

## Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

PHILIPPE ARIÈS. — *L'Homme devant la mort*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977. PP. 642.

On the basis of exemplary liturgical, iconographic, literary, and medical discourse, Philippe Ariès identifies the four successive representations of death in Western civilization since the fall of the Roman Empire. The parameters of these four sensibilities and ethical-aesthetic responses, he contends, were drawn by changing attitudes towards the self and by changing ways of apprehending nature, death, and life after death.

The first sensibility was “domesticated death” (*la mort familière et apprivoisée*). Distinguished by its sense of common destiny, by a charitable view of salvation, by the appreciation of collective joy and public lamentation, and by its aversion to clandestine death, it was founded on the ability of the social order of the First Middle Ages to moderate the power of sex and impose an image of death as a rite of tranquil passage. It made no radical distinction between life and death. A mix of pagan and Christian sensibility, it coped with dissent by means of its fêtes of reversal, or the periodic inversion of sexual and hierarchical taboos. It held sway until the expansion of towns between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

The growth of towns promoted the clericalization of society, or dissemination of bourgeois-clerical values, with the consequent development of a new sensibility — *la mort de soi*. By the use of this term borrowed from the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, Ariès desires to emphasize the specificity, the individuality, of death. Stressing the personal basis of salvation, the new sensibility perceived death as an act of justice (law, punishment, political power) by means of which salvation was withdrawn from the undeserving.

Reflecting the growing power of monarchy, *la mort de soi* was also the product of commercialization and, in particular, of the passion *avaritia*. To translate *avaritia* as avarice is to diminish it. *Avaritia* signified a passionate craving for objects, for the collection and accumulation of wealth, for the things of the here and now. It also signified a zeal for life. Moreover, maintains Ariès, even the macabre themes of the art and literature of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries were the product of *avaritia* — not of plague and demographic crisis, nor of secularization — which made men (probably more than women) keenly aware of the corruptibility of all life. Combined with the knowledge that salvation was now a personal matter, no longer assured by the Resurrection, the yearning for life and increase aroused in some persons a hate of God, prompting them to form a compact with Satan, drawing them to the pleasures of witchcraft (perhaps also alchemy).

Consciousness of the duality — even polarity — life/death stirred also a new mode of artistic expression, the still-life or *nature morte*. Little wonder, then, that Ariès should refer to the groups, culture areas, and period dominated by the mentality of *la mort de soi* as “materialist.” They were, indeed, as Fernand Braudel has shown, the world vanguard of “material civilization.” But the western European “materialist” civilization was also a clerical civilization, distinguished by clerical regulation of wakes and funeral processions, by the use of the epitaph to perform a

biographic function, by its pursuit of an art of technically realistic portraits of deathbed scenes and of the dead in prayer, and above all perhaps by the decision of the northern and western European clergy to put an end to the exposure of corpses to public view until the moment of burial by requiring that the body, almost immediately upon death, be sewed up from head to foot, generally in a linen cloth, and placed in a coffin that was nailed down immediately. Western European Catholicism consequently was differentiated from Mediterranean Christianity, Latin and Orthodox, by its aversion to death and by its preference for individual justice over communal eschatology. The clericalization of the West was evidenced also in the adoption of the written testament as an obligatory act of devotion and piety. Reflecting the personal nature of *la mort de soi*, the written testament reinforced the power of the clerical culture by the normal provision for transfer to the Church of a portion of the inheritance, a way of disavowing *avaritia*.

The third sensibility was that of *la mort de toi* (a term similarly taken from Jankélévitch). In at least two respects, *la mort de toi* evolved directly from the previously dominant sensibility, moving from the duality life/death toward the duality body/soul and from *avaritia* toward the love of "nuclear" family, friends, or secular culture heroes. Among some persons and groups, both Catholic (Jansenist) and Protestant, the new sensibility was the very opposite of *avaritia* in its espousal of asceticism, the propensity of laymen to regard life as vanity. But *la mort de toi* enjoyed several different forms of expression: ascetic, familial, private, civic, romantic, and Sadian. These diverse expressions nevertheless may have converged through their affinity for a new conception of nature: nature as an endless chain of changing forms, death as part of a continuing cycle of reproduction, to which society should adapt. There was therefore no need to fear death. In its extreme forms, the new sensibility culminated in the conception of the beautiful romantic death and in necrophilia.

One of the first ways by which was diffused the sentiment of *la mort de toi*, beginning as the high point of clerical culture and ending as its renunciation, was through the general acceptance among Catholics, by 1640, of Purgatory as a normal and necessary step in the migration of the soul. Prayers or masses for souls in Purgatory thus became the most popular act of devotion in the Catholic Church, at once giving support to and reflecting the choice of less instrumentalist, more altruistic, conceptions of family and friendship. By the end of the Ancien Régime, the privileged and well-to-do adopted the practice of burying family members in the same chapel, conceived as the place of periodic meeting of the family dead and living. As belief in Purgatory prevailed, belief in Hell declined, abetting the notion of death's beauty.

The cemetery illustrates alike the private and civic manifestations of the third sensibility. For example, instead of being buried on top of each other, as practiced in the past, at least in large cities, the poor obtained individual burial plots during the nineteenth century. But the democratization of the cemetery had been preceded, during the 1770s and 1780s, and was to be accompanied, by an alternative conception, civic and hierarchical: the cemetery as an ordered reflection of the ideal society of the living. A museum of fine arts and gallery of once illustrious men and women, the civic model sought to teach the compatibility of nature and society by its very conception as an "English garden", or humanized hilly rural wooded site. In France, however, the monument ultimately overcame nature. In England and the United States, the rural cemetery (an innovation over the earlier churchyard) of the nineteenth century evolved toward the lawn cemetery of the twentieth, in which stone slabs or metal plates have replaced headstones, footstones, and more impressive monuments. Since 1914, in particular, the civic emphasis has been merged with the cult of the war dead.

The fourth sensibility toward death is a product of the twentieth century, during which the once despised *mors improvisa* — sudden death, death without preparation, death in a place removed from normal life (the hospital) — has become the common, even admired, form of death. To this fourth sensibility Ariès applies the name “inverted image of death” or “inverted death.” A product of decline of belief in the Evil One, the inverted image of death perceives and depicts death as shameful. Regarded as ugly, malodorous, and obscene, death has to be hidden from public view. The family and friends of a person who is gravely ill thus hide from him the gravity of his condition, even as medicine diagnoses the illness with greater precision. The ill or dying person responds to the solicitude of family and friends by internalizing their sensibility.

The sensibility of inverted death, maintains Ariès, has two foci, one in England and the other in the United States and Canada. From England, it has spread since the end of World War II to Germanic Europe, notably by the acceptance of the practice of cremation. From North America, it has infiltrated into France and the Mediterranean, notably in funeral practices. Catholic Europe and Presbyterian Scotland, however, still constitute centres of resistance to inverted death. In the United States, death cosmetized and beautifully packaged and convoyed is made visible during the brief period of the funeral by the assertive entrepreneurship of capitalist undertakers (the old English word for entrepreneurs), who superficially cure the living of their grief. The attire and ceremonial of long mourning, however, have almost wholly disappeared, for they are not easily compatible with the values and business of contemporary society (economy).

My résumé and interpretation of Ariès's book are surely too schematic. They can hardly embrace his wealth of detail and nuance. But even if a reader wishes to alter a nuance or reject one detail for another, even if he finds fault with Ariès's thesis, even if he would like a more systematic look at popular culture (until the nineteenth century, local by definition), even if he would give a more central position to the Protestant Reformation, how can he but regard Ariès' *L'Homme devant la mort* as one of the great books of our time, a remarkable literary monument, an extraordinary history of the sensibilities to death, and so to life? So dear to Lucien Febvre, the history of sensibilities has been explored amply during the last thirty years by *Annales* and *Annales*-oriented historians. Only during the last two years, however, have the most powerful syntheses appeared, a brilliant and profound trilogy initiated by Philippe Ariès' *L'Homme devant la mort* and completed by Pierre Chaunu's *La Mort à Paris* (1978) and Jean Delumeau's *La Peur en Occident* (1978).

Traian STOIANOVICH,  
Rutgers University.

\* \* \*

*Lire et écrire. L'alphabétisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry*, sous la direction de FRANÇOIS FURET et JACQUES OZOUF. Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977. 2 vol.: 390 et 379 pp.

S'il ne conteste pas à l'économique le primat que lui a fermement reconnu l'historiographie française contemporaine, le socio-culturel fournit des apports de plus en plus volumineux à la perception différenciée des changements et des résistances qui ont parcouru le tissu social de la France depuis l'aube des temps modernes.