During the long period we have covered, from the High Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century, the attitude toward death changed, but so slowly that contemporaries did not even notice. In our day, in approximately a third of a century, we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that social observers have not failed to be struck by it. It is really an absolutely unheard-of phenomenon. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden.

This revolution occurred in a well defined cultural area, where in the nineteenth century the cult of the dead and of cemeteries did not experience the great development noted in France, Italy, and Spain. It even seems that this revolution began in the United States and spread to England, to the Netherlands, to industrialized Europe; and we can see it today, before our very eyes, reaching France and leaving oil smudges wherever the wave passes.

At its beginning doubtlessly lies a sentiment already expressed during the second half of the nineteenth century: those surrounding the dying person had a tendency to spare him and to hide from him the gravity of his condition. Yet they admitted that this dissimulation could not last too long, except in such extraordinary cases as those described by Mark Twain in 1902 in “Was it Heaven or Hell?” The dying person must one day know, but the relatives no longer had the cruel courage to tell the truth themselves.

In short, at this point the truth was beginning to be challenged.

The first motivation for the lie was the desire to spare the sick person, to assume the burden of his ordeal. But this sentiment, whose origin we know (the intolerance of another’s death and the confidence shown by the dying person in those about him) very rapidly was covered over by a different sentiment, a new sentiment characteristic of modernity: one must avoid—no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person—the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so. Nothing had yet changed in the rituals of death, which were preserved at least in appearance, and no one had yet had the idea of changing them. But people had already begun to empty them of their dramatic impact; the procedure of rushing-up had begun. This is very noticeable in Tolstoy’s stories about death.

Between 1930 and 1950 the evolution accelerated markedly. This was due to an important physical phenomenon: the displacement of the site of death. One no longer died at home in the bosom of one’s family, but in the hospital, alone.

One dies in the hospital because the hospital has become the place to receive care which can no longer be given at home. Previously the hospital had been a shelter for the poor, for pilgrims; then it became a medical center where people were healed, where one struggled against death. It still has that curative function, but people are also be-
beginning to consider a certain type of hospital as the designated spot for dying. One dies in the hospital because the doctor did not succeed in healing. One no longer goes to or will go to the hospital to be healed, but for the specific purpose of dying. American sociologists have observed that there are today two types of seriously ill persons to be found in hospitals. The most archaic are recent immigrants who are still attached to the traditions of death, who try to snatch the dying person from the hospital so he can die at home, more majorum; the others are those more involved in modernity who come to die in the hospital because it has become inconvenient to die at home.

Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomenon, obtained by a cessation of care, a cessation determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team. Indeed, in the majority of cases the dying person has already lost consciousness. Death has been dissected, cut to bits by a series of little steps, which finally makes it impossible to know which step was the real death, the one in which consciousness was lost, or the one in which breathing stopped. All these little silent deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death, and no one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost a part of its meaning.

From the end of the eighteenth century we had been impressed by a sentimental landslide which was causing the initiative to pass from the dying man himself to his family—a family in which henceforth he would have complete confidence. Today the initiative has passed from the family, as much an outsider as the dying person, to the doctor and the hospital team. They are the masters of death—of the moment as well as of the circumstances of death—and it has been observed that they try to obtain from their patient “an acceptable style of living while dying.” The accent has been placed on “acceptable.” An acceptable death is a death which can be accepted or tolerated by the survivors. It has its antithesis: “the embarrassingly graceless dying,” which embarrasses the survivors because it causes too strong an emotion to burst forth; and emotions must be avoided both in the hospital and everywhere in society. One does not have the right to become emotional other than in private, that is to say, secretly. Here, then, is...
what has happened to the great death scene which had changed so little over the centuries, if not the millennia.

The funeral rites have also been modified. Let us put aside for a moment the American case. In England and northwestern Europe, they are trying to reduce to a decent minimum the inevitable operations necessary to dispose of the body. It is essential that society—the neighbors, friends, colleagues, and children—notice to the least possible degree that death has occurred. If a few formalities are maintained, and if a ceremony still marks the departure, it must remain discreet and must avoid emotion. Thus the family reception line for receiving condolences at the end of the funeral service has now been suppressed. The outward manifestations of mourning are repugned and are disappearing. Dark clothes are no longer worn; one no longer dresses differently than on any other day.

Too evident sorrow does not inspire pity but revulsion, it is the sign of mental instability or of bad manners: it is morbid. Within the family circle one also hesitates to let himself go for fear of upsetting the children. One only has the right to cry if no one else can see or hear. Solitary and shameful mourning is the only recourse, like a sort of masturbation. (The comparison is Gorer's.)

In countries in which the death revolution has been radical, once the dead person has been evacuated, his tomb is no longer visited. In England, for example, cremation has become the dominant manner of burial. When cremation occurs, sometimes with dispersal of the ashes, the cause is more than a desire to break with Christian tradition; it is a manifestation of enlightenment, of modernity. The deep motivation is that cremation is the most radical means of getting rid of the body and of forgetting it, of nullifying it, of being “too final.” Despite the efforts of cemetery offices, people rarely visit the urns today, though they may still visit gravesides. Cremation excludes a pilgrimage.

We would be committing an error if we entirely attributed this flight from death to an indifference toward the dead person. In reality the contrary is true. In the old society, the panoply of mourning scarcely concealed a rapid resignation. How many widowers remarried a few short months after the death of their wives! On the contrary, today, where mourning is forbidden, it has been noted that the mortality rate of widows or widowers during the year following the spouse’s death is much higher than that of the control group of the same age.

The point has even been reached at which, according to Gorer’s observations, the choking back
WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

of sorrow, the forbidding of its public manifestation, the obligation to suffer alone and secretly, has aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss of a dear one. In a family in which sentiment is given an important place and in which premature death is becoming increasingly rare (save in the event of an automobile accident), the death of a near relative is always deeply felt, as it was in the Romantic era.

A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud.

* * *

The combination of phenomena which we have just analyzed is nothing other than the imposition of an interdict. What was once required is henceforth forbidden.

The merit of having been the first to define this unwritten law of our civilization goes to the English sociologist, Geoffrey Gorer.\(^3\) He has shown clearly how death has become a taboo and how in the twentieth century it has replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject. Formerly children were told that they were brought by the stork, but they were admitted to the great farewell scene about the bed of the dying person. Today they are initiated in their early years to the physiology of love; but when they no longer see their grandfather and express astonishment, they are told that he is resting in a beautiful garden among the flowers. Such is “The Pornography of Death”—the title of a pioneering article by Gorer, published in 1955—and the more society was liberated from the Victorian constraints concerning sex, the more it rejected things having to do with death. Along with the interdict appears the transgression: the mixture of eroticism and death so sought after from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century reappears in our sadistic literature and in violent death in our daily life.

This establishment of an interdict has profound meaning. It is already difficult to isolate the meaning of the interdict on sex which was precipitated by the Christian confusion between sin and sexuality (though, as in the nineteenth century, this interdict was never imposed). But the interdict on death suddenly follows upon the heels of a very long period—several centuries—in which death was a public spectacle from which no one would have thought of hiding and which was even sought after at times.

The cause of the interdict is at once apparent: the need for ha...
social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to be always happy, even if in the depths of despair. By showing the least sign of sadness, one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then risks losing its raison d'être.

In a book addressed to Americans which appeared in 1958, Jacques Maritain evoked the inalterable optimism of the dentists in an American small town.4 “You reach the point of thinking in a sort of dream that the act of dying amid happy smiles, amid white garments like angels’ wings, would be a veritable pleasure, a moment of no consequence. Relax, take it easy, it’s nothing.”

The idea of happiness brings us back to the United States, and it is now appropriate to attempt to understand the relationships between American civilization and the modern attitude toward death.

* * *

It seems that the modern attitude toward death, that is to say the interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness, was born in the United States around the beginning of the twentieth century. However, on its native soil the interdict was not carried to its ultimate extremes. In American society it encountered a braking influence which it did not encounter in Europe. Thus the American attitude toward death today appears as a strange compromise between trends which are pulling it in two nearly opposite directions.

There is as yet very scanty documentation on this subject, but the little that is available has inspired the following thoughts, which I hope will evoke comments, corrections, and criticism from American historians.

When I read for the first time G. Gorer, J. Mitford, H. Feifel, etc.,5 I thought I was finding in contemporary America traces of the mentality of the French Enlightenment.

“Forest Lawn” is not as futuristic as Evelyn Waugh thought,6 and it made me think of the descriptions of the cemeteries dreamed of by the French authors of cemetery plans in the late eighteenth century, plans which never materialized owing to the Revolution and which were replaced in the early nineteenth century by the more declamatory and figurative architecture of Romanticism. In the United States, everything was happen-


as if the Romantic interval had never existed, and as if the mentality of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had persisted without interruption. This first impression, this first hypothesis, was false. It did not take sufficient account of American Puritanism, which is incompatible with confidence in man, in his goodness, in his happiness. Excellent American historians pointed this out to me, and I was very willing to agree with them. Yet the similarities between a part of the current American attitude toward death and that of enlightened Europe in the eighteenth century are no less troubling. We must concede that the mental phenomena which we have just observed occur much later than the French Enlightenment. In America, during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, and even later, burials conformed to tradition, especially in the countryside: the carpenter made the coffin (the coffin, not yet the “casket”), the family and friends saw to its transport and to the procession itself; and the pastor and gravedigger carried out the service. In the early nineteenth century the grave was still sometimes dug on the family property—which is a modern act, copied from the Ancients, and which was unknown in Europe before the mid-eighteenth century and with few exceptions was rapidly abandoned. In villages and small towns the cemetery

most frequently lay adjacent to the church. In the cities, once again paralleling Europe, the cemetery had in about 1830 been situated outside the city but was encompassed by urban growth and abandoned toward 1870 for a new site. It soon fell into ruin and Mark Twain tells us how the skeletons would leave it at night, carrying off with them what remained of their tombs (“A Curious Dream,” 1870).

The old cemeteries were church property, as they had been in Europe and still are in England. The new cemeteries belonged to private associations, as the French authors of those eighteenth-century plans had fruitlessly dreamed. In Europe cemeteries became municipal, that is to say public, property and were never left to private initiative.

In the growing cities of the nineteenth century, old carpenters or gravediggers, or owners of carts and horses, became “undertakers,” and the manipulation of the dead became a profession. Here history is still completely comparable to that in Europe, at least in that part of Europe which remained faithful to the eighteenth-century canons of simplicity and which remained outside the pale of Romantic bombast.

Things seem to have changed during the period of the Civil War. Today’s “morticians,” whose letters-patent go back to that period, give as their
This meaning could indeed be that of a certain refusal to accept death, either as a familiar end to which one is resigned, or as a dramatic sign in the Romantic manner. And this meaning became even more obvious when death became an object of commerce and of profit. It is not easy to sell something which has no value because it is too familiar and common, or something which is frightening, horrible, or painful. In order to sell death, it had to be made friendly. But we may assume that "funeral directors"—since 1885 a new name for undertakers—would not have met with success if public opinion had not cooperated. They presented themselves not as simple sellers of services, but as "doctors of grief" who have a mission, as do doctors and priests; and this mission, from the beginning of this century, consists in aiding the mourning survivors to return to normalcy. The new funeral director ("new" because he has replaced the simple undertaker) is a "doctor of grief," an "expert at returning abnormal minds to normal in the shortest possible time." They are "members of an exalted, almost sacred calling."7

Thus mourning is no longer a necessary period imposed by society; it has become a morbid state

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7 From Mitford, The American Way of Death.
which must be treated, shortened, erased by the "doctor of grief."

Through a series of little steps we can see the birth and development of the ideas which would end in the present-day interdict, built upon the ruins of Puritanism, in an urbanized culture which is dominated by rapid economic growth and by the search for happiness linked to the search for profit.

This process should normally result in the situation of England today, as it is described, for example, by Gorer: the almost total suppression of everything reminding us of death.

But, and this is what is unique about the American attitude, American mores have not gone to such an extreme; the sto ed along the way. Americans are very willing to transform death, to put make-up on it, to sublimate it, but they do not want to make it disappear. Obviously, this would also mark the end of profit, but the money earned by funeral merchants would not be tolerated if they did not meet a profound need. The wake, increasingly avoided in industrial Europe, persists in the United States: it exists as "viewing the remains," the "visitations." "They don't view bodies in England." 18

FORBIDDEN DEATH

The visit to the cemetery and a certain veneration in regard to the tomb also persist. That is why public opinion—and funeral directors—finds cremation distasteful, for it gets rid of the remains too quickly and too radically.

Burials are not harmful and they are not hidden. With that very characteristic mixture of commerce and idealism, they are the object of showy publicity, like any other consumer's item, be it soap or religion. Seen for example in the buses of New York City in 1965 was the following ad, purchased by one of the city's leading morticians: "The dignity and integrity of a Gawler. Funeral costs no more . . . Easy access, private parking for over 100 cars." Such publicity would be unthinkable in Europe, first of all because it would repel the customer rather than attract him.

Thus we must admit that a traditional resistance has kept alive certain rituals of death which had been abandoned or are being abandoned in industrialized Europe, especially among the middle classes.

Nevertheless, though these rituals have been continued, they have also been transformed. The American way of death is the synthesis of two tendencies: one traditional, the other euphoric.

Thus during the wakes or farewell "visitations" which have been preserved, the visitors come with-
out shame or repugnance. This is because in reality they are not visiting a dead person, as they traditionally have, but an almost-living one who, thanks to embalming, is still present, as if he were awaiting you to greet you or to take you off on a walk. The definitive nature of the rupture has been blurred. Sadness and mourning have been banished from this calming reunion.

Perhaps because American society has not totally accepted the interdict, it can more easily challenge it; but this interdict is spreading in the Old World, where the cult of the dead would seem more deeply rooted.

During the last ten years in American publications an increasing number of sociologists and psychologists have been studying the conditions of death in contemporary society and especially in hospitals. This bibliography makes no mention of the current conditions of funerals and mourning. They are deemed satisfactory. On the other hand, the authors have been struck by the manner of dying, by the inhumanity, the cruelty of solitary death in hospitals and in a society where death has lost the prominent place which custom had granted.

9 A bibliography of 340 recent works is to be found in O. G. Brim et al., The Dying Patient (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970). It does not include anything having to do with funerals, cemeteries, mourning, or suicide.

FORBIDDEN DEATH

it over the millennia, a society where the interdiction of death paralyzes and inhibits the reactions of the medical staff and family involved. These publications are also preoccupied with the fact that death has become the object of a voluntary decision by the doctors and the family, a decision which today is made shamefully, clandestinely. And this para-medical literature, for which, as far as I know, there is no equivalent in Europe, is bringing death back into the dialogue from which it had been excluded. Death is once again becoming something one can talk about. Thus the interdict is threatened, but only in the place where it was born and where it encountered limitations. Elsewhere, in the other industrialized societies, it is maintaining or extending its empire.

* * *

CONCLUSION

Now let us try, as a sort of conclusion, to understand the general meaning of the changes which we have discerned and analyzed.

First of all, we encountered a very old, very durable, very massive sentiment of familiarity with death, with neither fear nor despair, half-way between passive resignation and mystical trust.
WESTERN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

Even more than during the other vigorous periods of existence, Destiny was revealed through death, and in those days the dying person accepted it in a public ceremony whose ritual was fixed by custom. The ceremony of death was then at least as important as the ceremony of the funeral and mourning. Death was the awareness by each person of a Destiny in which his own personality was not annihilated but put to sleep—requies, dormitio. This requies presupposed a survival, though a deadened and weakened one, the grey survival of the shades or larvae of paganism, of the ghosts of old and popular Christianity. This belief did not make as great a distinction as we today make between the time before and the time after, the life and the afterlife. The living and the dead in both medieval literature and in popular folk tales show the same simple and vague, yet rather racy natures. On both sides of death, one is still very near the deep wellsprings of sentiment.

This way of dying signified a surrender of the self to Destiny and an indifference to the too-individual and diverse forms of the personality. It lasted as long as familiarity with death and with the dead lasted, at least until the Romantic era.

But from the Middle Ages on, among the literati, in the upper classes, it was subtly modified, while retaining its traditional characteristics.

FORBIDDEN DEATH

Death ceased being the forgetting of a self which was vigorous but without ambition; it ceased being the acceptance of an overwhelming Destiny, but one which concealed no novelty. Instead it became a place where the individual traits of each life, of each biography, appeared in the bright light of the clear conscience, a place where everything was weighed, counted, written down, where everything could be changed, lost, or saved. In this second Middle Ages, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, in which were laid the bases of what was to become modern civilization, a more personal, more inner feeling about death, about the death of the self, betrayed the violent attachment to the things of life but likewise—and this is the meaning of the macabre iconography of the fourteenth century—it betrayed the bitter feeling of failure mingled with mortality: a passion or being, an anxiety at not sufficiently being.

In the modern period, death, despite the apparent continuity of themes and ritual, became challenged and was furtively pushed out of the world of familiar things. In the realm of the imagination it became allied with eroticism in order to express the break with the established order. In religion it signified more than it had in the Middle Ages—which, however, gave birth to this way of thinking—a scorn for the world and an image of the
void. In the family—even when they believed in the afterlife, and in a more realistic afterlife, a transposition of life into eternity—death became the unacceptable separation, the death of the other, "thy death," the death of the loved one.

Thus death gradually assumed another form, both more distant and more dramatic, more full of tension. Death was sometimes exalted (the beautiful death in Lamartine) and soon was impugned (the ugly death of Madame Bovary).

In the nineteenth century death appeared omnipresent: funeral processions, mourning clothes, the spread of cemeteries and of their surface area, visits and pilgrimages to tombs, the cult of memory. But did this pomp not hide the weakening of old familiarities, which alone were really deeply rooted? In any case, this eloquent decor of death toppled in our day, and death has become unnamable. Everything henceforth goes on as if neither I nor those who are dear to me are any longer mortal. Technically, we admit that we might die; we take out insurance on our lives to protect our families from poverty. But really, at heart we feel we are non-mortals. And surprise! Our life is not as a result gladdened!

Is there a permanent relationship between one's idea of death and one's idea of oneself? If this is the case, must we take for granted, on the one hand, contemporary man's recoil from the desire to exist, the inverse of what occurred during the second Middle Ages, the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries? And, on the other hand, must we take for granted that it is impossible for our technological cultures ever to regain the naive confidence in Destiny which had for so long been shown by simple men when dying?