

“THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY”, “A KIND BEHIND THE DOOR”,  
“NEVERLAND”, OR “A SMALL UNFOCUSED BLUR”: UNCANNY  
LITERARY DEFINITIONS OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Known yet unknown, undiscovered yet constantly discovered and re-discovered, death has always been a gold mine providing ideas, work and wages for scientists, sociologists, philosophers, artists, literary critics, and many others who find life's provisionality in any way “uncanny”. This article looks at select literary definitions of death that present mortality as a concept both familiar and unfamiliar, comforting and disconcerting, domestic and strange. Like the Freudian term “uncanny”, the nature of mortality is complex, mysterious and elusive. As Terry Eagleton (2003: 211) points out, “[d]eath is both alien and intimate to us, neither wholly strange nor purely one's own”. While some of Freud's ideas from his essay “The ‘Uncanny’” are used as the basis for discussion here, this analysis is not limited to a psychoanalytic perspective and includes psychological, sociological, medical and literary references which help explore different aspects of death in literature.

In one of the most famous soliloquies of all time, pondering the possibility of ending life's miseries, Hamlet seeks an answer to what happens to us after death. Filled with uncertainty and confusion, the Prince's meandering train of thought finally arrives at a surprisingly cogent vision of death seen not only as the post-mortem state of the human body and a lack of consciousness, but, first and foremost, as a phenomenon, a process, a parallel world which we all know of but no one has been able to explore and define conclusively. “Who would fardels bear”, muses the indecisive Shakespearean hero, “To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will, / And makes us rather bear

those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of?" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.76-82). Although Hamlet seems not to fear the moment of death as such but rather what form of an afterlife we might have to face, the two concepts are inseparable because, regardless of one's beliefs, without death there would be no notion of an afterlife, be it spiritual, philosophical or biological. In the age of transhumanism and cryogenics, the Prince's ruminations upon the unceasing, existential uncertainty that death evokes stand the test of time yet again as many individuals much less confused than the Danish youth remain unsure about the nature of mortality. Even in the precision seeking world of modern medicine, the ontological and epistemological debate over what human death is and how we determine that it has occurred has resulted in more than one answer, including, for instance, the traditional cardiopulmonary approach, the whole-brain approach, death as a process approach, or the higher-brain approach according to which "human death is the irreversible cessation of the capacity for consciousness" (DeGrazia 2011), though one might still be able to breathe due to life support equipment. Familiar yet unfamiliar, known yet unknown, common yet constantly discovered and re-discovered, death has always been a gold mine providing ideas, work and wages for scientists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, artists, literary critics, gravediggers, and many others who find life's provisionality in any way "uncanny". In Freud's famous essay, a literary example is used as one of the main means to clarify the concept of the uncanny. In the concluding sections of the essay, Freud reasserts that literature is a particularly prolific field capable of yielding multiple representations of uncanny phenomena: "The uncanny as it is depicted in *literature* ... is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life" (Freud [1919] 2001: 950). And of all the subjects that elicit uncanny feelings in real life, death appears to be exceptionally fertile and moldable material inspiring endless explorations and explanations in the world of literary creation. In their efforts to capture death's uncanny distance and closeness, writers have at their disposal what other disciplines can only dream of: imagination, or, as Freud ([1919] 2001: 950) phrases it, "this licence among many others" that freely allows the imaginative artist to "select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases". Like the Freudian term "uncanny", which in German comprises contradictory and complementary meanings, the nature of mortality is complex, mysterious and elusive. The select literary depictions and definitions of death discussed here examine, portray and rework the concept of death into a notion both familiar and unfamiliar, comforting and dis-comforting, domestic and strange. These varied literary approaches to death's elusiveness, inevitability and permanence remain unconstricted by the time period of their creation and, thus, oppose as much as inform each other.

The definition of death as a journey to "the undiscovered country" from which "[n]o traveller returns" relies on the concept of dying both as a process and as a point in time. The latter becomes not only the end stop and the exit from what we know, but also an entrance to the uncharted part of the travel that certainly continues, even if only in the form of bodily decomposition. Just like for Hamlet, for many of Emily Dickinson's speakers "the most enigmatic part of death [is] the gradual isolation of an increasingly helpless self moving toward the horror of the utterly unknown: "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so – / 'Tis Living – hurts us more – / But Dying – is a different way – / A Kind behind the Door –' (# 335)" (Wolff 1988: 220-221). Certainly, death is only one of many hurtful events in life, and life at times can be more painful than the frightening awareness of death's finality. Yet, mortality underlies and shapes the majority of human misfortunes, dramas and psychological disturbances. As Irvin Yalom (1980: 29) argues, "death itches all the time" and "our attitudes toward death influence the way we live and grow and the way we falter and fall ill". Still, most of us continue to "bear those ills we have" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.81) without giving death too much thought or credit for shaping our life on a daily basis because, as Dickinson stresses (1961: 158), "Dying", while parallel to life, is also "a different way – / A Kind behind the Door –" (# 335)<sup>1</sup> that forever separates one from all human contact. Although she was convinced that "once we have crossed into whatever lies beyond life, none can return to tell the tale of passage" (Wolff 1988: 220), Dickinson enjoyed speculating about what this "different way" "behind the Door" that we all follow but know so little of might be like. In one of her most anthologized poems, "Because I could not stop for Death –" (# 712), the female speaker rides into the underworld unprepared. In the midst of life, she is kidnapped by "Death" personified as a gentleman, a suitor, a wooer who always gets his lady and whose sudden appearance leaves the speaker of the poem no choice but to ride along with him and, thus, start thinking about mortality. In Freud's view ([1919] 2001: 945), "no human being really grasps [the idea that 'All men are mortal'], and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality", which makes the status quo in the poem's opening lines all the more eerie: the human corpse not only narrates her own journey with "Death" towards the grave (uncanny since no one knows what really happens after death), but also claims she politely agreed to leave ("put away") the living and her life behind (familiar yet uncanny

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<sup>1</sup> Because throughout the article several poems by Emily Dickinson are quoted and referred to, to streamline the in-text reference system, the author decided to document the rest of the quotations from Dickinson's verse by providing only numbers commonly assigned to her poems in various anthologies and used in the popular 1961 paperback edition of her complete poems documented in References. When necessary, additional information is provided.

since life is contingent and due to be terminated without any warning), just like she, supposedly, had been putting aside the thoughts of her own death (familiar yet distant since never consciously acknowledged) before the supernatural journey commenced (uncanny). Freud ([1919] 2001: 950) states that “in the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in real life”. Skeptical about the sentimental consolatory literature of her contemporaries (Wolff 1988: 261), Dickinson certainly does not aspire to make the reader believe that one will really ride with death into the afterlife in a kindly fashion when the time comes, and, thus, according to Freud, this ride macabre should not be uncanny for the reader because the death fantasy remains in the “setting of poetic reality” ([1919] 2001: 950). Yet, this metaphorical journey tackles what always creates, at least temporarily, an overwhelming sense of unreality in real life: sudden death and, by extension, the general unexpectedness of and unpreparedness for death caused by our reluctance to face mortality (Lynn and Harrold 2003: 84-85). By putting “Death” in the position of a guide and a companion, the speaker of the poem attempts to minimize the shock of her sudden demise. For the onlookers/readers, however, the overall effect may be quite different. Dickinson’s mesmerizing diction oscillates between rhythmical, seemingly unhurried and pacifying narration and an unnerving, barely detectable tone which becomes most audible in the poem’s concluding lines where the dead person loses her sense of time (“Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet / Feels shorter than the Day”) and is unclear as to what direction the final destination really takes (“I first surmised the Horses’ Heads / Were toward Eternity”). The clear vision of death as a journey gives way to the rather inconclusive notion of “Eternity” which “Death” leads to, confusing the speaker and the reader alike. The atmosphere of the unfamiliar, present all along but until now supposedly familiar because poetically justified, resurfaces in the poem’s climax with a new force, echoing Hamlet’s “undiscovered country” dilemma. Yet, for Dickinson, death does not “discourage sympathetic identification” (Wolff 1988: 235), and, thus, throughout the poem she smoothly shifts between what might be considered *heimlich* and/or *unheimlich*, adding valuable examples to Freud’s dictionary data. Observing life from within Death’s “Carriage”, the speaker suddenly realizes how hazy the division between life and death is and how freely the two realms of existence overlap: “We passed the Setting Sun – / Or rather – He passed Us –”. Dickinson’s dreamlike ride compels one to pause for a moment and look at death as something much more tangible in its proximity than the limiting “Ring” of everyday activities would have us believe. The contemporary Irish poet Dennis O’Driscoll (1982: 41) once quipped: “beneath the surface of our lives / skin deep is buried death / (like underwear we carry skeletons / folded neatly in our trunks)”. Dickinson gives us the negative of this picture as Death the Carrier encloses the speaker in his vehicle. Combining ele-

ments of the seduction novel and the bride-of-Christ tradition, the poet makes her narrative familiar and seemingly comforting, although "the notion of embracing 'Death' with pleasure can [also] be little more than a Gothic horror" (Wolff 1988: 275). Indeed, this journey to the grave is menacing, especially when, along with the speaker, one realizes that the ride might be an illusion and that death stretches indefinitely and stands still while life swiftly passes parallel to it. "Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct" (Yalom 1980: 29). Dickinson reminds us that death, the future permanent cessation of life, constantly controls the flow of our daily activities which are already innately subject to time, passing and termination. Death is not only a point in time but a process that extends throughout life and beyond it. It is indifferent and *unheimlich*, but so is life, which passes without any option to "kindly" stop for us.

Faced with the danger of drowning, J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan overcomes his fear in an instant and smiles with a smile which is saying, "To die will be an awfully big adventure" (Barrie 1986: 121). How "awfully big" of an adventure death can be often depends on how far down the road of life one has traveled and how willing one is to accept the fact that death's realm is not only the final destination but that mortality is also the passenger riding with us all along until the end and beyond. Devoid of fear and horror, Peter Pan's approach to death may be thought of as childish and, thus, strange and unnatural to an adult reader, but, to a certain degree, so is, for instance, Dickinson's vision of "Death" as a "supple Suitor" (# 1445) kidnapping a lightly clad lady for a drive macabre. Peter Pan's fantasy-based, naïve response to the danger of dying might be interpreted as one of many defense mechanisms which all humans develop to protect themselves from the threat of nonbeing. Psychologists have observed that even children who are two or barely three years old are able to realize that once certain things or people disappear they never resurface again (Yalom 1980: 84-85, 88). Consequently, to deal with the dread of nonexistence, "the child becomes the master rather than the victim of 'all gone'" and, for instance, "pulls out the bathtub plug, flushes objects down the toilet, gleefully blows out matches, [or] is delighted to assist mother by pressing the pedal of the garbage pail" (Yalom 1980: 90). As they grow older and their death anxiety increases, many children "disperse ... death, either symbolically, [for example] in games of cowboys and Indians, or literally by extinguishing life in insects" (Yalom 1980: 90). Even though he feels scared, Barrie's hero constantly puts himself in danger and boasts about his dare-devil qualities and conquests. Yet, to interpret his behavior and romanticized notion of what it is like to die as a mere means of dealing with the fear of death would probably be too much of a simplification. Peter Pan's attitude towards death exposes and, to a certain ex-

tent, criticizes different methods parents use to mitigate their children's fears connected with mortality. "Many parents, despite considerable enlightenment and firm resolve to provide honest instruction, waver in the face of a child's distress", and, as a result, "attempt to assuage a child's fears by offering some form of denial, either some idiosyncratic denial system or a socially sanctioned immortality myth" (Yalom 1980: 82). While it is natural to protect a child from unnecessary anguish, many adults tend to forget that an elaborate system of lies and myths concealing death's reality conveys their own anxiety and death denial, which may actually increase the fear of mortality in their child rather than assuage it (Yalom 1980: 82). Peter Pan's definition of what it will be like to die might help adult readers realize that the uncanniness of death can indeed be perceived as "an awfully big adventure" which might be scary and unexplainable but does not need to be made more inaccessible than it already is, especially if approached with a more open mind and spontaneity. Adventures necessitate risk-taking and the risk of daring to explain to a child one of the most complex terms in life needs to be taken. Undoubtedly, for many adults, the eternal boy's careless attitude towards death is bound to remain distant and disturbing because, no matter how immersed one can become in the fictional world of Neverland, in reality, grown-ups tend to lose the freshness of perspective needed to rework what is socially considered life's saddest challenge into an optimistic and educational vision.

A fresh perspective is what keeps literary definitions of death animated, so to speak, and because "[e]ach death proves / death still lives, / when lives regular" (O'Driscoll 1987: 33), such definitions also provide a therapeutic opportunity to confront death's uncanniness on multiple new levels. "The technique of art", Shklovsky ([1917] 2001: 18) argues, "is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged". According to Freud ([1919] 2001: 950), the aim of literature is also to make things and real life events "uncanny". Yet, when it comes to mortality, fabricating additional uncanny effects sometimes seems redundant because death's simultaneous proximity and unfamiliarity can stir enough emotions that border on dread and incredulity as it is. Thus, some writers struggle to make death more familiar by taking a less metaphorical or supernatural approach to the subject, which, paradoxically, often increases the uncanny effects as well as "the difficulty and length of perception". Although in our day-to-day existence death remains unconsciously secret or is viewed as a distant, somewhat unrealistic event, sooner or later it always comes to light, and more often than not as a sudden shock or horrible ordeal. In one of the best contemporary American elegies, "Neverland", Galway Kinnell relates the last moments of his older sister's life. In the opening lines, Wendy's smile blends the end of her life's journey with the

speaker's memories of its beginning, making this particular death a reminder of how birth simultaneously becomes an entrance into the world of death:

Bending over her bed, I saw the smile  
I must have seen when I looked up from the crib.  
Knowing death comes, imagining it, smelling it,  
may be a fair price for consciousness.  
But looking at my sister lying there, I wished  
she could have been snatched up from behind  
to die by surprise, without ever knowing about death.  
Too late. Wendy said, "I am in three parts.  
Here on the left is red. That is pain.  
On the right is yellow. That is exhaustion.  
The rest is white. I don't know yet what white is"

(Kinnell 1994: 79).

As mentioned earlier, according to Freud ([1919] 2001: 945), in normal circumstances, "no human being really grasps [the general proposition that 'All men are mortal'], and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality". The repressed, however, tends to resurface, and it frequently takes "the shape of something uncanny" (Freud [1919] 2001: 945). Regardless of whether we share Freud's psychoanalytic point of view when it comes to such concepts as the Oedipus complex or penis envy, his assumption regarding the everyday unawareness of death has been discussed and confirmed by scholars from different disciplines. In "Neverland", the unconscious is literally forced to grasp "the idea of its own mortality" by the process of dying, and the outcome is as crushingly tangible as it is unfamiliar. It is hard not to mention here Dickinson's "I like a look of Agony, / Because I know it's true" (# 241), a lyric which depicts the moment of death as the ultimate revision of all kinds of lies that life abounds in, one of which is death denial. Focusing on the moment of his sister's agony, Kinnell's unromanticized vision of the final journey defines "Knowing death", its "pain" and "exhaustion", as "a fair price for consciousness". Here, "the undiscovered country", the "Neverland", is at least partially revealed as Wendy feels death with almost all her senses. To share the harrowing experience with her brother, she visualizes "pain" as alarming "red" and "exhaustion" as "yellow", but there is still one more aspect of the dying process which is "white", widespread and yet unknown to her. On her journey through/to the title Neverland (here: death's territory), Wendy arrives at what can be compared to the "I could not see to see" (# 465) and "Finished knowing – then –" (# 280) moments that Dickinson's speakers address when death blurs their vision. Given the amount of pain and suffering the speaker and his dying sister go through, one hopes the enigmatic "white" Wendy senses is the alleged light at the end of the tunnel signaling the end of misery; or maybe it is a har-

binger of spiritual union with the universe, the return to the prenatal, innocent state often associated with whiteness; yet, it might also be all or none of the above, indicating both death's omnipresence and undefinability. Even when the physical, mental and emotional distress caused by dying finally forces us to face mortality, death may still seem distant and confusing, both to the dying and onlookers. The dying lose not only their bodily integrity but also "the sense of self" which in everyday life is "maintained ... by generating fellow feeling from participation in the social bond" (Seale 1998: 150). Witnesses struggle "to maintain this bond" as well as "their own sense of ontological security" through interacting with and taking care of the dying (Seale 1998: 150). In both cases, the awareness of death is heightened (unless one remains in a state of denial), which, theoretically, should prepare one to cope with mortality more efficiently. Such knowledge, however, can be as valuable ("a fair price for consciousness") as it is terrifying, which prompts Wendy's brother to confess: "... looking at my sister lying there, I wished / she could have been snatched up from behind / to die by surprise, without ever knowing about death" (Kinnell 1994: 79). Of course, while the ordeal of agony brings both parties a step closer to "knowing *about* death" (emphasis mine), the undefined whiteness that Wendy senses with her body is also a poignant reminder of how intimate but at the same time how incomplete our understanding of death remains.

Although in his verse he frequently defines death through images of birth in order to read the word death with less negation, in this harrowing elegy, Kinnell has no illusions: his sister's agony proves that however close they might be on the universal level, in reality, birth differs from death as at birth we have no concept of either. During this "Last scene of all", if we are lucky to live long enough, some of us will be like unborn or newly born babies: "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (*As you like it*, 2.7.166), but this kind of infancy lacks the endearing, hopeful and comforting qualities of birth. Yet, the codependence between birth and death has also inspired invigorating literary visions. In *Song of myself*, Walt Whitman ([1855] 2001: 6), one of Kinnell's poetic masters, announces: "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it". Whitman's democratic definition of death as birth's "lucky" alter ego is as exhilarating as it is disquieting since it captures the prolific power and fragility of being simultaneously. Many may find this optimistic, organic vision of death odd because, generally, humans tend to live in what Heidegger (Yalom 1980: 30-31) calls "a state of forgetfulness of being" rather than in "a state of mindfulness of being", and Whitman's familiarity with death definitely stems from the latter. In spite of his seemingly chaotic flow of thought, Whitman is quite adamant, aware and realistic when it comes to embracing death on equal terms with birth. Most of us, however, tend to deny mortality and "view death as such an unmitigated evil

that we dismiss any contrary view as an implausible joke" (Yalom 1980: 31). Psychologists, philosophers, clinicians and artists alike (Yalom 1980: 30-34) agree that "life shrinks when death is denied", that "the integration of the *idea* of death saves us; rather than sentence us to existences of terror or bleak pessimism, it acts as a catalyst to plunge us into more authentic life modes, and it enhances our pleasure in the living of life" (Yalom 1980: 31-33). In Whitman's poetic dictionary, "*death is the condition that makes it possible for us to live life in an authentic fashion*" (Yalom 1980: 31) and, thus, we should consider ourselves lucky to have it present in our life from the very beginning.

Kinnell's other great mentor, Rainer Maria Rilke, also tried to mitigate the human fear of the end by portraying death as the core of life. Death for Rilke is like love which is with us at all times, even if we do not feel it, and "each individual contains within himself his own death, peculiar to himself, which grows and matures as he grows and matures" (Rose 1973: 55-56). One of Rilke's most uncanny passages on the organic and fulfilling presence of death in human life comes from his novel *The notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The main protagonist, Malte, wonders at one point if the smile that appears on the faces of pregnant women does not stem from their sense of having two fruits growing in them, "a child and a death":

And what a rueful beauty was lent the women at times when they were pregnant and stood, hands involuntarily resting on their large bellies, in which there was a twofold fruit: a child, and a death. Did not the replete, almost nourishing smile on their faces, free of all else, come from their intermittent notion that both were growing?

(Rilke [1910] 2009: 11).

As David Kleinbard (1993: 38) points out, in this passage, "Rilke [converts] the fantasy of death developing within one like another organism ... from a source of fear into an idea which gives comfort and even pleasure and is, for this reason, an aid against the dread of death". In one of her less anthologized poems, Emily Dickinson captures the same uplifting correlation between birth and death as Rilke's Malte does:

The Opening and the Close  
Of Being, are alike  
Or differ, if they do,  
As Bloom upon a Stalk.

That from an equal Seed  
Unto an equal Bud  
Go parallel, perfected  
In that they have decayed (# 1047).

Humans refuse to see that the closest they can approach immortality is not by shunning the traces of death in everyday life through finding new ways of feeling alive, but by observing and learning about mortality from nature which does not single death out and continues to regenerate in spite of and because of constant decay. In one of his letters, Rilke (1969: 149) points out: “Nature knew nothing of this removal [of death from life] we had somehow accomplished – if a tree blossoms, death blossoms in it as well as life, and the field is full of death, which from its reclining face sends out a rich expression of life...”. Death is “something we feel alive at the center of our being” (Kleinbard 1993: 41), but dread to admit its proximity, which only increases the fear. According to Rilke, however, we are often unable to stop creating this artificial distance between us and death on account of mortality’s intimidating nearness:

Experienced, and yet in its reality not to be experienced, knowing better than we all the time and yet never rightly admitted by us, hurting and from the start outstripping the meaning of life; ... death, which is probably so near us that we cannot at all determine the distance between it and the life-center within us without its becoming something external, daily held further from us ...

(Rilke 1969: 148).

While Rilke’s “twofold fruit: a child, and a death” growing inside pregnant women might not be the easiest image to embrace, in his view, our inability to reduce this elimination of death from life is what really makes it “monstrous”, “violent” and “incomprehensible” (*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 147-148).

Death is “the undiscovered country”, “an awfully big adventure”, the kind kidnapper and “the supple Suitor / That wins at last –” (Dickinson 1961: 614, # 1445), the imaginary Neverland wrapped in undefined whiteness that is both scary and seductive; it is birth’s and life’s alter ego, or, as Wallace Stevens’ famous definition proclaims, given its ability to emphasize earthly pleasures and to make transitory things matter, “Death is the mother of beauty” (Stevens 1990a: 69). But sometimes, like the pain and suffering in Kinnell’s “Neverland”, “Death is just death – it’s nothing more” (Roth 2007: 119). This curt definition of death comes from Philip Roth’s 2006 novel *Everyman*, which opens with the main character’s funeral and traces his fate through flashbacks from his first serious confrontation with illness and death at the age of nine, past his burst appendix and several occlusions of major coronary arteries, until the final operation on his obstructed carotid resulting in fatal cardiac arrest. Roth’s idea of death is far from consoling. His protagonist bursts out at one point: “... life’s most disturbing intensity is death. It’s because death is so unjust. It’s because once one has tasted life, death does not even seem natural” (Roth 2007: 169). Although eventually the Everyman of the title transforms his bitter assessment of death as an unnatural process into “an angry acceptance that mor-

tality is the price we pay for the sheer wonder of this thing called life" (Kennedy, quoted in: Guardian 2006), the anxiety caused by aging and death frequently resurfaces on the pages of this illness narrative until the protagonist's fatal heart failure after which "He was no more, freed from being, entering into nowhere without even knowing it. Just as he'd feared from the start" (Roth 2007: 181-182). In an interview just before the book's publication, asked if he was afraid of dying, Philip Roth gave a reply which summarizes his protagonist's uncanny feelings about mortality: "Yes, I'm afraid. It's horrible. What else could I say? It's heartbreaking. It's unthinkable. It's incredible. Impossible" (Roth 2005).

Thirty years before Philip Roth's novel, Philip Larkin published "Aubade", an equally dreary description of death in verse. The poem is an intense and candid expression of human vulnerability and fear triggered by the awareness of death's inevitability and finality. Caught in an everyday routine, which mainly involves work and drinking, Larkin's speaker wakes up at four o'clock in the morning only to stare at "what's really always there: / Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, / Making all thought impossible but how / And where and when I shall myself die" (Larkin 2003: 190). Such existential "interrogation" is futile as one can anticipate but no one can foresee the precise time of one's death, and yet, because its inevitability is adamant and perpetual, "the dread / Of dying, and being dead, / Flashes afresh to hold and horrify" (Larkin 2003: 190). This sentiment is reminiscent of Hamlet's "dread of something after death" that "puzzles the will" preventing one from entering "the undiscovered country" sooner than scheduled. Yet, the answer "Aubade" gives to the speculations of what happens to us after death is similar to the viewpoint of Roth's protagonist and would rather encourage Hamlet to go through with his suicidal plans. Larkin's poem discards the idea of any parallel reality after death and mocks "[t]he invention of [any kind of] doubling as a preservation against extinction" (Freud [1919] 2001: 940). Halfway through his dawn song of death, after his "mind blanks at the glare" of this "total emptiness for ever" (Larkin 2003: 190), the speaker offers a rather unequivocal definition of what it means to be dead to him:

The sure extinction that we travel to  
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
 Not to be anywhere,  
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.  
 This is a special way of being afraid  
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
 Created to pretend we never die,  
 And specious stuff that says *No rational being*  
*Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing*

That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,  
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
 Nothing to love or link with,  
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.  
 And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
 That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
 Most things may never happen: this one will ...

(Larkin 2003: 190-191).

Death's proximity ("what's really always there", "nothing more true") makes it all but emotionally close, cozy or comfortable. While it always "stays just on the edge of vision" this "small unfocused blur" never becomes mundane or too common as "the dread / Of dying, and being dead, / Flashes afresh to hold and horrify". Death's "chill" increases proportionately to the amount of labels the speaker comes up with to define it. Mortality is not something he can really warm up to, although, ironically, the "realisation" of death's inevitability "rages out / In furnace-fear" (Larkin 2003: 190). All Larkin's signifiers are rather easily assignable to the signified: death equals "the total emptiness for ever", "The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always", "Nothing to love or link with", and "The anaesthetic from which none come round" (Larkin 2003: 190). The apparent lack of ambiguity in these rhythmically impeccable metaphors serves to emphasize the nearness of death, making the speaker's fear of what he sees and knows but would rather leave behind "the curtain-edges" also more prominent. To acknowledge the complexity of his dread, the speaker does not need excessive stylistic elaborateness, and in the concluding line of the penultimate stanza, he sums up all attempts to deal with death, including his own, with a rather discrediting, casual remark: "Death is no different whined at than withstood" (Larkin 2003: 191).

In Larkin's poetic dictionary, death is a dreadful point in life ("a small unfocused blur") that gradually becomes nearer, though not necessarily clearer, and after which the senses stop working altogether. This future state that prohibits all communication is also an always present phenomenon ("what's always really there", "a standing chill"), a common process heading towards the unfamiliar yet "sure extinction" (Larkin 2003: 190-191). Apart from struggling to find adequate nomenclature for what he fears, Larkin also employs the turn of night into day and the day's inevitable progress towards its end, "characterized by the same kind of inexorable movement that drives an individual life to death" (Wolff 1988: 291). When Dickinson found assigning a name to "a hidden God" problematic, she fixed upon 'Eclipse' to spell the paradox of a darkness visible" (Wolff 1988: 291). Similarly, when she tackles mortality, Dickinson sometimes uses solar and lunar phenomena to render death's omnipresence

and allow the reader to relate to it on yet another level. In poem # 710, she observes, "'The Sunrise runs for Both—': for some it is an eastering, the beginning of day; on the other side of the globe, however, it is a westering, the end" (Wolff 1988: 292). In Larkin's meditations at dawn, death, the great separator, accosts the speaker at the very start of a new day which is permeated by the dread of dying and the vision of the end. The sun's movement west barely begins but its light simultaneously participates in the sunset as the two are inseparable. In "Aubade", death is "the sure extinction" that we not only travel to but which surely and steadily races us to its finishing line at the mundane pace of everyday life.

"Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies" (Freud [1919] 2001: 944) because mortality is so familiar yet so unrealistic at the same time. While we learn about various deaths almost every day (e.g. a fatal car accident, hurricane victims, death of someone else's relative), many of us continue to go on with our own mortality unacknowledged, attributing the fact of life's end to some "malicious intervention from the outside ... [as] in our unconscious mind we can only be killed; it is inconceivable to die of a natural cause" (Kübler-Ross 2003: 16). "Biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life" (Freud [1919] 2001: 945). Religions have not gone much further, and they just "continue to dispute the importance of the undeniable fact of individual death and to postulate a life after death" (Freud [1919] 2001: 945). Literature has accumulated and continues to work on its own varied range of approaches to death, many of which exploit death's familiarity and unfamiliarity to help readers come to terms with the uncanny aspects of mortality. In *After theory*, Terry Eagleton offers his own literary definition of death which recaptures death's elusiveness and its ever inspiring duality discussed in this essay:

Death is both alien and intimate to us, neither wholly strange nor purely one's own. To this extent, one's relationship to it resembles one's relationship to other people, who are likewise both fellows and strangers. Death may not be exactly a friend, but neither is it entirely an enemy. Like a friend, it can enlighten me about myself, though like an enemy it does so in ways I would on the whole rather not hear. It can remind me of my creatureliness and finitude, of the fragile, ephemeral nature of my existence, of my own neediness and the vulnerability of others. By learning from this, we can turn facts into values. By being woven into our lives in this way, death can become less daunting, less of a baleful force which is simply out to tear us apart. It is indeed out to tear us apart; but in the process it can intimate to us something of how to live. And this is the kind of behaviour appropriate to a friend

(Eagleton 2003: 211).

Recent sociological analyses exploring the nature of mortality in Western societies suggest that “whilst we may not acknowledge it, it is the very fact of mortality that produces the cultures in which we live. Without death, there would be no culture” (Howarth 2010: 16). In other words, cliché as it may sound, it is safe to claim that without death there would be no creation on any level, or if there was it would be impossible to determine its value because everything would exist forever. As in the end there is no way around this “undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns”, death might as well be considered a friend rather than an enemy, a fellow companion who, in the course of the journey, can teach us how to accept the familiar direction and the unfamiliar place we inevitably head towards.

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