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## 'To Warm Our Hands'

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## ‘To Warm Our Hands’

Emmanuel Ordóñez Angulo

Lovers often die shortly one after the other. Romeo and Juliet. June Carter and Johnny Cash. My grandfather and my grandmother. Leonard Cohen and Marianne Ihlen.

Marianne was the inspiration, most famously, of Cohen’s song “So long, Marianne”, but also of “Bird on the wire” and poems from the collection *Flowers for Hitler*. Cohen’s last words for her reached her just two days before her death—and a few months before his own. They said: ‘you know that I’ve always loved you for your beauty and your wisdom, but I don’t need to say anything more about that because you know all about that’. And: ‘I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine’ (at this point, tells the friend who read the letter to Marianne, she stretched out her hand). And: ‘Goodbye old friend. Endless love, see you down the road’.

Two paragraphs. Less—basically, two phrases. ‘You’re dying. I love you. Bye.’

Can one say more?

Cohen’s short letter went public and, over the following days, was praised by many. Critic Suzanne Moore wrote in *The Guardian*: ‘Leonard Cohen managed that rare thing: to talk with clarity about death’. A rare thing indeed—if it is even possible. But is it? Picture it: you meet her in Greece, just a man buying a woman a drink on a hot day. You travel through Europe together; you invite her to come live with you; you help her raise her child. You dedicate poetry and music to her. Then you part ways. And now you learn she’s dying. What could you possibly say about the significance of this woman and her death that amounts to ‘talking with clarity’?

The question seems to be, rather: on the matter of death, can one say *anything*?

An intuitive answer is no. In the wake of his mother’s passing, Mexican poet Jaime Sabines wrote: ‘in the presence of death, one has nothing but a broken head and empty hands; in the presence of death, poetry doesn’t exist’. Sabines’ idea is simply that the experience of someone dear to you dying, and probably the experience of being about to die yourself, is such that there are no words to face up to it. If this is so, it might be best not even to try. And in that case, it might be best not to spare for death any thoughts at all. But of course, this is impossible. So perhaps one should just *snub* it.

One can do this by openly mocking death, as they say we Mexicans do, or by calmly smirking at it, as Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska does.

‘Death always arrives by that very moment too late’, writes Szymborska in reference to the moment just before we die. She says this moment is the duration of our immortality. And this moment (which is, of course, *life*) is our only field of action. But a subspecies of action is speech. So only during life can we act, and only about it can we talk. During or about death, nothing.

To be sure, Szymborska does not solve the problem; she just diverts our attention from it. It does seem pointless, though, if we’re in the business of saying things, to spend time on something for which there are no words anyway. But changing the subject is conceding, and so Szymborska surreptitiously concedes Sabines’ pessimism.

Their attitude might be found to be endorsed in philosophy. Consider one of Wittgenstein’s most well-known propositions from his *Tractatus*: ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’. The idea is that, when we speak or write, we can say something meaningful or that makes sense only if the statements we produce refer to something that can be found in the world: basically, facts made up of things that we can see and touch. So we can talk about the news, work, or the weather, but not about good, evil, or beauty. Saying ‘apples are red’ makes sense because apples and the colour red manifestly exist, but saying ‘eating apples without sharing is wrong’ or ‘apples are beautiful’ is nonsensical because, well, where exactly is wrongness or beauty in the world? If ethics and aesthetics are beyond the limits of language, never mind talking about the experience of death.

Now, Wittgenstein does give us an alternative. Speaking of your admiration for apples, he might say, you can at least produce the meaningless phrase ‘apples are beautiful’, and that might convey your taste. But speaking of what you feel when your mother or your lover dies, what could you say that even touches the surface of your experience? Nothing. All you can do is cry. And here’s the thing: crying is no second-rate response. He writes: ‘what can be shown cannot be said’—that is, since you can’t talk about your experience, what you can do is show it. So tears express what words won’t describe.

This seems fair. But are we satisfied? Surely you, like me, have felt the urge to *say something*, not only to cry, when somebody you love dies. In the absence of words, what might have escaped from your mouth was a scream, and from your fists, a strike against the wall, and from your knuckles, blood. In this, we stand with Cohen and Sabines (not sure about ironic, never-lose-my-cool Szymborska).

If you think that's tough, now imagine finding words when it comes to *your own* death. Here alone stood Richard Rorty.

In a posthumous essay, Rorty tells of one occasion, shortly after being diagnosed with inoperable cancer, when he was asked by a cousin whether the proximity of death had driven him to think about religion. Rorty's answer was no. 'Well, what about philosophy?', then asked his son. Rorty's answer was, to his own surprise, again no. Nothing of the philosophy he had read or written, it now was clear to him, held any interest in his situation. This might be all the more strange if we recall that Rorty has been one of the few Anglophone philosophers to engage with both sides of the analytic-continental divide, the former often accused of scientism and the latter of what analytic philosophers might call, following Wittgenstein, nonsense. Among these nonsensical writers is one who wrote notably about mortality: Martin Heidegger—one of Rorty's own favourites.

Heidegger's project is the investigation of being. But this project starts by the investigation of Dasein, the *human* being, and so from the (existential) premise that Dasein is temporally finite Heidegger derives the (ontological) conclusion that being is temporally finite as well. So our essential mortality, our 'being-toward-death', is not only at the core of Dasein's existence, but also at the core of ontology itself.

If *that* didn't ring any bells to Rorty when he was on the very verge of death, what in the world could?

"Hasn't anything you've read been of any use?" my son persisted. "Yes," I found myself blurting out, "poetry."

Rorty's thought is not that poetry can capture, against Wittgenstein (and Sabines), something philosophy can't. 'There is nothing about death that Swinburne and Landor knew but Epicurus and Heidegger failed to grasp', Rorty writes; rather, people 'are more fully human when their memories are amply stocked with verses'.

But both philosophy and poetry are language-based projects. They're both, presumably, different exercises of the task of putting some mental content into words. So it seems that, in one project, language achieves something it doesn't in the other. This might not imply that Wittgenstein is wrong to think that language cannot capture something like the experience of death, but that he might be wrong to think that language can only *say* things whereas, say, tears can *show* them.

There is a distinction to be made, it seems, between the *language of philosophy* and the *language of poetry*. Even if we concede that in philosophy the scope of words is reduced to the facts of the tangible world, in poetry words reach what Wittgenstein

thought was beyond them: the realm of the intangible—the realm of what you can only *show*. (Perhaps the pragmatist Wittgenstein did realise this.) In poetry, then, language has the force of tears.

‘Which poems?’, Rorty’s son wanted to know. And Rorty cited ‘On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday’, by W.S. Landor:

Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;  
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,  
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

Rorty departed at 75 exactly; Marianne Ihlen at 80. Cohen’s words warmed Marianne’s hands just like Landor’s words warmed Rorty’s—she stretched out her hand to touch their fire.

So our intuitive answer was wrong. On the matter of death, one can *say* something: a poem. And in the presence of death, against Sabines, poetry *does* exist. Poetry won’t heal our ‘broken head’ or re-fill our ‘empty hands’ with the hands of the departed. That’s not poetry’s job. Its job is, in Rorty’s words, to make us more fully human. Or, in Landor’s words, to warm our hands.

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