, is in the vernacular. The literary dimension of Lagrange's and Chichele's tombs is in contrast expressed in high clerical Latin verse, which immediately compromises these representations in two respects: it limits their readership, and it thereby undercuts the essentially democratic theme of Death as leveller, embodied in their lament for earthly station. Chichele was the founder of All Soul's College, Oxford, and, in being depicted on his tomb as a *literatus*, reminds us that sentiments of this type were first and foremost donnish conceits. These tombs reinforce precisely

the social and linguistic differences that Death undercuts: they are forms of self-reflection, not public address. And that self-reflection is essentially elitist. Transi tombs are in one sense the logical outcome of that trait we noted earlier in considering the over-mighty tomb, whereby clerical patrons deliberately sought out flat, but strategically well-placed, grave slabs as signs of humility. The discourse of the transi tomb is itself basically one of Christian humility (from the Latin *humus*, 'earth') in clerical guise. John Mirk, in his advice to parish priests, the *Festial*, had invited them to contemplate the dead bones of men to engender humility, and the tombs of the highest in the land were naturally best able to deploy this motif of being brought low, literally grounded, by death.

Medieval artists had long explored the relationship between pride, humility and death. An ancestor of this type of clerical sentiment is to be found in an innovative mid-thirteenth-century illumination by the Oxford artist, William de Brailes. In an illustration of the Wheel of Fortune, de Brailes cunningly contrives to coordinate small representations of the Ages of Man in the wheel's outer circuit, with the story of Theophilus, the proud clerk who yielded his soul to the devil, within. As man is laid low in death, so Theophilus is shown in his daemonic triumph, in other words in spiritual death; whereas when man is at the pinnacle of his powers, Theophilus is shown having been saved by the Virgin Mary, his



Wheel of Fortune, by William de Brailes, Oxford, *c.*1235. De Brailes has coordinated sixteen stages in the life of man in the outer circuit with eight episodes from the story of the clerk Theophilus and the Virgin Mary in the inner. The high and low points of each correspond to an image of death.

soul being commended to Abraham's Bosom, and so to spiritual life. At Rochester Cathedral, a contemporary Wheel of Fortune was painted over the clerk's stalls opposite the bishop's throne. It was an admonition against pride, aimed specifically at the clergy.

Nevertheless, it's fairly clear that to understand the why and when of the transi tomb, we have to sidestep this literary component, tempting as it may be to see the textual elements of such tombs as offering a simple key to their iconography and signification. Transi tombs are regarded too often as a transparent form of text – as the visual equivalent to a literary culture of guilt and penance, as sermons in stone – with multiple points of reference to a substantial body of thought, to which they are related as second-order epiphenomena. Owst long ago noted that the character of admonitions of the 'such shalt thou be' type were common in Mendicant-inspired sermonizing on death in the tradition going back at least to St Bernard. But there is no reason to assume from this that tombs of this type were essentially like sermons: their didacticism was much more class-specific. However, though their literary order was closed in virtue of its language, their visual order was much more fully open, and this order made itself felt, and was to my mind conceived both for and against the pre-existing conditions of burial and tomb design in the grave-cluttered late-medieval church.

Chichele's tomb in Canterbury Cathedral is a good instance: such tombs are never understood as isolated monuments, but are apprehended by the churchgoer as contributors to a collective order of the dead. They are variations on a theme. Canterbury Cathedral was, and is, crammed with tombs, many extremely distinguished, and the designers of the transi tomb knew and felt the repercussions of this. At Canterbury the royal tomb of Edward the Black Prince (d. 1376) in the Trinity Chapel next to the shrine of St Thomas has a French epitaph, specially selected by the Prince in his will to be 'on our tomb, in a place where it may be most clearly read and seen', whose contents play exactly on the textual themes of the transi tomb, though only in contemplating the loss of the Prince's station in death as a 'poor caitiff, laid deep in the earth'. In death Edward is robbed of his achievements says the epitaph, and it is exactly these 'achievements' – his armour, shield and so on – that were hung over his otherwise conventional effigial tomb in knightly fashion. In its organization of themes by means of *painture* and *parole*, then, the tomb adumbrates, if only informally, the structural play on 'before and after' that so marks out the rhetoric of the double tomb of Chichele's type, with the perfect 'social' body above – the man in life – and the imperfect 'natural' body below.

By the same token, it will be intuitively obvious to anyone who has pondered Chichele's tomb with its modestly-posed cadaver secreted in an open-work chest beneath a pompous effigy, that there is another form of context-dependent allusion here: not to earlier prototypes of the Black Prince's sort, but rather

sideways in genre, to the form of shrines like that of Becket himself. Shrines, which by their design permitted the ingress of limbs or whole bodies to their relics, had impacted quite early on tomb design, as is shown by the splendid arcaded metalwork tomb of Henry I, Count of Champagne, formerly at Troyes, and the tomb-shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe at Hereford. In such examples effigies, not relics, are enclosed by a screen. At Canterbury, no special claim is being made by this tomb for its incumbent's sanctity. This is not a proto-shrine. The similarity lies rather in the form of attention such displays, open above, part concealed below, were premised upon, since their fundamental character is similar to that of the usual English shrine-base type. What in the shrine base had



Tomb of Edward the Black Prince (d. 1376), Canterbury Cathedral. His will ordered that his war armour should be processed at his funeral; the achievements suspended over the tomb may be the same pieces. The will also specifies the appearance of his tomb in detail.

been a form of attention promoted by the old-established need for physical proximity to relics has, in the transi tomb, been converted and revealed as a characteristically late-medieval form of visual display: just as late-medieval English shrines were now being cut off from general view by screens and enclosures, the cadaver is glimpsed, sensed, revealed to the touch of the curious, but also partially cut off from the spectator, whose principal form of access is now by sight. We are teased by what ordinarily we should not be seeing. Where Lagrange's cadaver is an open vulnerable spectacle, Chichele's is enclosed yet open: the effigies are no less a spectacle, but one enhanced by partial concealment. This cedes to the transi tomb immense power – the power of fascination with the dead. Aristotle says, 'Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies.' But the fascination here is ambivalent: it is with a corpse, but a represented corpse.

This point can be broadened by suggesting that transi tombs owe their real character not to their 'textuality' but rather to their role as commentaries on pre-existing funerary genres, almost as anti-representations. Historically this makes sense. By about 1400 the art of the effigial tomb in north-western Europe had established a certain decorum of display: the body natural is represented by the body artful. The medieval effigy is a simulacrum, a substitute, but one which not only replaced but powerfully erased the thing, the natural body, whose form it suggests. In the same way the limb-shaped precious reliquary erased the reality of the shrivelled body-relics it enclosed, and instead sanctified those body parts as signs. Transi tombs acted as representations which overcame this erasure of the body by the effigy; they performed a kind of unmasking of that which had hitherto been concealed. Viewed in context and in time, the transi tomb was a sophisticated anti-tomb, disclosing and glossing that which had been closed and denied for over two centuries. The transi tomb now revealed the skeleton in the cupboard of medieval funerary art, namely its denial of the facts of decomposition.

As such, of course, it played havoc with the calm atemporal order and decorum of the conventional tomb with its reassuringly idealized prospective imagery. By its means, time is reinserted into the order of the dead, but with numerous ambivalences which had already marked what we might call the temporal and existential character of the effigial tomb. The usual trope of the medieval tomb is that the body is bereft of its better part, the soul, which is commended to Heaven: the tomb, in engendering memory and prayer, is thus in the first instance 'about' the soul and its future, and it addresses the viewer with that in mind. But the transi tomb is 'about' the body and not, in the first instance, the soul: these tombs are designed not to engender memory in the narrow sense, nor prayer, but to provoke, as with the Three Living and the Three Dead, a

certain type of response, the pondering of self. The representation of the body is implicated ultimately in salvation, but by a process of deferral. Their switch between the display of wordly station and its denial, their theme of nakedness, of stripping and of restoration, challenges our selfhood as well as that of the dead. We mourn ourselves.

The transi tomb seems at first sight especially relevant to structural oppositions between the 'social' and the 'natural' body, oppositions whose origins lie in anthropological distinctions between societies which stress cultural transformations and those which stress natural transformations (what Lévi-Strauss thought of as the distinction between cooked and raw food, for example). But the falsity of the nature–culture dichotomy is that it pretends that the natural body is not itself historically and culturally situated: all bodies, once represented, are social bodies. Nudity is an especially important theme of the transi tomb, indicating both the exposure of the private to the public, and the separation from the sphere of culture embodied in the exterior signs of wordly station, dress, ornament and regalia that could be buried with the corpse in the hope of the Resurrection – we are reminded of the expression 'bad and bare' on the tomb of John the Smith cited earlier. Just as nudity can be a sign of exile and the disordering of the natural, so it is also a form of disguise: the naked person is (paradoxically) desexed and desocialized. The nude body is informed culturally by its acting as a natural sign of the sinful and the penitent, as a site of suffering and decay, and by becoming an artwork. In this sense transi tombs, like portrait tombs, were the outcome of a long-evolving Gothic 'naturalism' which, since the twelfth century, had promoted the body as a living thing, or with the capacity to seem alive: but it is a measure of the transi tomb that it deploys an extraordinary artfulness to convey the idea of something which *has* lived. In this sense the transi corpse is an object of aestheticized interest.

The standard medieval effigy, like the statue, acts as a metaphor of permanence, strong and immobile in its seeming resistance to mutability, or incapacity for change. For this reason transis were only very slowly assimilated into the visual culture of power and specifically royal power, notwithstanding their seeming aptness in illustrating that theme of the divided character of royal power – of the king's two bodies, one natural and mortal, though God-made, the other cultural, man-made and permanent, the official body. Though the royal court of France during the Renaissance developed a vogue for the display of the royal body as a stitched-up, eviscerated, yet beautiful thing, tombs of this type were conspicuously avoided earlier. There are two exceptions. One was planned for Edward IV of England, whose will specified that he should have a tomb covered with a stone 'wrought with the figure of death', and a chantry above with a silver gilt effigy. Another was executed *c.*1450 in Angers Cathedral for René d'Anjou, titular king of Naples and Sicily, including a decidedly odd representation on its

back wall of the monarch crowned in death, enthroned but collapsing under the weight of his own decomposition, like the image of Death crowned with René's arms in a Book of Hours. (An image of Death crowned had already appeared *c.*1320 in the lower church of S. Francesco at Assisi.) The reasons for this paucity of royal transi tombs are clear: the transi tomb's unmasking of decay threatened the ideological integrity of the body politic, better exemplified by the tough ineluctable gilt bronze or marble effigy of the monarch as office holder. René's brittle and faintly absurd images of the mortal monarch amount on the other hand to a crack in the Mirror of Princes.

Transi tombs acted, then, to challenge and expose the myths and silences of the decorous medieval effigial tomb. They embodied an anti-decorum which could only evolve with reference to pre-existing norms of display. By the fifteenth century western Europe had generated an unprecedentedly elaborate visual culture of death and the cult of memory which, paradoxically, had served



A mid-15th-century crowned king-cadaver holds a scroll alluding to Genesis 3:19 and stands behind the tripartite arms of René d'Anjou accompanying the Office of the Dead.

increasingly to deny the realities of death. Against this mythologizing, death, and with it necromania, appeared in the later Middle Ages as a veritable organizing principle, a central allegory of understanding the world at large. That this new form of tomb, never very common, but symbolic even in its relative rarity, should be culturally specific to the north is significant. Panofsky noted that the northern European effigy was generally shown in life, eyes open, alert, while those of the Mediterranean sphere were shown in death, but never in decay. This locates the transi very effectively as the outcome of a specifically northern European culture of extremes, which itself became thematized in the fifteenth century in a visual order of the grotesque, the bizarre and the morbid. The macabre is, in its treatment of the body, precisely about extremes, the moments of passage from intactness to decay, and from decay to annihilation. Imaginative extremes were in this period related explicitly to images. In his treatise on memory of *c.*1335, Thomas Bradwardine wrote of memory images:

> Their quality truly should be wondrous and intense, because such things are impressed in the memory more deeply and are better retained. However such things are for the most part not average but extremes, as the most beautiful or ugly, joyous or sad, worthy of respect or something ridiculous for mocking, a thing of great dignity or vileness, or wounded with greatly opened wounds with a remarkably lively flowing of blood, or in another way made extremely ugly . . .

We can see in this type of visualization a strong sense of the somatic character of late-medieval religious and penitential imagery, precisely akin to images of Christ's suffering, or to the bodily devotional language of mystics like Richard Rolle.

From this perspective, the macabre stands in antithesis to the balance sought in the fifteenth-century Italian classical body, coolly distanced and sheltered by art from the thresholds of birth and death. The earlier medieval tomb had, too, projected the body in a state of perfection, embalmed by an aesthetic of the ideal. By the high point of the fashion for transi tombs in the fifteenth century, such memorials were in a sense reacting against two things, conceivably from a self-consciously 'Gothic' perspective: against both an earlier idealizing Gothic decorum and a new, neo-antique idealization which repressed the facts of death. Their perspective was still fully Christian: the body was essential to personhood, and Christian prohibitions still ceded to the body immense importance and power as a site of anxiety and control. The medieval quest for moral truth was accompanied by excess, and in this the transi's responsiveness as art, against art, was central.

Right The 15th-century city charnel-house, Rouen. The timber frames are adorned with grisly carved motifs.

The Dance of Death

Similar points can be made about the Dance of Death, the third genre of the macabre in chronological order of appearance. This subject, again primarily popular in northern Europe though known in Italy too, occurs in about eighty surviving representations dating from after about 1425. Its theme is simple: the living, regardless of their temporal or spiritual station in life as popes, emperors or kings down to the very humblest, even children, are compelled by dancing cadavers to cavort with them as a *memento mori*. The earliest image of the Dance appears to have been a mural, accompanied by hortatory inscriptions, in the



cemetery and charnel of the Innocents in Paris, executed according to a chronicle in 1424–5. It had been to the portal of its church that Jean, Duc de Berry, had added images of the Three Living and the Three Dead a generation earlier. At the Innocents about thirty characters skipped and tottered gingerly with death, and their image inspired part of Villon's *Testament*. By about 1450 the subject occurred more widely. The north cloister of Old St Paul's Cathedral possessed a set of panel paintings of *c.*1430 with texts by John Lydgate, who knew the series at the Innocents and who had discussed their meaning with French clerks. Here there were thirty-six dancers; the 'daunce of Powles' became English shorthand for the subject itself. Magnificent extant examples of the Dance include murals at La Chaise-Dieu and the woodcuts of the subject by Holbein. These were based on an exemplar at Basle, and followed also the example of Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabré* woodcut prints of 1485–6, which reached their third edition by 1490 and included the legend of the Three Living and Three Dead. At Kermaria in Brittany, and at Paris, the Dance was accompanied by the legend itself, and at Kermaria, with pagan conceit, some of the dancers bear animal heads.

The theme of the Dance, known throughout western Europe, plays on several conventions. At a primitive level it challenges the sacred notion of the dead at rest validated by the Requiem Mass of the funeral service. The villagers of Montaillou attributed to the dead doubles an endless energy and restiveness, appeased only by suffrages. Since the earliest examples of the tableau of the Dance accompanied cemeteries or charnels, the image too offered a subversive comment on the Church's frequent prohibitions on dancing in churchyards, enacted at Rouen in 1231 and again at Basle in 1435; a reminder that consecrated ground tended to attract vulgar activities which vigorously asserted the principle of life. The tradition of the so-called dancers of Kölbigk in the diocese of Magdeburg, which dates to the eleventh century, concerns a gathering of folk who defied Church authorities by dancing in a cemetery and were cursed to continue dancing for a year, whereupon they dropped dead. The cemetery was not an empty place, but throbbed with noise of betrothals, meetings, commerce, bread-baking, and judicial processes in and around the church porch. The Innocents confronted



one of the largest markets of medieval Paris. The Dance was a vigorous piece of taboo-breaking, connecting ritually purified spaces to the signs of fallen human nature in the world in all its worldliness.

Dancing was itself also potentially problematic. In Robert Mannyng's homiletic text *Handlyng Synne*, dance is viewed with disapproval. The activity was sensual and was tied in closely with music associated with seduction; in one longstanding Christian moral view, dance and music possess an erotic undertone. Dancing was a vehicle for the vices, and in the Dance of Death music and dance act as forms of seduction and so deceit. In the York Mystery plays, the tormentors of Christ are to dance around the foot of the Cross in mockery, dancing being a caper or game motif reminding us of the casting of dice for Christ's clothes on Golgotha. In one sense, then, the Dance is a penitential theme; in the fifteenth century Jean Gerson connected the Dance of Death with confession, and the great late fifteenth-century paintings of the Dance once in the Totentanzkapelle in the Marienkirke at Lübeck overlooked confession benches. Clerical patronage, as with the transi tomb, seems to have been important in its development and distribution. The dead and the living are pressed together by the Dance in the same way that life and death meet crucially, at the last minute, in the *Ars moriendi*. But the power of the Dance derived from the dialectical relationship it established between conventional Christian penitential thinking and worldliness. As a theme it appropriated visually what was becoming, in the fifteenth century, an important metaphor for social order, namely highly organized social dance itself. By this time courtly convention was producing dance forms like the *bassedance* which acted to display and discipline the courtly body: dance was becoming a sign not just of festivity but of controlled habits and bodily dispositions. On



Left Dance of Death, 15th-century wall-painting, La Chaise-Dieu.

Right Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise with Death, from the *Dance of Death* (*c.*1526) by Hans Holbein the Younger.

this basis it was possible to construct positive and negative views of the dance, comprehended both socially and morally: restrained courtly stepping on the one hand, and plebeian ring dancing, branles or *morescas* (i.e. Morris or Moorish dancing) on the other. Social dancing was thus usually clockwise in arrangement; low, or immoral, dancing, widdershins. The Dance of Death is thus at one level a tableau of class norms. The living step cautiously, the dead with uncannily enthusiastic high kicks: the dead by virtue of their movement are another order, another class.

Dance, like death, was itself becoming an allegorical form in the fifteenth century, a way of explaining and categorizing things. Again, as with the transi tomb, the order of death admits a kind of anti-representation: the Dance of Death is a theatrical piece of vaudeville whose strength derives from its parodic acknowledgement of emerging social norms and conventions and its picaresque inversion of those norms, of decorous rest and disciplined display. At first sight its import is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense (the critic Bakhtin regarded the pre-modern carnival as a means of discharging social tensions): it involves a suspension of hierarchical social precedence, and the consecration of social equality as a kind of popular utopian ideal, a turning of the tables. In this sense the Dance might be regarded as an 'anticipative representation' by means of which hierarchy was not subtly reaffirmed, but rather subverted in the interest of social liberation and some future hope for a social utopia. The Dance represents both present categories and future aspirations, the utopia of death. This does not mean that the Dance as employed as a homiletic and visual motif in this period was exclusively a 'popular' form (whatever that may mean): it enjoyed the same relationship to formal thought as Latinate parodies of other genres, like the drunkard's liturgy, the *Testamentum porcelli*, or Pig's Will – a mock-legal spoof on the high literary testament of the type promoted by Villon in which the pig leaves his bones to the dicemaker and his pizzle to the priest (!). It was in no sense marginal, and its allegorical force could be open to several types of audience. Many of the recorded cycles included the figure of a preacher, and the subject seems to have been popular in Mendicant, and specifically Franciscan, contexts. One friar delivered apocalyptic sermons from a pulpit hard by the Dance of Death at the Innocents in Paris. The subject had a respectable textual and performative basis in fourteenth-century culture, as in the Catalan *Dansa de la Mort* and Jean le Fèvre's poem of the late 1370s *Le Respit de Mort*, in which is apparently the first occurrence of the term 'macabre': 'Je fis de Macabré la danse'. Its theatrical character as spectacle could prompt performances of it in the highest circles; a Dance of Death was enacted significantly enough by a painter in Bruges in 1449 before the Duke of Burgundy; and on the occasion of a Provincial Chapter of the Franciscans in 1453 another was performed in a church in Besançon. Perhaps the tableau had been acted out in the previous century, to judge

by its consonance with later mystery and morality plays, and there seems to be some evidence for a related type of performance in Normandy, at Caudebec, in 1393. Its carnivalesque nature flourished within high culture as a form of reflexive critique: society as a body is punished by death. It is also commented on in its own terms. In the texts and images by Lydgate and Holbein, the lawyer is addressed litigiously by his cadaver, while from the rich man the dead take silver. This echoes the theme of the particularized Judgement that had emerged by the fourteenth century. Death here represents Everyman, rather than Death itself personified. In the comedy of manners of the Dance, the human faculty of choice is denied; whereas the Three Living and the Three Dead, in some ways visually adumbrating this theme, are permitted to choose to amend their lives, in the Dance of Death the living are stripped of choice and are compelled into submission. The theme is a grave one, but at another level possesses a certain bathetic comedy, revealing social dance itself to be a hell of submission to the unwanted partner. But its message is no less serious: Hades is a democracy and Death is the supreme leveller.

In this sense the Dance, as a comedy of manners with a penitential subtext, also takes its place as a manifestation of forms of social comment increasingly common from the mid-fourteenth century. The Dance came equally to all, and was an allegorical means of both reinforcing and subverting the late-medieval hierarchy of estates or classes, depending on its audience. Its 'leverage' as a theme of social comment was thus ambivalent. The fact of its early occurrence at the Innocents, a charnel, is significant: structurally, the Dance shuffled the dead and living regardless of station, just as the charnel shuffled the bones of the greatest with those of the least. It is ironic that this most trenchant expression of promiscuity between the living and the dead should have occurred at a famous haunt of prostitutes. Villon remarked in his *Testament* that it would take a strong pair of glasses at the Innocents 'to tell the decent people from the uncouth'. Death is now the allegorical means of expressing that idea of postlapsarian equality first expressed by Richard Rolle, and later appropriated by Wat Tyler during the Peasant's Revolt in 1381: 'When Adam delved and Eve span . . . where was then the pride of man?' Anticipating Villon, Langland's *Piers Plowman* remarks that knights and knaves are indistinguishable after death; for Death smites down 'Kings and knights, caesars and popes'. Death redistributes the true wealth of salvation, and it is the poor who have least to fear from it. According to the reading of late medieval society which stems ultimately from Huizinga, the period in which the Dance appeared was one of massive demographic change and social transformation. Wealth redistribution, and with it the redistribution of the power of consumption, threatened the old social order, which in turn was reinforced by new controls on labour and attempts, in sumptuary legislation, to separate the accumulation of wealth from its display by means of what Huizinga's contem-

porary Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption'. Erwin Panofsky's analysis of the International Gothic Style as a style of conspicuous display, pushed to hitherto unknown formal extremes by a parasitic aristocratic class intent on bolstering an ageing but threatened social order, helps to contextualize the Dance and the sense in which it allegorized a new anxiety of social control and order in a visual culture of excess.

Themes like the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, the transi tomb and the Dance of Death, all thematically related yet functionally separate, and offering different visions of the human dilemma of choice, all point up this new means of allegorical understanding of the self and of society. Death was itself a new order, a new class of representation and meaning. Arguably the history of the macabre represents a means by which the gaps in medieval culture's articulate meanings were to be filled. Death was itself personified. Beginning in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries with such texts as Hélinant de Froidment's *Les Vers de la Mort* and Robert Grosseteste's *Chateau d'Amour*, Death was ushered in as a literary figure of Everyman's fall, to vie with Life. The roots of the theme of course extend back to the opening of the seals in the Book of Revelation, and the appearance of the rider Death (Revelation 6:8) on a pale horse, with Hell following him. Usually we think of Death as male, but at the Camposanto in Pisa Death triumphs in feminine state with bat's wings and flying hair, bearing a scythe. Death is never inert: it rides, it hunts, it dances, pounces and (eventually) rapes, entering the life of mortals with an energy and timeless transformative power once the possession of the saints. It possesses the power of surprise of the ambush. Its bedside manner is increasingly represented. The corpse as *memento mori* can raise its heart up in the Mass at the *Sursum Corda*. Sometimes Death rises from the tomb in a grotesque parody of the Man of Sorrows, as in a French Book of Hours of *c.*1470 illuminated by Jean Colombe (PL. XI), again as a Christian anti-representation. Death is possessed of the faculties of sense. It is personified yet lacks personhood; its form is the form of the cadaverous body, and not the soul, and this lends to it its uncanny robotic quality and its automaton's attribute of irresistible yet terrible inexpressive power. Giovanni Fontana understood this quality in the animated skeleton precisely, when he included in his early fifteenth-century sketchbook the design for a machine powered by clockwork which, clicking, worked resurrecting skeletons. Death personified, the heir of the Greek *Thanatos*, illustrates through its universality of form the terrible blankness of death itself, for it is important to this representation that Death should be sensible yet unresponsive, that it should perceive yet be merciless, and that its look should spell the cancellation of the self; that it should embody anonymity. This of course reminds us again of the intimate relationship between images of mortality and the contemporary religious consciousness which invested holy images precisely with the fiction of respon-

siveness, especially the holy icon of the Veronica, the merciful Saviour Christ returning our gaze. Death personified requires and utilizes the same ideas of expressivity generated by contemporary artists, embodied in the sympathetic visage of the Redeemer; and in doing so it cancels them. In contrast, Death is the ultimate gargoyle. Yet unlike the gargoyle, trapped and subjected by the Church triumphant, it roams free.

Death and the Fall

As we have seen, the medieval view of human flesh is a divided one: flesh, since the Fall of Man, is fallen and naturally subject to decay, yet in medieval art is always perceived simultaneously with its intact character. In one sense, as I have suggested here, macabre imagery is in effect a form of deconstruction of what went before: the macabre is premised upon, and preys upon, certain norms. At the same time, of course, the macabre theme of the exposure of fallen flesh ties in with conventional Christian thinking validated by St Paul and St Augustine (*City of God*, XIII). Through the Gospels, and by means of the writings of St Paul and his medieval followers, the death of Christ on the Cross represented the final redemption of our fallen and knowing nature. In Pauline theology, mankind is in a state of spiritual perdition due to original sin (Romans 5–6:23); he cannot be saved by good works alone but requires the sacrificial victim to complete his atonement. For Paul the essence of salvation is sacramental. We are reborn in Christ, in baptism, a ritual purging of Old Adam, and so are reincorporated into the divine Saviour. As I noted earlier, it is the Pauline notion of the pre-baptismal body, naked and vulnerable, that informs perhaps the most telling late-medieval image of the solitude of death, that of the naked man commending his soul to God the King in the Office of the Dead in the Rohan Hours: here we have an anticipation of Martin Luther's sentiment that at death 'I will not be with you, nor you with me'. But, as Holbein's Dead Christ shows us, Christ too could be subjected to this aesthetic of solitude. In our unsharable mortality all we face is ourselves; and macabre themes are essentially mirrors of mortality which lie at the heart of what the critic Walter Benjamin called 'the allegorical way of seeing'. Mirk's *Festial* begins a sermon for funerals with the sentiment, 'Here is a mirror to us all: a corpse brought to the church.' Guyot Marchant's *Danse Macabré* of

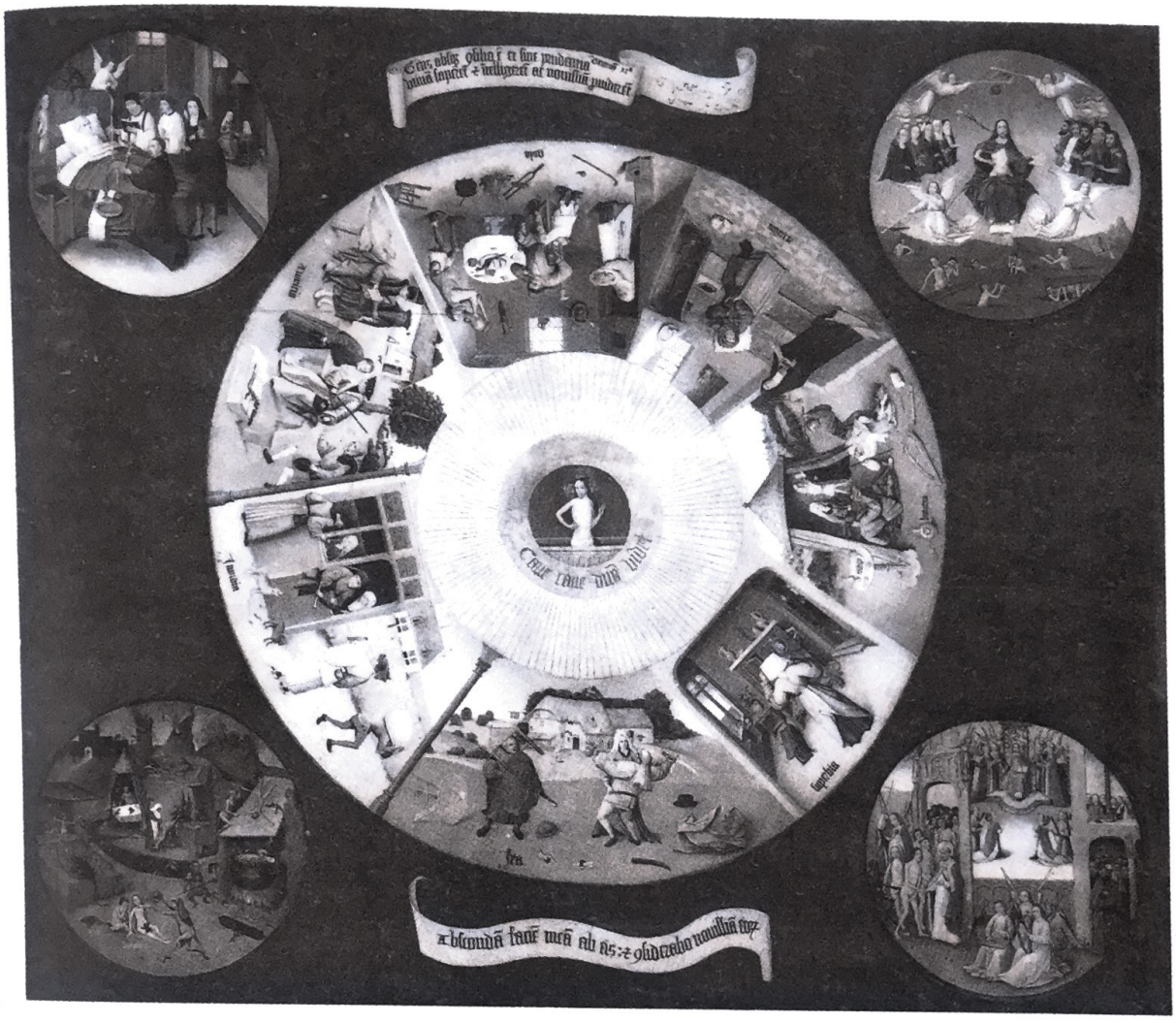


Dead Christ, by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1521–2.

the 1480s calls itself a 'miroer salutaire'. Lydgate also ends his Dance of Death on a specular note:

> Ye folk that look upon this portraiture
> Beholding here all the estates dance
> See what you have been and what is your nature
> Meat unto worms, not else in substance
> And have this mirror ever in rememberance.

But the mirror, an important bearer of meaning in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art and imagery, is not simply the thing which reminds us of the traditions of *vanitas* iconography, though it exploits them. An early fourteenth-century manual of religious instruction relates the story of a lady who sent her chambermaid to purchase a mirror, which turned out not to be to her liking. Sent out to buy another, the maid returned with a skull, saying 'Look at this: in all the world there is no mirror in which you can see yourself better'. The Mirror of Conscience is an important motif in the fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine* of Guillaume de Diguileville. Following St Paul's famous sentiment in I Corinthians 13:12, 'For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face', the lens or glass was an access-point for truth, and implicit in it was access not only to our present state, but to our future condition. The mirror was a means of divination, or catoptromancy, and it is for this reason that the breaking of a glass brings bad luck and even death. The mirror is that which, according to some psychoanalytical theory (represented by Jacques Lacan), enables the child to construct and integrate its ego from the uncoordinated childish body; the mirror, as any neurotic knows, is central to the reassurance of selfhood, to the production and so transformation of ego itself. Mirrors are thus related to unfragmentation, and introduce the idea of temporality, the passage of time. The subject encounters in the mirror its future state, something which it is in the process of becoming: death is already implicit in life, and the mirror lures us into self-understanding through auto-surveillance. From this encounter with the subject in an unfamiliar (dead or dying) form, as with the Three Living and the Three Dead, comes self-knowledge, recognition based on misrecognition. The all-seeing surveillant eye of God is at first hidden, then uncannily apparent, in Hieronymus Bosch's mirror-like Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins in Madrid, which has at its centre the Man of Sorrows framed by a monstrous iris, together with the seven mortal sins, the Fall, the good death and the Last Judgement. But when what we see in the Mirror of Conscience is our own death's head, representing not our integration but our disintegration, it is our own ego that is threatened, our very being, with its desire for pleasure and wholeness. The reflection of death is a kind of reversed narcissism: self-examination is now a form of self-rebuke rather than self-love, and life is to be understood and sustained through its revelation in death, and so in absence.



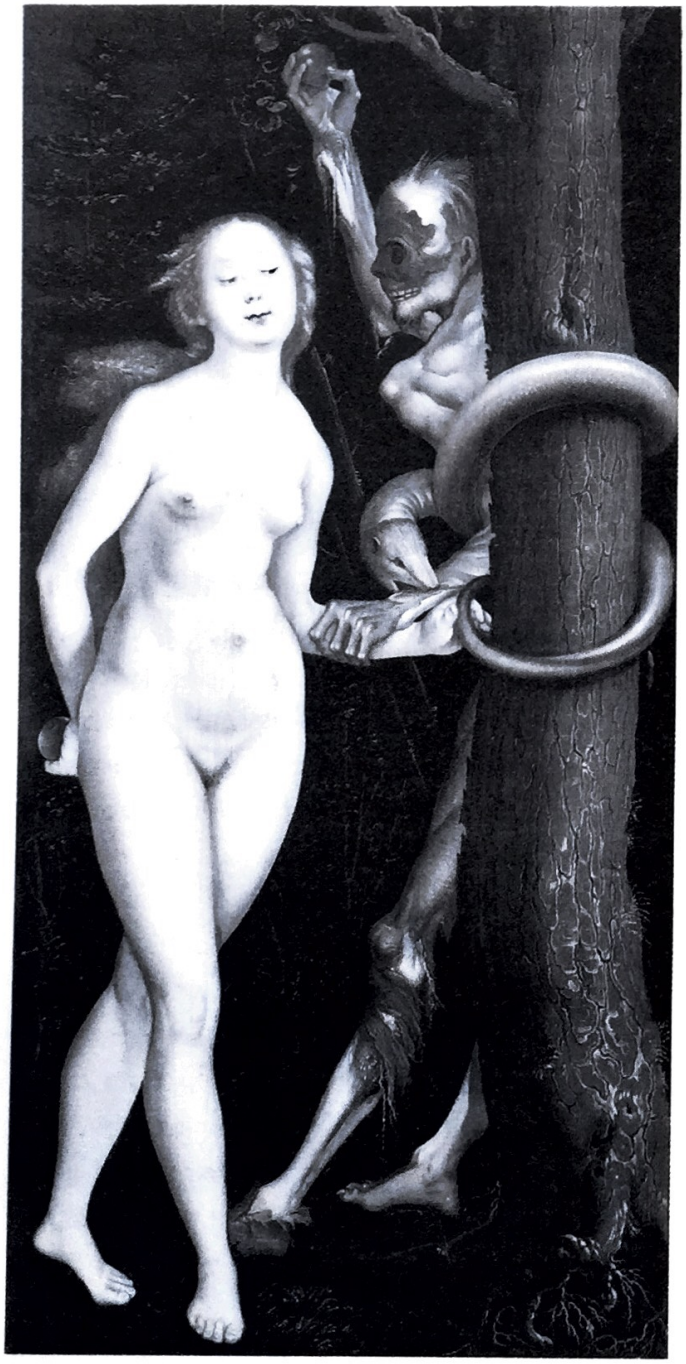
Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins, by Hieronymus Bosch, early 16th century. In this striking image of surveillance we slowly recognize a combination of the Mirror of Conscience, reflecting the sinfulness of the World, and the monstrous all-seeing eyeball of God: 'Beware, beware! The Lord seeth!' reads the text around the central image of Christ the Man of Sorrows. Four additional roundels show the good death, the Last Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

This is of course a theme of the Fall, that by sin and disobedience death and the knowledge of good and evil came into the world. In one telling image in Canto 23 of Dante's *Purgatorio*, we read of the gluttonous whose faces have shrunk to bone, the eyes and bridge of the nose spelling out the Italian vernacular for 'man', and who are punished by the aroma of fruit which cannot be eaten:

> The sockets of their eyes were like rings without stones:
> Those who read 'omo' in the human face
> Would certainly have recognized the 'm' there.
>
> Who would believe that the smell of an apple
> Had done all that . . . ?

In Holbein's Dance of Death woodcuts, Death leaves Paradise with Adam and Eve at their expulsion. The shame of Adam and Eve's nakedness is in the first

instance shame at self, and so is self-knowledge. By this means death, knowledge and sexuality, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, are linked in the Christian tradition. Modesty and desire both have a metaphysical significance. But Adam, the first man, knew nothing of death. In a homily on relics, St John Chrysostom said that it is important to understand the nature of death in one's lifetime; God allowed Abel, Adam's son, to die in order that Adam, who otherwise would have seen no death, might himself understand its nature. His punishment is both to die and to understand the consequences of death as the final punishment for his and Eve's disobedience. In Abel's corpse, Adam recognized himself. In the first days



Eve, the Serpent and Adam as Death, by Hans Baldung, *c.*1530. Eve, a coy but knowing figure, seductively grasps the serpent which simultaneously bites Adam as Death.

of creation, the notion of the body as a sender of signs to others, as in the culture of the macabre, is already established.

I have already noted that the culture of the macabre had roots which were both ancient, conventional and universal: the penitential world of the late Middle Ages is in a sense no more than a magnificent footnote to St Augustine and the Fathers of the Church. But, by the same token, the Gothic north developed a strikingly distinct vision of the body as a sign of this penitential thinking. Whereas the body of man in the Italian Renaissance was essentially an image of integration, of balance, whereby the best was selected from the diversity and accidental character of ordinary fallen humanity, so redeeming the body by art, in the north the most powerful and characteristic images are of disintegration, the exploration precisely of the accidents of death. Yet the net result was in each case the production of a type, a universal: on the one hand a universality of beauty, on the other a universality of Everyman's death, in which individuality is stripped away by the banal facts of decomposition. It is perhaps characteristic that it should have been German images of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, on the eve of the Reformation, that draw these two universalizing strands of the north and south together. As Joe Leo Koerner has shown, it was especially the work of Dürer's pupil Hans Baldung Grien, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, which collapsed these two themes together in an extremely distinguished set of images of the Fall. Baldung's representations of Death make play with Dürer's classically-inspired vision of perfect Adam. It is in these images that death as a vehicle of understanding of life emerges because of a new, and essentially modern, form of interaction and collusion: that between the viewer of the image and the image, as a means of understanding in itself. As we have seen, the roots of this relationship lie deep in the macabre itself.

In the art of Baldung, the impulse to voyeurism in the establishment of death as a spectacle is turned back on ourselves; as in the mirror, the image looks at us. Baldung's images of Adam and Eve at the Fall implicate us by their eye contact with us, and by their erotic impulse which we acknowledge as a symptom of our own fallen nature in our own erotic response. Death appears either in the guise of Adam or as a cadaver which pounces on and molests Eve. In such representations the conventional Christian discourse of gender is exposed: the feminine is aligned with death as the dangerous Other. Since the thirteenth century the serpent was frequently shown with a female head. But more important is how this image works. It engages us in a kind of aversion therapy: we shock ourselves into feeling Adam's own fallen sexual impulses, and comprehend through that feeling the consequence of it for Everyman, namely death itself. Death is revealed as itself an allegory of understanding: death, in Freud's words 'the aim of all life', becomes a criterion of the authenticity of human experience.