COSTICA BRADATAN

DYING FOR IDEAS

THE DANGEROUS LIVES OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

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The Dangerous Lives of the Philosophers

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Cristinei şi Anastasiei

Continuamente moriamo, io mentre scrivo queste cose; tu mentre leggerai, ambedue moriamo, tutti moriamo, sempre moriamo.

(FRANCESCO PETRARCA)

CONTENTS

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As I was working on this book project I published a handful of essays on various aspects of its main topic. Larger or smaller chunks of these texts have been reworked, recast (sometimes to an unrecognizable degree), and incorporated into what has become the final draft of the book: "Philosophy as an Art of Dying" (published in *The European Legacy*); "A Light for the Future. On the Political Uses of a Dying Body" (*Dissent*); "The Political Psychology of Self-immolation" (*The New Statesman*); "Philosophy as an Art of Living" (*Los Angeles Review of Books*); and "From Draft to Infinite Writing. Death, Solitude and Self-Creation in Early Modernity" (*Culture, Theory and Critique*). Big thanks are due to these publications as well.

INTRODUCTION

Death is the most precious thing which has been given to man. That is why the supreme impiety is to make bad use of it. To die amiss.

SIMONE WEIL

A matter of life and death

Socrates never wrote a line, yet his death was a masterpiece and has kept his name alive. While he was living, Jan Palach—the Czech student who set himself on fire in January 1969 in protest about the Soviet occupation of his country—did not amount to much. After his fiery death, however, he became for many nothing short of a demigod, a creature of tremendous vitality and influence. From beyond the grave Palach shaped Czechoslovakia's history. Whenever Gandhi would embark on yet another of his "fasts unto death" everything in India would become unusually lively, more vivacious than ever. During these fasts "every change" in his physical condition "was broadcast to every corner of the country" (Fisher 1983: 318). The whole of India lived Gandhi's hunger.

Death, it seems, does not always mean the negation of life—sometimes it has the paradoxical capacity of enhancing it, of intensifying it to the point of, yes, breathing new life into life. The presence of death can instill in the living a new appreciation of existence—indeed, a deeper understanding of it. It would be fair to say, then, that *life needs death*. Should death be somehow outlawed, life would receive a devastating blow.

First of all, life needs death for reasons of self-realization. It often happens that we realize how precious something is only when we lose

it, or are about to; it is the prospect of its sudden absence that teaches us how to appreciate the value and significance of its presence. So death can bring a new intensity to the act of living by its sheer proximity. Historians have noticed the curious fact that often, when natural or social disasters with a high-mortality rate—such as plagues or wars—strike, people seem more inclined to abandon themselves to worldly excesses. They pursue carnal pleasures (drinking, eating, or sex) greedily, with a newly discovered passion. Rather than acting cautiously to preserve resources, as common sense would require in situations of crisis, they are quick to spend whatever is left to them. For they are in the greatest of rushes, these people: they hurry to gorge on the pleasures of life at the very moment that death approaches. What increases their lust for life is precisely the presence of death. The attitude may seem irrational, yet there is something marvelous about it. On the verge of annihilation, these people discover the miracle of existence, and are celebrating.

Giovanni Boccaccio's collection of novellas, *The Decameron*, offers us a glimpse, if an oblique one, into this unique situation. While the Black Death is ravaging Florence in 1348, a group of young people take refuge in a villa, just a few miles away from the city, and engage in ten days of passionate living through vivid and salacious storytelling. The outcome is a collection of one hundred tales celebrating life and *joie de vivre* at its most carnal. Boccaccio intuits here the profound connection between fear of death and desire: in limit-situations, the proximity of death can be the most powerful of aphrodisiacs. Inspired perhaps by George Bataille (Bataille 1986), French historian Philippe Ariès speaks of a certain "erotization" of death. Just like the sexual act, death comes to be seen as "a transgression which tears man from his daily life … in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world" (Ariès 1974: 57).

We also need death in order to make better sense of life. In the absence of death, life would remain something boundless and shapeless—eventually tasteless. There would be no way to grasp it because it would have no edges. Since to make sense of something is to be able to put it into a story, one's life has meaning insofar as it can be narrated. Just as a story without an end would be impossible, a life without death would be meaningless. In an essay he wrote some eight years before his own death, and which I will discuss in

some detail later in this book, Pier Paolo Pasolini makes precisely this point. It is "absolutely necessary to die," he writes, because "*so long as we live, we have no meaning*, and the language of our lives … is untranslatable." It is just "a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution" (Pasolini 1988: 236–7; author's emphasis). To die is to give your life a sense of composition. Death is the skilful editor that puts your life together so that it comes across as intelligible. An endless human life would be a mineral existence of sorts—something bloodless, undifferentiated, unutterable, as dead as a stone. You would spend it mindlessly, purposlessly, geological age after geological age. At a more practical level, even if such a life were possible, I am not sure it would be desirable. As with any story, a biography—even the most interesting one—that is stretched beyond a certain point never fails to become boring. To stretch it even further would be to court horror. If we were made immortal one day, we might die of meaninglessness the next.

There is yet another way in which death can dictate the dynamics of life. This is a subtler, more difficult case. Here it is not your own death that shapes your life, but someone else's. It is the type of annihilation I referred to at the beginning: the death of someone who chooses to "die for a cause," for the sake of something bigger than oneself. Such a voluntary death affects the lives of those left behind in ways both profound and persistent: it directs their moral judgment, shapes their views on what matters, and pervades their understanding of what it means to be human. It ends up becoming a part of their cultural memory. Sometimes it even burdens their conscience and shames them into doing something. Thanks to the perceived selflessness of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, to their readiness to give up their own lives, some of these people end up projected into myth. Such a death often turns out to be the threshold where history ends and mythology begins.

Human beings must have been dying "for a cause" for as long as they have been around. They have died for God or for their fellow-humans, for ideas or ideals, for things real or imaginary, reasonable or utopian. Of all the possible varieties of voluntary death, the book you've started to read is about philosophers who die for the sake of their philosophy. Dying such a death certainly does not lack irony: you pay with the most precious thing you've got (your own life) for what

commonly passes as the least consequential activity. But philosophers —the most fascinating of them, anyway—are nothing if not ironical. In a certain sense, *Dying for Ideas* is an exercise in an as yet uncharted ontology: the ontology of ironical existence.

As good as dead

In 399 BCE Socrates took poison after he was condemned to death by an Athenian court. The charges were corrupting the youth and impiety. During the trial Socrates made it clear that, regardless of its outcome, he was not going to change the way he lived his life and practiced his philosophy. After the trial and before his execution, Socrates could still have saved his skin with the help of his wealthy friends. Out of loyalty to the city's laws, however, he refused to escape.

In 415 CE Hypatia, a pagan woman philosopher from Alexandria, was brutally murdered by a mob of Christians, instigated by the city's Patriarch, Cyril. By 415 Hypatia had become a unique intellectual presence, as well as an influential teacher, in the city. Even the governor, Orestes, although a Christian, actively sought her company and counsel. Apparently Cyril was not happy with Hypatia's influence in the city and in Orestes' circles.

In 1535 Sir Thomas More was beheaded in the Tower of London after he was found guilty of "high treason." What constituted "treason" was More's refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to the Act of Succession (whereby the succession to the throne was passed to the future Elizabeth I, the yet unborn child Henry VIII conceived with his new wife, Anne Boleyn) and to recognize the Crown's supremacy in matters religious. As a mere human being, thought More, a king cannot be the head of the Church because "no temporal man may be the head of the spirituality."

In 1600 Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome after he was sentenced to death by the Holy Office (Inquisition) of the Catholic Church. He had spent the previous eight years in the Inquisition's prisons. A Dominican friar, Bruno was condemned for holding beliefs contrary to the orthodoxy of the Church in such matters as transubstantiation, the trinity, the divinity and incarnation of Christ, and the

virginity of Mary. He stubbornly refused to repent, even on his way to the stake.

In 1977 Jan Patočka, a Czech phenomenologist (a direct disciple of Edmund Husserl), died of apoplexy in a Prague hospital after an eleven-hour-long interrogation at the hands of the Czechoslovakian secret police. Patočka was being investigated for his role in the founding of a human rights movement (Charter 77) deemed subversive by the communist regime. He felt that his involvement in this movement was necessary if he was to remain faithful to his philosophical ideas.

Philosophy as a dangerous pursuit

What kind of a philosopher does one have to be to die for an idea? What these people have in common, in spite of the specific beliefs each held, is a commitment to the notion that philosophy is above all else something you *practice*. Sure, it involves thinking and writing, reading and talking, but these should not be seen as an end in themselves; they need to serve the final purpose of philosophy, which is that of self-realization. Your philosophy is not something you store up in your books, but something you carry with you. It is not just a "subject" you talk about, but something you embody. This notion has been called philosophy as a "way of life" or as an "art of living."

What philosophy as an art of living often boils down to is, paradoxically, learning how to face death—an art of dying. The best example is Socrates himself. He understood philosophy as a way of life, and practiced it so uncompromisingly that it led him straight to his death. His disciple Plato was so affected by what the Athenians did to his master that in the *Phaedo*, a dialogue purportedly recording Socrates' last hours before execution, he skillfully advances an understanding of philosophy as nothing but "preparation for death" (*melétē thanátou*). Chronologically, *Phaedo* belongs to Plato's "middle period"; he must have written it many years after his master's death. It would be tempting to see this as an act of "philosophical justice": a still grieving, unhealed, perhaps even angry Plato smuggles the devastating event of his master's ending into the very definition of philosophy. "Philosophical justice" or not, Plato's notion gives voice to a crucial insight: philosophy is an art of living only to the extent that it offers us an art of dying.

The Platonic definition has had resonance right through the present. In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne, echoing Cicero, would title one of his essays: "That to philosophize is to learn how to die." In the twentieth century Simone Weil would place death at the center of her philosophical project. According to her, knowing how to die is even more important than knowing how to live. For death, says Weil, is "the most precious thing which has been given to man." The "supreme impiety is to make bad use of it" (Weil 1997: 137). Should we waste our death, in a certain sense we would have lived for nothing. This book is about how a philosopher can make a "good use" of her death and how, in so doing, she re-signifies her life and makes her work whole.

Marginal as the notion of philosophy as an art of living may be in today's mainstream philosophical circles, the idea doesn't lack in attraction. Indeed, there is something satisfyingly consistent about a definition of philosophy that presupposes perfect symmetry between word and deed, thought and practice, and which is all about self-realization—that is, the notion that the philosopher's self is a "work in progress," something she creates through philosophizing. At the same time, however, this is a dangerous idea because it can get those who take it seriously in trouble. Socially, a philosopher committed to philosophy as an art of living is often a *parrēsiastḗs*, a radical straight-talker; part of her job description is to *not* keep her mouth shut. And *parrēsía* has rarely led its practitioners to happiness.

Indeed, to embrace the notion of philosophy as a self-transformative practice is to make yourself fundamentally vulnerable. If a philosophy is genuine only to the extent that it is embodied in the one who practices it, then the philosopher is not unlike the tightrope walker performing without a safety net. The philosopher's life is a perpetual balancing act: the slightest wrong step, one side or the other, could be fatal. If he accommodates the demands of the world at the price of a disconnect with his philosophy, he is lost; if he obeys the demands of his conscience at the cost of his personal safety, he is lost again. This is precisely the situation that Socrates, Hypatia, More, Bruno, and Patočka faced. At one point in their lives these philosophers have had to make a choice: either they remain faithful to their philosophy and die or renounce it and remain alive. The exact details may have differed; some of them were specifically asked to desist and repent, while others were just given to understand that they should stop or else. The fundamentals of the

situation, however, are the same. And so is the precariousness of these philosophers' tightrope walking. *Dying for Ideas* has been born out of a fascination with their perilous performance.

The significance of the choice between dying to remain faithful to your ideas, on the one hand, and changing your philosophy to remain alive, on the other, cannot be overestimated. Since for these thinkers philosophy is not just a body of doctrines that you can in principle keep quiet about or even discard, but a way of life, something that has pervaded your entire biography, the choice carries considerable existential weight. You cannot change your philosophical views in the same way you change your clothes. Since philosophy is embodied in the philosopher, to give it up would be to tear her apart. The philosopher facing such a choice soon realizes that what is at stake here is not just a matter of avoiding a hypocritical position. The choice in fact conceals a test: if it is not to remain just empty talk, philosophy needs to pass the test of life. Showing, in hindsight, an uncanny prescience, Jan Patočka describes the situation in unambiguous terms. "Philosophy reaches a point," he says, where "it no longer suffices to pose questions and answer them, both with extreme energy; where the philosopher will progress no further unless he manages to make a decision" (In Kriseová 1993: 108). We need, then, to look at philosophy with new eyes: ultimately philosophizing is not about thinking, speaking or writing—not even about performing them in a bold, courageous fashion—but about something else: deciding to put your body on the line. In this book I follow as closely as I can the inner workings of this decision process, as well as what happens to the philosophers' bodies as they are put on the line.

These philosophers' situations are worth recalling in some detail. One day they found themselves in what must have been a profoundly disturbing position. As sophisticated speakers, they had now to realize that arguing and debating was out of the question. Masters of logic and persuasion, they were now in a place that had no use for words or arguments, sophisticated or not. Here they were, in all the nakedness of their predicament, unable to do the one thing they have been doing all their lives. Whether in a clear or a more obscure manner, these thinkers must have realized that, if they were not to be completely silenced, they needed something stronger than words to make themselves understood. And in a limit-situation like theirs—intense, straightforward,

stark—what was stronger than words was their own death. With the spectacle of their dying bodies alone they had to express whatever they could not communicate through all their rhetorical mastery. Throughout his life Socrates had spoken persuasively, yet he died even more persuasively. His death was the most effective means of persuasion he ever devised—to such an extent that, many centuries later, he is remembered not so much for what he did when he was alive, but precisely for the way he died.

It is telling that, at its most radical, when it comes to its final test, philosophy has to abandon its ordinary routines (speaking, writing or lecturing) and turn into something else: performance, bodily performance. We've thus come full circle. Living philosophically presupposes the body, but so does the philosophical death. These philosophers need the body not only to practice their philosophy, but—more importantly—to validate it. In *Dying for Ideas* I examine, in a manner that hasn't been tried before, the philosophers' dying bodies as the testing ground of their thinking.

So these philosophers choose a path that leads them to dying "eloquent" deaths, which are subsequently constructed as a culmination of their philosophical work. Whatever these thinkers' work may otherwise have been, in light of their ending there is a sense that it is incomplete if we dissociate it from the way they died. Indeed, such a death *is* a philosophical work in its own right—sometimes a masterpiece. The manner of Socrates' death, for example, has become such an inalienable part of his philosophical heritage that it is hard to imagine him dying of old age in his own bed. As time passes and the memory of their deaths start haunting subsequent generations, these philosophers' endings take on more and more layers of meaning. Eventually they end up in mythology.

Philosophical mythology

Fortunately, philosophers are rarely killed for what they think. Since, as a rule, they are not taken too seriously, most of the time philosophers are safe and the price they have to pay for their straight-talking rarely exceeds the cost of a few stitches. However, as rare as they may be, their voluntary deaths, whenever they occur, are worth paying attention

to because they exert a tremendous influence on subsequent generations. The martyr-philosophers end up casting a very long shadow over those who come after, who cannot help but feel indebted to, and intimidated by, the great dead. The memory of their deaths never quite fades away; indeed, it is preserved and exacerbated with every new generation. As a result, these thinkers often become more active posthumously than they were in their lifetime. In posterity they acquire brand new lives, which sometimes have little to do with their actual biographies. An important question that I ask in this book, therefore, is: What exactly lies behind such an extraordinary influence? It cannot be the intrinsic qualities of their philosophy; after all, Socrates never wrote anything to be read after his death, from Hypatia nothing has survived, and Giordano Bruno is hardly read today. What, then, gives these philosophers such an impact?

Of Socrates' ending Voltaire once said: "The death of this martyr was actually the apotheosis of philosophy" (in Ahrensdorf 1995: 2). Leaving aside the irony that such a statement implies—here he is, the famous anticlerical thinker, speaking like a man of the cloth—Voltaire, maybe even without realizing it, points to an explanation. For it is precisely the "martyrdom" of these thinkers that shapes their posterity and alters our perception of them. Even many centuries after, the event of their death still "blinds" us, and makes us misinterpret what exactly they did or wrote when they were alive. Indeed, their death turns out to be of a unique nature that resonates through some of the deepest layers of our psyche, where our primary impulses and drives reside. We end up processing the event of these philosophers' ending not through our intellectual faculties, but through our religious imaginary. Strictly rational as our approach to them purports to be, there is always something obscure or irrational at its root that eventually shapes the way we relate to these people. This happens for at least two different, yet complementary, reasons.

First, at a phenomenological level, in the presence of someone who commits to dying "for a cause," what we experience is a powerful mix of attraction and repulsion, fascination and terror, all at the same time. Their "readiness to die" places them in a space inaccessible to most of us: by doing what they are doing, these people cut themselves off from all human society. This is precisely the originary meaning of the sacred (*sacer*): that which is cut off from the rest (the profane), which is set

apart, and toward which we feel an uncanny mix of opposite emotions. In other words, someone who performs such an act places herself in a sacred mode of being. We are viscerally unsettled because our participation in the event, even when vicarious and mediated, activates in us a primordial experience of the sacred. That's why martyrdom has always played such an important role in the constitution of religion, and also why radical forms of political protest, such as self-immolation, can sometimes have extraordinary effects on society.

Second, if we choose to adopt a more sociological perspective, the philosopher's violent death can be understood with the help of René Girard's theory of sacrifice. A community in crisis, caught up in an endless cycle of violence, needs a scapegoat victim to find its peace. Society, says Girard, is "seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members" (Girard 1979: 4). If that happens successfully, the sacrificial murder is followed by some kind of "sacralization" of the victim. Thanks to what Girard calls the "scapegoat mechanism," the victim turns into a powerful agent of social change. Whereas initially she was totally powerless, having to absorb the community's aggression and violent impulses, now she has been elevated to a position of significant power. The "scapegoat no longer appears to be merely a passive receptacle for evil forces," writes Girard, but is "rather the mirage of an omnipotent manipulator shown by mythology" (Girard 1986: 46).

Most important of all, such a death not only heals the community in the midst of which it occurs, but it also comes to be seen as a "founding murder"; a new beginning has thus been made possible through a sacrificial death. Girard uses the examples of Moses, Oedipus, Romulus, and others. This may explain why most martyr-philosophers have been construed as "founders" of various philosophical traditions. Socrates is seen as nothing less than the true originator of Western philosophy (those before him are, tellingly, just "pre-Socratics"). Hypatia is placed at the outset of the tradition of women in philosophy, even though there were women philosophers before; or she is taken to be the founder of philosophical feminism, even if it is hard to know what she would have said about feminist issues. Similarly, Giordano Bruno is sometimes regarded as having founded a grand tradition of modern free-thinking, as well as a brand of anti-religious rationalism in modern Europe. There is great irony here: rarely did a modern philosopher

believe in magic and other "obscurantist" things more intensely than Bruno did.

These examples point to an important fact: the formation of intellectual and philosophical traditions is not governed by strictly rational patterns, but sometimes by forms of mythical thinking and imagination. The violent event of these philosophers' deaths is registered and processed by the tradition along the lines of myth-making. As a result, their endings are translated into mythology. Invisibly but tenaciously, then, the "logic" of the myth marks the way the history of thought takes shape. Conventionally we tend to think that myth subverts reason, but it must be more complicated than that. As the examples of these martyr-philosophers show, sometimes myth *complements* reason, just as myth-making and mythic imagination bring to philosophy a degree of human complexity, sophistication, and depth that reason alone is never able to secure.

A matter of rehearsal

This is the gist of the story I seek to tell in the book you've started to read. In an important sense, however, *Dying for Ideas* is not about making arguments. Indeed, at the core of it there lies a conviction that philosophy proper is not even about writing books. No doubt philosophy needs writing, and good writing can do it a great service. Yet, in relation to what philosophy ultimately is, writing is bound to remain something *preliminary*. For no matter how good philosophers are as writers, their philosophy does not lie in their writing, but elsewhere. In a certain sense, philosophy begins where writing ends. Writing is rehearsal, dress rehearsal at best, but not yet performance. Philosophy is performance.

1
PHILOSOPHY AS SELF-FASHIONING

[Philosophy is] a concrete attitude and determinate life-style, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.

PIERRE HADOT

The business of this chapter is to introduce the story's first lead character—*the philosopher*. Not an easy job. For the philosopher in this story is not something given once and for all, a ready-made character, which you can just look at, measure up and down, and introduce. There is something distinctly fluid about this figure—he is always a "work in progress," a character constantly in the making. Indeed, to be a philosopher like this is to continue fashioning yourself for as long as you are alive—that is, until you face your greatest self-fashioning project of all: your own death. The philosopher who chooses to die for the sake of his philosophizing pushes self-fashioning to its ultimate consequences: he practices it not only in life, but also in death—especially

there. That's why, difficult as this character may be to capture, there is something we can try: by examining self-fashioning closely enough, we have a chance to catch him in the act, as it were.

Renaissance man

In the summer of 1486, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) was only twenty-three years old, yet ready to save the world. Freshly returned from Paris, he embarked on a project as unique as it was utopian: a major theological-philosophical synthesis, in which all divergent opinions on any important matter would be reconciled, and any conflicts of ideas would be settled forever. The project was to end for good all religious wars, scientific disputes, and intellectual debates. As part of it, Pico challenged everybody who was anybody in the late fifteenth-century Catholic world to a public debate in Rome; he went so far as to offer to cover their travel expenses should they care to come. This was to be the last debate ever—after it there would be no reason for others.

On his way to Rome, however, Pico caused a small war of his own when in Arezzo he abducted—not entirely against her will—a young noblewoman named Margherita, the wife of one Giuliano Mariotto de' Medici. In the ensuing conflict, Pico was almost killed by the unphilosophical husband, and ended up in prison, from where he had to be rescued by Lorenzo de Medici himself. Once his wounds were healed, Pico set off to Rome at last, where later that year he published his manifesto in the form of "nine hundred Dialectical, Moral, Physical, Mathematical, Metaphysical, Theological, Magical, and Cabalistic opinions including his own and those of the wise Chaldeans, Arabs, Hebrews, Greeks, Egyptians, and Latins." Needless to say, the project ended in failure. It did not help matters that much of its content was profoundly pagan in nature. Pope Innocent VIII, who would not tolerate questioning of the perfection of Catholic doctrine, promptly halted the debate. Some of Pico's theses were deemed openly heretical and the Inquisition launched a formal inquiry. The debate was never going to take place. So much for universal philosophical peace.

Yet even though the *Nine Hundred Theses* failed in its main purpose, Pico's project had an important, if perhaps unintended, outcome: it spelled out a new vision of the human condition. To introduce his

project, Pico wrote a text called *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (*Oration on the dignity of man*). In it he retells the story of Creation, but with a twist:

> God the Father, the supreme Architect, had already built this cosmic home we behold …, by the laws of His mysterious wisdom. The region above the heavens He had adorned with Intelligences, the heavenly spheres … But, when the work was finished, the Craftsman kept wishing that there were someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness. … He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was not among His archetypes that from which He could fashion a new offspring, nor was there in His treasure houses anything which He might bestow on His new son as an inheritance, nor was there in the seats of all the world a place where the latter might sit to contemplate the universe. All was now complete: all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders. (Mirandola 1948: 223–4)

A crucial point in Pico's account is that the human being, far from being the crown of creation, as the Book of Genesis teaches, now appears superfluous: we have simply been left out. Indeed, God's creation seems to be complete *without* humans. There is no distinct place for us in the cosmos, and no function that we, and only we, can perform. Should we suddenly vanish, no one will miss us because, ontologically, we are an appendix. What started out as innocuous praise to God has quickly become an overt exercise in heresy. Within the space of one page Pico journeyed from one extreme to another.

Before we even have time to ponder the question of heresy, however, Pico makes yet another, perhaps even more spectacular move. With breathtaking ease, he turns the whole situation on its head and paradoxically construes man's ontological superfluity as a strength. The human being may not have a place of its own, but that's what makes it special. Since God has forgotten to give man a proper and natural place within the cosmos, he must now make amends and offer some kind of compensation. Making man the co-owner of everything God has created would be just about the right price:

> At last the best of artisans ordained that the creature to whom He had been able to give nothing proper to himself should have joint

> possession of whatever had been peculiar to each of the different kinds of being. He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him. (Mirandola 1948: 24)

According to Pico, then, man is important within the creation not despite the fact that he does not occupy a certain rank in it, but precisely *because of* that. The key phrase here is "a creature of indeterminate nature" (*indiscretae opus imaginis*, literally a "work of indistinguishable form"). When it comes to the creation of man, not only is Pico's God forgetful, he is also hasty and has a tendency to leave things unfinished—God must have a messy working style indeed. That's the only explanation why man has been left in such a raw state: a creature of imprecise, indistinguishable (*indiscretus*) contours, a work still in progress—a rough draft really.

As with any draft, much is still to be done. And who else can do God's unfinished work other than man himself? He has to clean up God's mess and do whatever he can to give himself a distinguished (*discretus*) appearance. If, therefore, God has made us creatures of an "indeterminate nature," it is up to us to determine who we are. Our status as "incomplete" creatures turns out to be a blessing in disguise. God's carelessness translates for us into a divine benediction to fashion ourselves into whoever, or whatever, we want to be. Says Pico's God:

> Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to

> degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine. (Mirandola 1948: 24)

In Pico's account of creation, man is by definition without a place and without a face—"neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone" (*nec certain sedem, nec propriam faciem*). One can hardly find a more appropriate definition of the human condition in the modern era. Without roots tying you to one place you can be at home anywhere you want; without a face of your own you can wear whatever mask you fancy. On the grand stage of the world you can play as many roles as you like—being nothing, nothing in particular, you can be everything. Thus, between these two extremes ("nothing" and "everything"), the playing field, as well as some of the vocabulary, for a new philosophical anthropology has been set. Much subsequent Western philosophizing on what it is to be human will take place precisely within this space. Some thinkers (Pascal, for example) will become so preoccupied, even obsessed, with the extremes themselves that they will hardly have any time or interest left for what happens in-between. Others (Michel de Montaigne for one) will spend most of their efforts exploring the wide assortment of blessings and curses, joys and sorrows scattered throughout. Needless to say, this in-between, this *ni ange ni bête* ("neither angel nor beast"), to use Pascal's own wording, is by definition the space of self-fashioning.[1]

The self as "work in progress"[2]

Self-fashioning is central to the spirit of Renaissance. In 1980 Stephen Greenblatt published an important book on the topic, and since then the two terms have become almost inseparable in scholarly conversations. There is a distinct sense, however, that the notion of "fashioning of the self" outlived the Renaissance to become an important dimension of the modern era itself. In some form or another, the idea that the self is not a given, but something we make and re-make, has become an important ingredient of our self-representation.[3] Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) is a significant case in this respect; I will discuss his case separately. Giuseppe Mazzotta examines in detail the presence of

self-fashioning in the work and life of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). In Mazzotta's reading, there is, for Vico, "no a priori essence for the self," we are our own product. One is "what one makes of oneself," and one makes of oneself "what one knows," which means that "being, knowledge, and making are ceaselessly interwoven in an endless recirculation" (Mazzotta 1998: 27). The self of an author is the result of the work he produces and of the ideas he entertains. Vico's books, then, made him who he was. He wrote these books, but in a way they "wrote" him too. Vico's *New Science*, says Mazzotta, "makes him … at least as much as he makes the *New Science*" (Mazzotta 1998: 18).[4]

The one who embarks on a self-fashioning project acts like the artist in the pursuit of the great, redeeming work. Indeed, creating a unique self for oneself is the most difficult and demanding of arts. It is not for nothing that in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche exclaims: "*One thing is needful.*—To 'give style' to one's character—a great and rare art!" Showing intimate knowledge of the process, Nietzsche gives us details about how such a work should be done. The masters of self-fashioning, he says, "survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art." Just like in other arts, a gift for composition, a sense of balance and proportion, patience and practice are much needed: "Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it" (Nietzsche 1974: 290).

It would not be out of place, then, to follow the analogy between the creation of the self and the process of literary creation—between the self of an author and the fictional worlds she brings into being in her work. The self is not something one is entrusted with at birth and then has to carry around as long as one lives, but an ongoing process.[5] If I were to employ Pico's terminology here, to become an individual is to become *discretus*, distinguishable and—why not?—distinguished. What is important in both cases—the creation of the self and literary creation—is that becoming *this* or *that* self ultimately is a matter of constant motion; neither one's character nor a literary character is given once for all, both are the result of a complex process of fashioning, deliberation, and projection. Since most of us aspire to have a "beautiful" self, we can be said to be creating a remarkable self for us just as an author seeks to create remarkable characters in her

books. That the same term ("character") is used—not only in English, but also in other languages—to designate both a "hero" in a work of fiction and the ethical quality of a self is not an accident and is telling. Someone who *has* character *is*, in an important sense, a character herself.

The self of an author is often something she makes in parallel with the creation of her work. The two, part of a larger process of existential configuration, are not completely separated from each other, they are communicating vessels. The selves I bring into being as a writer feed on my own self in ways of which I may not always be aware. In turn, my own self cannot remain untouched by the literary selves I fashion.[6] One corollary of this notion is that, to a certain extent, there is a kindredness, if a subtle and discreet one, between a work of fiction, on the one hand, and its author's character, personality, and worldview, on the other. This is not necessarily because the author gets her inspiration from her own biography, but because she herself is her own "creation:" a character, a *created self*, just like the people who populate her books.[7]

If self-fashioning is modernity by a different name, then we may know the latter's year of birth: 1486. That is when Giovanni Pico della Mirandola failed to have a public debate on his *Nine Hundred Theses*, and managed instead to have some of them condemned by the Holy Office, soon after seeking a taste of earthly love in the arms of a married lady from Arezzo. The birth of modernity, then, was accompanied by a double gesture of mockery. One was a mockery of the Church and the other of secular institutions (represented by the contract of marriage): trying to present a body of pagan-Arab-Kabalistic-Hermetic learning as orthodoxy, on the one hand, and trying to "steal" someone's lawful wife, on the other. It is worth noticing that, both in the case of heresy and in that of adultery, Pico recognizes the legitimacy of religious orthodoxy and of secular institutions. Their solid, imposing existence is there, as visible manifestation of a more profound cosmic and metaphysical order, what Brazilian theorist Luiz Costa Lima calls "the Law."[8]

Pico, a man with one foot in the Middle Ages and the other in modern times, recognizes the existence of the Law in the very act of mocking it. Mockery involves a distancing of the mocker from the mocked object, putting it into perspective, and toying with it. Based on subversion and derision, mockery is obviously dependent on the existence of something

"out there," with reference to which the act of mocking remains meaningful. In the absence of that external object, mockery loses any meaning and turns against the mocker. That's why mockery may also be seen as a form of appreciation, even of secret love.[9]

A very different picture emerges when the pre-modern order fades away and there is nothing to submit to, not even to mock. The fashioning of the self now takes place in absolute solitude. Montaigne is, again, a very good case in point, but before I discuss him I need to take a quick detour through the twentieth century.

Philosophy as an art of living

A quiet revolution has been taking place over the last three decades in our understanding of the history of Western philosophy. So quiet, in fact, that few have noticed it. What this revolution has brought forth is the realization that some of the most influential philosophers in the West (primarily the ancient philosophers, but also Montaigne, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and others) intended their philosophy to be not simply a body of doctrines, sheer intellectual content, but above all an art of living. Like most revolutions, this one, too, is about how we relate to the past.

In the late 1970s, Pierre Hadot (1922–2010), a distinguished French classicist,[10] started using the term *exercices spirituels* ("spiritual exercises") to describe what the ancient philosophers were doing. He borrowed it from Ignatius of Loyola, but expanded its area of applicability significantly. Yet in so doing Hadot thought he gave it back its original meaning. For Ignatius' *Exercitia spiritualia* (1548), he says, are nothing but a Christian adaptation of an old Greco-Roman tradition. Important as Ignatius' work may be, eventually it is to "antiquity that we must return in order to explain the origin and significance of this idea" (Hadot 1995: 82). In 1981 Hadot published his first book-length study on the topic: *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique.*[11] Among the book's instant admirers was Michel Foucault (1926–84). The latter's enthusiasm was boundless. Not only did Foucault help Hadot join the Collège de France, the country's premiere academic institution, but he did something more consequential: he embraced Hadot's view that, at its core, philosophy—especially ancient philosophy—is "a way of life"

(*une manière de vivre*). Foucault's intervention was to prove decisive for the reception of Hadot's ideas.[12]

Hadot writes in a sober, plain fashion. Unlike other French philosophers (Foucault included), he avoids rhetorical flourishes and unnecessary conceptual sophistication. There is something restrained, almost ascetic about Hadot's style, as if writing itself was for him a spiritual exercise. One can only wonder: how on earth was this most un-French of all French philosophers going to exert an influence? Who would notice his plain prose in the midst of the relentless stylistic orgy that is French philosophy? But exert he did, if on the heels of Foucault's fame. Hadot's approach to the history of ancient philosophy, even though sometimes challenged,[13] was to gain a steady following not only in France, but elsewhere. Later, in 1995, he would give his vision a more elaborate form in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*,[14] but the foundations had been firmly laid in the 1981 book that had captured Foucault's imagination. The latter's last work, *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*), in three volumes, came out just before his death in 1984. The third volume in particular, *Le souci de soi* (*The Care of the Self*), is obviously influenced by Hadot's understanding of ancient philosophy as a set of "spiritual exercises." Through this book Foucault—though he may have "betrayed" Hadot's view in some respects,[15] and had his own, quite distinct *problématique* to address—contributed significantly to the dissemination of Hadot's thesis. Foucault enjoyed a global popularity, and that gave it a much greater visibility.[16]

Whether as *exercices spirituels*, as in Hadot's case, or as *pratiques de soi* ("practices of the self"), as in Foucault's, a notion emerged that philosophizing is not so much about the world around them, but about the philosophers themselves—the notion, more exactly, that to philosophize is to engage in a project of self-realization (*réalisation de soi*). The idea found an increasingly international audience, so much so that in the 1990s it ceased to be a "French idea" and resonated across continents, cultures, and languages. By the end of the decade there was a sense that the art of living is inseparable from both ancient philosophy and Michel Foucault. The title of one of Alexander Nehamas's books is telling: *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Nehamas 1998). Today, many scholars tend to adopt this view without even feeling the need to bring up the names of Hadot or Foucault,

which is strong, if oblique, indication of just how persuasive and widespread their interpretation has become.

"You must change your life"

At the heart of philosophy as an art of living there lies the notion of *transformation.* This is not necessarily new. Indeed, such a conception of philosophy was taken for granted in Asian traditions: e.g. Confucianism, Buddhism—both of whose founders dismissed as "unprofitable" idle metaphysical speculation that did not bear on the art of living.[17] In the West, to give another example, Marxist philosophy is all about causing transformation in society. In *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) Marx famously challenges the way philosophy has been conceived: "Hitherto philosophers have sought to understand the world; henceforth they must seek to change it" (Marx and Engels 1998: I, 15).

Yet for philosophy as an art of living, the whole focus is not to change the world but the philosopher himself. In a sense, "changing the world" is a touch too easy because nobody exactly knows what that means. Revolutionaries and spin doctors alike never stop talking about "changing the world," which can result in a social anesthetization of sorts. Too much revolutionary talk may be the safest way to kill a revolution before it even starts. Soon enough we feel no discomfort living in a world that, in spite of all appearances, does not really change. *Plus ça change ....*[18] By contrast, the need to "change yourself" can have an urgency about it that, when it makes itself felt, no self-deceiving techniques manage to stifle it. Rilke's admonition now sounds harsher than ever: *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* ["you must change your life"].[19] Should you be visited by such a feeling, you will find it to be the most oppressive of oppressors; cruel and obnoxious, bitchy and itchy, drilling into you without mercy or respite. It will stay with you, like a thorn in the flesh, until you finally face it. What's more, you are totally on your own; if you don't change yourself through your philosophizing, nobody else can do it for you.

Here the chief reason for studying philosophy is not a desire to know more about the world, but a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the state in which one finds oneself. One day you suddenly, painfully, realize that something important is missing in your life, and that there is too

large a gap between what you are and the sense of what you should be. And before you know it, this emptiness starts eating at you. You may not know yet what exactly it is that you want, but you know quite well what you do *not* want: remaining the person you currently are. You may be so ashamed that you don't even dare to call that "existence": you don't exist yet properly. It must have been in this sense that Socrates used the term "midwifery" for what he was doing. By subjecting those around him to the rigors of philosophy, he was bringing them into proper existence. So closely related to self-detestation, it may well be that philosophy begins not in wonder, but in shame. If you are a bit too comfortable with yourself, if there is nothing you are ashamed of, you don't need philosophy; you are fine as you are.

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This is where Hadot's reading of the history of ancient philosophy comes in. The chief lesson we learn from the ancients, he suggests, is that philosophy should be understood as "an invitation to each human being to transform himself." To philosophize is to practice re-invention. Philosophy, he says, is "a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living" (Hadot 1995: 275). Hadot does not use the term "conversion" lightly. In anyone's biography, a conversion is a cataclysmic event, something that "turns our entire life upside down." Conversion may be of many kinds—religious, moral, artistic, political or philosophical—but the result is always the same: a decisive re-making.

Hadot believes that re-making was crucial to the way ancient philosophers conceived of what they were doing. Surveying the major philosophical schools of classical antiquity, he concludes that all of them believed that man, prior to his "philosophical conversion," finds himself in "a state of unhappy disquiet" (*un état d'inquiétude malheureuse*):

> Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself [*il n'est pas lui-même*]. All schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state. He can accede to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection [*un état de perfection*]. (Hadot 1995: 102; see also Hadot 1987: 89)

The fragment gives us a clearer sense of what Hadot means by "philosophical conversion:" the movement is not from one random self to another, but it is a process of "becoming who one is," as Nietzsche liked to put it. Before conversion that person may be someone, but not truly himself: *il n'est pas lui-même*. It is only through a philosophical transformation that one can make the most of what one is. Whatever functions philosophy may perform in other contexts (e.g. as social critique, general worldview, or linguistic analysis), now it comes across decisively as a tool for self-fashioning.

At this juncture, the discussion on the self as "work in progress," which I initiated earlier in this chapter and with which I am reconnecting here, takes on a new dimension. From the Renaissance on, there is a distinct sense that the self is something to be created "from scratch." The post-Renaissance project of self-fashioning is a radical one in that, in a world from which God is gradually withdrawing, there is more and more room for self-creation. The emphasis here is on the possibility of a total self-fashioning within an ontological arrangement where transcendence is increasingly absent. In the ancient world that Hadot is exploring, the cosmic-divine order is never really contested: any project of self-fashioning takes place *within* it. The emphasis now is on *how* the individual is to make the transition from "a state of unhappy disquiet" to "a state of perfection"—that is, on the discipline, methodology, and techniques of self-fashioning. And Hadot finds that the major philosophical schools of antiquity shared a set of fundamental techniques: "learning to live," "learning to die," "learning to dialogue," "learning how to read," and others. The synthesis of all these practices could be likened, to use an image Hadot borrows from Plotinus, to "sculpting one's own statue" (*sculpter sa propre statue*). There is hardly a better image to illustrate philosophy as self-fashioning.

In this reading of ancient philosophy, the raw material that is human being can be turned into something more refined through the employment of a series of "spiritual exercises," whose goal is "a kind of self-formation, or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live" (Hadot 1995: 102). The spiritual exercises are practices and routines, always performed in a highly self-conscious manner, that engage and train specific human faculties: attention, memory, imagination, self-control. Hadot looks at several such exercises practiced first in the Greek,

then in the Roman, philosophical schools. One example is "attention to the present moment." By focusing on the present we free ourselves from the passions that both the past and the future (none of which we can control entirely) stir in us: regret, fear, apprehension, anger, sadness. Attention to the present moment also gives us a sense of "cosmic consciousness," and helps us appreciate the "infinite value of each instant" (Hadot 1995: 84–5). Similarly, premeditation of evils (*praemeditatio malorum*), another key exercise, presupposes a constant awareness of the bad things (poverty, suffering, death, etc.) that may at any moment befall us. Through this type of meditation, we make mental room for them in our lives and ready ourselves to live with them should misfortune strike. By becoming aware of what could happen to us, we gain control over our fear of the unknown. The "view from above," to give a final example, helps us realize just how insignificant our lives are when placed within a bigger cosmic picture. This exercise is meant to cure us of the disease of arrogance. The emphasis on one type of exercise or another may have differed from school to school, from philosopher to philosopher, but in some form or another the spiritual exercises must have been practiced in all the schools.

Certainly, ancient philosophy involved systematic discourses about the world, the human condition, and the common good. It therefore involved the production and dissemination of texts (poems, treaties, dialogues), what's called "philosophical literature." Yet—and here is the major hermeneutic shift that Hadot proposes—such discourses and texts were not an end in themselves, but only a means for occasioning a transformation in those who wrote or read them. These works, says Hadot, even if "theoretical and systematic," were written "not so much to inform the reader of a doctrinal content," but to "form him," to determine him to "traverse a certain itinerary in the course of which he will make spiritual progress" (Hadot 1995: 64).[20]

At times, Hadot seems to blur the chronological lines and speaks as though his subject matter is not the world of the ancient philosophers any more, but our own. "We have forgotten *how* to read," he says at one point. We no longer know "how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality," in order to "meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us." Knowing "how to read" is never a trivial thing;

indeed, it is "a spiritual exercise, and one of the most difficult" (Hadot 1995: 109).

Relying on the Stoic distinction between a discourse *about* philosophy (with its divisions: physics, ethics, and logic) and *philosophy itself* (that is, the Stoic way of life), Hadot advocates an understanding of philosophy as a certain type of insertion into the world. Philosophy is not—it should not be—about abstracting something from life and postulating it as its essence. On the contrary, it is about enhancing life and taking it to a superior level. Philosophy, Hadot says, is a "concrete attitude and determinate life-style," something that "engages the whole of existence." It is not just something you read or write or speak about, but a mode of *being* in the world:

> The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. … It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom. (Hadot 1995: 82–3)

Hadot's views may need to be amended; his account of ancient philosophy as reducible to a set of spiritual exercises may need some nuancing, as some of his critics have said. As far as the subject of this book is concerned, however, the conception of philosophy as an art of living presents the decisive advantage that, within it, the death of a philosopher for the sake of his ideas is something *philosophically meaningful*. For an art of dying can only be practiced as part of an art of living. As long as philosophy is taken to be a purely academic exercise, the fact that a thinker is put to death because of his philosophizing does not necessarily have philosophical significance; his death hardly goes beyond the anecdotal. However, if philosophy is understood as the embodiment of a certain worldview, and the *practice* of it, then such a death suddenly becomes immensely relevant.

Intermezzo (where the philosopher forgets philosophy at the office)

While predominant among the ancient philosophers, as well as among some modern ones (Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Simone Weil, for example), the notion of philosophy as an art of living is far from current mainstream academic philosophy. Hadot challenged the way we understand the history of philosophy, but he hasn't managed to change the way contemporary philosophers view what they are doing. Today philosophy is primarily a "job"; philosophers are just another category of "professionals." When they are done with the day's required reading, they don't take philosophy home with them, but leave it at the office, behind locked doors. The work they produce, outstanding as it may be, is not supposed to change their lives. The philosopher's work, on the one hand, and her biography, on the other, are not to be conflated; they belong to two different orders of reality.

Perhaps as a corollary of this view, poorly conducted lives are not necessarily seen as detrimental to one's philosophy since they are philosophically irrelevant. In ancient Greece Diogenes of Sinope strived to live a "dog's life" as a matter of philosophical choice and practice. Today a philosopher can in principle live like a pig and still be seen capable of producing great works of philosophy. If he is to be criticized for anything, it is not the lack of harmony between what he says and what he does that concerns his critics, but other matters: some logical flaws in his work, the weakness of its arguments, or the vagueness of his concepts.

Things are not always that simple, though. In 1927 Martin Heidegger published Sein und Zeit *(*Being and Time*), one of the most important philosophical works of the twentieth century; some say the most important. Only a few years later Heidegger joined the Nazi Party. His political involvement is often cited as one of the most disastrous mistakes a philosopher can make. We are shocked, and rightly so. And, yet, where does our shock come from? From the fact that some German called Martin Heidegger joined the Nazis or rather that a great philosopher by that name did it? If the latter, why are we so upset? Isn't there at work, in our disappointment with Heidegger's lamentable*

political options, an expectation, if an obscure one, that a philosopher's life should be conducted philosophically?

Self-examined, shattered, worth-narrating lives

In *The Care of the Self* Michel Foucault reframes Hadot's concerns in terms of "cultivation of the self." The "art of existence" (*téchnē tou biou*)—which, for Foucault, was what ancient philosophy was all about—is governed by the principle according to which one "has to take care of oneself." This principle structures the economy of one's self, "establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice" (Foucault 1988: 43). In his study, Foucault finds out that "care for oneself" (*heautou epimeleisthai*) was deeply ingrained in Greek culture; he makes an inventory of intellectual and spiritual practices, which he calls "practices of the self" (*pratiques de soi*), through which someone could "perfect" his or her self.

In Greek philosophy, Socrates is the prime example of the "care for the self" practitioner.[21] Foucault reads Plato's *Apology* precisely in this light. What Socrates displays during the trial is not some shallow rhetorical mastery, but it is skill of a special kind: that of "the care of the self."[22] What such a master does as a matter of duty, unpleasant as it may be, is drum into his fellow-citizens' minds that their primary concern should be "not with their riches, not with their honor, but with themselves and their souls" (Foucault 1988: 44). Only such a preoccupation is worthy of an Athenian citizen. In an Athens severely weakened by war, and where wisdom was not exactly in abundance (something of which the trial itself was living proof), Socrates' irony must have felt like burning slaps on the cheeks of the jury members. Yet he does not stop there: relentlessly, he keeps humiliating his audience and digging his grave deeper. At times there is something of an Old Testament prophet in Socrates' posture. In a city that has become over-materialistic and spiritually poor, Socrates acts like the carrier of uncomfortable divine admonitions:

> Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring

> as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of the soul? (Plato 1961: 15–16 [29c-e, trans. H. Tredennick])

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Much of what follows in this book is about the dangers that face thinkers who speak their mind. The story I seek to tell here is of these philosophers' perilous journey from the agora to the scaffold or the pyre. Yet external dangers are not the only ones philosophers face; for there are also internal adversities and traps as poisonous as hemlock. Let me briefly mention two of them.

First, in the footsteps of Pierre Hadot, I earlier tied the philosophical art of living to the experience of a radical transformation. To turn philosophy into such an art one has to undergo a conversion. The process, however, is never simple, nor always safe. As someone who goes through the experience of a death-*cum*-rebirth, the convert is not a new person, but a *renewed* one, which is quite different. A convert is always a multi-layered, multi-faceted person. All his life he will remain a shattered creature, a complex, yet dangerous synthesis of old and new—new life grafted on old identity. A convert is the impossible mixture of nostalgia and hope, past and future; in such a soul the fear of a relapse lives side by side with an intense passion for the newly found self. The convert must often find himself in a state of grief, and the ardor with which he embraces the new cause must be his way of mourning the death of his old identity. The self of the convert can be the site of extraordinary inspiration and grace, just as it can exhaust itself in unresolvable conflicts and self-destructive desires. Converts are fascinating, yet shattered and profoundly vulnerable people.

Second, central to philosophy as a way of life is the practice of self-examination. The virtues of self-examination can hardly be over-estimated. Yet there can be something dark, unsettling, even dangerous about performing it.[23] Self-examination can sometimes be a curse and the self-examiner a doomed person. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the examined life can be unlivable. Philosophers gladly proclaim "know thyself," but usually forget to mention the high price that comes with such knowledge: self-doubt,

disorientation, groundlessness. Indeed, this is no comfortable learning but knowledge of one's limits and limitations; quite often what you face is not some beautiful vista, but your own abyss. To the extent that any serious quest for wisdom starts in self-examination, the one who embarks on it frequently navigates through a world of anguish, inner conflicts, even provocation to disaster.

Life-threatening as the journey may be, however, the final destination makes it worth taking. From a letter that Nietzsche sent to his doctor, Otto Eiser, in January 1880, we get a glimpse of both the journey's difficulties and the unique joy that overcoming them causes in the self-examiner:

> My existence is an *awful burden* – I would have dispensed with it long ago, were it not for the most illuminating tests and experiments I have been conducting in matters of mind and morality even in my state of suffering and almost absolute renunciation – the pleasure I take in my thirst for knowledge brings me to heights from which I triumph over all torment and despondency. (in Safranski 2002: 178)

No matter how unbearable life can be, Nietzsche suggests, its self-examination comes with a precious reward: the renewed dignity of the act of living. Life examined is thus life transformed. Your life changes in the very process of looking at it; if it doesn't, it only means you are not examining it properly. Philosophy, then, is indeed *performative*; it is not just something you talk about, it is above all something you do.

Intermezzo (where you can't tell people from buildings)

Converts are not unlike buildings refurbished after an earthquake. On the outside they exhibit freshness, confidence, and hope. It's all about renewal and rejuvenation. And yet there is always the lurking apprehension that there may still be something wrong with them—a never fully uttered, but sometimes felt and whispered fear that something of the old, compromised structure may give way and put everything at risk. You don't want to get too close to these people because you don't

want to be reminded of earthquakes or because you don't believe in refurbishing, or out of fear that, should they suddenly collapse, you will be caught amidst the ruins.

Philosophy and biography

In his *Memorabilia* Xenophon has Socrates say: "If I don't reveal my views in a formal account, I do so by my conduct. Don't you think that actions are more reliable evidence than words?" We should certainly appreciate Socrates' irony. Here he is—the unmatched speechmaker, the compulsive dialogist, the chatterbox—badmouthing the value of the spoken word itself. Yet precisely because it comes from someone like Socrates we have to pay closer attention to such an insight. Like few other thinkers before or after him, Socrates understood the power of language, but he was also keenly aware of the philosopher's need to transcend language. For philosophy relies on language just as much as it needs to overcome it. If it is to remain something meaningful, it should not be content with describing things, it has to *make things happen*, to effectuate a change. It is by that change, however small, that one can often tell whether a philosophy is alive or dead.

To push this line of thought one step further, I would say that the locus of philosophy, the place where it dwells, is not the book or the academic paper, but the body of the philosopher. It does not exist properly unless it is *embodied* in a human being. Philosophy is word made flesh. That's why, in this tradition, the philosophers' own biographies become highly relevant. If a philosophy is validated only to the extent that it is embodied in the philosopher's life, then that life is intrinsically philosophical, and examining it is not unlike studying a philosophical text. Just as in a philosopher's text we look for plausibility of evidence and soundness of arguments, so in a philosopher's life we seek consistency of behavior and symmetry between discourse and action. Indeed, in the tradition of philosophy as an art of living, a flawed biography can do more damage to the philosopher's reputation than a flawed argument; if the philosopher does not practice the philosophy he professes, he invalidates it.[24] In a certain sense, then, a philosopher's life is scripted—by no other than himself. He cannot do just whatever he fancies: what he does needs to be consistent with

what he says one should be doing. Every single gesture has to fit into the logic of the whole—anything amiss can endanger its integrity. Had Socrates, for example, asked the Athenian court for forgiveness, that single gesture—an "accidental weakness," you may call it—would have compromised his entire philosophical project. There are no such things as biographical accidents in the lives of those who practice philosophy as an art of living, just as there are no accidents in well-constructed narratives.

That's why one of the corollaries of the notion of philosophy as embodiment is the renewed importance of biography as a literary form. One might say that the story of the philosopher's life becomes as relevant as that life itself; it functions as an ideal image for others to see, admire, and emulate. For such a philosophical biography does not consist of a series of isolated anecdotes, but is a well-structured narrative whose purpose is to instruct and shape the mind of the reader.[25] Precisely because a philosopher's life can be seen, in this tradition, as the visible expression of her philosophy, we should read her biography in the same way we read a philosophical text. We observe the logic of her actions just as we follow the consistency of an argument. And by observing a philosopher's life, by empathically understanding the workings of her mind and behavior, our own minds and behaviors are being shaped.

The invention of solitude

The conception of philosophy as an art of living provides a good angle from which to look at Michel de Montaigne's life and work. My detour through Hadot and Foucault's theories should place us in a better position to encounter Montaigne at last.

Michel de Montaigne did not like the academic philosophers of his day. He disliked their "pedantries and abstractions," says a recent biographer, Sarah Bakewell. Instead, he was totally taken by another kind of philosophy: that of the "great pragmatic schools," concerned with such questions as "how to cope with a friend's death, how to work up courage, how to act well in morally difficult situations, and how to make the most of life" (Bakewell 2010: 109). The thinkers he admired were Socrates, Cicero, Seneca, the Stoics, the Sceptics,

and the Epicureans, all of whom form the backbone of the art of living tradition.

In Sarah Bakewell's *How to Live*, she explores Montaigne's life and writings with the overt purpose of extracting an art of living from them. The result is an impressive reconstruction of Montaigne's existential, cultural, and intellectual universe. The key to Montaigne's world, Bakewell believes, is the issue of "how to live." This is a large, multi-layered, and sometimes fluid interrogation, which is not to be confused with the narrower ethical question "How *should* one live?" Montaigne may have been interested in the latter as well, but most of the time he sought to know "how to live a good life," which is to say, a "correct and honorable life, but also a fully human, satisfying, flourishing one" (Bakewell 2010: 4). Indeed, the question "how to live" structured Montaigne's biography: it opened his eyes, made him travel, see the world, it made him get involved in politics, get out of politics, live with a disease, get used to the idea of dying, and finally die with dignity. In seeking to find out "how to live," and writing about it, Montaigne must have learned who he was.

Above all, the question of "how to live" made Montaigne quit his job, a decision for which we cannot be grateful enough. Montaigne's life truly starts where most others' end—with retirement. In 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, possibly out of frustration, after being looked over for promotion, he took early retirement. Along with Nietzsche's retirement, Montaigne's must have been one of the most active retirements in the entire history of modern philosophy. Ironically enough, what Montaigne did while he was on "active duty" matters as little today as it did then, whereas his accomplishments as a "retiree" are hard to over-estimate. Once freed of professional obligations, he launched a major personal project: the writing of the *Essays*. In so doing, not only did he come up with a new literary genre, but he invented a new literary character, and a fabulous one at that, one who would have an influence on whoever was to put pen to paper ever after. The name of this character is Michel de Montaigne, and he may well be the first fully-fledged modern intellectual.

In a note "To the Reader" prefacing the *Essays*, Montaigne famously says: "I myself am the object of my book" (Montaigne 2003: lix).[26] Not the world around, neither the past nor the present, neither his society nor his culture, but he himself. Lest there be any confusion, in the same note Montaigne describes the manner in which his self is to be

present—or, rather, presented—in the book: "I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice: for it is my own self that I am painting [*c'est moy que je peins*]" (Montaigne 2003: lix; see also Montaigne 1969: I, 35). The irony is that even to say such a simple thing—that he wished to be seen in his "simple, natural, everyday fashion"—he subjected this brief note to a tortuous process of editing and re-editing, addition and revision. For example, in the original (1580) edition, "without striving or artifice" (*sans contention et artifice*) had been "without study or artifice" (*sans recherche et artifice*). And this is the case with virtually every single page of the *Essays*; until the hour of his death Montaigne kept rewriting the book. This alone, along with the genre of the essay itself, poses some worthwhile questions to which I shall attend before moving on.

First of all, what is the essay? Luiz Costa Lima talks of the essay's "unfinishedness" as one of its chief characteristics. In more technical terms, he defines the essay as the genre that occupies "the interval between the discourse for which form is the principle—poetical or fictional discourse—and those for which questions about meaning are the principle, above all, philosophical discourse." The essay is thus "less a medium for the circulation of ideas than a medium for questions" (Costa Lima 1996: 64).

Montaigne invented the essay out of personal necessity. He must have looked around and realized that no existing literary form could serve him properly. If one's body is of a peculiar shape, one has no use for the clothes found in ordinary stores, one needs custom-made clothing. Similarly, Montaigne's personality was of such an unusual cut that he needed a literary form that was all his own—a custom-made genre. That's how the essay came into being—as an effort to accommodate the workings of an unusual mind: "If my soul could only find a footing, I would not be assaying myself but resolving myself [*je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois*]. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested [*en apprentissage et en espreuve*]" (Montaigne 2003: 908; see also Montaigne 1979: III, 20). Donald Frame's translation of *je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois* is even more poignant: "I would not make essays, I would make decisions." The essay is the opposite of resolution, the enemy of firm decisions.

In a certain sense, the essay is an impossible genre. It seeks to capture not the things themselves, not even things in change, but

change itself: "I am not portraying being, but becoming: not the passage from one age to another …, but from day to day, from minute to minute [*de jour en jour, de minute en minute*]." One cannot live first and then write about it later; such a postponement would jeopardize the whole project because memory is the most unfaithful of servants. Essay-writing is best when done at the same time as living; ideally, living and writing should be one and the same thing. Montaigne was only too aware of this: "I must adapt this account of myself to the passing hour [*Il fault accommoder mon histoire à l'heure*]" (Montaigne 2003: 907–8; see also Montaigne 1979: III, 20). If you wait for too long, what you will capture will not be life, but only the ashes of time. Writing delayed is writing made useless.

It must be this impossible "program" that lies behind the tremendous success of Montaigne's *Essays.* The reader is captivated by the realization that Montaigne is after something uncanny here: a seizing of the unseizable. Originally conceived as the literary device whereby a vacillating mind could express itself, the essay now turns out to be an extremely resourceful genre. Its strength comes from its versatility. We come to love Montaigne precisely because his mind was of such an unusual cut. What we gain access to in his book is a rare literary feat: the subtlest movements of the soul, almost imperceptible modulations of a state of mind or emotion, nuances that often evade language.[27] In the *Essays*, it is not the situational logic of a plot that captures our imagination, nor the compelling force of an argument in the making that arrests our attention.[28] It is something else: the sheer joy of witnessing the working of Montaigne's mind and participating in its spectacle. It is, no doubt, a peculiar mind, idiosyncratic, odd at times, forgetful or lazy at others, but a mind alive, and a mind that we hope can nourish ours. The book is the unique written testimony left behind by someone on a quest to find an art of living. It does not have a clear structure, plan, or definite lines of argument.[29] Often it is as though the author forgets where he is headed, if he is indeed headed anywhere. Often, too, the reader does not know what to make of what the book has to offer.[30] The book is rough, messy, chaotic—"monstrous," it has been called.[31]

It is also the same program of seizing the unseizable that lies behind Montaigne's uninterrupted effort to edit and expand the book. The fact that he published it in 1580 did not mean at all that the work was finished. He altered the subsequent editions, and when he died he

was working on yet more changes and additions. Modern translators and editors of the *Essays* use special notations and codes to signify the different layers of Montaigne's text. A more appropriate description would be to say that there is only one text of the *Essays*, which Montaigne wanted to be in a state of continuous transformation—a text alive. Importantly, in making these changes, Montaigne did not seek "better" formulations, as ordinarily happens in editing. Most likely, he was applying one of his own rules: "I must adapt this account of myself to the passing hour." The fact that the *Essays* had already appeared in print did not make much of a difference. As long as the "passing hour" was bringing him something new, that change, however slight, had to be reflected—"accommodated"—in the text if this was to be a true account of him. In an important sense, the essay is never supposed to be finished. This almost compels one to say: not only was Montaigne the inventor of the essay, he may well have been the only true practitioner of the genre. He practiced it as long as he lived. For, if it is to remain faithful to the original intention, the essay has to be a form of infinite writing. One cannot stop writing the essay, only death can make this happen.

By ordinary literary standards, that the book could have had any success at all was unlikely. That it was an instant best-seller is almost incomprehensible. But the *Essays* is no ordinary book. Sometimes obscurely, sometimes clearly, we realize that the extraordinary thing about the *Essays* is not what this book is about, but the process it embodies—the process, that is, whereby someone's self is taking shape, right there on the page, before our eyes. This is a book about everything and nothing, which only means that, in the end, it is about writing itself, and someone's self-configuration through it. We may find some of the book's contents elsewhere, but *what happens* in this book is not to be found anywhere else. Its writing does not "portray" a self, but *creates* one. When Montaigne says *c'est moy que je peins* (it is my own self that I am painting), he somewhat misleads us, as he does in other cases. He is closer to the truth when he admits, in the same note "To the Reader," that *je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre*, which contains a phrase (*la matière de mon livre*) ambiguous enough to allow a more liberal interpretation. The construction can mean that which the book is about (its "object"), but it can also mean simply the "matter" to be found in the book, without any clear

indication as to whether this is something the book gives to the world or takes from it.

As Montaigne writes his book something fascinating happens at a deeper level—his book, in turn, writes him. The essay-writing is self-writing; the main character in your book is your own character. In the end, the *Essays* are as much the product of Montaigne's mind as his self is the by-product of the *Essays*. Montaigne's self is not the stuff (*la matiere*) that his book is *made of*, but precisely what this book *has made*. The most spectacular story of the *Essays* (and Montaigne has many extraordinary stories here) is one we don't find anywhere in his text. It is something we become fully aware of only after we are done reading it: the story of Montaigne's own making as a result of writing this book.[32]

*

Reading the *Essays*, like any act of reading, may have a social dimension, yet writing it must have involved a high degree of solitude. The process whereby a self is being brought into being is too complex, too precious, and too important to be conducted in public. If there is one thing you don't need at such moments it is the others' indiscreet gaze. Montaigne draws a clear distinction between the layer of our existence that is open to the public—in which he includes even one's family—and another space, which has to remain private. The former is where we conduct the business of living (*boutique*), which always involves others, whereas the latter (*arrière-boutique*) is where we withdraw when we are tired of society, and where we can afford to take off our social masks. It is only in this "room behind the shop," Montaigne suggests, that we can be truly ourselves; solitude is a condition of authenticity. If the creation of the self is a spatialized process, if it "takes place" somewhere, it is here, in the *arrière-boutique.* That's why Montaigne urges us to make sure that we always have access to such a place. Rarely has solitude been as highly praised as in the *Essays*:

> We must reserve a back shop [*arrière-boutique*] all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude. Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and

> ourselves, and so private that no outside association or communication can find a place. (Montaigne 2003: 162)

The notion of the self as the outcome of a process of writing is especially fitting when we recall how, in Pico della Mirandola's retelling of Genesis, the human being is left in an unfinished state: God has made man a rough *draft*, and it is the latter's job to finish it. Importantly, in Pico's world there was still a sense of cosmic, social, and religious order in relation to which, or against which, one could define oneself and finish the draft. If nothing else, mocking this order would be a good technique of individuation, a philosophical practice whereby one could bring oneself properly into being. In Montaigne's universe, however, almost nothing is left of the ancient order. His is a world of radical solitude—he gives it a shape in his *Essays.*

The question, then, is: in a world where nothing is certain, a universe with no firm contours, how can we finish the draft that we are? Against *what* are we going to assert ourselves? Answer: death. Death is always certain, even in the most uncertain of worlds. Other things may come and go, but death is always there, the absolute referent. Montaigne knows this better than anyone else: throughout the *Essays* he defines himself with constant reference to death. That he started writing the book after the death of a close friend is telling.

Death and writing are always in an uncanny relationship. It is when it becomes an act of mourning that writing reveals its ultimate value. Finding yourself in the proximity of death one day and finding the right way to write about it must be a writer's most difficult test. Montaigne more than passed it. Performing such high-intensity writing must have been his way of finishing the draft that he was, his unique signature on the world.[33] He looked death in the eye and learned all he needed to know about himself.

What kind of look Montaigne and other philosophers have taken at death is precisely what the next chapter is about.

2
THE FIRST LAYER

To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death. At every instant let us evoke it in our imagination under all its aspects. Whenever a horse stumbles, a tile falls or a pin pricks however slightly, let us at once chew over this thought: "Supposing that was death itself?" With that, let us brace ourselves and make an effort. In the midst of joy and feasting let our refrain be one which recalls our human condition. Let us never be carried away by pleasure so strongly that we fail to recall occasionally how many are the ways in which that joy of ours is subject to death or how many are the fashions in which death threatens to snatch it away. That is what the Egyptians did: in the midst of all their banquets and good cheer they would bring in a mummified corpse to serve as a warning to the guests.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

An elusive character

It is time now to introduce the story's second character: *death*. For, after all, what I promised you was the dramatic narrative of the philosopher's clash with death. Yet, I am afraid, this is where the narrator's troubles truly start because death is an elusive, cunning character. To talk about

death is to talk about an *absence*—and a complex, labyrinthine one at that. Death comes in layers—layers of absence, as it were: an absence within an absence within an absence. At the risk of oversimplification, in this story I consider the philosopher's encounter with two layers of death, the first of which is the subject of this chapter. You will meet the second in Chapter 4.

When the philosopher first makes death's acquaintance, he does not meet it as his own death. At this stage he is relatively young and only knows death as a "philosophical problem," a theoretical provocation, some difficult issue to be thought out. This makes his approach, oddly enough, at once naïve and sophisticated. It is naïve because it lacks the immediacy of an impending personal experience. And it is sophisticated precisely because it is naïve. In his youth and middle-age, the philosopher is not yet within death's shadow, his vital instincts work well and his thinking is not clouded with the fear of dying. He can take a good look at death, examine it from multiple angles, size it up and down. He can afford to be serene in front of it because he is not yet wise (wisdom is the speech of the tired flesh) and he does not really know what he is facing. He jumps into the topic of death—for that's what death is to him at this early stage: a "topic"—with the blissful ignorance of someone who dives into a river that is too deep; he is not scared because he cannot really see the bottom.

Philosophers can thus say insightful things on death, but they do so perhaps without fully realizing what they are saying. I will look at three such cases of naïve-and-sophisticated encounters with death: Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and Paul-Louis Landsberg's *Essai sur l'expérience de la mort* (1936).

Intermezzo (where death is threatened with domestication)

The things that death does to us! For ages, poets, preachers, and moralists haven't stopped marveling at death's masterfully creative hold over us. Death, this line goes, is the tyrannical ruler of all things human, it reduces everything to nothing, turns splendors into ashes,

makes us food for worms and manure for the soil. The fear of death darkens the mind and cripples the soul. Death's proximity makes armies tremble and brave men crumble. There is hardly anything that death can't do to us long before its main job. Such things, and others still more dreadful, have been said of death. Blinded as we are by the formidable power of its reputation, however, we rarely see the few ways we can try to master it, the things we can do to *death. For, paradoxical as it may sound, death can be co-opted in a project of self-creation. Through self-transcendence we can turn the tables on the master of all destruction to make it play for the opposite side.*

Simon Critchley talks of those "acts of self-invention and self-creation, where death becomes my work and suicide becomes the ultimate possibility." (Critchley 1997: 25) He speaks on behalf of a line of thinking according to which suicide is living proof that we can to some extent control death itself. That we are able to put an end to our life is evidence that we possess a metaphysically-grounded freedom that allows us to enter into competition with God. Coming from the same tradition, Albert Camus held that suicide should be considered the fundamental problem of philosophy.

Yet there is a way we can control death without having to commit suicide. Undramatic and unassuming as it may look, this "domestication" of death may be more challenging a deed than suicide because it presupposes a disciplined practice of "death in life." No grand gestures, no gunshots, or letting yourself bleed to death in the bathtub surrounded by weeping friends and devastated lovers—Oh, mon Dieu!—*but a slow, discreet incorporation of death into life until the former becomes part and parcel of your every act of living.*

"That to philosophize is to learn how to die"

While far from being a book on death, Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* features what has turned out to be some of the most profound meditations on death in the history of modern philosophy.[1] He set out to write as a way of overcoming the pain caused to him by the death of his closest friend—truly the love of his life—Étienne de La Boétie

(1530–63). The *Essays* is a work of mourning.[2] Considerations of death are scattered throughout the book, but one of the essays (I, 20) is of particular interest: "That to philosophize is to learn how to die" (*Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir*). The Ciceronian maxim, of direct Socratic-Platonic inspiration, occasions one of Montaigne's finest reflections. He places his approach within a classic framework; the tone is generally Platonic, but also Stoic. In this tradition, the practice of philosophy presupposes a certain positioning in relation to one's body: more exactly, being alienated from it. Philosophical "detachment" means not only the philosopher's separation from the world, but also from her own corporeity, which is something "foreign" to her mission. Not only does the philosopher of this persuasion have to *not* love her body, but through whatever she does, she has to prove inimical to it.

Since death is defined as the separation of the soul from the body, it is precisely through such a practice of detachment that the philosopher acquires a full understanding of what death is. One can "rehearse" one's death while still in life through habitual detachment from one's body.[3] Such a philosophy is successful, then, insofar as it helps one experience the body as something external to one's self—indeed, as a prison to escape from. Montaigne begins his essay by adopting this Platonic mode of thinking. To philosophize, he suggests, is to learn how to distinguish soul from body, and to remain always aware of the distinction. This state of separation—which resembles and foreshadows death—is the ideal philosophical starting point. For study and contemplation, he notices, "draw our souls somewhat outside ourselves, keeping them occupied away from the body, a state which both resembles death and which forms a kind of apprenticeship for it [*qui est quelque aprentissage et ressemblance de la mort*]" (Montaigne 2003: 89; see also Montaigne 1969: I, 127). The true philosopher is an apprentice to death.

Soon enough, however, Montaigne switches to a more obviously Stoic tone. He makes two important observations. First, no one can flee death. "There is no place where death cannot find us." To be human is to be constantly advancing toward death. Nothing can put us off this track, with every passing instant we come closer to our final destination. "The end of our course is death. It is the objective necessarily within our sights" (Montaigne 2003: 92).[4] Montaigne's second observation has to do with the "wrong" take on death. This is the

attitude of "ordinary people" (*vulgaire*, he calls them), who seek to solve the problem by not thinking about it. Simply uttering the word "death" is enough to terrify them. This approach is wrong because it leaves people ill-equipped to cope with their ending. When death strikes (and it never fails to) these people find themselves in the weakest of positions: the more extensive their ignorance of death before, the deeper their devastation now. Unprepared, unwarned, childish minds in grown-up bodies, they have now become death's plaything. They die not one, but several deaths, each one uglier than the next. When death comes, "to them, their wives, their children, their friends," and "catches them unawares and unprepared," says Montaigne, "then what storms of passion overwhelm them, what cries, what fury, what despair! Have you ever seen anything brought so low, anything so changed, so confused?" (Montaigne 2003: 95).

This convinces Montaigne that death should be faced in a different fashion. Within a loosely Stoic framework, he designs his own approach to death, a method that is as simple as it is bold: take death by surprise, face it head-on. If it knocks on your door, do the unexpected: let it in. If it tries to scare you, don't run away, smile back, embrace it. Should it grin at you, show it boundless courtesy. Since death is not used to such fine manners, this will certainly put it off-balance.

The fragment that I use as an epigraph for this chapter illustrates Montaigne's approach: it describes as well as performs. At the descriptive level, Montaigne's text advances the argument that what makes us afraid of death is that we don't know much about it. The power of death over us is paradoxical: what renders it so terrible is not some positive feature, but precisely what death is *not*, the unknown it evokes. Hence Montaigne's remedy. "To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us," he says, we should deprive it of "its strangeness," we should "frequent it ... get used to it." At times Montaigne's remarks almost read like a "death manifesto": "Let us have nothing more often in mind than death. At every instant let us evoke it in our imagination under all its aspects" (Montaigne 2003: 96).

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Creatures of habit and followers of beaten paths that we are, we always seek to stick with what we know best. The ultimate divide that governs

our lives is not that between good and evil, or truth and untruth, but a more primitive one: the visceral distinction between *familiar* and *unfamiliar*. We conduct our dealings with the world and others, we structure our lives and invest our emotions primarily along this dividing line. "Familiar" and "unfamiliar," "home" and "foreign," "acceptance" and "rejection"—these are categories that structure our minds and shape our lives. The Greeks divided the world into a familiar universe where human life is grounded, *oikouménē* (the inhabited world), and the uncertain seas beyond the horizon, uncharted and unchartable. The basis of the *oikouménē* is that which is most familiar, *oîkos* (literally household or family). Human ontology, it might be argued, is at its core an ontology of dwelling. The way our mind embraces the world is not unlike the manner our body inhabits it. This is "our" world to the extent that we can insert ourselves comfortably and feel at ease in it. Jan Patočka expresses this insight with the help of some striking images. The entire world, he says,

> can be a mother's lap, can be a warm, cordial, smiling, and protective glass globe, or there may be in it the cosmic cold with its deadening, icy breath – and both are closely linked to whether in the world and out of the world someone smiles at us and meets us responsively. (Patočka 1989: 264)

Human life takes place and flourishes when we manage to insert ourselves into the world as if this were "a mother's lap." To live is to practice domestication; to be human is to turn the world into home and make the cosmos habitable. Things and events become intelligible as they are placed within the camp of the familiar; they make sense to the extent that we can make room for them on *our side* of the dividing line. If we only could to do the same thing with death, we would be living better lives!

The Egyptian trick

Montaigne's point is simple, then: to make your life livable you have to make room for death in it. "That is what the Egyptians did," he says. In the "midst of all their banquets and good cheer they would bring in

a mummified corpse." The Egyptians may have never done that, but the story's moral is too good to let it pass: living well means not just being aware of death, but domesticating it. You have to receive it in your home, show it hospitality, give it a place at your table and take good care of it.

The art of living may boil down to a science of dosage: if you let too much death into your life you can poison it, but if you don't allow enough you can ruin it, by living it in a tasteless, insipid fashion:

> In the midst of joy and feasting let our refrain be one which recalls our human condition. Let us never be carried away by pleasure so strongly that we fail to recall occasionally how many are the ways in which that joy of ours is subject to death or how many are the fashions in which death threatens to snatch it away. (Montaigne 2003: 96)

Montaigne believes that by allowing death to enter our existence we deprive it of its most savage element: unexpectedness. Ironically, even though death has never failed to strike, most of us are taken by surprise when it does. That's why death domesticated is death made less unpredictable. Not that we could set up the hour of our death (that would be suicide), but we can train our flesh and soul in such a way that, should death decide to take us for a ride, we can just up and say, as if to a companion we've been waiting for: "Sure, let's go!" "As far as we possibly can," says Montaigne, "we must always have our boots on." You are so well prepared for death that, no matter when it strikes, it can never take you by surprise. "I want Death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening" (Montaigne 2003: 98–9).

Key to all this is a sense of the "right time," which is born precisely out of a habitual domestication of death. The "right time" is not something measurable; there are no clocks to determine it. The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *chrónos*, which meant ordinary, quantifiable time, and *kairós*, which was time of a rather special kind, something that clocks could not measure and machines could not track. Everything mundane happens in *chrónos*, but extraordinary events—divine apparitions, for example—could only take place in *kairós*. The sense of a "right time"—which may well be the gift we

receive from death in response to the hospitality we show her—is the closest we can get to authentic *kairós* in our lifetime.

"That to philosophize is to learn how to die" is not only descriptive, but also—as I hinted earlier—performative, and it is so in a double sense. First, just like the rest of the *Essays*, the text is part of a process of self-configuration: Montaigne's meditations on death are constitutive of his self-fashioning project. Yet his writing on the subject is also performative in a more specific sense. Death is not only the object of rational analysis in his book, but also of bewitchment and incantation. It is not only discussed, but also acted upon. It is as though Montaigne wants to remove some bad spell death has placed on him; as if he hopes that his own writing-spell can "disenchant" death. Rhetorically, the essay—with its mix of classical exempla, snippets of wisdom literature, personal recollections, and private insights—fits within the general pattern of the book. Yet it also contains fragments of concentrated, repetitive, sometimes cryptic beauty, rich in internal rhyme and incantatory language, reminiscent of the disturbing expressivity one comes across in magic: "To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave [*Qui a apris à mourir, il a desapris à server*];" "All that you live, you have stolen from life; you live at her expense. Your life's continual task is to build your death. You are in death while you are in life: when you are no more in life you are after death [*Vous estes en la mort pendant que vous estes en vie. Car vous estes après la mort quand vous n'estes plus en vie*]"; "after life you are dead, but during life you are dying; and death touches the dying more harshly than the dead, in more lively a fashion and more essentially [*a mort touche bien plus rudement le mourant que le mort, et plus vivement et essentiellement*]" (Montaigne 2003: 96–103; see also Montaigne 1969: I, 132–8).

Imitatio Socratis

When we examine it more closely, we realize that the beauty of Montaigne's text masks a fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of his philosophizing on death. On the one hand, there is the imperative to make it a familiar presence in his life. Montaigne describes persuasively how one can gain control over death through meditation, preparedness

and, if one is lucky enough, a sense of the "right time." On the other hand, death is something that, properly speaking, we can never know. We can philosophize about death, talk and write about it, but never *know* it for the simple reason that we are alive. We can only experience it once and then no longer write about it. Many a philosopher has written insightful things about death, but they could not themselves confirm what they said, without dying first. Death for a philosopher can only be anticipatory speculation.

This also means that the only source of epistemic authority philosophers have when talking on the subject is the *death of others*. In the tradition of philosophy as an art of living to which Montaigne belongs, the death of exemplary figures (Socrates, Cato, Seneca, etc.) plays an important formative role. That these people appear to have died precisely in the manner they said philosophers *should* be dying has subsequently been read as a confirmation of their philosophy. As I suggested earlier, they don't simply die: their deaths embody the philosophical program that has shaped their lives. Just like their biography, their death is a philosophical work.

Anything exemplary obviously raises the issue of imitation; we deem something "exemplary" when there is a sense that it can serve as a model. An "exemplary death" is valued and celebrated for its harmony with the philosophy that anticipated it. Its admirers are invited to make their dying one with their thinking, in a similar fashion. The "greatness" of a philosophical death is born of the desire to emulate the "death teacher." In a certain sense, this is the secret of "immortality": the teacher's philosophy flows naturally into his death, is admired and reproduced by others, through whom it lives on.

And yet imitating someone else's death is not that simple. Dying is a profoundly private experience—indeed, an irreproducible event. One cannot die someone else's death. As a defining point in an individual's life, death has a distinct "aura," all of its own, that escapes imitation. The sheer "mechanical reproduction" of some "exemplary death" or another may be the best way of turning your existence into a mockery—of failing in your death, as Simone Weil would put it. That's why a better language for framing the relationship between an individual death and an "exemplary" one may be found in Luiz Costa Lima's notion of *mimesis*. Costa Lima thinks that *imitatio* was a poor translation of *mímēsis*, which presupposed a strong element of otherness. For him,

mímēsis[5] is also about the creation of something *new*. This sounds counter-intuitive, but in *Control of the Imaginary* he makes a persuasive case. "The real path of mimesis" he says here, "supposes not only copy but difference. Rather than imitation, mimesis is the production of difference."[6] The experience of *mímēsis* is an enriching one: you keep your eyes open to an outside model, but at the same time make sure that you don't ignore your inner potentialities. The final product is not an exact copy of the model, but something that has a life of its own.

Taking someone else's death as a "model" is a fine balancing act, as difficult as it is risky. On the one hand, if you stick too close to the model, you can end up dying an empty death, sheer "mechanical reproduction" of someone else's ending. On the other, if you don't get close enough to a model, you may die one of those "vulgar" deaths, so despised by Montaigne. You have to navigate your way carefully between these two extremes. That's why the notion of *mímēsis* as production of difference may offer a more adequate understanding of "exemplarity" when it comes to dying. What you do is not "imitation" of an exemplary death, but a personal "creation," part of a larger project of self-fashioning. This way you die a death that is your own, one that only you could die.

Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm

Montaigne's notion that we should "domesticate" death and receive it in the intimacy of our being may still seem difficult to grasp. What does it actually mean to "incorporate" death into life? Aren't they absolute opposites? To flesh this notion out I would like to use an illustration. In 1895 Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944) produced a lithograph called *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (Figure 2.1). Munch uses lithographic chalk to draw the prominent features of his face, which is enveloped in a black background of brushed Indian ink. At the bottom of the composition, resting horizontally on the frame, lie his arm and hand—their skeleton, that is.[7]

The "skeleton arm" immediately arrests the viewer's gaze. Within the economy of the image, it may look just like a detail exiled at the bottom, yet this feature dictates the dynamics of the viewer's perception. First, you may want to keep your gaze away from it (it is an epiphany of death

after all). Your eyes move up slowly, brush the painter's face, even dwell on it for a while. You can't miss Munch's penetrating eyes, clashing silently with yours. Yet before you know it you find yourself back at the skeleton arm and hand. These bare bones become the inescapable, intense focus of the lithograph. By now your mind has processed enough of the image to associate its dark background with the inside of a tomb. It is not for nothing that art historians say this composition is in the form of a sepulchral tablet.[8]

It would be difficult to overestimate the role of the hand in the human history and ontology. Much of what we are—not only anatomically, but also in terms of our cognitive capacities—is due to it. We use the hand to act upon the world, to position ourselves in relation to it, as well as to make sense of the world—to "grasp" it. Indeed, the hand is not just "the window on to the mind," as Kant puts it,[9] but also a visible *expression* of it, an optimal way of fleshing out the mind. The complex connection between the two has been studied lately by psychologists,

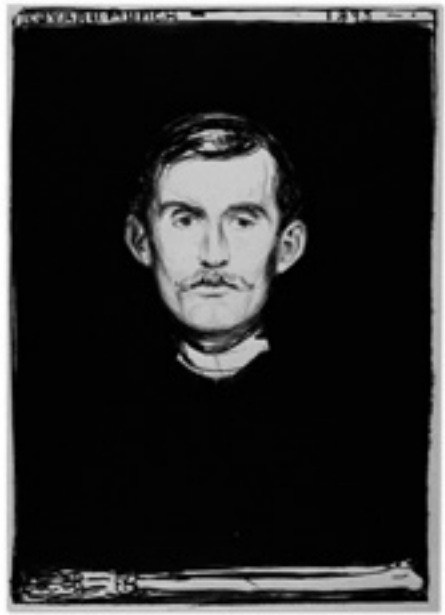

Figure 2.1 Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895). Lithograph. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM G 192 (Woll G 37). © Munch Museum/Munch-Ellingsen Group/ARS, New York 2014.

phenomenologists, and cognitive scientists. Seen from an evolutionary perspective, the hand is one of the most sophisticated devices humans have ever developed—a process that has been taking place at exactly the same time when, in turn, the hand was making them into human beings. For, like language, the hand is what makes our life properly *human*. "The hand," says Raymond Tallis, "is the instrument of transcendence required to bring us out of nature," which distinguishes us decisively from animals (Tallis 2003: 32).

That's why Munch's use of the hand—the organ of human life par excellence—to represent the irruption of death into the midst of our existence is a strikingly insightful gesture. Death, he shows in this lithograph, is not something we can easily manage, but an annihilating event of grand proportions. When it comes, it comes to destroy that which defines us. When it strikes, death doesn't waste its time: it goes for the life's center and eats it to the bone. A self-portrait with a hand that's already eaten up by death is a representation of our finitude at its most devastating. This image alone speaks of our mortality more eloquently than a philosophical tract ever could.

Moreover, the bones we see in Munch's lithograph are not just anybody's, but those of a *painter*. The painter's whole life is concentrated in his hand: no other bodily part, except for his eyes, plays a more vital role for him. And nothing is closer to him than his hand. I take it that for any painter the hand must be the embodiment of intimacy: he can keep secrets from people, even from close friends and lovers, but never from his hand. There has to be a total trust between them. As the painter knows only too well, a betrayal by his hand would be the ultimate betrayal. And yet Munch chooses his painter's hand as the window through which death breaks into the picture. The result is not only a strikingly original self-portrait, but in a way the portrait of the uncanny itself: the most unfamiliar and the most intimate linked together. "I could not believe that death was so inevitable, so near at hand," he once remarked (in Stang 1979: 34).

Munch's *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* illustrates well Montaigne's notion that the best way to deal with death is to make it part of life. His artistic instinct compelled him to look for death in the most unexpected of places: in the heart of life itself. One of the main themes of Munch's art, as he himself put it, was "love and death," not as separate items, but in their intricate interconnection: love-and-death. His 1894 *Death*

Figure 2.2 Edvard Munch, *Death and the Woman* (1894). Drypoint. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM G 3 (Woll G 3). © Munch Museum / Munch-Ellingsen Group/ARS, New York 2014.

and the Woman (Figure 2.2), where a nude young woman lasciviously embraces and kisses a skeleton, fleshes out this idea. The act of love, which is where life itself originates, is for Munch a most deadly encounter. In its passionate consummation, "death stretches out a hand to life." The smile of the woman making love is nothing other than "the smile of a corpse" (in Velsand 2010: 9).

Edvard Munch not only represented death and illness in his work, but he somehow managed to tie them into his artistic vision. He welcomed weakness and illness—these messengers of death—into the intimacy of his being, and offered them hospitality and friendship. "I must retain my physical weaknesses," he said, they "are an integral part of me. I don't want to get rid of illness, however unsympathetically I may depict it in my art." Indeed, he turned them into his closest artistic

allies. As an art critic has noticed, Munch "was haunted by the thought of death throughout his life, but nonetheless he considered illness almost a pre-condition for his work" (Stang 1979: 36). Montaigne, who had his own poor health to deal with, could not have agreed more.

Even though Munch arrived at the notion that we have to let death permeate our lives by a different route from Montaigne's, the starting point may have been similar. Just as for Montaigne the untimely demise of a close friend, and then of his father, triggered the articulation of an art of living that had death at its center, so for Munch the death of a significant number of family members brought nothingness right into the midst of his existence. "I live with the dead—my mother, my sister, my grandfather, my father ... All my memories, the least things, crop up" (in Eggum 1984: 62). This shaped Munch's self-representation: he confronted it, internalized it, and eventually made it a part of who he was. He eventually managed to find a way of living with death. "I arrived in the world on the point of death," he says, and "my parents had to have me christened at home as quickly as possible." Indeed, at the time of his birth, Edvard's mother was already "carrying within her the germ of the tuberculosis" that would kill her six years later. "Sickness and insanity and death were the black angels that hovered over my cradle and have since followed me throughout my life" (in Stang 1979: 31).

Munch may have never read Montaigne's book,[10] but he reached some of the same conclusions. Had he known of the ancient Egyptians' habit of bringing a mummy to their parties, he would have left no stone unturned until he could purchase one for private use. In the absence thereof, he had to re-create himself as a partial mummy in the form of a "self-portrait with skeleton-arm."

The book of enigmas

Being and Time (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) is an enigmatic book. It was written in a rush; Martin Heidegger had not published much since 1916 and his academic career was somehow stagnating. When it came out, however, the book became an instant classic. It has had such an overwhelming influence on subsequent philosophers, that, as George Steiner put it, "there is, in the history of Western thought, no

other work like *Sein und Zeit*" (Steiner 1980: 76). Like most classics, the book is as unread as it is famous. That it was written in a rush and had tremendous success does not mean that the book is an easy read, should anyone want to give it a try. On the contrary, *Sein und Zeit*—at least in parts—is one of the most difficult books of philosophy ever devised; for many readers it takes longer to read it than it took Heidegger to write it. Certainly, the book's lasting success over the decades is another of its many enigmas.

Intermezzo (where the philosopher turns out to be a master of disguise)

Heidegger's peculiar use of language—not only in Sein und Zeit*, but throughout his work—has given him the reputation of being, at once, one of the worst philosophers who have ever put pen to paper (if you listen to his detractors) and one of the greatest masters of the German language (if you believe his admirers). His language does not simply happen to be difficult, it is* deliberately *so. Indeed, an important objective of his philosophical project was to re-invent philosophical language itself. For Heidegger, Western philosophy has been in a serious crisis for almost as long as it has been in existence. "Almost" because there was a time, before Socrates and Plato, when philosophy flourished: the pre-Socratic period. Whereas for most philosophers Western thought begins with Socrates and Plato, for Heidegger it ends there. Heidegger has a name for this disease:* Seinsvergessenheit *("forgetting of Being"). Starting with Plato, philosophers have lost themselves in the multiplicity of particular entities (*Seiende*), forgetting to pay attention to that which makes all of them what they are: Being as such (*Sein*).*[11]

Since Being entertains a special relation with language,[12] *the "forgetting of Being" manifests itself in the degeneration of philosophical language itself. Philosophers, Heidegger believes, cannot find answers to their questions because they don't know how to ask them. A new philosophical language is needed. "New" is not exactly the right term: for what Heidegger is really after is a recovery of a primordial linguistic layer, the innocent state in which language was before being*

corrupted by philosophers. To unearth this supposedly uncorrupted layer, Heidegger uses the etymological method.[13]

Heidegger is a violent writer. Not in the sense of using "violent language," but in the subtler one of doing violence to *language, as though to "bring some sense" into it. A text by Heidegger looks more like a torture chamber than a piece of writing: you come across words that have been butchered (a beheaded noun here, an eviscerated verb there), and sentences mercilessly tortured to death. It is as if his plan is to put the words to some test of resistance, to find out where their "breaking point" is. David E. Cooper recounts a typical scene of linguistic butchery in Heidegger: "Nouns become verbs, and vice-versa; new words are coined; old ones are used in unfamiliar senses, and then assembled together into such concoctions as 'Being-already-alongside-the-world.'" (Cooper 1996: 5–6)*[14]

Some of Sein und Zeit*'s central concepts are born in this painful fashion—for example, "readiness-to-hand," and "presentness-at-hand." Although they sound rather abstract, both concepts are rooted into something as concrete as the human hand (*Hand *in German, as well). The language of the hand, again, proves crucial for understanding the life of the mind. To make sense of something is to "grasp" it. You understand what is going on when you have a good "hold" on things. Someone is said to be smart when she knows how to "handle" a situation. Heidegger makes the most of this insight and places the hand at the center of his philosophical anthropology. He divides that which we come across according to how the hand encounters it: first, as something concrete, in a process of "concernful dealing" with the world around, in which case things are "directed" toward the hand so that it can actually "catch" them ("Readiness-to-hand" /* Zuhandenheit*, he calls it) or, second, as objects of theoretical knowledge, situated, vaguely, somewhere "in front of" the hand (which he calls "Presentness-at-hand" /* Vorhandenheit*). Heidegger seizes an ordinary word, places it in isolation, presses it harder and harder, and "handles" it as if in some interrogation room until the poor thing has to spill out all its secrets.*

The reason for such a peculiar use of language, he suggests, is the need to change the way philosophers ask questions, but there could be other reasons as well, which might account for deliberate philosophical obscurity more generally. For there has always been a class of philosophers who, when making their arguments, use veiled

pronouncements, half-uttered statements, and difficult terminology. It is as though for these people to communicate is to build a thick wall of words between what goes on in their minds and their audience.[15] *There is a double movement in this rhetoric of concealment. The philosopher wants to give something out—she seems to extend a hand. Clearly, she* means *to say something, to be heard out, otherwise she would not have published anything. She is on the lookout for an audience, maybe even a following. When it comes to saying it, however, she does so in such a manner that the audience is left perplexed. Through the peculiar rhetoric she employs, her delivery puzzles rather than enlightens. The hand, which initially seemed to promise to offer something, now only wants to push you away.*

The situation is replicated by a similar pattern we encounter in the history of religion. In some Christian monastic orders, when someone wanted to become a monk he was first unkindly turned away; often stones were thrown at him. If he insisted, he was left to wait. After a while, if he was still there, he was reluctantly let in, yet again treated harshly. Elsewhere—in Zen Buddhism, for instance—when someone wanted to become the disciple of a sought-after master, he was first asked to perform humiliating jobs, or even meaningless acts (such as filling a bottomless barrel). Such practices are not empty ritual, but serious gestures meant to test the determination of the novice. They operate as a screening device and make admission both competitive and meaningful.

Just as a Zen master ritually subjects candidates for discipleship to excruciating pains, so Heidegger greets his readers with tests and ordeals. Granted, he does not throw stones at them like the ancient fathers, but something just as heavy. Sentences like this: "Whenever Dasein is, it is a Fact; and the factuality of such a Fact is what we shall call Dasein's 'facticity'*." (Heidegger 2000: 82) It is as though, to make sure that he does not end up hooked with the wrong kind of readers, he keeps everybody out. Those easily disheartened will soon go away, but they are no loss. Those genuinely interested will find their way in somehow. The few who, after having faced the refined torture and syntactical ordeals of Heidegger's German, will be found still standing will have passed the test. They are the bravest: they have wrestled with the torturer's writing until it started to give in, and kept hammering their way into the text until they faced no resistance.*[16]

Being toward death

What is *Being and Time* about exactly? The title almost says it all: being is (to be related to) time. The opening page of Heidegger's book states its purpose: "Our … aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being." What Heidegger seeks to do is to ask "the question of Being" (*Seinsfrage*)—that is: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" A crucial aspect of this question is the existence of the one who does the asking. A methodical mind, Heidegger believes that, before addressing the question of Being, he has to raise the issue of the one who does this questioning:

> The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about – namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*." (Heidegger 2000: 19)

The analysis of *Dasein*, which means literally "being-there," but is left in the original by most translators, occupies most of *Being and Time.*[17] *Dasein*, as an "entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being," (Heidegger 2000: 78) refers to a type of experience of being in the world that is specific to humans alone. Heidegger analyzes it in its fundamental structures, in relationship to other entities with which it comes in contact, as well as with entities like itself, in its "basic state" (care), in its "thrownness" into the world, in its moods and, finally, in its relation to time and finitude.

The topic of death plays a central role here. When Heidegger defines *Dasein* as *Sein-zum-Tode* ("Being-toward-death"), thus placing death at the heart of the human condition, in fact he re-establishes a connection with an old meditative tradition, whose essence is expressed briefly in a medieval homily: "as soon as man enters on life, he is at once old enough to die." Death, this line of thinking goes, is not an event that will occur at some point in the future, but is already here because it is part and parcel of life. Death is not something coming to us from the outside, but something *we carry within*. Indeed, in this

tradition, to live a good life is to accept the presence of death in its midst. Your existence as a whole acquires meaning insofar as you learn how to attune yourself to this ontological arrangement.[18] For Heidegger the "essence, the motion, the meaning of life are totally at one with being-toward-death" (Steiner 1980: 104). To live better, Montaigne advises us to allow death into our lives. Heidegger might quip: that's not necessary, death has always been there: being human is "being toward death."

Heidegger employs a striking metaphor to illustrate the force of this "toward-ness." He likens human life to a process of ripening: we can be said to be living only as long as we are "unripe." The state of "ripeness" toward which life is directed is also its end—the riper we become the closer to death we are. "The fruit brings to ripeness," says Heidegger, and "such a bringing of itself is a characteristic of its Being as a fruit." The fruit's ripeness is in it from the very beginning. "Nothing imaginable which one might contribute to it, would eliminate the unripeness of the fruit, if this entity did not come to ripeness *of its own accord*" (Heidegger 2000: 287–8; author's emphasis). The insight evoked by Heidegger's metaphor is chilling: a fruit is nothing unless it is ripe, yet as soon as it reaches ripeness it is as good as dead.

Death is always fuller than life. For life is nothing but *passing* from one state to another, while death is *completion*—ending but also fulfillment. Since death is the only direction toward which we move, we are placed in a paradoxical situation: to live is to come closer and closer to that which denies life. "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein." Heidegger reiterates this aporetic statement in several places, marking this possibility as a defining feature of the Dasein. Using a formula that will become a mantra in *Sein und Zeit*, he states that death reveals itself as that "*possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*." Death is something "*distinctively* impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that Dasein is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself" (Heidegger 2000: 294; author's emphasis). Unlike other entities in the world, Dasein knows that it will die.

Yet death is not something "unfortunate" that Dasein is "doomed" to experience. *Dasein needs death*. For Dasein death can be a blessing. In its absence, it would be a failure because it would not have access to a deeper sense of its own Being: "As long as Dasein *is* an entity, it has

never reached its 'wholeness'" (Heidegger 2000: 280). Only through a decisive insight into our "no-longer-being-there" can we get access to what we really are. It is crucial, then, that we learn how to look at our condition from the standpoint of our own non-being.[19] More important still, it is through our relation to our own death that we can *individualize* ourselves. Death, says Heidegger, does not "just 'belong' to one's own *Dasein* in an undifferentiated way; death *lays claim* to it as an *individual* Dasein. The non-relational character of death … individualizes *Dasein* down to itself" (Heidegger 2000: 308). This process of individuation is very important if Dasein is to become an authentic Dasein. Indeed, death is something each Dasein experiences individually:[20] "*No one can take the Other's dying away from him*" (Heidegger 2000: 284, author's emphasis). Each Dasein dies *its own* death. Due to Dasein's fundamental character of "Being-with," when I am a witness to the other's death, I can feel sympathy and have a representation of her death; by witnessing the other's death I form some knowledge of death in general.[21] However, I can never die the other's death. Death is by definition an *inalienable* experience. "Dying," says Heidegger, is "something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time." I cannot delegate my death to others, just as I cannot die for them. By its nature, "death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all." In dying, "it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death" (Heidegger 2000: 284).

Since death is such a highly individualized and individualizing experience, it brings about an infinite solitude in the one experiencing it. When dying one is completely on one's own, no matter how many people happen to be around; this is why Heidegger calls death a "non-relational possibility." When Dasein, as Being-toward-its-end, is to finally encounter its end, it cannot "share" it with anybody else. This is *its own death*, irreducibly so.[22] The dying Dasein occupies a space that no other Dasein can occupy at the same time, no matter how much affection it has caused in others in the course of its life. This is a space in which only that particular Dasein can dwell—that Dasein along with its anxiety, that is.

"Being-towards-death," says Heidegger, is "essentially anxiety," which is a central concept in *Sein und Zeit*. He defines anxiety as "*the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being*" (Heidegger

2000: 310; author's emphasis). Anxiety (*Angst*) is no ordinary fear: its concern is not with some particular occurrence in the surrounding world, but with the possibility of the world itself. The "threat" that Dasein experiences in anxiety is ontological. Anxiety is not about *something*, but about everything, and therefore about nothing—more exactly, *nothingness*. That's why anxiety plays a major role within the economy of Dasein: it gives it access to its very essence, as "Being-toward-death."[23] As such, it is a "privileged" state of mind.[24] Anxiety is Dasein's chance to die in such a manner that will allow it to make the most of its life.[25]

*

I can see you smiling. And you are right to smile. Everything sounds so abstract and dry. Yet given the unusual cut of this thinker's mind, this is unavoidable. That's why, to make the discussion a touch more tangible, I propose an experiment: a reading of Heidegger's considerations on "Being-toward-death," anxiety, the "they," and authenticity, through Leo Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

The portrait of Ivan Ilyich as Dasein

Scholars have noticed that the way Heidegger talks of Dasein as "Being-toward-the-end" in *Being and Time* is close to Tolstoy's treatment of death in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (*Smert' Ivana Il'icha*, 1886).[26] At times it is so close that the term "pastiche" would not be out of place. Yet, oddly enough, Heidegger cites Tolstoy's book only once—and then only to exile it to a footnote. He acknowledges that he has read it, but does so in such a furtive manner that the possibility of any significant influence is dismissed. Indeed, as if to put the reader on the wrong track, he gives the impression that he has misread it. "In his story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*," says Heidegger, "Leo Tolstoy has presented the phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having 'someone die'" (Heidegger 2000: 495). Tolstoy's book is *not* about that—not primarily so, in any case.

The most remarkable aspect of this parallelism is that the death of both characters—Heidegger's Dasein and Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich—is

projected against the background of a "they" existence. Ordinarily, Heidegger thinks, we are not ourselves: we live in a state of *alienation*. We think as the "they" thinks, dress as the "they" dresses, and in general we live as the "they" does.[27] Dasein, says Heidegger, "stands in *subjection* to Others." Properly speaking, Dasein "itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please." Dasein is the plaything of the "they," and as such it doesn't belong to itself. "One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power." The Others are here the indistinct mass, a faceless, nameless entity. If you asked the Others who exactly they are, you would ask in vain: "The 'who' is not this one, not that one, not oneself [*man selbst*], not some people [*einige*], and not the sum of them all. The 'who' is the neuter, *the 'they'* [*das Man*]." The "they" is virtually *anybody* and *nobody* in particular. "They" is imitable and replaceable ad infinitum. If any one of them expires, in no time another will take its place. No one will notice the difference because there is no difference: "every Other is like the next." That "they" is replaceable does not mean that it is powerless. Its power is tremendous and comes precisely from its infinite replicability. "In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability," says Heidegger, "the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded" (Heidegger 2000: 164). One of the most important functions of the "they" is to generate norms, rules, and standards of taste. If you want to live in society, you have to behave as the "they" says you should, and in so doing you let the "they" permeate your life.

In its average everydayness, then, it is as "they" that Dasein exists—just as Ivan Ilyich has lived his life. Indeed, in Tolstoy's vision, this is one of Ivan's most "distinctive" features: "from his earliest youth he had been drawn to people of high standing in society as a moth is to light." Ever eager to please, he "had adopted their manners and their views on life." In the novel, the "they" acts as "people of high standing," who remain appropriately nameless and faceless, but exert a crushing influence on individuals like Ivan. Tolstoy analyzes his hero's awareness as he transforms himself following impact with the "they." We see how any good natural impulses he may have had are gradually replaced with whatever the "they" decrees as desirable. As a student, for instance, Ivan had done things that "at the time, seemed to him extremely vile and made him feel disgusted with himself." Yet later, noticing that

"people of high standing had no qualms about doing these things," he dismissed the unpleasant feeling and ended up not being "the least perturbed when he recalled them" (Tolstoy 1981: 44).

As long as Ivan Ilyich behaves according to the norms set up by the "they," he has nothing to be afraid of. Indeed, such behavior only increases his social "respectability." The "they" is a magnanimous master and conformity to its dominion comes with handsome rewards. Later, as a young prosecutor, Ivan would get involved in "drinking bouts" and "after-supper trips to a certain street on the outskirts of town." There were also attempts to "curry favor with his chief and even with his chief's wife." Yet all this had "such a heightened air of respectability that nothing bad could be said about it" (Tolstoy 1981: 45). Social respectability is one reward that the "they" always grants in abundance.

Appropriately enough, even occasional acts of rebellion are allowed as long as they follow the way of the "they." Indeed, provided that it comes with prior approval from higher up, a bit of dissidence is good—both for the contested authority and for the dissenter. It makes the former look more legitimate in society and the latter less of a coward in his own eyes. At some point, for example, Ivan Ilyich put "a suitable amount of distance between himself and the provincial authorities," assuming an "air of mild dissatisfaction with the government" (Tolstoy 1981: 47). All this is very touching. Heidegger's Dasein would do nothing else: "we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find 'shocking'" (Heidegger 2000: 164). The distance that both Ivan and Dasein take from the "they," however, is not an inch larger than the amount of illusory freedom that the "they" has given them to play with.

As Ivan Ilyich moves up the social ladder his life turns into one of total conformity to the postulates of the "they." He is so good at the art of obedience that even when making what should be rather personal decisions—such as picking a book to read—it is not him who does the choosing, but the "they": sometimes, after dinner, Ivan would read a "book that was the talk of the day" (Tolstoy 1981: 60). That's precisely what Heidegger's Dasein would do in a similar situation: "we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge" (Heidegger 2000: 164). I may be holding the book in my hands, but it is not me who does the reading, it is the "they." Indeed, most of the time it is also the "they" who does the writing.

Confirming Heidegger's observation that, in our everydayness, we "take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure" (Heidegger 2000: 164), Ivan adopts a lifestyle that, far from individualizing him, aligns him to the dominant tastes and fashions set up by the "they." Take the decoration of his new home. Freshly promoted, and seeking to upgrade his social standing, Ivan embarks on a grand project to create the most original and attractive of homes for himself and his family. The result, from his point of view, is "stunning." His extreme efforts were worth making. Yet, as Tolstoy remarks with fine irony, the home "was like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich, and therefore end up looking like one another." Eventually Ivan's place looked "so much like the others that it would never have been noticed" (Tolstoy 1981: 57–8). Of course it did—as long as it was not Ivan who decorated the house, but the "they," it could not have been otherwise. No matter what he does, Ivan Ilyich is never himself, always somebody else: a faceless, nameless entity. Ivan is the "they."

"And so they lived," says Tolstoy. They moved in "the best circles" and their home "was frequented by people of importance." So Ivan Ilyich lived, but how did he die? Did he for once escape the ways of the "they"?

The business of dying

As we open the book, before we even know who Ivan Ilyich is and what his life has been like, we learn of his death. We learn of it through the reactions of other people (close friends, colleagues) towards it. Despite the different relationships they've had with Ivan while he was alive, their reactions to his death display a surprising consistency. These are reactions of people who couldn't care less. Indeed, for whom this death could turn out to be something—how shall I put it?—profitable. His colleagues assess the possible gains literally as they receive the news—Ivan's death means that his position in the hierarchy is now vacant, which will trigger promotions and transfers and relocations. A few pages later, as Ivan is lying in his coffin, everybody in attendance is busy with something. His wife has a pressing "business" with Ivan's friend, Pyotr Ivanovich—that is, "how, in connection to her husband's

death, she could obtain a grant of money from the government" (Tolstoy 1981: 39–40). His daughter will now have to change her wedding plans (something for which she will never forgive him). Schwartz, one of his colleagues, seeks to pre-empt any change to the plans they've already made for the night.

Ivan's colleagues go on to play their game of cards, his family resumes its routines, everything falls back into place. Small inconveniences aside, the death of Ivan Ilyich has not caused that much distress after all. There is even something soothing about it. In some obscure way, everybody was relieved: "the very fact of the death of a close acquaintance evoked in them all the usual feeling of relief that it was someone else, not they, who had died" (Tolstoy 1981: 33). Heidegger talks of a process of "tranquilization" in relation to the "relief" we tend to feel about the other's death. The "they" has its means to reduce the discomfort caused by someone's death and to keep anxiety at bay. "The 'they' provides a *constant tranquilization about death*," says Heidegger. In its essence, this is "a tranquilization not only for him who is 'dying' but just as much for those who 'console' him" (Heidegger 2000: 298; author's emphasis).

Tolstoy highlights this tranquilization process in the novel. Not even Pyotr Ivanovich, Ivan Ilyich's childhood friend, can escape a persistent feeling of indifference. All along, upon learning the news of his friend's death, even in proximity to his dead body, then on his way home, Pyotr Ivanovich simply cannot mourn. It is as if to understand someone else's death one needs a specific organ, which Ivanovich lacks. This death has nothing to do with him; it was "as though death was a chance experience that could happen only to Ivan Ilyich, never to himself" (Tolstoy 1981: 39). Tolstoy doesn't say it clearly, but we are given to understand that this is precisely how Ivan, too, would have reacted to someone else's death. Stylistically, this is one of the finest accomplishments of the opening chapter. To the death of a close friend, Ivan Ilyich would have reacted in the same manner Pyotr Ivanovich reacted to his. For Ivan and Pyotr are one and the same: they are "they." Ivan would have behaved no differently because he was "they" and always reacted as "they" did.[28]

For most of his life, Ivan Ilyich did not know anything about death. Nor did he want to. He had been one of those people (the vast majority of us) for whom death is of no concern. In *Being and Time* Heidegger talks specifically about people like Ivan. "Factically," he says, there are

many who "do not know about death …. Dasein covers up its ownmost Being-towards-death, fleeing *in the face* of it" (Heidegger 2000: 295; author's emphasis). Ivan's knowledge of death has been strictly theoretical, as an abstract possibility: death might happen in theory, but *not* to him. Just like Pyotr Ivanovich, he must have felt that death was "a chance experience" that could only happen to someone else, "never to himself." When Ivan was learning logic in school, the sample syllogism in the textbook—"Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal"—looked fine to him. Caius may have had to die, but Ivan was a different matter altogether: that man represented "man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound." But Ivan had always been "a creature quite, quite distinct from all the others" (Tolstoy 1981: 79–80).

That's a lofty feeling, but Martin Heidegger has news for Ivan Ilyich: he is not distinct at all. Indeed, Ivan's attitude is symptomatic of the approach the "they" typically takes to death. For the "they," death is by definition "an indefinite something." To the extent that I am "they," death is something that always happens to others, never to me:

> The expression "one dies" spreads abroad the opinion that what gets reached … by death, is the "they." In Dasein's public way of interpreting, it is said that "one dies," because everyone else and oneself can talk himself into saying that "in no case is it I myself," for this "one" is *the "nobody."* Dying … belongs to nobody in particular. (Heidegger 2000: 297)

The fact that death has been of no concern for Ivan does not prevent him from getting closer to it every day. For death is wherever life is, it "takes place" continuously in the midst of life. Ivan Ilyich has been dying for as long as he has been alive. And so has Dasein, "proximally and for the most part." Dasein, says Heidegger, "is dying as long as it exists," and it "does so by way of *falling*" (Heidegger 2000: 295). At this juncture, what is striking about a parallel reading of *Being and Time* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is that Tolstoy uses the term "falling" in his story to designate pretty much the same process. When Ivan, shortly before his death, comes to revisit his earthly existence, he realizes that there was "only one bright spot back at the beginning of life." After that, everything "grew blacker and blacker," and "moved faster and faster":

> "In inverse ratio to the square of the distance from death," thought Ivan Ilyich. And the image of a stone hurtling downward with increasing velocity became fixed in his mind. Life, a series of increasing sufferings, falls faster and faster toward its end – the most frightful suffering. "I am falling …" He shuddered, shifted back and forth, wanted to resist, but by then knew there was no resisting. (Tolstoy 1981: 105)[29]

For most of the time Ivan has "evaded" death, even as he was falling faster and faster toward it. Like the "they" always does, Ivan has never looked death in the face, never "anticipated" it, all of which—from a Heideggerian standpoint—is equivalent to an "inauthentic death."[30] David E. Cooper would say that, in the absence of a picture of life as defined by his death, Ivan is in the position of a story-teller who has no idea how his narrative will end[31]—indeed, a story-teller with no story to tell.

Not only has the "they" shaped Ivan's life, but also his dying. His struggle with his sickness is for the most part the struggle of the "they" with sickness and mortality. An important point of Tolstoy's story is to show just how *ordinary* one's death can be. Still, a question persists in the reader's mind: isn't there anything that redeems Ivan Ilyich's death from utter inauthenticity? Hasn't he experienced any genuine anxiety in those moments, which from a Heideggerian perspective would have redeemed his death?

He may have. As Ivan realizes that he is soon going to die, a question starts to haunt him: "What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply *was not the real thing*?" For someone only days away from dying, such a question must be more than just an intellectual proposition. It takes considerable courage just to ask, let alone answer, it. At first, Ivan is dismissive of it. When it dawns on him that maybe he "had not lived as he should have," he recalls "how correct his whole life had been." (Tolstoy 1981: 102–8) A "they" existence is always "correct." For all his efforts to push it away from his mind, however, the question keeps returning—until finally, shortly before his death, Ivan gives in and receives the ultimate revelation, the story of his life. What is this story exactly about? It is a summary of *Sein und Zeit*: a story about the "they" and its traps, about the fundamental lie on which "publicness"[32] is based, and the effects it can have on life. It is the story of most of us.

It is thus revealed to Ivan Ilyich that those "scarcely perceptible impulses of his to protest what people of high rank considered good," which he had

always sought to suppress, "might have been precisely what mattered," the *real thing.* His "official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people, in society and in his profession—all these might not have been the real thing." There is certainly a note of anxiety here: Ivan has suddenly gained access to the "nothingness" behind the beautiful façade of his "easy, pleasant, cheerful, and respectable life." This anxiety tears down the convenient certainties in which he had wrapped himself up, and leaves him in all the nakedness of his condition. On the brink of life, death firmly in sight, Ivan is now the closest he could ever be to what may be called an "authentic existence."[33]

Does this mean that Ivan Ilyich died "authentically" in a Heideggerian sense? One of the greatest merits of Tolstoy's story is that it doesn't provide an answer. Tolstoy the artist respects his character too much to take us inside Ivan's death. Tolstoy the philosopher does not allow himself to suggest one answer or the other. He simply lets Ivan die his death. In this respect he is one step ahead of Heidegger. One criticism that has been brought against the latter's account of death (by Blanchot and Levinas, for example) is that, from a strictly phenomenological standpoint, as long as one is alive, one cannot experience one's own death, only the death of the others. If these critics are right, then Tolstoy is a better phenomenologist than Heidegger. Tolstoy knows where to stop; he feels that there is no (honest) way of knowing whether his hero dies authentically or not. Phenomenologically, one can only talk of experiences one has had, or can have, personally. Death is a personal experience, but of such an ultimate nature that it does allow any accounts of it by the one who does the dying. In a rigorous sense, the experience of death can only be lived, not articulated. As long as we are in a position to talk, we haven't experienced it yet; once we have died, we are done talking. In a fundamental sense, death *escapes us*. This is all the more ironical as we never escape death.

Intermezzo (where the possibility of a farce is raised)

Sein und Zeit *belongs to that rare class of masterpieces with which, as you delve in, you have an unsettling experience: you come to*

ask yourself, over and over again, whether what you are reading is something monumentally serious or just a monumental farce. And the attraction of such works comes precisely from the impossibility of deciding one way or the other—not even after you've finished reading them, not even after several re-readings. There is seriousness in Sein und Zeit*, depth of thought and a sense that its author has stumbled upon something important about what it means to be human. But there is also, at times, a sense that the book was written with tongue in cheek, and in a mode of playfulness and self-subverting irony. One of Heidegger's best biographers even talks of his "involuntary self-parody."*[34] *The book's writing style and terminology often creates the impression that what you are reading is a work of pure fiction, if a brilliant one. Heidegger's language, which pretty much excludes him from the ranks of the "serious" scholars, placing him instead among poets, prophets, and magicians, is a language that does not so much describe a world as it creates one. Indeed, Heidegger's text often comes across as a concatenation of spells, charms, and incantations. You can never quite decide, for example, what he really had in mind when playing with the infinite possibilities of the German prefixes, as he did with* Um- *(*Umsicht, Umwelt, Umgang, *etc.). Did he really mean something deep here or is he just caught in a game from which he didn't know how to get out?*

Death as mystical initiation

Paul-Louis Landsberg (1901–44) is very little known today, even among philosophers. A student of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as Max Scheler's disciple, he was a German Jew who found in Catholicism a religion and a philosophy of life. When Hitler came into power, Landsberg left Germany. For a couple of years he lived in Spain, where he studied the sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, and taught philosophy. Because of the Spanish Civil War, however, he had to move to France. In Paris he taught at the Sorbonne and became closely associated with the journal *Esprit* and Emmanuel Mounier's Personalist movement. In 1943 he was captured by the Gestapo and deported to the Oranienburg concentration camp, where he died a year later.

Soon after he moved to France, Landsberg published a little book

called *Essay on the Experience of Death* (*Essai sur l'expérience de la mort*, 1936). The book could be read as a response to Heidegger's philosophizing on death. Landsberg engages explicitly with *Sein und Zeit*, he quotes and criticizes it. And yet the *Essai* is an important philosophical work in its own right. Using the excuse of reviewing a number of classical philosophical and mystical texts, Landsberg advances an understanding of the experience of death that, within the context of twentieth-century philosophy, is bold and traditional at the same time. For a twenty-first century readership, Landsberg's discussion, marginal as it may be, seems both uncannily fresh and out-of-fashion.

There is a double movement of thought in Landsberg's analysis of the experience of death. The first one is "vertical:" it is a progression that starts from a consideration of death at its most basic, as a strictly biological fact that we share with other animals. Gradually, death takes on more and more complex forms: it is seen as a social phenomenon, then as something that shatters us in relation to the other (as in the death of a close friend, for example), which makes it a highly individualized and personal experience. Finally, at its most personal and intimate, death can be a form of mystical experience, something that brings us nearer to God. The second movement is "horizontal": Landsberg reviews the manner death was approached by the ancient thinkers (Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans and the Stoics, as well as the Buddha), and then dwells on how the problem of death is approached in the Christian religion. According to him, the only satisfactory response to the metaphysical scandal that death presents comes from Christianity, with which the whole evolution of human thinking about death culminates. That's why the second movement is also teleological. Eventually, the two movements merge to become one central insight: death as a mystical experience, our gateway to eternity, lies at the heart of the Christian revolution. I will examine some of the more prominent moments that punctuate the work's double movement.

Landsberg distinguishes between two ways we experience death (he talks of a "duality of our experience of death"). One is the experience of death as "the immanent future of our own life." Above all, we experience our death on a biological plane as we go through life: "I am face to face with the real possibility of death, immediately, at every moment of my life, right now and always. Death is close to me [*proche de moi*]." At this stage there is still nothing personal about my death; it

is simply the working of nature within me—to live is to die little by little. Yet the problem of "the human experience of the necessity of death," as Landsberg puts it, "goes beyond biology" (Landsberg 1936: 15). That's how we come to have the second experience of death: *the death of the other*. This is an important moment in Landsberg's argument because it is primarily "through the second mode that we know that death does not have anything to do with the process of getting old" (Landsberg 1936: 14). As long as we experience death as just biological decay, we don't experience it properly. To do so, we would need to make it personal. Landsberg links the experience of death to a process of individuation: "a decisive experience of death to a certain degree," he says, is related to "man's personal uniqueness … the process of individualization and that of 'mortalization' [*mortualisation*] go together" (Landsberg 1936: 23).

It is, then, not my own getting old that makes death personal to me, but the death of the other. The death of "the neighbor" (*prochain*) is a catastrophic event, a metaphysical earthquake of sorts. Yet what emerges from among the ruins, in the clearing thus created, is a renewed sense of personhood. We take as our "point of departure the experience of the death of the other," says Landsberg, because "this way we hope to meet the *person* as such." The birthplace of the person is a deathbed; next to the suffering body of someone close, someone who is vanishing before my eyes, I have the sudden, unmistakable revelation of the person he is:

> A living body suffers; in its turn, ours suffers sympathetically with the flesh of the tortured comrade. – And then, there comes a moment when everything goes quiet, everything seems over, and the contorted features of the loved face start to relax. It is precisely at this moment, when the living being leaves us, that we come to experience the mysterious absence of that person as a spiritual entity [*l'absence mystérieuse de la personne spirituelle*]. For an instant we feel relief. The pain [*douleur*] induced by our bodily sympathy is over: – yet, immediately we are taken into the foreign, cold realm of an accomplished death [*le monde étrange et froid de la mort accomplie*]. Our vital pity, hanging as it does over an empty space, is replaced by the profound awareness that this being, in all the uniqueness of her person, is not *there* any longer, and cannot return into this body any longer. (Landsberg 1936: 25–6)

The whole process relies on a negative revelation: it is precisely that person's ultimate *absence* that makes us fully aware of her uniqueness. Each death is just "as unique as each person's presence" among us. For those left behind, the manner in which someone does *not* exist any more bears the marks of her unique personality. For her living along with us, and then her dying before our eyes, and all the suffering this has caused in us, have somehow made her an inseparable part of who we are. Such a death cannot be but very personal; its significance is for me "so profound that it belongs in an essential way to my personal existence, and not to the 'they' [à l'*on*]," says Landsberg, borrowing from Heidegger (Landsberg 1936: 35).

When discussing the death of the other, Landsberg remarks, as if in passing, that such an event "takes our soul into an unknown land, into a new dimension. We discover that our existence is a bridge between two worlds" (Landsberg 1936: 35). Envisioning a way to cross this bridge is the task that Landsberg takes upon himself in his book: the "new dimension" thus opened up turns out to be one of Landsberg's most refreshing contributions. He starts out with a head-on critique of Heidegger: death cannot be a form of personal fulfillment, a way to live authentically. Death is not, he says, "a possibility that belongs immanently to the personal existence, to the *Dasein* itself." The human person "is not, in its essence, an *existence towards death.*" There is something profoundly *foreign* about death. "Coming as it does from a foreign sphere, death appears as *an intrusion* [*comme introduite du dehors*] into our existence." Dying may be part of our biology, but we are much more than biology. That's why death is not a structural part of what we are.

Or, rather, it *should* not be, because Landsberg's text oscillates between a descriptive and an imperative mode. He talks of overcoming death as something we have to strive for, as a *task* (*tâche*): "The spiritual appropriation of death is a decisive task for every human being … One's personal existence is not a destiny; its task is to transform one's destiny to die into freedom." What defines us is not our mortality, as Heidegger would want us to think, but a thirst for the absolute. If we dig deep enough into the human condition, what we come across is not nothingness, but a primordial drive for self-transcendence. This act of *affirmation of the self* (l'*affirmation de soi-même*) structures our condition, always compelling us to transcend our finitude. In every

person aware of his or her uniqueness we find the affirmation of this "unique element that seeks its own realization, an affirmation that involves a tendency to overcome temporal boundaries" (Landsberg 1936: 41–3).

The whole point is to see death not as an end, but a stage on our way to self-realization. In its essence, the human person is "directed towards self-realization and towards eternity." It moves towards "its own perfection, even if this means passing through the old, harrowing millstone [*la vieille pierre dure et péenible*] that physical death is." The human person cannot change "its *ontological exteriority* other than by turning this death into the means of its own fulfillment" (Landsberg 1936: 41; author's emphasis). If Montaigne thinks that, to render death less savage, we have to make it our guest, and Heidegger that, far from being death's host, we are its hostage, Landsberg sees death's visit as our greatest opportunity. Death is here only to take us elsewhere.

*

This is where philosophy comes in. For philosophizing plays an important role in any project of self-immortalization. If death is a grinder through which we can gain entry into a "new dimension," it is philosophy that tunes the grinder: it can turn us into fine powder or coarse, cheap stuff. With an obvious reference to Heidegger, Landsberg states that "*Metaphysics does not have its origin in the nothingness revealed by angst, but in the being into which the philosophical Eros partakes by its very nature*" (Landsberg 1936: 41–2; author's emphasis). A death-centered philosophy like Heidegger's does not give you access to anything. Even though he does not use the word, Landsberg comes close to calling such a philosophy "nihilistic." "Death taken to be something final, the physical death taken to be the universal negation of our existence," he says, is nothing other than "the reflection of a despairing faithlessness, a negation of the person by the person herself" (Landsberg 1936: 43).

Such philosophies remain stuck in immanence and corporeity; for these philosophers the human person is nothing but "the smoke of the vital fire maintained by the hard, solid reality of a living body." When it comes to offering some consolation, they are hopeless. Instead of helping us enter another "dimension," they leave us out, prey to a

merciless "angst of death" (*angoisse de la mort*). On the contrary, ever since Plato, there has been a tradition of "philosophers of the spirit" for whom death carries "a force that seems able to exist independently of corporeal life" (Landsberg 1936: 57–9). Landsberg calls such an experience "ecstatic," and relates it not necessarily to religion, but more broadly to any "strong spirituality."

Plato himself plays a major role in this tradition. He initiated a form of philosophical practice where the overcoming of death was paramount. In the state of "philosophical ecstasy" that Platonism proposes, the human being can come to see "physical death as something beneath him, worthless and powerless" (Landsberg 1936: 60). The Platonic notion that "to philosophize is to practice death" translates for Landsberg into an invitation "to leave this world of images, this cave of shadows, for another world, the one that truly exists because it is eternally present." For all its merits, however, Platonism has some "essential limitations" when it comes to helping us transcend our mortality and attain a "victory of the hope over death" (*victoire de l'espérance sur la mort*) (Landsberg 1936: 73). And so does Stoicism, to which Landsberg also pays close attention. Indeed, all pre-Christian philosophies, religions and religious cults remain at the "not yet" stage. If they carry any valid insights it is only because they are anticipations of the only philosophy-religion that can offer us a complete *victoire de l'espérance sur la mort*: Christianity.

When Landsberg discusses "the Christian experience of death," he refers to his subject-matter in terms of a mystical experience. For him, Christianity is not primarily a body of doctrines, a moral code or a system of rituals, but a form of mysticism—a manner of encountering the divine, one in which death plays a central role. So central in fact that, in Landsberg's reading, Christianity is not a religion of life, as conventionally seen, but a religion of death—of death as a gateway to life eternal.

The incarnation of God as a human being caused an anthropological mutation. The ultimate significance of this "real transformation of the human condition [*situation humaine*] brought about by the coming and example of Christ" is our participation in "the eternity of the divine person." Key to all this is death, which is "a form of birth that is superior to the physical birth." If there is "a life that in truth is death, then there is a death that in truth is the Life." In this respect, Christianity represents

the fulfillment of centuries of philosophical hope and messianic dreams. Jesus Christ

> fulfills the premonitions of the Mysteries and of Platonism by revealing a spiritual realm inaccessible to death, a realm into which man can partake. In the new religion man can transform and transcend his mortal condition because, beyond death, there is the possibility of a Life that is the only one worthy of this name, because eternity is its condition. (Landsberg 1936: 84–8)

Thus Landsberg's chief insight—that at the heart of human being there lies a drive towards eternity—comes full circle. Life is not defined by death, but by ever more life—by life eternal; the primary human impulse is not to be no more, but to be forever. Only by following this instinct can we return to our true homeland: "close to the divine person, so close to it that the human person partakes into its divinity."[35] We don't have to wait until we die to enjoy eternity: encrypted in Christ's message there is a recipe for self-immortalization. Through proper exercise (*áskēsis*), some of us can embark on the task of self-immortalization while still in this world: "the empirical death," Landsberg says, can start "in the midst of life with mortification, through methods that free in part the soul from the body." The outcome is wondrous. These people, for whom by God's grace life eternal "can to a certain extent make itself present here below" (Landsberg 1936: 85–9), have dual citizenship: they seem to be living at once here, among us, and elsewhere, in God's kingdom. But who are they, exactly?

They are the mystics and occupy a privileged position in Landsberg's essay. The mystics are God's traffickers: they routinely smuggle bits of eternity into our corrupted world, keeping it on eternal-life support, as it were. Dying is what they do for a living. "The experience of God that mystics have," says Landsberg, "also includes a certain experience of death" (Landsberg 1936: 90). They live off nothing but death because only through it can they get a glimpse into the place where they truly belong: their "love of death proceeds in them from a certain experience, from a state analogous to death." The experience is "*the anticipation of death in ecstasy*" (Landsberg 1936: 97; author's emphasis). Death proper, horrible as it may be, is the least painful thing for the mystic. In death, "the sweetness of the birth into a new life" appears to him

"infinitely stronger than the pain still associated with the separation from the earthly life." Compared to the intensity of heavenly life, life down here is nothing but a shadow. Santa Teresa de Avila says that she experiences her terrestrial existence as a kind of dream. The mystics, then, have all the reasons to love death because for them it means the departure from an unreal world of shadows and dreams and the entry into the real one:

> The true love of death cannot be but a form of the love of God. Death is then the final fulfillment of the mystic marriage between God and the soul. … Death offers the soul a community with the eternal lover as a permanent state. It offers the soul a community with the person who *is* and gives *being* … (Landsberg 1936: 100–1)

Mystics don't die, they just wake up.

Intermezzo (where you have to have faith)

It may also be time for us *to wake up. Landsberg's teleological vision of the evolution of Western spirituality with regard to mortality, as well as his understanding of death as mystical initiation, are inconceivable in the absence of* faith*. He mentions faith discretely, in several places in his essay, but so as not to disrupt the narrative flow I have so far left it out. When speaking of the immortality of the soul he uses what he takes to be St. Paul's definition of faith as "the substance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 11.1), and then goes on to say that hope "constitutes the meaning of our life." He also seems to "naturalize" faith by tying it into the "affirmation of the self," which is constitutive to our ontology. "Faith in a personal survival," he says, is not "merely a comforting promise, it is also … the* actualization *of this ontological factor" (Landsberg 1936: 43). Which, of course, is true only if one* believes *in it.*

Faith is perplexing. For those who have it, it is more conclusive than mathematical proof, but for those who don't, even mathematical reasoning can be a dubious affair. The "things hoped for" are overwhelming for the faithful, but cannot be even imagined by the

faithless, no matter how hard you press them. The full biblical quotation reads: "For faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) But to deal with "things not seen" is to try to catch a black cat in a dark room—indeed, always aware that there may well be no cat in there after all. The things "unheard-of" are child's play compared to "things not seen." When something happens that is "unheard-of," its novelty may shock you at first, but it soon wears out and everything falls back into place. The things we can't see, instead, remain; they can haunt you and trap you, they can poison your life or devour you entirely. When dealing with them, philosophy comes at its closest to witchcraft. No wonder that philosophers are sometimes the object of witch-hunts.

In Chapter 4 of Cervantes' Don Quixote*—one of the finest books on faith ever written—Don Quixote chances upon some silk tradesmen from Toledo. Before they could say anything, the Knight—in full armor, spear in hand—places himself menacingly in front of them, making it clear that they cannot pass unless they admit that "there is no maiden fairer" than the lady of his heart, Dulcinea del Toboso. Upon realizing who they are dealing with, one of the more empiricist of the Toledans asks Don Quixote: "Sir Knight, we do not know who this good lady is that you speak of; show her to us, for, if she be of such beauty as you suggest, with all our hearts and without any pressure we will confess the truth that is on your part required of us." The Knight's answer is theologically on a par with that of any doctor of the Church: "If I were to show her to you," replied Don Quixote, "what merit would you have in confessing a truth so manifest? The essential point is that without seeing her you must believe" (Cervantes Saavedra 1981: 35).*

It is not for nothing that Unamuno dubbed Don Quixote the "Knight of Faith." For this is exactly what faith is all about: believing without seeing, without proof, without guarantees.[36] *Faith, as "evidence of things not seen," is the art of the impossible. Those things are neither existent nor inexistent, neither here nor there. Ontologically, they are the stuff of nightmares. Logically, they can drive you mad. Rhetorically, they make for the greatest stories. Otherwise, they fill Heaven and the psychiatric wards alike.*

A game of life and death

Right after discussing the ancient "philosophers of the spirit," such as Plato and Seneca, and before tackling "the Christian experience of death," Landsberg inserts an odd little chapter. It is called "Intermezzo about bullfighting" (*Intermezzo tauromachique*) and is one of the most remarkable sections in the whole book—a brilliant essay in its own right. Chronologically, the chapter is not related to those that precede or follow it, yet thematically it fits well between them as it marks the transition from an attempt at self-immortalization unassisted by grace to one that presupposes God's active presence.

"The life of the man without God is like a tragedy," Landsberg states abruptly. And his Intermezzo is the tragic account of the man who meets death in a godless world. To help us better grasp this tragedy's meaning, Landsberg uses an analogy—bullfighting—which he sees as a disguised survival of the ancient Mysteries:

> The bull that enters the arena knows nothing of what awaits him. Joyfully, he rushes out of the obscurity of his dungeon and rejoices in his vitality of young athlete. Suddenly overwhelmed by light, he is the master of the closed circle, which becomes his world and which still seems to him an endless plain. Vigorously, he tosses up the sand in his way, and rushes in all directions, feeling nothing other than the enjoyment of his own vigor. – This is how the infant leaves the body of his mother and soon starts playing in a bright world that keeps him ignorant of his destiny and of its dangers. (Landsberg 1936: 75–6)

We are the bull. It is still early, morning, but make no mistake: soon we will have to look death in the eye and start receiving its blows. By the end of the day, it will be as if we never existed. No matter how hard we fight, how graceful our dance, how bold our stance, the end is always the same: total annihilation. Throughout the *Essai*, Landsberg seems to stand on a firm footing, coming across as a man of vigorous faith. Yet his faith is not of the conventional kind: it is a constant dealing in "things hoped for" and "things not seen"—which means it is faith that comes with a good measure of doubt. What is particularly touching about Landsberg's Intermezzo is the extent to which, beyond a façade

of self-assurance and firm convictions, it betrays inner struggle and anguish. Even from the short passage I just quoted the reader can sense his sympathy for the one who dies without faith. Indeed, that in the Intermezzo we come across some of the best writing in the entire book is further proof of how close the subject is to his heart. Some small cracks, then, can be discerned in his edifice of faith; very small, but still cracks.[37] Far from diminishing his stature, however, all this makes Landsberg a more complex, more intriguing figure.

"The first adversaries are coming," he says as he continues to tell the story. Man thus comes to make his acquaintance with death. "Who are you?" he asks. "I am Death," says death. "Have you come for me?" the man asks. Truth be told, the bull doesn't really have a conversation with the *toreros*. Yet the dialogue is not my invention—it is real. It takes place in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957).[38] Landsberg, in his Intermezzo, and Bergman, in his movie, talk fundamentally about the same thing: man's confrontation with death, his gradual wearing down, followed by an inevitable defeat. It is unlikely that Bergman read Landsberg's book, yet the commonalities are striking: before annihilating him, death "plays" with man for a while—it plays chess in Bergman, and *corrida* in Landsberg; man plays the game desperately, hoping against hope that somehow he stands a chance; the game is played in several sessions, each bringing him closer to his end than the other; each session consists of a series of "moves"; both are games of anticipation, preparation, and decision; and in both death eventually scores a crushing victory. Landsberg and Bergman's narratives are ultimately one and the same story told from two angles. Moreover, one enriches the other. To better understand Landsberg's *corrida*, we need to look at it with an eye to Bergman's chess game. Bergman's film not only illuminates Landsberg's Intermezzo, but also makes clearer what otherwise is only half-uttered by the philosopher.

So the "first adversaries are coming. It is still a game. For the bull fighting is natural. The fight sharpens his feeling of being alive and of his own strength" (Landsberg 1936: 76). "Are you prepared?" Death wants to know. "My body is frightened, but I am not," firmly says Bergman's hero, Antonius Block, another "Knight of Faith." It is as though Block's body and Block himself are two different things. Then, as Death prepares to seize him, he adds, pushing his luck: "Wait a moment … You play chess, don't you?" The day is young, it is barely morning, the

world is fresh, and the Knight, in the fullness of his strength, feels bold enough to challenge Death to a game of chess. (Here Bergman's script notes coldly: "A gleam of interest kindles in Death's eyes.") It looks as if Death is caught by surprise. "Yes, in fact I'm quite a good chess player," says Death. To which the Knight, a touch too boisterously perhaps, replies: "But you can't be better than I am." For the Knight fighting is natural: he has just returned from the Crusade.[39]

Even many years after he made the film, Bergman was amazed at his own boldness: "I had recklessly dared to do what I wouldn't dare to do today. The knight performs his morning prayer. When he is ready to pack up his chess set, he turns around, and there stands Death" (Bergman 1990: 236). Death playing chess is not Bergman's invention. The Swedish painter Albertus Pictor[40] (c. 1440—d. c. 1507) represented the game in a work that affected the filmmaker deeply.[41] Yet, even though he did not invent it, Bergman gave the scene an almost iconic status (Figure 2.3). The sheer notion that, through skill and discipline, we can do something to prevent the inevitable has a beauty of its own and conveys a sense of great promise. For to engage in a game of chess with death is, at least theoretically, to believe in the possibility of winning. Difficult as it may be, victory is not impossible. All you need is death's agreement to play along. If it agrees, it is constrained by the rules of the game to adopt behavior. Later on during the game, when Death tries to hurry things up, the Knight calms it down: "I understand that you've a lot to do, but you can't get out of our game. It takes time."[42] Death submits. The play makes everyone equal: there are no masters and slaves in the game, only better or worse players. No matter how terrible Death is, once it has given its consent, it can't just do anything; it has to play by the rules and accept the outcome.

Once Death has agreed, Antonius Block does not waste time and specifies his terms: "The condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you. If I win, you will release me. Is it agreed?" So he asks, but Block is a wise man who knows that in the long run he cannot win. All he wants is to buy time. A slight postponement of the inevitable is all he can hope for.

Who exactly is Antonius Block? The most accurate and concise account of Block we find in Landsberg: Block is "the man without God" whose life is a "tragedy" and whose story Landsberg tells in his Intermezzo.[43] Block is "without God" insofar as he has to face death

Figure 2.3 Bengt Ekerot and Max von Sydow in Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1957). © Svensk Filmindustri, Ingmar Bergman (director), Gunnar Fischer (cinematographer).

all by himself, without hope or illusions. And yet he is also "with God" in that he is constantly tormented by issues of faith. Bergman loved to quote Eugene O'Neill: "Drama that doesn't deal with man's relation to God is worthless" (Bergman 1970: 177). Throughout the film the Knight is haunted not only by death, but also by God—more exactly, by God's silence. As the viewer soon realizes, he plays chess with Death not "for his life," but in the hope that in the process he might learn something about God. He asks Death about its secrets. "I have no secrets," Death says. "So you know nothing," he says. "I have nothing to tell."[44] When Death proves as silent on the matter as God himself, the Knight does not hesitate to turn to the Devil for answers. Shortly before Tyan, the young "witch," is burned at the stake, he approaches her: "They say that you have been in league with the Devil." "Why do you ask?" Tyan wonders. "Not out of curiosity, but for very personal reasons. I too want to meet him." "Why?" "I want to ask him about God. He, if anyone, must know."

Not only is Block an illustration of Landsberg's man who has to face death all alone in the *corrida* ring of life, but he also seems to

have something to say about the tormenting issues of faith that must have preoccupied Landsberg himself.[45] For the Knight's faith, too, is profoundly doubt-ridden. A dramatic and painful process, Block's faith is all about "things hoped for" and "things not seen." He always longs after his theological conversations with Death. Not that the latter is much of a talker, but Death's silence somehow stimulates the Knight to think aloud. Block "wants knowledge,"[46] he wants to know God through the senses, to see him, touch him. "Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses?" Death doesn't bother to answer, and he goes on:

> How can we have faith in those who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want to nor are capable of believing?

Even though he has just returned from the Crusade, when it comes to God, the Knight can't find any use for the Church: "I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions ... I want God to stretch out His hand towards me, reveal Himself and speak to me." At times the hiddenness of God proves unbearable: "I call out to Him in the dark but no one seems to be there." To which Death, teasingly, adds: "Perhaps no one is there." Block then voices an idea that may come straight out of Landsberg's book: "Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness." The faith-cum-doubt mix drills deeper and deeper into Block's head: "In our fear, we make an image, and that image we call God."

Meanwhile, the *corrida* of life continues. No matter how hopeless the fight, man keeps waging it as bravely as he can. It is not always easy because this is also a humiliating experience. As Landsberg notices, "slowly something annoying appears. The game is rigged. The adversary is too cunning" (Landsberg 1936: 76). This is what happens to Block at the church. Using the disguise of a monk to whom the Knight goes to confess, Death tricks him into revealing his strategy: "How will you outwit Death in your game?" He obliges: "I use a combination of the bishop and the knight which he hasn't yet discovered. In the next move I'll shatter one of his flanks." The Knight is chivalry embodied. "I'll remember that," Death says with a smile, pulling off its mask.

And yet, the day is young and "the bull is still strong enough" (Landsberg 1936: 77). And so is Antonius Block. Despite being badly tricked by Death, he is not demoralized. Indeed, in these final hours he finds a renewed *joie de vivre*. The sheer fact of being alive fills him with tremendous joy. To live is to be in possession of your body, to take pleasure in the flesh that you are. Block watches his hand, feels it, moves it, and has a revelation: "This is my hand. I can move it, feel the blood pulsing through it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with Death." (Figure 2.4) Later on, when he joins the "holy family" of Joseph, Mia, and Mikael, and officiates at a secular communion before them, he talks again of his hands: "I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light ... I'll carry this memory between my hands." On the chessboard Block's hand is what keeps Death at bay and gives him breathing space. The hand, again, becomes the condensed expression of life, its epiphany. All the life-celebrating gestures also originate in the hand.

Meanwhile, the fight continues. "A good bull remains dignified, remains a fighter to the end" (Landsberg 1936: 76). So does the Knight. Again, he plays chess with Death not to gain immortality, but to buy time. The "reprieve" gives him the chance to "arrange an urgent matter." Block

Figure 2.4 Max von Sydow in Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1957). © Svensk Filmindustri, Ingmar Bergman (director), Gunnar Fischer (cinematographer).

still has some unfinished business to attend to. His life has been "a futile pursuit, a wandering, a great deal of talk without meaning," and now he wants to use his reprieve for "one meaningful deed." Within the economy of the film's narrative, the "meaningful deed" seems to be the escape of the "holy family" from Death's net, while the latter is being deliberately distracted by Block. And most film critics agree.[47] But do they really "escape"? Has anyone ever escaped death? Block hasn't really "saved" them, only postponed their death. His deed is hardly "meaningful."

I have a different interpretation. The "meaningful deed" is the play itself, the sheer gesture of opposing death; the "urgent matter" has to do with the sense of accomplishment that comes from it. Playing chess with Death is an end in itself: it gives life a redeeming meaning. Of course we will be crushed. Sooner or later we will all die. Yet the point is not to avoid death but to live without fear and humiliation before it comes. To die properly you need to learn how to die—and what better way of learning that than playing with Death itself? By the end of the game you are a different person.[48] And here it's Landsberg's turn to illuminate Bergman's film. Every battle against death is "lost in advance," says the philosopher. "The splendor of such a battle cannot lie in its outcome, but only in the dignity itself of the act" (Landsberg 1936: 80). Challenging Death to a chess match, playing the game, facing all the tricks and losing with grace is not only bold, but also wise. It is the wisdom of Sisyphus. The absurdity of the situation, the fact that there is no escape from it, the inevitability of the outcome—all these don't matter in the end. What counts is the act itself. *The act is its own reward*.[49]

In both cases, the end is quick and almost totally silent. The bull is killed in the ring, with a swift mortal blow from the matador:

> His massive body wears the sword … like a final cry, proud and desperate. For a few seconds he still seems to resist. But death is accomplished, this death that has been present there for so long, identified with the sword, and identical with its source, the matador himself who handles it. The dead animal is taken away like a thing. (Landsberg 1936: 80)

The Knight is killed in his castle, along with the others. Death does not come to play chess this time, just to do its job. Its victims introduce themselves, one by one. "Good morning, noble lord," says the Knight.

"I am Karin, the Knight's wife," says Karin. Everybody is courteous, well-behaved, submissive. Only Jöns the Squire does his usual rebelling, but that does not really matter now. For a few seconds the Knight seems to resist, but that does not matter either. Karin hushes: "Quiet, quiet." Jöns makes one final, feeble attempt at philosophizing, and then everything falls into place. The final line of the scene is uttered by the nameless, hitherto voiceless girl: "It is the end" (*Det är fullbordat*). That these are also the last words that a reader of the Swedish Bible would hear from Jesus Christ on the Cross ("It is finished."—John 19.30) makes the conclusion of Bergman's film at once bold (bordering on the blasphemous) and open-ended.[50]

The dead are then carried away. Death, the supreme ironist, is not content to leave the poor things alone. It throws a mocking party and sets everyone to a dance: the *Totentanz.* In the film's final frame (Figure 2.5), the dance of the dead dominates the horizon. It is as though Death has seized in its grip not only those it found at the castle, but the world entire.

*

I've examined so far the philosopher's encounter with the first layer of death: the abstract, lofty region where death is nothing but a topic.

Figure 2.5 *Totentanz* in Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal* (1957). © Svensk Filmindustri, Ingmar Bergman (director), Gunnar Fischer (cinematographer).

There is another layer, however, the concrete one, where death can sometimes be so alive that you feel its breath on your neck. Between the two layers of death there lies the flesh. The way to the concrete layer passes through the philosopher's body. This is a notoriously slippery territory, but one has to cross it if one is to grasp what it means to "die for ideas." Mapping out the body of the philosopher who finds herself in such a limit-situation is the task of the next chapter.

3
PHILOSOPHY IN THE FLESH

The beauty of the world is the mouth of a labyrinth. The unwary individual who on entering takes a few steps is soon unable to find the opening. Worn out, with nothing to eat or drink … he walks on without knowing anything or hoping anything … But this affliction is nothing compared with the danger threatening him. For if he does not lose courage, if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God.

SIMONE WEIL

Of bodies and philosophers

When Death unexpectedly showed up to scythe Antonius Block away, it had the good grace to ask him first: "Are you prepared?" "My body is frightened, but I am not," said the Knight. When we face death we discover that we are two: our frightened bodies, on the one hand, and ourselves, on the other. Faced with the sudden prospect of my annihilation, my body reveals itself to me as otherness, as that which I am not. Indeed, it has a tendency to take over the one I normally am. Irrespective of what I happen to think of death, my body seems to have made up its mind already: to stick to life for as long as it can. Captured

by the Khmer Rouge in 1971 and led to what he thought was certain death, François Bizot remembers his body "was in turmoil." The body's instinctive rejection of death made itself felt in no uncertain terms: "A heavy sense of my imminent execution was throbbing through my veins," he says. The less "I grasped of the situation, the more it seemed to progress. I remained in shock, and it became as hard for me to catch my breath as to hope or despair" (Bizot 2012: 22–4).

Philosophers who "die for ideas" have not only to "shut up" their dying bodies: more important still, they have to turn them into a means of philosophizing. Their flesh has to become a live inscription of their philosophy. In a certain sense, there is nothing radical about such a claim. For quite a while, philosophers, cognitive scientists and psychologists have linked thinking to corporeity. There is no such thing as disembodied reason, they suggest. Our being "embodied creatures" shapes our mind in ways both substantial and far-reaching. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have put it, "the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 4). Recent findings in neuroscience confirm the intuitions of phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that mind and body are not separate entities, as the Platonic and, later, Cartesian traditions maintained. The mind is not a "charioteer" in charge of taming the beastly nature of our body, as Plato would have it; nor is it a skilful "pilot" maneuvering the heavy, inert ship that is our body, as Descartes thought. Instead, mind and body are fused inseparably into one complex entity, which determines what we are. Indeed, how this entity works is also a function of the specific context in which it finds itself at any given moment. "Whatever happens in your mind happens in time and in space relative to the instant in time your body is in and to the region of space occupied by your body," says neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (Damasio 1999: 145).

Our body plays a fundamental role not only for our understanding of what we are, but also for making sense of the world around us. The body is present in, and structures, the operations of the mind. Even something as abstract as conceptualization is determined by our corporeity: we "can only form concepts through the body." Whatever insights we can gain of "the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 555). Thinking is not some abstract "faculty," but is an

embodied process that presupposes the active presence of the body.[1] Since reason, the philosophical capacity par excellence, is shaped by the "peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 4), philosophizing cannot take place in the absence of the body. Any philosophy, then, is "philosophy in the flesh," as the title of Lakoff and Johnson's influential book alludes.

At least three distinct, yet complementary lines of thought have been employed to make the case for the philosophical relevance of the body. First, there is the "phenomenological" claim, associated especially with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, that talking about our mental life presupposes, in an important way, our "being-in-the-world" as embodied agents. There is, then, the "philosophical behaviorist" claim, found in thinkers like Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that any analysis of terms such as "think" or "feel" must involve a reference to actual or potential behavior, which presupposes the existence of the body. Finally, there is the notion that attributing mental states to persons ultimately relies on a recognition of their bodily life. When we describe minds we use metaphorical terms that are derived from their literal role in describing the physical world. The work of Lakoff and Johnson[2] is a good example of this.[3]

What's new about martyr-philosophers is that they take the notion of "philosophy in the flesh" to a radically new level. To understand the significance of their gesture, insights from the phenomenology of the body are certainly helpful. When Merleau-Ponty, for example, says that the "use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity" or that "gesture transfigure[s] the body" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 229), he points in the right direction. But he doesn't take that path. For dying for ideas does not presuppose the body per se, but *the dying body.* The limit-situation in which martyr-philosophers find themselves is of such a nature that it requires them not to think *through* their bodies, as normally happens, but *against* them. Since our embodied selves are designed to maintain and preserve life, philosophers "dying for ideas," to be successful, have to *transcend their embodiment*. Their bodies are now not something to live with, but something to overcome, re-signify and destroy in the process. That's why to understand the process martyr-philosophers go

through, we need to compare their actions not to what other embodied selves ordinarily do, but to the performances of those who embark on similar projects: religious martyrs, "fasters unto death," self-immolators, and suicide-bombers.

Nietzsche liked to see himself as "philosophizing with the hammer," which seems an odd way to describe a philosopher's job. Breaking idols is certainly not for the faint-hearted; the one who dedicates himself to such a project puts his existential stability at risk, and Nietzsche's own tormented life is proof of that. Dangerous as breaking idols can be, however, there is something even more perilous: breaking yourself. Martyr-philosophers are conspicuously empty-handed: they philosophize with nothing but their own dying bodies. Whatever significance their gesture acquires, its source always lies in the use they make of their dying flesh. Nietzsche's notion projects the image of an active stance. His iconoclast philosopher is obviously "in charge," he approaches the world in a violent manner, subjects it to a last judgment of sorts and inflicts on it his sentence. The philosopher "dying for ideas," instead, strikes us as totally defenseless. It is not she who judges the world, but the other way around. Far from inflicting anything upon it, she is struck by it. And yet it is precisely this being crushed that helps her realize and articulate the ultimate message of her philosophical project. For more is to be gained from being crushed than from doing the crushing, painful and humiliating as the former may be. As always, Simone Weil puts it aptly: "Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening" (in McLellan 1990: 93).

The crushing

No part of Hypatia's work has survived, although she seems to have been well versed in philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics. A charismatic teacher, she attracted students from remote places who came to Alexandria just to attend her lectures. A pagan Platonist (she was the head of the Platonic school in the city), Hypatia was intellectually ecumenical and tolerant, as proven by the diversity of her followers—pagans and Christians, Greeks and foreigners. One of her disciples, for example, Synesius of Cyrene (c. 373—c. 414), was a Christian

who became Bishop of Ptolemais in 410. We don't know exactly what her philosophical ideas were, but there is evidence that her learning, practical wisdom, and manner of speaking made her influential in Alexandria and gave her access to people in high places, including the Roman prefect (governor), Orestes. Socrates Scholasticus, who was Hypatia's contemporary and is considered a reliable source, says of her in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*: "On account of the majestic outspokenness [*parrēsía*] at her command as the result of her education [*paideía*], she maintained a dignified intercourse with the chief people of the city, for all esteemed her highly, and admired her for her sophrosyne" (in Dzielska 1995: 41).

There was something distinctly uninhibited about Hypatia's public persona. She was free-spirited, independent, and, as the chronicler mentions, she always spoke her mind. She socialized with whoever she pleased, showed up wherever she wanted, and social conventions didn't mean anything to her. A beautiful woman in her youth, Hypatia didn't think much of her attractiveness. As a Platonist, she must have been keenly aware of the precariousness of everything finite, physical beauty included. According to another source, Damascius (c. 458–538), one of Hypatia's students fell madly in love with her. Unable to suppress it, he confessed his passion. Hypatia listened patiently and, in response, produced her sanitary napkin, offering it to him along with a lesson in applied metaphysics: "This is what you really love, my young man, but you do not love beauty for its own sake" (in Dzielska 1995: 50).[4] Apparently she kept her chastity to the end of her life, and adopted an ascetic life-style, as was the custom among philosophers at the time.

Her contempt for the body was something she shared with the Christians, but that may be all they had in common. In the Alexandria of the early fifth century a woman like her—outspoken, independent, and pagan to boot—was bound to enter on a collision course with the city's authoritarian Christian leader, the Patriarch Cyril (c. 376–444). He must have perceived Hypatia as a competitor for the symbolic power over the city that he was seeking to gain for himself. It didn't help matters that she was also on close terms with the city's prefect.[5] As customarily happens in such situations, Hypatia must have received warnings and threats, more or less discreet. But she did not change her ways, which must have enraged Cyril and given him a reason to

act. Indeed, it appears that he incited his faithful *parabalani* (a Christian brotherhood, a militia of sorts) against Hypatia. Involved primarily in charity work, *parabalani* also served as Cyril's "toughs," being deployed wherever firm action was needed.[6] Their involvement in Hypatia's death, attested to even by pro-Cyril chroniclers, reveals the kind of work they sometimes did for the Patriarch.

In March 415 ("in the tenth consulship of Honorius and the sixth consulship of Theodosius II, during Lent"), Hypatia was abruptly seized by a group of *parabalani*. This is how Socrates Scholasticus reports the event:

> They threw her out of her carriage and dragged her to the church called Caesarion. They stripped off her clothes and then killed her with broken bits of pottery [*ostraka*]. When they had torn her body apart limb from limb, they took it to a place called Cinaron and burned it. (Socrates Scholasticus in Dzielska 1995: 17–18)

What the report communicates is an image of total annihilation. For a mob of hot-blooded fanatics the *parabalani* are remarkably thorough. Slowly, methodically, they subject the body of the philosopher to a process of utter physical destruction. Hypatia is dragged, broken, burned, torn to pieces, literally reduced to nil; they want to make sure that nothing is left of her corporeal presence in the world. There is an uncanny sense here that such an exit—departure through dismemberment—cruel beyond measure as it certainly was, suited Hypatia the Platonic philosopher. For someone who associated feminine beauty with menstrual blood, the body must have been a site of discontent and frustration, a rather unpleasant place to find yourself in. The tomb of the soul indeed. This may explain Hypatia's total lack of resistance; the chronicles don't mention the faintest opposition on her part. Why oppose your liberators?

Giordano Bruno's end took a different form. Like Socrates before him, he was tried in a court of law and procedures were properly followed. Modern historians can't really find flaws or irregularities in the conduct of the trial.[7] Indeed, the Inquisition was rather reluctant in pushing the death penalty; they kept hoping that Bruno would eventually admit his errors and repent publicly, which would have spared his life. Roberto Bellarmino, the cardinal inquisitor in charge of

the case in the final stage of the process, and a reputable theologian in his own right,[8] knew only too well that, by giving Bruno to the flames, they were offering him a substantial gift: martyrdom. In the end, after years of protracted proceedings, Bellarmino boiled down Bruno's wildly heretical views to some eight "propositions" and pressed him to abjure them unconditionally. Among them were Bruno's notion of the plurality of the worlds (*mundos esse innumerabiles*) and their eternity, his denial of Christ's divinity (*Christum non esse Deum*), his positive views on magic (*magiam esse rem bonam et licitam*), his denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation, as well as his belief in the transmigration of souls (*animam de corpore in corpus, imo et alium in mundum migrare*).[9]

The inquisitors' hope that Bruno would admit his errors and recant was not totally unfounded. For the best part of his eight-year imprisonment, he had shown considerable flexibility. At one point even, just a few months after his arrest, while he was still held in Venice, Bruno made a humiliating confession, admitting all the errors attributed to him, falling on his knees before the inquisitors, and begging for forgiveness. This is Bruno at his humblest, a rare sight indeed:

> I hate and abhor all the errors I've committed to this day that have to do with the Catholic life and with my profession, as well as all the heresies I've held, and the doubts that I've had regarding the Catholic faith and the matters established by the holy Church … and I pray that this holy Tribunal, knowing my infirmities, will receive me in the flock of the holy Church, giving me the cures appropriate for my [poor] health, and showing me mercy. (In Firpo 1998: 32)

This didn't secure his freedom though, and he would soon be transferred to Rome. There he still seemed open to "negotiating" his positions, conceding a point here, sticking to another there, giving in today, getting stubborn again tomorrow. To defend himself he would make use of his solid Dominican training, employing dialectics and subtle conceptual distinctions. Whenever he found it convenient, he would, for instance, draw a distinction between matters of doctrine *stricto sensu*, which the Church was entitled to formulate, and philosophical matters, on which he could exercise his *libertà di filosofo*. Or he would engage his interrogators in endless philosophical-cosmological debates. Or he would submit a written defense meant to be read

by the Pope himself. Or he would ask for a face-to-face meeting with the said Pope. Or he would just keep quiet.

There must have been a moment, however, when Bruno realized that this was not taking him anywhere. Bellarmino was not someone you could fool easily. In the end, as I said, the astute cardinal inquisitor came up with a number of specific points which Bruno had to abjure or suffer the consequences. There must have also been a psychological factor involved: Bruno was a very proud man, who had only contempt for the Church's theologians and clerics, whom he considered *asini pedanti* (pedant asses). He spared no one, ridiculed everybody, he was better than anyone else. In *La Cena delle ceneri* (1584), for instance, he turns Copernicus himself into a modestly trained soldier, one of those "country folk who report the circumstances and the shape of a battle to a captain who was absent" (Bruno 1977: 85).[10] The captain who is busy elsewhere, you've guessed, is Giordano Bruno himself. In the same book, he introduces himself as the one who, carried by his winged genius, "has found the way to ascend to the sky, compass the circumference of the stars, and leave at his back the convex surface of the firmament" (Bruno 1977: 88).[11] To say that Bruno was immodest would be an understatement. In his "extraordinary style, with its mixture of magic, philosophy, and poetry" (Yates 1991: 240), Bruno does not hesitate to portray himself as a new Messiah, demi-god and *thaumaturgos*, the creator of a novel spiritual world: "by the light of his senses and reason, he opened those cloisters of truth …; he laid bare covered and veiled nature, gave eyes to the moles and light to the blind; he loosed the tongues of the dumb … strengthened the lame" (Bruno 1977: 90). And now here he is, locked-up, humiliated, having to flatter and engage in debates with *asini pedanti*. Sometime in early-1599 Bruno radically changed his stance: he let his accusers know, in no uncertain terms, that they did not have the authority to judge him. This pretty much sealed his fate.

As Bruno stopped negotiating with the inquisitors, he started working on his martyrdom: rather than recant his views, he would now die, as he put it, *martire e volentieri* (as a martyr and gladly). Much as he hated Jesus Christ (while in the Venetian prison he would hurl obscene curses at him), as he was preparing to die Bruno discovered more and more similarities with the Nazarene. "In the prison of the Holy Office," writes Ingrid Rowland, "Giordano Bruno found his own Gethsemane"

(Rowland 2008: 265). Having fancied himself a divinity of sorts in his philosophical work, Bruno was now to die like a god.

As was fitting for a divinity in waiting, during the trial Bruno kept quiet for most of the time; you don't make a scene while waiting for your apotheosis. Kaspar Schoppe, an eyewitness to Bruno's trial and execution, describes the proceedings in a letter to a friend:

> Bruno was lead to the Inquisition's hall; there, on his knees, he listened to the sentence that was pronounced against him. In the sentence, his life was narrated, and his studies, and his doctrine … After the sentence was read, he responded with these few, menacing words: "Certainly you are more afraid pronouncing this sentence against me than I am receiving it." (In Bassi 1996: 35)[12]

The apotheosis itself took place on February 27, 1600. Appropriately enough for someone who not just wrote plays, but was also inclined to see the whole world as an unfolding play,[13] the burning was staged in front of a theater. In the same letter, Schoppe tells his friend how Giordano Bruno was "burned while alive and conscious," in Campo dei Fiori, "publicly, in front of the theater of Pompey." As he was led to the stake, Bruno bid farewell to the religion that condemned him in an eloquent fashion: when "an image of Christ crucified was placed in front of him, he turned his face away full of contempt." As long as you can still turn your face from something, you have all the freedom you need.

Burning at the stake was meant to be a profoundly humiliating punishment. At the time just visualizing it must have been terrifying because one could not help seeing in it a rehearsal for life in Hell. The death itself was slow and cruel, the pain unspeakable, the shame enormous. The public gaze—vulgar, impudent, insatiable—must have made everything even more unbearable. When the execution was over, there was nothing to bury and the ashes would be disposed of like trash. Indeed, turning human beings into trash was what this form of punishment was all about. Someone burned at the stake was not just annihilated, but degraded, made repulsive, flushed away (whatever was left of Bruno was thrown into the Tiber). Painful as it certainly was, this punishment was not primarily corporeal, but—one might say—ontological. It was meant not simply to kill the victim, but to push him outside the limits of humanity.

And yet if there is a form of exit from this world that would suit Bruno's philosophy, it is death by fire. "Death" is not even the right term here, for in Bruno's universe you don't really die, you just take another form—you never retire from the *theatrum mundi*, you only put on another mask. As the visible expression of an infinite God, the universe too is boundless. Life is never-ending, always recycling itself, and death is nothing but a moment in this infinite cycle of life. According to Bruno's philosophy, then, death could not annihilate him, only change his ontological status: the fire would simply dissolve him in the ether.[14] Indeed, Bruno's universe is not cut off from God, but is God-filled—God is everywhere, you can't escape it. In *La Cena delle ceneri* he speaks of "this deity, this our mother [the earth] who feeds and nourishes us on her back after having conceived us in her womb to which she always receives us again" (Bruno 1977: 90).[15] When Bruno was tied to the stake, he was stripped of all his earthly possessions and left naked. He was meant to be humiliated in this way, but the scene may have looked more like a preparation for rebirth.

If Bruno vanished into thin air, the manner of Jan Patočka's death was much more prosaic. He died on March 13, 1977, in a Prague hospital, shortly after his seventieth birthday. The cause of his death was a "massive brain hemorrhage suffered under police interrogation. Over the preceding two months, he had been interrogated repeatedly, the last interrogation lasting over eleven hours" (Kohak, 1989: 3). He had been interrogated as one of the leaders ("spokespersons") of Charter 77, a human-rights movement in which he had become involved over the preceding year, and which the Czechoslovakian communist regime rightly perceived as anti-establishment. Václav Havel, one of the movement's initiators, had been involved in Patočka's recruitment, recognizing from the very beginning that he, "better than anyone else, could impress upon the Charter a moral dimension" (Havel 1990: 135). In the philosopher they found an uncontested moral leader whom everybody respected.

There had been something deeply apolitical about Patočka's public persona up to that point. He had "never before been directly involved in politics," says Havel, and "he'd never had any direct, sharp confrontation with the powers that be. In such matters he was reluctant, shy, and reserved." His strategy *vis-à-vis* official politics was very much the "strategy of trench warfare." He tried to hold out "as long as he

could without compromise, but he never went on the attack himself." Patočka dedicated himself almost exclusively to philosophy, and "never modified his opinions, but he did try to avoid things that might have put an end to his work." Yet there was also a sense that Patočka only *postponed* his involvement in dissident politics. He knew that, when he would get involved, he could not do it otherwise than completely, without reservation, but "with the same perseverance he devoted to philosophizing," says Havel (Havel 1990: 135).

One of the central notions in Patočka's philosophy is famously the "care for the soul" (*péče o duši*). In *Plato and Europe* (a posthumously published collection of his underground lectures), he places this notion at the foundation of European philosophy itself. Thanks to the care for the soul, we can overcome our mortality and instinctive fear of death; whatever makes us properly human—morality, thought, culture, history—has its root in the care for the soul. Through it we become connected to that which is eternal, yet without having to leave this world: it is "the attempt to embody what is eternal within time, and within one's own being, and at the same time, an effort to stand firm in the storm of time … in all dangers carried with it" (Patočka 2002: 87). There is nothing individualistic or asocial about Patočka's notion. On the contrary, the care for the soul has a distinct political dimension: as he puts it elsewhere, the "proper place of the care for the soul" is the *pólis*, which is also "the proper place of history" (Patočka 1996: 103). The life of the soul is inconceivable outside the life of the community within which it finds itself; a soul that cares for itself does anything it can to help its fellow-souls realize themselves and "live in truth." The care for the self is just another form of the care for others.

If it is not to betray itself, a self-caring soul has to remain so at any price. The best example is Socrates, whom Patočka praises for having put the care for the soul above anything else, including his own life. Socrates teaches his fellow Athenians that "an unexamined life is not worth living," even though sometimes this pits the examiner against his city. Eventually, his existence becomes "a provocation to the city." This is one of those cases where the care for the soul endangers its practitioner: "the care of the soul in a lawless city endangers a human being … just as that being endangers the city. And it is altogether logical that the city then treats it accordingly." In passages like these Patočka speaks not only of Socrates and the city of Athens, but

also, indirectly, of himself and his own "lawless city": Husák's regime in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, he takes a step further and makes his own philosophical project part of a "Socratic heritage," where the philosopher, no matter how bad his historical circumstances, has to put himself at the disposition of others:

> In what way can a philosopher who is in such dire straits help others? In a philosophical way, through the outline of a city, where the *philosopher can live*, where the man who is to care for the soul can live … To create such a city is the work of his successors. (Patočka 2002: 87–8)

There must have been a moment in Patočka's life when he realized that his scholarly work and underground lectures, subversive as they may have been, were not enough to make a difference in the real world. His philosophical speculations could not, by themselves alone, amount to the active care for the soul that he so praised in Socrates. Something was still missing, and he knew that. He openly admitted to the sense of impasse that philosophy done as a strictly academic exercise could bring about. The philosopher reaches a point, he once said, as you may recall, where he "will progress no further unless he manages to make a decision" (In Kriseová 1993: 108). To cross this threshold would be to accomplish two things at once: it would test his philosophy and make it relevant for life. Havel, too, noticed that Patočka became increasingly aware that a decisive moment would come when he would "have to put his thinking to the test in action … that he couldn't avoid it or put it off forever, because ultimately this would call his whole philosophy in doubt" (Havel 1990: 135). That moment came when he got involved in the Charter movement.

When Patočka decided to cross the threshold, he knew exactly what he was doing: he was walking in Socrates' footsteps. This meant an open confrontation with the regime, political persecution and a death resembling Socrates'.[16] His was an existential, politically-charged gesture whose theoretical foundation he had set when he made his philosophical project part of the "Socratic heritage." Like Socrates', Patočka's civic involvement was not only consistent with his philosophy, but represented its culmination and inescapable conclusion.[17] Just as Socrates had to spell out to the court what he thought in order not

to betray his philosophical project, so Patočka had to get involved in Charter 77 to prove—to himself, to his students, to everybody—that his philosophizing was worth taking seriously. Had he not performed this gesture, he could have never said that his philosophy "worked." Indeed, his inaction would have "invalidated" it: if a philosophy cannot do anything to stop barbarity, then it doesn't have a right to say anything against it.[18] By performing it, instead, Patočka became, in Paul Ricoeur's words, "the most Socratic of modern philosophers" (In Kohak,1989: 8). Adopting a Socratic understanding of the philosopher's mission, Patočka secured for himself a Socratic ending.[19]

Patočka's political career didn't end with his death, though. When he died, the philosopher became politically even more unsettling than when he was alive, as attested by the impressive police forces deployed to flank those who attended his funeral. By their sheer presence, the police acknowledged that Patočka's death had a political dimension, and that his body, lifeless as it was, was carrying an important message. The authorities must have realized now that their victory over Patočka had been a short-lived one: Patočka dead was much stronger, more eloquent, and even more dangerous than Patočka alive. They had the power to turn him into a corpse—now, mysteriously, the corpse was rising and laughing at them. They did all they could to sabotage Patočka's posthumous political life: "Police cameras filmed and photographed everybody, even at the graveside. The service was interrupted, and the priest's funeral oration drowned out, by a military helicopter circling overhead and the heavy revving of police motorcycles at a nearby racetrack" (Keane 1999: 253–4). But their efforts were in vain; the corpse eventually defeated them.

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I've looked here at the deaths of three philosophers—Hypatia, Giordano Bruno, and Patočka—primarily, and inevitably, from an outsider's perspective. It is an outside made even more distant because these martyr-philosophers left no texts or other personal testimonies from which to gauge how they coped with their imminent annihilation. Our gaze inevitably lingers on the spectacle of their crushing ends. We seek to understand them by examining the "working" of their dying bodies on the surrounding world. Yet all these martyr-philosophers found

themselves in that situation because they made a certain choice. Let us consider that choice more closely.

Choosing death

First, this choice consists in the adoption, early on in their lives, of a certain type of intellectual and ethical existence. Then, later, sometimes much later, these philosophers find themselves, at a precise point in their lives, in a decisive situation, where they have to opt between two very different paths: *either* they renounce their views, "amend their ways" and repent *or* they have to die. The former does not always mean a life of freedom, but the latter always means death. Ultimately, then, what we have here is *the choice to die.*

To grasp the meaning of such a choice, it would be helpful to look at Kirilov, the suicidal character in Dostoevsky's *Demons.* Admittedly, Kirilov never existed in flesh and blood, but this does not prevent him from being a great philosopher. He is often deemed mad, but far from being a madman, Kirilov is a deep thinker who made important contributions to our understanding of what it means to die. One of his most insightful notions is that our fear of death is tied to the experience of the sacred. Coming from an atheist, the insight is not without irony, but that's what makes Kirilov's point even stronger. "Sacred" here is about a certain type of human experience and its quality. More exactly, it signifies a gesture of self-transcending. Whether you believe in God or not, Kirilov's argument goes, when you've managed to kill your fear of death, you have crossed an important ontological threshold. In a certain sense, you are not merely human anymore. What ties us to the earth, what keeps us in a state of existential dependency, is not some external force, but something we carry within ourselves: our own fear of death. Should we manage to get rid of it, we would transcend human nature altogether. Says Kirilov:

> I am terribly unhappy because I am terribly afraid. Fear is man's curse … But I will proclaim self-will. … the attribute of my divinity is – Self-will. That is all, by which I can show in the main point my insubordination and my new fearsome freedom. … I kill myself

> to show my insubordination and my new fearsome freedom. (Dostoevsky 1995: 619)

The notion that by overcoming one's natural fear of death—which is accomplished through a commitment to voluntary death—one crosses a threshold and enters a new, radically different space, is of particular importance for understanding martyrdom. The "sacred" that person experiences as a mode of being also awakens the social "sacred" in the witnesses to her death. This is a profoundly shattering social experience. For to be human is to be preprogrammed to be afraid of death; human life is based on—and is made possible by—the fear of death. Our entire ontological, biological, and mental set-up is oriented toward self-protection. That's why when someone performs an act of voluntary death in our presence we are so unsettled: we feel instinctively threatened and experience that person as *radically other*. Theoretically, we can understand what she is doing or is about to do. But it is because we understand it that we don't want to have anything to do with it. We do all we can to keep safely away from the freezing breath that the gesture exudes. By doing what she is doing, that person is shattering our existential stability, our belonging in the world, the fundamental presupposition of our everydayness.

Picture a self-immolator, just a few moments before the act. Here he is: matches in one hand, gasoline bottle in the other. He removes the cap, drops it to the ground, and douses himself in flammable liquid. He gets rid of the empty bottle, and regains his composure. He does everything slowly, methodically, as if all this were part of a routine he has practiced for years. Then, without much looking around, he strikes a match… At this moment nothing in the world can bridge the gap that separates the self-immolator from the rest of us. His defiance of survival and self-preservation, his determination to trample on what everybody else finds precious, the ease with which he seems to dispose of his own life—all these place him not only beyond our comprehension, but also outside human society. He is now in a place that most of us find unhabitable.

And yet from where he is he does not cease to overpower us. For we find that we are not only repulsed, but also secretly attracted to the gesture. What we feel toward the person performing it is in fact a complex mix of fear and respect, of fascination and repulsion, attraction and revulsion, all at once. The experience is so powerful because it is

structurally imbedded in the human psyche. Self-immolation awakens an ancestral layer of our being: it occasions the sudden experience of the "sacred," even in the absence of any notion of God. Here, "sacred" has no relation to specific religious beliefs, but is returned to its primary sense of *sacer*: that of a radical separation, of being "cut off." In this sense, the sacred is defined by an ontological difference from that which is merely human. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto (Otto 1958) sees the sacred precisely in terms of a "radically other" (*das ganz Andere*), in relation to which humans feel at once terror and fascination. The abrupt emergence of something *sacer* causes a major breach in the human universe: it destabilizes its structures, shatters its certainties, and undermines its routines. To experience it is to see the cracks in the fabric of existence.

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There is something fundamentally ambivalent about our experience of the sacred. As one scholar has put it, the "sacred thing" is "solemnly designated, set apart, charged with effective energy": the *sacer* implies "both blessed and cursed, blessing and cursing."[20] That's what renders it so special. When it erupts into our lives—and it can at any time—its presence is unmistakable, its effects lasting, its memory haunting. If a member of human society goes against the survival instincts on which life is based, her gesture is perceived as belonging to another order of reality. Since such a gesture is doubly charged, with both the positive (as blessing) and the negative (as curse), it confers upon its author an aura of almost un-human distinction.

When Jan Palach set himself on fire in Prague's Wenceslas Square, in January 1969, to protest against the presence of the Soviet Army in Czechoslovakia and the people's complacency toward it, the flames not only engulfed him, but also separated him forever, radically, from the rest of his community. Those who shared his cause might have called the act "magnificent," but must have also felt profoundly unsettled because they knew only too well that they could never imitate it. The flowers constantly laid on Palach's grave could never bridge the distance between him and his people, they only signal its existence. This structural ambivalence is preserved in the language used to frame the act: when we say, for example, that Palach "sacrificed" himself, the

connection between death and the sacred is particularly strong, as the Latin word for sacrifice (*sacrificare*) means literally "to make it sacred" (*sacer* and *facere*). Through his "sacrifice" Palach set himself apart from ordinary, "profane" humanity.

At first glance, it may seem as if someone performing such a gesture is in the weakest of positions, a victim's position. But we've crossed into a territory where ordinary logic is reversed: here it is sometimes the victim who has more power than the victimizer. The former controls the latter by directing his attention, shaping his behavior, and by giving him a victimizer's status. By choosing to die, the victim places herself in a position that is not only inaccessible to her fellow humans, but also of significant power—the uncanny power that comes from her being in the proximity of death. Paradoxically, death does not weaken her, it makes her stronger. A good illustration of this comes from Roman antiquity. Here the victim, far from occupying an inferior position, was "conspicuously central and active." For both pagans and Christians,

> the more actively voluntary, the more effective the sacrifice. Sacrifice exalted the victim and rendered him or her divine. For the Roman, *sacrificare* still emphasized its root meaning, "holy making." The active rather than passive act of sacralizing is emphasized by the Roman words *sacrificare*, *sacramentum*, *exsecrare*, *devovere*, etc. (Barton 2002: 30)

This is indeed a space where everything is turned upside down, and different rules apply. Within such a space life is not "the supreme value." Indeed, it can be "sacrificed at any time" (Todorov 1996: 9). Here one's readiness to die is a symptom of vitality, one's sacrifice a disguised appreciation of life, and death itself a celebration of existence. *Joie de mourir* is just another form of *joie de vivre*. In this reversed logic, self-destruction is "the supreme form of munificence, the extremes of largesse and deprivation at once" (Barton 2002: 27). In some accounts of early Christian martyrs one finds the phrase *libido moriendi* ("lust for death"), just as later, in Shi'ite Islam, martyrdom would be sometimes associated with a "thirsting for death." To a person committed to pursuing such a radical project, "death has more value than life" (Todorov 1996: 10). The martyr is a *virtuoso* of self-reconfiguration, an

artist of dying in whose hands death ceases to be a calamitous event and becomes an instrument for self-transcending.

This art of dying is present especially in those societies where honor is related to self-sacrifice. Here Carlin Barton sees the capacity for self-sacrifice as key to gaining, or retaining, a strong sense of personal honor. One's honor is in direct proportion to one's willingness to lose what others see as most precious—the more you lose the more you gain. You can gain, regain or retain your honor by displaying contempt toward that which most people show an ardent attachment. Someone trying to "preserve his life at any cost" is a "miser," without any honor left and unworthy of respect. On the contrary, "the chosen, the voluntary, the generous death," says Barton, constitutes a form of "extreme renunciation" that puts "a high charge on life." It is a renunciation that enlarges life, "enhances the value of the thing being renounced," and empowers "the person or thing or value on which it was spent" (Barton 2002: 26).

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This is the unlikely arena where philosophers who "die for ideas" have to perform their deed. Their peers are no longer scholars, essayists, or sophists, but martyrs, self-immolators, "fasters unto death." Who would have thought? All their lives they've trained, but for a different performance and for a different arena. But then, again, philosophical life is nothing if not ironical.

Intermezzo (where the philosopher performs a disappearing act)

In the Spring of 1943 the doctors at the Middlesex Hospital, off the Tottenham Court Road in London, were faced with a curious case. On 15 April a 34-year-old female patient was admitted with high fever; soon after that she was diagnosed with tuberculosis in both lungs. Poor as her condition was, doctors predicted recovery provided that the patient took complete rest and ate properly. But that's where the trouble began: she would hardly touch any food. An odd idea had

entered her mind that she had no right to eat more than people did in Nazi-occupied France, where she had come from. The food rations had, moreover, just been reduced over there.

In many ways, the woman must have seemed out of this world. She would not even accept a private hospital room because she thought that would be an entitlement; she moved into one after days of negotiations, only after she was firmly assured that she was contagious. From a medical perspective, dealing with this case was a nightmare; her doctors would later say that she was the worst patient they had ever had.

On 17 August, much to the relief of the medical staff, the patient was transferred to a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent. When she entered the room assigned to her, the first thing she said was: "What a beautiful room in which to die!" And die she did, one week later. As cause of death, the Coroner's report mentioned: "The deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed."[21] *The local newspaper,* Tuesday Express*, ran a front-page report with the title: "French Professor starves herself to death." The headline of the* Kent Messenger *piece was similar, if a touch sensationalist: "Death from starvation. French Professor's curious sacrifice." Just a handful of friends were present at the funeral. For some fifteen years the grave would remain unmarked; the locals took it to be a pauper's grave.*[22] *When a tombstone was finally placed, it read:*

SIMONE WEIL
3 février 1909
24 août 1943

Very few people in 1943 knew who Simone Weil was. She had friends and admirers in France, but because none of her books had yet been published, hers was not a recognizable name. Her literary and philosophical writing, brilliant as it was, had only come out in periodicals, some of them obscure. It was only after the war, when her manuscripts, notebooks, and letters were published and translated throughout the world, that Weil emerged as one of the most intriguing philosophical figures of the twentieth century. Albert Camus would say of her that she was "the only great spirit of our times." Today, even if she is not the fashionable figure she used to be some decades ago, there is still

a vigorous Weil scholarship, with countless titles dedicated to her every year.

For all that has been written on her,[23] *we can't really say, seventy years after her death, that we know exactly who Simone Weil was. She seems to defy all convenient classifications, labels, and categories.*[24] *She was a philosopher, but also a mystic; a socialist, but at the same time a fearless critic of what was taking place in the Soviet Union, socialism's homeland; she was Jewish, but also prone to anti-Semitic views; she was attracted to the Catholic Church, but also to anti-Catholic heretical movements such as Catharism; she would spend hours on end in church praying, but refused to be baptized; she had a very personal relation to Jesus Christ, but could not help seeing him as just one of the many divine incarnations; she was a pacifist, but she also enrolled to fight in the Spanish Civil War; she was a weak, sickly, and clumsy person, but always sought out hard manual labor, which she thought to be a blessing; she graduated from the best institution of higher learning in France, the École Normale Supérieure, but wished to be hired (which she eventually was) as an unskilled factory worker. Doing or being all these things she always remained herself, Simone Weil.*

The manner of Weil's death has sparked debate ever since 1943. Some saw it as straightforward suicide, while others posthumously diagnosed her with anorexia. People find it difficult to accept the reasons she gave for not eating: a sense of solidarity with those in occupied France who, she thought, were starving because of the meager food rations. Yet for anyone familiar with Weil's biography her explanation can't be dismissed so easily. One of her most prominent features had always been a visceral sympathy for the victims of any forms of injustice and exploitation. This sympathy not only permeated her social and religious thinking—as evidenced, for example, by Oppression et liberté *(*Oppression and Liberty*)—but marked her entire biography. During the First World War, as a child, Weil refused to eat chocolate after she learned that soldiers on the frontline did not have enough food. Later she would donate her wages to the unemployed, and she refused to heat her room because, she assumed, the workers could not afford to heat theirs.*[25] *So for her, abstaining from food as a form of solidarity with the oppressed must have been a matter of remaining faithful to herself, irrespective of the consequences. Indeed, she must have found it supremely liberating. For true liberty, she says*

in Oppression and Liberty*, is "not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action" (Weil 1958: 85).*

Yet the meaning of Weil's starvation to death goes deeper than that. A striking aspect of her writing is that she frames her intellectual, spiritual, and even mystical life in terms of food, nourishment, hunger, and starvation. She says, for example: "I only read what I am hungry for at the moment when I have an appetite for it, and then I do not read, I eat*" (Weil 1973: 69). And this goes not only for books, but for whatever the soul needs. Even religion is "a form of nourishment." To determine whether a religion is good for you, you have to put it in your mouth first and taste it—otherwise you can't be sure it would suit you. For it "is difficult to appreciate the flavor and food value of something one has never eaten." (Weil 1973: 183) For Weil, the physical act of eating is only the poor imitation of a more substantial process of nourishment that takes place deep within. Indeed, at this spiritual level, things can turn into the opposite of what they normally are. For example, here what is most needed, what keeps us alive may not be feeding, but hunger. The eternal part of the soul, says Weil, "feeds on hunger":*

> *When we do not eat, our organism consumes its own flesh and transforms it into energy. It is the same with the soul. The soul which does not eat consumes itself. The eternal part consumes the mortal part of the soul and transforms it. The hunger of the soul is hard to bear, but there is no other remedy for our disease. (Weil 1970: 286)*

At a still deeper level, what's best for the soul may be neither to eat nor to starve, but something different altogether: to be eaten—to be devoured by God. In one of the essays collected in Waiting for God*, Weil talks of how the beautiful appearance of the world can be a "trap" set up by God to catch the one who contemplates it. "The beauty of the world," she says, is "the mouth of a labyrinth." The contemplator goes in, takes a few steps and soon enough—exhausted, disoriented—proves "unable to find the opening." That's only the beginning:*

> *For if he does not lose courage, if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will*

> *be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God. (Weil 1973: 163–4)*

Such writings give us a sense of how seriously Weil took everything that had to do with food. The metaphors of eating, starving or being eaten are for her not just rhetorical topoi*, devices employed at the surface of the text: they signify spiritual experiences, modes of self-transcending.*

Yet the key to the ultimate meaning of Weil's starvation to death may not be found here either, but in an even deeper layer of her theological writings, where she seeks to re-signify the notion of death. In a sense, dying is what Weil had been doing for almost as long as she was living.[26] *She placed death at the center of her life: for example, she took her work in the factory, as an unskilled laborer, to be a rehearsal for death, and constantly mortified her body. The reason why Weil was so obsessed with the ending had probably to do with what I would call an "ontological shame" that permeates her thought. There is, she seems to think, something impudent about our very existence: to be is to commit a form of* hubris*. We are usurpers, by existing we occupy a place that's not ours. "Our sin consists in wanting to be," says Weil, and that disrupts the order of things. To expiate we should "desire to cease to be" (Weil 1970: 218).*

Gravity and Grace *is one of the places where Weil articulates this insight in detail. God, she says here, has given us being, thus "renouncing being everything." What we should do in response to God's generosity is to "renounce being something." To be born as a human being is to incur a debt: "God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him." We can clean up the mess caused by our birth only if we engage in a series of ontological transactions with God: "Our existence is made up only of his waiting for our acceptance not to exist. He is perpetually begging from us that existence which he gives. He gives it to us in order to beg it from us." Repaying our ontological debt is all our lives should be about; there is no other thing more important than this. There is "absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish, only the destruction of the 'I'" (Weil 1997: 71–9).*

Just to be clear: Weil's philosophizing is not an apology for suicide. She never attempted suicide and was openly against it. Instead, it is

a demanding existential project, which requires vitality, dedication, and skill. Weil's project is to be placed within the mystical traditions where the annihilation of the "I" is so important. Its central aim is "to undo the creature in us." We should do everything in our power to get rid of our "creatureliness," clean up the place, and let the creator in. The term Weil uses is "decreation," which she defines as making "something created pass into the uncreated." A fundamentally constructive project, "decreation" is opposed to "destruction," which is "to make something created pass into nothingness" (Weil 1997: 78).

As long as we exist, our flesh—our earthiness—obscures God's view. In a memorable passage Weil imagines that God "loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am." But she realizes that she is in God's way: "I act as a screen," she says. "I must withdraw so that he may see it" (Weil 1997: 88). Such passages bring to mind the personal impact Weil had on those who knew her. "I had the impression," wrote Gustave Thibon[27] of being "in the presence of an absolutely transparent soul that was ready to be re-absorbed into original light" (Perrin and Thibon 2003: 120). It should not surprise us that Simone Weil admired the Cathars, the medieval heretics who saw the world, and each one of us, as a battlefield where two Gods were locked in a perpetual fight: a good God, divinity of light and of all things spiritual, and an evil one, a divinity of darkness and matter, of the flesh and the carnal desires. Existentially, Weil was a Cathar—the last of the Cathars perhaps. She had a profound repulsion toward any form of physical contact, practiced extreme forms of asceticism, and subjected her body to monastic rigors. Her dematerialization project makes perfect sense when seen from the perspective of the Cathar theology to which she was so attracted, as it does when considered from a Neo-Platonic standpoint—Plotinus, too, was ashamed of his body.

Weil's disappearing act, then, was a deliberate gesture of self-transcending in search of the light. She seems to have been oppressed by her material condition, by her embodiment, by her sheer existence, as evidenced by this frightening prayer:

> *May all this [sensibility, intelligence] be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack any kind of*

nourishment. And let me be a paralytic – blind, deaf, witless, and utterly decrepit. (In Pétrement 1976: 486)

"Dying for God" and "dying for ideas"

Socrates, Hypatia, Bruno, and the other philosophers who have "died for ideas" are frequently referred to as "martyrs of thought." Their dying for the sake of their philosophy is thought to be similar to the situation of those who die for their faith. Indeed, sometimes the deaths of these philosophers are made part of the general history of martyrdom, and discussed side by side with religious martyrs, which some of them, like Thomas More, of course, were. This is why an even cursory look at the phenomenon of martyrdom in the narrow sense ("dying for God") would be helpful for understanding philosophical martyrdom ("dying for ideas").[28]

Etymologically, "martyr" comes from the Greek word for witness: *mártys*. It meant someone with first-hand knowledge, who has seen how things happened and gives an account of them (the verb is *martyrein*, to give testimony). In the Septuagint *mártys* is used as a legal term; in the New Testament (in Matthew 18.16 and Mark 14.63, for example), it is used with the original meaning of witness to describe the apostles as those who witnessed Jesus Christ's deeds. Since to have been such a witness was, in times of persecution, enough to make someone suspect before the law, the word started changing its meaning, and ended up being used to designate anyone killed for their faith. It has this new sense, for instance, in Acts 22.20 and Revelation 2.13 and 13.6. Dying for one's faith is related to "bearing witness" in Islam as well. The word that would later signify martyrdom (*shahadat*) in the Koran meant just that, bearing witness. When there is a reference to dying for Allah, the Koranic expressions used are "slain in the cause of God" (II: 154) or "fight for the cause of God" (IV: 74)[29]; the phrase "the cause of God" (*Sabil allah*) originally designated what later would be covered by "martyrdom" (*shahadat*).[30]

Defining martyrdom is not always easy. The term can mean anything from setting yourself on fire to make a political statement to turning yourself into a bomb and killing as many people as you can. As Jolyon Mitchell noticed recently, one "community's 'martyr' is another's

'terrorist'; one person's 'martyrdom operation' is another's 'suicide bombing'" (Mitchell 2012: 2). Jan Willem Van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, drawing on Christian and Jewish traditions,[31] propose a "functional definition" of martyrdom, which seems both pertinent and sufficiently capacious. For them a martyr is someone who "in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities" (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002: 3). Other scholars have sought to identify some formal criteria to determine whether an instance of voluntary death qualifies as an act of martyrdom. Arthur Droge and James Tabor, for example, propose five comprehensive criteria. First of all, there has to be a situation of "opposition and persecution." Secondly, the choice of death is viewed by those who make it as "necessary, noble, and heroic." Third, these people are "eager to die." Fourth, there is a sense of "vicarious benefit resulting from their suffering and death." And fifth, a sense of "vindication and reward beyond death" is in most cases the "prime motivation for their choice of death" (Droge and Tabor 1992: 75).

These are rather general criteria. When it comes to individual religions, martyrdom obviously takes on specific features. People don't just die for their faith—there are different fashions of doing it, "cultures" of martyrdom. In Christianity, for example, martyrdom is structurally tied to the life and death of Jesus Christ as represented in the Gospels.[32] In several places here, Jesus comes across as an advocate for martyrdom.[33] For instance, he did not wait to be arrested in Galilee, but "set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9.51) In St. John's Gospel, he displays an acute awareness of his self-sacrifice: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own free will. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." (John 10.18) As scholars have shown,[34] the Fourth Gospel is of particular interest in this respect because it contributed decisively to the making of Jesus' Passion into the archetype of Christian martyrdom. In John's text, Jesus emerges as someone who is visibly "in charge" and has full control over events. He displays serenity, composure, and eagerness to die, all a martyr needs. In a sense, just like Socrates before him, this Jesus almost "stages" his own martyrdom.

Along with his personal example, Jesus offered his followers a "methodology" of dying, a roadmap to Heaven. For the early Christians, the death of Christ was central to their faith. What a martyr strove to

achieve was the most glorious, yet difficult form of imitation of Christ: the imitation of his own death (*imitatio mortis Christi*). "Behind every martyrdom," writes Robin Lane Fox, there is "the self-sacrifice of Jesus himself" (Fox 1986: 441). The martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35—c. 107 CE) is a perfect example. In his *Letter to the Romans*, which he wrote on his way to Rome where he was to be fed to the animals, Ignatius uses his approaching death to establish an intimate link with Jesus Christ: "if I suffer death, I will become a freedman of Jesus Christ and I will arise again free in Him." He had been a Christian from an early age, and later in life he became a Bishop. Yet, in a certain sense, only his martyr's death would make him a true Christian. Only upon the complete destruction of his body could Ignatius call himself a follower of Jesus: "I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ when the world will not even (be able to) see my body."

At its core, martyrdom is a project of dematerialization. What follows is almost unintelligible to the twenty-first century reader: Ignatius proceeds to his own, slow destruction as one goes to a party. He gets drunk on the prospect of his encounter with a terrifying death: "Let fire, cross, groups of wild beasts, the scattering of bones, the cutting out of limbs, the grinding of the entire body, and the devil's evil punishments come upon me, only that I may attain Jesus Christ" (In Van Henten & Avemarie 2002: 109–10). On this view, you can realize yourself only to the extent that you are no longer a physical presence in the world. The more thorough your dematerialization the better the chances to become divinity.

In other religions, dying for God takes different forms. The Prophet Mohammed's biography and the founding of Islam (the fact, for example, that the Prophet was not martyred or that the new religion had to assert itself against a hostile environment) shaped the formation of the Muslim concept of martyrdom.[35] In Islam a martyr (*shahid*) is someone who "died on the field of battle whilst fighting the infidel," and who was "promised great rewards in the life to come" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 11). Initially, the "infidels" were pagan Arab tribes antagonized by the new religion. Later they would be members of any religion other than Islam, even though a distinction was made between "religions of the Book" (Judaism and Christianity), to which Muslims were supposed to show respect and tolerance, and "idolatrous" religions (such as Hinduism), towards which violent action was allowed. The new religion's rapid

expansion over the next few centuries after its inception, as well as the early split between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam, meant that Muslim martyrs were produced in significant numbers. And they enjoyed a special reverence. They are not considered saints, says Farhad Khosrokhavar, but since they embraced a holy death they can be "compared with the saints and can become their companion in Paradise." They are seen as heroic figures, though their "heroism is not of the worldly kind." Their commitment is to "a noble religious cause governed by the logic of being rewarded in the next world" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 4).[36]

Compared to Christianity, where martyrdom is exclusively non-violent (the martyr doesn't do anything, just *lets herself be killed* because of her faith), in Islam, in addition to this non-violent component, a distinctly active stance is present. The martyr is someone who dies *fighting*, either to defend Islam or to expand it. This duality has been present since its inception; the Koran (in the repentance *surah*) mentions it explicitly when referring to those who die for "the cause of God": "They will fight for His cause, kill and be killed" (IX.111). Indeed, the formula "kill or be killed" (or, in other translations, "slay and be slain") comes back, again and again, throughout the Koranic text: "If you should die or be killed in the cause of Allah, His mercy and forgiveness would surely be better than all the riches they amass. If you should die or be killed, before Him you shall all be gathered" (III. 157–8).

This has caused scholars of Islam to draw a distinction between two forms of martyrdom. The first one, the so-called "defensive martyrdom," is quite close to the Christian concept of martyrdom. Its goal is not to wage "a violent struggle against heretics and oppressors," but simply, as the original sense of the word implies, "to bear witness—even at the point of death, to the righteousness of the cause by opposing heretics and oppressors by adopting a non-violent attitude of defiance." The second form, "offensive martyrdom," involves an active, "and if need be violent, struggle against those the believer regards as oppressors and heretics" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 5). Not only is the martyr ready to die himself, but he also wants others to die as well. This form, often called "predatory martyrdom," plays an important role in the justification used, legitimately or illegitimately, for today's suicide-bomber.

*

Important as religious martyrdom is for understanding philosophical martyrdom, there are important differences between them. First, even though the martyr-philosophers tend to be treated with reverence because of their death, there is rarely any cultish devotion to them in the way there exists a "cult of the martyrs" in religion. Second, it is true that these philosophers often become founding figures, but what they founded are not well-defined institutional structures (in the way religious martyrs found new religions or religious schools, new churches, or sects). Instead, through their deaths, martyr-philosophers set the basis of philosophical life-styles or broad movements of ideas. Third, their commemoration rarely emphasizes the process of their dying, with all its physiological, gruesome details, whereas in religion the remembrance—even re-enactment—of this process is essential (e.g. the Passion of Christ in Christianity or the Ashura in Shi'ia Islam). Finally, the cases of philosophical martyrdom are much rarer than those of religious martyrdom. Moreover, they are highly individualized. In religion, persecution and martyrdom are more frequent and often collective.

The most important difference, however, has to do with motivation. A religious martyr dies for the sake of a transcendent being. His death is part of a soteriological scenario at the conclusion of which he is rewarded. He dies in the faith that there is a personal God who is aware of the sufferings he undergoes, and who will make sure that his self-sacrifice will not go uncompensated. The religious martyrs go through the process knowing that what they do is "pleasing in the eyes of God"—that sustains them and gives them satisfaction. There must be at work here, if sometimes in an obscure manner, some kind of "martyriological pact": If I die because of my faith, God is somehow duty-bound to secure a place for me among his chosen. He simply cannot *not* do that. On the contrary, with few exceptions where the philosopher dies for his faith (Thomas More, again), the martyr-philosophers do not expect a reward for their deed in some other life. Their motivation comes exclusively from this world. Some of them may be overtly atheist. Others may believe (as Bruno did) in some divine principle, but this is not relevant because it does not affect their motivation to die. If they see themselves enjoying some form of life after death, that would happen simply because they've died (as it would to anyone), and not because they've died for a cause.

The martyr-philosophers choose death for many reasons. They choose to die because they believe that a philosophy has to be manifested and cannot be separated from the philosopher—if you are not able to exemplify your own philosophy, who will?; or because they think that by renouncing their views under coercion they would be the first to invalidate them—and if the philosopher herself cannot stand behind her ideas, who can?; or because they are proud people, with only contempt for their accusers and judges, to whom submission would be worse than death; or because they know that a martyr's death can enhance one's reputation; or because they are afraid that, if they repent, the shame will kill them; or simply because they can't do otherwise.

In all these cases, there is a strong sense that what these people do is *self-rewarding*—for there is no other reward they are going to get. Theirs is a purely secular martyrdom, which will have no echo in some other world. And this confers a discreet sublimity upon these philosophers' gestures. It is great to die for God, but it may be greater to die for no God.

The art of hunger

Religious martyrs play an important role in understanding the gesture of those philosophers who die as part of their philosophizing. Yet there also are other categories of people who die for a cause and whose death might cast some light on the significance of the martyr-philosophers' deeds. What these people do may be called "political martyrdom" because it involves the political uses they make of their dying bodies.

Ordinarily, politics is about living bodies—bodies assembled or scattered, hungry or well-fed, bodies migrating or accommodated. In a world without bodies, there would be no politics, and no need for it. Under extraordinary circumstances, however, a dying body can perform political functions that a living one cannot even dream of. The sheer act of dying in such circumstances generates among those who witness it that uncanny mix of awe, repulsion, and fascination of which I spoke earlier, and which comes across as a form of power. Thanks to the voluntary nature of their death, to their commitment to doing

something that only very few of us would, the performers of these acts envelop themselves in an aura of transcendence. And from there they dominate the imagination of others, win over their hearts, and sometimes even shape their political life. I will discuss briefly three types of voluntary deaths that can have significant political impact: starvation to death, self-immolation, and suicide-bombing.

In pre-Christian Ireland there was a practice (called *Troscadh* or *Cealachan*) of shaming an enemy by starving oneself on his doorstep in order to protest against an injustice or to recover a debt. The power thus exerted was certainly paradoxical: you defeat your adversaries not by killing them, but by your determination to kill yourself. The more passively you behave, the more decisive the blow. The hunger strikes that the Irish would deploy against the British in the twentieth century were likely inspired by this practice. Hunger strikes anywhere else would rely on what the Irish discovered and made extensive use of: the power that comes from a determination to destroy oneself. It is the weapon of choice of anyone in an obviously inferior position; when you don't have anything to fight with, you can still use and "spend" yourself. You can defeat an adversary by doing absolutely nothing to them for all you do is to yourself, and that's precisely what weakens and eventually can defeat them.

The one who brought this "art of hunger" to perfection did not come from Europe, though: he came from India. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) made "fasting unto death" a key component of his program of nonviolent resistance (*satyagraha*). To use one's body offensively—in a battle, for example—would be brave enough, Gandhi thinks. However, the bravest thing would be to take no action; turn your dying body into an even more efficient, if symbolic, weapon: "To fight with the sword does call for bravery of a sort. But to die is far braver than to kill" (In Johnson 2006: 105). Needless to say, this sort of bravery is not easy; it goes against our nature and survival instincts. This art of dying is a difficult craft, one that takes time, pain, and patience.[37]

With Gandhi, the non-violent use of the body to bring about political change is part of a dialectical method that may be called the "reversal of the opposites." Finding himself in a context where binary terms—one charged positively and the other negatively—are involved, Gandhi always seeks to switch the charge. He redeems the weak, the

humble, the marginal, just as he calls into question the powerful, the self-assured, the mainstream. In the fragment I just quoted, he finds more heroism and bravery in suffering violence than in inflicting it, and undermines the traditional ideal of "fighting with the sword." Elsewhere, he states that it is "more blessed to be poor than to be rich" and that the "uses of poverty are far sweeter than those of riches." And still elsewhere, in keeping with the same pattern, he talks of the positivity of failure: "Every one of my failures has been a steppingstone" (In Fisher 1983: 439).

Gandhi's entire approach to politics and society revolves around what later in the century would be known as "the power of the powerless." And this is where his "fasting unto death" fits in. He reconnects with the medieval Celtic tradition (but also with a similar ancient Indian custom), where such a gesture could turn the tables and make a powerless person powerful, and performs his customary reversal of opposites. Starvation to death is thus turned into a form of political action; hunger doesn't make you weaker—indeed, it can increase your power. Gandhi used his "fasting unto death" systematically, as a matter of political strategy. A brilliant political mind, he was fully aware that there were different ways of reaching out to people, and that very often mere verbal communication proved insufficient. To mobilize his fellow citizens to take part in a transformative societal project, their hearts had to be captured, not just their minds. "We have now reached almost the end of our resources in speech-making," Gandhi once said, and "it is not enough that our ears be feasted, but it is necessary that our hearts have got to be touched and that our hands and feet got to be moved" (In Fisher 1983: 134). He thought that "fasting unto death" could accomplish just that: "What my word in person cannot do," he said, "my fast may." Speeches are mostly short-lived, what is enduring is a powerful personal example, a gesture that can unsettle people's consciousness and activate deeper layers of the collective psyche. "You can influence the mass mind not through speeches or writings," Gandhi says, "but only by something which is most well understood by the masses, that is suffering, and the most acceptable method is that of fasting" (In Smith 1997: 293).

Gandhi's strategy of fasting at crucial moments in his political career was extremely fruitful. Thanks to radio and newspapers, the whole

nation would be virtually attuned to his starving body.[38] His fast would shame Indians into doing, or not doing, certain things,[39] and the British authorities into paying attention or changing their policies. Never in modern history has a starving body had more political power than Gandhi's at those moments. Yet his "fasting unto death" was more than politics. It also reflected a certain philosophical attitude toward the world, which was rooted in India's spiritual traditions. Throughout his life, Gandhi fought against the demands of his body—the flesh, he said, is a "hindrance." He lived a distinctly ascetical life, and constantly sought to overcome himself through victories over his body. His fast was not just for political reasons, but it was also part of a personal spiritual project. Once, after a political setback, he concluded: "I must undergo personal cleansing. I must become a fitter instrument able to register the slightest variation in the moral atmosphere about me" (In Fisher 1983: 198). And he fasted for five days.

This is where Gandhi comes close to Simone Weil. She connected hunger to the life of the spirit and saw in it a means of self-transcending. That's exactly what Gandhi did, too: "I never feel so happy as when I am fasting for the spirit. This fast has brought me higher happiness than hitherto" (In Fisher 1983: 499). Strikingly, both Weil and Gandhi establish a link between the act of eating (or abstention from it) and the act of seeing. They reach different conclusions, but the sheer fact that they made the connection independently of each other is remarkable. Weil states in *Gravity and Grace* that our "great affliction" is that "looking and eating are two different operations. Eternal beatitude is a state where to look is to eat" (Weil 1997: 153). Gandhi, who considered his fasts an intimate part of who he was, says that what "the eyes are for the outer word, fasts are for the inner." Finally, he too sees in hunger, even though not as radically as Weil did, a mode of self-denial that takes us closer to God: "No matter from what motive you are fasting," he says, "during this precious time think of your Maker, and of your relation to Him and His other creations, and you will make discoveries you may not have dreamed of" (In Fisher 1983: 233-4). What hunger ultimately reveals is our creatureliness, while what it performs is self-transcendence.

Burning to die

Idealistic as it certainly was, Gandhi's "fasting unto death" was also a pragmatic political strategy. It was an act of self-denial, a very generous one, but still designed to serve a specific political agenda; whenever his objectives were accomplished, Gandhi would resume eating. At the other end of the spectrum, as I will show below, suicide-bombers begin and end with destruction (their own included), and the terror it generates. Somewhere in between is the self-immolator. The mode of passivity he displays, his literal burning for an idea, the sense of total dedication to a cause—all these bring the self-immolator close to the philosopher who dies for the sake of her philosophy.

The self-immolator combines the element of "purity" that Gandhi's method of self-annihilation displayed with the "explosive" imagery evoked by the suicide-bomber, while retaining neither the former's "pragmatism" nor the murderous intent of the latter's deed. There are different reasons and motivations behind their desperate actions, but the compelling image that self-immolators end up projecting is of performing a selfless sacrifice—one disarmingly generous, disinterested, beyond petty calculations. Wherever self-immolators are going, they are not taking anyone with them: their deaths are fierce, but remain exclusively their own. Despite the "explosiveness" associated with the gesture, the best way to describe their disappearing act would be "implosion." It is as though, overwhelmed by an excessive humility, all they want is to slip back into nothingness.[40]

It is no accident that the most striking trait of a self-immolator's gesture is silence. The opposite of the talkers, these people never make speeches before they die and no famous "last words" of theirs are preserved. If speeches were ever made, they've gone unnoticed, and that's telling. (Memory, always selective, has its own ways of rendering things meaningful.) What is remembered most about the self-immolation of Thích Quàng Đúc (the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in June 1963, to protest against the persecution of Buddhists under the Ngô Đình Diem regime) is the uncanny silence that settled in the square: his slowly taking the lotus position—no words uttered, no unnecessary gestures—and gradual disappearance into the flames (Figure 3.1). This is how David Halberstam, the *New York Times* journalist who witnessed the event, describes what happened:

> Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering .... As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him. (Halberstam 1965: 211)

Similarly, we don't know what Jan Palach said, if he said anything at all, as he was being consumed by fire. Nor is it recorded that Mohamed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian street vendor who through his self-immolation in December 2010 helped to trigger unprecedented political turmoil throughout North Africa, uttered anything as he was burning. It is only appropriate that silence should accompany such an act; anything else would be cacophonic.

That self-immolators keep quiet, however, does not mean that their deeds remain untold or their bravery unsung. On the contrary: the more intense the silence, the more it invites a narrative. Self-immolation may be the quietest of performances, but it is one that cries out for a story. And stories are quick to follow.

Figure 3.1 The self-immolation of Thích Quàng Đúc (June 1963). Photographer: Malcolm Browne. © AP/Malcolm Browne.

What sparks these stories above all is the element of fire itself. Few things have attracted the human imagination as much as fire. It is as though fire lies at the root of all things human, cosmic, and divine. In some way or other, the imagery of fire has shaped the way we experience the world and make sense of it. Thanks to the rich symbolism it evokes, fire has acquired a privileged position among the elements. In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* Gaston Bachelard spells out some of its universal appeal:

> Fire is … a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything .... Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substances and offers itself with the warmth of love .... It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and apocalypse. (Bachelard 1964: 7)

It is no wonder, then, that in some cultures "death by fire" has been seen as more than mere death: it can be the beginning of a new life, the gateway to a higher existence. It is reported, for example, that the ancient philosopher Empedocles decided to prove his immortality by throwing himself into an active volcano. For similar reasons, self-immolation is allowed in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism. In the *Lotus Sutra* there is the story of the Bodhisattva Medicine King who sets himself ablaze as a form of ultimate renunciation of the body.[41] It was this account in particular that must have inspired not only Thích Quàng Đúc and other Vietnamese monks and nuns who self-immolated during the Vietnam War, but also a number of self-immolations in India.

Even though, technically, the same method ("fire") is used in both cases, self-immolation is very different from, if not the opposite of, burning at the stake. There is a dialectic process at work here that must stem from the complex symbolism of fire itself. Nothing is more heroic than *to set yourself on fire*, and nothing more degrading than *to be set on fire*. When you *choose* to die by fire you project the image of something more than human, but when fire is *imposed* upon you, you are rendered less than that. You are dumped into fire just like trash.

All this makes self-immolation as a form of political protest particularly prone to "mythicization." A "death by water" could never have the same impact. Not only do self-immolators renounce body and life, but

in so doing they help others: the same fire that consumes their bodies helps their fellow-humans to "see" better. Self-immolations occur, as they say, in "times of darkness": self-immolators turn their bodies into candles, helping others to find the right direction. It is significant, in this respect, that Jan Palach signed his last note with "Torch Number One," not with his own name. The self-immolator's deed has something of an alchemical operation: he transforms human flesh into light, matter into spirit. As a result, although he may have started out as totally powerless, he is now in the most powerful of positions: he has become a path-opener, a founding figure, the one toward whom the others turn for a glimpse of hope. At Palach's funeral, someone observed: "What a country we live in! Where the only light for the future is the burning body of a young boy" (In Sabatos 2009: 193).

For a self-immolation to become politically relevant, however, there must be someone to tell its story. So many people have died in vain (farmers in India, monks in Tibet) because their self-immolations could not find the right narrators. Soon after his death, Jan Palach would start a second career as a literary character, featuring in countless plays, poems, novels, and essays. From Pier Paolo Pasolini to Ernesto Sábato, from Václav Havel to Milan Kundera, both East-European and Western authors have written extensively about Palach's gesture and its significance.[42] Most recently, the story of Mohamed Bouazizi was performed in front of our eyes, so to speak.[43]

Apart from the storyteller, if it is to be politically effective, self-immolation also needs the encounter with a guilty conscience. Nothing, it seems, works better than guilt in the formation and dissemination of a martyrdom narrative. The self-immolator's death, no matter how brave, will remain fruitless unless it is captured by a receptive gaze—that is, unless it occurs within a community eaten up by guilty thoughts and feelings. The guilt may be due to different factors: habitual toleration of injustice, collective cowardice and ethical numbness, passivity in front of political oppression, defeatism in the face of a force (totalitarian government, foreign military occupation) perceived as invincible, if illegitimate.

What self-immolators do, after all, is disarmingly simple: they break the spell, which is what it takes for the web of collective servitude to start unraveling. As a result, they are instantly embraced as "saviors" and "redeemers," when in fact sometimes, as with Bouazizi, they only happen to light a match at the very moment when social tension has

become explosive. The strength of the community's embrace is in direct proportion to the intensity of the collective guilt; if the self-immolator redeems them from anything, it is this oppressive feeling.

Self-immolators can under such circumstances become important figures for their community. Their terrible deaths, the image of selflessness they manage to project, the extremely violent nature of the event contribute to their recasting, in the public mind, as mythical heroes. It is difficult to speak of self-immolation as a unified phenomenon, though. Springing as they usually do from strong personalities, self-immolations have no single pattern. Furthermore, the way they become "successful," if they do, varies according to context and culture. Bouazizi's gesture set the North-African political world on fire within weeks. Palach's sacrifice shaped the political culture in his country significantly, but rather slowly. His death took some twenty years to influence events in such a manner as to lead to a regime change.[44] Yet there are so many other cases where self-immolation produces no change whatsoever. Between February 2009 and February 2014 some 127 Tibetans, mostly Buddhist monks and nuns, self-immolated, yet they did not manage to cause any significant political change. Why? For many reasons (cultural, religious, social, and political), but primarily because 127 self-immolations may be 126 too many. All a community needs is one self-immolation to which it can relate spontaneously and meaningfully: the number doesn't seem to count. Quàng Đúc, Jan Palach, or Mohamed Bouazizi were lucky: their timing was right and their storytellers were ready.

Fearsome and compelling as self-immolation may appear, then, it would be wrong to infer that whenever it occurs it has significant political consequences.[45] What makes a death by self-immolation politically consequential is its capacity to become the focus of a community's social life. Self-immolation is "successful" in this sense when it is no longer about the one who performs it, but about the community in the midst of which it occurs.

Dying to kill

The suicide-bomber, too, uses his dying body politically, but there is nothing passive about his gesture. His action is designed to cause the

death of others even as its author dies performing it.[46] Yet the ultimate objective here does not seem to be the sheer volume of victims, but what the suicide-bomber projects in the process: the terrifying image of an individual (one of the many out there) who does not fear death, who does not hesitate to waste his life, or anyone else's, for the cause. What these people mean to communicate is that they are above "life and death," and that they strike like natural disasters: mercilessly, implacably, and indiscriminately. It is this carefully induced perception that counts most. For suicide-bombers, and those who commission them, know only too well that they cannot win anything strictly militarily. Their primary targets are not those whom they kill, but those before whom they perform the act. That's why they perform it as if on a stage: the videos they leave behind, with all their rehearsals, elaborate *mise-en-scène*, and standard recitations; the posters displayed afterward; and the entire publicity industry backing them. This is a fundamental part of what suicide-bombing is about; it is perhaps more important than the act of killing itself.

Yet no matter how sophisticated the propaganda machine, there is something at the core of the suicide-bomber's gesture that prevents it from generating the kind of effective, constructive social energy that, say, Quàng Đúc's deed did. The latter's power came from the fact that the harm he was causing was directed exclusively against himself; nobody else was hurt, nor meant to be, in the process. The only body Quàng Đúc disposed of was his own. What produced a change in society was not some physical pressure he put on its members, but the strong impression left on their minds by the public spectacle of a supremely selfless act. By contrast, the change that the suicide-bomber seeks to produce is done, by definition, through the harm he causes to the bodies of others. Such a gesture cannot go unnoticed: the event is noisy, messy, and bloody, the carnage unbearable and traumatic, and the terror is real. But that's pretty much what suicide-bombing is all about. Its significance exhausts itself on the stage of the killing, be it a bus, metro, or café. There is nothing in this gesture that transcends it such as a wave of genuine sympathy from the larger community. Society is terrorized, but not moved. This is why suicide-bombing is doomed to remain within the confines of guerilla warfare. Far from being structured by some symbolic values, by something higher, these actions, as Malise

Ruthven observed, remain driven "by a combination of realpolitik and despair" (Ruthven 2002: 101).

From the perspective of the Gandhian method of the "reversal of opposites," one may say that suicide-bombers are eventually powerless precisely because they appear so powerful. Their impotence comes from the offensive nature of their act. You cannot use actual weapons and still turn your body into a symbolic weapon, one nullifies the other. The method of the suicide-bombers is eventually ineffective because it is calculated to be so effective. And they don't gain anything more meaningful precisely because their aim is entirely pragmatic. Further, Gandhi would likely have said that harming others in order to cause a change in society is not proof of courage, but of cowardice.

An inspiration for suicide-bombing was probably the Japanese *tokkotai* (kamikaze) pilots. Towards the end of the Second World War, when it became clear that Japan was losing, these youths would fly their planes into enemy targets, killing themselves—deliberately and spectacularly—in the process. They did it—just like young Muslims blow themselves up today—because they wanted to show that they were not afraid of dying, or because they had been brainwashed, or both.[47] The important qualification here, however, is that the Japanese pilots would aim exclusively at military targets, whereas contemporary suicide-bombers strike indiscriminately. Indeed, since most of the time military objectives remain out of their reach, suicide-bombers end up targeting defenseless civilian populations, which renders their acts fundamentally powerless.

Another inspiration is certainly the Muslim tradition of "offensive martyrdom" mentioned earlier. For decades now, in Islamist circles there has been a whole industry at work seeking to produce a theological justification for suicide-bombing. The fact remains, however, that there is hardly anything in the Koran to justify the killing of innocent, defenseless civilians, many of whom are Muslim themselves. As one scholar has noticed, in "most cases, religion is no more than a pretext" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 48).[48] One suspects that with concepts like "offensive martyrdom" there is always a risk that sooner or later one term will cannibalize the other: where there is an excess of "offensive," there isn't much room left for "martyrdom."[49] The symbolic power associated with a selfless, disinterested sacrifice comes from an act

of recognition, and one can never gain recognition from those whom one destroys. The vanished cannot recognize anyone.

*

The body speaks, often persuasively, but the dying body is more convincing because it delivers its performance under the most difficult of circumstances. You can always ignore speech-makers, even the most entertaining of them, but you cannot take your eyes away from a dying body with something to say. What I've been trying to do here is to sketch a hermeneutic able to make sense of a unique rhetoric: that of the dying flesh. In so doing, I've placed the martyr-philosopher where he seemed to belong—among those who die for things larger than themselves: God, political ideals, and chimeras (which sometimes are more real and more demanding than God himself). I've looked closely at the philosopher's body in the process of withering away, seeking to transcribe what it had to say. I've read its gestures and written down the message. I've listened to its silence, and especially to its being silenced. I've charted the flesh that lies between the two layers of death. Having done all this, we are now in a better position to approach death's second layer.

4
THE SECOND LAYER

[The] chief jailor over this whole broad prison the world is (as I take it) God. … this prison is also so sure and so subtly builded that albeit that it lieth open on every side without any wall in the world, yet wander we never so far about therein, the way to get out at shall we never find. So that He neither needeth to collar us nor to stock us for any fear of scaping away. … For, of very truth, our very prison this earth is. … Upon our prison we build. Our prison we garnish with gold and make it glorious; in this prison they buy and sell; in this prison they brawl and chide; in this they run together and fight; in this they dice; in this they card; in this they pipe and revel; in this they sing and dance.

THOMAS MORE

Something concrete

When the practice of his thankless profession sets the philosopher on a collision course with his society, there is fun to be had. For it is one of the philosopher's distinctive features, almost a professional deformation, to be stubborn. It is not only telling, but perhaps also appropriate, that what the West takes to be its first major philosopher was executed because of his stubbornness. Ever since Socrates' death, stubbornness has been inseparable from the history of Western philosophy. Stubbornness is also what makes the philosopher a good character in a story, what gets him in trouble and sets the plot in motion, what promises a climax and a fine ending.

Death comes in layers, as you may recall—layers of nothingness. One layer is abstract and immaterial: here death is just a "topic," a thing of the mind more than anything else. I talked of this appearance of death in the naïve, yet sophisticated meditations of Montaigne, Heidegger, and Landsberg. Once the body has come into play, however, everything changes. Now death can no longer be a "topic," there cannot be anything abstract about it. On the contrary, this layer of death is entangled with one's flesh; it occupies one's living body inch by inch; it steals into one's entrails and nightmares; it invades one's gaze; and it comes with an abundance of brutality, pain, and anguish. This is the picture of the dying animal.

The arrival of death in this form is a cataclysmic event in anyone's life. Its boundless, incomprehensible nature defies understanding; the dread that surrounds it freezes the mind; its uniqueness and unrepeatability make preparation impossible; it often opens the way to nihilism. Such death is not so much something to be *thought about* as something to be *experienced*. And yet, even under this radical circumstance, some room can be made for self-mastery and self-creation. Indeed, when one defines philosophy as "preparation for death," as Socrates did, one is bound to address death head-on, irrespective of how ugly it is. More important still, it is only in the face of such a death that philosophy as *therapeia* passes or fails the test of life. If the philosopher fails to cure himself of the dread that he—like any living creature—feels before his imminent annihilation, by his own standards his philosophy is not of much use. If earlier in this book we considered how philosophers look at death, let us now see how death looks at philosophers. That's the job of this chapter.

*

"My body is frightened, but I am not," says the Knight, when Death asks him if he is ready. Then he readies his flesh—and works on his self-fashioning—through a game of chess with his questioner. Philosophy may be just another way of playing chess with Death.

I will discuss two thinkers who, as they were faced with the prospect of their annihilation, had to pull themselves together and put their philosophy to work. They turned their philosophizing into a form of action—an action upon themselves. In all this their stubbornness

proved to be of paramount importance. Like a guardian angel, it led them by the hand throughout the process. Socrates' performance before the Athenian jury, as reconstructed from the texts of Plato and Xenophon, is the first milestone on this dramatic road. On the same road, centuries later, we meet Thomas More. Locked in the Tower of London, and awaiting execution, More wrote *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, a book that I will discuss in relation to another, written in similar circumstances: Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae.*

Death hides between the lines

In what should probably be seen as an extraordinary tribute to Plato's literary gifts, and to the power of literature to recreate life, the death of Socrates has become inseparable from Plato's description of it in the *Phaedo*. The writing is so convincing that we often forget that what we read is essentially a *work of fiction*. One of Plato's "middle period" works, not only was *Phaedo* written relatively long after the events it purports to describe, but also at a time when Plato was starting to assert his own ideas, even if he was putting them into his illustrious master's mouth.

That's why, to gain some access to the real Socrates—the one who heard his death sentence pronounced in court and understood that he was soon to die, who had to conceal his anger, and master his frightened flesh—I propose another route: Plato's *Apology.* Not only is it one of his earliest texts, written relatively soon after the fact, but it can be corroborated, up to a point, with the record of Socrates' trial written by another of his disciples: Xenophon.[1] In his own *Apology* Xenophon seems to make a slightly critical reference to Plato's text, without saying however that it is inaccurate. Plato's *Apology* is by far better written, more comprehensive, and more detailed than Xenophon's. Yet by reading them in parallel one hopes to piece together some of what Socrates actually said on that day in court, and to reconstruct his reaction when he realized that his death was imminent. Like any reconstruction though, much of its truth lies in the eye of the beholder.

In Plato's *Apology* the words "death," "dying," or "fear of death" appear relatively late in the body of the text. They emerge timidly in the

first speech Socrates delivered to the jury. Once they have made their appearance, however, these words are used with increasing frequency, betraying a certain unease on Socrates' part. He keeps reassuring his audience—but especially himself—that there is no reason to be afraid of death. We should not be afraid of it, he says, because to be afraid of death is just "another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows when one does not know" (Plato 1961: 15 [29a-b, trans. H. Tredennick]).[2] Since we have no positive knowledge about death, we should not really be afraid of it. To be afraid of something, one has first to know what it is. Indeed, whatever death may be, it is nothing to be afraid of:

> Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or … it is really a change – a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain … If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this? (40c-d)

Technically, Socrates may be right. Death may be indeed the greatest blessing one can receive or at least some never-ending dreamless sleep, which wouldn't be bad either. Yet the unease comes precisely from this uncertainty as to *what death is exactly*. Either of the two possibilities he indicates is equally acceptable, but we do not know which one is actually the case. For Socrates the intellectual, who held that people do evil only out of ignorance, and that if they knew what the good is, such knowledge would make them virtuous and happy, *not* knowing what death is exactly must have been a painful admission. Death is *either* this *or* that, both of which are equally fine, but to the lover of clear-cut conceptual distinctions and perfectly matching definitions, this fundamental ambiguity of death must have caused a profound humiliation. Socratically speaking, not being able to make sense of death must be a major philosophical failure.

You must be asking yourself, smiling: "Was Socrates actually afraid of death in these moments?" Of course he was. He must have been. He was seventy and had already lived a long life, long enough to understand a thing or two about it. Life is usually a highly addictive

drug: the longer one has lived, the more addicted to living one is. The older one grows, the more painful it is to quit; it is easier, if more tragic, to die when one is young than when one is old. That's why martyrdom usually happens during youth—it is the decision of a soul that has not yet become too deeply entangled into this world. When you are 20 or 30 years old you make a better martyr: you have not had enough time to understand what life has to offer, so you don't fully know what you leave behind and what lies ahead.[3] But when you are seventy, like Socrates, you must be afraid of dying. Human life, it may be argued, is a gradual process of insertion, assertion, and adaptation. Yet with every new experience you grow deeper into the world and the world grows deeper into you. After a certain age an abrupt separation cannot but be painful, so Socrates had reasons for being afraid.

And yet sometimes the anguish experienced just before death may be the best angle from which to approach it.

Intermezzo (where fear and courage are exposed as close collaborators)

Opposed as they seem to be, courage and fear are in fact secretly related; one presupposes the other, it would be nothing without the other. It often happens that extreme heroism is born precisely out of extreme anguish, and the most admirable courage out of the biggest fear. In Disturbing the Peace, *Václav Havel makes a telling confession. The man who had the guts to oppose the totalitarian regime in his country, risking his life and losing his freedom, admits that his "alleged courage and stamina spring from fear." That is, from fear of his own conscience, which "delights in tormenting me for real and imaginary failures." He confesses disarmingly that all his "heroic time in prison" was "one long chain of worries, fears, and terrors." He recalls how he was a "frightened, terrified child, confusedly present on this earth, afraid of life, and eternally doubting the rightness of his place in the order of things." He doesn't think that he had more courage than others, and believes that he bore prison worse than most of his admirers would. "Whenever I heard the familiar shout in the hallways, 'Havel!' I would panic." At one point, "after hearing my name yelled out like*

that, I jumped out of bed without thinking and cracked my skull on the window" (Havel 1990: 204–5). It is as though fear and courage are chained together like convicts. That's how they exist, how they show up in the world. If one moves in a certain direction, the other has to follow suit.

Taming death

A heroic Socrates, one who had never felt any fear of death, would certainly be glorious. This would be a quasi-divine Socrates, beyond the constraints of biology and the limitations of the flesh. Yet a Socrates who had to struggle to overcome his fear, and to find courage in the depths of his anguish, is even more glorious. In Plato's, as well as in Xenophon's, *Apology* we see a man who, rather than being crushed by the awareness of his impending death, manages to pull himself together in an admirable fashion. And, indeed, to toy with his accusers, to practice irony even during the trial and, finally, trick his fellow citizens into making him the greatest gift he could possibly hope for in that situation, something of which I will speak momentarily.

The whole last part of Socrates' first speech (up to 36a, in Plato's text) is a sophisticated approach to *taming* death. Thanks to Plato's excellent narrative, we witness here a Socrates who is approaching death gradually, one step at a time—he cautiously circles it, takes a look, moves closer, takes another look, moves even closer, gets used to it. Socrates has had his brushes with death before. A veteran soldier, he has been ready to die more than once in the past. He has survived the plague, the wars and the peace, as well as the recent political storms in Athens.[4] Yet this time it is different: death is no longer a risk, but a growing certainty. Death as a risk and death already on its way are two different deaths.

On that day in court Socrates has to unlearn all he knows philosophically about death in general in order to learn how to cope better with one that is rather specific, a custom-made death—his own. What we have here is a Socrates who *familiarizes* himself with death—he brings it close to him in the way one is close to a family member.

Socrates says at one point: "if I am what I claim to be, and you put me to death, you will harm yourselves more than me" (30c). Then, again: "I would never submit wrongly to any authority through fear of death, but

would refuse even at the cost of my life" (32a). Then, later: "I again made it clear not by words but my actions that death did not matter to me at all—if that is not too strong an expression—but that it mattered all the world to me that I should do nothing wrong or wicked" (32d). In all these statements Socrates is too insistent on having no fear of death not to draw our attention and suspicion. Someone who was not afraid of dying would spend less time talking about death. But this very insistence has a *performative* role: Socrates is not so much trying to convince the jury that he is not afraid as he is persuading himself. Through such statements he is drawing himself nearer and nearer to his death, turning it into a familiar presence. This is self-fashioning philosophy at its most urgent.

At the same time, however, Socrates has to make sure that he is not sending an ambiguous message to his judges. No matter how much he is afraid of death, he is even more afraid of living an unworthy, un-Socratic life. More than once he tells his audience that, regardless of the trial's outcome, he would not change his way of life. Aware of the possibility that his judges might forgive him on the condition that he would stop philosophizing, Socrates strikes pre-emptively, making it clear that he would not accept such an offer. Should they make it, he would turn it down: "Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you." As long as Socrates is alive and has his faculties, he will "never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet" (29d-e). This isn't exactly the best way to court a jury's favor. But then, again, Socrates was never in the business of courting favors.

Socrates does most of the talking, though at one point in Plato's *Apology* one of his accusers, Meletus, shows up briefly, mumbles a few words, and then melts away into the amorphous crowd. As we go through the two accounts of the trial, we keep wondering what the jurors' reaction was as they listened to Socrates. Did they get the jokes? Feel the irony, the bites, the veiled insults? Did they jump angrily from their seats? Leave the court in protest? Plato mostly ignores them in his text; we can't really gauge the jury's reaction from it. He has them mute, dumb, barely existent. In Xenophon's *Apology* we sometimes sense the jury's presence: "when the jurors heard these things … [they] raised a clamor" or "the jurors clamored even more" (Xenophon 1996: 12). Such are the references to them in the text. They don't amount to much—hardly a presence.

The burning philosopher

One of the turning points of the trial occurs when the first jury vote takes place and the majority judges Socrates guilty as charged. The philosopher's disappointment in his fellow-Athenians must have been enormous. Even though this was only a vote about establishing guilt, the sheer fact that most of the jurors voted "guilty" must have been for Socrates an indication not only that he failed to persuade the jury of his innocence, but more importantly that his whole mission in Athens, over several decades, had also failed. In his mind the two were never quite distinct. Shortly before the trial, seeing that Socrates wasn't paying any attention to it, someone had asked him: "Shouldn't you also consider, Socrates, what you will say in your defense?" To which he answered: "Then don't I seem to you to have spent my life caring for my defense?" Asked "How?" Socrates responds: "Since I have gone through life doing nothing unjust, which I believe to be the noblest care for one's defense" (Xenophon 1996: 9–10). His failure to persuade the jury must have looked to him like the reflection of a much larger failure.

With so many, so important failures, Socrates must have felt that his life in the city had lost some of its meaning. The Athenians were now deaf to his arguments (or just tired of his arguing)[5]—all the brilliant rhetoric he had employed in his first speech had left them unmoved. It must have become obvious to Socrates that neither reasoning nor speaking was the way to reach them. Between him and his fellow-Athenians an immense rift was now revealed. This was a gap of misunderstanding and suspicion, hurt feelings and resentment, betrayed hopes and poisoned memories. No rhetoric, no matter how clever, could bridge it. What could Socrates do? The majority's vote convinced him that whatever he might add to what he had already said would not reach these people's minds or hearts. A new notion must have crossed his mind: "If there were good moments to die, this must be one of them." Xenophon says as much: Socrates "believed that it was even an opportune moment for him to die then" (Xenophon 1996: 14–15).

So Socrates found himself with only one thing left: his own life. By means of his dying body he had to "say" whatever he could not with his whole mastery of the Greek language. Faced with the deaf ears of the Athenians, all he could do now was to express himself by other

means—namely, through his own body, letting it die in an eloquent manner, so that nobody could not listen to it. What else could he choose? If he had an alternative, it was pretty obvious what it was: asking the Athenians for forgiveness, repenting, and promising that he would stop doing what he had been doing for most of his life. But that wasn't really a choice. He had already made it clear that nothing could stop him from living philosophically. Accepting the alternative would be to save his life, but also to turn it into a mockery, and to betray his philosophy. Turning it down would be to save his philosophy and his face, but also to lose his life in the process.

Since life is one of the few things one loses only once, knowing how to do it—how to make such a loss most profitable—is a delicate business. This is truly a "one-shot" act: if one makes a mistake, one loses everything because there are no second chances here. With very limited means at his disposal, and in the short period of time that was left to him, Socrates had to transform his death into something that—from the standpoint of his philosophical project—would serve him in the best possible way. If done properly, the event could do him much good in terms of saving face and honor, of exemplarity and posthumous influence.[6] This is not very different from the self-immolator's strategy. Socrates was now, you might metaphorically say, a self-immolator for whom there was no turning back. He was set on a collision course with his city and, like the doomed protestor who has just lit the match, had to make his death as eloquent as possible. When all other means of persuasion had failed, Socrates must have hoped that his spectacular "burning" would not only open the Athenians' eyes, but also purify their souls.

It was not even gambling, what he faced was a matter of basic accounting: balancing what his death would bring him now with what his remaining life might offer him in the future, Socrates realized that the former was the more profitable solution. The true genius of his *daimonion* was that, this time, it did not show up, as we read in Plato's *Apology*: "I am quite clear that the time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions. This is why my sign never turned me back" (41d). Xenophon's *Apology* is even more straightforward. Here not only is Socrates' personal divinity firmly opposed to a more compromising stance ("twice already I tried to consider my defense, but the *daimonion* opposes me"), but Socrates'

decision to die is presented as the most rational one he could have reached in that situation. "If my age will advance further," Xenophon has Socrates say, "I know that it will be necessary to pay the dues of old age, to see and to hear less well and to learn with more difficulty and to be more forgetful of what I have learned" (Xenophon 1996: 10).[7]

While in Plato's *Apology* Socrates' willingness to die has primarily to do with his God-assigned mission in Athens, in Xenophon there is a distinct element of pragmatism in Socrates' decision, even of "calculation." Throughout his speech before the jury, Xenophon's Socrates is working out the best "arrangement" regarding his death. Oddly enough, at some point you have the impression that the worst thing that could possibly happen to this man would be if his plan failed and he did *not* die. Had he got an acquittal from the court, "it is clear that … instead of presently ending my life, I would have arranged to end it while being pained by sickness or by old age, where all the difficult and cheerless things converge" (Xenophon 1996: 11). For someone who thinks philosophy to be above all an art of living and dying well, that would be a very bad arrangement indeed. "I will choose to die," says Socrates, "rather than to live longer by slavishly begging to gain a much worse life instead of death."

And choose he did. First of all, Socrates had to make sure that he would get the death penalty and nothing less. For he could have ended up in limbo, neither dead nor alive—exiled, for example—having to face for the rest of his life the shame of having asked for forgiveness from people he had despised and turned into the butt of his jokes. The trick he used was a brilliant one. Once he had been found guilty, as is well known, his accusers were to propose a penalty (they chose the death penalty). Socrates, in turn, had to come up with a counterproposal. Instead of proposing a lighter penalty, he considered that, given what he had done for the city, what he really deserved was some reward, and asked the Athenians to provide him with free maintenance for the rest of his life. For nothing "could be more appropriate for such a person than free maintenance at the state's expense." He deserves it "much more than any victor in the races at Olympia." Whereas the athletes give them "the semblance of success," Socrates offers them "the reality" of it. "So if I am to suggest an appropriate penalty which is strictly in accordance with justice," he concludes, "I suggest free maintenance by the state" (36d–37a).

This was the safest way to secure the death penalty. Anything less than that would have spoiled his endeavors. As if to make sure that there was no way out for him, in his final speech Socrates burned his bridges, exercising his irony even more sharply than before: "being convinced that I do no wrong to anybody, I can hardly be expected to wrong myself by asserting that I deserve something bad, or by proposing a corresponding penalty" (37b). Having nothing to lose, Socrates is now at his boldest. What he is doing here might be called "suicide rhetoric": you talk your audience into killing you. In his *Apology* Xenophon makes precisely this point: he relates Socrates' "boastful manner of speaking" (*megalēgoría*, literally "big talk") to his decision to die (Xenophon 1996: 9). Indeed, he cannot understand how others who have written about the trial (Plato included) have failed to make the connection.

Socrates comes across now as the ultimately truthful and fearless speaker, a *parrēsiastḗs*. Everything has to be told, nothing is to be left concealed any more. There is an ethics of public speaking, he tells the audience. Should you find yourself publicly accused, you can't just talk your way out of it: "In a court of law, just as in warfare, neither I nor any other ought to use his wits to escape death by any means" (38e–39a). You always have to tell the truth, no matter the cost: "It is not a lack of arguments that has caused my condemnation, but a lack of effrontery and impudence, and the fact that I have refused to address you in the way which would give you most pleasure" (38d). Nothing could stop a self-immolating Socrates from enlightening the Athenians, and telling them what he thought of them. Not that he still hoped to change their lives, but—it must have appeared to him now—this was the right way of rounding off his own. His final speeches are not so much about Athens and the Athenians, as about his bitter disappointment in them:

> If you expect to stop denunciation of your wrong way of life by putting people to death, there is something amiss with your reasoning. This way of escape is neither possible nor creditable. The best and easiest way is not to stop the mouths of others, but to make yourselves as good men as you can. (39d-e)

Then, there was also, of course, Socrates' insufferable arrogance. "Usually moderate in an age of extremes," says a recent biographer,

"at his trial Socrates seems to have forgotten entirely the meaning of the word 'humility'" (Hughes 2011: 335). If, for a second, any juror forgot what he was doing sitting in court that day, Socrates' speech was there to remind him: to judge a man whose main occupation over the past few decades seemed to have consisted, day in and day out, in stopping innocent passers-by and subjecting them to humiliating interrogations just to prove their stupidity. If that's philosophy, we can do without it.

The Socratic plan worked with excellent results. The philosopher got the death penalty and few weeks later died an impressively self-controlled death. Ever since he has been ranked "among the most glorious of heroes and the most holy of martyrs" (Ahrensdorf 1995: 22). His manner of dying has come to be regarded as the kind of death that makes a philosopher's life most meaningful. Thanks to it, and to what Plato made of it, philosophy understood as "preparation for death" has become a prominent feature of the Western philosopher's self-representation. Socrates' death has come to be part of the definition of philosophy itself.

Intermezzo (where time stands still)

A smallish man with shopping bags in hands, a sparrow of a man really, finds himself in front of a column of moving tanks. Nobody knows how he got there—him least of all. Nobody else seems to be around. All the others have had time to make themselves scarce, but not him. He seems to have forgotten where he was headed and, God knows why, decides to stop right there, in the middle of the immense, empty street, conspicuously in the way of the oncoming tanks. He still has time to run, to vanish, but he doesn't. There can be no doubt: it is his choice to confront the column. Under normal circumstances, a speeding bicycle would have scared him, he would have pulled back swiftly. Not now: somehow the sparrow has got what it takes to confront a much bigger danger. Only moments away from hitting him, the first tank stops abruptly, as do all the others in the column. For a few seconds, very long seconds, nothing moves, nothing seems to happen. A huge, cosmic silence envelops everything: the square, the sparrow, the tanks' tracks and the shopping bags. And yet it is precisely during these few

seconds that everything happens: something extraordinary, something that can never be undone, something after which nothing can be the same again.

Philosopher in the Tower

In April 1534, Sir Thomas More was asked to take an oath of allegiance to the Act of Succession recently passed by Parliament. The succession side of the oath didn't bother him too much. What troubled him deeply, however, was that, as part of the oath, he had to recognize the King's supremacy in matters of religion.[8] More was a staunchly conservative Roman Catholic. As dedicated to the Crown as he was, he could not accept that a king, any king, could be the "Supreme Head of the Church in England." Such an oath was for him one of those matters over which one could lose one's soul: "For this I am very sure, that if ever I should swear it, I should swear deadly against mine own conscience" (More 1961: 244).[9] So More refused to take the oath, which was considered "high treason," punishable by death. He was subsequently arrested and kept in the Tower of London for more than a year. His trial and execution took place in July 1535. More's time in the Tower was to be one of the most decisive periods of his life. Whatever he had done wrong he now had a chance to fix: important issues to which he hadn't paid enough attention in the past came back to him and called for resolution. His life was now reduced to its bare essentials, which meant that he could spend most of his time thinking about death.

Doing so was nothing new—More had been thinking of death pretty much all his adult life. Displaying what we would call a "morbid sensibility," he had visited the topic again and again. He always had a lively imagination, yet when he wrote on death he was livelier than ever.[10] For instance, the first part of his unfinished *The Four Last Things* (c. 1522) is called "The Remembrance of Death." After making a passing reference to the Socratic notion of philosophy as "preparation for death,"[11] More touches on what he considers to be the easiest death we can hope for:

> [T]hou seest, I say, thyself, if thou die no worse death, yet at the leastwise lying in thy bed, thy head shooting, thy back aching,

> thy veins beating, thine heart panting, thy throat rattling, thy flesh trembling, thy mouth gaping, thy nose sharping, thy legs cooling, thy fingers fumbling, thy breath shortening, all thy strength fainting, thy life vanishing, and thy death drawing on. (More 1931: I, 468)

If such a death was easy, one may wonder what a more difficult one would be like for More?

In his Tower cell, however, death took on a new meaning for him. This was no longer the death on which you could write lightly, a scholarly topic that you can be smart about, and with whose imagery you can toy as you please. This was a serious, imminent death, which would happen *to him* and not to some abstract person. To meet this death mid-way, More intensified his usual "mortifications": wearing a hair shirt, fasting and apparently whipping himself. According to one of his first biographers, every night, as he went to bed, "he wrapt hym selfe in a linen sheet, like a bodie to be laid in a grave."[12] He felt his death was close. In a letter to one of his close friends, Dr. Nicholas Wilson, he confesses: "I have since I came in the Tower looked once or twice to have given up my ghost ere this and in good faith mine heart waxed the lighter with hope thereof" (More 1961: 233). In his youth More dreamt of becoming a monk, of "dying for this world." It looked as if his dream was finally coming true—though this was a literal, not a metaphorical, death.

Yet it wasn't that easy. Dying never is. More was to die soon, but his was no ordinary death. His manner of dying was supposed to teach others a lesson: it had to be gruesome, cruel beyond measure, and hard to erase from memory. There were specific provisions in the law about how a traitor was supposed to die. As More the lawyer knew only too well, for "high treason" the law required that the condemned be

> hanged until he lost consciousness, and then was revived so that he could watch as his penis was cut off and stuffed into his mouth; his stomach was then cut often and his intestines tossed in a cauldron of boiling water so that the dying man might smell his own mortality. Then the heart was plucked from his steaming body and held before his face. (Ackroyd 1999: 368)

Besides, he was also aware that at any time he could be subjected to torture as a means of extracting consent.[13] His death was coming,

More knew that, but it wasn't coming alone: it would be accompanied by tremendous pain. Sheer resistance to pain is ultimately a matter of physical constitution, as More knew from personal experience. In a letter to his daughter, Margaret Roper, he confesses disarmingly: "I am of nature so shrinking from pain that I am almost afeard of a fillip." He feels himself vulnerable, weak, unable to stand challenging situations. He is openly terrorized by the fear that, given the limitations of his flesh, he could not live up to his own Christian standards, thus "damnably casting" himself "in the displeasure of God" (More 1961: 242). Rarely has a candidate for martyrdom been worse equipped.

Here *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* comes in. More started writing it soon after he was taken to the Tower. At first, he may have had books to consult, and writing materials to use, but when his imprisonment became stricter he had to rely just on a piece of coal to write with.[14] He may have written a few pages at a time and smuggled them out through his servant, or dictated them directly to his daughter Margaret during her visits.[15] The fact it was written episodically shows abundantly in the text. Those inclined to read it with a more generous eye might say, as Richard Marius does, that the *Dialogue of Comfort* "rambles gently from topic to topic like a boat afloat on a placid sea and moved by soft waves" (Marius 1985: 472). More demanding readers, such as Leland Miles, one of the text's modern editors, cannot help noticing its shortcomings (tedious repetitions, poor structuring, false starts) and tend to conclude that the book is "nothing more than a first draft" (Miles in More 1965: xxix).

Yet to judge the *Dialogue of Comfort* by ordinary literary standards would be to miss the point, for the text was not intended as a "literary work." Its title should be read literally: More meant the writing of this book to bring him *comfort*. Given what we know about his situation, his fear of pain, his anguish, the prospect of torture, of dying a gruesome death, comfort was something he badly needed. Very much like the speech that Socrates made before the Athenian jury, More's *Dialogue of Comfort* was primarily intended as a form of *action* of the spoken or written word upon the author's desolate soul. The most important thing about such a text is not its form, not even what it is about, but the effect its writing has upon its author. In this respect, *Dialogue of Comfort* accomplished its purpose brilliantly.[16] As Miles himself puts it, the man who "dreaded pain had *written* himself into facing it unflinchingly." Rarely

if ever in "literary history have we had such empirical proof that a writer achieved his goal." (Miles in More 1965: xviii)[17] The writing of this book is a telling instance of philosophy as self-fashioning: the philosopher does not just "talk" about some subject, but induces a *change* in his life.

Presumably in order to protect the English Catholics of Henry VIII's persecution, as well as himself from further trouble, in the *Dialogue of Comfort* More moves his drama to a faraway location, and recasts it allegorically. The setting is Budapest, the year 1528. The Turks keep making strategic advances, they might besiege the city at any moment. This is a Europe under siege, very much like More's faith was at the time. More recasts himself as Anthony, a sick old man, apprehensive of imminent disaster, afraid of persecution and duress, and of what a victory of the "unbelievers" might mean for himself and his people. He does most of the talking (the *Dialogue* is fundamentally a monologue), even though his nephew, Vincent, intervenes sometimes, first to give the reader a sense of the context, then with further questions, prompts, or updates. Henry is recast as the Grand Turk Suleiman, cruel persecutor of Anthony/More's faith, oppressor of the true Christians, the ultimate enemy—the Devil's emissary. Even though the device is employed primarily for non-literary reasons, the result is an increase in the text's dramatic force: it is as though this is not More's drama anymore, but a larger, almost cosmic battle. Besides, the employment of such an allegorical device may have had a much weightier implication for More's own self-understanding and self-fashioning, as I will show below.

Another philosopher, another prison

Thomas More waiting for his execution in a prison cell; his ending up there after a very promising, yet eventually failed political career, after falling from the King's grace; his need as a thinker to make sense of what's happened to him; his search for a higher form of "comfort," and his resort to writing as a means of attaining it—all these bring to mind a strikingly similar case: that of Boethius. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480–524 or 525) was an outstanding Roman philosopher, often referred to as "the last of the Romans and the first of the scholastics." Apparently his fabulous learning attracted the interest of the Ostrogoth King Theodoric the Great, for whom Boethius worked

for a while, occupying a number of influential positions (including the consulship for 510). Eventually, however, the King accused him of treason and in 523 Boethius fell from power. Not all the details of the story are clear, yet we do know that after a period of detention Boethius was brutally executed.

During his detention Boethius composed what would become perhaps the single most influential book in medieval Europe, apparently second only to the Bible itself: *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (*De Consolatione Philosophiae*). The book's "plot" is disarmingly simple: in his prison cell, or under house arrest (this is not clear), accused of a crime punishable by death, the philosopher feels crushed, defeated, utterly inconsolable. He is unhappy with his current state, with the misfortunes that have befallen him, the loss of freedom, the cruelty of it all. Yet what troubles him most is an issue of a philosophical nature: if God, "the ruler of the universe," is good, why does evil exist and why do evil people remain unpunished? Why, while "wickedness thrives and rules the day," "virtue lacks reward" and is even "overthrown and tramples underfoot by wicked men"? (Boethius 2012: 109). These are big, difficult questions, to which only Philosophy itself might know the answer.

And here she is, Lady Philosophy, materializing miraculously in Boethius' prison cell. "She had a holy look and her eyes showed fire and pierced with a more-than-human penetration," he describes her. "One could hardly guess her age; her face was vital and glowing, yet she seemed too full of years to belong to this generation." Implying that his visitor might well have been the product of his own troubled soul, Boethius says that her height was "hard to tell." She could appear like "any ordinary human," but there were times when she seemed to "strike the clouds with the crown of her head. Indeed, when she lifted her head higher, she could no longer be seen by mortal eyes" (Boethius 2012: 5–6). With a dialogue partner of such an uncertain existence, the conversation that followed might well have been the author's soliloquy.

At the outset Boethius is restless, self-righteous, bold. He demands answers, makes accusations, needs to place blame. He keeps complaining about his predicament and about Fortune's changing nature. He decries the wickedness of people and the farce of existence, and reproaches Lady Philosophy herself for having brought him to this state. For it is her who demanded that philosophers become involved in the affairs of the city:

> Weren't you the one who hallowed the words of Plato when he claimed that the Republic would be blessed if lovers of wisdom ruled it or if its rulers happened to love wisdom? You used the words of that very man to argue that this is why the wise must take a part in public affairs, so the helm of state won't fall to wicked and criminal men, who would bring ruin and destruction to the good. And so I followed this advice and chose to apply to public affairs what I had learned from you. (Boethius 2012: 16)

Lady Philosophy keeps her calm. She listens patiently and waits until Boethius is done with his tirade. Then, with clinical precision, she decides that he is sick. And she claims that the cause of his sickness is that "you no longer know what you are" (Boethius 2012: 28). That's why she has come to him: for him to be "cured and made whole." Thus one of the book's most compelling ideas is introduced: the notion of philosophizing as *therapeia*. The ignorant person is a suffering individual. Philosophy is the doctor: good, sound arguments are the drugs. And its method of care is rhetoric—philosophy heals through persuasion. Since Socrates at least, philosophy had often been associated with medicine, but in *De Consolatione* Boethius makes the most of this association. Lady Philosophy's approach to Boethius' predicament is emphatically medical.[18]

As Boethius begins his treatment, Lady Philosophy reveals to him that his real problem is not his falling out of the King's favor nor the loss of his earthly possessions and freedom. His trouble lies in his way of thinking. His whole approach to the world is misguided: he wants to get from it that which, by its very nature, can never be his. People wrongly believe, says Philosophy, that some things (wealth, honors, pleasure, even health, etc.) could bring them happiness, but that's not where they should be looking for it. She goes on and dismantles, one by one, all the earthly attractions that may give us the illusion of happiness (*felicitas*), but which prevent us from pursuing the only happiness worth pursuing, which is blessedness (*beatitudo*):

> Suppose you will try to acquire wealth? But you will seize it from someone who possesses it. Do you want the splendor of honors? You will pay the price to the one who gives them. If you desire to surpass others in these honors, you will become base through

> the humiliation of asking for them. Do you want power? You will be subject to danger and open to the plots of those who rule. Would you seek glory? Then you will cease to be secure, as you are dragged down difficult paths. Would you live a life of pleasure? But who wouldn't despise a slave of the body, which is the vilest and most fragile of all things? … Go ahead and value the goods of the body as much as you wish – just remember that whatever you admire can be destroyed by a three-day fever. (Boethius 2012: 79–80)

Once these transitory goods have been proven unworthy of any sustained pursuit, Philosophy leads Boethius, and us, in search of something more reliable. More importantly, she makes us realize that such a quest is imbedded in human nature: "the desire for the true Good," which is the state of blessedness, "has been planted naturally in the minds of all men" (Boethius 2012: 65). Ontologically, we exist only insofar as we participate in the Good and, therefore, "whatever falls short of the Good ceases to be." In this arrangement, evil and wickedness do not properly exist. Evil men cannot be happy; they are, on the contrary, truly miserable, the sickest of us all. When we see that their evil deeds go unpunished, we should rather pity them because "evil men are necessarily more unfortunate when they accomplish their desires than when they fail to achieve what they want" (Boethius 2012: 120–3). Because of the ontological deficit that comes with any remoteness from the Good, the evil-doers lose their humanity and are degraded to an animal state. Thus, Philosophy answers Boethius' big question about how a benevolent God can allow evil men to exist. They don't really exist, and their acts are their own punishments. In the end, the good are "always powerful and the wicked always abject and helpless … happiness always falls to good men and misfortune to evil ones" (Boethius 2012: 110).

What gradually emerges in Boethius' book is a philosophical mysticism of clear Platonic inspiration. As we listen to Lady Philosophy's speech and become persuaded by her reasoning, our minds gradually follow an upward spiral: the higher we go, the smaller what we leave behind seems; the vista becomes larger and larger, and the mind sees more and more clearly. Nothing can stop us from pursuing our quest

because it is in our nature to move on until we reach blessedness. At our closest to the Good, as in any mysticism, we become gods ourselves: "those who are blessed are rightly called gods" (Boethius 2012: 119). This is a moment when everything becomes brilliantly clear. We can now see the world from God's point of view.

What is remarkable about Boethius' work is that, while it was written in a Christian epoch and by a Christian,[19] nowhere does its author ask us to take a leap of faith. The Socratic dialogue that Lady Philosophy conducts is as watertight as a mathematical demonstration. Philosophically, her argument is meant to be self-sufficient: her explanations, as Boethius puts it, are "not by premises taken from elsewhere, but rather by inherent and natural proofs drawing their support from each other" (Boethius 2012: 105). There are allusions to Christian texts in *De Consolatione*, but the name of Jesus Christ does not appear anywhere. God plays an important role, yet it is a God that belongs to no particular religion.

Boethius' work generates a distinct sense of hope. We may remain fragile, failing creatures, but eventually there is redemptive potential in us. No matter how deep we fall, how farcical our existence can seem, it is within our power to muster the strength we need to end our affairs in this world with some degree of dignity.

The "inconsolation" of philosophy

In *De Consolatione* Boethius looks philosophically at his life and its imminent ending, places his finitude within the cosmic picture, and draws philosophical conclusions. In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, by contrast, More considers philosophy and finds it wanting. What is happening to him calls for something bigger, stronger, heavier. That's why he decides to approach his predicament from an eschatological perspective. Indeed, by looking at it eschatologically, he re-signifies it so that his misfortune is no longer a biographical accident, but part of a larger story, one that transcends his biography and even his historical context. To think eschatologically is to consider everything from the standpoint of the "four last things:" Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. The *Dialogue of Comfort* is an exercise in personal eschatology.

In its opening pages, Vincent, the younger, more impressionable

character, sets the tone. These are extraordinary times, he says. Even death would be preferable to life in such times: "the world is here waxen such, and so great perils appear to fall at hand, that methinketh the greatest comfort that a man can have is when he may see that he shall soon be gone." The enemy is seemingly all-powerful because his wickedness knows no boundaries. Nothing can stop him:

> his high malice and hatred; and his incomparable cruelty – with robbing, spoiling, burning and laying waste all the way that his army cometh. Then, [he is known for] killing or carrying away far thence from home, and there sever[ing] the couples and the kindred asunder, everyone far from other. Some [are] kept in thralldom, and some kept in prison, and some for a triumph tormented and killed in his presence. (More 1965: 5–8)

Once the contours of the catastrophe have been sketched, Anthony, representing More himself, can step in. His is the voice of wisdom. As bad as things may be, we should learn how to look beyond them. For these tragedies don't amount to much if we place them in perspective. To developments in this world that seem of apocalyptic proportions we need to apply an eschatological reading: the terror that the Grand Turk inspires may be great, but it is nothing when compared with "the fearful dread of hell." He may be setting the world on fire, but that's a trifle if you compare it with the "furious endless fire" that awaits us in the world beyond if we fail to resist. On the other hand, no matter how big the harm the Turk may do to us in this world, it is nothing if we "compare with it the joyful hope of heaven" (More 1965: 10). Framed like this, the story of *The Dialogue* is no longer about an individual waiting for his execution in the Tower of London, but about something much more consequential—the last things.

Traditional philosophy (the personification of which reveals herself to Boethius in his cell) is powerless in a situation like More's. He employs Boethius' medical imagery, but ascribes the doctor's role to God himself—"natural philosophy," Boethius' doctor, is now demoted to a mere pharmacist ("druggist"). The "natural philosophers" leave untouched, "for lack of necessary knowledge," a special point which is "not only the chief comfort of all, but without which also all other comforts are nothing." This point consists in taking God as the general

frame of reference for all human affairs. We have strayed well away from Boethius. True, in *De Consolatione* God plays a central role; what Lady Philosophy offers is, after all, a philosophical formula for acceding to divinity. But this, as Pascal would put it, is the God of "philosophers and scholars," not of "Abraham and Isaac." And for such an abstract God More has no use. He needs a living God, one who can help us to "move, stir, and guide[s] us forward" (More 1965: 13). He needs a father-figure who delivers admonitions and penalties, but also love and forgiveness, tenderness and care.

A pervasive sense of eschatological terror creeps out of these pages. Everywhere More looks, he sees signs of damnation and doom, helplessness and defeat. He mentions the "wretchedness of this world and the frailty of the flesh and the subtle sleights of the wicked fiend" (More 1965: 67). Thus a new face enters the scene. As if it wasn't bad enough that, due to original sin, we come into this world with a genetic disease (the "very deadly disease of damnation"), we live our lives in a constant state of war. Day in and day out, we have to fight a formidable enemy. More does not think that the Devil could compel us to do something against our will. But because the flesh is weak, the mind feeble and faith wavering, the poor soul often finds itself powerless. And countless are the fashions in which the enemy pierces us with his temptations.[20] More lists just a few of them, but enough to give us a sense of the kind of world that inhabited his mind:

> He tempteth us by the world; he tempteth us by our own flesh; he tempteth us by pleasure; he tempteth us by pain; he tempteth us by our foes; he tempteth us by our friends; and under color of kindred he maketh many times our next friends our most foes. (More 1965: 83)

Given More's situation at the time, of particular interest is the temptation of persecution, which is the "invasion of the devil in the midday." Such a devil tempts you to renounce your faith—should you resist, persecution follows. One is assaulted, trampled upon, degraded or even killed because of one's faith. Says More, with the certitude of someone who speaks out of personal experience: "of all his temptations this is the most perilous, the most bitter sharp, and the most rigorous …" In the case of more ordinary temptations, the Devil "stealeth on like a fox."

Now it is different, the Devil and Henry VIII have put on a scarier show: "this Turk's persecution for the faith he runneth on roaring with assault like a ramping lion" (More 1965: 151–2).

At times a distinctly Manichean tone is manifest in More's text. A certain dualism of Gnostic inspiration had been lurking in Christianity's theological imaginary since its foundation: Paulicianism, Bogomilism, and Catharism were only its most notorious resurfacings. More is no Cathar, but some of the language in the *Dialogue of Comfort* is telling. There is in this world, he says, "set up, as it were, a game of wrestling wherein the people of God come in on the one side." On the other side, "come mighty strong wrestlers and wily, that is to wit, the devils, the cursed proud damned spirits" (More 1965: 83). This world is truly a battlefield. Caught up as we are right in the middle, we cannot but take the heat of the clash. Noted for his oratory and rhetorical skills, More knows exactly how much he can press a point. He certainly wants to scare, but not scare away, the reader—the text, after all, is supposed to offer "comfort." In due course, he switches back to a vision of God as bulwark, our reliable protector against the Devil's assaults.

We are vulnerable creatures, always exposed to temptations and sin, but not everything is lost. We need to keep our faith: just when we think we cannot take it anymore, God will show up to *refrigerate* us:

> God giveth the faithful man that hopeth in Him the shadow of His holy shoulders, which are broad and large, sufficient to refrigerate and refresh the man in that heat. And in every tribulation He puteth His shoulders for a defense between. And then what weapon of the devil may give us any deadly wound while that impenetrable pavis of the shoulder of God standeth always between? (More 1965: 84–5)

More is obviously working on his martyrdom.

God the jailor

More's perspective in the *Dialogue of Comfort* is eschatological most of the time, but not always. Sometimes More the eschatologist gives way to More the philosopher, with a sudden change of tone and style, even of the writing's texture, as well as a fresh infusion of irony and

playfulness, for which More was famous. One such moment occurs in Part Three, where he introduces the notion of the "world as prison." It certainly wasn't his experience in the Tower that gave him the inspiration for the idea had been with him for quite a while. More than a decade earlier, when he was working on *The Four Last Things*, More was already toying with it: "of this thing we be very sure, that old and young, man and woman, rich and poor, prince and page, all the while we live in this world we be but prisoners, and be within a sure prison, out of which there can no man escape" (More 1931: I, 447). Even earlier, the world he depicts in *Utopia* (1516) unmistakably reminds the reader of a penal colony. From the ideal city's setting and layout to the heavily regulated lives of its citizens, to the uniforms they have to wear and the permits they need to carry when they travel, to the total lack of privacy and the omnipresence of surveillance, to the minimal contacts with the outside world and the punishment for any escape attempts—everything in Utopia brings to mind the image of an enormous prison. Moreover, the idea itself was not necessarily More's. It had been floating around in the history of Western philosophy since Plato at least. In the Platonic philosophical imaginary the metaphor—in the form of prison proper, cave, or tomb—plays a major role. For Plato and his followers our life on earth is nothing more than imprisonment, and so is for the Gnostics. Even in the *De Consolatione* Boethius talks at some point of the "earthly prison" of the soul (Boethius 2012: 59). In *The Dialogue of Comfort*, however, More takes the notion to an extreme. The result is a re-making of the old metaphor, and a sense that this is no longer a rhetorical trope, but an articulated, if grim, philosophical vision of the human condition itself.

Taking up the topic seems to have had a liberating effect on More: we sense, more than once, that he is no longer the frightened prisoner, but a philosopher at work. Like any good, imaginative philosopher, More's first reaction to what he sees around him is a bold act of reinterpretation: this world is *not* what it seems to be. Then, his second gesture is an act of world-making: let's make it a prison. And he builds everything from there. In addition to the previous variations, More spices up the topic with a new ingredient: God the jailor-in-chief, the one who makes sure that the place is run smoothly and order kept at all times.[21] In the *Dialogue of Comfort* God appears under several guises: as physician, loving father, even as a caring hen mother at one point,

but this instantiation is the most striking. As you read these pages you cannot help hearing, somewhere in the background, the barely controlled, sardonic laughter of the author of *Utopia*. Here he is again, one of the greatest ironists of his time. More seems so "comforted" by now that he allows himself occasional acts of poetic justice, like putting Henry VIII himself in jail. Not even "the greatest king upon earth," he says, can be pardoned and is forced "by the ordinance of God" to serve his sentence in the prison of the world, "out of which no man can escape" (More 1965: 200).

In More's time prison itself was rarely a form of punishment.[22] It was primarily the place where people were held, for longer or shorter periods, before a trial or while awaiting punishment, which was usually death, even for petty crimes. We should keep this in mind when we consider More's notion of the "world as prison." What does he mean by that exactly? Because of our original sin, at the very moment of our birth we are automatically condemned to death. God passes the sentence (apparently, More's God has a triple appointment: judge, jailor, and hangman): no sooner do human beings come "into the world out of the mother's womb" than God "condemneth them unto death by His own sentence and judgment for the original sin that they bring with them, contracted in the corrupted stock of our forefather Adam." To modern sensibilities such a view of the human condition seems cruel, if not plainly sadistic, but in the theological and philosophical imaginary that defines More's world, it was nothing unusual.

Beyond the language of original sin and damnation, however, there is in this text an important and timeless insight: we are born to die. Today we say "all humans are mortal," and it does not strike us as particularly cruel, but this is just another way of stating, with More, that man, from "his first coming in hath [Death] ever hoved aloof and looked toward him and ever lien in a wait on him" (More 1965: 199–201). No matter how you look at it, to be human is to be subjected, sooner or later, to a death sentence.

"Fine," you may say, "but why do we need a jailor? Isn't the prison itself bad enough, let alone the death sentence?" More would answer that the jailor is here just to help. He can assist us and give us comfort along the way, and make our waiting more tolerable. God is the one "in charge"—and for More nothing could be worse than a world with no one in charge. In this wretched place, where we can rely on nothing

and trust no one, he suggests, it is the chief jailor that we can always go to. For God, "the chief jailor, as I say, of this broad prison the world, is neither cruel nor covetous." That's important because, when the sentence is to be carried out, and the jailor is to do the hangman's job, we can hope for the favor of an easy death.

There is an odd, frightening beauty about "the great prison of this whole earth," where the "chief jailor … is God" (More 1965: 201–4). More's metaphor is powerful, and his vision, we have to admit, daring and unforgettable. It is, moreover, suddenly reminiscent of the maddened world that stares at us when we contemplate the paintings of one of his contemporaries: Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516). Just like Bosch, More had the gift—if gift it is—of seeing reality in all its brutality. He does not come up with something new, only re-signifies that which already exists: by singling out one detail here, overemphasizing another there—and in general undermining the seriousness of it all—More reveals the world as a theater of absurdities. (His contemporaries often noticed that he lived his life as if he were on a stage.)[23] More shocks us as he means to: neither his imprisonment nor his death sentence have managed to change him. He is determined to leave the world laughing.

Yet this is not all rhetorical fireworks. Once the shock has passed, More details his vision, which grows in complexity. The prison in which we live is not in fact the outside world: it is human nature itself. What keeps us imprisoned is what these days we would call our "finitude." The walls of the prison are not visible, worldly walls, but our physical, biological, ontological limitations. God does not really guard the "prison," weapon in hand, uniform and all, he just set up the world the way he did, and the prison guards itself, as it were:

> [T]his prison is also so sure and so subtly builded that albeit that it lieth open on every side without any wall in the world, yet wander we never so far about therein, the way to get out at shall we never find. So that He neither needeth to collar us nor to stock us for any fear of scaping away. (More 1965: 204)

There is an unmistakable element of cosmic farce (here we hear More's sardonic laughter louder than ever) in this vision of humankind as a universal penal colony. Locked inside we don't have the slightest idea

about what our true condition is. Not only are we miserable, we are also blind to our misery. Instead of protesting or rebelling, we sing and dance in celebration. "Upon our prison we build," says More. Our prison "we garnish with gold and make it glorious." In this "prison they buy and sell; in this prison they brawl and chide; in this they run together and fight; in this they dice; in this they card; in this they pipe and revel; in this they sing and dance" (More 1965: 204). At times More's text reads like a script for a Bosch painting.

In shambles

Up to the point of his imprisonment More's biography was, in an important sense, a history of paradoxes, inner conflicts, and irreconcilable contradictions.[24] When his friend Erasmus called him *omnium horarum homo* ("man for all seasons"), he may have said more than he meant to. More was indeed a man of many masks. Which one did he *not* wear? He was the scholar, the courtier, the flatterer, the dignified man, the self-flagellator, the burner of heretics, the good Christian, the fanatic, the monk, the family man, the misogynist, the humanist, the ironist, the polemicist, the idealist, the money grabber, the actor, the puppet, the puppeteer, the inquisitor, the persecutor, the book lover, the burner of books, the rationalist, the spy-in-chief, the saint, the practitioner of scatological humor, the torturer, the victim, the sweetest of men (*mellitissime Thoma*). He was all of these to different degrees, none of them fully.

No matter how you look at it, shortly before his death, More's life was in a shambles. How are we to reconcile, for example, More's serious asceticism with the histrionic aspects of the man? Throughout his life More displayed a propensity toward bodily mortifications, self-flagellation, and fasting, but at the same time he "could make even the most solemn colleague burst into laughter" (Ackroyd 1999: 95).[25] And how about his motives? There is evidence to suspect, for instance, that the reason he mortified his body may not have been necessarily to open the gates of Heaven, but a rather worldly, therapeutic one: to keep a troubling sensuality in check. His great-grandson and biographer Cresacre More suggests that much. When More was about "eighteen or twentie years olde," we read in this account, "finding his

bodie by reason of his yeares most rebellious, he sought diligently to tame his unbrideled concupiscence by wonderfull workes of mortification."[26] As a young man, More very much wanted to become a monk, but was concerned that the strong temptations of the flesh would make his monastic life unhappy. He decided to marry instead. Yet he was not happy as a married man either. He used to humiliate his first wife, bringing her to tears, and famously turned the second one into the butt of his jokes.

The most troubling of all the contradictions of More's life is probably that the same man who treasured his religious beliefs, and eventually died rather than betray his conscience, was himself a merciless persecutor of other people's convictions. Apparently, listening to the dictates of one's conscience was a good thing as long as More was involved in the dictation. Thomas More, a book lover and author of books himself, spent considerable amounts of time interrogating people suspected of owning banned books (primarily the Bible in Tyndale's English translation).[27] He would gladly hand out guilty sentences, as a result of which the condemned heretics were "forced to ride, facing the horses' tails, with various of their texts pinned to their clothing" (Ackroyd 1999: 300–1).[28]

Italy and Spain may have had their Inquisition, but England had More. During his chancellorship, he was apparently a tireless interrogator. "His methods were not gentle," remarks one of his modern biographers (Marius 1985: 395). He would show up unannounced in people's homes, searching for banned literature; he would promptly make arrests and send people to the torture chamber. To make everything more efficient, he conducted the proceedings, and kept the detainees, at his Chelsea home. Since for him a heretic was not a proper human being, but the Devil's instrument, any method was permitted. He would, for example, lie to the accused or make false promises—to extract confessions. Every trick was legitimate. The "right to remain silent," which he would invoke repeatedly in his own defense in a few years, he utterly denied to those he accused of heresy. In his writings More openly defended burning at the stake as a means to fight heresy, and believed that heretics, for whom no toleration should be shown in England, must be "punyshed by deth in ye fyre," should other methods fail. In the *Dialogue concerning Tyndale*, Chapter Thirteen purports to show the reader that "the burning of heretics … is lawful, necessary, and well done."

And here he is now, in his prison cell, only months away from his execution. The best thing he ever wrote, *Utopia*, was almost twenty years behind, almost forgotten—he would no longer recognize himself in the book, anyway. Much of what he wrote after *Utopia* is painful to read today. He could have been a great Renaissance scholar like Erasmus, but decided that a poor scholar's life was not for him, not enough. He wanted to be more, and thought that a political career suited him better. Yet as a politician More was unremarkable, to put it mildly. Indeed, at the personal level, his involvement in politics proved not only disastrous, but fatal.

Locked in the Tower, with all the time he now had on his hands, More must have asked himself who exactly he was, what his life had been about, and what he would be remembered for. And he must have realized, with considerable anguish, that it was not easy to come up with a clear answer. What he needed most badly now was something big, redemptive, something capable of cleansing his biography of its contradictions, ambiguities, and wrong turns. Martyrdom, for example. Very likely, without a martyr's death, Thomas More would not have meant much for us today.[29]

How to make a martyr

The greatest challenge More faced in the Tower, greater even than his "nature so shrinking from pain," must have come to him in the form of a series of questions such as: how can you work consciously on your martyrdom without committing the sin of pride? Can you force the gates of Heaven? Wouldn't that send you packing straight to Hell? What More was doing here was tightrope walking at its most dangerous.

Again, More always tended to see human life as a form of theater, the enactment of a play of sorts. And he worked tirelessly to construct a complex public *persona* for himself.[30] The different masks he wore (the family man, the King's faithful servant, the defender of faith, etc.) were all part of a major project of self-fashioning. Increasingly, however, as it became clear that Luther and his revolution could no longer be ignored, More's self-fashioning efforts must have revolved around his role as defender of the old faith against the new heresies. He put himself entirely in the Church's service and, in so doing, he didn't think

that any cost was too high. No doubt, serving the Church was for More a matter of sincere conviction, but at the same time he couldn't help *not seeing himself doing it*, not feeling himself on a stage. As he got in the character more and more, and Henry VIII moved further and further away from the Roman Church, More's falling out of the King's grace was inevitable, and so was an open conflict with England's political establishment. More's role, then, had to take on new features, or more exactly, to be pushed to its final consequences. Before he knew it, More's role had a new name: martyr.

The trouble is that, even though the martyr may be a role to play in relation to other human beings, it can't be when it comes to God. You don't play a martyr, you *are* one. One doesn't wear masks when one is exposed before God. More was an intelligent and self-reflexive man, as well as a sincere believer. He knew that he could fool his fellow-humans, countless of them, but not God. As far as the Almighty was concerned, More had to put an end to his role-playing.

In the Christian theology, martyrdom is a mode of total passivity, there is nothing you can do to "engineer," however slightly, your martyrdom—that would nullify it because it would be pride.[31] True martyrs die humbly. For a long time, since Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century at least, pride—*superbia* in Latin*, hýbris* in Greek—had been considered the most serious of the deadly sins: all the others derived from pride. So More was walking a very thin tightrope indeed.[32] We can never know how the walking ended. The Catholic Church, by making him a saint, proclaimed that he arrived safely. Maybe. More significant than the arrival proper, however, is the sheer performance of More's tightrope walking. We can look at some of its moments and try to reconstruct the man's struggle.

First of all, while obviously aware that his anti-Crown stance might cost him his life, More wanted to make sure that, through whatever he was doing, he did not *invite* death. True martyrs die reluctantly. Throughout his time in the Tower, he strived not to do anything that might have provoked the King and rushed his ending. His position was remarkably defensive, sometimes even conciliatory. For instance, while refusing to take the oath, More made it clear that this was his personal choice, and nobody else should in any way feel compelled to follow his example. When members of his family took the oath, he did not object.[33] When asked which part of the oath he did not like,

More answered that he preferred not to say because he had already offended the King too much and if "I should open and disclose the causes why, I shall therewith but further exasperate his Highness, which I will in no wise do." He would rather "abide all the danger and harm that might come toward me than give his Highness any occasion of further displeasure."[34] More also made it clear, repeatedly, that the King's new marriage to Anne Boleyn was fine with him (even though he had opposed the King's divorce from Catherine de Aragon before). As part of his tightrope walking, he would go a long way not to displease the King.[35] It is not easy, at first sight, to reconcile this accommodating, almost compromising More with an image of martyrdom. For martyrs die resolutely.

And yet martyrdom it was. For at the same time—often within one and the same statement—More makes it clear how little he cares about his life. If he is conciliatory, it is not because he is afraid to die, but because he has his reasons (he wants to bear martyrdom, not to cause it). If his death is what the King wants, that's fine with him. A much quoted letter he sent from the Tower is exemplary. "I am the king's true, faithful subject and daily bedesman and pray for his Highness and all his and all the realm," says More here. "I do nobody harm; I say none harm; I think none harm, but wish everybody good. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith, I long not to live." He resigns himself to whatever the day will bring. "My poor body is at the king's pleasure; would God my death might do him good" (More, 1947: 553). This is "grace under pressure" at its most impressive.

As you can see, even under the difficult circumstances of his imprisonment, amidst disruption and distress, More's rhetorical mastery remains remarkable. He manages to convey—unambiguously, economically, elegantly—two different messages at once: he doesn't necessarily want to die, but he doesn't want to live at any cost either. Similarly, when he points out that his not taking the oath is just a matter of personal choice, he also makes clear that, personal as it may be, such a choice is of uttermost importance for him. His purpose is not to put "any fault either in the Act or any man that made it," or in "the oath or any man that swears it," nor to "condemn the conscience of any other man." As a matter of conscience, even though he will not "deny to swear to the succession," it is his belief that "unto the oath that here is offered to me I cannot swear, without the jeopardizing of my soul to

perpetual damnation."[36] More's conciliatory tone, then, his efforts not to displease the King, the overall defensiveness of his dealings with the Crown, should not be seen as the sign of a change of mind, but as part of a larger project—More's "martyrdom project," you may call it. He wanted to make sure that his martyrdom would not be something of his own making. When he realized that a martyr's death was inevitable, he took it most seriously and readied himself as diligently as he could for it. For martyrs don't play with death.

*

In Christianity martyrdom is, in its most condensed definition, "imitation of the death of Christ." That's what More ended up doing in the Tower. He is increasingly and intensely preoccupied with the Passion of Christ; no sooner did he finish the *Dialogue of Comfort* (if he ever did), than he started working on such writings as a *Treatise upon the Passion*, *Treatise on the Blessed Body* or *De Tristitia Christi*, all revolving around the death of Christ.

The *Dialogue* itself culminates with a detailed discussion of Christ's Passion. For people persecuted for their faith, More says here, the greatest comfort they could secure comes from a meditation upon the Passion and death of Christ. No matter how great the challenges, how cruel the persecutions, they would not feel anything if they bring before their mind's eye the example of Christ. Their pain may be unbearable, but Christ already felt it; the endless humiliations, the infinite anguish, the total solitude—he felt them all, and much more. Christ already died the death you are dying now; he opened the way for you—all you have to do is just walk in without fear, without regret.[37]

In a spectacular display of what would soon, with the Counter-Reformation, become a central element of Catholic sensibility, More devises a system of "spiritual exercises" meant to dispel any remaining fear. Had any other means of persuasion failed, Anthony urges Vincent to consider

> the many sore bloody strokes that the cruel tormentors with rods and whips gave Him upon every part of His holy tender body; the scornful crown of sharp thorns beaten down upon His holy head so strait and so deep, that on every part His blessed blood issued

> out and streamed down; His lovely limbs drawn and stretched out upon the cross, to the intolerable pain of his forebeaten and sore beaten veins and sinews—new feeling with the cruel stretching and straining, [and with] pain far passing any cramp in every part of His blessed body at once. Then [consider] the great long nails cruelly driven with hammers through His holy hands and feet … (More 1965: 233).

Coming, at the end of a "dialogue of comfort," from someone with a "nature so shrinking from pain," such a fragment is more than eloquent. It is powerful proof of the preeminence of the mind over the precariousness of the flesh. Self-fashioning indeed.

*

We've now explored the second layer of death. This time the philosopher's encounter with death does not take place in the lofty regions of metaphysical speculation, but in rather unpleasant locations: courts of law, prison cells, and interrogation rooms. Have you noticed how some of the most important things in life have a tendency to happen in humble settings? It is in such a place that martyr-philosophers reach their "point of no return" where they look death in the eye, make up their minds, and ready themselves for the final act. That act's unfolding we will see in the next and final chapter.

5
THE MAKING OF A MARTYR-PHILOSOPHER

It is therefore absolutely necessary to die, because, so long as we live, we have no meaning, *and the language of our lives … is untranslatable; a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution.* Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives; *that is, it chooses the truly meaningful moments (which are no longer modifiable by other possible contrary or incoherent moments) and puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain – and therefore linguistically not describable – present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past ... It is thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves.*

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

What it takes

We've almost reached the end of the journey. It is now time for the two lead characters to have their final clash and put an end to the story. Just like Antonius Block, the philosopher cannot emerge victorious out of his match with death. Yet victory is not the point—at least not victory in the ordinary sense. In the business of "dying for ideas" to be victorious, by definition, is *to die*. Victory consists in performing one's death as well as you can, making it as relevant for others as possible, and transcending it in such a manner that something new will be born out

of it. That's what martyrdom is primarily about, be it religious, political, or philosophical.

Becoming a martyr, however, is a tortuous process. And here I leave aside the physical pain and mental anguish that candidates for martyrdom go through in their final moments, to which we cannot have access, and of which we can never speak properly. Instead, what I have in mind is the complex political and cultural process whereby a dead body becomes a "martyred body," and an executed criminal becomes someone worthy of others' admiration, even reverence. For dying is only half of the job—turning one's death into an act of martyrdom is the other half, if not more than half. Right after Socrates' execution, what his close associates were contemplating in that prison room was not Socrates, just a dead body. It took, among other things, Plato's unique literary genius, the Athenians' sense of guilt, and centuries of intellectual labor to turn that cold thing into Socrates as we know him today. Similarly, when the Holy Office burned Giordano Bruno at the stake, that death—fiercely spectacular as it may look today—was not a martyr's death. It took a long process of secularization, heated public debates as well as a receptive audience to recast Bruno's immolation as a "martyr's death." What, therefore, is essential for martyrdom is the construction of a martyr's posterity.[1] Martyrs are martyrs only insofar as they perform their death in the presence, either actual or vicarious, of a receptive audience, there is somebody to tell their story and people willing to listen to it.

The "conditions of possibility" behind the martyr-making process, then, may be grouped under three broad categories: (a) *The performance of the martyrdom*. This is the actual happening that sets everything in motion: historical facts and events that have the potential of being framed into a story of martyrdom and stirring people's consciousness. As a result, an ordinary event, often violent and traumatic, becomes one day a "founding" event. (b) *The story-telling.* Martyrdom is as much the deed of the one who performs it as it is the product of those who *story* the deed. You would die for nothing if no one told your story. There would be no Socrates without Plato—no Jesus Christ without the Gospels. (c) *The audience.* A martyr is always a martyr *for* someone.[2] Both as an actual performance and as a story, an act of martyrdom requires a public. At an early stage, the audience can be quite involved in the martyrdom's performance, by applauding the executioner, throwing occasional stones, or shedding

tears of compassion. After the event, the public becomes involved in the production, dissemination, and consumption of martyrdom narratives. The locus of martyrdom is collective memory and it is the public that does the remembering. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between a martyr's actual performance, its fictionalized version, and the way future generations reconstruct the deed. That's why these categories should be seen as a dynamic continuum rather than entries in a bulleted list. What follows, then, is fundamentally *one story*, told from *three* different *perspectives*.

PERFORMANCE

On stage

Committing oneself to an act of voluntary death is only the first, though crucial, step in the making of a martyr. A distinctive feature of the martyr's gesture is its *public* nature. Martyrdom cannot take place in secret, one cannot ask for a "private viewing" of this type of performance.[3] Choosing to die—the awe-inspiring act of voluntary death—is not martyrdom unless it is performed before an audience. For martyrs have to bear not only the mark of a violent death, but also that of the public gaze, sometimes equally violent, that closely accompanies their ending. When the execution is not public, people participate in it vicariously through "inside information" that's made available for public consumption. This re-creates the event. The public version of it soon acquires a life of its own and, in the end, the consumers of this product could swear they witnessed the execution.

Martyrs don't have a hard time securing the presence of the public gaze. Usually, their persecutors—whether they operate within an institutionalized framework or as a mob exacting "people's justice" or "God's"—want to make sure that the event is widely publicized and attended by as large an audience as possible. The persecutors' purpose is not just to suppress the actual offender: through an appropriate display of cruelty, they also want to deter any potential offenders. For all this publicity is essential. By trying to dissuade future offenders,

however, they contribute to the making of the actual one into the much more consequential figure of the martyr.

Unwittingly, then, the executioners offer the future martyrs what they need most: a *stage*. The condemned thus receives public attention and the chance to perform their death before a rapt audience, which assures them a place in collective memory. Death is transfigured by those witnessing its unfolding and something new emerges. The collective gaze proves to be a true blessing for the newly born—a martyr would never make it into the world without its hostility. Thanks to it, the offender's death ceases to be a mere biological occurrence, a moment in the history of one's body, and starts to count as something with a distinct cultural, political, and social significance.

The public's gaze, it may be said, is what invites the martyr's involvement in the performance,[4] what stimulates her and compels her to act. Indeed, the profoundly public nature of the martyr's deed raises the issue of acting. Given the intensity of the public gaze focused on her, the martyr feels obliged to respond in kind. She finds herself caught up in a game of life and death from which she has to act her way out. "If my dead body is what you want," she might say, "fine, you can have it. Indeed, I will give you more, I will give you the performance of a martyred body."

Socrates's behavior in court and right before his execution[5] is the perfect example. In the previous chapter, I examined his performance before the Athenian jury, his toying with his audience, the merciless irony he exacted upon the jurors, his "suicide rhetoric." Yet, in a certain sense, Socrates' whole life was an actor's life, something which comes across in his disciples' writings. The Socrates we encounter in Plato's dialogues is not just one man, but many men, an uninterrupted succession of masks. Acting lies at the very heart of his philosophy as the Socratic method—simulating ignorance in order to trigger a maieutic process—relies on systematic pretense, role-playing, mask-wearing, emplotment, dramatic build-up, and emotional manipulation. Since acting was Socrates' second nature, "masquerade" may be a better name for his method.[6]

And here he is, the compulsive actor, now having to *play his own death* as though he would be acting on a stage. But Socrates is nothing if he is not a histrion, even as he dies.[7] Even though all his life involved public performance, it was not until his trial and execution that

Socrates got the chance to stage a production of grand proportions. This allowed him to play on his fellow-Athenians one of his greatest tricks: while all that time in court they thought that they were in charge, that they were trying him, it was in fact he who was toying with them and doing the judging. As the trial unfolds, Socrates emerges as the one who, singlehandedly, scripts and stages the trial, plays the lead character, drives the plot, and keeps the audience engaged. Under the guidance of such a brilliant stage manager, as you may recall, the outcome of the first act cannot be anything but a huge success: he gets what he expects—the death penalty.[8]

The climax of the production takes place in a second act, where the director/producer/lead actor delivers his Socratic death.[9] The scene is performed so masterfully that its significance exceeds the confines of Socrates' biography, as well as the context of his time and culture, to become instead a timeless scenario of philosophical self-assertion and self-transcending. The setting of the Socratic drama's closing scene—the small space of a prison cell—expands to encompass a significant episode of the human drama itself. Thanks in part to Jacques-Louis David's influential painting (Figure 5.1), we can no longer disentangle Socrates' ending from what we mean when we speak of a philosophical attitude towards death. A dying Socrates reaches casually for the hemlock cup with one hand, while illustrating a philosophical point with the other—as if dying and philosophizing are two movements of the same gesture. The scene has become the iconic image of philosophical life itself: for a philosopher, ideas are not just something to entertain and explore, teach and write about, they are also something you may have to die for.

David's depiction of Socrates's death has also come to encapsulate some important ingredients of the Western philosopher's self-representation: intellectual courage; self-reliance; faithfulness to one's ideas; serenity before death; the pre-eminence of the spirit over the precariousness of the flesh; of the eternal over the temporary; the transitory nature of all things human; virtuous life as self-rewarding; true happiness as having to do with the life of the mind; faith in a higher form of existence; the philosopher's pre-eminence over the political world; of the exceptional individual over the mob; the imperfection of human justice; philosophy as an act of defiance and resistance; the importance of dissent, autonomy, and independence of mind. Never has the narrow space of a prison cell managed to accommodate so much at one time.

Figure 5.1 Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates* (1787). © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

Intermezzo (where Plato never stops writing plays)

Among the youths irresistibly attracted to Socrates there was a promising dramatist who, we are told, upon his encounter with the philosopher quit playwriting altogether and burned all his plays. It may well be, however, that Plato never really abandoned drama. When he met Socrates and discovered what a fabulous actor the philosopher was, he just changed his approach to playwriting. Instead of writing plays to be played out by actors on stage, Plato did the opposite: he wrote down the play Socrates the actor kept performing before his eyes.

The fine art of gallows humor

To talk of the performance of one's death is, in a certain sense, impossible. "Performance" and "death" cannot co-exist unproblematically next to each other—they are enemies. "Performance" entails

self-awareness and self-control, a distinct capacity to focus on what one is doing or not doing, saying or not saying. "Death," instead, is the eruption of the incontrollable, a loss of confines. Even its proximity is annihilating. How can you control yourself when death already controls you? That's why the self-control that martyr-philosophers display at the hour of their death is all the more captivating. These people seem capable of an unusual mastery over their emotions and behavior; the prospect of their imminent annihilation does not seem to disturb them. In Plato's *Phaedo*, for example, after Socrates talks at length, serenely, about death, he goes on, as serenely as he spoke, to die before his audience. He ends his discourse on death with his own. The icon of self-mastery itself.[10]

When practicing this ultimate form of self-control, however, there is sometimes an almost imperceptible line that some philosophers cross—for instance, when they start cracking bold jokes with the prison warden, or laughing a bit too loudly or otherwise indulging in ironies a touch too biting. All of this only moments away from their execution. These philosophers' composure and self-control are admirable, but it is their *overdoing* it that, I think, is even more intriguing.

On the one hand, this excess betrays a certain degree of nervousness, anxiety, even fear of death. These people are not machines after all, but creatures of flesh and blood who feel and fear. At such moments we can still sense the fragile humanity in them, if for a split second. They "perform" their deaths, but they do so humanly, and that's what makes them even dearer to us. When, after a long, sophisticated demonstration of the immortality of the soul, Crito asks Socrates, at the end of the *Phaedo*, "In what way would you have us bury you?," the latter's irony is philosophically brilliant, but—for someone so close to death—perhaps a bit too sharp.[11] "In any way that you like," answers Socrates. Only "you must get hold of me, and take care that I do not walk away from you." Upon which he turned toward the others and said with a smile: "I cannot make Crito believe that I am the same Socrates who has been talking and conducting the argument; he fancies that I am the other Socrates whom he will soon see, a dead body" (115c, Trans. Jowett). What's remarkable about this still-alive Socrates who makes jokes about "the other Socrates"—the corpse—is not necessarily the humor itself, even though that was funny, but the fact that the philosopher was still working on his death, still self-fashioning.

On the other hand, the curious propensity of some martyr-philosophers to use humor and make bold jokes up to their last breath may conceal an elaborated program of defying death through laughter. Thomas More could not help making witticisms even on his way to the scaffold. He was certainly aware that you can't "play" the martyr before God, but for his fellow-humans in the audience he put on a rare performance. Just as he was about to lose his head, he busied himself trying to … raise the morale of his hangman: "Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office. My neck is very short: take heed, therefore, thou strike not awry for saving thine honesty."[12] His execution gave More an opportunity to try his hand at the art of gallows humor. Why was More laughing at such a moment? At whom? He must have been laughing at himself.[13] For when you laugh at yourself like this you show that you are only too aware of your ontological precariousness. If you are the first to laugh at yourself, what else can death possibly do to you? By laughing at himself at the hour of his death More offered further proof, if proof were needed, that his chess game with Death was not in vain.

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There are certainly other ways to die a martyr's death, besides the composed kind practiced by Socrates and More. Sometimes the nature of the execution renders irony out of place and *les mots d'esprit* indecent. When Giordano Bruno was executed, he was taken to Campo di Fiori, stripped of all his clothes, tied to a pole and set on fire alive. With telegraphic matter-of-factness, a Roman chronicle (*Avviso di Roma*, February 19, 1600) records the event. The document mentions that Bruno was a "Dominican brother of Nola" and "a persistent heretic," and adds the significant detail that "his tongue was immobilized [*con la lingua in giova*] because of the terrible things he was saying [*per le brutissime parole che diceva*], unwilling to listen either to his comforters or to anybody else" (In Firpo 1998: 355–6). Utterly humiliated, tied naked to a pole, and about to be barbequed, it is hard to imagine Bruno exchanging subtle ironies with the monks in the audience. He had kept his calm during the trial, but now he did what any good Neapolitan placed in such a situation would: he started cursing. He cursed the poor monks so wildly, so colorfully that they

could not take it any longer and had to silence him. In *this* context, *that* was an appropriate reaction. Bruno's performance wasn't less heroic than Socrates or More's. It just had a different style.

There are, finally, situations where the ending is performed in a mode of total submission. The victim does not have the time or the space to say or do anything. She is simply "processed," "handled" by the executioners, who maintain total control. The bodily performance in such a context is distinctly passive. Hypatia's death, described by Socrates Scholasticus in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, is related in similar terms in *Suda* (the large Byzantine encyclopedia): "She was torn to pieces by the Alexandrians, and her body was mutilated and scattered though all the city" (In Dzielska 1995: 93). What transpires from both accounts is Hypatia's total defenselessness as she "performed" her death: she didn't do anything, everything was *done to her*. What is conspicuous is her silence: she didn't utter a word, didn't protest or cry, didn't try to defend herself or showed any signs that she wanted to flee. Her silence is deafening. Next to her the dying Socrates is a chatterbox.[14]

More's, Socrates', Bruno's, and Hypatia's deaths are all public performances. In each case there is a stage and, before it, an expectant audience on whom the event will leave a lasting imprint. What happens on each stage, however, is different. More performs his death almost as if he is a standup comedian. Socrates takes his time, philosophizes and ironizes, gives speeches and admonitions—he is the proud stage manager of his impending demise. Bruno revolts and curses in defiance, engaged in an active quarrel with his executioners. Hypatia's performance is brief and quiet. She is killed swiftly—as though the *parabalani* are afraid that if they don't act quickly they will find themselves too ashamed to do it later.

*

To philosophize, let me say again, is to act upon yourself, to embark on a journey of self-creation. The philosopher looks at the self as a project upon whose successful completion he or she will have been realized. What martyr-philosophers do is take this process of individuation to the limit. They practice self-fashioning in the most unlikely of places: on the verge of the abyss. And this is what renders their project unique.

The performance of a martyr's death is a climax that few self-fashioning projects ever reach.

STORY-TELLING

Death and narrative

To grasp the ultimate significance of someone's life we may need to look at it from a specific angle: its ending. One's life starts to make full sense only after one has died. For death offers the unique retrospective that rearranges everything that a person has done and thought, loved and hated, created and destroyed. One's death, be it heroic or humble, under the spotlight or in anonymity, induces an order and a structure into the chaos that one's life is as long as it still unfolds. Beneath life's hectic appearance, death makes out a certain sense of "composition." Death, then, can be said to be a seer and a visionary, perhaps the most obscure and misunderstood of artists. That's what Pier Paolo Pasolini suggests in the fragment I use as an epigraph to this chapter. Death is the greatest maker of stories because, in the end, it is one's death that determines the shape of one's life narrative. It "effects an instantaneous montage of our lives," says Pasolini. If he is right, then storytellers have reasons to celebrate: they've found employment. For death may be a great master itself, but it speaks a foreign and obscure language, and a storyteller is always needed to serve as its interpreter. Storytellers have always entertained a special relationship with death—it would not be wrong to call it their Muse. That's what any good storyteller does: he listens to the Muse in order to put together *un montaggio della nostra vita*. We may well call him a *montatore*.

Unless they are ordered by a story, our lives remain in a state of flux, shapeless—"untranslatable," Pasolini calls them. One cannot read the book of one's life as it actually unfolds, because as long as it is still in progress, it is just a "chaos of possibilities," a painful search for "relations and meanings without resolution." If we are to make any sense of them, we need to submit them to a *montatore*, someone

good at choosing "the truly meaningful moments" and putting them "in a sequence."

The importance of the *montatore*'s job is difficult to overestimate. For as long as we live we do too many things, speak too many words, and waste a good deal of our life in pursuit of projects not worth pursuing—getting lost on paths not worth taking, sometimes driving from cul-de-sac into cul-de-sac. Should we look closely, we will find out that there is too much ballast in our existence. A *selection* has to be made in order to bring forth only that which truly represents us. Certainly, there is a price to be paid: the selection has to kill the living present and freeze it into what will come across as a more stable past, but—if we are to trust Pasolini—the price is worth paying.

The present (the "infinite, unstable, and uncertain" present) is unmanageable anyway. It is too much, it overwhelms us and, "linguistically not describable," overwhelms language itself. It may be therefore preferable to have it distilled into "a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past" (Pasolini 1988: 236–7). That's precisely the job, the undertaking of a *montatore*: to incinerate all the irrelevant details, the embarrassing little facts, and blushing moments, and preserve only that which can fit into a legible story. Thanks to the good offices of this undertaker—remember, death is his Muse—we can be said to have lived a "memorable" life. Memorable because worth remembering. Memorable because narratable. The unnarratable doesn't really count. As Socrates says—or should have said—the unnarratable life is not worth living.

A most ancient art

As someone in the business of dying, the martyr-philosopher is badly in need of such a *montatore*. Like any hero in-the-making, he is dependent on storytelling. "Without a story to exalt him," says Tzvetan Todorov, "the hero ceases to be heroic" (Todorov 1996: 47). But "exalting" is not that simple. Not only is exaltation a complex, most ancient art, but also one of the riskiest. Being slightly on the side of enthusiasm can get you dismissed for flattery; slightly on the side of caution can get you beheaded in no time for treason. As Ethan ben Hoshaiah, the historian in Stefan Heym's *The King David Report*, wisely remarks, sword dangling over his head:

> I shaved from the facts much that was rugged, and evil-smelling, and distasteful to the eye of the King. But you cannot entirely divorce history from truth and expect to remain credible. Who can cook without fire? Who can wash you without wetting you? (Heym 1997: 244)

Granted, exalting philosophers post-death may not be as risky as exalting kings still-on-the-throne, but it has its difficulties. What a martyr-philosopher needs is not just a chronicler, someone who "faithfully" records his deeds and sayings. What would be the point of all that? He needs a crafty portraitist to put him in the best of lights: to show him as an individual of exceptional determination, but still a gentle human being; idealistic enough, yet not a fanatic; strong-headed, but not obsessed; a visionary, but not a lunatic. That's where the *montatore* comes in. His methodology, of pure Pasolinian inspiration, is as simple as it is effective: he will weave the story of the martyr-philosopher's life *backwards*—yes, *dal fine al capo*—as seen from the unique perspective of the philosopher's martyrization. The eventual success of the *montatore*'s work will confirm Pasolini's insight: death operates a "montage"—a drastic rearrangement, a reinvention—of one's life. Indeed, a martyr-philosopher's death raises the storytelling bar high. The more spectacular his death is, the deeper the changes to his life have to be. The more heroic the ending gets, the more arresting the story becomes.

Take Thomas More, for example. I described his perilous tightrope walking in the previous chapter. He gained sainthood thanks to his "dying for Christ": the brutal manner of his execution; the admirable self-control, restraint and serenity he displayed before execution; his virtuous refusal to concede to Henry VIII's demands; a whole life spent in prayer, holy learning, and good deeds. William Roper (1498–1578), his son-in-law, was More's first biographer—also his best *montatore.* He had intimate access not only to More's life, but—thanks to Margaret Roper, his wife and More's favorite daughter—to his death as well (Margaret had been allowed to spend time with More as he was waiting to be executed). Through Margaret's vicarious presence Roper becomes the "faithful disciple," the last witness to the master's death, which he experiences as the traumatic event provoking him to write his story.

Roper's work, dedicated as it is to "a man of singular virtue and of a clear unspotted conscience …, more pure and white than the whitest snow," (Roper 1947: 210) was to become one of the most influential books for constructing More's posthumous career. How does Roper weave More's biography? He is Pasolinian to boot: in his story, More's death sets in motion the best possible montage of his life. Even though *The Life of Sir Thomas More* is told chronologically for the most part, the event of More's death shapes the biographer's representation of his whole life.[15] The entire dynamic of More's life is dictated by his future martyrdom. Should one ask, for instance: what kind of life is most fitted for a future martyr? A life of prayer and meditation, what else? Here it is:

> [A] good distance from his mansion house he [More] built a place called the new building, wherein was a chapel, a library, and a gallery in which as his use was upon other days to occupy himself in prayer and study together, on Fridays there he usually continued from morning to evening, spending his time duly in devout prayers and spiritual exercises. (Roper 1947: 226)

For any martyr the body is crucial. His flesh is not simply the site of his biological existence, nor just the earthly dress that his pious soul has to wear in this world. The martyr's body is a battleground, the scene of the most dramatic trials. You become a martyr only insofar as you pass the test set up by your body. What a martyr has to do, then, as long as he is alive is "train" his body through ascetic practices, deprivations, and mortifications. That's exactly what we learn of More from Roper's account: starting from an early age his father-in-law "secretly wore next his body a shirt of hair." He also used to "punish his body with whips, the cords knotted, which was known only to my wife, his eldest daughter" (Roper 1947: 242).[16]

This may all be true. More was a man who took his faith seriously. Yet it is also true that this is only a *selection* of facts—*a montaggio della vita di Moro*, as Pasolini would say, a significant rearrangement. For from other sources we learn that More was much more complex than this. Indeed, as I showed already, he was a kind of meeting point for his country's many contradictory trends, passions, and ideas at the time.[17] Before becoming the victim of royal intolerance, More was himself so intolerant of the beliefs of others that he would have them burnt at the

stake. The same man who seriously contemplated a monastic life was also a master of scatological humor. More sought holiness while having to fight a "powerful sense of guilt and sinfulness" (Greenblatt 1980: 51). The author who gave us, in *Utopia*, the notion of a perfect society, designed to run as a purely rational machine, was grievously oppressed by his own irrationality.

Now, if you happened to be the *montatore* in charge of putting together the story of More's life, what would you do with all of this? Obviously, there would be no point in recording everything you know. As the historian in Heym's novel declares, since "knowledge of the facts may lead a person to dangerous thoughts, the facts must be presented so as to direct the mind into the proper channels" (Heym 1997: 82). What a martyr-philosopher really needs, then, is a storyteller who practices what may be called "negative generosity," one who leaves things out, rather than putting them in. Indeed, a storyteller generous enough to kill the live, contradiction-riddled person of the philosopher and remold him into a (heroic) *literary character*.

Intermezzo (where Socrates is murdered by his disciple Plato)

It is commonplace to praise Plato for his exquisite rendition of "the death of Socrates." Scholars, writers, and philosophers have variously talked of this representation as a major aesthetic accomplishment—a death more "beautiful" would be hard to find.[18] *Plato's* Phaedo*, this line goes, is an unparalleled artistic feat*[19] *because it managed to freeze in time the very act of Socrates' dying, it immortalized his death. No doubt there is truth here. Plato's rendition of his master's ending is outstanding. His craft is impeccable, his vision inspiring, the execution exquisite. Plato is almost too good at depicting Socrates' death. How could someone, who was supposed to be devastated by that very death, portray it so flawlessly? How can this be a mourner's work? Unless Plato executed Socrates' death so well because he had a hand in it. The sheer beauty of his portrait is indirect admission of guilt. Guilt made visible, guilt transfigured. Plato's deed is brilliant, an almost perfect crime. He certainly managed to get rid of the body.*

Of masters and disciples

There are hardly any traces left today of the historic Socrates. The latter, the flesh and blood man who lived in Athens in the fifth century and died by hemlock poisoning in 399 BCE, has been overwhelmed by the literary character bearing the same name, whom we come across in Plato's work. There is also Xenophon's account of Socrates, which confirms Plato's version in its essentials.[20] But the impact of the Platonic character on the subsequent development of Western philosophy has been so pervasive that, when we think of Socrates, it is almost always the Platonic creation that comes to mind.[21] Whatever the greatness of the historic Socrates may have been, in the absence of a body of written texts it would have amounted to little if it were not for Plato's literary genius. The marriage between Socrates, the philosophical actor, and Plato, the philosophical writer, was ideal. The life and death of the founder of Western philosophy became almost the sole property of a skilled dramatist.

Some have criticized Plato for having betrayed Socrates by hijacking his message, manipulating his ideas, attributing to Socrates views that were his own, or by turning him, in his dialogues, into a puppet. Such criticism stands only as long as the disciple's function is understood to be a faithful reproduction of the master's teachings. Otherwise, Plato's "betrayal" of Socrates should be taken as a compliment. We remember Nietzsche's Zarathustra famously saying, "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil." Plato turned out indeed to be more than a pupil. Not only did he create an impressive philosophical work of his own, but he re-created his master as well.[22] He may have killed the-Socrates-we'll-never-know in the process, but that's what true philosophical discipleship is all about: to be faithful to your teachers, you must cannibalize them, devour and digest them. That helps them live on a new life in your work.

Above all, Plato re-made Socrates into a *voice* resoundingly present throughout his work. We always *hear* Socrates, almost never see him. The few scattered references to Socrates' physical appearance (that he was "ugly," that he looked like Silenus[23]) don't really make him visible. The Platonic Socrates is, as the real Socrates was, a pre-eminently audible phenomenon. The overwhelming presence of

this audible Socrates in Plato's work is what makes our encounter with it such a disquieting experience. Dialectically, however, the most disquieting of all is the Socrates who keeps quiet. Admittedly, it is not easy to catch this chatterbox in a quiet mode, but it can happen. As you read Plato's dialogues, Socrates' voice is authoritative, compelling, commanding, almost annoyingly so. Yet his *silences*—whenever they occur, whenever he gives himself time to observe quietly how his interlocutors embarrass and entrap themselves—these silences can be unbearable. This is Socrates at his most uncanny. We cannot but suspect a tremendously provocative, unsettling force in these pauses.

Unsettling—this is what the encounter with Socrates' story normally does to people. Plato may have killed the historic Socrates, but the crime, as I hinted earlier, was only *almost* perfect. He may have gotten rid of the body, but there was something he could not dispose of: *the Socratic unsettling*. Socrates unsettles Plato's readers today as much as he unsettled his contemporaries in fifth-century Athens. This unsettling quality permeates almost every one of Plato's dialogues, reminding the reader of the Platonic deed. You cannot ignore it, there is nothing you can blot it out with, it is always there, it always surfaces.

How we respond to this unsettling experience is something that defines us. "The way in which a man experiences Socrates," writes Karl Jaspers, "is fundamental to his thinking." Jaspers talks of the profound "therapeutic" effect that reading the *Phaedo*, the *Apology*, and the *Crito* had on people in antiquity.[24] These writings compelled them to reflect on their lives and change them in the process. They shaped individual behaviors, civic projects, and political visions. Ultimately, Plato's dialogues taught them the essentials of an *ars moriendi*, which guided them through misfortunes and old age: "All through antiquity," says Jaspers, "men of philosophical mind read it and learned how to die at peace by accepting their lot, however cruel and unjust" (Jaspers 1966: 15–20).

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The first story of philosophical martyrdom in the West is also the best. Plato did not just recreate Socrates as a literary character, he created a totally new genre. With the *Phaedo*, the *Apology* and the *Crito* he produced the paradigmatic narrative of philosophical martyrdom,

and came up with the formula for a successful philosophical death. In his account of Socrates' life, trial, and execution we find the key features of most subsequent narratives of philosophical martyrdom: a protagonist committed to a certain style of ethical and intellectual life, who is ready to die for the sake of his beliefs; a hostile political environment that does not tolerate certain ideas and behaviors; a crisis that triggers the unfolding of a series of dramatic events; the climax in the shape of a public trial and the protagonist's confrontation with the representatives of the hostile crowd; finally, the protagonist's death and the glorious posterity he will enjoy as a result—everything projected against a background marked by collective complicity, unease, and guilt.[25]

Significantly, the archetype of the martyr-philosopher was born at almost the same time as the figure of the philosopher himself: Socrates is not only one of the first Western men to have dedicated their lives to philosophy as we understand it today,[26] but also the first martyr-philosopher. It is as if martyrdom is imbedded in the genome of Western philosophy itself, as though dying for one's ideas is an occupational hazard. Granted, this is a limit-situation that philosophers rarely face, but if they are to remain faithful to a Socratic understanding of philosophy, they should behave as if it could happen *at any time*.

Socrates' other children

Plato's rendition of Socrates' death has proved to be a great formula for dying philosophically since then, and philosophers who found themselves in a position similar to Socrates' made good use of it. They died with Platonic fragments on their lips, sometimes literally. When it came to facing his death, Thomas More deliberately sought to frame his own martyrdom in terms of a Socratic death as Plato portrayed it. This meant not only the adoption of a Socratic attitude, but also paraphrasing portions of the *Apology*. It is reported that, just as he was about to be executed, More uttered: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first."[27] It is not hard to see here a reference to, if not a rephrasing of the statement Socrates made after learning his sentence: "Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you" (29c-e). "What a peculiar

creature the philosopher is," you may be wondering, "he cannot even die without giving the proper references!"

Echoes of Plato's narrative of Socrates's death can be heard as late as the twentieth century. A few weeks after Jan Patočka's death, Havel wrote a short text on his master, celebrating his memory. Titled "The last conversation," the piece recalls Havel's final encounter with his teacher, in a waiting room at Prague's Ruzyně Prison during one of their long interrogations. The interrogators had just taken a break, which gave the two suspects the opportunity to spend some precious moments together. That was to be their last meeting. What struck Havel was that Patočka was not at all bothered by what had been going on in the other room, where he could have been summoned back at any time. He had other things on his mind. At any moment, says Havel, the interrogators "could come for any one of us, but that did not matter to the professor." But in his "impromptu seminar on the history of the notion of human immortality and human responsibility," Patočka

> weighed his words as carefully as if we had unlimited time at our disposal. Not only did I ask questions, I even presented him with some of my own philosophical ideas (a thing quite unthinkable before), and he, it seemed to me, was animated by the fact that he found me more than just a polite listener. (In Goetz-Stankiewicz 1992: 213)

An elderly philosopher, who is soon going to die, converses serenely with a younger disciple about the immortality of the soul. He still has something to figure out and doesn't want to rush things. The conversation occurs in a prison interrogation room, of all places. He takes his time because he has his habits, his philosophical routines. The guards are about to come in. Doesn't this sound like a Czech version of the ending of Plato's *Phaedo*?[28]

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The story-teller doesn't always have to be a "faithful disciple," even though he often is. Since some martyrs' deaths take place in particularly repressive contexts, a narrative of martyrdom is sometimes delayed. As a result, it may well happen that the storyteller is not even a contemporary

of the martyr, or of the events he narrates. It took Hypatia many centuries to find someone to tell her story: indeed, it was not just one "storyteller," but a large group of writers from Edward Gibbon and Voltaire to the feminist scholars of the twentieth century that made her into a martyr-philosopher. In these cases, where the narratives of martyrdom are not available from the outset, the pressure from the audience becomes so powerful that they have to emerge. If a martyr doesn't get the storyteller of her choosing, she will get one assigned, you may quip.

AUDIENCE

From the perspective of their communities, the future martyr-philosophers often come across as trouble-makers, "hooligans," individuals set to undermine the mental habits of others and upset the social order. Yet usually this is not enough to make them targets of annihilation. They can still be tolerated, exasperating as they are. Martyr-philosophers are "produced" only when a certain connection can be established between the event of their annihilation and a renewed sense of social peace.

Intermezzo (where certain illusions of grandeur are exposed)

They make kings tremble. No one is like them: when they speak, those in power feel ashamed, the rich blush, the poor are moved, and the unfortunate see hope. They don't wear swords, but their words always cut to the bone. They are the professionals of "speaking truth to power." With their bare hands, and just the boldness of their language, they can unsettle empires, dismantle tyrannies, and subvert lawless regimes. They expose corporate corruption at breakfast, redress the wrongs of the world at lunch, and eviscerate rogue rulers for dinner. "But who exactly are these people?" you must be asking yourself impatiently.—They are philosophers at work.

This is one of the favorite fantasies feeding the imagination of the West—especially that of the philosophers themselves. Much of Western philosophy has articulated itself around a political self-representation that made it a "duty" not just to discover the "truth" but, more importantly, to communicate it to the larger community. A significant amount of power is thought to be gained by this communication—speaking "truth to power" is supposed to empower the philosopher. Philosophy may begin as a private exercise, but its final aim is all too often civic and political. Granted, this is not the only self-representation of philosophy in the West,[29] *but historically the political one predominates. It has shaped the way philosophy has been seeing itself from Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics to St. Augustine, from Campanella and More to Voltaire and Rousseau, from Hegel and Marx to the Frankfurt School, Sartre, and Foucault. Such philosophers have worked under the assumption that knowledge without a positive social impact is knowledge not worth pursuing.*

A "tell-all" affair

In a series of lectures he delivered at Berkeley in 1983 Michel Foucault speaks beautifully of *parrēsía* (speaking out, telling the truth), and places the notion at the foundation of European culture itself. For him "telling the truth" is the expression of a mode of being in the world and of a style of living in society. One cannot find out what the truth is and then keep quiet about it—no matter what, you have to tell. One's access to knowledge compels one to share it. Even though Foucault does not mention it explicitly, the reader senses that lurking in the background of his thinking there is at work a Heideggerian understanding of the notion of truth as "unveiling" (*alḗtheia*). Once the veil has been removed, there is no way back—no way can you conceal what has just been revealed. The *parrēsiastḗs*—the practitioner of *parrēsía*—does not have much of a choice, she has to speak out. The truth pushes to reveal itself in much the same way as a fetus emerges into the world. The midwife doesn't have time to waste—she must deliver it. Paradoxically, the *parrēsiastḗs*' role is somewhat passive: she is only, as it were, truth's mouthpiece.[30] This does not mean that the *parrēsiastḗs*' gesture is without merit. On the contrary, such an act takes courage. The dangers the *parrēsiastḗs* is facing are considerable, for "telling the truth" is a risky business.[31]

Yet to see the act of "telling the truth" as a form of power would be wrong. Power is usually of a raw nature and it cannot stem from such a delicate business as truth-telling. Strictly speaking, the philosopher dethrones nobody, unsettles no governments, and dismantles no tyrannies. The figure of the "philosopher-king" is a fantasy that should be taken for what it is: the expression of a desire that remains, by its very nature, unsatisfied. The true relationship between "philosopher" and "king" is revealed, perhaps against his best intentions, by an example Foucault himself uses when trying to define *parrēsía*. When a philosopher, he says,

> addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and, more than that, also takes a risk (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him). (Foucault 2001: 16)

Foucault uses this image for his own purposes, but the example, to my mind, is a good illustration of the true relationship that the philosopher bears with power. Granted, the philosopher *can* "speak the truth," but that's pretty much all he can do; when he is done speaking, his ability has reached its limit. Others—activists, journalists, political writers—may be able to do more, but the philosopher *qua* philosopher cannot. The speaking is not without risk, but the philosopher's words have only as much weight as the tyrant decides to give them. The tyrant can choose to behead the philosopher, to argue with him, kick him out, or just smile and thank him for his time. The tyrant can do or say anything he wants, while the philosopher can do nothing. He cannot even leave the room before asking the tyrant for permission. In the end—just as at the beginning, before the truth was told—the tyrant has all the power, and the philosopher none. The figure of the tyrant is itself significant here. In the West, enjoying all the rights and privileges that liberal democracy has to offer, we often forget that, historically speaking, participatory democracy is the exception rather than the rule. We end up projecting upon the past, as well as other places, our own understanding of politics, political power and involvement—an understanding shaped, if not conditioned, by our own experiences. That's why, on a

larger historical scale, much of what transpires between the tyrant and the philosopher remains, in a sense, inaccessible to us.

Ironically, the philosopher's powerlessness comes precisely from his *parrēsía*. For it is his need, or "duty," to "speak the truth" that prevents him from ever gaining any real power. One thing Foucault forgets—or does not want to say—is that *parrēsía* can also be a curse. There is something about it that makes it a problematic practice. Etymologically, *parrēsía* comes from *parrēsiazesthai* (*pán* and *rhēma*): to say everything, to speak "without reservations," to speak one's mind. The assumption is that you cannot tell the truth and leave something out: to be truthful you have to be complete, to cover everything (*pán*). Spelling out the word's etymology, Foucault himself portrays the *parrēsiastē´s*, tellingly, as the one who says "everything he has in mind." The *parrēsiastē´s* "does not hide anything." Instead, he opens his "heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse" (Foucault 2001: 12).[32]

The *parrēsía*'s curse is revealed by its etymology: no one wants to be told "everything." While philosophically an attractive idea, socially *parrēsía* can be a recipe for disaster. There is always something we don't want to hear about, things we keep hidden, even from ourselves. Social life is possible precisely because of this *unnamed* and *unsaid*. It is by *not* "telling everything" that we can live side by side with others. Indeed, the pleasure of life in a peaceful society comes from that which we decide to pass over in silence. This is not hypocrisy, it is charity. With charitable eyes, I look at my neighbor and, with some effort, manage *not* to see that which does not have to be seen. I am an accomplice to his weaknesses, vices, and dirty little secrets, just as he is an accomplice to mine. Our encounter is the encounter of mutually understanding, mutually forgiving gazes. Social forgiving presupposes a complex "social contract," and the combination of the two words ("for giving") implies a gift. Because of this gift we continuously make to one another, society can function smoothly. Now, imagine that someone shows up one day carrying a banner that reads "Nothing left untold!" Wouldn't that individual be spontaneously branded an "enemy of the human race"? That's why, in an important sense, the plain-speaking philosopher is incapable of acquiring political power.

A political vocation presupposes a great capacity to establish bonds with others, to participate in social games, and identify spontaneously with everyone who has signed the social contract. You are a politician insofar as you can sense the *pólis* as a vast network of bonds that

stem from the unspoken and the unnamed. You can reach out to anyone, and they can reach back to you, because you share a mutual investment in either the status quo or a program to change it. From a political perspective, it is crucial that these bonds are recognized, maintained, and cultivated. That's why the true politician is an expert in the art of *not* telling everything. Indeed, he needs to have an instinctive understanding for whatever is *not* to be said or named.

Needless to say, the *parrēsía*-loving philosopher is the opposite. If he excels in an art, it is the art of breaking bonds: breaking bonds and burning bridges. By definition, *parrēsía* dissolves bonds. Tellingly, the *parrēsiastḗs*' remarks and comments are often thought to be "acidic"—few societal bonds can stand their corroding effect. *Parrēsía* kills the harmony of social interactions based on embarrassing information mutually shared and withheld. Socrates was only too aware of this. "I am fairly certain," he says, "that this plain speaking of mine is the cause of my unpopularity" (24a). How could he be popular doing what he was doing? Read in reverse, his statement (in Plato's *Gorgias*) that "I am one of the few Athenians, not to say the only one, who undertakes the real political craft and practice of politics" (521d) is an admission, if an ironical one, that he doesn't have what it takes to be a politician in the ordinary sense of the word.

By doing what he is doing, the *parrēsiastḗs* cuts himself off from his community; very few would want to have anything to do with such an individual. "He is definitely not one of us," any victim of the philosopher's indiscretion could say, "you can tell by the way he looks at you. Buzz killer! While the politician cares for you and never hurts your feelings, this guy does everything he can to ruin your day. The politician makes you feel good, while the philosopher acts like one whose job is to make people's lives miserable." The politician mingles with people and shares in the warmth of assembled bodies, while the philosopher always keeps the distance. He is all coldness. The philosopher has almost no friends, and does not even look like he needs one. In the Greek sense of the word, the philosopher is an idiot (*idiōtēs*). *Parrēsía* does not always kill the philosopher, but in many cases it turns him into a social cripple.

The natural state of this kind of philosopher, then, is one of *alienation*. The state is self-induced: in order to be able to function as a philosopher, he has to re-invent himself as someone else, to become a *foreigner*. *Parrēsía* always bears a complex relationship with the notion

of "foreignness": in his community, the *parrēsiastḗs* is so different from others that he often comes across as someone from another place. At the same time, being a foreigner (or just passing for one) enables him to act more boldly. Using the excuse of not being familiar with the local cultural or social codes, the *parrēsiastḗs* can afford to engage in a direct confrontation with the unsaid and the unnamed of that community. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which I mentioned earlier, Socrates Scholasticus tells how Hypatia's practice of *parrēsía* allowed her to "confront face to face, with the same imperturbability, even the most powerful" in Alexandria (in Ronchey 2010: 29). Socrates almost never leaves his city, but he practices self-alienation as a matter of routine; he "claims to be a foreigner in his own city, even to the extent of not speaking the Attic dialect" (Wilson 2007: 76–7). When he has to defend himself in court, one of the first things he tells the jurors is that he is a "complete stranger to the language of this place" (17d). No wonder that he is perceived as *átopos*, which means "out of place," but also "perplexing" and "disturbing." In *Theaetetus*, he says it himself: "I am utterly disturbing [*átopos*] and I create only perplexity" (149a).

Giordano Bruno, on the other hand, did not have to make any effort, he was a natural foreigner. After he left his native Naples, he was always an alien—everywhere at home, nowhere a home. Abroad, he was an Italian, and very Italian at that. At some point, when he was in England, Bruno gave some lectures at Oxford. Never had the dons been so wildly amused. They laughed at the Italian accent of Bruno's Latin, at his appearance, at his short stature, at his name, at everything. Here's a later echo of the amusement he caused there, reported by one George Abbot who was in the audience:

> When the Italian Didapper, who intituled himselfe Philotheus Iordanus Brunus Nolanus, magis elaboratae Theologiae Doctor etc. with a name longer than his body, had in the traine of Alasco the Polish Duke, seene our University in the yeare 1583, his hart was on fire, to make himselfe by some worthy exploite to become famous in that celebrious place. (In Rowland 2008: 145)

Back "home" in Italy, Bruno still behaved like a foreigner. Discussing his interrogation in Rome, Ingrid Rowland is intrigued by the radical *parrēsía* Bruno displays in his dealings with the Inquisition. The explanation, she

notes, must lie in the years he had spent abroad: "Bruno revealed how thoroughly his strange life had accustomed him to speaking his mind" (Rowland 2008: 239).[33] Indeed, as you may recall, throughout the interrogations one of Bruno's defense points was precisely his right to *parrēsía*, which he calls his "philosophical freedom" (*libertà di filosofo*) (In Firpo 1998: 20).

The philosopher's self-alienation allows her to withdraw into a social and mental space she can inhabit all by herself, with plenty of room to strategize the launch of her straight-talking raids, and without the handicaps of familiarity, inside information, or the appearance of treachery. For *parrēsía* to be possible the existence of such a secluded space is crucial: philosophers can "tell everything" about their society only when they can look at it from the outside. They need to take this fundamental step, otherwise they cannot see any better than the others. At the very moment when they do so, however, with no ties left to the world they were born into, they've become powerless. And now they are up for grabs.

Intermezzo (where nothing really happens)

If the philosopher is defined by parrēsía*—and he is bound to be, otherwise he risks ending up a flatterer—there can be no serious political career for him. Philosophers are incapable of political action because, as philosophers, they are usually unable to obtain power in society. Power can be conjured and mobilized only through a capacity to participate in the web of social bonds, from which philosophers exclude themselves in order to practice their philosophy. That suits them well, however. For from Plato's misadventures in Sicily to Heidegger's ill-fated rectorship at Freiburg we are reminded, again and again, that a philosopher who wants to make himself into a politician usually only manages to make a fool of himself.*

Ironical existence

The question on your mind right now must be: "If philosophers are powerless, why are they murdered?" Precisely *because they are*

powerless. Ironically, they are targeted not because they are as a threat, but because they don't count. That they are a "threat to the regime" is usually a romantic misrepresentation. Philosophers have never been a threat to anyone, except maybe to themselves. What the persecutors are after is just their raw flesh. When they need a victim, they pick philosophers, just as they pick prostitutes, beggars, and other marginals.

In light of what I've been arguing in this book, you must be scandalized. "The philosopher," you might say, "has trained for death for as long as he can remember, he has taken all the risks that philosophy as *parrēsía* presupposes and now, when the moment has come for him to die for his ideas, all he stands for does not matter. The persecutors are not impressed. If they decide to kill him, it is not because they are afraid of his opinions. Dying for ideas, then, is a misunderstanding: the philosopher doesn't die for ideas, he dies for nothing. But this is outrageous!" To which I can add even more: a case can further be made that, even though the philosopher has "chosen to die," this choice does not mean anything unless his persecutors, in turn, choose to kill him. To add insult to injury, they "pick" him from a larger pool of potential victims, instead of being "compelled" to get rid of him because of the boldness of his views. Indeed, as if this was not bad enough, the act of killing itself is part of a social process over which the philosopher has little control.

Such a reading would be a misinterpretation of what these philosophers' project is primarily about, though. They are neither militant nor suicidal. They don't *seek* to die in a confrontation with a political regime or a crazed mob. Such an ending may or may not happen, but it doesn't change the fundamentals of their project. If it happens, their philosophy compels them to behave in a certain fashion, but if it doesn't, it does not follow that there is something wrong with their project. That most philosophers who take philosophy to be an art of living and practice it in a mode of *parrēsía* die naturally in their beds does not mean that their ideas are weak or they are not brave. It only means that persecution has its own logic. The heroes of this story—Socrates, Hypatia, Bruno, More, and Patočka—all died because of the ideas they professed and the kind of life they lived. When the moment came for them to choose, they all knew what they had to do. Yet eventually they were killed not because such ideas automatically trigger persecution, but because, by professing them, they made themselves *vulnerable*. And vulnerability is

a condition of persecution. The message discernible throughout their biographies is straightforward enough: "Always live your philosophy *as if* you will have to die for it. That this may never happen should not change anything. Live *as if* your death sentence has already been written."

As I showed earlier on in the book, what defines these philosophers' projects is primarily an ideal of self-fashioning. Through what they are doing—thinking, writing, lecturing—they work upon themselves. There is something distinctly constructive about such a project: these people's ultimate goal is not to demolish their selves, but to create them. If they employ death in the process, they somehow manage to trick it into playing for the opposite side. Within their project, death, far from an annihilating occurrence, contributes to bringing something into being. All this requires time, dedication, and practice—especially practice. When Plato says in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is "preparation for death," he uses a term, *melétē*, that suggests the kind of habitual, focused, and painstaking exercise that, say, an instrument player has to engage in before being ready to perform in public. Such a "pursuit" (one of the other meanings of the term) involves a sharpening of one's attention, a concentration of one's whole being, and an overall aliveness, which are all the opposite of death.

Indeed, either in the form of more abstract meditations on death and finitude, as in Montaigne, Heidegger, and Landsberg, or in response to an impending ending, as in Socrates, Boethius, and More, philosophers bring death into focus not because of some morbid sensibility, but as a way to grasp better what it means to be human. A proper understanding of the human condition is not possible without thinking through its limitations, precariousness, the nothingness against which it emerges. If philosophy is to be of any use, it has to help us come to terms with these aspects of our condition. There is nothing more precious than to be alive, but you understand that only when you realize what it means *not* to be alive. Death, then, is not an end in itself for these thinkers, only a means for making life more livable. At its core, their work is a celebration of life. That's how they define their philosophy after all: as an art of living.

Finally, that the philosopher's choice to die has to be accompanied by his persecutors' choice to kill him must be one of the greatest ironies of the story I've been weaving here. The would-be martyr-philosopher asserts himself against his community and fancies himself as their

"gadfly," their volunteer prophet, their better conscience. He relishes in spelling out in public whatever has to remain unnamed and unsaid. He turns his fellow-citizens into the butt of his jokes, attacks their certainties, and mocks their conventions. And yet, if he is to become a martyr-philosopher, *he needs them*. It is up to them whether he will be martyred or not. Even though he has been practicing self-control all his life, he has little control over the most decisive phase of the process. The irony of such a death is matched only by these philosophers' readiness to embrace it. That an irony of cosmic proportions eventually defines their endings renders their situations all the more dramatic. But then, again, philosophers are nothing if not ironical. Just as this book should be read as an exercise in the ontology of ironical existence.

Where a certain sacrifice is performed

To make better sense of the social process whereby martyr-philosophers are made, I propose to read the event of their death through René Girard's theory of sacrifice.[34] Girard's studies on the relationship between violence and the sacred, on persecution, sacrifice, and scapegoating published in the 1970s and 1980s have, not once, been subject to either zealous embrace or contemptuous dismissal. Granted, his views may not hold water in all their details, but it is hard to deny the remarkable force of some of his intuitions.

One of Girard's main contributions is his theory of the "scapegoat." By their nature, humans envy one another. People sometimes want to possess what the other has in the hope of acquiring the fullness of life that the other seems to enjoy. In fact, sometimes one comes to desire something only because the other already has it. Girard uses the term "mimetic desire" to designate this all-too-human trait. When this trend reaches a tipping point, society may fall prey to a generalized state of violence, where everyone wants to dispossess everyone else, people start attacking each other, and chaos ensues. Soon no one even remembers how it all started. As Girard puts it, "if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area" (Girard 1979: 10). A fundamental crisis thus threatens

that community's existence; society is on the verge of self-annihilation. In such a situation, when "the madness of crowds"[35] overtakes good sense, there is only one solution left: if society manages to single out one of its members toward whom all the collective aggressiveness can be directed, the killing of that individual could potentially put an end to the generalized violence. It is what Girard calls the "scapegoat mechanism." The scapegoat is the victim chosen for sacrifice, whose performance brings about a miracle: all the collective violence, all the envy and "bad blood" of the community, will now focus on one person and it will end there, exhausted.

Due to the mix of guilt, shame, and gratitude, the victim is made sacred. The one who has been sacrificed comes to be seen as the community's "savior," as well as the initiator of a new beginning. He can become a god or semi-god, a hero or a founding figure. Moses, Oedipus, and Romulus are some of Girard's examples. For him, at the origin of any myth (and, by extension, at the root of civilization itself) there lies a primordial act of violence. In relation to this act, myths perform a double function. On the one hand, they commemorate the event and celebrate the victim, showing him boundless gratitude. On the other, due to the diffuse sense of collective guilt, they seek to mislead us, concealing what actually happened within a beautiful story. That's why myths have to be "decoded." This, in a nutshell, is Girard's theory.

There is a significant overlap between philosophical martyrdom and the phenomena that Girard describes. The murder of philosophers may not fit every detail of his theory, but a Girardian reading of the event of their death can help us understand the social and cultural significance of philosophical martyrdom better. These philosophers die, either at the hands of the state or of a crazed mob, in times of profound crisis. Each case has its unique features, but there is some "family resemblance" in all cases: a sense of imminent collective danger, of anarchy and dissolution of the community through internal fractioning and atomization; a state of collective anxiety, fear, and suspicion; the always-ready "madness of crowds." Everybody suspects everybody, open *bocas de leones* are ubiquitous, and there is a growing social pressure to find "internal enemies," "traitors," and "spies." Collective paranoia sets in.

Athens was going through such a time in the late fifth century BCE. After a long, exhausting war with Sparta, which ended in embarrassing defeat, the Athenians were a divided society. There was a pervasive

sense that all these misfortunes were due to some transgression, and people were anxious to find out and remove the sources of impurity. Some scholars have already related these collective anxieties to Socrates as a "voluntary scapegoat."[36] The Alexandria of the early fifth century CE was another troubled place. While Christianity was formally the religion of the Roman Empire, the Church still had significant competitors in what was left of pagan culture (whose brilliant representative Hypatia was), as well as in the city's active Jewish community. It didn't help matters that the new Patriarch, Cyril, who wanted total control over the city, was incapable of tolerating dissent.

The first half of the sixteenth century, to jump more than a millennium ahead, was a time of great divisions throughout Western Europe, and England was no exception. Luther's ideas were having a significant impact—as well as attracting a following on the island—and sorely divided the nation. More's uncompromising attitude toward the new direction in which his country was moving made him particularly vulnerable. On the continent, Bruno was condemned and executed by a Catholic Church that was going through a period of acute paranoia. The Inquisition saw "heretics" and "enemies of the faith" everywhere, and felt it had to "cleanse" society of their presence. Finally, in 1977, just a few years after the Prague Spring's failure, Czechoslovakia was a country in trouble. The Communist regime lacked legitimacy and had to govern through total social control. Dissident movements such as Charter 77, whose spokesperson was Jan Patočka, were branded as "counter-revolutionary," "anti-Socialist," the work of "internal enemies," who had to be dealt with appropriately.

These sketches of societies in crisis give us a sense of the kind of social-political situation that calls for a scapegoat. An atmosphere of doom settles in, society is divided, the crisis persists. Everything seems to move in circles, the usual remedies don't seem to work.[37] Something radical is needed. There gradually emerges a sense that a sacrifice is necessary. Its notion may seem obscure at first, but then the pressure mounts toward such a solution. The scapegoat mechanism is widely spread. In ancient China *The Book of Rites* reads: "It is through the sacrifices that the unity of the people is strengthened."[38] If that society is to survive, it often has no choice but to perform such a sacrifice—to single out one of its members and dispose of it for the survival of the others. The scapegoat will become

the vehicle whereby that community will rid itself of its crippling issues and become functional again.[39]

The big question now is: *who* is going to be the "sacrificial victim"? What makes someone "sacrificeable"? Girard gives examples of several categories of victims that have been deemed "sacrificeable" at one time or another: prisoners of war, slaves, small children, unmarried adolescents, the handicapped. They all exhibit "victimary signs." The categories may differ widely from one another, but all these people have something in common: they are "either outside or on the fringes of society." Crucially, Girard argues that what makes these people "sacrificeable" is, first of all, the fact that they are "*incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants*" (Girard 1979: 12; emphasis added). They can be easily taken away and disposed of.[40]

It is not difficult to make out in Girard's description the figure of the *parrēsía*-bound philosopher. She lives in a state of alienation from her society. She is, just as Socrates was, "out of place" in the society of most others and, in equal measure, disturbing to them. For the philosopher of the "nothing left untold" persuasion, this *atopía* is a personal feature that makes her "incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds." And *it shows.* Indeed, separation from others, in a sense, is the assumption on which her entire project is based. Her *atopía* is a precondition of her autonomy, the mark of excellence—we would be rightly suspicious of any philosopher who seems to "fit in" too easily. The less capable they are of establishing bonds with others, the better practitioners of *parrēsía* they must be. This absence of social integration is Girard's first criterion of "sacrificeability."

According to his second criterion, what distinguishes "sacrificeable" from "non-sacrificeable" beings is that they can be "exposed to violence without fear of reprisal." Their death "does not automatically entail an act of vengeance" (Girard 1979: 13). For a victim to be a "successful" scapegoat, the execution has to be an act of violence that puts an end to all violence, at least for the time being. Vengeance would make the sacrifice ineffective.[41] Our philosophers also meet this criterion. Rarely has anyone sought to avenge martyred philosophers. After Hypatia's lynching, even though she had been on good terms with the city's prefect, there was no punishment of the perpetrators. The Patriarch not only got away with murder, but enjoyed a very successful

career, becoming one of the most influential figures of the Church (he was later canonized). Such a post-sacrificial silence should not surprise us, however. These philosophers spend their lives making others' uncomfortable. Aren't they in fact asking for a lonely, unavenged death? Speaking of Giordano Bruno's execution, Ingrid Rowland remarks: "If he had friends or sympathizers among the crowds who watched him burn to death, no one noticed them" (Rowland 2008: 279).

For this type of sacrifice to be effective, the violence has to be uncommon, unforgettable, orgiastic. By participating in a spectacle of extreme cruelty those in the audience are supposed to undergo a process of *purification*—Girard speaks at one point of the "sacrificial catharsis" (Girard 1979: 30). The scapegoat becomes the focus of the entire community's attention, its members are overwhelmed with joy. Right there, before their eyes, the sacrificial victim is expiring, and her exit is not empty-handed: she is taking away with her their sins, transgressions, and shameful deeds. Hypatia is perhaps the best illustration of this orgiastic violence. The *Suda* entry offers the most graphic details. She was "torn to pieces by the Christians of Alexandria," and bits of "her violated body were scattered throughout the city, and she suffered this because of the envy [*phthonos*] for her exceptional wisdom, and especially because of the hostility against her astronomical knowledge" (in Ronchey 2010: 60). They "tore her to pieces," after which they "scattered her body" throughout the city because of their *phthonos*—Girard would see this as a "textbook" case of scapegoating. In his theory, envy is a crucial symptom of scapegoating, and so is the body "torn to pieces" and scattered. When we learn from another source that Hypatia was also considered a "witch" by the Alexandrians, her case becomes almost too trivial to be worthy of further attention.[42] Of course, she was a scapegoat. What else?

Anther display of orgiastic cruelty is to be found in Thomas More's sentence to death. The text reads:

> Sir Thomas More, you are to be drawn on a hurdle through the City of London to Tyburn, there to be hanged till you be half dead, after that cut down yet alive, your bowels to be taken out of your body and burned before you, your privy parts cut off, your head cut off, your body to be divided in four parts, and your head and body to be set at such places as the King shall assign. (In Ackroyd 1999: 397–8)

Later the King downgraded the sentence and More had to content himself with a simple beheading. Yet the original text remains a masterpiece of sorts. Its composition must have been a hangman's job. Such a sentence does not even have to be carried out: its cruelty lies in the writing itself. Carrying it out couldn't be crueler than writing it down. Rarely has the pen acted as sharply as the sword.[43]

Granted, not all martyr-philosophers die in this extreme fashion. Thanks to the generosity of his friends, who could afford to pay for an expensive poison, Socrates died a peaceful death. Jan Patočka did not die violently either—he died a hospital death. Still, while their deaths may have been quiet, they were made public right away and so could play a cathartic role in society. That police showed up in force to disturb Patočka's funeral is telling: they realized that his death had already started to have a social impact.

Where the philosopher tricks the tyrant, cheats death, and enters myth

It is not too surprising that these philosophers become the objects of sacrifice. From the outset, you could tell, they took a path that would lead them to a dangerous life, as well as a bad end. They opted for a life-style they stubbornly refused to abjure. And yet if we adopt a Girardian interpretation, from their persecutors' standpoint they are not deliberately targeted—they only *happen* to be picked, alongside with prostitutes, witches, cripples, foreigners, and other marginals. The victim is chosen, says Girard, "only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (Girard 1979: 2). This may explain why philosophers are not killed for their bold opinions whenever they express them, but only when certain conditions are met, and they find themselves in particularly troubled social and political contexts. If a regime finds some thinkers inconvenient, there are always other ways of silencing them such as imprisonment, deportation, and exile. It happens most of the time.

These philosophers' selection for sacrifice may be ordinary, but what happens to them after their death is nothing short of extraordinary. As a result of their "sacrifice," a major transformation takes place in the audience's relation to them. When they were alive they were neither

read nor loved by the wider public—now they are not only read, but taught, not just loved, but venerated. Their renown as thinkers and weight as public figures grows exponentially, in some cases without any clear connection to their work. We should not be surprised, though: this is the sign of a successful sacrificial operation, the confirmation of a more general pattern. It hasn't happened only to Socrates or Hypatia, but also to Oedipus, Moses, and other non-philosopher scapegoats. What is remarkable is that the frenzied crowd—all those participating in that orgy of violence, destruction, and hope, waiting for something extraordinary to happen—*was right*.

A miracle has indeed taken place as a result of the victim's sacrifice. An intuitive connection has been established in the collective mind between the event of her murder and the end of a major existential crisis. First, they made her a victim, now—out of shame, gratitude, or guilt[44]—they proclaim her sacred.[45] A fundamental reversal of roles thus takes place. The sacrificed victim is no longer passive; instead she takes on an eminently active role.[46] The scapegoat becomes a dominant figure in the life of the community and comes to shape and channel its future.[47] Often this takes the expression of a new constitution, a better legal system, a revealed table of laws.[48] This is typically the moment of a new beginning: as a result of the successful sacrifice, the community manages to forget all the past violence and to start everything from scratch. The scapegoat becomes a "founding figure."

This may explain why martyr-philosophers are utterly transfigured in the public imagination as a result of their sacrificial death. In many cases they, too, become "founding figures": founders of schools of thought or major philosophical movements. Blinded as we are by the tremendous mythic force of Socrates' transfigured image, we often forget that he didn't leave any published output. His posthumous influence is nothing short of miraculous: Socrates has become one of the most significant figures in a field that, for more than two thousand years, has been defined by *writing*. What, then, makes him so influential? It cannot be his (nonexistent) written work. Isn't then Seneca right when he says that it was "the hemlock that made Socrates great"?[49] What renders Socrates such a towering figure is precisely his "sacrificial death." His case is so unsettling that Voltaire starts speaking theologically of him (he calls him a "martyr" and talks of his "apotheosis"). Before Voltaire, Erasmus had called Socrates a saint, if only ironically: *Sancte Socrates,*

ora pro nobis. From a Girardian perspective, such language makes perfect sense.

None of Hypatia's writings has been preserved, and only very few surviving contemporary sources mention her. She had no Plato. Yet this hasn't prevented her from acquiring a growing following over the centuries. Even though it is unlikely that Hypatia expressed any feminist ideas in her day, she has come to be seen as one of the founding figures of feminism (at least two feminist journals bear her name). Hers, too, was a "founding" sacrifice. Nothing can stop the mythical process once it has been set in motion. When Hypatia's admirers lack historical sources, they are not shy about using their imaginations. In the nineteenth century the French poet Leconte de Lisle talked of her—a woman who at the fiery climax of her career, was most likely about sixty years old—as a young lady of exquisite beauty, someone gifted with "le souffle de Platon et le corps d'Aphrodite."[50] From a Girardian perspective, again, it is only natural to associate Hypatia with a mythical figure.

Martyr-philosophers, then, often become secular divinities of sorts, figures who can be conveniently invoked as "patron saints" of some public cause or another.[51] Take Giordano Bruno. He is rarely read today. As a philosopher, he has become rather difficult to follow. Much of what he says (when he talks of magic or numerology, for instance) is not always intelligible to the non-specialist. In spite of all this, however, he has come to be seen as one of the most important Italian philosophers of all time—indeed, as one of the founders of modern free-thinking.

Bruno played an important role in nineteenth-century Italy, during the debates over what should be the role of the Church in the modern, newly unified country. The anticlerical intellectuals of the Risorgimento were not primarily interested in Bruno the philosopher, but in Bruno the martyr. They didn't need another thinker, they needed a mythic figure. And here's one of the greatest ironies of Bruno's life and death. While he was alive, Bruno—who didn't exactly excel in modesty—didn't have the slightest doubt that a great, posthumous career awaited him. But it never crossed his mind that what would really matter to future generations would be not his spirit, but his flesh—that is, that the Church burned it at the stake. Such is the way of mythology.

*

Earlier in this book, you may recall, I said that a philosopher's readiness to die cuts him off from society and places him in a special ontological space, which makes him attractive and repulsive at the same time. I used the term *sacer* to designate this state; by doing what he is doing (choosing to die) the philosopher enters a "sacred" mode of being. Not to lose sight of the main character, in this chapter I've switched perspective, which allowed us to capture another view of him. This time we've looked at the future martyr-philosopher from the standpoint of his community, against which he asserts himself, and which eventually suppresses him, thus setting him on a track to become a mythical figure. In this second perspective, we could follow him in society, see him doing what he knows best, and paying the price for it. Since the two perspectives are complementary, we've now seen all that is to be seen. All this time, no matter how we've looked at him, the philosopher, slowly but steadily, has been straying away from us. Farther and farther. He has now vanished and the deepest silence has covered his tracks. *La commedia è finita.*

Here comes the end of our journey. We can now kiss the story's heroes good-bye and contemplate their gradual integration into myth. They vanish from sight as they fill the air. What's next? They will return. Once out of our sight, they will start feeding our mythic imagination, shaping our worldviews, and occupying our minds. We kill them and they return with a vengeance.

POSTSCRIPT
TO DIE LAUGHING

Philosophy, then, can be performance. Live, flesh-and-blood, sometimes bloody performance. It may start out as an idea, but if it weren't for a philosopher's life to flesh it out, philosophy would end up as empty talk. For the philosopher's biography is philosophy's playfield, just as the philosopher's body is the tool for philosophy's enactment. No matter how well the philosopher writes, philosophizing, at its most essential, cannot be locked up in a written text. Indeed, philosophy is a form of self-inscription whereby the philosopher herself *becomes a living text*, a book always in the making. The performance of such a gesture of self-creation is what defines the philosopher, what constitutes the discreet, yet unique signature this person leaves in the world. And here's where the labor of death comes in: within the philosopher's self-fashioning project, death is not only an integral part of biography, but it may end up being as important as life itself. Simone Weil, who knew more about these things than most people, was less concerned that she would not find the "meaning of life" than she could miss the meaning of her death: "I have always had the fear of failing, not in my life, but in my death" (Weil 1965: 178).

*

There is no hint of levity in Weil's confession. And yet many philosophers approach their life with utmost gravity only to greet their death with a big laugh. In *The Book of the Dead Philosophers*, Simon Critchley looks at the lives and deaths of the philosophers as though they were characters in a comedy. Some figures in his compendium literally die laughing, while others die making us laugh. Critchley's is a *buffa* history of philosophy, where nothing is to be taken too seriously

and a tragic end is never far from a punch line. As reported in *Dying for Ideas* as well, not even martyr-philosophers can refrain from dying laughing. Socrates engaged in escalating irony, mocking and laughing, until the moment of his death; apparently that stopped him. But did it? Thomas More, just a few moments before his death, trying to comfort his executioner on the way up to the scaffold, made the "most famous sick joke in history"—he kindly asked the official in charge: "I pray you, I pray you, Mr. Lieutenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself" (in Smith 1997: 180). Can't top that.

*

Why do philosophers die laughing? The explanation must have to do with the philosophical attitude itself. At the root of virtually any philosophy there is a strong deconstructive element. The philosopher's originary gesture is to call everything into question. "Things are not what they seem to be!" is the philosophers' first commandment. To look at the world philosophically is to *see right through* it. Whatever passes for real needs to be contested, demolished, abolished. At its essence, philosophy is highly acidic: it dissolves anything it touches. Arthur Schopenhauer regarded this capacity to see the unreality of things as the philosophical gift par excellence. The philosopher's second commandment, however, must be "You shall not leave the world as you find it!" because, in the next movement, more constructive minds replace this unreality with something new and more enduring: atoms, ideal archetypes, the Absolute Spirit, the Will, Being and Becoming. The attractiveness of philosophy often comes from the beauty of the fictions and metaphors with which philosophers try to fix a world torn apart by their own deconstructive efforts. "You can never overstate the importance of imagination in philosophy!" is their third, and final, commandment.

Yet this can be a dangerous path. Minds so deeply inclined to call everything into question are sorely tested to come up with an unquestionable replacement. Indeed, if there is something more common among philosophers than tearing apart the fabric of existence it is the tearing apart they do to each other. So rebuilding the world once it has been dismantled can be difficult. In fact, it often happens that nothing gets rebuilt. A simulacrum of a solution can briefly flare up, but as Robert Frost would say, "nothing gold can stay." Often, after philosophy

completes the demolition job, it ends up content with contemplating a world bound to remain in a profoundly shattered state—or indeed, a non-entity.

The philosopher can thus find himself alone with his phantasms, caught up between a "real" world that no longer is and an "ideal" one that is too difficult to sell. Sometimes more adventurous minds turn this vision of emptiness into a philosophical program in its own right: that is, a program according to which the world *is* fundamentally unreal, and human existence is shadowy and phantasmatic in its nature. A higher form of existence—this line of philosophizing goes—may be possible, but we never have access to it. We remain perpetually cut off from it. Indeed, if some god created and placed us here, he must have done it in mockery, just for amusement. That we are nothing but God's plaything is an insight as old as philosophy itself: Plato for one says as much in the *Laws*.

It is entirely conceivable that philosophers entertaining such a vision, or one close to it, at the moment of their death may well come to think that their lives haven't been "the real thing." They now realize that they are dying without having ever lived. At such moments, ironically, existence no longer reveals itself as uncertain, but as something strikingly clear: *a farce.* And, if this clarity visits you when you are about to die because of your philosophizing, the revelation comes with additional cruelty. When you, moreover, realize that, for all your bold views, you haven't really compelled your persecutors to kill you, but you've been picked along with prostitutes, witches, and beggars, the revelation can be unbearable. If philosophers' lives can be "dangerous," the sheer arrival at such an insight, at such a moment, should be counted as one of the greatest dangers.

*

Realizing, then, that everything has been set up in such a way as to make you a laughable entity, what is left for you do to? Nothing really, unless you can come up with a counter-laugh. The best thing you can do when the world is laughing at you is to start laughing in turn. Moments from dying, you laugh at yourself, at the entire cosmic *mise-en-scène* and the *deus ludens* that has cast you in the farce of existence.

Now philosophy, more than ever, is a matter of performance. The philosophers' laughing at existence at the very moment of their

departure from it must be their most significant feat—the ultimate philosophical masquerade. And what is such a laugher if not the best possible way to act out your final philosophical insight—the notion, that is, that you were made in mockery and your life is a cosmic joke? Your existence has been taking place on a stage all along, even though you've discovered it only now. You've been badly laughed at, mocked, and ridiculed, and you've had no idea. The trick, however, is to show no surprise and pretend that you've been playing along all this time. This would be to trick the trickster. *Ironical existence at its best*. That's how you can preserve some dignity in the comedy of being in which, unasked, you have been cast to play.

But this is the beginning of another story, which I hope to tell elsewhere.

NOTES

Philosophy as self-fashioning

1 Perhaps the most obvious echo of Pico's insight in twentieth-century philosophy is Sartre's definition of human being as a "nothing," as being "what is not" and not being "what it is."

2 In this section I incorporate and develop some considerations I first expressed in an article I co-authored with Simon Critchley, Giuseppe Mazzotta and Alexander Nehamas, "Of Poets and Thinkers. A Conversation on Philosophy, Literature, and the Rebuilding of the World" (Bradatan et al. 2009).

3 An important contribution in this respect, though coming from a different direction, with different philosophical priorities and serving different purposes, is offered by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989).

4 It would be legitimate to speak of "a history of the self" in Vico, of a self fundamentally caught up in the logic of historicity, or, as Mazotta puts it, a "*sub-jectum* … literally thrown under, without a firm foundation, losing control of oneself, and provisionally without consciousness" (Mazzotta 1998: 19). To regain control over one's self, to put it on its feet, as it were, is a lifetime's project.

5 Alexander Nehamas describes the process in these terms: "To create a self is to succeed in becoming *someone*, in becoming a *character*, that is, someone unusual and distinctive. It is to become an individual… To become an individual is to acquire an uncommon and idiosyncratic character, a set of features and a mode of life that set one apart from the rest of the world" (Nehamas 1998: 4–5).

6 An insightful filmmaker such as Kieslowski was only too aware of the nature of this relationship: "If you don't understand your own life, then I don't think you can understand the lives of the characters in your stories, … the lives of other people" (Stok 1993: 35).

7 This seems to go against Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "polyphony," according to which a novelist uses multiple voices and speaks through

many characters, some of them very different from herself. Yet the divergence is resolved at a deeper, more existential level, where the author's identity is given precisely by the larger project of creation of selves.

8 In *The Limits of Voice* (1996). Classical antiquity, says Costa Lima, had "conceived a cosmic order that prevailed through the early Middle Ages." This is a "Law" that, in Christianity at least, "was believed to come from a benevolent God, whose magnanimity had built into things the possibility of their being known, used, and transformed for the greater good of his creatures" (Costa Lima 1996: 2).

9 Nothing is sadder than a rebel who outlives the object of their rebellion. An example: many East-European dissidents, who opposed the communist regimes in their countries in the 1970s and 1980s, became desolate figures in the 1990s after the collapse of communism. Once the object of their fight, disdain, and mockery disappeared, a sense of emptiness must have entered their lives. Indeed, communism must have been their greatest loss. In the 2000s some of them could not stand it any longer and became Marxists themselves.

10 Of strict Catholic upbringing and rigorous Jesuit philological instruction, up to that point Hadot had done work on the Fathers of the Church, but also on Plotinus, Marcus Aurelius, Wittgenstein, and others.

11 Published in English, in Michael Chase's translation, in 1995 as *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault.*

12 Arnold Davidson, one of Hadot's main promoters in the English-speaking world, remembers Foucault's enthusiasm: "I believe it was in 1982 that Michel Foucault first mentioned Pierre Hadot to me. Struck by Foucault's enthusiasm, I photocopied a number of Hadot's articles" (Davidson 1995: 1).

13 For a recent criticism, see John Cooper's latest book, *Pursuits of Wisdom* (Cooper 2011).

14 *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Michael Chase's translation came out in 2002.

15 For example, Pierre Hadot says in an interview: "It seems to me … that the description M. Foucault gives of what I had termed 'spiritual exercises,' and which he prefers to call 'techniques of the self,' is precisely focused far too much on the 'self,' or at least on a specific conception of the self" (Hadot 1995: 206–7).

16 There is something distinctly "unfinished" about Foucault's last project, and a sense that, had he lived longer, he would have had more to say about the tradition of "the care of the self" in Western philosophy. This "unfinishedness" itself is testimony to the notion that not only is one's life part of one's work, but also one's death.

17 For more on this, see David E. Cooper's essay, "Visions of Philosophy" (Cooper 2010).

18 In his book *Convergence with Nature* David E. Cooper make a similar point with regard to the environmentalist movement. He suggests here that the facile rhetoric of "saving the planet" distracts from the difficult task of adjusting one's own life and relationship to nature (Cooper 2012).

19 Peter Sloterdijk borrowed Rilke's line for the title of one of his recent books (Sloterdijk 2013).

20 Hadot says, for example, that the "written works of this period remain closely tied to oral conduct. Often they were dictated to a scribe. And they were intended to be read aloud, either by a slave reading to his master or by the reader himself, since in antiquity reading customarily meant reading aloud, emphasizing the rhythms of the phrase and the sounds of the words, which the author himself had already experienced when he dictated his work" (Hadot 1995: 62).

21 For Foucault, just as for Hadot, Socrates is a founding figure. The whole philosophical tradition of "the care for the self" originated with him: "it was this theme of the care of oneself, consecrated by Socrates, that later philosophy took up again and ultimately placed at the center of that 'art of existence' which philosophy claimed to be" (Foucault 1988: 44).

22 It is "as a master of the care of the self that Socrates presents himself to the judges" (Foucault 1988: 44).

23 To examine oneself is not to take a path to happiness. In a recent book, *Examined Lives*, James Miller casts some light on these aspects of philosophical self-examination. For anyone who hopes for "happiness, or political wisdom, or salvation," says Miller, self-examination has led to "self-doubt as often as self-trust, to misery as often as joy, to reckless public acts as often as prudent political conduct, and to moments of self-inflicted torment as often as moments of saving grace" (Miller 2011: 349).

24 Later on in this book, in Chapter 3, I will return to the issue of the philosopher's relationship to the body and dwell on it in some detail.

25 "The telling of tales about spiritual heroes … played a formative role in the philosophical schools of antiquity. The need for such narratives led to the crafting of idealized accounts that might enlighten and edify" (Miller 2011: 8).

26 "[J]e suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre" (Montaigne 1969: 35).

27 Sarah Bakewell talks of "[s]ensations that are harder to capture in words, or even to be aware of: what it feels like to be lazy, or courageous, or indecisive; or to indulge a moment of vanity, or to try to shake off an obsessive fear. He even writes about the sheer feeling of being alive" (Bakewell 2010: 5).

28 As Sarah Bakewell has observed, a typical page of Montaigne's *Essays* is "a sequence of meanders, bends, and divergences. You have to let yourself be carried along, hoping not to capsize each time a change of direction throws you off balance" (Bakewell 2010: 33).

29 Sarah Bakewell speaks of Montaigne's "art of sitting on every part of the fence at once" (Bakewell 2010: 97).

30 Bakewell observes how Montaigne tells us, "for no particular reason, that the only fruit that he likes is melon, that he prefers to have sex lying down rather than standing up, that he cannot sing, and that he loves vivacious company and often gets carried away by the spark of repartee" (Bakewell 2010: 5).

31 See Bakewell 2010: 226.

32 Self-fashioning, says Stephen Greenblatt, "is always, though not exclusively, in language" (Greenblatt 1980: 9).

33 As Hugo Friedrich puts it, he "completes his discovery and portrayal of himself in his reflection upon death" (Friedrich 1991: 258).

The first layer

1 In his book on Montaigne, Hugo Friedrich openly calls it "one of the greatest texts on death of the postantiquity Western world" (Friedrich 1991: 258–9).

2 According to Sarah Bakewell, Montaigne "never fully got over La Boétie, but he learned to exist in the world without him, and, in so doing, to change his own life" (Bakewell 2010: 108).

3 This is the meaning of *mortification* in the ascetic traditions, where the process is also accompanied by specific bodily practices (fasting, self-flagellation, etc.).

4 "Le but de nostre carrière, c'est la mort, c'est l'object necessaire de nostre vise" (Montaigne 1969: I, 129).

5 Which is not at all "reducible to experience of the fictional" (Costa Lima 1988: ix).

6 He adds, however, that this difference is neither gratuitous nor chaotic: not "an idiosyncratic difference similar to an idiolect but a socially recognizable, potentially acceptable difference" (Costa Lima 1988: viii–ix).

7 Speaking of this self-portrait and its significance for the body of Munch's work, Arne Eggum notices: "This lithograph has become *the* picture of the symbolist painter Edvard Munch. It is also the most sensitive portrait that he created. By simply letting one eye stare straight ahead and

making the left eye look downward and inward, he managed to express a balance in the way the subject's soul is revealed" (Eggum 1978: 20).

8 Arne Eggum, for example: "The picture is in the form of a sepulchral tablet. … The self-portrait may … basically be looked upon as a memento mori" (Eggum 1978: 20).

9 Quoted in Tallis 2003: 4.

10 Munch's formal education was rather limited and, while intellectually curious, he was not exactly a bookworm. However, his friends were often puzzled by his remarkable insights and the many things he seemed to know. Contemporary painter Ludvig Ravensberg notices: "Munch knew so much without being conscious of knowing it himself and without anyone knowing how he could possibly have acquired this knowledge" (in Bjerke 1995: 19).

11 Heidegger fully develops this notion in his later work, after the *Kehre*, but even in *Sein und Zeit* he offers sufficient hints in this regard.

12 As Heidegger would famously put it later, "language is the house of Being" (*Die Sprache is das Haus des Seins*) Being cannot be (articulated) in the absence of language; it would be nothing without it. Any ontological engagement, any gesture toward Being is also a "linguistic" gesture. It follows that any mistreatment of Being is reflected in the language itself and the use people make of it. Indeed, language in general, says Heidegger, "is worn out and used up—an indispensable but masterless means of communication that may be used as one pleases, as indifferent as a means of public transportation" (in Steiner 1980: 45).

13 George Steiner writes: "The *figura etymologica*, the excavation of meaning from verbal roots and the history of words, is in the fullest sense an 'emergence,' a stepping into light" (Steiner 1980: 47). Heideger's heavy reliance on etymologies, with all the allusions, inside knowledge, and philological expertise it presupposes, makes his writing particularly dense. Sometimes, it takes a command of ancient Greek, medieval Latin, and old German just to go through a Heideggerian paragraph.

14 "In the earlier writings," says Cooper, "readers suffers the heavy-weight vocabulary of phenomenology ('ecstasis,' 'categorial intuition,' and the like), while some of the later work still strike them as more akin to the incantations of a mystic poet than to the essays of a professional philosopher" (Cooper 1996: 5–6).

15 In a famous book, Leo Strauss relates these philosophers' "esotericism" to the fear of political persecution that their texts may bring about (Strauss 1988); such a rhetoric of convolution, artifice, and ambiguity is meant to mislead potential persecutors. Strauss' argument may work in some cases and not in others. Moreover, such a theory could hardly explain Heidegger's preference for an obscure style.

16 In *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, Martin Heidegger explicitly says, first, that clarity is a bad thing in philosophy and, second, that the work is only written for the very few, special ones.

17 Technically, the work is unfinished.

18 It is precisely death that makes us what we are; the experience of death is "an essential distinguishing mark of what it is to be human. The nature of human life and the nature of human death are tied inextricably together" (Wrathall 2005: 62).

19 As George Steiner has put it, "*Dasein* can come to grasp its own wholeness and the meaningfulness that is indivisible from integrity only when it faces its 'no-longer-being-there' (*sein Nicht-mehr-da-sein*)" (Steiner 1980: 102).

20 "Death individualizes, even though dying takes place in huge numbers" (Safransky 1998: 164).

21 Dasein can gain an "experience of death, all the more so because Dasein is essentially Being with Others" (Heidegger 2000: 281).

22 "When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one" (Heidegger 2000: 294).

23 In this state Dasein finds itself "*face to face* with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of its existence."

24 For Safransky anxiety is "the shadowy queen among the moods" (Safransky 1998: 152).

25 "Anxiety is anxious *about* the potentiality-for-Being of the entity so destined, and in this way it discloses the uttermost possibility. Anticipation utterly individualizes Dasein, and allows it, in this individualization of itself, to become certain of the totality of its potentiality-for-being" (Heidegger 2000: 310).

26 Philippe Ariès, for example, mentions it (Ariès 1974), and so does George Steiner (Steiner 1980: 105).

27 "They" is the usual translation of Heidegger's *das Man*, for which a literal translation is impossible in English. *Man* does not have an English equivalent, but its function is performed satisfactorily by "they" (as in "as they say"). In other languages *Man* can be translated unproblematically—in French, for example, with *on*, in Spanish and Romanian with *se*, in Italian with *si*, and so on.

28 *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* has a peculiar structure. The story unfolds in chronological order, narrating Ivan's life from childhood on, with one exception: the first chapter, where we are introduced abruptly to his death. This irregular structure has puzzled scholars, most of whom have a hard time figuring out Tolstoy's rationale for it. In his book, *The*

Death of Ivan Ilich. An Interpretation, Garry R. Jahn discusses this in detail (Jahn 1993). Yet in light of what I've been arguing, starting the story of Ivan's life with his death, and more specifically with the others' attitude to it, makes perfect sense. For it is in the "they" that his life truly originates; the "they" has made him who he is. The first chapter does a wonderful job at setting the stage for the unfolding of Ivan's deeply alienated life.

29 George Steiner talks of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* as some sort of exercise in controlled falling. For him the novel "descends, with agonizing leisure and precision, into the dark places of the body. It is a poem—one of the most harrowing ever conceived—of the insurgent flesh, of the manner in which carnality, with its pains and corruptions, penetrates and dissolves the tenuous discipline of reason" (Steiner 1996: 283).

30 For Heidegger death "offers us an opportunity to take responsibility for our existence if we will face up to it" (Wrathall 2005: 61).

31 "Anticipation of my death," says Cooper, induces "a sense of my 'Being-a-whole,' for I am capable of 'taking the *whole* of [my existence] in advance,' viewing the possibilities that lie before me in relation to that final one, my death. Lacking such a view, I am in the position of a novelist with no conception of his book's ending, for I am without guidance on structuring my life in a coherent fashion" (Cooper 1996: 45).

32 By "publicness" he means an invisible, frightful force pressuring everybody into submission and uniformity. "Publicness" is the enemy of anything distinguished, rare, outstanding. Because of it, "everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone" (Heidegger 2000: 165).

33 In his study on Tolstoy, Richard Gustafson sees *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* as an "autopsychological prose fiction" that describes "the discovery of life in the face of death" (Gustafson 1986: 159).

34 See Safransky 1998: 154.

35 In his Confessions, Saint Augustine gave this notion its optimum literary form: *Fecisti nos ad te, Domine, et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.* ("Thou hast made us for Thyself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rest in Thee.") Unsurprisingly, Landsberg quotes and discusses the Augustinian passage.

36 "[W]ithout guarantees or security," says Simon Critchley (Critchley 2012: 18).

37 They are also visible in other places. For example, when he discusses the mystics' experiences, he feels compelled to add that, as a philosopher, he doesn't "have any authority in this field of exceptional experiences, where you can never prove anything" (Landsberg 1936: 84).

38 Bergman scholar Peter Cowie comments on the scene: "Death appears.

Suddenly. Soundlessly. Miraculously. Bergman extinguishes all noise, even the lapping of the water, at this precise moment. It constitutes one of the most dramatic 'entrances' in all cinema; in the hands of another director, the situation would be ludicrous, but no audience laughs at this point in *The Seventh Seal*" (Cowie 1982: 142).

39 "Block and Jons are both soldiers; hence the appropriateness of chess and its place as the knight's emblem. Chess is a game (and a mode of thinking) for adversaries and, if one's opponent is stronger, its strategy is keeping one's distance until one can be sure, just like the knight with life" (Kalin 2003: 66).

40 Albertus Pictor, says Cowie, "was the finest of all Swedish medieval church painters. In his murals, and in those by other, anonymous artists, the theme of Death is paramount" (Cowie 1982: 137).

41 A play that precedes the film, and on which it is based, written by the director himself, is called *Wood Painting*.

42 Peter Cowie has remarked on Block's dialogue with Death: "The dialogue between Death and the Knight amount to a verbal equivalent of their struggle at the chess board; each remark seeks to outflank and outmaneuver the other" (Cowie 1982: 149).

43 Bergman would say: "*The Seventh Seal* swept like a forest fire across the world. I was met with strong responses from people who felt that the movie struck right at their own inner doubts and agony" (Bergman 1990: 242).

44 "Bergman's conception of Death is intriguing; he endows him with the sardonic stare of the intellectual, who is both afraid and bereft of emotion. Death glides into the frame from one side or the other, always unexpected" (Cowie 1982: 151).

45 As a Bergman scholar has put it, Block "has an ascetic quality. His torments are not about art or love, but about the nature of faith itself" (Macnab 2009: 97).

46 In an insightful book on Bergman (*The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*), Frank Gado says about Block: "Perhaps inspired by Faust (his 1958 production of the *Ur-Faust* in Malmö would often be compared to *The Seventh Seal*), he introduced the knight's compulsion for knowledge at any cost as a key element, and to accentuate the knight's intellectualism, he borrowed a convention from *Don Quixote* and made the squire an earthly sensualist" (Gado 1986: 198). Macnab sketches an inventory of influences: "The influences Bergman cited in interviews and in his writings included everything from Carl Orff's choral work *Carmina Burana* to works by Picasso and Durer. Historians have noted nods in the direction of Carl Dreyer's *Day of Wrath*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, plays by Strindberg and even some of Bergman's earlier plays and films" (Macnab 2009: 99).

47 This is, for example, how Peter Cowie reads the scene: "Death is distracted, and Jof and Mia escape. Death tells Block that he will be checkmate at the next move. But Block does not care. He has accomplished his task" (Cowie 1982: 150).

48 Somehow, making *The Seventh Seal* has a similar effect on Bergman. The film, he says, "is about the fear of death. It freed me from my own fear of death" (Bergman 1970: 117).

49 At one point Frank Gado suggests, somehow obliquely, a similar interpretation: "By virtue of his request to 'live as long as I hold out against you,' the match becomes a metaphor for life itself: though Block knows he must lose in the end, he hopes that contesting his fate may reveal something that will make the effort worthwhile" (Gado 1986: 201). However, in the end, he seems to go back to the more conventional interpretation: "The import of his meaningful deed is that something other than 'emptiness under the moon' lies beyond his death as an individual, Mikael, the emblem of the human community's future, will be his heir—in a manner of speaking, his 'reincarnation'" (Gado 1986: 209).

50 Commentators tend to assume that Bergman became an atheist in the obvious sense of that word, but his relationship to religion remained always complex. He was inspired by it, repelled by it, always interested in it. Peter Cowie even talks about Bergman's embrace of religion: "Orthodox religion runs in Bergman's blood. He often signs his scripts with the initials *S.D.G.* ("Soli Deo Gloria"—"To God alone the Glory"), as J.S. Bach did at the end of every composition. He is fond of quoting Eugene O'Neill's dictum "that all dramatic art is worthless unless it deals with man's relationship to God" (Cowie 1982: 137).

Philosophy in the flesh

1 Lakoff and Johnson consider that the "faculty psychology" which we inherited from the Western philosophical tradition is wrong. "There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement. The evidence supports, instead, an evolutionary view, in which reason uses and grows out of such bodily capacities … reason is fundamentally embodied" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 17).

2 See, for example, their *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

3 I am particularly indebted to David E. Cooper for his thoughtful comments on the importance of body in philosophy, as outlined in this paragraph.

4 Maria Dzielska comments on this episode: "Since the young man, despite being her student, showed complete ignorance, she violated him

psychologically (whereas Socrates only derided Alcibiades' stupidity) to make him see that beauty cannot be identified with a concrete object (in this case Hypatia's body)" (Dzielska 1995: 51).

5 "He could not reconcile himself to the possible eclipse of his influence. Hypatia and, through her, Orestes exercised leadership among the elite of Alexandria. Cyril, his ambition thwarted, consumed by frustration and envy, became a dangerous man" (Dzielska 1995: 97–8).

6 As Dzielska notices, "the sources reveal that they also served as a sort of military arm of the Alexandrian patriarch, carrying out actions against his adversaries in various places and situations" (Dzielska 1995: 96).

7 As Ingrid Rowland puts it, in their "investigations, the inquisitors obeyed strict rules of due process; unless two witnesses backed up an accusation, there was no case" (Rowland 2008: 230). Similarly, Luigi Firpo says "Nessuno vorrà negare alla Chiesa cattolica che il processo fu condotto secondo il respetto della piú stretta legalità" (Firpo 1998: 112).

8 Bellarmino was "by all reports the most incisive theological mind of the outgoing sixteenth century" (Rowland 2008: 252).

9 The most extensive discussion of Bruno's trial is offered by Luigi Firpo in his book *Il Processo di Giordano Bruno* (Firpo 1998). Mercati's book *Il Sommario del Processo di Giordano Bruno* (Mercati 1942) is invaluable, but his vitupurations against Bruno are profoundly unsettling. For literature in English, Ingrid Rowland's book offers an excellent presentation of Bruno's trial.

10 "que' rustici, che rapportano gli affeti e la forma d'un conflitto a un capitano absente" (Bruno 1985: I, 27).

11 "Bruno has made the Gnostic ascent, has had the Hermetic experience, and so has become divine, with the Powers within him" (Yates 1991: 239).

12 "Forse con maggior timore pronunciate contro di me la sentenza, di quanto ne provi io nel riceverla."

13 Michele Ciliberto's remarkable biography of Bruno bears the title *Giordano Bruno. Il teatro della vita* (Ciliberto 2007).

14 "If he truly believed his own philosophy," observes Rowland, Bruno's "own death formed an infinitesimal part of the eternal life of the universe" (Rowland 2008: 266).

15 "questa nostra madre, che nel suo dorso ne alimenta e ne nutrisce, dopo averne produtti dal suo grembo, al qual di nuovo sempre ne riaccoglie" (Bruno 1985: 33).

16 "When Patočka signed Charter 77, agreed to serve as a spokesperson, and authored documents for it, it was an invitation to Husák's regime to persecute him" (Tucker 2000: 86).

17 Aviezer Tucker notices the same thing: "Patočka's metaphysically founded ethical system fully explains his involvement with Charter 77" (Tucker 2000: 43). See also the observations that Barbara Falk makes on this subject. She says, for example, that "Signing the Charter was an extension of what Patočka had always been doing, whether as a student of Husserl, a clerk in the Comenius archive, or as a lecturer of an underground seminar. Like Socrates, his task was to actively 'do' philosophy, not face some forced and false choice between 'politics' and 'philosophy.' The point was not to engage in politics for its own sake, but to logically follow the Socratic dictates of attending to issues of truth and reason in the search for the Good" (Falk 2003: 246).

18 Fanynka Sokolová, Patočka's daughter, recounts in her contribution to a Patočka memorial volume their final moments: "You were not well; you were lying down. You were speaking about the lives of philosophers. … Then suddenly you said, 'You know, when William of Orange had that Spaniard murdered … no one said anything. And Spinoza … went and wrote on his door: *Ultimi barbarorum*" (Quoted in Kriseová 1993: 130).

19 As a commentator prosaically put it, Patočka's philosophical journey, "which began with the Socratic question, finds its Socratic conclusion in the interrogation rooms of the police headquarters" (Kohak 1989: 8).

20 See Barton 2002: 32, n. 6.

21 See McLellan 1990: 266.

22 The information regarding the circumstances of Weil's hospitalization, death and funeral are taken primarily from the excellent biographies of Simone Weil by Simone Pétrement (Pétrement 1976) and David McLellan (McLellan 1990).

23 Simone Weil, says Francine Du Plessix Gray in her biography, "has been praised and condemned, commented, annotated, interpreted, footnoted, almost to extinction" (Du Plessix Gray 2001: 229).

24 David McLellan has put it well: "she remains unclassifiable—and therefore perpetually unsettling" (McLellan 1990: 2).

25 McLellan talks of a profound coherence between Weil's thought and her life, and notices that she was "astonishingly quick to put her principles into practice" (McLellan 1990: 1).

26 McLellan says that "she had been killing herself all her life" (McLellan 1990: 263) and Palle Yourgrau that "it could well be said that Simone Weil was born to die" (Yourgrau 2011: 9).

27 Thibon was one of Weil's closest friends. He published some of her materials as *Gravity and Grace*.

28 The literature on Christian martyrdom is immense. No bibliographical

note can do justice to the numerous titles that come out virtually all the time. Apart from the books I quote from, here are some others that I used for writing this chapter: Daniel Boyarin's *Dying for God* (Boyarin 1999); Elisabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* (Castelli, 2004); Sarah Covington's *The Trail of Martyrdom* (Covington 2003); Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Croix 2006).

29 See Khosrokhavar 2005: 11.

30 Khosrokhavar draws the distinction between the meaning of martyrdom in the two religions in this way: "The Muslim *shahid* does … differ from the Christian *martyros* in one fundamental respect. In Christianity, death results from the Christian's refusal to obey the will of a powerful figure who wants to impose his religion upon him. The Christian does not seek to inflict death upon the Roman pagan who wishes him to foreswear his faith. … In the case of Islam, martyrdom is a death resulting from the fight against the enemy of the religion of Allah" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 11).

31 For a parallel exploration of Jewish and Christian martyrdom, see also Boyarin 1999.

32 Of course, a distinction is to be made between the historical Jesus and the Jesus about whom we learn in the Gospels. The two Jesuses had different approaches to martyrdom: "Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed himself the messianic king and never expected to die ... The Jesus of Luke's biography actually baited the Romans to kill him! It is not so much the historical Jesus as the Jesus imagined by the early Christians who is of interest to us here. Clearly, they understood his death not as the execution of a convicted criminal but as a divinely ordained event: predicted by the prophets and provoked by the Jesus himself" (Droge and Tabor 1992: 116).

33 "The writers of the Gospels created a Jesus who became the prototype of the Christian martyr" (Droge and Tabor 1992: 126).

34 Droge and Tabor, for example (Droge & Tabor 1992: 118).

35 There is a growing literature on martyrdom in Islam, in good part due to the fact that in Islamist circles theological arguments are used to justify terror-based politics. These are some of the books I used here: Khosrokhavar 2005; Husain 2007; Ruthven 2002; Oliver & Steinberg 2005; Glucklich 2009.

36 Khosrokhavar also points to the differences between the cultures of martyrdom in Sunni and Shi'ite Islam: "The Sunni martyr is one who dies 'in the path of God' by taking part in a *jihad*. In Shi'ite Islam, martyrs have something in common with the tragic saints that we find, for similar historical reasons, in southeast Europe. … Shi'ite communities have often been persecuted or, which is more important, have perceived themselves as being persecuted by Sunnis" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 4).

37 "Just as one must learn the art of killing in training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for nonviolence" (Pandey 1998: 52).

38 Gandhi's biographer, Louis Fisher, notices how when he was fasting "every change in Gandhi's physical condition, every word pronounced by anyone who had seen him, every journey of the least of the negotiators was broadcast to every corner of the country" (Fisher 1983: 318).

39 "A spirit of reform, penance, and self-purification swept the land [as a result of Gandhi's fast]. During the six fast days, most Hindus refrained from going to cinemas, theaters, or restaurants. Weddings were postponed" (Fisher 1983: 319).

40 Self-immolation has little to do with suicide. "Suicidal tendencies almost never lead to self-immolation," says Michael Biggs (Biggs 2005: 201). Self-immolation is a deliberate, determined and painfully expressive form of individual protest. Under certain circumstances, the gesture of an individual self-immolator is enough to ignite large-scale social movements.

41 For more on the significance of self-immolation in Mahayana Buddhism, see James Benn, *Burning for Buddha* (Benn 2007).

42 For more on reactions to Jan Palach's gesture, both in Czechoslovakia and abroad, see Charles Sabatos' essay (Sabatos 2009).

43 What's novel in Bouazizi's case is the role of the social media. For the first time a story of martyrdom has been created not by individual authors, but by a new type of narrator: collective, unseen, faceless, yet omnipresent and tremendously powerful.

44 Historians consider "the beginning of the end" for the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia to be the "Palach Week" in January 1989, a commemoration of Palach's death that the authorities tried to repress, thus setting in motion a process that would culminate in the Velvet Revolution several months later.

45 The sociologist Michael Biggs estimates that between 800 and 3,000 self-immolations may have taken place over the four decades after 1963. Yet, only a handful of them had any political impact (Biggs 2005: 174).

46 After 9/11 the literature on suicide-bombers has grown exponentially. Here are some of the titles I used for this chapter: Khosrokhavar 2005; Abufarha 2009; Husain 2007; Ruthven 2002; Havez 2006; Oliver & Steinberg 2005; Glucklich 2009; Pape 2006.

47 For a good discussion of the topic, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's two books: *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms* (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002) and *Kamikaze Diaries* (Ohnuki-Tierney 2006).

48 Ruthven makes the same point: "The religious legitimacy of these acts is, to say the least, highly questionable" (Ruthven 2002: 101).

49 In a sociological study, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs*, Khosrokhavar looks at contemporary forms of alienation among Muslim youth and seeks to identify mechanisms explaining how young Muslims voluntarily turn into human bombs. He discovers that these youths—marginalized, frustrated, suffering from an acute inferiority complex—cannot find the means to individualize themselves properly. They don't really belong anywhere and end up "trapped into an East–West dichotomy," and "wounded by the crushing superiority of *homo occidentalis* at the economic, material and mental level" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 57). Thanks to their alienation doubled by an aggressive Islamist propaganda, the only place that they could see as offering them some sense of belonging is "a ghostly community in death" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 50), which they hasten to join. Khosrokhavar uses the term "martyropathy" to designate the condition of these youths, and that form of behavior where "death, and not life, is seen as the goal" (Khosrokhavar 2005: 59–60).

The second layer

1 Plato's and Xenophon's Apologies are the only surviving accounts of the trial of Socrates. Ancient authors make references to other "Apologies of Socrates," but they are lost.

2 I will use Stephanus edition numbers in all my subsequent references to Plato's *Apology* (in Tredennick's translation).

3 I should also mention here the fascination that dying young sometimes produces. Peter France discusses "the Romantic scheme of things" where "an early tragic death is read as a mark of election" (France 2000: 11).

4 "Although traditionally we focus on his trial and death, he was actually a survivor. By 399 BC, many men in Athens were destroyed or were shadows of their former selves" (Hughes 2011: 358).

5 As a recent biographer puts it, perhaps "towards the end of the fifth century BC Athens was simply tired of him. The conversations about Socrates, once excited, indulgent, were now tetchy, damning" (Hughes 2011: 238).

6 Nietzsche would say: "The *dying Socrates* became the new ideal, never seen before, of noble Greek youths" (In Ahrensdorf 1995: 2).

7 Emily Wilson relates Socrates's "clean" death by poison, at an age when he was still healthy, to the image he left behind, and on which his posterity was to be built: "Socrates avoided all the indignity usually associated with death. He died at the peak of his powers. His friends did not have to see him convulsed or racked by agonizing pain. They did not

have to empty bedpans, mop up vomit or nurse a senile old man. He left only good memories behind him" (Wilson 2007: 12).

8 Peter Ackroyd says: "in his careful consideration and rereading of the two documents [the Act of Succession and the oath of succession], he had realized that the oath itself went far beyond the matter of the royal succession. It required obeisance not only to the Act of Succession itself, in other words, but also to 'all other Acts and Statutes made since the beginning of the present Parliament.' That included the Acts of Annates, of Appeals, of Dispensations, and of Peter's Pence" (Ackroyd 1999: 364).

9 "If More had sworn the oath, as presented to him with this wording, he would have concurred in the forcible removal of the Pope's jurisdiction and the effective schism of the Church of England. This he could not do, even at the cost of his life" (Ackroyd 1999: 364).

10 As Richard Marius writes, "More's prose is most lively when he speaks of death and of the way we are soon forgotten" (Marius 1985: 356).

11 "For some of the old famous philosophers, when they were demanded what faculty philosophy was, answered that it was the meditation or exercise of death" (More 1931: I, 468).

12 See Ackroyd 1999: 369.

13 In a letter he wrote at the beginning of 1535 he warned: "if ever I should mishap to receive the oath (which I trust our Lord shall never suffer me), ye may reckon sure that it were expressed and distorted by duresse and hard handling [torture]" (More 1961: 243).

14 As one of the text's modern editors puts it, it is "doubtful if many literary works have been written under more adverse circumstances" (Miles in More 1965: xvi).

15 This is what Leland Miles suggests (Miles in More 1965: xxx).

16 Marius notices how "much in the *Dialogue of Comfort* deals with the conquest of fear. Yet we find no panic; rather we find serenity and composure" (Marius 1985: 472).

17 The *Dialogue*'s failure as a "literary work" strictly defined doubled by its success as an exercise meant to bring its author comfort reminds us of something that Pierre Hadot noticed about the ancient philosophical works. In the tradition of philosophy as an "art of living" that he describes, a written work was often only the approximate recording of a live philosophical act: "Quite often the work proceeds by the associations of ideas, without systematic rigor. The work retains the starts and stops, the hesitations, and the repetitions of the spoken discourse. Or else, after re-reading what he has written, the author introduces a somewhat forced systematization by adding transitions, introductions, or conclusions to different parts of the work" (Hadot 1995: 62).

18 Seeing progress in his condition, she notices at some point: "the medicines of my arguments have begun to work on you" (Boethius 2012: 46).

19 In recent scholarship, however, this is sometimes disputed.

20 The "devil hath of his trains a thousand subtle ways, and of his open fight as many sundry poisoned darts" (More 1965: 83).

21 Commenting on *Utopia*, Marius writes insightfully: "He wanted order. He wanted people kept in line, disciplined, communal, and busy. He believed that human society was a precarious business, that sinful human beings required all-encompassing authorities or else their world would degenerate into licentiousness and chaos" (Marius 1985: 290).

22 As it happens, in *Utopia* More was the first modern author to suggest the use of imprisonment as a form of punishment.

23 This is how a contemporary chronicler, Edward Hall, describes him: "I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wise man or a wise foolish man, for undoubtedly he beside his learning had a great wit, but it was so mingled with taunting and mocking that it seemed to them that best knew him, that he thought nothing to be well spoken except he had ministered some mock in the communication" (Quoted in Marius 1985: 518).

24 "More's inner conflicts and fundamental mystery loom darker than most of his modern admirers care to admit" (Marius 1985: 518).

25 Ackroyd calls him a "resourceful actor," (Ackroyd 1999: 55) and so does Marius: "More, always the actor" (Marius 1985: 86).

26 See Ackroyd 1999: 69. According to Thomas Stapleton, one of More's earliest biographers, More feared "even with the help of his practices and penance that he would not be able to conquer the temptations of the flesh that come to a man in the vigor and ardor of his youth" (in Marius 1985: 37).

27 For a good discussion of More's reaction to Protestant literature see James Simpson's *Burning to Read* (Simpson 2007).

28 They had to ride like this from the Tower to Cheapside Cross, while Londoners "obliged by pelting them with rotten fruit and dung" (Ackroyd 1999: 300–1).

29 Marius says in this regard "it was his death that made his life truly important and called forth the biographies that formed an enduring image of the man in English history" (Marius 1985: xiv).

30 Steven Greenblatt wrote convincingly about More's "self-fashioning" (Greenblatt 1980), but the issue comes up in virtually all the modern biographies of More. Marius even finds More's constant working on his public image a bit annoying: "He felt himself on stage, and we weary of the self-serving of his image making" (Marius 1985: 518–19).

31 In his reading of the *Dialogue of Comfort* Peter Ackroyd notices something similar: "Half of his struggle lay in preventing himself from rushing to such a death, and indeed many of his references in the *Dialogue* concern those who suffer from spiritual pride or are tempted into that dreadful vanity by the devil himself" (Ackroyd 1999: 372).

32 Maybe this necessary circumspection explains, at least in part, a certain mystery that still surrounds More's martyrdom. Neither his contemporaries nor later generations have fully understood More's motivation. As Marius has put it: "What kind of martyr is it who will not make a strong, clear statement of the reasons for his martyrdom?" (Marius 1985: 470).

33 This is puzzling, at the very least: if the oath was something that, should he swear it, would bring him "eternal damnation," why didn't he say anything when people about whom he cared deeply took it?

34 See Ackroyd 1999: 362.

35 When one of his modern biographers, Marius, asks himself about how far More "was willing to … accommodate himself to the king's new marriage," he finds out that it was "very far indeed" (Marius 1985: 455).

36 See Ackroyd 1999: 360–1.

37 As Greenblatt notices, "More imagines not that he is reenacting Jesus' part, imitating Christ, but rather that with supreme generosity Christ has rehearsed the part that More must now play" (Greenblatt 1980: 72).

The making of a martyr-philosopher

1 There is a growing literature on martyrdom and memory: Boyarin 1999, Castelli 2004, and Khosrokhavar 2005 are only some of the most recent examples.

2 "People only become martyrs because others make them so. … The martyrs are model figures for the groups who transmit and read the writings devoted to them. Martyr figures play an important role in the process of the formation of self-identity" (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002: 7).

3 As one scholar has noticed, "for all its religious and theological overtones," martyrdom is "at heart a public and political spectacle" (Smith 1997: 10).

4 "The day martyrs are executed is frequently referred to as their birthday" (Van Henten and Avemarie 2002: 110, n. 107).

5 Lacey Baldwin Smith makes this point. He considers that Socrates made such a great martyr precisely because of his "acting" abilities:

"Martyrdom … requires a leading actor of great ability and determination. And Socrates … proved to be a superlative performer" (Smith 1997: 31).

6 As Smith puts it, Socrates' "sense of timing and instinct for stage center have rarely been matched" (Smith 1997: 26).

7 In his book (Smith 1997) Smith places Socrates the public performer at the heart of Socrates the philosopher-martyr; I find this to be one of the most insightful ideas in the entire book.

8 Says Smith: "It was as if Socrates were simultaneously writing, directing, and enacting a scene of cosmic proportions in which he was the sole actor, not even god being permitted a walk-on part" (Smith 1997: 34).

9 See also Emily Wilson's take on this: "Plato's Socrates is extraordinary for many reasons, but not least for his attitudes towards his own death. He is able—perhaps more than any other character in literature, before or since—to take control of death, to own it, and to tell the whole story of his own life, including its end" (Wilson 2007: 101–2).

10 As Emily Wilson remarks, the *Phaedo* "offers us a picture of an ideal death. Socrates dies with courage, in complete control, calmly, surrounded by his friends. Death, he shows us, is the wise man's friend" (Wilson 2007: 104).

11 Speaking of Socrates' last moments, Emily Wilson asks herself: "I wonder whether it is really admirable to die so calmly, so painlessly and, above all, so talkatively" (Wilson 2007: 6–7).

12 See, for example, Ackroyd 1999: 406.

13 It is what Simon Critchley calls *risus purus*: the "highest laugh" (Critchley 2002: 95).

14 The full title of Emily Wilson's book is: *The Death of Socrates. Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint.* On the other hand, as far as Socrates' trial (not death) is concerned, there was a rumor, dating from the late fourth century, which Robin Waterfield mentions in his book, that Socrates "said nothing at his trial, but just stood there mute and defiant" (Waterfield 2009: 12).

15 One of More's most important modern biographers admits openly the existence of this privileged perspective in our reception of More: "it was his death that made his life truly important and called forth the biographies that formed an enduring image of the man in English history" (Marius,1985: xiv).

16 Most touching of all in Roper's biography is the scene where More has a "premonition" of his own martyrdom. When he talked to his wife and children "of the joys of heaven and the pains of hell," he would also bring up the topic of martyrdom. He would talk to them of the "lives of the holy martyrs, and of their grievous martyrdom, of their marvelous patience,

and of their passions and deaths, how they suffered rather than offend God," and in general "what a happy and a blessed thing it was for the love of God to suffer loss of goods, imprisonment, loss of lands, and life also" (Roper 1947: 246–7).

17 Speaking of what may have been the source of the contradictions of More's life, Marius suggests that perhaps "the fundamental cause was that he struggled to combine medieval piety with the invincible temptations of Renaissance secularism" (Marius 1985: 66).

18 Emily Wilson, for instance, places Plato's representation of the "dying Socrates" at the origin of Western literature: "The dying Socrates was not only Plato's mentor, but his subject, and ultimately his creation. Plato's Socrates is the first novelistic character in literature. Plato, founder of western metaphysics and western political thought, was also the originator, through Socrates, of modern western literature." (Wilson 2007: 99).

19 One recent example in Smith: "Possibly no death has ever been staged in such a coldly deliberate and calculated fashion, and the scene, as recorded by Plato, has a sterility and immobility about it reminiscent of a Vermeer painting—beautifully atmospheric but rigid and devoid of action: Socrates stands motionless in the limelight" (Smith 1997: 38).

20 Robin Waterfield does not limit the fictionalization of Socrates just to Plato, but makes it a feature of all of Socrates' philosophical descendants: "Plato, Xenophon and all the other Socratics were writing a kind of fiction—what, in their various views, Socrates might have said had he been in such-and-such a situation, talking with this person and that person on such-and-such a topic" (Waterfield 2009: 9).

21 "The enormous imaginative dominance of Plato over the western tradition has made it difficult to think of Socrates except through the eyes of Plato, who created the Socratic character that has been of most interest to later readers" (Wilson 2007: 94).

22 Emily Wilson again: "Plato was a pupil of Socrates the historical figure. But he is also the creator of 'Socrates,' in his best-known literary manifestation" (Wilson 2007: 89).

23 In Plato's *Symposium* (215b).

24 For a comprehensive discussion of the "therapeutic" in Socrates, see Tullio Maranhão's *Therapeutic Discourse and Socratic Dialogue* (Maranhão 1986).

25 Lacey Baldwin Smith has similarly noted how martyrdom more broadly was born full-grown with Plato: "The concept of martyrdom, as well as the world's first recorded martyr, emerged fully developed from the head of Plato; and to this day Socrates' performance—the cold deliberateness of his actions, the dramatic style of his death, and the purpose for which he died—has stamped and befuddled the history of martyrdom" (Smith 1997: 23).

26 This of course is still open to debate, but there is a certain consensus.

27 See, for example, Ackroyd 1999: 405.

28 For an ampler account of Patočka's involvement in Charter 77, as well as his place in the tradition of philosophical martyrdom, see my essay "Philosophy and Martyrdom. The Case of Jan Patočka" (Bradatan 2010).

29 There are philosophers for whom, for some reason or another, the "truth" is *not* to be communicated and knowledge has to be kept safely away from the "crowd," or others who believe that philosophy is a strictly private affair.

30 Foucault seems to suggest that much when stating that the *parrhesiastes* says "what is true because he *knows* that it *is* true; and he *knows* that it is true because it is really true." The *parrhesiastes* is "not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he *knows* to be true" (Foucault 2001: 14).

31 For Foucault the existence of courage is the very criterion of *parrhesia*: "If there is a kind of 'proof' of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes*, it is his *courage*. The fact that a speaker says something dangerous—different from what the majority believes—is a strong indication that he is a *parrhesiastes*" (Foucault 2001: 15).

32 In *parrēsía*, the one who speaks "is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks" (Foucault 2001: 12).

33 "Bruno answered his inquisitors frankly as they brought Mocenigo's accusations, one by one. Some of his answers must have shocked them" (Rowland 2008: 240).

34 In my following considerations I will rely mostly on René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (Girard 1979) and *The Scapegoat* (Girard 1986).

35 This is a reference to Charles Mackay's 1841 book, whose full title is is *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*.

36 Robert Waterfield, for example. "I like to think," he says, "that Socrates … accepted his death as a voluntary scapegoat" (Waterfield 2009: 204). Even though Waterfield does not mention Girard and discusses Socrates as a scapegoat rather briefly, at the very end of his book, he makes some insightful comments. For example: "Voluntary scapegoats were far more propitious than unwilling ones, and there would always be criminals available who preferred a ritual flogging and expulsion to whatever fate the courts had decreed for them" (Waterfield 2009: 203). Or: "Playing on the close link between *pharmakos* and *pharmakon*, 'scapegoat' and 'cure', Socrates saw himself as healing the city's ills by his voluntary death. A thanks offering to the god of healing [Asclepius] was due" (Waterfield 2009: 204).

37 "The scapegoat is only effective when human relations have broken down in crisis" (Girard 1986: 43).

38 The example is given by Girard (In Girard 1979: 8).

39 Once the community has managed to identify a victim, the "elements of dissention scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice." The sacrifice's function is thus to "protect the entire community from *its own* violence" (Girard 1979: 8).

40 Historically, the Jews were persecuted in this fashion. For centuries they were always the convenient scapegoats. Indeed, Girard opens his *Scapegoat* with a discussion of such a case of scapegoating.

41 This is such an important condition that at one point Girard defines sacrifice primarily as "an act of violence without risk of vengeance" (Girard 1979: 13).

42 "Sorcerers and witches are thought to have a particular affinity with the goat, an extremely evil animal. During the trials, suspects' feet are examined to see if they are cloven; their foreheads are tapped for any trace of a horn. The gradual disappearance of the borderline between animal and man in those who are marked as victims is an important concept" (Girard 1986: 48).

43 There seems to be no other account of Giordano Bruno's burning apart from the one already cited. The document is frustratingly telegraphic; based on it alone, we cannot have a clear idea about what a burning at the stake looked like around 1600. For this reason, in her book on Bruno Ingrid Rowland describes the execution of a Scottish heretic in Rome only few years earlier, in 1595. One can easily use it to "visualize" Bruno's own death: "to terrify him a huge pile of firewood, charcoal, kindling, and more than ten carloads of pitch had been prepared, and for the occasion a shirt of pitch was made for him that extended from his waist to his feet, black as coal, and then it was put over his naked flesh so that he would not die as quickly, and his life would be consumed in the fire as painfully as possible. He was conducted to the scaffold with a large escort, and made to sit on an iron chair next to the fire, which had already been lit" (Rowland 2008: 11–12).

44 Girard speaks of "mythic guilt."

45 In *The Scapegoat* Girard distinguishes between two major stages: the first consists of just accusing a scapegoat "who is not yet sacred [and] to whom all evil characteristics adhere," whereas in the second stage he is "made sacred by the community's reconciliation" (Girard 1986: 50).

46 The "effect of the scapegoat is to reverse the relationship between persecutors and their victims, thereby producing the sacred, the founding ancestors and the divinities. … the scapegoat no longer appears to

be merely a passive receptacle for evil forces but is rather the mirage of an omnipotent manipulator shown by mythology to be sanctioned unanimously by society" (Girard 1986: 44–6).

47 Girard traces the presence of this major transformation of the powerless victim into a god-like figure in mythology where the victims become "monstrous and display fantastic powers." After causing disorder, they "reestablish order and become founding fathers or gods." This is, concludes Girard, "what makes the victim sacred and transforms the persecution into a point of religious and cultural departure" (Girard 1986: 54–5).

48 Girard often uses Moses as an example of successful scapegoat. "The supreme legislator" he says, is "the very essence of a scapegoat who has been made sacred" (Girard 1986: 178).

49 See Wilson 2007: 128–9.

50 See, for example, Dzielska 1995: 7.

51 When Voltaire, for example, wrote about Hypatia, his main purpose was not so much to give an account of a fifth-century philosophical figure, but to support an Enlightenment campaign against the Church.

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INDEX