

The Last Moment

Jonathan Rée

For many years, studies of death have been dominated by the distinction made by Philippe Ariès between modern ways of dying, hidden away in a hospital room, and traditional death-bed rituals, where friends gather round and celebrate the process with stories, music, art and prayer.¹ The difference is obviously connected with a re-orientation in metaphysical opinion about the afterlife: if you believe that the dying person is going to live on and meet you again, then you will do your best to part on good terms; but you have no reason to bother if you are a materialistic modernist who thinks that death means total annihilation.

The contrast is somewhat overdrawn, however, not only historically (as we all know) but metaphysically too. If you have a robust belief in individual survival, you will still be prey to doubts about life on the other side, and once you try to envisage it in detail—what people will look like, whether they will change over time, and how friendships will be conducted—it is liable to lose both its attraction and its plausibility. On the other hand, if you are a secular rationalist grieving for someone you love, your unconscious can be counted on to supply you with fantasies about escapes from death and renewed encounters. If we met someone whose

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attitude to death was untouched by conflict, doubt, and an uneasy sense of mystery we would, I think, conclude that they were not really human.

The scenarios of post-mortem encounter that play themselves out in our imaginations are of enormous interest, both historically and psychologically; but they tend to distract us from a phenomenon that is perhaps equally significant, and equally fundamental: from what might be called the *fascination of the last moment*. When we get news of the death of strangers—famous people, perhaps, or victims of a mass-shooting or a plane crash—we find it hard not to wonder what it was like for them in their last hour, their last minute, or their last second: what were they thinking about; what did they know; and how did they feel? In the case of close friends and family, we will speculate rather more intrusively: were they inwardly angry or were they serene; were they in pain; and as they departed this world, did they cast a glance back at someone in particular—for example, did they spare a thought for me?

If we are modern and rational, we will try not to be so sentimental. Why should any special interest attach to the last moment of a life? What makes it different from any other segment of time? All of us are subject to ups and downs in our moods, and why worry about which part of the cycle we are in when it stops? The historians among us may offer explanations in terms of inherited religious traditions which portray us facing our maker and being made to answer for how we spent our life on earth. In that case, our dying state of mind might possibly swing the case for us: a lifetime of wickedness could be cancelled by last-minute repentance, and perhaps the converse holds as well. The absurd disproportion between the dying moment and eternal punishments, or rewards, may have been a challenge for subtle theologians, but the deathbed industry got on with the business of conversion, confession, indulgence, unction, absolution and prayer. It is easy to make fun of these last-chance rituals, comparing them perhaps to stand-and-deliver academic exams, or a game of roulette; but I would like to suggest that the fascination of the last moment has roots that reach far deeper than the contingencies of religious doctrine.

Death has a special presence in everyone's life, even for those who encounter it as an everyday reality—priests, doctors, nurses, and undertakers, or, in a different way, historians and archaeologists. If we are living like human beings as well as fulfilling our occupational roles, then every moment of our existence has the characteristic that Martin Heidegger called *Sein zum Tode*, or being-towards death.² Our activities

get their significance from our sense of them as episodes in a life-story that began earlier than we can remember and will end with our death even if we never think about it explicitly; death will always be, as a phenomenologist would put it, the “horizon” of our existence. Hence, the peculiar thrill of witnessing a death, or of death as a spectacle; however much we differ from each other in particular ways, the anticipation of dying is something we all have non-contingently in common. We can hardly stop ourselves feeling some kind of sympathy, or personal involvement, with people on the brink of death; we identify with them, because we know that our own turn will come one day.

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This perspective—call it existential or phenomenological if you like—may cast some light on the salience of the moment of death in fine art, high tragedy, and grand opera, or more particularly, in narrative fiction, since the middle of the nineteenth century. Take Leo Tolstoy’s 1886 story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”, which opens with a character called Peter Ivanovich learning that his old friend Ivan has died, still young, though no longer full of promise. Even though Peter Ivanovich has known Ivan Ilych all his life—they used to play together as little boys—he receives the news with apparent indifference. He pays an obligatory visit to Ivan’s widow, even though he dislikes her; but to his surprise he is terribly moved, at least briefly, when she tells him how Ivan passed his last hours: he “screamed incessantly”, she tells him, and was “conscious all that time”, right up to “the last moment”.

‘Three days of frightful suffering and then death! Why that might suddenly, at any time, happen to me’, he thought, and for a moment felt terrified. But...the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him...after which reflection Peter Ivanovich felt reassured...as though death was an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself.

But the act of repression requires an effort that Peter Ivanovich is unable to sustain; despite his outward nonchalance, he knows that death is the great leveller, eventually making equals of us all.

Ivan Ilych had known it too; the truth had impressed itself on him as he talked to the peasant lad who looked after him in his final illness. The boy seemed happy in his work, however repulsive his duties were, and he explained that he was sustained by the knowledge that “we shall all of us

die”, telling Ivan that he “did not think his work burdensome... because he...hoped someone would do the same for him when his time came”.

But all of us know—we the readers, and Ivan, Peter, and the peasant boy—that the fellowship of death goes deeper than some intergenerational compact about end-of-life care. Ivan died in terrible pain, but his spiritual anguish was far worse: “I am leaving this life”, he said to himself, “with the consciousness that I have lost all that was given to me and it is impossible to rectify it”. He “had not spent his life as he should have done”, and he “struggled”, we are told, “as a man condemned to death struggles at the hands of the executioner, knowing that he cannot save himself”.³

The analogy between being condemned to death in the special sense of facing judicial execution, and being condemned to death in the way all of us are, has tremendous emotional and literary resonance. Dr Johnson was right, no doubt, to say that “when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully”.⁴ But that tells only half the story, because the prisoner will not be the only one counting down the minutes that remain: anyone who knows about the impending event will be doing the same. Crowds of us will gather at the spot, in imagination if not reality, to project ourselves into the consciousness of the prisoner and rehearse for the time when our own end is near.

Claude Lanzmann (the filmmaker who made the documentary film *Shoah* (1985)), began his autobiography by saying that he could not remember a time when he was not entranced by the idea of being sentenced to death. In 1938, when he was 13, he read about the death by guillotine of a murderer called Eugen Weidmann in the street outside the prison in Versailles. (It would be the last public execution in France, and the newsreel is available online). Lanzmann was struck by the resemblance, such as it was, between his own name and that of the man about to be decapitated, and he was never able to shake off the fantasy that a similar fate awaited him; and as he wrote his memoirs seventy years later, he still imagined himself as a prisoner on death row, struggling to give an account of himself before his appointment with death.⁵

But it is not just Lanzmann; law has always aspired to the condition of theatre, and judicial executions are its masterpiece, generating an appetite for tales of the prisoner’s last moments. But *execution narratives*, as they are sometimes called, come in two very different kinds. Some are *hostile*: they work to place those condemned to death at a great distance from us, beyond the pale of common humanity. Take, for example, a

pamphlet about the execution in 1606 of the conspirators in the gunpowder plot—a “horrible and abominable Treason”, as we are informed: “detestable in the sight both of God and man” and “odious in the eares of all humane Creatures”. We are invited to shudder at the thought of their “bewitched hearts”, to wonder at their refusal to exercise the “true repentance, that in true Christians may be required” and, in short, to marvel “that so many monsters in nature, shoulde carry the shapes of men”.⁶

Then there are the *sympathetic* execution narratives, which ask their readers to identify with those about to die, and enter into their inner world; the corpus could be thought of as reaching back to Plato on the death of Socrates, or to the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, and it would include hagiographies of Christian martyrs, and heroic accounts of royal beheadings. The genre seems to have remained distinctly aristocratic in focus until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it took a turn towards literary realism, and its protagonists became more plebeian.

The closing pages of Charles Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities* (1859) provide a transitional case, with Sydney Carton achieving greatness by choosing to die in the place of Charles Darnay (perhaps in the place of us all) and eliciting our tears (for him, for us) with the supreme pathos of his inner monologue (“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known”) on the scaffold. The situation poses a problem from the point of view of narrative technique, and the solution chosen by Dickens was bold if not crude: if Sydney had “given utterance” to his thoughts, he wrote, “they would have been these”.⁷ The problem seems to have defeated Herman Melville, who was never able to complete his complex and multi-perspectival execution narrative, *Billy Budd*. His contemporary Ambrose Bierce was apparently unfazed by the difficulty, and his “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890), became the founding classic of sympathetic execution narratives. Without fussing over the question of narrative point of view, Bierce offered direct access to the consciousness of a “man who was engaged in being hanged” and the lifelike world he entered as he “closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts on his wife and children”.⁸

Albert Camus offered a fully first-person execution narrative in the last chapter of *L’Étranger* (1942), where the unrepentant murderer Meursault fills his notebook with reflections on the prospect of being guillotined the next morning. “I regret not paying more attention to

tales of execution”, he says, as his imagination scurries around searching for a way out; for example, if the blade of the guillotine gets jammed in mid-fall. He also remembers that his father once attended a public execution and ended up sick with rage and fear. “From that point on my father rather disgusted me”, he recalls, but now he thinks he understands:

How could I have failed to see that there was nothing more important than an execution and that in fact it was the only really interesting thing in a human life? If I got out I would certainly make it my business to go and watch every public execution I could.

But he knows it is not going to happen; instead of witnessing the execution of others, he will have to participate in his own, and he ends his account with the words: “I only hope there will be plenty of spectators at my execution, and that they will greet me with cries of hatred”.⁹

Grammatically, *L'Étranger* is an exercise in first-person narration, but it keeps spinning round to a third-person perspective in a way that seems to be characteristic of sympathetic execution narratives. Or equally the other way around: a third-person narration will directly evoke a first-person perspective—as for example in George Orwell’s essay “A Hanging”, which describes an incident in Burma in the 1920s. As an officer of the British Imperial Police, Orwell was required to supervise the execution of a poor Hindu, after which he met up with his British colleagues and found himself laughing far too much as he tried to conceal his anguish at what he had seen and done:

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me...At each step his muscles slid neatly into place...and once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped lightly aside to avoid a puddle in the path.

That little gesture, the deft avoidance of the puddle, stuck in Orwell’s memory like a dart:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just

as we are alive...His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.

Orwell flips the third person into the first (“one of us would be gone”) and we are inside the world of the condemned man.¹⁰

The shuttle between different points of view at the execution scene becomes more elaborate in the final chapter of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966), which tells the story of the gruesome murder of a farming family—Herb Clutter and his wife and two children—in Kansas in November 1959, and of the two obtuse young lads, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, who committed the crime in the mistaken belief that they would find large sums of money in the house. When their trial ends and Hickock and Smith receive their death sentences, they laugh loudly as they are taken to their neighbouring prison cells, out of sight of each other, but not out of earshot. After five years of incarceration, their appeals are exhausted, and Capote describes how they spent their last day—Tuesday 13 April 1965—looking forward to being hanged one after the other, in alphabetical order (as they had chosen), just after midnight. They both ordered a large meal: shrimps, fries, and strawberries and cream. When the time came, Smith was, as usual, rather withdrawn, but Hickock, who was the intellectual of the two, extended a warm welcome to those who came to witness his death (“nice to see you!”), and expressed disappointment that no members of the Clutter family had bothered to come (“as though he thought the protocol...was not being properly observed”). “I just want to say I hold no hard feelings”, he said as he stepped up to the gallows: “you people are sending me to a better world”. Then it was Smith’s turn: “It would be meaningless to apologise for what I did”, he said: “but I do: I apologise”. And then, as Capote puts it, “the thud-snap that announces a rope-broken neck”.¹¹

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The rise of the sympathetic execution narrative went alongside a striking alteration in ordinary attitudes to the death penalty, and was, no doubt, in part responsible for it: a public that has learnt to identify with the prisoner as the last seconds tick away is likely to find the very idea of judicial execution unconscionable and to lose any capacity

to imagine how enlightened opinion could ever have taken a different view. John Stuart Mill was acutely aware of swimming against the tide when, during his brief career as a member of parliament, he gave a magnificent speech on the subject in 1868. He was embarrassed, as he put it in his *Autobiography*, to find himself advocating a position “opposed to what then was, and probably still is, regarded as the advanced Liberal opinion”. It struck him as inconsistent to say that every citizen has a right to life, which the state can never abridge; after all, every citizen has a right to liberty too, but no one has any problem allowing the state to withdraw it in the case of certain kinds of crime, and for that matter extreme insanity. He therefore defends the death penalty (provided it is restricted to “atrocious crimes” that have been proved beyond all possible doubt), and he defends it on enlightened, modern grounds—“on the very ground on which it is commonly attacked—on that of humanity to the criminal”. We may think it would be merciful to spare the life of the criminal; but, Mill asks, “what kind of a mercy is this?”

There is not, I should think, any human infliction which makes an impression on the imagination so entirely out of proportion to its real severity as the punishment of death...Is death, then, the greatest of all earthly ills?...Is it, indeed, so dreadful a thing to die? Has it not been from of old one chief part of a manly education to despise death—teaching us to account it, if an evil at all, by no means high in the list of evils....The human capacity for suffering is what we should cause to be respected, not the mere capacity of existing.

Mill’s argument strikes me as impeccable: executing a murderer might indeed be an act of mercy, and some execution narratives could be cited in support of it. Camus’s hero was, you might say, begging to be executed, and he would have been horrified to be reprieved; and as for Hickock and Smith, I, for one, find it hard to put down Capote’s book without thinking that it would have been cruel to condemn these two young men, both in their thirties, to “existing” for its own sake; however long they might have lived, they could never have amounted to anything more—in their own eyes or those of others—than exceptionally stupid and cruel murderers. If they had any sense, they would have wanted to take their own lives, and the death sentence was enabling them to get what they wanted. But then, as Mill admits, the question turns, for many

of us, not on the “real severity” of the punishment, but on the way in which it “makes an impression on the imagination”.¹²

I conclude with another sympathetic execution narrative—a description of a hanging in Georgia, USA, in 1893, by the French writer Paul Bourget. The prisoner was Henry Seymour, a young “mulatto” (as Bourget calls him) who had once enjoyed the affection and patronage of a gentleman called Colonel Scott, accompanying him on some of his hunting expeditions. But Seymour had gone off the rails, first committing a murder for which he was condemned to death, and then killing one of his warders and escaping. He was apprehended by Scott himself, who gently dressed his wounds and returned him to prison, leaving him with a bottle of fine whiskey—the same brand they used to drink together when they went hunting—urging him to finish it before he dies. The encounter with the hangman was fixed for the following day, but with a choice of times—any time between 9am and 4pm—and Seymour settles for 1:45pm, so that he can enjoy a good meal, waited on by the sheriff in person.

Bourget was issued with a ticket to witness the execution, but as a man of sensibility, he screwed it up and threw it away in the street. But then he reflected on the seriousness of what was about to be enacted in the prison:

Any person of culture who has entertained the thought of observing a public execution has probably been through the same nervous emotions as I. The mysteries of death, of moral responsibility and of justice and social right...together with the most intimate frisson of existence, as at the approach of inexorable tragedy...are all wrapped up in an execution of this kind.

In the end he retrieves his ticket, and on admission to the prison, he is able to gaze on Seymour—a lean figure of arresting beauty, reminiscent of a “bronze statue”, except for his warm vitality and the “simple play of his muscles”—and he observes him tucking into a plateful of fried fish. Seymour notices Bourget and says with a smile: “I will carry with me a belly full of fish, where I go!”, before washing his hands, combing his hair, and walking out to greet the witnesses gathered round the gallows. (His wife and young children were not admitted, but they were waiting

in the street outside.) He mounts the scaffold with a firm tread, and if he feels any anxiety he shows it only for a moment, when the cigar he kept for the occasion falls from his lips; and once the noose is round his neck, he turns to Bourget, Scott and the rest, utters a brief prayer, and finishes with “I am all right now”, and “good bye everybody...good bye colonel”.¹³

Bourget was impressed by the “irony” of the scene: by the fact that an ignorant mulatto who seemed to live only for whiskey and fried fish had faced his executioner with a display of courage that was “suddenly ennobled by a touch of the ideal”.

What an irony, that a man of this character—an orang-outang with the capacity to...speak—suddenly achieved what philosophers regard as the supreme fruit of their teaching: resignation in the face of the inevitable.

Philippe Ariès refers to Bourget’s story and finds his analysis absurd: Bourget failed to appreciate that Seymour did not belong to the same modern rational world as him, and that his behaviour was simply a manifestation of the pre-modern tradition of “immemorial resignation in the face of death”.¹⁴

This dispute strikes me as artificial. Seymour’s death was part of a public ritual—a piece of legal and political theatre belonging to a particular place and time, and as such, it is open to investigation by the methods of the historian. But between the lines of Bourget’s evolutionary racism, we can glimpse something more primordial: Seymour as someone just like us, trying to make sense of a difficult situation, and facing a death like any other, in which everyone can see a prefiguration of their own. He was not appropriating a few lines from an incongruous modernity, as Bourget seems to have supposed, but neither was he confined, as Ariès suggested, within the limits of pre-modern tradition. He had never really been traditional, and he was never going to be modern, but he was caught up, like everyone else, in the existential fascination of the last moment.

NOTES

1. Philippe Ariès, *L’Homme Devant la Mort* (Paris, 1977), pp. 13–96.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of “Sein und Zeit”*, Joan Stambaugh trans. (New York, 1996), p. 216.

3. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych: and Other Stories*, Aylmer Maud trans. (New York and London, 1960), pp. 95–156, 101–102, 138, 152, 154.
4. James Bowell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. 2 (London, 1791), p. 152.
5. Claude Lanzmann, *Le Lièvre de Patagonie* (Paris, 2009), pp. 17–19.
6. Cited in Leigh Yetter ed., *Public Execution in England, 1573–1868*, Vol. 1 (London, 2009), pp. 47–72, 48–49. See also Katherine Royer, *The English Execution Narrative, 1200–1700* (London, 2014).
7. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York, 1910), pp. 376, 377.
8. Ambrose Bierce, *Terror by Night: Classic Ghost & Horror Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire, 2006), p. 2.
9. Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris, 1942), pp. 165, 168, 186.
10. Cited in Joshua R. Farris and Charles Taliaferro eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology* (London and New York, 2015), p. 320. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gregory Rabassa trans. (London, 2014), p. 122, the author plays an extended game with the idea of an impending execution. In it, the dying Santiago, with his viscera tumbling out of his stomach, “even took care to brush off the dirt that was stuck to his guts”.
11. Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (London, 2000), pp. 300, 331, 333.
12. John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger eds., (Toronto, 1981), p. 275; Vol. 28, John M. Robson and Bruce L. Kinzer eds., (Toronto, 1988), pp. 266–272.
13. Paul Bourget, *Outre-Mer (Notes sur l'Amérique)*, Vol. 2 (Paris, 1895), pp. 241–261.
14. Ariès, *L'Homme*, p.35.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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