A large, detailed woodcut illustration of a woman's face, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a ruffled collar. The style is characteristic of 19th-century book illustrations.

**NOTES ON  
DEATH AND THE MAIDEN**

ROBERT O. LENKIEWICZ



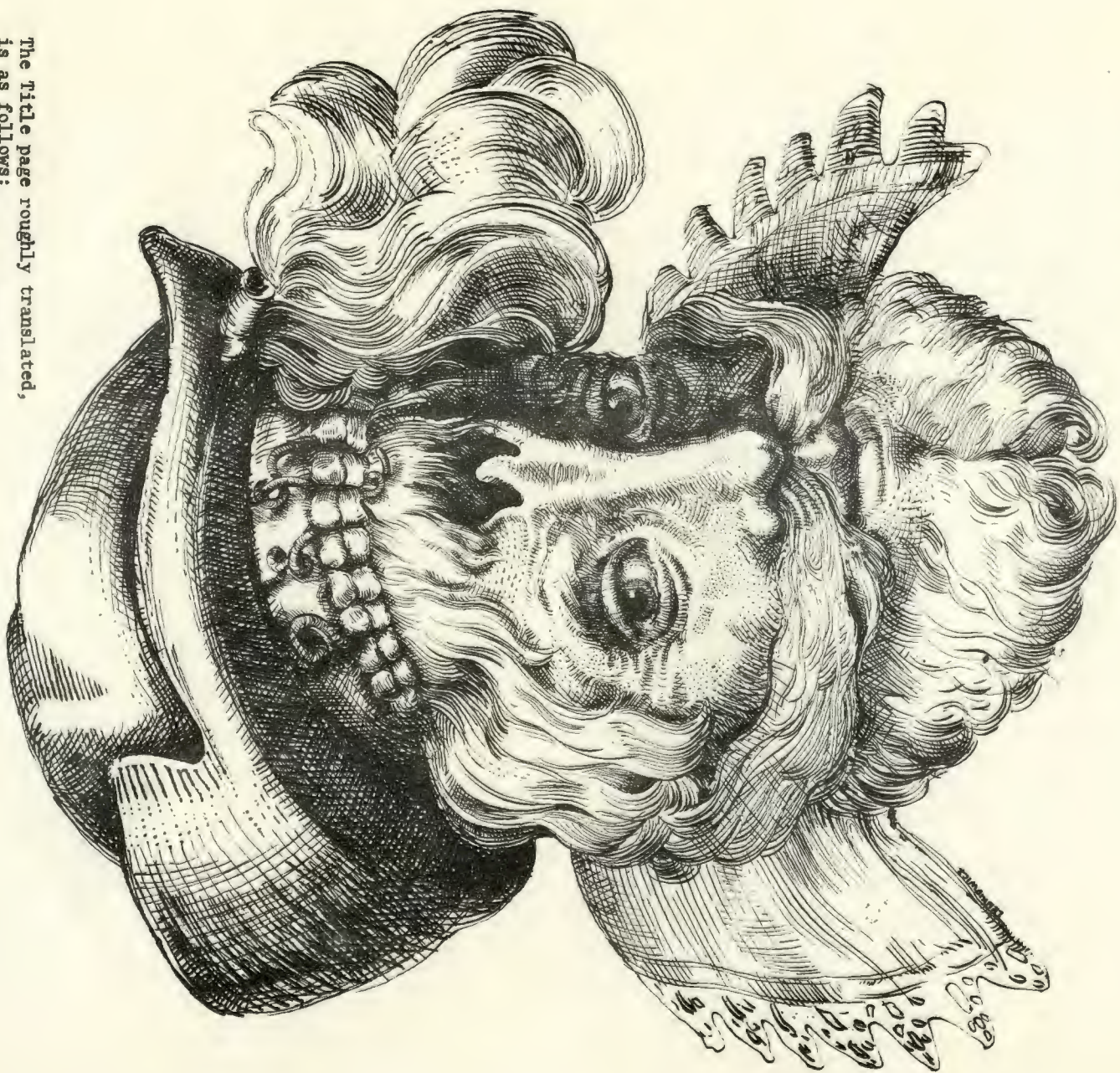


To Aude - without knowing why.

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The title page roughly translated,  
is as follows:

DANCE OF DEATH; how it was  
painted artificially and to  
be seen in the praised and  
world-famous city of Basel  
as a mirror of the condition  
of man. The above engraving  
is on page 98. Date, c.1836 ?

Double-headed engraving found at the rear  
of a curious German Dance of Death book.

The original quotes Biblically, observing  
that when facing this way up; He needs  
nobody, is rich and has everything in  
abundance. When facing the otherway,  
however, He cries; Look fellow human,  
how I have ended; miserable, poor and  
with nothing.

"Supposing truth to be a woman - what?  
is the suspicion not well founded  
that all philosophers, when they have  
been dogmatists, have had little  
understanding of women? that the  
clumsy importunity with which they  
have hitherto been in the habit of  
approaching truth have been inept  
and improper means for winning a wench?"

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: Prelude to a  
Philosophy of the Future. Preface; 1885.  
By, Friedrich Nietzsche.



NOTES ON DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

R.O.LENKIEWICZ

" If I must die, I'll snatch at everything  
That may but mind me of my latest breath;  
Death's-heads, graves, knells, blacks,  
Tombs, all these shall bring  
Into my soul such useful thoughts of death,  
That this sable king of fears  
Shall not catch me unawares."

Francis Quarles 1592 - 1644.





THE advice inscribed upon a 1st century B.C. tomb of a dead woman says:

"Hail, my brother, husband, friend, . . . let not thy heart cease to drink water, to eat bread, to drink wine, to love women, to make a happy day, and to seek thy heart's desire by day and by night."

We recognise here a world-view that is very familiar. It is hardly surprising that this basic attitude has maintained itself for thousands of years. The inclination to reflect upon transience and mutability finds further expression in the MEMENTO MORI device alluded to by Herodotus in his History; (book two). He informs us that during the banquets customarily held by the wealthy of Egypt, a servant would carry round a wood-carving of a corpse in a sarcophagus. So doing, he would tell each guest to drink and enjoy himself since after death he would be as the wooden image.

Similarly, in Imperial Rome, accounts of feasts refer to miniature skeletons made in bronze or silver; the more skilful ones were jointed. This articulation permitted the guest to fix it into any posture appropriate to his sense of humour. Many of the dining rooms at Pompei contained mosaic floor patterns, the centres of which depicted skeletons or death's-heads.

IN the Louvre museum can be seen two silver wine-cups. They are embossed with skeletons ("Shades") and bear various inscriptions. They advise that one eats, drinks, and enjoys life, for tomorrow one becomes a "Shade". Some of the skeleton images can be recognised as poets and philosophers. One of them, (possibly Epicurus) holds a long philosopher's staff in his left hand; whilst his right hand reaches to some food on the table. Above the food is engraved: "Pleasure is the final object." These cups are designed to remind the drinker of the end of all things, the temporary nature of philosophic learning, and of philosophers. The drinker draining his

wine, is echoing the drinker draining his life. A similar moral is emphasised - more directly - by a Macedonian cup of the 1st century B.C. The relief-images on the side of the cup depict two emaciated figures - each with an enormous phallus - with the inscription: "Hold (or, possess) and use."

CLEARLY, the most direct analogy between the theme of drinking and of death is achieved when the drinking vessel is the human skull.

One may find endless references to the use of the cranium as a drinking-cup in all cultures.

Warriors in Teutonic paradise drank mead from the skulls of vanquished enemies. Aldoin, King of the Lombards, (6th, century.A.D.) forced his wife Rosamunda, to drink from the skull of her father. The skull of the 10th century Slavonic Prince of Russia, was embossed with gold and used as a cup for the conquering chief.

Similarly, the skull of the first Latin Emperor of Constantinople - with the unfortunate name of Baldwin - fell into the hands of a Bulgarian king as a wine-cup.

THE skull as a wine-cup delivers the final ironic twist to those believed that they drank the 'Wine of Life'; understandably, it became a sought after culinary item. As late as the 17th century Sir Thomas Browne felt obliged to argue in favour of cremation on the grounds that ordinary burial permitted the:

" tragicall abomination, of being knav'd  
out of our graves and of having our  
skulls made drinking bowls and our  
bones turned into pipes." (ii)

(ii) Hydriotaphia; I658.  
Sir Thomas Browne.

THE Greeks likewise advocated pleasure and hedonistic abandon; an anonymous Greek verse concludes:

"Remember joys can last but with the breath,  
And think how short s space parts life and death;  
An instant:- seize what good may now befall;  
Dead, thou hast nothing, and another all."



The objection to 'endless sleep' is implied in the Greek word 'cemetery' meaning a 'sleeping chamber'. Their mythology stated that Hypnos (sleep) and Thanatos (death) were related; what came before was certainly preferable to what came after. The epitaph of Julianus Aegyptus insists:

'What oft alive I sung, now dead I cry  
Loud from the tomb: 'Drink, mortals, ere you die.'"

ATTITUDES towards death maintained themselves in endless variations during the following centuries; but by the turn of the 14th century a new aspect had developed.

In the year 1330, gunpowder was used for the first time in the west. By 1336 the Hundred Years' War had commenced, and in 1345 the first apothecary's shop was opened in London. That same year the bubonic plague was epidemic in Africa and Asia. Two years later it spread to Constantinople and then to Greece and Italy, and so inevitably from there throughout Europe. It was during this great epidemic that the plague was named "the Black Death", because of the dark areas formed by minute hemorrhages which appeared in the skin of those affected.

During times of the plague comfort was provided to the dying people by absolutions granted by the popes. In the year 1348 Clement VI granted absolution from all sins of all Christians who should die on a journey to Rome, where, in spite of the plague, a Holy Year was being celebrated. As well as absolution, it was assured that the souls of those who died would go straight to heaven without having to pass through purgatory. By Easter 1,200,000 people from all parts of Europe had gathered at Rome. Some of these had brought the plague with them; it rapidly spread throughout the crowded city, and hardly ten per cent lived to return to their homes. The offerings that the pilgrims made amounted to an enormous sum for the Church. The pope did not contract the plague as he was at Avignon, (which he had just purchased from Queen Jane of Naples), and when



Terminating rosary - bead (possibly from chaplet). MEMENTO MORI; Ivory with traces of red and black paint. Flemish: first half of the 16th century. Victoria and Albert Museum; 2149 - 1855.

The bead measures two inches in diameter, and consists of four half - figures placed back to back. (a) shows a young man in costume; (b) represents the man dying, mouth open, gasping for breath; (c) shows him in a shroud, with staring eyes and swollen tongue; the abdomen occupied by an unpleasant head to signify punishment; (d) is a skeleton with an hour-glass, crawling with worms.



the plague reached that city he isolated himself in one room for the duration of the epidemic. This sensible advice was given by his physician who himself died of the plague.

Frantic waves of piety overwhelmed the people, they gave their possessions to the Church, who in turn enforced moral regulations. They issued edicts against concubines and forbade the manufacture of dice.

The dice factories adjusted and for a while manufactured rosary beads.

During the 14th century, in Europe alone, twenty five million people died. The dead and the dying blocked the streets. Liberated convicts carted them away to massive pits and even to the sea, from which the bodies were washed back to pile up on the shores.

The figure of death took on gigantic proportions, he straddled the horizon with his silhouetted scythe, and every person in Europe could see him from their windows.

THE skeleton figure took on h rrowing overtones, it symbolised death on a vast scale without discrimination or politics on the one side, and the vanity of the world on the other.

Doctor Faustus reflects the current morals when he says:

" When all is done, divinity is best:

Jerome's Bible Faustus, view it well:

Stipendium peccati mors est: ha! . . .

The reward of sin is death? That's hard.

Si peccasse negamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis veritas:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. Why then belike, we must sin, and so consequently die.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

What doctrine call you this ? Che sara, sara:

What will be, shall be. Divinity adieu! " (iii)

(iii)The Tragicall History  
of the Life and Death  
of Doctor Faustus.  
Christopher Marlowe.  
1624. Act I, Scene i.

ICONOGRAPHY in general began to 'report' on death as a terrible warning. The visual imagery became far more explicit; little doubt remained about what happened to the body after death. French and German artisans in particular, became lovingly gruesome.

Crude in some cases and technically highly accomplished in others, the skeleton figure became an appendage upon which the process of decay could be exhibited.

There was a precedent for this in the Old Testament:

(iv) Ecclesiasticus.X.II.

" For when a man is dead, he shall inherit creeping things, beasts and worms." (iv)

Indeed, a German engraving of 1480 represents Moses with the ten commandments in the upper section, and a corpse being eaten by worms in the lower one.

This motif clearly illustrates the specific passage in Ecclesiasticus;XXVIII.6.:

" Remember corruption and death, and abide in the commandments."

Quite an accurate painting of a decaying body may be seen in the work of the Master of King Rene; - one of these being described as 'King Death'. (v)

The well known painting - allegedly by Grunwald - of a man and a woman in the process of decomposition; snakes and worms emerging from their throats and intestines.

A toad - always a symbol of death - rests on the woman's vagina. The harrowing image bitterly derides the illusion of youth and passion.

The medieval artist naturally assumed that the representation of death as a rotting shrivelled corpse would add 'bite' to the lesson; and henceforth decay began to be treated very literally.

In the crowded graveyards of Germany, France and Italy, a visitor or passer-by had every opportunity of seeing the remains of a cadaver as the grave-digger turned out the contents of old graves into pits or 'charnel-houses' to make room for new arrivals. The remains of hanged criminals, customarily left on the gibbets would have

(v) King Rene, Book of Hours.  
British Museum.MS.Egerton  
I070. fol; 55.

Pair of Lovers.  
Mathis Gothart-Neithart  
(grunewald). Strasbourg,  
Musee de la Ville.





A common sight in  
medieval Europe.

PISANELLO; Hanged Men.  
Drawing. (British Museum)



provided further evidence for the curious, life-size sepulchral statues became fashionable; the statue of Jeanne de Bourbon, Countess of Burgundy, -in the Louvre- depicts a woman partially draped being eaten by worms. The Bargello museum in Florence contains two reliefs in coloured wax by G. Zumbo, that represent decomposing bodies amidst ruined buildings and tombs. A figure of Time points to the spectacle of putrefaction. Countless memento mori 'curios' abound in the form of decomposing skeletons. There are some very skilful examples in room 62 of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

THERE is an amusing relation by Vasari in his Lives of the Painters, regarding Fivizzano, an Italian painter, who painted death so literally on canvas that he died from the effect of contemplating his own work. A 16th century stained glass window in the Church of St. Vincent at Rouen, records the putrefying body of the donor. One of the most extreme incidents recorded regarding the portrayal of decay is related by Jeremy Taylor: (vi)

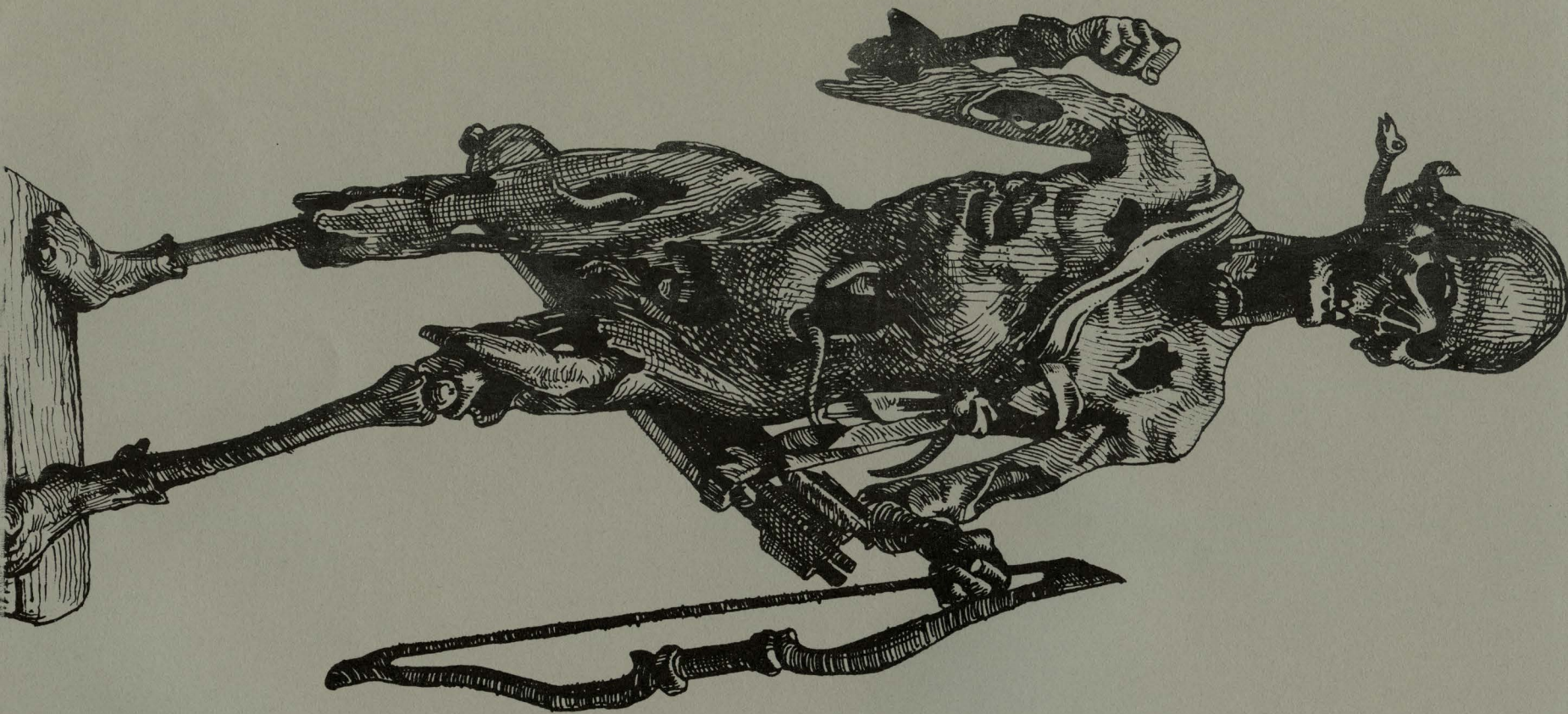
" I have read of a fair young German gentleman, who, living, often refused to be pictured, but put off the importunity of his friends desire by giving way, that, after a few days' burial, they might send a painter to his vault, and if they saw cause for it, draw the image of his death unto the life. They did so, and found his face half eaten, and his midriff and backbone full of serpents; and so he stands pictured among his armed ancestors. "

Before his death, Rene de Chalon, Prince of Orange and killed in 1544, is said to have expressed a wish that a statue be cut of him, not as he appeared alive, but as his body would appear some considerable time after his death. His widow, Anne de Lorraine employed the sculptor ichier, who carved the figure, decaying with his hand raised high clasping an hour-glass.

An apocryphal collection of anecdotes regarding Jesus

(vi) The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying.  
Jeremy Taylor. 1651.  
2nd section.





Wooden Statuette of  
Death, carved as a  
corpse - decaying -  
with bow and arrows.  
Skillful piece - one  
of three similar items  
to be seen in Room 62  
of the Victoria and  
Albert Museum. London.



Christ, tell the following tale:

" As he and his disciples went along the road they came on the stinking body of a putrefying dog. His disciples turned away their faces in disgust, but Jesus, looking steadily at the rotten carcase, bade them observe the beauty of the white and pearly teeth and learn the moral."

The painting by the Spaniard Juan de Valdes Leal 1630-1691, which hangs in the Caridad Hospital at Seville, represents the decaying corpses of a bishop and a knight with considerable realism. Titled: "Finis Gloriam Mundi", Murillo is said to have remarked that it was so forcibly painted, one had to hold one's nose when looking at it.

Claudio's outburst exemplifies the sense of horror towards decay, and the Renaissance image:

" Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;  
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;  
This sensible warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit  
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;  
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds  
And blown with restless violence roundabout  
The oendent world; or to be worse than worst  
Of those, that lawless and uncertain thoughts  
Imagine howling! - 'tis too horrible!  
The weariest and most loathed wordly life,  
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment  
Can lay on nature, is a paradise  
To what we fear of death." (vii)

(vii) Measure for Measure.  
Shakespeare.  
Act III., Scene I.

AT times we may sense a certain confusion on the part of these illustrators and artisans, a doubt about the precise distinction between what happens to the body when it dies, and the concepts of everlasting torment in Hell. Their almost pathological interest in decay and the collapse of tissue, betrays a fear of retribution.





Left: Part of mummified corpse  
found in Guanajuato.



Below: Head of corpse; one of  
7000 in the convent of  
the Cappuccini, Sicily.

The word 'hell' itself comes from an Anglo-Saxon root meaning to 'cover' or 'to conceal', - clear associations with the grave.

The Scandinavian goddess 'Hel' ruled all those that died of disease and old age. She lived in the pitiless underworld of Nifelheim, characterised - strangely enough - by freezing cold.

The harrowing details of perennial torture, taught by the Old and New Testaments (viii), and recorded in the form of numberless Last Judgements, might be seen as an obsession with the sensual and material aspects of life, and the fear of losing them.

It is interesting to note that the name of 'Gehenna' derives from the valley of Hinnom, where the rubbish of Jerusalem was burned.

Catholic thought produced some extraordinary concepts of Hell, summarised strikingly in the words of James Joyce: (ix)

" Imagine some foul and putrid corpse that has lain rotting and decomposing in the grave, a jelly-like mass of liquid corruption. Imagine such a corpse prey to flames, devoured by the fire of burning brimstone and giving off dense choking fumes of nauseous loathsome decomposition. And then imagine this sickening stench, multiplied a million fold, and a million fold again from the millions upon millions of fetid carcasses massed together in the reeking darkness, a huge and rotting human fungus. Imagine all this, and you will have some idea of the horror of the stench of hell."

)viii) See: Malachi;4.I.  
Isaiah;30.33.  
Mathew;I3.25.  
Revelations;  
Ch.2I.

(ix) A Portrait of the  
Artist as a Young  
Man.  
James Joyce.



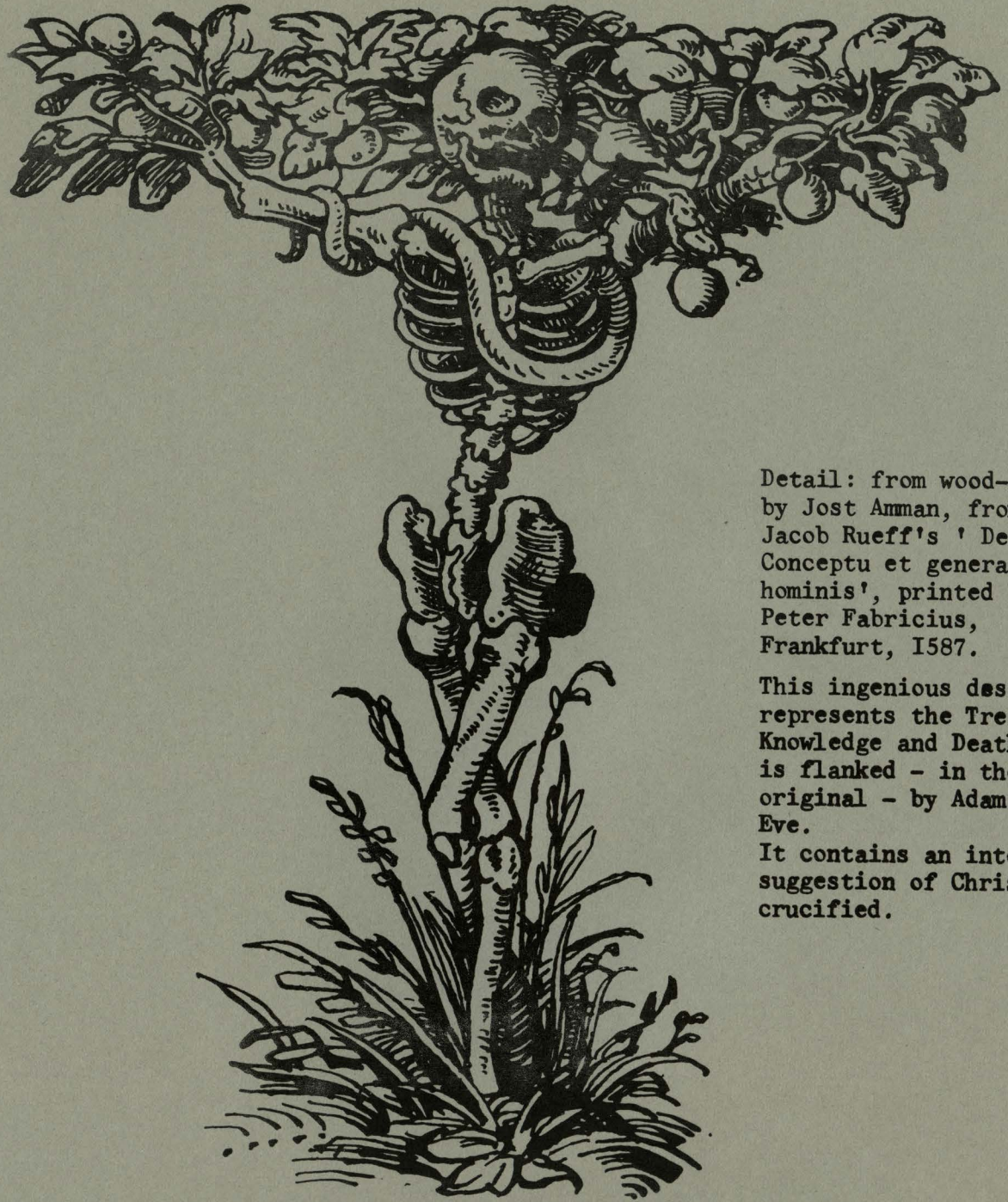
(x) The Triumph Of Death.  
Pieter Bruegel.  
Datable, c.1562.  
(twenty four years  
after Holbein's  
'Dance of Death')  
46 X 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
The Prado. Madrid.  
Bruegel would  
probably have known  
of the Basel Cemetary  
Cycle.

Indeed nowhere is there a more successful portrayal of the hideous relationship between death and hell than in that extraordinary painting by Pieter Bruegel of the Triumph of Death. (x)

Thousands of people are herded together and slaughtered by an army of skeletons, whilst - in the bottom right-hand corner - two lovers preoccupy themselves, the only figures oblivious to the loathsome threat. While he serenades her, Death - immediately above - serenades them both.

ALMOST equally well known is the study in charcoal by Albrecht Durer in the British Museum, dated 1505. 'King Death on Horseback' depicts the indefatigable figure of death clasping his scythe riding steadily on the back of a tireless looking Rosinante. And who does not know Durer's engraving 'Knight, Death and the Devil', where death is shown as an emaciated old man, hoary, with crown on head entwined by snakes, and holding an hour-glass in his right hand.





Detail: from wood-cut  
by Jost Amman, from  
Jacob Rueff's ' De  
Conceptu et generatione  
hominis', printed by  
Peter Fabricius,  
Frankfurt, 1587.

This ingenious design  
represents the Tree of  
Knowledge and Death; it  
is flanked - in the  
original - by Adam and  
Eve.

It contains an interesting  
suggestion of Christ  
crucified.



" Life is impoverished, it loses in interest when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked. It becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation. . . It is evident that war is bound to sweep away (the) conventional treatment for death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day . . . Life has, indeed, become interesting again; it has recovered its full content. "

Sigmund Freud.

BY the turn of the 14th century the form of the DANSE MACABRE was widely known. The very term implied that when one was to die, one 'performed' or 'took part' in the Dance of Death. It is often observed that today's interest in the interpretation of the Dance of Death reflects the last generation passing through two world wars. Such incidents are perhaps the only parallel of sufficient scale to the great plagues of the 14th/15th centuries. Two publications at about 1486 introduced the theme in popular terms; the DANSE MACABRE by Guyot Marchand, and the so-called HEIDELBERGER TOTENTANZ by Knoblochzer. These, and all variations depict a skeleton leading his partner away from whatever activity he undergoes. Death invariably confronts representatives of different ways of life and snatches them away. Occasionally Death leads a procession or pageant playing bagpipes, tabor, harp, trumpet, busine or kettle-drum. Sometimes they carry shovels and pickaxes - which helps to support the suggestion that the term MACABRE originating in the Syrian Arabic dialect comes from the word meaning grave-digger. Thus Danse Macabre would

mean the 'dance of the grave-diggers'.  
Indeed, the alledged custom of the grave-diggers dance may have been some kind of semi-professional performance on the part of their Guild. Possibly designed to cheer up the audience - family and friends of the deceased - and to inform them that in some way death may not be such a bad thing.  
After all, the grave-diggers might say,- if we don't know, who does ?

APPROXIMATELY forty years after the publication of Marchand's Danse Macabre, the major artist of Henrician England produced forty one woodcuts on the Dance of Death theme. These were published in 1538 at Lyons five years before the artists death.

Hans Holbein the Younger born in Augsburg in 1498, was one of the most skilful North European artists alive. Durer had been dead ten years - at the time of Holbein's woodcut series - and the Italian painter Michelangelo was almost half way to completing his Last Judgement on the wall of the Sistine Chapel (which contains several studies of corpses, including one of Michelangelo himself as a sheaf of skin held in the hand of St. Bartholomew. Indeed Michelangelo was said to have drawn on the wall of his staircase in his home, the figure of a huge skeleton carrying a coffin on his back).

Holbein's version of the Dance of Death theme is certainly the most aesthetically exciting example; witnessed in part, by the fact that the publishing company had to produce eleven editions in the first 24 years. In the course of the 16th century there may have been as many as a hundred unauthorised editions and imitations elsewhere. But the main success of this work must be attributed to the sense of relevance and appeal of the Death theme to the European world-view.

Few of us are unfamiliar with the life size painting in the National Gallery known as "The Ambassadors". The whole portrait is characterised by highly accomplished painted details of mathematical, musical and furnishing items.



The dominant feature, however, is the presence on the floor in the foreground of a curious 'memento mori', namely, a human skull elongated almost beyond recognition. It is depicted as it would appear if reflected from a cylindrical concave mirror, and only becomes visually intelligible when viewed obliquely from the right-hand side of the painting.

This curious formula may be accounted for by what is known of Jean de Dinteville, Lord of Polisy, one of the two men represented. He wears in his bonnet a jewel formed of a silver (or white enamel) skull set in gold, and it seems that at the time of posing - he was twenty nine - he thought a great deal about death.



Even in this cool almost anecdotal painting, where we are presented with the pomp and quasi-order of court life, we are forced to acknowledge the 'Remember you will die' motif.

The 15th and 16th century took mortality very seriously. They believed that the human soul was immortal, and would ultimately be judged.

Holbein's woodcuts were far from hedonistic; they failed to cojole: 'make hay while the sun shines'. They were not designed for this; on the contrary, they exhort their reader to maintain a state of readiness.

To prepare to die gracefully at any moment, and to face the judgement of their Maker.



Detail of wood-cut number 31.  
THE KNIGHT.  
From: The Dance of Death; 1538.  
By: Hans Holbein the Younger.



NUMBERLESS woodcuts, etchings, manuscripts and books, paintings on wood, stone or canvas, sculptors work of all kinds, tapestries, embroideries, stained glass windows, monumental brass plates and numerous 'curios', demonstrate the fascination for death and the constant remembrance of it.

What is more the symbols associated with death are equally countless. They include - to name just a few - skulls, urns, upside-down torches, hourglasses, scythes, spades, toads, serpents, worms, owls, ravens, weeping willows, severed tree stumps, cypresses, parsley, and colours of all kinds depending upon the culture and time.

The imagery usually employed was stark, direct and to the point. Invariably the formula was one of the aggressor and the victim.

An ironic Austrian engraving of 1482 depicts Death hunting a hunting party. One figure lies prone with an arrow in his heart, another attempts to scramble up a tree, and the third looking back into the eyes of Death, rides away through the hills in the vain hope of escaping the arrow poised and aimed in the right hand of Death.

A German engraving of 1490 shows a corpse in a shroud with a snake and a toad at his feet; he is gently laying his hand upon the shoulder of a beautiful Dureresque youth.

Sebastian Brandt's book, the Ship of Fools, published in 1494, contains woodcuts depicting a physician holding a discussion with Death, who seems so engrossed that he has lain aside his scythe, spear, bow and arrows, plus a length of rope. In others of the same work Death captures a fool.

A curious variant of Death meeting his prey is that of the confrontation between three revelers or hunters, and three corpses.

- (xi) The Three Living and the Three Dead Kings. engraving in the British Museum. by the: "Meister des Amsterdamer Kabinets" (Meister von I480).
- (xii) Death leaving the mouth of Hell and hunting a victim. From The Boke named the Royal, printed by Wynkyn de Worde for William Caxton, London, I507.
- (xiii) Death and the lansquenets. Woodcut by Urs Graf. dated; I524.

The interesting feature, however, is that the revelers recognize their personal selves in the decaying vision. A harrowing 'doppelganger' experience with delay-reaction undertones. Several variations on this theme exist, but the most dramatic is in the British Museum (xi) . Three Kings on horseback are accosted by three shrivelled corpses each wearing crowns. One has taken hold of the hem of a Kings gown; the horses rear in fright, the dogs snarl, and the horrified Kings attempt to disengage themselves and flee.

Another woodcut depicts Death rushing from the mouth of hell (xii) and heading towards a somewhat tolerant young man who looks back with gentle anguish at the apparition. Death stretches back his left arm about to hurl the spear at his victim, whilst in his right arm he has conveniently ready not only the spade and pick for burial, but the coffin also.

A fine woodcut of the early I6th century (xiii) shows two sturdy looking soldiers armed to the teeth, and standing by a tree. Behind them, and smiling out to us, a bizarre shepherdess wearing an extraordinary hat, with a young lamb in her lap. Seated in the crook of the tree surveying the scene is the grinning figure of death holding an hourglass and pointing to the Raven of Death perched upon it.

The whole theme of the Dance of Death and associated memento mori imagery has been ingeniously explored throughout the centuries. From John of Calcar's melancholy illustrations to Versalius' 'Anatomy', to the studies by Ligozzi, Gamelin, Della Bella, Rowlandson, Daumier, Hogarth, Goya, Puget de la Serre; even the anti-smoking pamphlets of the mid-I7th century. The list is endless: Johann Koch, Hans Weiditz, Lucas van Leyden, Conrad Meyer; the curious engravings by Barthel Beham (German; I6th century) 'Baby, with the four skulls', 'Mother and Child, with skull and hour-glass'. More recent interpretations are also not lacking. The Swiss painter Arnold Boecklin did a self portrait with Death as a fiddler behind him. Several paintings by G.F. Watts devote themselves to Death. From Flegel, Sattler, Alfred Rethel, Posada, Bresdin, Munch, Ensor to the extraordinary series of abstracts in the Tate Gallery by Mark Rothko.



" Where be your gibes now ? your gambols ?  
your songs ? your flashes of merriment,  
that were wont to set the table on a  
roar ? Not one now, to mock your own  
grinning ? quite chapfallen ? NOW GET  
YOU TO MY LADY'S CHAMBER, AND TELL HER,  
LET HER PAINT AN INCH THICK, TO THIS  
FAVOUR SHE MUST COME; MAKE HER LAUGH  
AT THAT."

Hamlet speaking to Yorick's skull.  
ACT V. Scene I. (Author's capitals)

AT the turn of the sixteenth century a further development in  
Death iconography made one of it's first appearances.  
Hans Baldung, called Grien, (possibly because of the pungent greens  
in his paintings, and the fact that he liked to dress in that colour),  
was born in 1484/5 and died in 1545.  
He is supposed to have kept a lock of hair belonging to Durer - fifteen  
years his senior - whose pupil he may have been.  
He was respected in his day as a painter of alterpieces, and allegorical  
paintings with a Classical reference.  
Not unlike Goya, however, he was prone to depicting the world of  
superstition and sorcery where witches gathered to prepare themselves  
for activities only they understand.  
Lusty women with full forms and massy hair and explicit hints regarding  
the vulnerability of the flesh to time.

In the year 1517 he completed a painting of a putrefying semi-shrouded  
corpse grasping the golden hair of a beautiful woman who stands naked  
beside a grave that corpse indicates to with his right hand.

The maiden weeps and holds her hands in the position of prayer and  
supplication; Death however, is resolute. (xiv)

In contrast to the work of Baldung, the imagery in Marchand's *Danse  
Macabre* is very mild. One of the pages titled 'La danse Macabre des  
Femmes' portrays two nervous well dressed young ladies being led away  
by two corpses. The same again in a similar work of the same year by  
Antoine Verard. And even twenty years after Baldung's painting, in the  
woodcuts of Holbein's version, we see only the form of 'Death' and  
the form of a woman; (xv) there is no hint of 'activity' between them.

(xiv) Death and the  
Maiden. 1517.  
tempera on wood.  
 $11\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{5}{8}$  inches.  
Basle; Offentliche  
Kunstsammlung.

(xv) Wood-cuts: No.33.34.35.  
Countess, Lady & Duchess.

(xv cont'd) Similarly, Schubert's 'Der Tod und das Madchen' song, based on a verse by Claudius; is a gentle rather agreeable chap. Also: String Quartet in D Minor, D. 810. "Death and the Maiden." 1826.

(xvi) The Isenheim Alterpiece. Colmar, Museum Unterlinden. Carved and painted on limewood. approximate size: 26 x 16½ ft.

In the case of The Duchess (no; 35) Death can be seen actually dragging her out of her bed. But she is fully clothed, and we can see that Death has no ulterior motives, he remains a gentleman with only God's demands in mind.

In the small work by Baldung, however, we sense something quite different goin on, and it is of great interest.

Two years before the painting by Baldung was completed one of the most extraordinary and forceful images ever to be painted was probably being finalised. The ISENHEIM ALTERPIECE by Mathis Nithardt-Gothardt (popularly known as Grunewald), has been adopted, with good reason, as the prototype of twentieth century expressionism. (xvi)

It depicts with unprecedented pathos the crucifixion of Christ. A combined declaration of intense christian mysticism with fervent personal emotion.

The Christ figure hangs like a plucked chicken - harrowing to an extreme - his body, covered in sores and putrescent eruptions, bruised and broken, his skin covered in splinters broken off from the scourging rods.

The alterpiece was painted for the church of the monastery of the hospital order of St. Anthony in the small town of Isenheim. The hospital received patients suffering from venereal diseases, and mental disorders.

The painting of Christ is undoubtedly a painting of a decomposing corpse. Immediately below the figure of Christ, kneels a woman in a position of unutterable anguish; it is the figure of Mary Magdalen. She strains upward towards the corpse, hands clenched with an air of terrible supplication. Her hair is so long that it touches the ground. Irreligious though it may seem, the woman is related to the corpse in a manner rarely so explicit in the history of European art.

We have, inadvertently, a precursor to Baldung's Death and Maiden theme, but one in which the sacrificial element is far more alive, and the implacability of Death far more absolute.



THE precise nature of the relationship between Death and the maiden/  
Death and the Feminine, is difficult to isolate.

One interpretation turns up in the interesting work by E.Lucie-Smith: (xvii)

- (xvii) Eroticism in  
Western Art.  
Edward Lucie-Smith.  
Thames & Hudson.  
1972. p.194.
- 

" . . . there is much evidence to show that  
European erotic art is not only voyeuristic,  
but inherently sado-masochistic as well.

One traditional subject that comes to  
mind is the allegory of Death and the Maiden.  
No one who looks at the version by Hans  
Baldung Grien in Basle could doubt that it  
expresses not only the fear of death, but  
fear of the female, who must be punished  
because of the threat she represents."

Acceptable though this is (and only a small remark within a complex  
study), it is unsatisfactory to assume that a castration fear, or  
the fear of impotence motivated the Death and the Maiden formula.

The whole issue is complex, and shadows are cast upon it from unexpected  
areas.

The figure of Death for example may not necessarily represent a  
'masculine' force. The Hindu goddess Kali, - one of the most horrific  
creations of man's concept of Death, - is feminine. (xviii).

- (xviii) Kali seated in  
intercourse with  
Shiva, the male  
principle, in his  
corpse-form.  
Rajasthan. 18th Cent.  
Brass. h. 5 in.

The western concept of Death may not be as masculine as it appears.

It is interesting to note that frequent devices in medieval Danse  
Macabre imagery, present the corpse with intestines and viscera  
curiously emphasised.

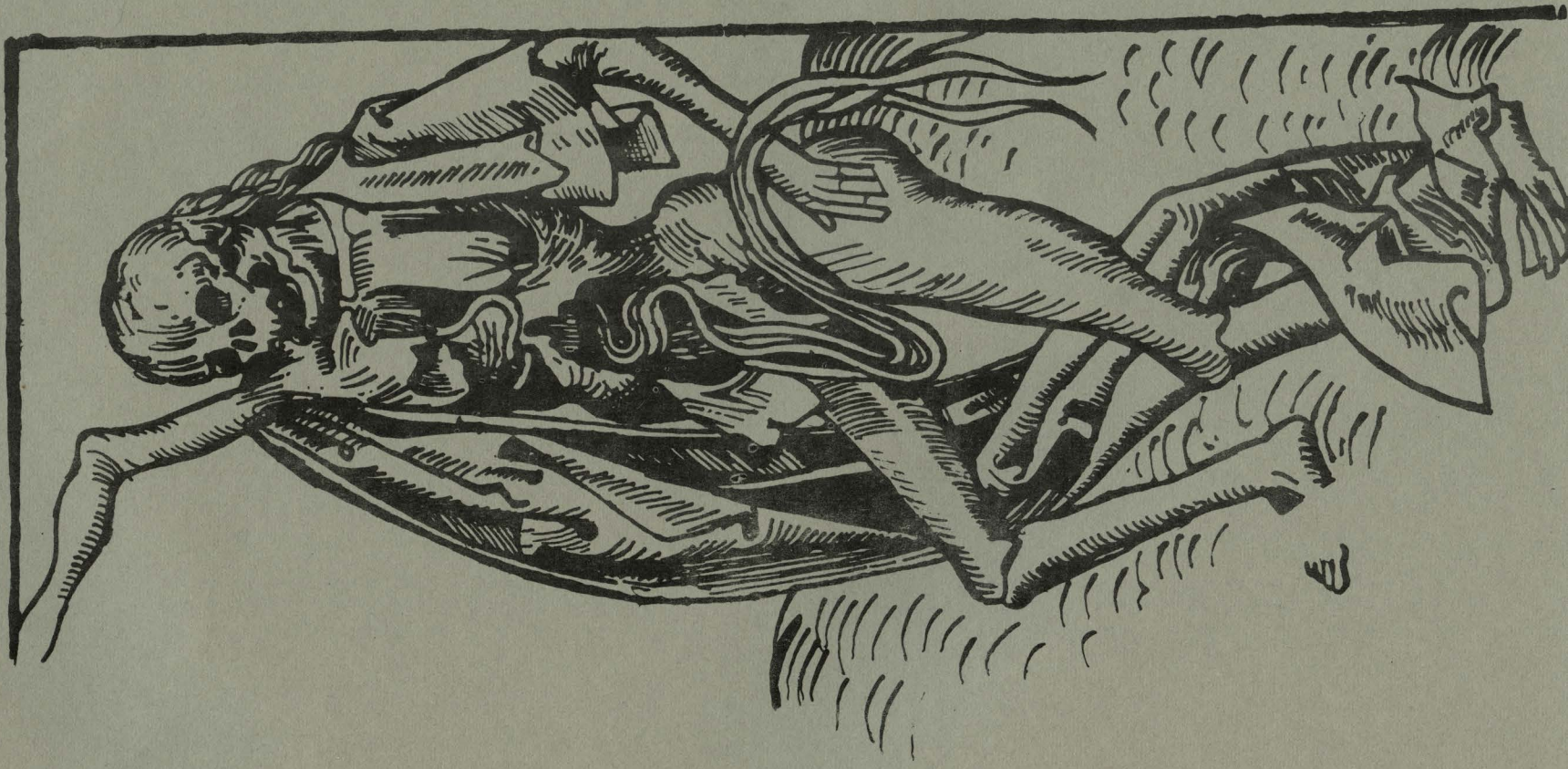
- Kali seated in  
intercourse, with  
the corpse-image  
of Shiva.  
Panjab; 18th. cent.  
Gouache on paper.  
9 x 6 in.

A striking wood-cut by Michael Wolgemut - a teacher of Durer - that  
is found in the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' published in 1493, depicts five  
corpses (one emerging from a grave) dancing ecstatically to the  
piping of one of their colleagues.

The right-hand figure, is that of a woman whose intestines are flailing  
in the air. She dances - one breast alone undecayed - (see illustration)  
with her open abdomen blatantly revealed as though to emphasise the  
irony of pregnancy. This decomposing woman was designed to bear children,  
but the contents of her stomach reveal only too clearly the destiny of birth.

- See: plates, I7 & I8.  
TANTRA: by P. Rawson.  
London. 1973.





Detail: from the  
Nuremberg Chronical.  
Orchestra of the Dead.  
Woodcut by Michael  
Wolgemut, from Hartmann  
Schedel's 'Liber  
Chronicarum', printed  
by Anton Koberger,  
Nuremberg, 1493.



A drawing of the school of Augsburg (c.1520) in the British Museum, pictures the Pope and a group of ecclesiastical dignitaries confronted by three corpses. Although part of the 'Three Dead meeting the Three Living' theme referred to above, it is of extra interest in so far as two of the 'Dead' are displaying their decomposing viscera.

There is an allusion to the endless cycle of birth and death, implied by the simulated pregnancy image of the intestines. We have the curious possibility of Death presenting his intestines in a final attempt to parody birth itself - and in so doing - undermining the force of his own reality.

Further, we are invited to entertain the possibility of Death's entrails being 'presented' to the Maiden who, symbolically accepting them (rarely does the Maiden figure in western iconography reject or repel the figure of Death) takes on the function of Life.

In this sense, Death's putrefaction 'fertilizes' the earth (mother-maiden) which may be seen as a vast womb.

We are left in doubt regarding Death's intentions; it is acceptable that Death, jealous of voluptuous youth - which he/she once was - indicates the grave with a tone of malice and judgement. But when the Death motif is depicted having some sort of 'sexual' relations with the Maiden, the implication becomes more complex.

" THEY ARE MADLY IN LOVE - HE WITH HIMSELF,  
SHE WITH HERSELF."

Yiddish Proverb.

PEOPLE are attached to their bodies, they make efforts to ensure that it is adequately pampered and comfortable during life.

We are somewhat astonished, however, if this attachment - for a persons body - sustains itself after its decease.

It appears that Herod slept for no less than seven years by the side of Mariamne his dead wife.

As Charlemagne grew older, he was unable to tear himself away from the remains of his German mistress.

From 1506-1509, Queen Juana of Castile took the corpse of her husband - Philip the Handsome - everywhere she travelled.

Emily Bronte tells us that Heathcliff:

' Being alone, and conscious two yards of loose earth was the sole barrier between (them), . . . said to (himself) - "I'll have her in my arms again! If she be cold, I'll think it is this north wind that chills me; and if she be motionless, it is sleep." (xvii)

(xvii) Wuthering Heights.  
by Emily Bronte.  
Chapter 29.

The charming story by Perrault of 'Sleeping Beauty in the Wood', may conceal a tale of necrophilia.

She is asleep for more than a hundred years; the Prince finds the Princess only 'at night and unknown to all'.

There are similar undertones in the tale of Beauty and the Beast, whilst Little Red Riding Hood may certainly be viewed as the Maiden who goes to visit the Wolf - long recognized as a symbol of Death.

Far from uncommon is the tendency to 'make love' to one's partner when they are asleep. Proust has observed that:

' In a certain measure her sleep brought about the possibility of love. When she slept, I no longer had to talk, I knew I was no longer being looked at by her, and that I no longer needed to live on the surface.' (xviii)

Marcel Proust.

(xviii) A la Recherche du  
temps perdu, Vol. VI.



It appears that the actress Sarah Bernhardt would only agree to rendezvous with lovers in a coffin; and transformed her own bedroom into a death-chamber where, surrounded by mourners, she would often play the part of a dead woman.

This behaviour does not seem to have been exceptional as certain brothels of this period regularly kept a death-chamber for any clients that might wish to use it.

The implication clearly, is that if one's partner appeared to be dead, or, preferably, was dead, the companion would become less 'responsible' and less inhibited.

This perhaps, is one way of viewing the curious development of the Death and the Maiden formula.

Certainly, the remarkable studies by the German illustrator Beham, 1500 - 1550, can be seen to reflect this aspect through the isolated problems of a single person. One drawing depicts a sleeping nude with her legs wide and open; Death creeps onto her bed, and gently rests an hour-glass upon her shoulder. Far more direct is another study showing a youth whose penis is firmly grasped by an aggressive looking female at his right. To his left Death sidles up and caresses his thigh.

Beham perhaps, reflects the view that mother-attached religions connect sex with life and survival, whilst father-attached religions - in Beham's case the Medieval Church - associate women with love and death.

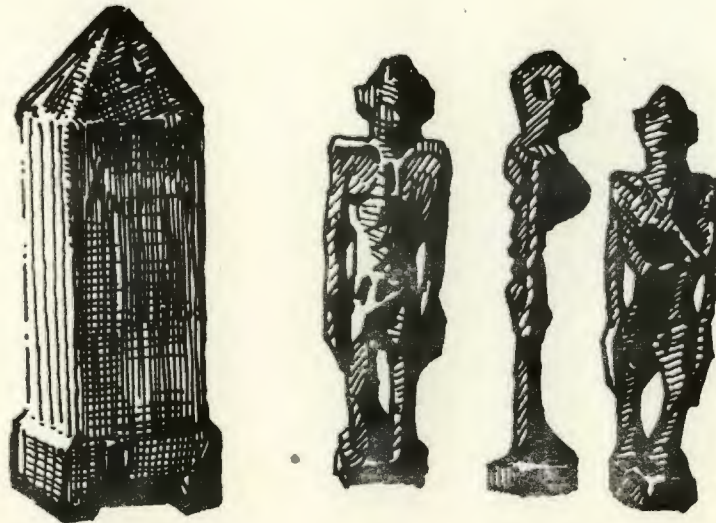


Detail: Beham; 'The last thing is Death'.  
(There is another called: 'The three women and Death'.)

In the work of Nicolaus Manuel (sometimes called Deutsch) a more positive element of sexuality appears. He seems to have begun by painting a series of frescoes on the walls of the Dominican convent of Berne. These frescoes apparently depicted the Dance of Death.

Later engravings however, orientate towards eroticism and the bizarre. One drawing shows a woman quite undisturbed by the fact that Death has lifted up her skirts to take a very inquisitive look.

What is probably one of the most striking Death and the Maiden compositions ever done, presents us with a direct sexual act on the part of Death. The engraving known as 'Death the Soldier Embracing a Girl' (now in the Offentliche, Kunstsammlung, Basel), depicts an emaciated rather mangy corpse drawing a voluptuous woman close to his wiskery mandible. His left hand, meanwhile, explores the girls vagina. One has the distinct impression that the girl has come to a tacit agreement with him, and is



Ancient Egyptian little wooden figure of a mummy, used as a 'memento mori' at banquets, and box to contain it.



(xvvi) 'Deutsch'; Swiss artist; I484/I530. May have studied under Titian, he was a painter, wood-engraver, poet, statesman, and curiously enough, . . . a soldier.

leading him there. (xvvi)

Baldung also produced a painting on a similar theme; in the same museum as the above, it shows death kissing a naked woman at the edge of a grave.

Indirectly, the works of Baldung and Beham - and a little known engraving by Durer on the same theme - reflect the problems of human relationships.

Above all, they hint at an attitude towards death itself which was echoed in the words of Henri Blot, when he was tried in 1886 at Paris. He had violated graves at the cemetery of Saint Owen, and had the unfortunate habit of falling asleep immediately after completing the act (the cause of him being caught on the second attempt).

When facing his judges, he declared:

" What more do you want, your Honour ?

All tastes are tastes! Mine are for corpses."

To find oneself unable to differentiate between life and death, in human relations may well imply sexual confusion.

Western and Eastern culture is saturated with tales of the 'Un-dead', Vampires and Werewolves, they serve only to emphasise our unwillingness to die.

The Death/Maiden theme, may from this point of view, be seen as a more fundamental reflection of our fear of dying.

The decay of the body is frightening, it is this same body, however, that is bound up with our personal sex lives. Consequently, fear and sexuality are forced together.

Thus fear may stimulate sexuality into compensating itself, and Death may take on unexpected possibilities.

" ALL UNION OF THE SEXES IS A SIGN OF (COMING) DEATH;  
AND WE COULD NOT KNOW LOVE WERE WE TO LIVE INDEFINITELY."

Anatole France.

THERE is one further stage to which we may direct this note, a human issue that appears in tireless variation throughout creative symbolism.

When we experience 'love' we are particularly sensitive to the possibility of the situation 'ending'.

It is of interest to observe that there is a point in a relationship that one has become aesthetically/sexually dependent upon, when one partner is willing to 'give' him/herself in a totally unhibited manner.

This point is when the relationship is ending (dying).

Only when it is 'dying' does the sacrificial element of 'love' confess itself.

Death, therefore, may become the enticer of unconfessed vulnerability. When the relationship ends - dies - someone becomes the corpse and someone the lover.

Desire is profoundly connected to decomposition, and one may result from the other.

Poe observed that he could not succeed in loving beauty 'if she does not breathe Death'.

Thomas Mann sets the highly sensitive infatuation that Gustavo Aschenbach feels for the beautiful young Tadzio, against a background of a devastated Venice rank with a cholera epidemic. ( xxii)

Putrefaction need not smell, the decay of love has its own immediately recognizable odour.

The formula of Death and the Maiden may unwittingly underline the parrallel between the decay of the body and the decay of love.

(xxii) Death in Venice.  
A novel by Thomas  
Mann.



(xxiii) Death and the  
Maiden. 1893.  
oil on canvas.  
52 x 36 inches.

—————  
Death and the  
Maiden. 1894.  
drypoint etching.  
II  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches.

IN 1893 and 1894 the Norwegian Painter Edvard Munch painted and etched two studies devoted to the Death and the Maiden theme. (xxiii) They were part of the 'Frieze of Life' theme that preoccupied him for most of his working life.

Surrounding both studies are suggestions of human sperm and the embryo. Both designs hint directly at the connection between birth and death. Munch seems to say that the 'wages of love is death'.

When lovers are together, they seem to aim at possession and recognize only their own demands and expectations.

In their 'love' they feel the joys of touch and of gratification. Their mutual dependence renders them each-other's slave.

Before long, one sideways glance betrays the idyll; putrefaction sets in.

They sense the collapse of their needs and the pattern they created and depended on.

A panic ensues, an isolation and an intense demand for compensation.

The illusion rots away, and in the same way as the body filters into the earth, so the memories of 'loved ones' vapourise and die.

In the decomposition of our 'loves we unwittingly attend our own funeral: we stand at our own grave and watch like a distant stranger, the slow inevitable separation of part from part, the worms and maggots of new events slyly introduce themselves into the more porous areas, and soon the whole form loses its shape.

The news of dead or dying relationships amongst friends and associates, brings more pleasure than the news of their birth.

In the death of love we learn to meet the death of ourselves.

Death and the Maiden echoes the mortality of our affections, and in so doing, forces us to consider them more carefully.

APPENDIX : A brief reference to death symbolism in Alchemy.



' (Hermes.) . . . For there's no DEATH for aught of things (that are); the thought (this) word conveys, is either void of fact, or (simply) by the knocking off a syllable what is called "death" doth stand for "deathless". For death is of destruction, and nothing in the Cosmos is destroyed.'

THRICE-GREATEST HERMES:  
Studies in Hellenistic  
Theosophy and Gnosis.  
3 Vols; by G.R.S.MEAD.  
London.1949.Vol.2.p.124.

' We must emphasise the importance accorded by the alchemists to the 'terrible' and 'sinister' experiences of 'blackness', and of spiritual death, of descent into hell. Not only are they constantly referred to in texts, but they can be detected in the art and iconography inspired by alchemy, where this sort of experience is translated by saturnine symbolism, by melancholy, the contemplation of skulls, etc.'

THE FORGE & THE CRUCIBLE.  
By; MIRCEA ELIADE.  
tr. S.Corrin.Harper.New York.  
Pub; 1971. p.161.

THE alchemical illustration - in it's thousands of varied forms - conveys a world of fascinating metaphor. Numberless diagrams and motifs lie in manuscripts and printed books in libraries all over the world testifying to the extraordinary ingenuity of these anonymous designers.

Death appears as the second of third stage of the process of making the 'Philosopher' Stone'.

The chemicals used would darken and appear to decay in order to make way for the following stage. For the alchemist this vital period of 'putrefaction' had to be carefully controlled and deeply respected. It was profoundly associated with the concept of rebirth, and particularly Christ's admonition regarding 'entering the Kingdom of Heaven.'

Brief examples follow:

VIRIDARIUM CHYMICUM, 1624; possibly by Daniel Stolcius or Michael Maier. Putrefaction is there called Mortification, (Death of the King).

The King is shown seated on a throne, surrounded by ten young men with clubs raised high about to dash out the King's brains.

The reference proceeds:

' Now the blazing glory of the King  
gives birth to envy: and a band of  
ten rustic youths slay him. All things  
are in confusion, Sun and Moon in  
darkness reveal many signs of their  
sadness. . . '

THE BOOK OF LAMBSPRINK, 1625/1678; possibly by N.B.Delphinus, or the Benedictine Abbey of Lambsprink (which housed nuns!)

The second figure of this extraordinary work depicts a Dragon in the forest being threatened by a man in Greek armour, whose sword raised high is about to decapitate the creature.

This emblem is described in the text as follows:



' The Sages say  
That a wild beast is in the forest,  
Whose skin is of blackest dye.  
If any man cut off his head,  
His blackness will disappear,  
And give place to a snowy white.  
Understand well the meaning of this head;

. . . . .  
When the Beast's black hue has vanished . . .  
The Sages rejoice  
From the bottom of their hearts;  
But they keep it a close secret,  
That no foolish man may know it.

CABALA MINERALIS: by Rabbi Simon Ben Cantara. British Museum; MS  
Addition. 5245.

This curious work consists of 12 pages of watercolours; folio 4  
illustrates a large alembic containing a child with wings standing  
knee deep in jet black liquid representing 'the Sophik Putrefaction'.  
Beneath the alembic is a flame around which fly three eagles.

SPLENDOR SOLIS: possibly by Salomon Trismosin. British Museum. Harley MS.  
3469, dated 1582. This late medieval manuscript may justifiably be called  
one of the most beautiful bound manuscript books in the world.  
A German text of 48 leaves, illuminated in gold, with 22 coloured  
allegorical paintings representing alchemical ideas and techniques.  
The tenth illustration depicts a dark soldier having severed the head  
from a naked white man, who lies dismembered upon the ground.  
The accompanying parable states:

' Rosinos relates of a vision he had of a man whose  
body was dead and yet beautiful and white like salt.  
The Head had a fine golden appearance, but was cut off  
the trunk, and so were all the limbs; next to him stood an  
ugly man of black and cruel countenance, with a bloodstained  
double-edged sword in his right hand, and he was the good  
man's murderer. In his left hand was a paper on which the  
following was written: " I have killed thee, that thou  
mayest receive a superabundant life, but thy head I will care-  
fully hide, that the worldly wantons may not find thee, and

destroy the earth, and the body I will bury,  
that it may putrefy, and grow and bear innumerable fruit."

This extraordinary work may be seen in London by anyone who cares to take the trouble.

It is an excellent example of the force and presence of pictorial allegory.

THE HIEROGLYPHICALL FIGURES OF NICHOLAS FLAMEL: translated by E.Orandus. I624.

This fascinating little volume contains naive but extremely evocative descriptive prose.

I quote from the section dealing with putrefaction; p.71.

" . . . they should see in the ayre a venomous fume & stinking, worse in flame, and in poyson, than the envenomed head of a Serpent, and Babylonian Dragon .

The cause why I have painted these two Spermes in the forme of Dragons, is because their stinch is exceeding great, and like the stinch of them, and the exhalations which arise within the glasse, are dark, blacke, blew, and yellowish, . . . the force of which, and of the bodies dissolved, is so venomous, that treuly there is not in the world a ranker poyson; for it is able by the force and stench thereof, to mortifie and kill everything living:

The Philosopher never feels this stinch, if he breake not his vessels . . . for at the same time, the matter is dissolved, is corrupted, groweth blacke, and concieveth to engender; for all corruption is generation, and therefore ought blacknesse to be much desired; for that is the blacke sail with the which the ship of Theseus came back victorious from Crete, which was the cause of the death of his Father; so must this father die, to the intent, that from the ashes of this Phoenix another may spring, and that the Sonne may be King. Assuredly hee that seeth not this blacknesse at the beginning of his operations, . . . shall altogether fayle in the Maisterie, . . . and this dissolution, and Perditiion, is by the envious Philosophers called Death, Destruction, and Perditiion, because that the natures change their forme, and fromhence are proceeded so many Allegories of dead men, tombes, and sepulchres. . . the



envious have called Terra Foetida, that is, Stinking earth: for then because of the perfect putrefaction, which is as natural as any other can be; this earth stinks, and gives a smell like the odour of graves filled with rottenness, and with bodies as yet charged with their naturall moisture.'

The selections are endless, but a final example is taken from a work called

THE GOLDEN TRIPOD by Michael Maier, a German collector and doctor of the early 17th century. In this collection of alchemical tracts, he prints an interesting work called THE TWELVE KEYS by Basilius Valentinus. The eighth illustration (key) depicts a graveyard scene, lying by the side of an open grave is a corpse, on either side of the grave sit two crossbow men aiming at a target. (One has hit the bullseye, the other has missed.) They probably represent the successful and unsuccessful adept. On the foreground left a man sows seed into tilled ground, and on the right an angel sounds a trumpet symbolising the resurrection of man.

Scavenging the seeds at the left are four crows, symbolising putrefaction.

Part of the text to this curio by Valentinus reads as follows:

" Neither human nor animal bodies can be multiplied or propagated without decomposition; the grain and all vegetable seed, when cast into the ground, must decay before it can spring up again."

An odd description of the function of worms and weeds within the scheme of things ensues, ending:

" But you who should know more than the vulgar herd, must search into the causes of things, and endeavour to understand how the process of generation and resuscitation is accomplished by means of decomposition, and how all life is produced out of decay."





