Ars Moriendi: A Selection of Texts Concerning the Phenomenon of Death

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Ars Moriendi: A Selection of Texts Concerning the Phenomenon of Death

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fig. 1. Books from the present collection.
In the upper right corner there is an illustration of the “matador” of Death from Osborn on Leisure (see item 21). The other open text is the Death and Afterlife Book (item 13), open to entries about deathbed visions and the *ars moriendi* tradition.
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Essay

This book collection takes its title, *Ars Moriendi* (Latin for ‘the art of dying’), from a late medieval literary tradition consisting of texts that ‘guide’ readers through a rigorous programme that teaches the art of ‘dying well.’ (As the lore has it, if one were to follow the instructive dictates of an *ars moriendi* text verbatim, then one’s soul would be guaranteed salvation from eternal damnation in the life to come.) This literary tradition developed due to the convergence of an unlikely pair of historical events: namely, the infectious spread of Gutenberg’s printing press and the mass distribution of *Yersinia pestis*, more commonly known as the bubonic plague. In the wake of the Black Death, there was a critical shortage of priests (who traditionally fulfilled a cultural role as the guarantors of salvation through the administration of ‘last rites’), whereas pamphlets containing prayers and penances were easily producible and distributable. Thus, these ‘paper-priests’ made their way into households all over Europe, where they often lie waiting (in cupboards or at bedsides) in the case of an unexpected fatal illness.

However, one would be mistaken in reducing the *ars moriendi* tradition to the status of a curious artifact produced by the demands of a unique historical situation. Indeed, well-known texts on the ‘art of dying’ have been produced in almost *every* cultural context. From the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to the writings of the Roman philosopher Seneca, it could be said that most cultures, whether they were aware of it or not, had crafted their own *ars moriendi* texts. The *ars moriendi* tradition, then, could be said to pertain as a literary genre that spans across cultures, a form of writing that most directly reflects any given culture’s fears and hopes with respect to the occasion of death and the possibility of the afterlife. Presented herein are thirty items of literature that I take to be exemplars (or direct descendants) of this tradition. This collection contains a wide breadth of scientific, theological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives.
that have been adopted with respect to death. While many of these texts are reference books that consider the phenomenon of death itself from a strictly scientific or theological perspective, others consider the human response to death as the crucial issue, adopting an anthropological or a psychological point of view. The styles of writing featured range from the metaphysical to the fictional, from the ‘informed’ to the ‘informal.’ Several inclusions are humorous, or at the least, meant to be tongue-in-cheek. However, I believe that these texts are all united under the banner of the *ars moriendi* tradition, in that they indicate the human need to formulate a response to the prospects of death and human finitude: the need to determine what it means to ‘die well.’

My penchant for selecting books about death, which perhaps could be characterized negatively as a ‘fascination for the morbid,’ stems in fact from a sincere sensitivity to the problems raised in the encounter with death, conditioned in part by the fact that I was forced to confront death directly at a very early age. When I was seven, I learned that my parents were having another child. Gradually, it became apparent that my sister, still unborn, suffered from a chromosomal defect, ‘Trisomy 18.’ I remained excited at the prospect of a third sister’s arrival, regardless of the fact that many difficult words like ‘chromosome’ and ‘Trisomy’ would soon be entering the household with her. My parents kept secret the doctors’ premonitions that my sister would not survive past the first week of her life, deciding to carry the pregnancy to term anyway. My six-pound sister Maeve was born: we were able to visit her in the hospital, and eventually, we took her home. Her smile, a brittle gleam, meant everything; all in all, she was with us for fifteen days. I can remember clearly the morning that I woke up only to discover that she hadn’t.

I was faced, time and again, with the reality of death for much of my adolescence: my parents continued to try for another child, and in the years that followed Maeve’s death, they had a child who was born still, named Matthew, as well as three consecutive miscarriages. While my
family’s Christian belief system was able to provide me comfort, I grew to understand that the experience of the death of another being is always a singular event, as unique as the life that is taken, and that the experience of a death necessitates a recasting of one’s beliefs regarding the nature of the soul and the afterlife. Thus, at an early age, I had already begun turning to a variety of Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, and secular writings on death in the attempt to formulate a syncretic perspective of my own. The present collection is a testament to my continued search for such a perspective, although it is not by any means indicative of the conclusion of this search.

A majority of these texts were discovered in used bookstores such as King’s Books, Culpepper Books, and Half Price Books in Tacoma. Others were found in bookstores along the West Coast in cities such as Portland or San Francisco. Exceptional cases, such as a copy of one of the original *Ars Moriendi* texts, were ordered online from used bookstores in other parts of the country, as the only existent ‘first run’ copies of these texts are historical documents, and there is little to no demand for reproductions of these arcane texts. Occasionally, I visit the bookstore with a specific book or author in mind, but I am more likely to spend a few hours during a visit combing the shelves, looking for an encounter with an unfamiliar or exotic work. I tend to gravitate towards the Philosophy, Science, and Religion sections, as I have found that these are the most likely places for such encounters. Many of the books I have purchased this way have been about death and illness; thus, this collection developed somewhat organically, and was largely complete by the time I learned of Collins Memorial Library’s book collecting contest.

I assume that it is not very often that books on ‘death’ are considered collectible items: more often than not, these ‘finds’ lie waiting for me in the bargain bin. The saturation of these modern-day *ars moriendi* texts in these marginal locations suggests that, while people turn to texts on death and loss in times of tumult, they turn away from them just as quickly when those
times have passed: these books become unpleasant reminders, relics of our losses. We would much rather *repress* the thought of death than *respond to* it honestly. And yet, the explorations of fictional and non-fictional literature remain a profound and powerful means through which we can articulate a response to the presence of death, cope with our losses, and preserve the memories of those people in our lives whom we think to have ‘died well.’ It is for these reasons that I have assembled this collection.
Annotated Bibliography
(Listed in Alphabetical Order)


   The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* contains spells and songs that not only ensure health and prosperity in this world, but also guarantee a quick and painless transference into the world of the afterlife. For us, it provides a definitive account of the way the Egyptians perceived the nature of the body and the soul, the process of death, and the qualities of life to come. As James P. Allen points out in the introduction to this text, the *Book of the Dead* was not titled or thought of as such when it was used: it was known instead as “ Spells of Emerging in Daytime,” and was thought of as a ‘book of life’—eternal life, that is—and not as a ‘book of the dead.’ This particular edition is an ‘art book’ produced for the recent Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition on Egyptian art and is replete with full-color reproductions of Egyptian idols, hieroglyphics, and papyrus art, in addition to the complete text of the *Book of the Dead*.


   This enduring and comprehensive survey of attitudes towards death in Western cultures presents a wide breadth of evidence to argue the compelling case that the ‘fact’ of death has only recently become invisible in Western societies, having previously played a perspicuous and formative role in our cultural practices. Philippe Ariès argues further that, whereas the early Middle Ages emphasized a *collective* judgment of humanity at the end of time, individual
judgment immediately after death was the primary concern by the fifteenth century. Evidence includes an analysis of the presence of macabre imagery in Christian art and literature, such as in the *ars moriendi* (or the book of the ‘art of dying’), as well as in letters, private journals, and other rich primary sources feature a writer reflecting on his or her own fatality. The book begins with an analysis of death as it is presented in early chivalric romance, arguing that a ‘good death,’ such as that of a nobleman, would inevitably be a drawn out affair, where relatives and friends would be able to visit the dying party before their passing (see item 14). This is a very traditional perspective on what it means to ‘die well.’


This book draws on the influential work of psychological thinkers such as Freud, Jung, and Otto Rank, as well as existential philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, in order to provide a unique and forceful psychoanalytic perspective on the status of death in human culture. Society, according to Becker, is little more than the codification of an ethics of heroism, which is, in turn, an impulsive and narcissistic response to an animalistic fear of death. Becker closely reads Freud and other psychologists who have discussed the repression of the perpetually lived experience of ‘being-towards-death.’ The ‘art of dying,’ Becker claims, is not to escape unconscious repression in ‘living life to the fullest,’ that is to say, in liberating ourselves from our natural fear of death through the effacement of guilt and repression. Rather, Becker advocates for a stoical acceptance not only of the limitations of biological life, but also the limitations of our psychology, which necessitate a repressive response to death; the denial of death is the fundamental fact about humans, a inescapable fact just as much as death is.

The title of this satire of Victorian-era institutions and society hints at the fate that is common to all: death and decomposition. However, the story itself is much more implicit about the role of death, weaving the gradual progression of the protagonist’s loss of faith with respect to the afterlife within a larger complex narrative that spans decades. The protagonist, Ernest, has a tumultuous relationship with his father, specifically, who believes that “money is the highest good and its loss the greatest evil” (*Introduction* vii). In a search for meaning, he attempts to reject worldly possessions and live among the poor, but this proves to be similarly impossible. *The Way of All Flesh* is an honest look at how, sometimes, the search for the meaning of life does not go as one intends it to, and that the meaning of life and death are ‘predetermined’ in some way or another by the institutions of the culture surrounding (and trapping) the individual.


This profound work reflects Camus’s views about the absurdity of life and human existence. The only notable ‘events’ that propel the plot are the apathetic narrator’s attendance at his mother’s funeral, his irrational and senseless murder of an Arabian man on a beach, and his trial, at which he is sentenced to death. Written in daringly stringent prose that reflects the protagonist’s internal confusion and conflict, as well as his nihilistic tendencies, Camus develops a new type of novel that makes a deliberate and pessimistic ‘anti-statement’ regarding the value and meaning of life. There is no ‘dying well’ in this text, as the protagonist furiously refuses the prison chaplain’s attempts to guide him through the *ars moriendi*. 

This infamous text concerns the implications—and complications—of the question of whether there is a continuity of consciousness after death. The book divides reality into six domains of experience: waking life, dreams, meditative states, the time of our death, and two phases of the after-death state (which are the ‘intermediate state of reality,’ and the ‘intermediate state of rebirth’). Together, these two after-death phases are known as Bardo, a liminal world in between death and birth that presents us with hallucinatory ‘temptations.’ If one chooses to succumb to these temptations, one must accept the dangerous fate of a lower karmic rebirth. Thus, unlike the European *Ars Moriendi*, in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* desire and temptation defines both our experience in this world and in the supernatural realm.


Dante’s most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, is the story of a man who comes across the dead poet Virgil while lost in the woods, and who is given a guided tour through the many layers of the afterlife. Dante’s work lies somewhere between a precursor to the *ars moriendi* and a satirical allegory: it provides examples of those who lived (and died) well or poorly, but it is ambiguous whether Dante intended these descriptions to provide the reader with ‘models’ to simulate in this world, or with positive or negative estimations of various historical figures based on where he placed them in the next world. This recently published deluxe compilation of Robin Kirkpatrick’s translations of Dante’s *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* features deckle edging (just like the ‘rough’ or ‘uncut’ look of pages from antique books) and fantastic artwork.

In this memoir, the influential French social theorist Simone de Beauvoir relates the day-to-day tribulations that she experienced when helping her mother through the processes of aging and death. In incredibly lucid and matter-of-fact prose, Beauvoir relates how she guided her mother (affectionately referred to as ‘Maman’) through tasks such as changing clothes, eating, and the like. These tasks, while seemingly insignificant in a context of youth and docility, are sublimated once they enter a clinical environment: they are transformed into small feats of athleticism that express in themselves a defiance of death, a vitality that is unique to the aging and the dying. Prefaced by a quote from Thomas Dylan’s requiem for his father (“Do not go gentle into that good night…”), *A Very Easy Death* reminds me deeply of witnessing my father’s recent experience guiding his only surviving parent through the process of dying.


In these essays, Dillard weaves together moments from her life in the Puget Sound. The most well-known of these stories is Dillard’s take on Virginia Woolf’s “Death of a Moth,” a story in which a moth becomes stuck to a candle wick; the moth bursts into a brilliant “saffron yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk,” burning for two hours until Dillard chose to blow her out (17). Also included is a much more visceral account of a plane crash survivor, Julie Norwich, who is similarly burnt beyond recognition. These stories, when considered as a unity, provoke at once a sense of awe and despair at the fragility of existence. My copy of Dillard’s *Holy the Firm* was a gift from my high school religion teacher, in part due to the fact that I was moving up to the Puget Sound to study (which is where the
events of this short collection of writings take place). On the inside cover, he wrote to me the following note:

- an essential for your library
- Puget Sound
- suffering, death, God, beauty
- you’ll understand


    Death may come at an expected time for some, but often it is unanticipated. In these cases, we would rather be able to inform our loved ones as to what happened to us. Hence the science of forensics, of which this book provides a remarkable introduction: Genge covers everything from how fingerprints are taken at the scene of the crime, to the advantages of polymerase chain reactions (PCR) when analyzing blood samples. I found this book in the bargain bin at Half Price Books and was initially intrigued by the inclusion of unfamiliar scientific nomenclature, such as the names and descriptions of the five stages of bodily breakdown: namely, (i) initial decay, (ii) putrefaction, (iii) black putrefaction, (iv) butyric fermentation, and (v) dry decay. I took it home and found Genge’s book to be an easy read about the science of forensics—an unusual case, to be sure, as forensics texts usually make me squirm.

Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is the most perspicuous instance of a work of philosophy that engages to a significant extent with the problems posed by death. Perhaps the most comprehensive and complicated analysis of the existential problematic of death conducted so far in human history occurs in division two of the first part of this work, when Heidegger turns towards the thought that humanity’s unique mode of existence is ‘being-toward-death.’ According to Heidegger, there is a manner of death unique to humans and not shared by animals: other species simply ‘perish,’ that is to say, they come to the end of their life with no preconceived notion or awareness of their own finitude. Human existence does not perish in such a way; rather, it dies (or “demises”), meaning that it is aware of its own finitude as it lives. Heidegger that this fact changes what ‘death’ means in and of itself to us. Furthermore, we can only be said to ‘be’ human only in relation to the awareness of our own mortality or finitude.


I first came across the Yale philosophy professor Shelly Kagan while searching for free seminar videos online. Kagan sat cross-legged on his wooden desk and talked for over an hour about the ‘philosophy of death.’ This encounter led me to purchase his recent book on the topic, which presents helpful readings of Plato, Descartes, and other major philosophers for the purposes of summarizing arguments for and against the immortality of the soul, as well as the many positions regarding questions of personal identity and other philosophical problems. At the heart of this text is its discussion of whether death, as we understand it, could actually be a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing, and whether or not immortality would actually be preferable to oblivion.

This book excellently catalogues a variety of reported death phenomena, from highly contentious events such as ‘phone calls from the departed’ and ‘ectoplasm’ to safer ontological commitments (such as the Native American Ghost Dance rituals). Also, the book features entries with respect to the attitude towards death taken up by cultures, such as Australian aboriginals, the Aztecs, and the Mesopotamians. Of note in this collection are the multiple entries on international parapsychological or religious societies and associations related to death, dying, and the afterlife, such as the International Association for Conscious Dying, the International Association for Near-Death Studies, and the International Church of Ageless Wisdom. Several reproductions of woodblock prints, fresco paintings, and illustrations are included.


A near-perfect example of the notion of a ‘good death’ (that is, a slow one) in early chivalric romance, the ‘mortal blow’ responsible for the eponymous death of this text occurs after nearly eight hundred pages of King Arthur’s ‘last adventures.’ But with respect to other deaths in this story, Ariés writes, *Le Morte D’arthur* is difficult to pin down; it is due to this ambiguity that I began to look into King Arthur’s adventures and the unique way in which death is faced in these texts. The mourning practices of the chivalric Knights of the Round Table are notably ‘wild’ and excessively emotional, as per the expectations of knightly behavior in the chivalric tradition (such as Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Willehalm*). And yet, as Ariés points out, “vile and ugly” deaths (such as that of the poisoned knight Gaheris) cause so much grief in King
Arthur’s court that they reduce Arthur and his men to silence—an anachronistically modern response to death (*The Hour of Our Death*, 10-11).


   This contemporary perspective on death comes from a renowned Foucault scholar, Todd May, who decided to write a text on mortality after he had decided that academic philosophy “spends too much time removed from issues of importance to people who do not do academic philosophy” (vii). May, who has taught a seminar course on the topic of the philosophy of death in the past, brings together a variety of outside literary sources, such as Jorge Luis Borges’s story “The Immortal” and Milan Kundera’s excellent novel “Immortality” (which was itself a candidate for this collection), in order to pose questions about how we deal with death, or more aptly, how we choose *not* to deal with death—and why we ought to. It is said that one ought not judge a book by its cover, but I cannot help but mention that this book has the best cover in the entire collection, to my eye.


   This unorthodox book had a tremendous impact upon first release, as it sought to rethink human history from an entirely non-anthropomorphic perspective. That is to say, in considering the relationship between ‘plagues and peoples,’ McNeill chose to write from the viewpoint of the *plagues themselves*—those parasitic and often fatal diseases that have employed us as carriers. McNeill’s highly ambitious account of history attempts to explain a variety of historical events by way of chronicling the spread of epidemics that have made a pronounced lethal impact on
human societies. These lethal epidemics, McNeill argues, are quite often the impetus for dramatic societal changes. In his complex analysis, McNeill shows how disease spreads according to the rhythms of so-called ‘equilibrium patterns’ at the cellular, organismal, and societal level, and how significant aspects of our history (say, the horrors of the Black Plague) are fundamentally linked to ‘accidental’ features of the societal infrastructure that enable the transfer of parasites from one host to the next.


The title of this classic book immediately caught my attention during my second trip to Culpepper Books in the Proctor District. Mitford’s meticulously researched work, *The American Way of Death*, is a muckraking exposé that “rips the lid off” the impersonal capitalistic motives that underpin the American funeral industry. Mitford’s dryly humorous account presents high-price funerals as a definitively American phenomenon. Unlike the Egyptians, who limited their iconic lavish burials to members of royal families, we Americans can be expected to spend thousands and thousands of dollars on any given funeral due to the cultural stigmas associated with ‘opting out’ of traditional funeral practices. *The American Way of Death* is a powerful work that subversively calls into question the way that Americans handle death: we think of death the same way that we think of everything else, that is, in term of wealth. The shinier the coffin, the closer the soul is to its hard-earned eternal rest, according to Mitford’s cynical take on the American *ars moriendi*. 
Monsen, Avery, and Jory John. *All my friends are dead* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010). Hardcover (no page numbers given).

This highly morbid and unorthodox children’s picture book presents us with the first ‘accessible’ introduction to the fact of the impermanence of life. What friends are left for dinosaurs, dodos, trees (“All my friends are end tables”), or cassette tapes (“All my friends are obsolete”)? John and Monson lead us through unhappy ending after unhappy ending to show the fate that is common to us all. In fact, the only ‘happy ending’ belongs to a hooded figure with a scythe, who proclaims: “This job makes me feel so alive.” Don’t be fooled by the cute illustrations—this work is hardly recommended for children.

Nicholson, Edward Williams Byron (ed.). *Ars moriendi: that is to saye the craft for to deye for the helthe of mannes sowle* (Miami: Hardpress Publishing, no year given). Reprint.

Originally published in 1491, and rediscovered and republished in the nineteenth century, this particular instantiation of the *ars moriendi* is most likely a commoner’s translation of an ‘archetypal’ Latin text. It is clear that whoever translated the Latin text did not have access to a smoothly running printing press: as the introductory note makes clear, the type used to produce this copy is “very ragged.” If anything, this goes to show that the *ars moriendi* texts were widely read and produced by common people, for common people. Scholars have generally agreed that there are two ‘archetypal’ manuscripts from which the hundreds of variants that comprise the *ars moriendi* tradition in England are said to derive. The first of the two is a six-chapter work that explores the notion of an ‘artful death’ in great detail, whereas the second of the two is a briefer work that adapts and illustrates the longer treatise's second chapter. This *ars moriendi* is a descendant of the second model; unfortunately, this version of the text does not feature the
excellent woodblock illustrations of the archetypal ‘short version.’ This text nonetheless demonstrates the key point of the short version—namely, that maintaining stability in one’s faith in salvation in the face of death is the most important step to attaining salvation.


Nuland, a distinguished surgeon, presents a medically informed account of the most common forms of ‘natural’ death in American society (such as heart failure, Alzheimer’s, AIDS, and cancer), as well as deaths provoked by humans (such as in cases of murder, suicide, and euthanasia). This book is calmly written, lacking in the sentimentality that characterizes many other texts about death, and thus presents a fresh alternative to other books designed to help people cope with death. In presenting death as a scientific and natural phenomenon, Nuland makes it easier to deal with the experience of death of a loved one due to something as terrifying and unfamiliar as Alzheimer’s disease.


This illustrated *ars moriendi*, found at Culpepper Books, was especially intended for workers in the medical professions, and other lines of work with high-stress environments and little to no leisure time. Humorous illustrations are juxtaposed with reproductions of classical works of art (such as Verrocchio’s “Lorenzo de’ Medici”), matching the unusual typesetting format. Osborn says that the lifestyle of modern society is more suitable for machines than it is for human beings, and that we are paying the price in the long run. Modern day man is “CROWDED every day by that petty thief… TIME…. …and he is blocked ultimately by Death,
Osborne agrees with the Roman philosopher Seneca (whose entry in this collection appears soon) that, indeed, life is much too short; but whereas Seneca takes this fact to show how frugally we must regard the time that we do have, Osborn argues that the art of living (and, thus, the art of dying) can only be achieved once we stop thinking of life in terms of ‘minutes’ and ‘hours’ and begin to live a balanced life of work and play at a slow, steady pace.


I first was introduced to this book when a friend, who shares my fascination for biology, loaned it to me and suggested that I read it. I tore through this darkly humorous account of what happens to people who donate their bodies to science, and ended up purchasing a copy of my own. Roach presents singular and highly humorous findings far beyond the domain of text-based research. For example, she visits a medical school lab where each student is assigned their own cadaver for the entire semester, and finds that the students inevitably become attached to their ‘lab partners.’ Roach also discusses more traditional (i.e., less ‘productive’) ways of dealing with death, such as burial and cremation.


The sequel to *Stiff*, Mary Roach’s *Spook* essentially presents an exposition on the Freudian theme of the ‘uncanny’ *[Unheimlich]*. This is a notion, developed by Freud, referring to the feeling of ‘shivers up one’s spine’ when juxtaposed with the feeling that there is a rational explanation for all phenomena. For example, if one were to feel strongly that they had a real
encounter with a ghost, despite the equally strong belief that ghosts do not exist empirically and are figments of the imagination, then that person would be dealing with the uncanny. If one were to believe in ghosts, they would not be dealing with the uncanny, for there would not be the accompanying cognitive dissonance between sensed reality, on one hand, and intellectual rationalization of reality on the other. Roach’s book presents a series of interviews and encounters with scientists who do not believe in the reality of the afterlife to varying degrees. Regardless of their doubts, these scientists usually have a story where they felt they were confronted with the inexplicable and supernatural, despite having awareness that there was most definitely a causal, empirical account that would explain the content of experiences. Thus, *Spook* presents us with a look into the uncanny aspects of death and dying.


*No Exit* is a play focused on three characters, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, who have been checked into a hotel room that is presumably violating several fire and safety codes for not having an exit. As they converse further, they realize that they all are implicated in each other’s pasts, and they begin to accuse and attack one another. A further twist arrives when none of the characters are harmed even by fatal stab wounds: they cannot die—for they are already dead. This classic work is as much of a thought experiment as it is a drama: “What if Hell were other people?” In posing this question, Sartre turns our idea of Heaven, that is, an immortal existence with our loved ones, on its head, twisting it into a thought that would make the infinite ‘loneliness’ of oblivion seem infinitely more appealing.

The prominent use of metaphor and magical realism makes *The Street of Crocodiles* initially appear as a playful, dreamlike work, but the protagonist Józef’s delicate and uncertain descriptions of the death of his father pull the reader immediately under this ‘surface’ into the depths of a language that provokes the very real (albeit incommunicable) emotions associated with the loss of a loved one at an early age. Józef describes his father in each chapter as having died, or as not yet having died, or as alive but slowly coming to grips with his own mortality, with little to no respect for the temporal progression of the narrative. This literary technique effects a nonlinear oscillation between vitality, aging, and death—an irrational temporality that is reminiscent of memory itself, perhaps reflecting Józef’s attempt to preserve his father in what hazy memories remain. My particular copy of the book had been given to me by a friend who had read it after his father’s unexpected and tragic passing. I experienced much more of what my friend was going through in comparing his perspective to that of Józef’s than I ever could have on my own accord.


This copy of Seneca’s essay “On the Shortness of Life” was located at a bookstore in San Francisco. The Roman philosopher Seneca was perhaps the first to suggest that there was as much of an art to dying as there was to living. In a letter not included in this collection, he writes: “Before I became old I tried to live well; now that I am old, I shall try to die well; but dying well
means dying gladly.”¹ Seneca wrote to his friends, family, and political figures about the inevitability of death, and about how life must be spent in preparation for death. The essays in this collection all express that life is short, and that time must be used very wisely, but they also feature a cheerful acceptance of death as a natural part of life, in a manner that is indebted to the philosophy of the ancient Greek Stoics. This healthy attitude towards death may, in part, be due to the Stoic cosmological doctrine of the ‘eternal return,’ or the idea that the universe is perpetually born, extinguished, and reborn—and that we are subject to the same fate. In light of such a belief, the ultimate fear is not of death (for death becomes nothing more than a ‘moment’ in the cosmic cycle), but is instead the suffering that is caused by excess and wastefulness, the harmful effects of which are multiplied infinitely in the infinity of self-same ‘universe cycles.’ This doctrine must have appealed to the Roman Seneca, who was highly critical of his decadent cultural environment.


While this novel is best known for the iconic monster that it created, at work behind the scenes is a carefully crafted consideration of Dr. Frankenstein’s psychology, and his insatiable Promethean desire to fulfill the possibility of immortality. Dr. Frankenstein presents us with one perspective towards death (that is, the heroic desire to overcome it); his monster, on the other hand, assumes an autonomy of his own and overturns Frankenstein’s accomplishment by causing death and destruction, in turn. *Frankenstein* is a chilling and thought-provoking work on what

might happen if the perceived ‘limits’ of human nature, the necessity of mortality, and the limits of the organism were ever to be transgressed through the progress of science.


   This contemporary spiritual perspective on the afterlife, while principally philosophical, takes a decidedly Christian approach to answering questions about death and the life to come. Tompkins explores the present debate in philosophy of mind with respect to the duality of body and soul, arguing that there is an incorporeal soul that survives biological death that nonetheless has not been ‘pinned down’ by any description of it so far. Thus, Tompkins provides a ‘middle way’ between a religiously informed dogmatism and a spiritually informed agnosticism, presenting accurate and piercing accounts of the variety of views on death and the afterlife held by the dominant cultural traditions of human history along the way.


   Quigley’s *Death Dictionary* features a selection of entries from medical dictionaries and ‘rare word’ compilations that focuses strictly on death and disease. I first saw this compilation of rare and archaic words regarding burial practices, fatal diseases, and other death-related topics while browsing the reference section of the Collins Memorial Library; later, I was able to locate a paperback copy. This book provides ample trivia: who knew, for instance, that the fate that
befell Kate Chopin’s protagonist in her seminal novel *The Awakening* had already been symptomatized in clinical nomenclature as “catabythismomania” (“An impulse to commit suicide by drowning”)? Or that the gate through which a casket is carried, and the path over which it is carried from the mortuary to the cemetery or churchyard, are properly referred to as the “lich gate” and “lich way,” respectively? Occasionally, I flip this text open to a random page and see if I might learn of a new colorful euphemism that I might substitute whenever I am trying to express some statement about ‘kicking the bucket.’


*Jacob’s Room* is a landmark modernist work by Virginia Woolf. In this book, Woolf explores the limits of literature itself in reducing the eponymous protagonist, Jacob Flanders, to an ‘absence’: he has already died in World War One. Rapidly oscillating between perceptual fragments that comprise Jacob’s life, the novel is highly effective in creating the impression that ‘Jacob’ is nothing more than the brief glimpse, cinders, or fragments that we see of him. The focus of the story, instead, is on Jacob’s mother’s attempt to make some sort of sense of his life after he has died tragically. Paired with *The Waves,* another difficult read, *Jacob’s Room* is a challenging and ambiguous narrative that complicates the relationship between ‘mother’ and ‘child’ (How much of the child is in the mother’s mind?), and indeed, between our notions of life and death themselves (How much of ‘death’ is really just in the minds of the living?).
Annotated Wish List

(listed by degree of significance to collection and rarity, from least to greatest)

5. Bradley, Ben, with Fred Feldman and Jens Johansson (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*.

While death has been a hotly debated topic in philosophy since the beginning, only recently has the distinct sub-discipline of ‘Philosophy of Death’ come to life. This collection of twenty-one essays from leading analytic philosophers, including Eric Olson, Dean Zimmerman, and Jens Johansson, poses questions regarding the following: ‘When, precisely, does death occur?’, ‘What is the relationship between a person and a corpse?’, ‘Is death significant for animals?’, and so on. Also included are ancient perspectives on death that are illuminated through readings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. This compilation of essays would make an excellent contribution to my collection.


While Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive ruminations on religion and ethics in *The Gift of Death* are perhaps more directly related to the topic of the *ars moriendi* itself, I would much rather locate and possess a copy of his collection of eulogies for his fellow intellectuals, titled *The Work of Mourning*. As per the reasons stated in the essay attached, I find memoirs to be a profound and spontaneous medium for immortalizing the memories of another, and am less concerned with Derrida’s attempts to define death abstractly (as in *The Gift of Death*) than I am with his attempts to deal with it in his actual life. This collection contains eulogies on some of
my favorite critical theorists, including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-François Lyotard.


This comprehensive study focuses on the earliest versions of Ars Moriendi literature from sixteenth-century Europe, beginning with a sermon by Martin Luther on “Preparing to Die.” Reinis argues that the ars moriendi texts are in fact situated within the context of a crucial conflict between Protestant and Catholic understandings of death, providing a close reading of several versions of the Ars Moriendi and drawing on many other sources from the same historical context to prove her case. Such a text would undoubtedly enrich my knowledge of the Ars Moriendi tradition and its origins in Europe.


The German philosopher Philip Mainländer’s only published text, The Philosophy of Redemption, has been described as the most radically pessimistic work of literature of all time. Through a developed line of argumentation, Mainländer argues that the human unconscious is characterized by a ‘will to death,’ and that the only eschatological moment of redemption available to us is to follow this will to death to the end in a species-wide collective suicide. Talk about an ars moriendi text: the key to ‘dying well’ is not living well, but is instead in taking your own life as quickly as possible. The only true ‘Mainländerian’ in existence would have to be Mainländer himself, who practiced what he preached less than one month after the publication of
his first work. The thirty-five year old Mainländer hanged himself—using a pile of copies of Die Philosophie der Erlösung as a footstool. It should be clear why the book has not been popular.

*The Philosophy of Redemption* has so far not been translated into any language. However, I would like to see it translated into English some day, if only for the fact that Mainländer belongs to a lineage of notable German pessimists (including Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann) who have all received complete translations of their work, and scholarly attention has been unequally distributed between these other pessimists and the more radical Mainländer. And, with reference to the present collection, I would be properly stunned if I were to some day locate a copy of the first edition of the text in an antique bookstore.

1. *An original Ars Moriendi text complete with woodblock print illustrations.*

If I could possibly obtain one (or several) actual versions of the European *Ars Moriendi* pamphlets, my collection would be largely complete. Granted, this is admittedly a pipe dream: as I have already mentioned, these texts, if still existent, are priceless historical documents and are probably locked away in libraries for safe keeping.