

appropriations is the *hand of a thief*, a particular, peculiar *main-tenant*, writing considered as a Discourse of Their going back to Prometheus and Jason."

<sup>10</sup> Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "La mythologie blanche", in *Marges* (Paris: Minuit, 1972); and cf. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing", in *Contingencies of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; also published by Harvester (Brighton) in 1982) and Berel Lang, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> John Lyly, *Euphues*, in James Winny (ed.), *The Descent of Euphues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Etymologically, strictly speaking, the words euphuism and euphemism, of course, are not directly related: Euphuism derives from *eu* = well, *physis* = nature; Euphemism derives from *eu* = well, *pheme* = speaking. The movement, or slippage, between them effected in Donne's writing, is a movement, then, from the body, from Euphuism (well-endowed by nature, well-natured) to the voice, Euphemism (well-speaking).

<sup>14</sup> John Donne, Elegy 7, in A. J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: Complete English Poems* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971; repr. 1973), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> The most obvious instances in Shakespeare are in *Hamlet*, IV, v, and in *The Winter's Tale*, IV, iv. There might indeed be a useful argument in which Ophelia is construed as a mother of sorts to Perdita, thus establishing some kind of matrarchal historical lineage of Shakespeare's plays. For a further development of this argument, see my *On Modern Authority* (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> See, in this context, Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 262.

<sup>18</sup> The link between legibility and legitimacy is an etymological one.

<sup>19</sup> John Donne, Satire 2, in Smith (ed.), *John Donne*, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> John Donne, "Air and Angels", in *ed. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 255: "The extinction . . . of the personal names of both author and readers shows what ideally happens in the act of reading: if there is a sacrifice to the exemplary, it involves the aggrandizement neither of author nor of reader but leads into the recognition that something worthy of perpetuation has occurred."

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Folie et Dérivation*, p. 14; italics mine.

<sup>23</sup> Paul M. Ochojski, "Did John Donne Repent his Apostasy?", *American Benedictine Review*, 1 (1950), 535-48.

<sup>24</sup> Donne, Satire 3, in *ed. cit.*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>25</sup> Hartman, *Saving the Text*, p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> See the full study from which this essay is an edited extract for many further examples of Donne's name "graved" and "engraved" in stony texts.

<sup>27</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, in Dolan (ed.), pp. 151-2; emphasis on "sin" in "insinuation" added.

<sup>28</sup> Donne, "The Triple Fool", in *ed. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Donne, *Divine Meditation* 19, "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one", in *ed. cit.*, p. 317.

## Love and death in "To his Coy Mistress"

CATHERINE BELSEY

### I

"The omnipotence of nature", Philippe Ariès says in his fascinating history of western mortality, "asserts itself in two areas: sex and death."<sup>1</sup> At the same time, these supremely natural areas of experience do not, at least in their human manifestation, exist outside culture. People have always, we may reasonably assume, made love, and always died. But the meanings of love and death are discursively and historically specific. Marvell's poem, which may well have been drafted in 1649, the year when the execution of Charles I emblematically established the end of the old order of sovereignty and subjection, can be seen as marking the border between two regimes of discourse, bringing into collision two distinct sets of meanings for these terms and for the relationship between them. As a poem about love and death, "To his Coy Mistress" may be read as displaying the cultural relativity and the historical instability of those areas which assert themselves as so self-evidently natural.

Formally the poem promises a certain transparency. This is a persuasion to love which apparently sets out to convince rather than to perplex or to dazzle. The structure, as is widely recognized, is that of a logical argument:

Had we but World enough, and Time,  
This coyress Lady were no crime. (lines 1-2)

But at my back I always hear  
Times winged Chariot hurrying near. (lines 21-2)

Now therefore . . . (line 33)<sup>2</sup>

The octosyllabic couplets effortlessly reproduce the word-order and the rhythm of speech: there are very few inversions. And this, in conjunction with the familiarity of the vocabulary, lends a certain laconic quality to the hyperbole of the first section of the poem and the macabre imagery of the second. The result is a combination of poise and intensity which is hard to resist.

*To his Coy Mistress*

- Had we but World enough, and Time,  
This coyress Lady were no crime.  
We would sit down, and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.  
Thou by the *Indian Ganges* side  
Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide  
Of *Humber* would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood:  
And you should if you please refuse  
Till the Conversion of the *Jews*.  
My vegetable Love should grow  
Vaster then Empires, and more slow.  
An hundred years should go to praise  
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.  
Two hundred to adore each Breast:  
But thirty thousand to the rest.  
An Age at least to every part,  
And the last Age should show your Heart.  
For Lady you deserve this State;  
Nor would I love at lower rate.  
20 Nor would I love at lower rate  
But at my back I alwaies hear  
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:  
And yonder all before us lye  
Desarts of vast Eternity.  
Thy Beauty shall no more be found;  
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound  
My echoing Song: then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity:  
30 And your quaint Honour turn to dust;  
And into ashes all my Lust.  
The Grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.  
Now therefore, while the youthful hew  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing Soul transpires  
At every pore with instant Fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may;  
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our Time devour,  
40 Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r.  
Let us roll all our Strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:  
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,  
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.



La paritarche et Le comestable  
Guyot de Marchant, 1485



From the *Danse Macabre des Femmes*  
Paris, 1491

Like so many Renaissance lyrics, the poem offers itself as a text of performance. It is neither directly addressed to the reader, simulating the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, nor yet a fully fledged dramatic monologue, specifying an ironic relationship between speaker and author, speaker and reader. The poem is presented as a speech, or perhaps a rehearsal of a speech, a marshalling of the arguments, addressed to a mistress. The reader is offered a position outside the event as a third person, present and absent, an observer, detached and knowing.

And yet by the end of the poem what precisely is it that we know? Is the text an invitation to savour the rhetoric of seduction (Marvell's control, wit, urbanity), or to celebrate the punishment of feminine coyress (the body of the mistress is anatomized, buried and then desecrated)? Or are we to delight in the triumph of love over time and death, as most critics have assumed? Or alternatively does the relationship identified in the text between love and death call in question, in ways these readings ignore, the system of differences that we, as twentieth-century readers, take for granted?

The argument of the poem depends on a series of oppositions between time and eternity, active and passive, life and death, and also on the transgression of the antitheses between them. The first section defines a world of infinite space and time:

We would sit down, and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.  
Thou by the *Indian Ganges* side  
Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide  
Of *Humber* would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood:  
And you should if you please refuse  
Till the Conversion of the *Jews*.

(lines 3-10)

This rich imaginary world embraces the exotic and the familiar, east and west (the Ganges, the Humber), past and future (the Flood, the Conversion of the Jews), wealth and deprivation (rubies, complaints). It contains everything – everything, that is, except action. To love is to sit down, think, complain, gaze, adore.

An hundred years should go to praise  
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.  
Two hundred to adore each Breast:  
But thirty thousand to the rest.

(lines 13-16)

The promise for the lover is "vegetable Love" (line 11), like the Aristotelian vegetable soul, endowed with life but not motion, and for

the lady "Stare", ceremony (line 19). For them both endless courtship and endless refusal, coyress endlessly endorsed.

The absurdity is crucial to the rhetorical project. It depends on the precision of the arithmetic (one hundred years for eyes and forehead, two hundred per breast . . .), and on the vegetable love, a giant plant, "Vaster then Empires" (line 12). The comedy throws into relief the limitations of an imaginary plenitude which is the effect of a gaze moving epoch by epoch across the dissected fragments of a woman's body: "An Age at least to every part" (line 17).

But the poem never doubted the impossibility of its own golden world. The plenitude of the first section is precisely imaginary: "Had we but World enough, and Time . . . we would . . . you should . . ." In the rhetoric of the proposition it is the imminence of death which constitutes the imperative to action:

yonder all before us lye  
Deserts of vast Eternity.  
Thy Beauty shall no more be found;  
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound  
My echoing Song: then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity:  
And your quaint Honour turn to dust;  
And into ashes all my Lust.

(lines 23-30)

Death makes a desert of eternity – and of honour, body, lust, poem and all. "Now therefore . . .", the text urges, "let us sport us" (lines 33, 37). Death introduces into the continuous and motionless plenitude of timeless adoration the mortal difference which has the effect of redefining love as action.

Time moves: its hurrying chariot threatens lovers, propels them towards eternal emptiness. Worms act, penetrating virgin cadavers. Death actively pulverizes beauty and coyress and desire to supply the deserts of vast eternity. To stay ahead, the text proposes, the lovers are to construct a counter-sphere, a full and continuous globe of their own, a new world of love in motion, all strength, all sweetness, all states, all princes, complete with its own (pre-Copernican) sun which, in contrast to Donne's in "The Sun Rising", will have to race to keep up with them:

Let us roll all our Strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one Ball;  
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,  
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

(lines 41-6)

The logic of the argument, of course, does not hold. It was a woman, perhaps less impressed than some of her critical predecessors by the

display of masculinity they found in the poem, who perceptively pointed out that the argument was not valid. If we had time we should wait; but we don't; so we shouldn't. "It does not follow", the lady might have replied.<sup>3</sup>

And if the logic is false so, however erotically enticing, is the rhetoric. It was another woman who suggested that "To his Coy Mistress" was not really a seduction poem at all, "but something much lonelier: it tells, not woos, and what it tells is not encouraging".<sup>4</sup>

The Grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.  
Now therefore . . .

(lines 31-3)

And yet in the margins of the difference which it is the apparent project of the poem to cement as opposition, the antithesis between love and death, morning and perpetual night, the sexual act and the passivity of decomposition, a figure steals out of the tomb to haunt the embrace which the grave itself excludes. Love is urgent because death threatens; love is action because time devours. It is the Ovidian commonplace which makes the logical and rhetorical case against delay. But the poem's alternative is that the lovers themselves should supplant time, simultaneously emulating and accelerating time's gradual consuming process: "Rather at once our Time devour, / Than languish in his slow-chapt power" (lines 39-40). To act is to behave like time and death.

But in the economy of the poem to take time's place is to speed towards the desert, and to accelerate the process is to hurtle through the gates of life. An earlier version of the text makes the point more sharply: "Let us at once our Selves devoure . . ." Love, death's opposite, is also its double in the "rough strife" which identifies the lovers as falcons, rearing their pleasures. The verbs, establishing the antithesis between the first section of the poem and the third, simultaneously indicate a parallel between the third section and the second. Love is like death – as violent and as destructive. As the rhythm drives the text forward, repeatedly eliminating the caesura (lines 35-6, 40, 44), the act of love sweeps the lovers through the gates of life, speeding up the sun and thus propelling them towards death. Love acts like death; sex is deadly; to make love is to die. And so the poem invokes without citing it the seventeenth-century pun which has so delighted generations of students.

## II

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Dance of Death was familiar all over Europe. During the 1420s it was painted, with accompanying

verses, round the walls of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris, where it formed a backdrop to sermons, social events, commercial exchanges, illicit meetings and prostitution. It was, in other words, part of life. It subsequently decorated the walls of the Pardon Churchyard of St Paul's Cathedral in London, where it remained until the churchyard was demolished in 1549, with verses translated from the French by Lydgate. There is evidence to suggest that the Dance was widely imitated in a number of churches in England and Scotland, including the parish church of Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>9</sup> Its most famous representation is probably the series of woodcuts designed by Holbein and printed in 1538. It is to be found in miniature in a number of Books of Hours, and in at least one Anglican book of prayers printed in 1578. It survives in seventeenth-century England as a ballad with woodcut illustrations.

In the Dance of Death emaciated cadavers seize as partners living men and women, each representing a specific social position, usually beginning with the Pope and the Emperor and including the Ploughman, the Peasant or perhaps the Beggar. Rhythm and movement are the property of the desiccated figures: the living hang back, reluctant to join the dance, coy. The gestures of the dead are not overtly erotic, but the irony of the Dance of Death depends on the parallel between love and death. In Lydgate's English version Death tells the Lady of Great Estate that she must now learn a new dance step. The Lady acknowledges that there is no remedy. "Dette hath yn erthe no ladi ne maiestresse / And on his dannce yitte moste I nedes fore."<sup>7</sup> More explicitly, in a sixteenth-century version Death takes hold of a princess with the words, "Content you, I am your mate."<sup>8</sup>

There is no defiance among the living. Death's invitation is recognized as irresistible, inexorable and final. In consequence mortal sexuality is seen to be vain and fleeting in the context of eternity. The parallel between love and death also marks an ironic distance between them. (As another of Marvell's poems reminds us, parallel lines, "though infinite can never meet".<sup>9</sup>) In Guyot Marchant's version of the Dance of Death, printed in 1485, the Squire claims a moment as Death accosts him to bid farewell to earthly pleasures: "Adieu deduis, adieu solas, / Adieu dames". The Knight's boast as he joins the dance that he has been loved by the ladies is no more than a pathetic irrelevance.<sup>10</sup> Lydgate's Baron was accustomed to dance with women, but he finds that Death has made him lame.<sup>11</sup> A ballad version, probably printed in 1625, shows Death in the company of Time, who has wings (but no chariot), an hourglass and a scythe. In this text Death is more specific than some of his predecessors about the pleasures he destroys:

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And you that lean on your Ladies laps,  
and lay your heads upon their knee,  
Think you for to play with beautiful paps  
and not to come and dance with me:  
No, fair Lords and Ladies all,  
I will make you come when I do call,  
And find you a Pipe to dance withal.<sup>12</sup>

In a French book of hours dating from the mid sixteenth century (MS. Douce, 135) a miniature Dance of Death decorates the Office of the Dead. At the foot of the pages depicting Death and the Emperor a lover shows his mistress her face in a glass. No sooner are they married than Death, in a grim parody of the god of love, aims his dart at them as they stroll together in the fields. Death is equally indifferent to the youth and beauty of Lydgate's Amorous Gentlewoman. Polixena, Penelope and Helen were just as handsome, and they all joined the dance.<sup>13</sup>

Love is momentary, death eternal. But the Dance of Death also exposes the instability of other earthly values – glory, wealth and power. Death releases the soul from its temporal and temporary alliance with the body, leaving the corruptible flesh to inevitable decay. The project of the Dance of Death is to invite the spectator to see the world and flesh in their transience, and to view them in consequence with a proper contempt, choosing instead the spiritual values which promise eternal life. Death itself is an affair of the body.

Medieval asceticism leaves its mark on "To his Coy Mistress". The body devoured by worms was a common warning against worldly pride. The image of a beautiful woman attacked by worms in the grave served as a reminder of the mutability of the flesh.<sup>14</sup>

Thy Beauty shall no more be found;  
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound  
My echoing Song: then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity.

(lines 25-8)

In medieval representations of the punishment of lechery, sin of the flesh, serpents twined themselves round the body of a woman, sucking at her breasts and entering her vagina.

It is not necessary to argue that Marvell was personally familiar with these images, or with the Dance of Death, though he may have been. Lydgate's text of the Dance of Death was reprinted by Tottel in 1554, and new versions appeared in ballad form with graphic woodcuts in 1569, 1580(?), 1625(?) and 1631. "To his Coy Mistress" itself makes clear that the images, and the contempt of the world which they urge on the spectator, were wholly intelligible in the first half of the seventeenth century.

But there intervenes between the Dance and Marvell's poem the Renaissance discovery of the *carpe diem* tradition of Latin poetry, which recognizes a similar network of differences between love and death, but reverses the values. In innumerable Renaissance poems daffodils, roses, dew, snow, spring and all of nature conspire to demonstrate the worth of things that perish. The imminence and the eternity of death makes sex more urgent, its pleasures more intense. The body is precious because it dies.

Marvell's poem also participates in this reversal of values. It is chastity, not lechery, which is punished after death by worms. In the Dance of Death the dead mimic lovers: in "To his Coy Mistress" it is love which emulates death. To choose love rather than asceticism is to defy eternity and choose the world, to choose to be a world. And yet the imagery of this challenge, the imagery of emulation, abolishes the opposition between love and death set up in the first two sections of the poem and thus, ironically, reinstates asceticism. To make love is to die; to choose the world and the flesh is to repudiate the values which promise eternal life; to choose the pleasures of the body is thus to reject immortality. In its account of time and death the poem reproduces the terms of the medieval contempt of the world. Indeed, in the mid seventeenth century it cannot escape them. At the same time it defies them. Asceticism condemns the world as inadequate, as merely temporal. The poem's lovers, also recognizing the inadequacy of the temporal world, make their own world, and opt for that — and in doing so they opt for death.

### III

In the late middle ages the iconography of death was elaborate, complex and pervasive. In the Renaissance death invaded the newly defined privacy of the home in the form of skulls displayed among the furniture or reflections on mortality inscribed on mantelpieces and sundials.<sup>15</sup> Death's-heads commonly decorated personal possessions, jewellery and weapons.<sup>16</sup>

But in the twentieth century death has become unspeakable. Death is concealed from our knowledge as far as possible. Friends and relations often preserve in conjunction with the dying person a conspiracy of silence, of apparent ignorance, of optimism. We debate whether the doctor should tell the patient the truth. The moment of death is a private one: the family no longer assemble at the bedside. Death tends increasingly to take place in the solitude of the hospital. Children are kept away, perhaps not told: death is an adult secret. Sudden death

is a blessing: "at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that she knew nothing about it". Mourning has become a discreet and reticent affair compared with the elaborate funerals of earlier periods. It is a consequence of individualism that the death of the individual is no longer the concern of the community. Monuments, unless to public figures, are rare. Sorrow, however, is no less intense for that. On the contrary, it has become an inner, private anguish to which ritual cannot do justice — that within which passes show. Meanwhile, the bereavement of other people is a source of embarrassment, a topic to be avoided. An interest in death is morbid. As Arès, who lists most of these modern developments, suggests, "this is a way of denying the presence of death in practice, even if one accepts its reality in principle . . . . Death has been banished."<sup>17</sup>

At the end of his elegant and challenging book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt recounts how he was unable to mime the words, "I want to die". He had been asked to do so by a stranger on a plane, whose suicidal son, he understood, had lost the power of speech. The stranger was anxious to try out his own ability to lip-read. Why, Greenblatt wonders, could he not carry out the man's request. Superstition? Fear that his fellow passenger was some kind of homicidal maniac? The desire to be the author of his own sentences?<sup>18</sup> All those things, perhaps, and, I suggest from a post-structuralist point of view, one more: that the self, the subject, constructs itself in the act of speaking, is an effect of its own utterances, and that the supreme fear of the modern self, the subject of liberal humanism, is the fear of death. To say, "I want to die" is simultaneously to produce the self and to will the abolition it dreads.

Liberal humanism makes the subject sovereign, the ultimate location of presence. In liberal humanism the subject is absolute. While Marvell was putting the finishing touches to his poem in the 1670s, Locke had already begun his twenty years' work on *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which theorized the nature of subjectivity in the new order of sovereignty brought about by the Revolution of the 1640s against the absolutism of Charles I. In the *Essay*, published in 1690, Locke makes clear that the only evidence we have of the existence of anything outside ourselves is our experience of it. That we exist, on the other hand, is self-evident, and here Locke amplifies Descartes. My experience confirms that I exist: "I think, I reason, I feel pleasure and pain"; and if I doubt that, my very doubt confirms my existence (IV ix.3).<sup>19</sup>

Even God cannot be shown to exist independently of the subject. The evidence that God exists is that I exist as a knowing subject and,

since nothing can come of nothing, there must eternally have been something intelligent and knowing (IV.x). Locke's humanism is, as the term implies, basically (though not very explicitly) secular. The subject is the guarantee of the existence of God. Good and evil are no more than what is synonymous with our pleasure and pain (I.xx.2). The afterlife is never identified as more than a probability (II.xxi.70), a matter of faith (IV.xviii.7). The subject itself is the only certainty.

In Locke's account the origin of knowledge is experience, and the subject is the place where experience is assembled and interpreted. Experience shows that people die. We know therefore that we die, but we do not know what death is like. We cannot have experience of our own death. Death is fearful because it is in this sense unknown. When Claudio in *Measure for Measure* thinks of death with horror for this reason, "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where" (III.i.119), or when Hamlet dreads "something after death — / 'The undiscover'd country'" (*Hamlet*, III.i.78-9),<sup>20</sup> they approach the modern consciousness of death as the unknown and unknowable.

But if in liberal humanism the evidence for the existence of the world is the existence of the subject, nonetheless the liberal-humanist subject needs the world as other, as that which defines the subject by its difference. The subject is necessarily a knowing subject, differentiated as an entity from the objects of its knowledge. Knowledge (experience) is the guarantee of our existence as subjects, of the consciousness which, according to Locke in the seventeenth century — and to common sense in the twentieth — constitutes personal identity (II.i.11). But our death exceeds consciousness. It is an end to consciousness of which, precisely, we cannot be conscious. That our own death is unknowable thus marks the sovereign subject as finite in more than a merely chronological sense. The fear of death is the recognition of the limits of the subject's imaginary sovereignty.

This absence at the heart of consciousness brings the subject to confront that other absence which is the condition of its being. As an effect of language, the subject is never able to be fully present to itself in its own utterances. From moment to moment, as it speaks, the self which is the guarantee of the world slips, slides and perishes in the very act of affirming its own supremacy. The project of liberal humanism is to reaffirm the sovereign subject by denying the discontinuity of the self.

The nineteenth century specialized in ways of disavowing death, defining it as the gateway to heaven, a sort of large-scale home (what could be more inviting?) beyond the sky, where loved ones would recognize each other and be reunited. But in the more sceptical twentieth century the fear of death is correspondingly more acute. Freud,

who so shrewdly observed the emotional contortions of the liberal-humanist subject, draws attention to the contradiction between our recognition that everyone must die and our evasion of the thought of our own death. He also points to the solution we tend to propose: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators."<sup>21</sup> By this ingenious means the secular subject reasserts its own immortality, preserving its knowing essence as it imagines itself hovering over its own body, watching how the world goes on, missing people — and being missed. Even suicides, who must seem, after all, a counter-example to the modern denial of death, tend apparently to share this impulse. Writers of suicide notes commonly pay considerable attention to the future. They often "appear to be profoundly interested in what is going to happen after their death, as if they were still going to participate in events."<sup>22</sup>

What survives in this imagined future is consciousness, identity. The denial of death thus reaffirms the sovereignty of the subject. Greenblatt, who began, he says, by assuming the autonomy of the subject, and came increasingly to doubt it, ends his narrative and his book as follows:

I have related this brief story of my encounter with the distraught father on the plane because I want to bear witness at the close to my overwhelming need to sustain the illusion that I am the principal maker of my own identity.<sup>23</sup>

But "To his Coy Mistress", acknowledging death, makes no attempt to sustain such an illusion. Marvell's speaker hears time's chariot; his gaze encounters the deserts of vast eternity; his lust is turned to ashes. His song, the poem, the utterance which constructs the speaker as subject, is inaudible in the grave. If it is the fate of the woman's body which most appals and thrills us in the second section of the poem, the force and strangeness of that medieval image should not distract us from this new element in the text, death as the end of consciousness, of desire as well as of the body which is its object.

The Grave's a fine and private place,

But none I think do there embrace.

(lines 31-2)

What is the sense of that "I think"? Hesitant, possibly, or perhaps admonitory. But does it not also mark the tentative entry of the Cartesian *cogito* into the terrain of death, a terrain which has hitherto been above all that of the body?

#### IV

In the middle ages people were surrounded by the iconography of death. But as early as 1658 the Dance of Death had already become a matter of

antiquarian interest, reprinted as an appendix to Dugdale's *History of St Paul's Cathedral*. In the twentieth century it is the iconography of love which everywhere proclaims our commitment to life. Advertising, popular music, novels and films make sexuality synonymous with vitality, with psychic and bodily health. In the system of differences brought into being in the seventeenth century, the set of meanings which frame our modern convictions and practices, romantic love and marriage become indissolubly linked with each other and with life.<sup>24</sup> The conjugal family, as the authorized location of the creation of life in a literal sense, centres on the loving couple, whose concord guarantees the growth of their children in moral and physical health. As the alternative to the brutality and impersonality of the market, its other, the family constitutes and circumscribes the legitimate realm of intimate and intense feeling.

From this moment onwards until the nineteenth century, fiction becomes increasingly concerned with the family and family relationships. The obvious identity of love with life, and of both with the family, is reaffirmed in a great many mid-Victorian novels. Lucy Snowe, for instance, heroine of *Villette* and, like so many nineteenth-century protagonists, an orphan (what could be worse?), is haunted by the figure of a spectral nun, emblem of the loveless and thus deadly future she dreads. Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*, another orphan, begins to decline spiritually and physically when she is cut off from the love of Robert Moore. There is nothing organically wrong, but gradually Caroline at eighteen begins to share the "bloodless pallor" and the "corpse-like" appearance of the "old maids" the novel struggles so valiantly to treat with respect. The effects of unrequited love are defined in the imagery of death:

she wasted, grew more joyless and more wan . . . an elegy over the past still rung constantly in her ear; a funeral inward cry haunted and harassed her: the heaviness of a broken spirit, and of pining and palsifying faculties, settled slow on her buoyant youth. Winter seemed conquering her spring: the mind's soils and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation.<sup>25</sup>

Shirley's friendship, though precious, is not enough to protect her, and Caroline slowly sinks towards death. It is her long-lost mother who saves her life, and the love of Robert which restores her to youth and beauty with "the cordial of heart's ease".<sup>26</sup> Within the family, and within romantic love which is its foundation, is health and vitality: outside it, solitude and death. The figure of Miss Havisham, in *Great Expectations*, skeletal in her faded wedding dress which is also a shroud, conflates the elegiac and the Gothic strands in the Victorian image of

the sexless woman. Abandoned on what was to have been her wedding day, Miss Havisham, in a grotesque parody of motherhood, brings up Estella an enemy to love and life.

But the equation of life with love is not confined to women, though they are its foremost victims. The dividing line between public and private, economic and affective, is transgressed by Mr Dombe, who has no identity outside his firm ("the House"), and who brings death into his home in consequence. Incapable of love, and thus deadly to his first wife and to the doomed son who is permitted to be no more than a repetition of his own (public and economic) being, Mr Dombe dismisses little Paul's nurse, the apple-checked and fecund Polly Tootle, and consigns him to the care of the loveless Cornelia Blimber, "dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages. None of your live languages for Miss Blimber. They must be dead — stone dead."<sup>27</sup> The dying Paul solicits and secures the love of everyone in that unloving academy, but the totality of their kindness does not stand in for the vital and vitalizing love of father and mother. Without such nourishment he shrinks and fades.

The coerciveness of this series of equations of life with love and love with the family is at once apparent. Emotional fulfilment is to be found within the family and not outside it. Friendship is always secondary. Celibacy is a kind of death. The world of work is legitimately harsh, since the family provides what the market-place fails to supply. And meanwhile, the economic and political relations which exist within the patriarchal family are disavowed, dissolved in the naturalness of domestic concord.

In the twentieth century attention narrows to the sexual relation itself. Connie Charterley, married to an impotent husband, begins to lose touch with "the substantial and vital world".<sup>28</sup> The terms are familiar: there is nothing organically wrong, but she wastes. The doctor tells her, "You're spending your life without renewing it . . . You're spending your vitality without making any."<sup>29</sup> Sexual experience brings her back to life — or rather to life for the first time. The male sensuality of Mellors causes Connie at last to be "born: a woman".<sup>30</sup> In a society which is rapidly losing touch with the primordial centre of the truly human, Mellors holds on to the real value of the sexual. "For me it's the core of my life: if I have a right relation with a woman."<sup>31</sup> A right relation: the coercion is there again, and more palpably in this overtly proselytizing work. Mellors has already systematically listed all the possible wrong relations — which is to say the wrong kinds of sexual behaviour on the part of women.<sup>32</sup>

Lawrence was familiar with the work of Freud,<sup>33</sup> and would no

doubt have endorsed Freud's valuation of "the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act".<sup>34</sup> It was in the 1920s in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Ego and the Id* that Freud helped to cement the existing system of differences by theorizing an opposition between two contrary drives, the sexual which presses towards life, and the death drive which issues in hate, destructiveness or sadism. Though Freud concedes that the death drive may be brought into the service of sexuality,<sup>35</sup> and that love may alternate with hate,<sup>36</sup> the texts struggle to keep sex and death apart, insisting that there is a fundamental opposition between them.<sup>37</sup> A similar opposition informs the work of Freud's most Oedipal of descendants, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who propose an antithesis between paranoid/fascist signification, which is deadly, and the liberation of desire in schizo-revolutionary nonsense.<sup>38</sup>

How can we account for this great dualism of love and death in liberal humanism? Conjecturally, by returning to the subject, so absolute and yet so precarious. Identity is an effect of language. Subjects are constituted and take up their places in discourses which define "reality", a set of evident truths, perceived and lived, experienced. But the maintenance of their subject-positions depends on the constant and reiterated confirmation of this reality, a complicity with other subjects to recognize the same objects of knowledge, to share their experience. Our social organization divides work from leisure, the public and the political from the personal. The public world offers confirmation that subjects participate adequately in the consensual knowledges in the form of material rewards, promotion or prestige. It thus reaffirms their identity. In the personal realm, however, only sexual love, the sexual act, self-evidently requires the undivided attention of subjects to each other, depends on a complicity to share the same experience, and promises the reassurance that that implies. Hence the value attached to simultaneous orgasm. Lovers act as mirrors for each other, reflect back in the act an experience of loving each other's imaginary identity. Reciprocal love is the affirmation of the subject, as death is its dissolution.

## 17

But in the seventeenth century the liberal-humanist dualism of love and death was not yet fixed, and an ironic parallel between them was still in play. The collision between two orders of sovereignty and subjectivity which took place in the period produced strange and shifting alignments between love and death. The swooning death, the quasi-

sexual beatitude of the expiring Counter-Reformation saints, is one of these. The element of sadistic pleasure that invades the depiction of violence and torture in the baroque era is another. Marvell's poem is distinct from either. If "To his Coy Mistress" identifies a similarity as well as a distance between love and death, it does not confuse the two.

But the obscurity of the third section of the poem, its difficulty for us now, is, I suggest, an effect of its historical moment. The majority of twentieth-century readings, in quest of coherence, the single, unified meaning which is the impress of the author-subject's consciousness, follow the text's apparent logic (if . . . but . . . therefore . . .), and treat the final section as a celebration of love and life victorious over time and death. Read in this way, the poem elegantly restates an evident truth, confirms the familiar antithesis between love and death, and so reaffirms our experience and thus our identity.

There is, however, a motive for refusing this majority reading, seeking out instead a set of inter-discursive relations that the poem does not name but cannot ignore, a collision between the asceticism it both defies and defers to and the humanism which it cannot yet recognize. Read in this way, the poem indicates that there have been other dispositions of knowledge, that in the mid seventeenth century (liberal-humanist) consciousness began to supplant the (medieval) soul and to invade the realm of the body, bringing about a new alignment of love and death, and a new place for the body and its pleasures.

Our sense of history determines our sense of the present, of its naturalness and inevitability on the one hand, or its relativity on the other. To read texts from the past in their historical difference is to relativize the present, to locate it as a moment in a continuing process of change. It is consequently to release the present — and the future — from the determinism of the natural, and so to place them both rather more firmly in our hands.

## Notes

- 1 Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, tr. Helen Weaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 392.
- 2 H. M. Margoliouth (ed.), *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, revised by Pierre Legouis and E. E. Duncan Jones, vol. 1, *The Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). All references are to this edition.
- 3 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 134.
- 4 Barbara Everett, "The Shooting of the Bears: poetry and politics in Andrew Marvell", *Andrew Marvell: essays on the tercentenary of his death*, ed.



- R. L. Brett (Oxford: University of Hull and Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 62-103, p. 70.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Michael Cazez, *The Life and Lyrics of Andrew Marvell* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 322.
- <sup>6</sup> James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son and Co., 1950), p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Florence Warren (ed.), *The Dance of Death, Early English Text Society O.S.* 181 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), Ellesmere MS., lines 194-5.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Day, *A Booke of Christian Prayers* (London, 1578), p. 94v.
- <sup>9</sup> "The Definition of Love", Margoliouth ed., *Poems and Letters*.
- <sup>10</sup> Edward F. Chaney (ed.), *La Dame Maabre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1945), lines 235-6, 204.
- <sup>11</sup> Warren (ed.), *The Dance of Death*, Ellesmere MS., lines 173-83.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Doleful Dance and Song of Death* (London?), 1625(?).
- <sup>13</sup> Warren (ed.), *The Dance of Death*, Ellesmere MS., lines 449-53.
- <sup>14</sup> Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 29-30 and fig. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, pp. 330-1.
- <sup>16</sup> For examples see William R. Levin, *Images of Love and Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1976).
- <sup>17</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, p. 580.
- <sup>18</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 255-6.
- <sup>19</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). All references are to this edition.
- <sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951).
- <sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 273-302, p. 289.
- <sup>22</sup> Erwin Stengel, *Suicide and Attempted Suicide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 36.
- <sup>23</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 257.
- <sup>24</sup> Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1985) pp. 206-16.
- <sup>25</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Andrew and Judith Hook (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 195, 199.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 557.
- <sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, *Domby and Son*, ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 120.
- <sup>28</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 21.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-12.
- <sup>33</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 102.
- <sup>34</sup> This is not offered as a declaration of personal preference: it lays claim to the status of a scientific truth. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 62.
- <sup>35</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, p. 54; *The Ego and the Id, The Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 41.
- <sup>36</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, pp. 42-4.
- <sup>37</sup> So firmly is sex identified with life that Freud sees the fear of death as in reality a development of the fear of castration, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 58.
- <sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking, 1977); Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).