Death in American Letters

by

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Graduate Department of English
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Abstract

This dissertation examines American attitudes towards death from the colonial era to the end of the nineteenth century. I begin with a close analysis of the thanatology of the Congregational church in New England, before demonstrating the lasting influence of Puritan thought on three later writers: Jonathan Edwards, Henry David Thoreau and Stephen Crane. In contrast to purely cultural studies of mortality in America (including those by Phillipe Ariès, David Stannard and Michael Steiner), my investigation discusses the philosophical difficulties that obstruct any attempt to speak about death. Building on Jacques Derrida’s work in Aporias (1993), I identify three logical impasses that interrupt Puritan writing on mortality: the indeterminacy, singularity and finality of death. While Edwards, Thoreau and Crane write in different circumstances and diverse genres, I argue that they are sensitive to these same three aporias when they discuss death. In this regard, they resist a broader post-Puritan tendency (in both scientific and sentimental texts) to minimize the uncertainties surrounding human mortality and approach death as a universal (rather than radically singular) phenomenon.

While my study situates each of its authors in the cultural and intellectual contexts in which they worked, it also challenges the notion that it is possible to write a history of death. Speaking
strictly, mankind’s relationship to death can never change. It is always, in fact, a non-relation. The very idea of death destabilizes our most fundamental historical and literary assumptions. Accordingly, my second chapter uses a deconstruction of Edwards’ theory of revivalism to argue that the New-England awakenings of the eighteenth century expressed the converts’ desire to renounce responsibility for their souls, rather than accept it. In my third chapter, I argue that those writings in which Thoreau registers what might seem to be a nihilistic fascination with dead and decaying bodies in fact express a sentimental desire for a peaceful death. Chapter four reads Stephen Crane’s poetry, fiction and journalism in the context of his Calvinist heritage, breaking down the distinction between his textual play with the concept of death and the Puritans’ “serious” attempts to come to terms with mortality.
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Introduction

How would we write a history of death in America? Which sources would we employ, which testimonies would we reproduce? Is there a standard narrative, an accepted history that we may rewrite or re-inscribe? Any American history of mortality is likely to begin in colonial New England, with the Puritans’ powerful sense of the imminence of death.\(^1\) While Puritan ministers spoke of God’s special covenant with the colony, prophesying that, one day, he would establish his earthly kingdom there, they warned that the fate of the individual Christian was far from certain.\(^2\) Since death might steal him away at any moment, he must strive always to be reconciled to God, always to live in a state of grace. Calvinism may have preached that grace was a gift bestowed by God and that individual salvation and damnation were predestined, but it also warned that each human being was to be held accountable for the manner in which they

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1 In *Albion’s Seed*, his study of the cultural origins of four areas of seventeenth-century British settlement in America (Massachusetts, Virginia, the Delaware Valley and the Appalachian Backcountry), David Hackett Fischer observes that despite the relatively high life expectancies of New Englanders, the Massachusetts Puritans’ “thinking about death … had an exceptional intensity even by the macabre standards of their age” (111).

2 This disjuncture stands at the centre of modern scholarship on the American Puritans. Perry Miller argued that New England ministers developed a complex federal theology, in which the individual’s relationship to God was enfolded within three contractual agreements: “the covenant of grace” (which stipulated that God would grant salvation to those who possessed true faith in him [The Seventeenth Century 375-77]), “the covenant of the church” (in which believers were required to demonstrate their election through participation in their local congregational church, an institution that was supposedly comprised only of visible saints and was thus “an autonomous unit,” independent from the power of “bishops and archbishops, synods and assemblies” [435]), and the “social contract” (which upheld that God specially favoured the colonies as a nation, because of the number of pious individuals and holy congregations within them [410-3]). This covenantal view of the world, Miller maintained, was part of the Puritans’ attempt “to mark off an area of human behavior from the general realm of nature, and within it to substitute for the rule of necessity and rule of freedom” (398). “They were striving[,]” he continues, to push as far into the background as possible the order of things that is fulfilled by unconscious and aimless motions, that is determined by inertia and inexorable law, and in its place to set up an order founded in voluntary choice” (398). This, it seems to me, is a long way of saying that the federal theology, on the most basic level, was a response to the Calvinist’s heightened anxiety concerning death. Miller’s next sentence, indeed, appears to confirm this interpretation. The Puritans sought, he claims, “to extricate man from the relentless primordial mechanism, from the chains of instinct and fear, to set him upon his own feet, to endow him with a knowledge of utility and purpose, with the faculties to implement his knowledge, so that he might rationally choose and not be driven from pillar to post by fate or circumstance” (398-9). Although covenantal theory could not guarantee that the individual would be saved (since he could not be absolutely certain that he stood within them), they offered him a degree of agency in determining his destiny.
had lived their lives. In particular, they would be judged according to their use of the most precious resource available to them: time. To waste the brief life available to them in pursuit of pleasure and pastime was to reckon the value of redemption cheap. The Puritans’ literary and theological discourse never strayed far from this subject, and pastors counselled their parishioners that their private devotions should follow this lead. “We are none of us very far from a Night, when we shall Sleep in the dust[,]” wrote Cotton Mather, “We Shall not Sleep in our Sin, if we are duly Sensible, how sure, and how near, this Night is to us” (A Midnight Cry 56). In the midst of every activity, in every place they visited, reformed Christians were to keep death constantly in mind. “When we go out of our Houses,” Mather continued, “Let us think, I shall shortly be carried unto my Long Home. When we sit at our Tables, Let us think, I shall shortly be my self a morsel for the Worms. When we rest in our Lodgings, Let us think, A cold Grave will shortly be my Bed. And when we view the Chests, where we put our Treasures, Let us think, A little black Chest is that wherein I my self shortly may be Locked up” (56-7). Every night before going to sleep, Mather stipulated, the believer should ask himself: “Have I lived this Day under a Deep Sense of Mortality and Eternity; and as a Stranger in the world?” (57).

This extreme level of vigilance was necessary because the individual was solely responsible for his own death and because the Puritans had a keen sense of the finality of death.

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3 Sacvan Bercovitch’s influential accounts of the impact of Puritan theology on the American sense of the subject (The Puritan Origins of the American Self) and the nation (American Jeremiad) repeatedly stress the symbolic connections between the individual and New England (or America) as a whole. He observes, for instance, that Cotton Mather’s biography of John Winthrop in Magnalia Christi Americana presents the first governor of Massachusetts as both “citizen and saint[,]” a representative of “state and church” (Puritans Origins 44). Mather’s depiction of Winthrop’s final moments, Bercovitch argues, “predicates the glories in store” for the colony that he had led (48). This identification worked to allay the believer’s fears concerning mortality and the next life: if he were able to successfully imitate Winthrop, then, after death, he would take his place alongside the statesmen in the company of New England’s saints, becoming himself an exemplar of the special favour that God had shown to the colony. At the same time, the proliferation of this kind of discourse in the writings of the Puritans is testament to the persistence of uncertainty and anxiety about the death of the individual.
In Roman Catholicism, death was not such a solitary or even completely final affair. Catholics had recourse to the sacraments administered by the church—rituals that both signified and produced the grace that saves. If reception of the sacraments did not guarantee salvation (the Christian must receive them willingly and with right intention), they were the only means by which an individual could be redeemed. The doctrine of purgatory, moreover, meant that the souls of the departed generally did not arrive at their final destination at the moment of death. Nor were they beyond the help of the living, who were permitted to intercede on their behalf in order to speed their entry into paradise. Puritanism, by contrast, saw the struggle to come to terms with death in terms of private introspection, not public ritual. Ministers might offer emotional support, scholars of divinity intellectual reassurance, but only the believer could scrutinize his conscience for traces of grace. While they rejected the medieval Christian idea that the manner in which an individual died could determine the fate of their spirit (Gordon Geddes notes that “while the act of dying retained its importance as a major eschatological boundary for the individual … it lost much of its medieval significance for salvation” [35]), Puritans stressed the conclusiveness of death. The instant of death was the very second in which one would rise up into heaven or descend into hell (Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* 87). Once in either place, one was fixed there for eternity, beyond human contact, beyond the power of prayer.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, this constant wakefulness towards mortality had been cast aside. Death had become a dream. No longer a wrenching, painful experience, it was now a peaceful passage into a better life. David Stannard makes a telling comparison between the lessons taught to the Puritan and the nineteenth-century child concerning death. The former, he writes, “was told to ‘think how it will be on a deathbed’; to consider the terror of certain separation from, and even betrayal by, parents and loved ones, and to imagine what his well-deserved torments in Hell would be like” (*The Puritan Way of Death*
The latter, on the other hand, “was rarely told to contemplate the physical act of dying, and whenever he was, it was because the transformation thus effected was seen as a peaceful and beautiful deliverance” (174). He was asked to imagine “the sweet glory of salvation” instead of “visions of Hell and damnation,” “eternal and heavenly reunion [with his parents]” rather than “separation from or betrayal by [them].” Where the Puritans had attempted (at least in the early years of the colony) to keep their funerals simple and spare, the nineteenth century saw the development of an expansive industry of death that included sprawling, parkland cemeteries, daguerreotypes of the dead, and “prolonged periods of seclusion for the bereaved” (The Puritan Way of Death 168). Stannard, then, describes a shift towards a more secular conception of mortality. Nineteenth-century culture was no longer prepared to view death as a moment of crisis, the instant in which the eternal fate of the soul would be revealed. Instead, most Americans chose to believe that their deaths would be comfortable and were less inclined to accept uncertainty, in life, regarding their destiny beyond the grave. The elaborate mourning practices of the middle class in this period reflect their relative lack of concern regarding preparation for death (168). This narrative follows the outline of Phillipe Ariès’ classic histories of mortality, Western Attitudes Toward Death and The Hour of Our Death. Ariès charts the Western world’s transition from a preoccupation with the death of the individual or “one’s own death” (la mort de soi) to death of “the other person” (la mort de toi) (Western Attitudes Toward Death 55-6). For him, the aestheticisation and commercialisation of mortality in the nineteenth century...
century, with its concomitant development of a professional class of undertakers, was a prelude to the twentieth-century process by which death became “invisible,” removed from the home and hidden away in hospitals, hospices and funeral parlours (The Hour of Our Death 570-1). Stannard’s brief portrait of death in the twentieth-century United States is little different from this general study of the modern West. Like Ariès, he observes that death is now in the hands of doctors, frequently occurring when the “dying patient” is under sedation (The Puritan Way of Death 191-2; The Hour of Our Death 583-8). The title of his last chapter, “Toward an American Way of Death,” takes on an ironic tone when one considers that it charts the nation’s renunciation of the Puritan approach to mortality (which was, I would argue, more broadly accepted in the American colonies than anywhere else) in favour of an attitude that is, according to Ariès, standard across the modern Western world.

In Aporias, Jacques Derrida praises the “richness” and “necessity” of Ariès’ works, which he describes as “masterpieces of their genre” (25). On the other hand, he reminds us of “the strict limits of these anthropological histories.” As a historian, Ariès “knows, thinks he knows, grants to himself the unquestioned knowledge of what death is, of what being-dead means.” Therefore, Derrida observes, “[t]he question of the meaning of death and of the word ‘death,’ the question ‘What is death in general?’ or ‘What is the experience of death?’ and the question of knowing if death ‘is’—and what death ‘is’—all remain radically absent as questions [from his works].” Histories of death tend to be histories of dying, of funerals, of the cultures that grow up around death. Is a history of death itself even possible? Perhaps, if one bears Derrida’s critique of Ariès in mind. But the historian would have to take into account Wittgenstein’s observation that “unlike dying, death is not an event in one’s life—not even the last one” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. London: Routledge, 1922. 6.4311ff.; qtd. in Mulhall 122). At the same time, he or she must acknowledge the truth of Heidegger’s dictum that “[d]eath, in the
widest sense, is a phenomenon of life” (*Being and Time* 290). We can only “relate to our death” as an “impending possibility” within our lives (Mulhall 125). Heidegger insists that his “existential Interpretation of death takes precedence over any biology and ontology of life” (*Being and Time* 291). He adds that “any investigation of death which is biographical or historiographical, ethnological or psychological” must take the existential analysis of mortality as its “foundation.” While Derrida offers Heidegger’s careful thinking as a corrective to Ariès’ philosophical naivety, he also seeks to complicate Heidegger’s conclusions. *Aporias* deconstructs, for instance, Heidegger’s distinction between dying and perishing (30-42; *Being and Time* 290-2). It also casts doubt on the philosopher’s assertion that language, *Dasein’s* ability to witness or testify to its living relationship with the possibility of its death, is a prerequisite of that relationship. Derrida suggests that, rather than “giving us added assurance about the experience of death as death,” language might “create an illusion,” fooling us into thinking that “to say death [is] enough to have access to dying as such” (36-7). *Aporias* expands *Being and Time*’s discussion of the limits which death imposes on philosophy and every other intellectual discipline into a complex and substantial metaphor of borders and frontiers. For Derrida, the most important boundary over which death presides is the one marked by the “syntagm ‘my death’”(21-2). Everyone alive today may speak of “my death,” yet in each case the referent is radically different, since each individual’s death is an “absolute singularity” (22). “Nothing,” therefore, “is more substitutable [than this phrase] and yet nothing is less so.” Every study of, every statement about death must attempt, and, inevitably, fail, to cross this border. Death, like Derrida’s *différance*, ensures that meaning is never fully present. As Mjaaland

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6 He warns us, too, that we must not “cite Heidegger as an illustration or as an authoritative argument” (26), as if he had finally settled all the philosophical and cultural difficulties surrounding mortality.
elaborates, when death is “introduced into the discourse, one includes a definitive border, a total yet indefinable category, a category which opens a rift in the text, opens the space for the other, a ‘difference which makes a difference,’ and breaks up the connection between the signifier (significant) and the signified (signifié), between intention and meaning” (Autopsia 86).

This study is, like Stannard’s, an investigation of cultural attitudes towards death in America from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the close of nineteenth. But where Stannard views the Puritans as an exception, an “anachronism” even (196), in the Western world’s progression towards “invisible” death, I examine the way in which their thanatology exerted a lasting influence on American thought. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries certainly witnessed a series of dramatic changes in American attitudes to death. Although they appeared set to “revive” religious orthodoxy, the awakenings of the 1730s and 40s loosened Puritanism’s hold on the colonies in the long term. The new form of evangelical Protestantism that would emerge from this period took a more optimistic attitude to death. Revivalist leaders may have warned their congregations of the threat of hell, but the violence of the conversions that their preaching inspired suggested that the re-born believers had definitely been granted a place in heaven. The Liberal theology of the nineteenth century took this trend further, placing

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7 One symptom of this tendency was the Wesleyan concept of Christian perfection, which was developed in nineteenth century America by the Presbyterian Congregationalist Charles Grandison Finney. This doctrine held that it was possible for believers to enter into a state of perfect holiness (not an inability to sin, but a powerful aversion from doing so). The implication was that certainty of salvation was something that might be achieved during one’s life. Mark Noll identifies perfectionism as one of the “divisive issues” in the eighteenth-century debate between old-fashioned Calvinist evangelicals, including Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, and those of a more Arminian persuasion, such as the Wesleys (The Rise of Evangelicalism 270-1).

Counter-intuitively, the awakening sermon’s intensified focus on the sufferings of the damned may also have been expressive of a new confidence regarding mortality. David Stannard claims that “the Puritan vision of death had been rooted in an incongruity between an optimistic rhetorical interpretation of death and a desperate introspective fear of it” (Puritan Way of Death 146). During the awakenings, on the other hand, “much of the rhetorical interpretation was rich with expressions and images of terror, while in private a new optimism was becoming evident.”
less emphasis on eternal punishment and suggesting that salvation could become universal. In Henry Ward Beecher’s account, for instance, death was less a moment of ethical reckoning than a natural function: the means by which the soul shed the body, in preparation for immortality (Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* 80). At the same time, scientists began to view death as nothing more than a biological process. Advances in evolutionary biology meant that the demise of the human individual now seemed less significant than the survival, or extinction, of entire species (Farrell 48-9). By the end of the century, many American intellectuals had adopted a cynical perspective on mortality. Literary naturalists such as Jack London and Frank Norris saw human life as a hopeless struggle against inherited inclinations and social and natural environments. Death, for them, revealed that man was just another beast: the universal fact of mortality made a mockery of our notion of individual agency. The misanthropic humorists Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce were at bottom equally nihilistic: nothing revealed humanity’s vanity and absurdity as clearly as its attempts to imbue death with meaning. Beneath all of these various developments lay one substantial change. The Puritans had stressed that every individual’s death possessed a radically singular ethical significance. Each of these post-Puritan approaches, on the other hand, both Christian and secular alike, viewed mortality as a universal phenomenon. From their perspective, death was the same for everyone.

In the pages that follow, I will examine those writers who worked against this line of thought. For different reasons, Jonathan Edwards, Henry David Thoreau and Stephen Crane resisted the post-Puritan tendency to treat mortality as a settled question and disguise its philosophically troubling qualities. While they did not all accept the metaphysical assertions of the Puritan thanatology (here there is a clear line between Edwards as a theologian and Thoreau and Crane as essentially secular authors), they each acknowledged that the teaching that each
individual death is unique might be true. As a result, their writing is especially useful for my purposes. Drawing on Derrida’s conception of the *aporia*, I want to examine the way in which their thinking about mortality is inevitably undermined by an inability to come to terms with what death “is.” I do not suggest that their works are unique in this regard: every attempt to understand mortality is necessarily a failure. Instead, I would argue that the aporetic quality of death is particularly prominent in their compositions. This is partly because they all produced such a large amount of writing that touched on the subject, and also because they each wrote in periods in which attitudes towards death and religion were changing (Edwards at the origins of evangelical Christianity in America, Thoreau as evolutionary theory was coming to prominence, and Crane as nihilism and cynicism were coming into fashion). My study, then, is far from ahistorical, in as much as it pays specific attention to the ideological context of the writers that it discusses, and attempts to connect them to the intellectual heritage of New England Puritanism. At the same time, it differs substantially from works such as Stannard’s and Ariès’ insofar as it also examines that which does not and cannot change: the existential conundrum of humanity’s impossible relation to death. In this sense, my investigation could have taken any culture as its subject. In another, it is most fitting that it should treat death in America. For America, as

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8 For Edwards, of course, there was no question that this was the case.

9 Derrida observes that each of the sociological and ontological (or the historical and anachronistic) approaches to death can seem to presuppose the work of the other: *On the one hand*, no matter how rich or new it may be, one can read a history of death in the Christian West, like that of Ariès for example, as a small monograph that illustrates like a footnote the extent to which it relies, in its presuppositions, upon the powerful and universal delimitation that the existential analysis of death in *Being and Time* is. The existential analysis exceeds and therefore includes beforehand the work of the historian, not to mention the biologist, the psychologist, and the theologian of death. It also conditions their work; it is constantly presupposed there.

However, *on the other hand*, conversely but just as legitimately, one can also be tempted to read *Being and Time* as a small, late document, among many others *within* the huge archive where the memory of death in Christian Europe is being accumulated. Each of these two discourses on death is much more comprehensive than the other, bigger and smaller than what it tends to include or exclude, more and less originary, more and less ancient, young or old. (80-1)
Derrida reminds us “is that historical space which today, in all its dimensions and through all its power plays, reveals itself as being undeniably the most sensitive, receptive or responsive space of all to the themes and effects of deconstruction” (Memoires 18). I would venture that this is because it has proved itself to be the place where the impossible and implausible are always on the verge of actualization.

My investigation examines death in terms of four different “types” of border over which death presides (Aporias 23). The first is the boundary between “nations, States, languages and cultures.” Different peoples, scattered in space and time, will have their own understanding of what it means to die and their own ways of dying (Derrida even proposes that every culture, at root, is a “culture of death” (43). “There is no culture[.]” he writes, “without a cult of ancestors, a ritualization of mourning and sacrifice, [and] institutional places and modes of burial”). The second marks the distinction between, and intersection of, a host of disciplines and discourses—the different languages that we might use to discuss the question of death. Derrida names philosophy, anthropology and theology (23), to which we might add literature and history. The third, closely related to the second, is the “demarcation … or oppositions between conceptual determinations,” the border between the different terms that we employ in our deliberations over death. The fourth and final limit governs the other three. It makes them possible—allows us “to trace them,” as Derrida has it (73). At the same time, it renders them impossible—“erase[s]” them—preventing us from using these categories and distinctions to define death authoritatively. This fourth limit is an aporia: a path that cannot be travelled, or a line that has yet to be drawn, or, lastly, a situation in which the very idea of intellectual borders and the possibility of movement and progress slip away (20-1). This aporia is the problem of death itself: the question of what death is “as such,” of what we talk about when we talk about death (it can also be expressed in the syntagm “my death,” as we saw earlier). Strictly speaking, indeed, this aporia is
not, and cannot be a problem, because “problem” implies possible solution, and the question of death can never be resolved, since death cannot be experienced. Drawing on the Greek etymology of the word (“problēma”), Derrida observes that it “can signify projection or protection, that which one poses or throws in front of oneself, either as the projection of a project, of a task to accomplish, or as the protection created by a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forth in order to represent, replace, shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something unavowable” (11). The problems of death, then, are those topics that we discuss in order to convince ourselves that we have discussed death itself. These issues are invariably connected to the first two “borders” that Derrida marks out. Accordingly, most analyses of death focus on cultural issues (the difference between American and European funeral practices, for instance) or on the question of which discipline (biology, ethics, metaphysics or ontology) should constitute the starting point for interpretations of mortality. To see death in terms of aporia (or a multiplicity of aporias) is to deny oneself the protection of this type of problem and to recognise that thinking about death will always reach an impasse. Since death necessarily “eludes an unambiguous rhetoric and an ontological definition” (Mjaaland 86), the best that we can do is to raise the questions that Ariès did not—to wonder whether there is such a thing as “death in general” (Aporias 25). At the same time, we must not suppose, like Heidegger, that this practice will provide us with a more “authentic” take on death (77). Just as anthropological

10 Being and Time argues that it is possible for the individual to enter into an authentic relationship with death (for Dasein to recognise its “Being-towards-the-end”) by acknowledging the possibility of that which seems impossible to him: that he may cease to exist (Heidegger 306-7). While Derrida agrees that thinking about death must engage with the notion of the impossible, he questions Heidegger’s addition of a value judgement to the equation. “If death, the most proper possibility of Dasein,” he writes, “is the possibility of its impossibility, death becomes the most improper possibility and the most ex propriating, the most inauthenticating one” (Aporias 77). The process of becoming authentic is the means by which we take possession of ourselves, make ourselves our own. In Heidegger’s model, this procedure is inextricably connected to death. When we die, however, we finally lose control of ourselves. The ultimate source of authenticity—relationship to one’s own death—is also the portal to total
studies such as Ariès’ depend on philosophical “presuppositions” about the nature of death “that do not belong to [their] knowledge or competence,” so ontological “questioning” about the “fundamental” qualities of death (that seem free from any particular cultural context) “cannot protect itself” from contamination by anthropological, biological and theological concerns (79).

In my study, the first type of border is represented in the line between Puritan and post-Puritan conceptions of death. As Derrida makes clear, frontiers are points of contact as well as division. I argue, therefore, that while Thoreau and Crane reject many of the most important aspects of the Puritan conception of mortality (including divine judgement and life after death), there are a considerable number of correspondences between their positions and those of their Calvinist forerunners. These two secular writers, as I shall demonstrate, draw on the rhetorical and ontological structure of Puritan thinking about death, even if they do not accept its content (this point, I might add, also intersects with the third type of boundary—between different “conceptual demarcations”). The second boundary, between disciplines, also finds a place in my study: while my first two chapters focus on theological tracts, the second two deal with literary texts. Thanks to the liberalisation of American Protestantism in the nineteenth century, authors such as Crane and Thoreau have more in common with Puritanism than the majority of contemporaneous theologians. My own thinking, moreover, investigates the intersection of Puritan rhetoric and theology and post-structuralist critical theory. Alongside this cultural critique, my study offers an analysis of the aporias in the Puritan approach to death. These logical contradictions constitute what Derrida (after Paul De Man) might call the “defective inauthenticity. “From the most originary inside of its possibility,” as Derrida puts it, “Dasein becomes from then on contaminated, parasited, and divided by the most improper.” Derrida prefers Maurice Blanchot’s approach to the “impossibility … of dying” (77), set out in works such as The Step Not Beyond (1973) and The Writing of the Disaster (1980), which contains “neither … approbation nor … critique” (87n.18).
cornerstone[s]” of the Puritan edifice (*Memoires for Paul De Man* 72). Set off to the side of the Calvinist discourse on death, they are rarely (if ever) formulated or enunciated explicitly. Like cornerstones, however, they are essential to the stability of the structure in which they are set. In so far as they are defective (or, in this case, aporetic), they also threaten to undermine that structure. The work of deconstruction, Derrida notes, does not take place after the fact, outside the text in question. Instead, it is “always already at work in the work” (*Memoires* 73). My deconstructive analysis of Puritan thanatology, therefore, does not seek to point out its inconsistencies and injustices from a modern, secular standpoint, but simply to uncover the tensions that were always at work within Puritan thinking about death.

In a certain sense the aporia of death is singular. Our deliberations about our mortality are always occasioned and frustrated by the stark, single fact of death’s inscrutability. From another perspective, we might speak of many aporias—the different impasses that bar our way when we attempt to approach death through a new trajectory of thought. My study discusses three aporetic themes within the Puritan conception of death: indeterminacy, singularity and finality. I make this thematic division primarily for the sake of clarity of argument; these three themes are, in fact, closely intertwined. Each of them, for instance, is related to the key Puritan concept of grace. For the New-England Congregationalists, religious life was not just a question of obedience, or even of faith, but of participation in God’s saving grace. The individual believer had an obligation to constantly scrutinize himself for the presence of grace—for signs that his sinful nature would be redeemed. While only God could decide whom to give grace to, one had a duty to ensure that one’s heart would be receptive if that gift did indeed arrive.\textsuperscript{11} During life,
Christians could never be certain that they had received a saving measure of grace—Thomas Shepherd’s *Journal* for instance, witnesses his unceasing oscillation between “assurance” and “anxiety” concerning his salvation (McGiffert 24-6). Only in death would this ambiguity be resolved. Then, every mortal would discover whether he was redeemed or damned: if they would enter into eternal life or die the second death and undergo an eternity of punishment. The desire to comprehend death before it arrived exerted a considerable pull on the Puritan psyche. Even Cotton Mather, as we shall see, was not immune from this impulse, which worked against the indeterminacy of death. Indeed, one could argue that the Calvinist was obliged to exercise this inclination as part of his duty to himself, even though it asked for the impossible—to detect a pattern in the unpredictable movement of divine grace. Like death, grace was radically singular—to become a full member of the Congregationalist church, it was necessary to produce a convincing and personal account of the operation of grace in one’s life. In order to be approved, however, this profession had to conform to the expectations of the presiding minister and the precedent set by other church members. Similarly, the individual’s understanding of death was inevitably caught between the knowledge that it was singularly “his” and the way in

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which his conception of what death entailed was entirely based on knowledge about the passing of other people. This aporia, of course, also applies to death in an entirely secular context. For the Puritans, however, it was a more serious concern. There is little sense, today, that my death will be significantly different from that of others (apart from the fact that it is “mine”). When the manner of one’s death holds the secret of one’s salvation or damnation, however, this impasse becomes indescribably important. This brings us to the aporia of finality. The absence or presence of grace at death would determine one’s irrevocable and final destiny throughout eternity. The English Puritan William Perkins warned that “as death leaveth a man, so shall the last judgement find him, and so shall he abide eternally: there may be changes and conversions from evil to good in this life, but after death there is no change at all” (*A Salve for a Sicke Man* 30). Nevertheless Calvinists placed little or no stock in the Catholic trope of deathbed conversion (Perkins observed that “late repentance is seldom or never true repentance” [33]). The Puritan duty to prepare for death throughout life was in constant tension with the crucial moment itself, in which this preparation would either come to fruition or prove to have been in vain. The contemporary consensus holds that we do not experience death itself—that it is not a part of our life in any sense. The plausibility of this position notwithstanding, my study offers no judgement or critique of the Puritan belief that we “feel” our deaths. In this regard, I write in the spirit of Derrida’s remarks, late in his career, about the sacrosanctity of grace as an experience: “On or about ‘grace given by God,’ deconstruction, as such, has nothing to say or to do. If it’s given, let’s say, to someone in a way that is absolutely improbable, that is, exceeding any proof; in a unique experience, then deconstruction has no lever on this. And it should not have any lever” (“Epoché and Faith” 39). “But once this grace,” he adds, “this given grace, is embodied in a discourse, in a community, in a church, in a religion, in a theology … then deconstruction, a
deconstruction, may have something to say, something to do, but without questioning or suspecting the moment of grace.”

My first two chapters consider the Puritan approach to death in two contexts. The first examines the New-England Puritan thanatology in general, with reference to a range of texts from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries; the second focuses on a narrower period of time: the New-England awakenings of the seventeen thirties and forties. In each case, I aim to show how these three issues—the singularity, indeterminacy and finality of death—become aporias for those ministers who attempt to offer their followers practical guidance on the subject of death. Puritan thinkers were drawn to these subjects because they demanded explication. In my close readings of the solutions that they offer, I argue that these explications always fall short. Despite the confident, sure voice with which they are invariably delivered, they never manage to penetrate the paradoxes and ambiguities that surround death. This does not necessarily mean that these texts are failures, however. It could be argued that the aporetic quality of the Calvinist discourse about death was a key contributor to the intellectual dynamism of Puritan culture. Because preparation for death was so central to Puritan soteriology and since death itself inevitably resisted any attempt to unlock its secrets, theologians were continually attempting to produce the definitive *ars moriendi*. On the other hand, the complexity of the Puritan approach to death may have contributed to the decline of Calvinist Congregationalism in America. In the conclusion of my second chapter I argue that, on the popular level, we can read the New-England awakenings of the eighteenth century as a reaction to the anxiety produced by Puritan thanatology. Many of the “religious affections” that took hold of revivalists—fainting fits, speaking in tongues, etc.—are means of abrogating one’s subjectivity or losing one’s individuality in the collective fervour of the awakening.
The first and second sections of chapter one centre on the demise of John Cotton (1584-1652), perhaps the most influential thinker amongst the first generation of Puritan leaders in America. In 1658, John Norton, who took up Cotton’s position at the First Church in Boston, published an account of his life and death—*Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh*, the first biography published in New England. The title refers to the Letter to the Hebrews’ analysis of the story of the first murder: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh” (11:4). For Norton, the manner in which Cotton died was the most significant aspect of his life—his calm bearing and careful provision for the future of both his family and his congregation set the seal on his redemption. Texts such as *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* and Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) push against Puritanism’s emphasis on the singularity and indeterminacy of death. They hold up John Cotton as a model for the imitation of other Christians. They suggest that if we can live and die in the same manner as he (“run the race that is set before us” in “the same spirit” [Norton 5]), then our salvation will be assured. My analysis argues that at certain key junctures of Norton’s tract, we can see singularity and indeterminacy reassert themselves. In particular, two brief incidents in Cotton’s life, one of which took place at the time of William Perkin’s death in Cambridge, England, the other just before Cotton’s own death in Cambridge, Massachusetts, register the deeply private, personal nature of mortality and suggest that it is something that cannot ever be fully shared. Norton’s own argument, furthermore, implicitly depends upon the paradox that it was only the inimitable quality of Cotton’s passing—the presence of grace, which cannot be counterfeited—that made it worth imitating. In the third part of the chapter, I consider William Perkins’ *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1596). Although published in England, this text, like most of Perkins’ writings exerted considerable influence in colonial New England. Perkins sought to evade the aporetic
indeterminacy and singularity of mortality by counselling his readers to contemplate their own deaths. The difficulty with reading exemplary biographies to prepare for death was that there was always a chance, no matter how slim, that the demise of the most holy and respected church leader might have been unhappy and ungracious. Perkins therefore recommended that believers write a kind of prospective autobiography, suggesting that it was possible to anticipate the quality of one’s own death. If the individual experienced grace as he meditated on his last day, his final hours would be suffused with it. This idea plays the singularity of death against its indeterminacy by suggesting that we hold the mystery of our death within us all our lives, and that it is possible to learn how to see it in secret. The problem with this model, however, lies in Perkin’s admission that the solace the Holy Spirit will offer the saints on their deathbed is “unspeakable” (A Salve for a Sicke Man 69). A secret that we cannot articulate, even internally, to ourselves, is not a secret that we possess. In the closing portion of the chapter, I consider an incident in Cotton Mather’s private devotions, when he believed that he had received an angelic visitation. This extraordinary episode would seem to suggest that Mather had been singled out for divine favour and that he must be bound for heaven. The minister treated this momentous event with all the caution that it deserved, enfolding it within multiple layers of secrecy: he confided it to his anonymous autobiography, which was not published in his lifetime and discussed it there in Latin. Even as he sought to keep the affair secret from all but his son (to whom the autobiography was entrusted), he acknowledged that the truth about it was also a secret for him, insofar as he could not be certain that his visitor was an angel rather than a illusion sent by the devil.

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12 Derrida’s thinking about autobiography proves pertinent here. He observes that the absolute secret of radical individuality, “that we speak of but are unable to say[,]” is the foundation of this kind of writing (A Taste for the Secret 58). This is the mystery of death, of an entirely different order to those secret feelings and incidents that autobiographies invariably uncover.
Chapter two analyses the revivalist theory and practice of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). In his five major works on the New-England awakenings—*A Faithful Narrative* (1737), *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion in New-England* (1743), *Religious Affections* (1746) and *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749)—Edwards sought to refine the Puritan approach to death, to lend it a greater urgency. In his account, a revival was a period that seemed to stand outside the flow of time. It was a season in which death and judgment seemed especially close at hand, when many people stood in the “valley of decision” (Joel 3:14). This compression of the Puritan struggle to come to terms with death into a brief span was an extremely effective proselytizing strategy. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741) set the template for revivalist preaching. In that text, Edwards famously warns his audience that they are in danger of dropping into hell at any moment. The time of reckoning, in which they must face up to their depravity and mortality, is compressed into the length of the sermon itself. By the time Edwards stops speaking, their conversion or damnation will have already been sealed (the sermon closes with the unsettling observation that “the wrath of almighty God is undoubtedly hanging over great part of this congregation,” and the earnest wish that “everyone” should “fly out of Sodom” [418]). While this pressurising strategy did win many souls for the Congregationalist church, it also threatened to destabilise Puritan society. Separatist preachers sought to oust any clergy who could not produce public, material proof of their own graciousness. Furthermore, the excesses of the more enthusiastic New Lights revealed that revivalism could undermine, rather than reinforce, the Puritan conception of mortality. They exerted new pressure on the old fault-lines: singularity, finality and indeterminacy. Rogue itinerant James Davenport, for instance, challenged the notion that the question of the individual’s salvation would remain indeterminate until death. The recent outpouring of the spirit made the hitherto hidden distinction between the sheep and the goats
quite plain to any careful observer. Although Edwards himself was confident that he could identify counterfeit conversions, devoting most of his writing on the awakenings to this task, he insisted that the inscrutability of God’s judgement must be respected. While he recognised that revivals spread through imitation and replication, he continued to assert the inimitable singularity of the Christian’s awakening. Lastly, the Puritan emphasis on the finality of death was also under threat. According to Edwards, a true rebirth would be but the beginning of a lifelong revival: a daily struggle to live in full consciousness of mortality and to preserve regeneration until death. If the rhetoric of the revival sermon argued that for the colonists as a people the hour was getting late, on a personal level conversion was the prelude to a potentially long period of watching, praying and waiting. Melancholics might be tempted to take their own lives in order to put an end to this dreadful suspense. To commit suicide, however, was to abrogate God’s judiciary power, by bringing one’s final moment forward in time. Those New Lights who were all too confident in their own election, by contrast, sinned against the doctrine of judgment after death in a different way. The definitive quality of their conversion meant that they were guaranteed salvation. As a result, the manner in which they approached their mortality and the way in which they died were no longer so significant. For them, revival had replaced death as the most important part of the reformed Christian’s life: if one had truly been born again then there was no real need to die. The post-Christian sects that developed from this unorthodox wing of revivalism in the nineteenth century pushed this logic one step further. In the early days of Mormonism and Oneida Perfectionism Joseph Smith and John Noyes were convinced that their followers would never taste death. Mary Baker Eddy, moreover, argued that death, like all evil, was an illusion. In the final section of the chapter, I suggest that these “heretical” beliefs have their precedents in

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13 The first awakening in Northampton was marred by the tragic suicide of one Joseph Hawley, a relation of Edwards’ who had come to despair for the state of his soul.
Edward’s thinking. His attempts to ensure that Christians took an active responsibility for their mortality may have had precisely the opposite effect, encouraging both melancholic resignation and arrogant complacency. In this way, the surprising afterlife of his theory of revivalism uncovers the aporetic impasse at the centre of his theology.

The third and fourth chapters of my study discuss secular, literary texts. My argument here rests upon a reinterpretation of the typical narrative of the secularization of death in Western culture. The movement from a religious to a secular understanding of mortality is usually figured as a loss of certainty about what happens when we die. While the Puritans were entirely fixed in their faith in an afterlife and divine judgment, the beliefs of modern man seem far more fluid and uncertain (Ariès, whose works broadly conform to this account, observes that in the twentieth century the percentage of people in the Western world who believe in the afterlife not only declines to around thirty or forty per cent, but that this figure fluctuates significantly across particular demographics: “decreas[ing] in the young … [and] … increas[ing] among the very ill” [The Hour of Our Deaths 576]). From another perspective, the secularization of death heralds an increase in intellectual certainty: we are sure that death causes no pain, that there is little or no difference between the decease of one individual and another and are more or less convinced that death marks the end of our existence. Despite the dogmatic tone of much of their discourse, the Puritans were far from complacent in their treatment of death. They always stressed that an individual’s relationship to his mortality must be marked by uncertainty and anxiety. Crane and Thoreau, the two authors in question here, did not seek to reassert the metaphysical significance of mortality. Indeed, they both reacted strongly against their Calvinist inheritance, savouring the intellectual and literary freedom that this rebellion bought them. At the same time, they were repeatedly drawn back to the quintessentially Puritan subject of death, questioning the received wisdom of the nineteenth century. Neither writer can be said to have been fully in control of his
work on this topic. Thoreau’s essays and journals present at least three contrasting attitudes to
dead, without offering any attempt to synthesize them. Crane’s fiction and war journalism focus
as much on the problems of representing death on the page as on death itself. This very lack of
certainty, this instability, is what links their thinking with the Puritan thanatology. Indeed,
insofar as they expanded the indeterminacy of mortality, applying it to death in general as well
as to the demise of the individual,¹⁴ Crane and Thoreau seem more Puritan than the Puritans.

My third chapter examines Thoreau’s two most fully realized interpretations of death,
without suggesting that either one was fundamental. Walden and “A Plea for Captain John
Brown” stress the aporetic aspects of mortality: in particular, they emphasise the finality of
death. I argue that this strategy was a response to the prevailing attitude in antebellum America,
which saw death as part of a continuum with life. Henry Ward Beecher, for instance, “believed
that people naturally progressed through death from life to immortality” (Farrell 80). Biologists,
of course, also spoke of death in terms of nature, claiming that the death of a human individual
was no more than the culmination of a process of decay that occurred throughout every
organism’s life. Notwithstanding their obvious differences, I argue that these two perspectives
have much in common: both obviate the radical singularity of death, treating it as a collective
phenomenon; both accentuate the contiguity of death with life, presenting it as a part of an
ongoing process rather than an intrusive event; both, lastly, suggesting that death may be
knowable and threatening to strip it of any sense of the paradoxical. In the aforementioned texts,
Thoreau reasserts the mystery of mortality. John Brown, for instance, becomes the first person to
die in America (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 414). Those who have gone before him to the

¹⁴ For the Puritans, of course, death in general had a clear and fixed set of meanings: it was both a punishment for
original sin and the gateway to salvation or damnation (see Geddes, Welcome Joy 18-36).
grave have “merely rotted or sloughed off.” Like an animal or plant they have entertained no intellectual or ethical relationship with their mortality. As a result their demise is simply a (rather distasteful) biological process. Brown’s decease, by contrast, affirms the definitive character of human death—he has, unquestionably, passed on. At the same time, a portion of him has not departed. He does not live on as a conscious spirit or soul, but his efforts on behalf of the immortal ethical ideals of freedom and equality survive, as does the example that he set in his fearless acceptance of death. Death, then, both is and is not final. The immediate context of this speech presents one more complication: Brown had not yet been executed when Thoreau wrote and delivered it. This last detail underlines the aporetic quality of death’s finality, suggesting, improbably and impossibly, that it was possible to die in an ethical sense before one’s heart stopped beating. This was one of the ways in which Thoreau emphasised the distinction between death and life, in the face of his contemporaries’ tendency to intermingle the two. Elsewhere, his thought articulates, rather than opposes, the thanatology of his age. I demonstrate that his naturalist writings (particularly the travelogue *Cape Cod* [1865]) express a desire to resign responsibility for his mortality, to return into nature in the manner of the rotting men that he disparaged in “A Plea For Captain John Brown.” I argue that the fascination with violent death that he displays in *Cape Cod* and several journal entries registers the same impulse. Thoreau derives a peculiar comfort from the sight of bodies tattered and torn, as if this disintegration confirmed the mere materiality of human life or even speeded the departed’s journey back to their natural home (here I argue against Richard Bridgman [*Dark Thoreau* (1982)], who reads Thoreau’s interest in violence as evidence of a depressive and nihilistic frame of mind). Where *Walden* and his political works tend to reinscribe the Puritan understanding of death as a means of distinction and moral judgment, in these naturalist texts Thoreau attempts to occlude the aporetic singularity of death, suggesting that every human death is the same. In the final section
of the chapter, I briefly consider a third approach to mortality in Thoreau’s writing: a flirtation with nihilism on Mount Katahadin in *The Maine Woods* (1846). I argue that this brief passage, where the author comes to feel that man is both a stranger in the universe and alien to his own body, reveals that the two other attitudes to death do have something in common after all. Each is an attempt to provide an explanation and a context for death, to imbue it with the human dignity that the massive scale and tremendous age of the mountain seem to suggest is a mirage.

Chapter four argues against a critical tendency to cast Stephen Crane as a nihilist and a cynic when it came to death. This perspective, most fully realised in Marston Lafrance’s *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (1971),\(^\text{15}\) holds that Crane viewed death as the meaningless and total annihilation of the individual. As a result, he saw human life as an absurd struggle against an indifferent and violent natural world. This reading, in my contention, is based as much upon Crane’s biography as on a careful analysis of his work. Although his personal philosophy must remain a secret, his choice of career seems to constitute a rebellion against his Methodist minister father, Jonathan Townley Crane (whose *Popular Amusements* (1869) warned that novel reading was often a sinful waste of time). As a war correspondent and a writer of adventure fiction, Crane sought to entertain his readers with scenes in which men witness the deaths of others, or are forced to confront their own mortality. However, this aesthetic fascination with dead and dying bodies does not necessarily portend a total rejection of the Calvinist conception of death or the adoption of a cynical, nihilistic attitude towards mortality. As an impressionist, Crane was interested in conflicting viewpoints on the world, and his treatment of death was no

\(^{15}\) In *Stephen Crane: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989), Chester L. Wolford also takes this point of view, particularly in his discussion of Crane’s war stories (61-86). He argues, moreover, that Crane was an “Expressionist,” meaning that the author sought to investigate the irrational part of human experience: “the emotions of hope, dread, and horror” (80). Stanley Werheim’s “Stephen Crane and the Wrath of Jehova” (1964) claims that through his writings “[Crane] submerged himself in nihilism, viewing with chilling objectivity the barren schemes of men who seek to impose patterns of order upon an arbitrary universe” (48).
exception. Each of the texts that I discuss—The Red Badge of Courage (1895), his verse collection The Black Riders (1895), the late short story “Death and the Child” (1898) and a selection of his war dispatches—present death as a radical indeterminacy. In The Black Riders Crane plays different beliefs about mortality off against each other. His fiction and journalism, on the other hand, explore the uncanniness of the material side of death: their narrative eye often rests on dead bodies that seem half-alive—about to move or speak. The indeterminacy of death in these works does not partake of the same structure as the Puritans’ understanding of the same. Where they were concerned with the indeterminate quality of the death of the individual (would he be saved or damned), here, the meaning of death in general (or lack thereof) is at stake (in The Black Riders, especially its last poem, this question is tied up with the existence or non-existence of God). Furthermore, whereas contemplation of the mystery of mortality was the most serious and important aspect of a reformed Christian’s life, that which he undertook in defiance of the spendthrift manner in which the heathen spent their time, in Crane’s writing death is frequently associated with ludic activities and recreational time. The practice of thinking about death, it seems, was a kind of play for the author. Drawing on Derrida’s thinking about play in both its early and later instantiations, as well as Freud’s discussion of the subject in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, I argue that the gap between these two positions may be narrower than first appears: Crane’s play with the concept of death necessitates that he engage with its aporias in a “serious” manner; the Puritans’ attempt to come to terms with mortality is marked by the possibility that it may be no more than an idle pastime.

In as much as it uses nineteenth-century literary texts to reassess the Puritan approach to mortality my study is unlike other investigations of death in America. Its focus on the theoretical paradoxes and impasses within the Puritan thanatology is also atypical. The two most comprehensive investigations of the subject, David Stannard’s The Puritan Way of Death (1977)
and Gordon E. Geddes’ *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England* (1981) centre on the problems that death posed for the Congregationalist church. In particular, each of these books marshals a considerable quantity of primary material on the cultural problems of the funeral rite, burial and mourning and the theological problems of correct preparation for death and the process of dying. It is in this last area that they have their biggest disagreement. Stannard argues that “despite their traditional optimistic rhetoric” the Puritans “were possessed of an intense, overt fear of death” (*The Puritan Way of Death* 89). This was largely due to their belief in the “total and utter depravity of humanity,” the notion that their salvation was outside their own control and the fact that even those individuals who had achieved assurance of grace were forced to accept the possibility that they might not be saved (83). While Geddes acknowledges that fear was a significant part of the Puritan approach to death, he claims that many Calvinist believers were able to view their passing with confidence, treating it even as a cause for celebration (*Welcome Joy* 67-70, 210n.50). James J. Farrell describes his 1980 book *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, as a “sequel” to Stannard’s study (4). He traces the “dying of death” in nineteenth-century America, detailing the process of naturalization by which death lost its grip over the American psyche. Intellectual developments in theology and science (the liberalisation and sentimentalization of American Protestantism and the rise of evolutionary biology) (7-8), together with the entrenchment of consumer capitalism (8-10), led to profound changes in the material, ritual and social culture around death. Mortality, Farrell observes, was no longer an everyday concern or even a cause for fear. Michael Steiner and Drew Gilpin Faust’s more recent books also deal with changing attitudes to the problem of death in this period. Steiner (*A Study of the Intellectual and Material Culture of Death in Nineteenth-Century America* [2003]) provides a compelling account of the aestheticizing of death, including the origins of the garden cemetery movement, the increased popularity of embalming and the
daguerreotyping of the dead. Faust (This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (2008) contends that the unprecedented brutality of the Civil War, which killed over two percent of the nation’s population (266), had a considerable effect on the way in which America dealt with death. She demonstrates how the conflict produced the institutional and imaginative practices that comprise the modern American thanatology. The government’s responsibility to ensure that its soldiers are properly buried, the location of their graves registered, and their next of kin notified has its origin in the Union’s war against the secessionists, as does the national cemetery system. Faust also traces to this time our contemporary notion of the soldier’s sacrifice and our fear that war tends to desensitize combatants to violence.

The underlying narrative of all of these books fits into Ariès’ pattern of the social history of death in the Western world. Each testifies, in its own way, to the movement of death from the home to the hospital, to the replacement of a personal, religious conception of mortality by a scientific, standardized approach. Each is more concerned with what comes before and after death, with preparation, mourning and burial, than with death as such (Derrida observes that Ariès “real theme … is not death itself, but behavior before demise” [Aporias 46]). To a certain extent, my own study also shares these qualities. It is, in part, a cultural history: an investigation of the decline of a particular way of thinking about death. At the same time, it is also a theoretical and critical work: an exploration of the gaps, contradictions and impasses in both Puritan thanatology and the thought of those post-Puritan writers whose thought was most closely related to it. In this regard my approach is somewhat similar to that of Russ Castronovo’s Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States (2001). Castronovo argues that nineteenth-century conceptions of citizenship and freedom were structured around death. The dead appeared to exist in a state beyond racial, sexual and social (or class) difference. The liberty and fraternity of the dead was fetishized in literature,
abolitionist and secessionist propaganda and a variety of occult practices including mesmerism, spiritualism and automatic writing. Castronovo speaks of a kind of “necrophilic desire” in the American culture of the period, which “pivots on a political [need] to narrate the citizen’s life story as a morbid tale” that valorizes passivity and disenfranchisement over activism and involvement (129). Individuals were classified as American citizens through their adoption of an “abstract personhood” (8)—citizens “consented to the repression of all associations [familial, racial, cultural or religious] … that lay outside their formal relations with the state,” while groups whose “bodies [were] encumbered by history and particularity [women, blacks, natives] were denied rights” (9). This meant that participants within the nation state were expected “to behave politically as dead citizens” (8), and that those outside could appeal for inclusion within the ranks of the living dead, or console themselves with the thought of the timeless, space-less and caste-less world beyond the grave. Nineteenth-century America’s attitude to death, as Castronovo unfolds it, worked to control and suppress the political significance of cultural difference. He adds that “writers and activists from Hawthorne and Jacobs to Douglass and [Frances] Harper” contested this “ideology,” presenting “corpses, ghosts, suicides and socially dead persons [such as] slaves” as a location of resistance to deathly citizenship. My study, as we have seen, also suggests that the understanding of mortality that came to prominence in the nineteenth century (and is arguably still predominant today) aimed to repress difference in death. However, it is the radical ontological distinction between each and every individual, rather than cultural, racial or gender differences that exercises me here.16 Through his analysis of the relationship between mortality and citizenship in the nineteenth-century United States, Castronovo attempts to free

16 I am inclined to agree with Alain Badiou’s contention that cultural differences “amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind” (Ethics 26).
politics of its deathly associations, and to reveal the way in which democracy renders people politically lifeless: “[i]n focussing on moments and discourses in the nineteenth century when state identity and formalistic freedom deadened complex sociopolitical lives, I am seeking possibilities of telling a different story for a future where political subjects might be active and alive” (11). Implicitly, his argument also looks to strip death of its political significance and thereby return it to a more “authentic” state, in which it is purely biological and strictly ametaphorical. This strategy, however, is simply another way of relieving mortality of its mystery, and turning it into a problem, rather than an impasse.  

“I do not seek to establish any kind of authenticity,” Derrida once wrote (Limited Inc 55). While it points out the limitations of Ariès’ sociological approach to death, Aporias can also be read as a critique of Heidegger’s insistence that the ontological approach to death was the most authentic, and of his notion that it was possible for Dasein to enter into an authentic relationship with its own death. As a rejoinder to Heidegger’s authenticity (and, perhaps, to the philosopher’s Nazism), Derrida adopts the figure of the Marrano as a more fitting expression of our connection to death. Just as the Marrano, in secret, awaits his messiah (or a time in which he may practice

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17 Although Derrida asserts that there can be no politics of death in itself, “of death properly speaking” (Aporias 59), he does cite a number of developments in modern international relations (the “hostage war,” “surgical” bombardment of enemy military resources, the manner in which the AIDS epidemic in Africa is reported) that reveal that there is a real discrepancy between the value placed on individual lives in different political and cultural contexts (60). His point, I think, is that while “the existential analysis of death” must attempt to be “neutral with regard to culture, morality … [and] politics” (59), it cannot help but take partake of any number of specific cultural and political assumptions and biases. The relationship between anthropological studies of mortality (such as Ariès and Castronovo’s) and existential investigations of death itself (such as Heidegger’s) is an aporia in itself: a strict division between these two disciplines is “untenable” (79).

18 In fifteenth and sixteenth-century Spain “Marrano” was a derogatory name for converted Jews (conversos) who were suspected of continuing to practice their old religion in secret. Derrida’s use of the term “universal Marrano” (Aporias 74) is highly significant in the light of his dictum that the idea of death “as such” both “marks and erases” the boundaries between different cultures and periods of history (73). The notion of a “universal Marrano” is oxymoronic in a sociological sense, since the existence of Marranos is dependent on a specific political situation: a dominant culture that will not tolerate the existence of another within it (and is particularly paranoid about this issue). The paradoxical and “anachronistic” possibility that every human being may be a Marrano when it comes to
his religion openly), so we all await our deaths without being able to articulate our common condition of mortality (Aporias 74). Death, for Derrida, is fascinating because it is a site of indeterminacy, aporia and uncanniness (Nicholas Royle notes that interest in these qualities, rather than the pursuit of authenticity is the hallmark of Derrida’s career [Jacques Derrida 121]). Similarly, it is the aporetic nature of the Puritan thanatology that I find compelling: I do not wish to hold it up as a more authentic approach to death than our own. The closing passages of Stannard’s study suggest that he has sought to do just that. “Death has never been easy for humankind,” he writes, “and probably never will be—but the style of unease displayed varies dramatically from culture to culture” (The Puritan Way of Death 194). The next few pages imply that the style of the Puritan’s unease was greatly preferable to ours. Where they openly struggled to come to terms with mortality, we seek to repress it, to hide behind the institutions (the hospital, the hospice, the crematorium, and, still, the church) that have been created to deal with it so we don’t have to. “It may be uncomfortable,” he continues, “it may in many ways be condemnable, but the Modern American way of death is a direct response to the modern American way of life” (195). It seems quite clear to me that Stannard wants to condemn modern culture for allowing the way life is lived (in a commercialised and “institutionalized way” [196]) to determine its approach to death. Everything is set up for the convenience of the survivors and mourners of the deceased. After bereavement, life must carry on with minimum disturbance.

Death, “whether we want to be or not, whether we know it or not” (81), is a fitting expression of the logical, ethical and historical impasse of mortality.

Aries, too, seems to prefer the several pre-modern thanatologies that he describes to the contemporary denial and concealment of death. According to Derrida, he must both “deplore and denounce what, according to [him], [he] must record: a sort of disappearance of death in the modern West and in industrialized societies” (Aporías 57). “[I]n recent years[,] he reports, “there has been a vast proliferation of advice literature and of social organizations for the dying and the bereaved, as well as of programs and seminars in hospitals that attempt to come to grips with
The Puritan approach, which acknowledged that death must be a disruption, holds more appeal for him. They struggled with the disjunction between their own “[religious] culture and the larger social world in which they lived” and with the incompatibility between the traditional Christian optimism that they had “inherited” and their own sense of the powerlessness of mankind in the face of double predestination (195-6; 84-95). In this way, Stannard suggests, they seemed to show death greater respect. This interpretation, of course, is rooted in historical analysis. The American Puritans’ more compelling thanatology is a product of the specific historical circumstances in which their culture unfolded. The problem with this perspective (and with Stannard’s entire project), however, is that in the strictest (ontological) sense mankind’s relationship with death never changes. It is always, in fact, a non-relation, since our best guesses about the truth of death cannot fail to be inaccurate. The modern conception of mortality, then, must contain as many intriguing paradoxes as that of the Calvinists. The only difference is that, from a distance, the contradictions within the Puritan system seem more pronounced. Their intricate, confident writing about death inevitably appears more ambitious than ours. The towering structure of their thanatology leaves its foundations open, ready for deconstruction.

the modern meaning of death … [As] admirable and hopeful as much of this activity may seem to be, [however] […] there are already signs that it is being undercut by the realities of American life: taking their cue from many of these well-meaning efforts to come to terms with death, other organizations are now appearing throughout the country to supply—for an hourly fee—‘specially trained companions’ to sit with the dying while family and friends go about their everyday business free of the burdens of conscience” (195). Stannard’s objections here follow the same line as Jessica Mitford’s The American Way of Death (1963; revised 1998), whose title his book’s name clearly references. Mitford exposes the exploitative practices of the funeral industry, arguing that it capitalized on the family members’ reluctance to have anything to do with the corpse of their departed loved one.

Stannard’s closing observation seems to suggest that there is something inherently more authentic about the Puritan approach to mortality: “if there is one … lesson that the Puritan way of death has had to teach us, it is that death cannot be abstracted from life and still retain its meaning” (196). Alternatively, this sentence could be interpreted in a manner that would support my point here. In this case, one would have to assume that it was the disparity between the modern and Puritan thanatologies, rather than the content of the Puritan philosophy itself, that is instructive.
Invisible Death

In October 1602, the great Puritan theologian William Perkins died in Cambridge. His death, at the comparatively early age of forty-four, would be greeted with some considerable sadness across Protestant Europe. His hard-line interpretation of predestination (as presented in *De Praedestinationis Modo et Ordine* (1598) and *God’s Free Grace and Man’s Free Will* [1602]) achieved popularity amongst both old and new-world Puritans. He inspired “an entire generation of preachers” with his “exacting and penetrating” homilies and irreproachable personal devotion (Schaefer 41). The young John Cotton, then an undergraduate at Trinity College, did not share in the godly grief at Perkin’s demise. In John Norton’s biography of Cotton, we read how, walking in the fields outside town, he “heard the Bell toll for Mr Perkins who then lay dying [and] was secretly glad in his heart, that he should now be rid of him who had (as he said) laid siege to and beleaguer’d his heart” (*Abel Being Dead* 12). “God,” Norton explains, had “[begun] to work upon him under the ministery of Mr Perkins.” Concerned that his studies would suffer if he should be converted, he was determined that he should resist Perkins’ call, at least for the present moment:

the motions and stirrings of his heart which then were, he suppressed; thinking that if he should trouble himself with matters of Religion, according to the light he had received, it would be an hindrance to him in his studies, which then he had addicted himself unto. Therefore he was willing to silence those suggestions and callings he had from the Spirit inwardly, and did wittingly defer the prosecution of that work until afterwards. (12)

In Norton’s account (drawn from Cotton’s own words “as neer as can be remembred”), this fleeting instant of resentment is a minor detour on the road to redemption. Indeed, the memory of
this secret, shameful delight at the death of another would later contribute to his conversion. Norton tells us that it “became a cause of much affliction to him, God keeping it upon his spirit, with the aggravation of it, and making it an effectual means of convincing and humbling him in the sight and sense of the natural enmity that is in man’s nature against God” (12-3). Considered in itself, however, aside from its place in God’s plan for Cotton, this guilty moment of selfish pleasure tells us a great deal about the complex relationships between salvation and singularity, publicity and privacy, in Puritan thought.

Just over fifty years later, Cotton lay on his own deathbed. Ever eager—at the age of sixty-seven—to prosecute his pastoral duty, he had caught cold crossing the river to Cambridge, Massachusetts, on his way to preach there. During the long illness that followed, the people of Boston saw a comet passing overhead. It was still visible, fourteen days after it had first appeared, when their pastor Cotton took his leave (Bush Jr., “Cotton, John”). Norton, who succeeded Cotton as a minister of the First Church, observed that this “Apparition in the Heavens” marked the passing of a great “man of God” (Abel Being Dead 47). It was not surprising that the death of such an important spiritual leader should be predicted in this way—Cotton’s death was itself an omen of much “evil to come” (47). Norton warned that difficult times lay ahead for New England: “Thus are our trials increased, and our strength decreased, that we might learn to trust in God. What the counsel of the Lord is concerning the bereaved Churches of New-England, is a solemn and awful meditation” (46). Like Perkins’, Cotton’s death was a public affair. Over the nineteen years of his ministry in Massachusetts he had become one of the most respected and influential clergymen in the colony. The first few months of his tenure at the First Church were astonishingly productive: records show that the congregation increased by over fifty percent between September and December 1633 (Bush Jr., “Cotton, John”). He
played a significant role in crafting of the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the “official statement of [the] faith and policy” of the Congregational church in New England, writing the preface to the declaration (Bremer, “Cambridge Platform” 338-9). While his reputation was briefly tarnished by his initial defence of Ann Hutchinson in the Antinomian controversy, he emerged as a champion of Congregational orthodoxy in a long polemical exchange with the dissenter Roger Williams. Although his devotion would still shine through his varied publications, from the eschatological tract *The Powring out of the Seven Vials* (1642) to his popular catechism for children *Milk for Babes* (1646), the extinguishing of his life’s light was still cause for serious concern: “Now our Candlesticks cannot but lament in darkness, when their Lights are gone” (Norton 46).

Through the first weeks of his sickness Cotton continued to minister and preach to his congregation, all the while under “the sentence of Death” (Norton 43). As his strength failed him he took to his bed, from whence he took great care to “[set] his House in order.” This involved not only “making his Will,” but ensuring that his congregation, his extended spiritual family, would be provided for.\(^3\) Norton notes that during this period “his own People resorted unto him daily, as to a publique Father.” Cotton himself made certain that his final moments would play out in public: we read how “he sent for the Elders of the Church of Boston to pray over him.” This last encounter would benefit both the dying man and his survivors. He received their prayers, support and affection, they gathered in the final fruits of his learning and wisdom: “This

\(^3\) In taking these two steps, he followed the advice of Perkins himself in *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1596), an influential handbook on preparing for death. There Perkins advises “the master of the familie” (86) to secure both the material and spiritual future of his household: “governours, when they shall carefully dispose of their goods, and give charge to their posteritie touching the worship of God, shall greatly honour God dying as well as living” (87). As regards clergymen, he writes: “[t]he dutie of Ministers when they are dying is, as much as they can, to … provide for the continuance of the good estate of the Church over which they are placed” (82). We shall take a closer look at this text later.
was his ultimate solemn transaction with man in this World; Silver and Gold (though he wanted not) he had not much to give them, but the benediction of a righteous Parent they are to expect” (44). The Puritans broadly rejected the late-medieval conception that the last moments of an individual were crucial to the fate of their soul. They were still very much exercised, however, with the art of dying well: safely entrusting the care of one’s body and soul to Christ. In *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1596), his influential treatise on that subject, William Perkins warned that “as death leaves a man, so shall the last judgement finde him: and therefore if death take him away unprepared, eternall damnation followes without recovery” (52). The death of a prominent minister or religious political figure was particularly significant, since they were expected to set a profitable example, to show all believers the right way to die. The tableau in Cotton’s chamber—his bed surrounded by the elders of the church as well as members of his family—was a preparation for the public afterlife of his death in print. Norton’s account of Cotton’s life and death, *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* (1658), has been described as the first American biography. It would, as Sargent Bush Jr. observes, become the model for “many later hagiographical biographies about the first-generation leaders” (“Norton, John” 183). In his grandson Cotton Mather’s comprehensive compendium of the history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Cotton holds a place of honour at the head of the third

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4 In the “iconography” of the *artes moriendi* which became popular in the fifteenth century, “[t]he bedroom … became the arena of a drama in which the fate of the dying man was decided for the last time, in which his whole life and all his passions and attachments were called into question” (Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* 108). The moment of death becomes an “ordeal whose outcome will determine the the meaning of his whole life (109). In order to secure salvation, the dying man must take care not to despair in his sins, glory in his good deeds or cling too strongly to the pleasures of life (Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death* 37). Ariès observes that in the course of the sixteenth century humanist Catholic and Protestant thinkers began to place less emphasis on the “hour of death.” No longer would the last minutes of life determine one’s fate—thinkers as diverse as Bellarmine, Erasmus and Calvin argued that preparation for death “[took] no less than a lifetime” (*The Hour of Our Death* 305). Although, as we shall see, the moment of death caused seventeenth-century Puritans in England and America some considerable anxiety, they conformed to this intellectual and cultural development.

book, “Polybius,” containing the lives of “New-England’s first ministers … offered unto the contemplation and imitation … of the generation which are now rising up” (*Magnalia Christi* 1: 235, 249).

*Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* contains little of the factual information that we would expect in a modern biography. Cotton’s debate with Roger Williams, one of the most significant passages in his life, receives no mention at all. Indeed, Norton only briefly touches on the Anne Hutchinson affair and makes no “specific” reference to “Cotton’s many writings” (Gallagher vii). For Sacvan Bercovitch, Cotton’s decision to leave England for the colonies forms the thematic, as well as the structural, centre of the narrative. The crossing itself is a kind of spiritual rebirth: “Norton … makes Cotton’s conversion experience interchangeable with his ‘tempestuous Flight’ across the Atlantic” (*Puritan Origins* 123). Norton, too, makes much of the literal birth of Cotton’s first child, Seaborn, during the voyage: “He that left Europe childless, arrived a joyfull Father in America; God who promiseth to be with his Servants when they passe through the Waters, having caused him to embrace a Son by the way” (*Abel Being Dead* 18). But this is also a text about death, as the title suggests. It tells of a journey towards death, towards an acceptance of mortality. When the undergraduate Cotton felt a secret thrill at the sound of William Perkins’ death-knell, as he resolved that his studies would not be disturbed by the call of religion, he was not simply postponing his salvation: he was turning away from his death. That which holds him back from the true faith is a selfish desire to live his life as he sees fit—in the pursuit of academic excellence. What brings him to account, into the fold, is the acceptance that

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6 Given the unfortunate position in which Cotton found himself during the Antinomian controversy—his orthodoxy was briefly under suspicion—it is perhaps unsurprising that “the episode receives only passing mention [from Norton] as an example of Cotton’s meekness” (Gallagher vii).

he must live and die as God chooses. The very brevity of his life, the fact that he has so little
time to devote to the occupation that he chooses, underwrites the importance of this decision. In
worldly terms, he exchanges a private life for a public death. Spiritually speaking, he sacrifices
his life on earth for life in heaven, after death. Just as importantly, he also ensures that he will
live on as a model to those Christians who will come after him. Norton makes this clear in the
very first words of his biography: “It is the priviledg of the blessed who lived in Heaven, whilst
they lived on Earth; That they may live on Earth, whilst they live in Heaven” (3). A few pages
later he claims that, on the last day, “The Mystery of God, concerning all the transactions of his
eternal purpose, through-out the whole time of time” will be nowhere more “admired … [than]
in what he hath wrought in the lives and deaths of Beleevers, as Beleevers” (5). The last clause
here is crucial: Cotton is only significant as a believer. The particular details of his life, his
human singularities and irregularities, fall away before the fact that he “live[d] and die[d] in the
Faith of Jesus” (5). In this sense, Perkins’ death was as Cotton’s own—the death of every
believer being essentially the same. Norton’s hope and expectation is that his readers will make
an end like Cotton’s, that they will follow his example of “obedience … unto the death” (5).

In both Norton and Mather’s accounts, Cotton’s death and life become a kind of public
property. Each author, on the other hand, observes that the venerable man desired a degree of
privacy for his absolutely final moments. Up to a certain point, the stories follow the same
course—Cotton makes his farewells, offers his last words of advice, and then asks to be left to

8 The life of “Jesus Christ himself excepted” (Abel Being Dead 5).
9 Later in the text, speaking of Cotton’s doctrinal beliefs, Norton remarks: “As concerning any Tenet wherein he
may seem singular, Remember, he was a man, and therefore to be heard and read with judgement, and haply
sometimes with favour” (41). There may be an allusion to the Hutchinson affair here—Cotton’s insistence that
justification preceded sanctification (or that consciousness of the presence of saving grace within the soul, rather
than holiness of moral conduct, was the first proof of the election of an individual) left him out of step with Thomas
Hooker, Thomas Shepard and John Wilson’s prevailing orthodoxy (Everett Emerson, John Cotton 85-89; Bush Jr.,
“Cotton, John”).
die in peace (Mather, indeed, offers more detail here, specifying that he talked to his colleagues first and “then called for his children” [Magnalia Christi 1: 272]). But where Mather simply states that “lying speechless a few hours, [Cotton] breathed his blessed soul into the hands of his heavenly Lord” (1: 272-3), Norton produces an anecdote that provides evidence of a certain tension between the public and the personal on Cotton’s dying day. Here the minister does not lie in absolute solitude. Rather than requesting that the company leave the room altogether, we read how “he caused the Curtains [around his bed] to be drawn,” in order “that he might be permitted to improve the little remnant of his life without any considerable impediment to his private devotions” (Norton 45). A trusted “Gentleman and brother of the Congregation” was on hand to ensure “that the Chamber should be kept private.” It seems that this man, however, failed in his task:

But a while after hearing the whispering of some brethren in the room, he called for that Gentleman, saying, Why do you break your word with me? An expression so circumstanced, as that impression thereof abideth unto this day, in the heart of that godly man, whose omission gave him occasion so to speak. (45)

William Perkins’ death once led the young Cotton to seek the seclusion of the fields outside Cambridge. This outburst of irritation on his own deathbed, however brief, registers a similar resistance to the Puritan culture of public death. Its presence within Norton’s text is intriguing, especially as Mather, who otherwise follows Norton’s wording in this passage quite closely, decided to omit it. For Norton, one suspects, this is one more example of Cotton’s patience

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10 For example, Norton’s account of Cotton’s last moments runs as follows: “These words were his … last words, after which he was not heard to speak, but lying some hours speechless, quietly some hours speechless, quietly breathed out his spirit into the hands of him that gave it, December 23. 1652, between eleven and twelve (after the bell had called to the Lecture, Thus preventing the Assembly in going to see, what they were but going to hear) being entred into the Sixty and eighth year of his age” (Abel Being Dead 45-6), Mather has: “So lying speechless a few hours, he breathed his blessed soul into the hands of his heavenly Lord on the twenty-third of December, 1652, entring on the sixty-eight year of his own age: and on the day—year, at the hour—of his constant weekly labours in the lecture, wherein he had been so long serviceable, even to all the churches of New-England” (Magnalia Christi Americana 1: 272-3). There are similar correspondences throughout Mather’s text.
triumphing over the distractions and temptations which inevitably face a saint, even to the very end. The dying man, “mindful no doubt of [the] great helpfulness which he [had] received from [the elder],” forgives him and offers him a final blessing. Yet Cotton’s desire for privacy works against the logic of the biography. As a justified believer, he forfeits the confidentiality of his spiritual life. In his opening meditation, Norton insists that “‘tis part of the Portion of the Saints [on earth]” that “they may enjoy both the life and death of those, who both lived and dyed in the Faith” (3). He regrets that Cotton did not imitate the Huguenot theologian Junius “in leaving behind him the history of his own life” (5-6), but adds that “it remains [for those] who have known his doctrine, manner of life, purpose, Faith, Long-suffering, Love, Patience, Persecutions, and afflictions” to see that “[his] Light [should not] be hid under a Bushel” (6). In other words, Cotton has no choice but to speak, like Abel, from the grave.

These two instances of self-interest, in the biography of a selfless man, carry a considerable significance. In each case Cotton resists the process by which the death of an individual becomes exemplary. First, he turns away from the death of a man who had produced one of the definitive Puritan artes moriendi. Then, on the threshold of his own death, he turns away from his parishioners, in order to die in private. Having offered some reconciliatory words to the man who had disturbed the silence of the room, we read that he lay “speechless” for “some hours … quietly breath[ing] out his spirit into the hands of him that gave it (Norton 40). This last period of silence contrasts sharply with the loquaciousness of his example in death. These two moments, as brief as they are, do not simply work against the rhetoric of the text in which they appear: they also uncover the seam of tension that runs through every Puritan sermon, book or tract on mortality. If the death of the individual is radically singular, as the Puritans insisted it was, then how could theologians write instructional works on the subject, or ministers offer pertinent criticism, advice and reassurance from the pulpit? This is one of the theoretical
impasses that texts such as *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* and *Magnalia Christi* attempt to occlude. Close analysis, however, reveals that these aporetic breaks are always there, often hidden in plain sight.

This chapter, then, is concerned with those junctures in the Puritan thanatology where logic and sense begin to break down—at which the aporias of death reassert themselves as borders that cannot be crossed. It examines two textual strategies through which the Puritans attempted to cope with death, fix a limit to its limitlessness and assign it a function within their culture. The first part of this investigation has already begun: its subject being the biographical writing that offered the believer a model for his own approach to death. Having described the tension between singularity and exemplarity in Norton’s biography of John Cotton, I will go on, in a moment, to outline the contradictory quality of the Calvinist’s personal devotions. Even as he was informed that he must take sole responsibility for his life and death, he was constantly reminded of his duty to imitate other people, particularly religious leaders who had already passed into the next world. These dead saints pointed to a road past the aporia of indeterminacy. Their deaths, surely, had been full of grace. The singularity of death, however, still stood in the way: how could the reformed Christian apply their example to his own passing, which was radically distinct? The second part will focus on a kind of autobiographical thinking that certain texts encouraged their readers to employ. By meditating on the moment of their death, they could abrogate its finality and indeterminacy. If they felt the stirrings of grace as they did so, then they would doubtlessly pass away in a similar state, safely protected by the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. The advantage of this strategy was that it did not vitiate the singularity of death, removing

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11 Almost invariably, the models were male. There are no biographies of women in Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, the largest compendium of colonial lives. Women operative in the public sphere, indeed, were more likely to be models of misconduct, as the example of Anne Hutchinson shows.
any rhetorical relationship to the mortality of others. It too, however, was compromised in its own way.

Following Derrida, my study treats death as an aporia that can never be transgressed, conceptually or literally. Just as it is impossible to come to terms with one’s mortality in an intellectual sense, so, dying, one’s consciousness will never actually pass across to the other side of death. The instant of death is an “unexperienced experience[,]” a moment “that never arrives and never happens to me” (Demuere 65). It is, as Blanchot has it, *A Step Not Beyond.* The Puritans, on the other hand, saw death as a problem that might be solved through the intervention of grace. Theoretically, I want to suggest, this amounts to the same thing. Calvinist writing about death cannot present an approach that is without risk and free from any indeterminacy. There must be a break in the logic, an impasse that only faith can traverse: otherwise reason, rather than grace, would be doing all the work. Calvinist theology posited two varieties of grace—common and special. By the former God sustained his creation, spun the earth on its axis and held the stars in the firmament. Its operations also extended to religious and ethical spheres: through it, men come to know that there is a God and that his Scriptural commands are just and ought to be obeyed through the work of common grace. Puritan thanatology was concerned with the latter type, which governed the process of salvation and its attendant miracles (including the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ). The mysteries of common grace lay just beneath the surface of the world. Although, to the untutored eye, they might not have been immediately apparent, they remained inside what Derrida calls “the order of visibility” (*Gift of Death* 90). The believer could learn to discern the hand of God in the processes of the natural world and see his

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12 This, of course, is the title of Blanchot’s study of the relationship between death and writing. He proposes that the “fragmentary” form is the most suited to this topic because “[t]here is no experience of it, in the sense that one does not admit [in] it … any form of present” (*The Step Not Beyond* 49).
Spirit at work through human politics and history. Even those wonders that Cotton Mather termed “invisible” (the operations of witches, demons and evil spirits) were part of this pattern. They too might be identified, indexed and understood, as *The Wonders of the Invisible World* and his father Increase’s *Remarkable Providences* attest. The workings of special grace, on the other hand, could not be traced; it was “a lawless force that flashe[d] through the night in unexpected brilliance and unaccountable majesty” (Miller, *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century* 34). No Puritan could ever fully uncover the secret of a gracious death, either another’s or his own. It did not hide within the Eucharistic wafer, or in the actions or devotions of a man of faith. With no edge, no axis, no surface, it retained an “absolute invisibility” (*Gift of Death* 90). Like Derrida’s concept of the secret, this grace was “heterogeneous to the hidden” (“Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’” 21). This chapter, therefore, draws upon Derrida’s thinking about the secret, which underwrites his work on autobiography, mortality, translation and the gift. I shall demonstrate that the difference between the Puritans’ conception of the secrecy of death and Derrida’s is slight and yet substantial. When he writes that this secret is beyond the demystifying powers of the “moralist or psychologist” (“Passions” 24), I feel confident that the Puritans would have agreed (this, after all, was a key part of their quarrel with the Arminians, who suggested that man’s moral agency might enable him to win his salvation). Yet where he speaks of casting aside the protective shield of the “problem” of death, the secret and individual responsibility (*Aporias* 11-13; “Passions” 10-11), they do their best to consolidate these related aporias into one question: am I saved or damned?
Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh

Puritan culture in New England placed considerable emphasis on the individual’s responsibility for the welfare of his soul. If God drew the line between the reprobate and elect, every Christian was obliged to dedicate their life to discovering—or proving—the side of the great divide to which they belonged. The colony as a whole may have been chosen as a light amidst the darkness of the world, but there was no guarantee that any given individual would be saved. Until the Halfway Covenant of 1662, every member of the Congregational church in New England was required to produce a convincing account of the presence of God’s free grace in his or her life. Even after this compromise, “half-way” members were obliged to make a profession of gracious faith in order to enjoy the privileges of full membership (the right to partake in communion and cast a vote in the church’s affairs). Nor were infants exempt from this responsibility towards themselves. Children’s catechisms such as John Cotton’s *Milk for Babes* stressed their accountability before God. Following a comprehensive summary of the Ten Commandments, the text presents this exchange:

Q. Whether have you kept all these commandments?
A. No, I and all men are sinners.
Q. What is the wages of sin?
A. Death and damnation.
Q. How look you then to be saved?
A. Only by Jesus Christ. (99)

Care for the soul, then, began in the cradle, and was expected to permeate every aspect of the individual’s life. John Winthrop may have preached of the colonist’s responsibility for the material well-being of his fellow man (“A Modell of Christian Charity” *passim.* [1630]), and ecclesiological tracts may have spoken of the minister’s responsibility for the souls of his parishioners, but the individual’s responsibility towards himself was paramount. Cotton Mather, for instance, reports that it was John Cotton’s apparent fixation on his own redemption, rather than the theological and political controversies that were dividing the Church of England, that
secured him his first position as a preacher in the face of competition from another Cambridge graduate: “Mr. Cotton found the more peaceable reception among the people, through his own want of internal peace; and because his continual exercises, from his internal temptations and afflictions, made all people see, that instead of serving this or that party, his chief care was about the salvation of his own soul” (Magnalia Christi 1: 257).

This reflexive responsibility was inextricably bound to one’s death. While the Puritans believed that it was possible to achieve “[a]ssurance of salvation” in one’s lifetime, its achievement “lay less in the subjective response of the believer than in the Christ who … accomplished it” (Geddes 8). Only the instant of death would reveal whether Christ’s blood had saved him. In seventeenth-century New England, this moment could arrive at any time. Although living conditions in the colonies “were sometimes superior to those in … England and Europe” (Stannard 55), devastating epidemics were far from infrequent and infant mortality rates were high. Death, in the developed modern world, is generally hidden from sight, anesthetized in clinics and hospices, concealed in funeral homes. For the Puritans, by contrast, it was quite “openly visible”—at the scaffold, on the streets, in their homes (Geddes 58). When they spoke of their death—which they did frequently, producing hundreds of sermons, books and pamphlets on the subject—they talked of it as an imminent likelihood, not a distant prospect. As Gordon

13 Norton makes the same point in his narration of the episode, although he places less emphasis on Cotton’s care for his soul: “But when [the parishioners] saw Mr Cotton wholly taken up with his own exercises of Spirit, they were free from all suspicion [sic] of his being pragmatical, or addicted to siding with this or that Party, and so began to close more fully with him” (Abel Being Dead 16).

14 Of Cotton Mather’s fourteen children, seven died just after birth, one died aged two. Five of the six who “survived to adulthood … died in their twenties” (Ilick “Child Rearing in Seventeenth-Century England and America” 325; qtd. in Stannard The Puritan Way of Death 56).

15 In his influential histories of Western attitudes towards mortality, Ariès speaks of a death that is “medicalized” and “hidden” in the modern age, “denied” even (The Hour of Our Death 559-601). Since death, “a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care,” now rests in the hands of the doctor, “[it] 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” (Western Attitudes Toward Death 88-9).
Geddes observes, “[i]n New England, the call, ‘Prepare to die,’” referred to a present duty, not a future ritual” (Welcome Joy 64). Just as they were held to account for the state of their souls, children were continually advised to be ready for death.16 No fewer than six of the New England Primer’s rhymes make reference to death—four of them touching on infant mortality: “Rachel doth mourn / For her first born;” “Time cuts down all, / Both great and small;” “Xerxes the great did die, / And so must you and I;” “Youth’s forward slips / Death soonest nips.” Although even the clergy had difficulty accepting the idea,17 the orthodox teaching of the New-England church was that unconverted children were damned. Dante assigned unbaptised infants a place in Limbo; Michael Wigglesworth, in his great eschatological poem, The Day of Doom (1662), placed unelect children in “the easiest room in Hell.” This remarkable raising of salvation’s stakes reflects the seriousness that the Puritans invested in the individual’s duty of care towards himself.

Concern for one’s mortality, “the attentive anticipation of death, the care brought to bear upon dying,” is, according to Derrida, the foundation of Western philosophy (The Gift of Death 12-3). Following the pattern set out by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (“Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?”), he traces the origin of what he calls “European

16 In A Token for Children (1672), the English Puritan James Janeway recounted the experiences of several of his young parishioners. In each case the child dies—but not before they have come to terms with their sinfulness and mortality and been granted a gracious conversion. Stannard estimates that it “may have been exceeded in popularity only by the New England Primer” as an instructional text for the young (The Puritan Way of Death 65). The book was particularly widely read in America, with new editions published into the nineteenth century. Cotton Mather produced his own version, A Token for the Children of New England (1700), drawn from American examples (Hall, “New England, 1660-1730” 151).

17 Geddes finds evidence for this fact in the consolatory poems that several Puritan clergymen produced on the occasion of the death of their own or others’ children. In “To Urania, On the Death of her first and only Child,” Benjamin Colman asked: “Why mourns my beauteous Friend, bereft? / Her Saviour and her Heavn’n are left: / Her lovely Babe is there at Rest, / In Jesus’ Arms embrac’d and blest” (Geddes 166; qtg. Meserole, Harrison T. Ed. Seventeenth-Century American Poetry. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1968. 337). Like Colman, most of the authors of this kind of poetry appealed to the belief that the saving power of the covenant of grace extended to the children of the elect (Geddes 166-7).
“responsibility” (The Gift of Death 50)—the notion that my death, and thus my moral responsibility, cannot be taken away from me or given to another—to Plato (and, more, specifically, the Phaedo). Where pagan religion encouraged human beings to lose themselves in an orgiastic trance that obliterates subjectivity (Patočka 101) and responsibility (The Gift of Death 3), Platonism stressed the discrete and independent character of each person’s soul. Through “facing up to” mortality, rather than “fleeing from it” in the death-like stupor of the orgiastic rites, the individual could begin a journey towards the Good, to the world of immortal truth (Patočka 105). While Christianity retains Platonism’s notion of the individual’s responsibility towards his soul, it also initiates a new conception of salvation: In Plato’s model, one saved oneself through rational intuition of universal truths; in Christianity, the truth at stake “is not the truth of intuition but rather the truth of [the soul’s] own destiny, bound up with [the] eternal responsibility from which there is no escape” (107). Christian soteriology also constitutes a new relationship with the orgiastic. For Patočka, the doctrine of grace represents a partial return to the demonic quality of the sacred in paganism. Salvation is no longer “vested in a humanly comprehensible essence of goodness and unity [as in Platonism], but … in an inscrutable relation to the absolute highest being” (106). “Responsible life[,]” moreover, “was [now] presented as a gift from something which ultimately, though it has the character of the Good, has also the traits of the inaccessible and forever superior to humans—the traits of the mysterium that always has the final word.” Derrida uses this idea as the basis for an investigation of what he calls the “dissymmetrical” relationship between the individual and God: “[the] disproportion that relates me, and whatever concerns me, to a gaze I don’t see and that remains secret from me although it commands me” (The Gift of Death 27). He observes, with Patočka, that this “abyssal dissymmetry” within Christianity has yet to be properly thought through (The Gift of Death 27; “Is Technological Civilization Decadent?” 108). Neither Patočka nor Derrida
thematize the distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism in their analysis of this history of religion. It seems to me that Calvinism comes closest to the version of Christianity that Patočka describes. The Catholic sacraments interpose a ritual structure between the individual and the mysterious God who granted him the gifts of death and grace. The priest acts as a kind of surrogate for God, distributing forgiveness and saving grace through the performance of the correct ceremonies. Puritanism, which strips the Christian of this support, leaves him utterly alone before the mystery of grace. The doctrine of predestination, furthermore, casts him as the receiver, rather than the acquirer, of salvation. The responsibility to which God calls him is, therefore, also a form of submission, or even irresponsibility (*The Gift of Death* 61-2).

This theoretical and historical aside has been necessary to underline the aporetic quality of Puritan individualism. The Calvinist must express his concern for himself through “*self-denial,*” “*self-abasing*” or even self-hatred (Richard Baxter, *The Benefits of Self-Acquaintance*; qtd. in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 17). He acted in his own best interests when he strove to ignore those interests and when he realised, in the words of Richard Baxter, that “[t]he very names of Self and Own, should sound in the watchful Christian’s ears as very terrible, wakening words, that are next to the names of sin and satan” (*Christian Directory*; qtd. in Bercovitch 17). The imitation of Christ offered him a way out of this quandary. He must submit himself to the pattern that Christ’s biography had established and the lives of his saints had repeated. Even as it

18 Although the Puritans retained baptism and the Eucharist as sacraments, they viewed them only as symbolic practices with “no … inherent efficacy” for the achievement of salvation (Miller, *From Colony to Province* 83).
19 In the book’s third chapter, Derrida considers “the aporia of responsibility” with which the Christian is confronted, via Kierkegaard’s analysis of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. He speaks of the “insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility in general [moral responsibility to one’s fellow man] and absolute responsibility [one’s ethical responsibility to God]. On Moriah, Abraham must make an incalculable decision between these two callings. One could argue that Puritan life in New England, with its particular emphasis on the individual’s responsibility to his soul and his duty to the colony, re-enacts this impossible situation.
stressed the innate depravity of all humankind, reformed Christianity taught that any believer might become a saint. To be converted was to re-enact Christ’s resurrection within oneself (Bercovitch 9). The prospect of direct imitation of the Son of God was potentially troubling: it raised the possibility of men and women claiming divine authority and perfection for themselves, as did Anne Hutchinson, from the Puritan perspective (25-6). As a result, Puritan authors asked that their readers should imitate those who had imitated (or else foreshadowed) Christ. This might include scriptural figures, particularly the prophets and apostles, or more recent saints—heroes of the Protestant Reformation or of the first generation of New-England settlers.

Each of the texts that concern me here presents John Cotton as the type of a biblical figure. At the beginning of *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh*, Norton observes:

> A considerable part of the Scripture is a divine testimony of what the Faithful have done and suffered, recorded unto succeeding Generations, not only as a memorial of them, but as so many practical demonstrations of the Faithfulness of God: as so many full and glorious triumphs over the World, Sin and Satan, obtained by persons in like temptations, and subject to like passions with ourselves. (4)

His own book, on these terms, is an extension of the scriptures. Norton pictures Cotton as a latter-day Moses, Jacob, Ezekiel, David, St. John the Divine and, of course, Abel. He takes his place amongst those worthies as another symbol of the transformative power of the religious life: “[T]he signal presence of God” in Cotton, “manifests [him] to have been fore-appointed, for the further compleating of that Cloud of Witnesses which elevates the Beholders thereof, to lay aside every weight that doth so easily beset us, and with the same spirit to run the race that is set before us” (4-5). The *Magnalia Christi America* presents the same idea on a grander scale—Mather tells the story of not one saint, but many, as his general introduction makes clear: “I … introduce the *Actors*, that have in a more exemplary manner served [these] Colonies; and give Remarkable Occurences, in the exemplary LIVES of many Magistrates, and of more Ministers,
who so lived as to leave unto Posterity examples worthy of everlasting remembrance” (Magnalia Christi 1: 25). The first age of the church—the time of the Apostles—“was the golden Age: to return unto that,” he claims, “will make a man a Protestant, and, I may add, a Puritan” (27). In order that Mather’s generation should fulfil the promise of their fathers, it was essential that they read the sacred history of New England, the story of “the WONDERS of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the depravations of Europe, to the American Strand” (25).

Both biographers insist that their subjects should be emulated only in those matters where they emulated Christ. Their unique personal qualities were wholly insignificant next to their timeless and universal piety. Norton glosses over Cotton’s problematic association with Anne Hutchinson by reminding us that “he was [but] a man, and therefore to be heard and read with judgement” especially in those “Tenet[s] wherein he may seem singular” (41). In the introduction to “Johannes in Eremo”—the first part of book three of the Magnalia, containing the lives of Cotton, Norton, Hooker, John Wilson and John Davenport—Mather cautions his readers to keep their eyes fixed on Christ, rather than the particulars of each man’s life: “So let my reader do, when all that was imitable in the lives of these worthy men, has had his contemplation and admiration; they all yet had their defects, and therefore, ‘look off unto Jesus,’ following them no farther than they followed him” (252).20 This helps to explain why Puritan biographies are generally so disappointing to modern readers. We expect—or hope—that a biographer will disclose some secrets from their subject’s life—episodes or opinions that have

20 The quotation here is from Hebrews 12:2, where the author, having produced a great “cloud of witnesses” of those Old Testament figure who won victories through their faith, counsels us to follow Christ’s example above all (Norton, as we have just seen, drew on the same passage in his opening remarks). Mather begins the concluding paragraph of his introduction with a fuller reference to this passage: “Finally; when they apostles had set before Christians the saints which were a ‘cloud of witnesses,’ by imitating of whose exemplary behaviour we might ‘enter into rest,’ he [sic] concludes with a ‘looking unto Jesus,’ or, according to the emphasis of the original, ‘a looking off [from them] unto Jesus,’ as the incomparably most perfect of all” (252).
been concealed until now. It is the private life of the individual that interests us most—we scour the pages for some hint of the inner workings of his mind, a half-hidden emotion, or a secret joy or sorrow. However regretfully, we must acknowledge that the author and audience of these spiritual biographies were not concerned with the unique characteristics of the person in question, but their archetypal religious virtues. Where we value the idiosyncratic, the distinctive, the Puritans prized that which was imitable in these lives, those things that might be made to happen again. At the same time, they were acutely aware that biography is only necessary and possible because each human life contains a kernel that is irreplaceable and inimitable, which cannot be re-made. Puritan biography, then, was as deeply invested in the secret as its modern equivalent. The difference is that it was not concerned with hidden secrets (what went on behind the door of the bedroom or prayer closet), but with those that are “absolutely non-visible” (The Gift of Death 90): the irreducible gap between every human individual and the grace that set the elect apart from the damned.

This brings us back to John Cotton’s death. Notwithstanding his wisdom, eloquence and generosity, it was the manner of his passing—the fact that he was presumed to have died in Christ—that made him a suitable object for imitation. At the beginning of Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh, Norton draws a distinction between genuine and “unhappy emulation” (4). The latter, he notes “happily [expires] with the life of the emulated.” Norton appears to be referring to competitive, selfish imitation here, as the next sentence suggests: “We greedily own and enjoy such Worthies, when they are not, whom envy in a great Degree bereaved us of, whilst they were.” Nevertheless, his remarks serve to remind the reader that death has set the seal on Cotton’s sainthood and underwritten his imitability. It was always possible that the living might fall away from the high standard of godliness that they had set themselves; the piety of the dead was unchangeable. The book’s subtitle, “The Life & Death of that deservedly Famous Man of
GOD, Mr John Cotton,” reinforces the connection between his merited renown and the fact that he was deceased, just as its closing prayer reasserts the central significance of its subject’s death: “Moriar ego morte justorum, & sit finis meus sicut illius” (50) (“May I die the death of the just, & may my end be just as his”). The Puritans accepted that their own fate must remain uncertain until death. When they witnessed or heard about the passing of a man such as Cotton, by contrast, they knew that he had achieved redemption (their response to the deaths of family members also reflected this certainty. Gordon Geddes notes that their diaries “do not reveal any tortured grief at the possible damnation of the soul of a dead loved one” [175]). 21 This confidence, I want to suggest, was closely connected to the sense that public piety of the minister was but the visible surface of a deep private devotion. In what was a commonplace of Puritan biography, Norton accentuates the secret quality of Cotton’s personal religious practice. When “any weighty cause … in the Church, Commonwealth, or Family” came to his attention, “he would set days apart to seek the face of God in secret: such were the bowels of this spiritual Father” (28). Mather reworks and expands this passage in his text, observing that Cotton “was in fasting often, and would often keep whole days by himself, wherein he would with solemn humility and supplications, implore the wanted mercies of Heaven; yea, he would likewise by himself keep whole days of thanksgiving unto the Lord: besides the many days of this kind which he celebrated in publick assemblies with the people of God” (Magnalia Christi 1: 279). In life, this secret graciousness seemed to shine forth—“so conspicuous was this grace in him,”

21 Amongst his evidence for this assertion, Geddes points to Thomas Shepard’s account of the death of his second wife, from the very end of his Autobiography: The night before she died she had about six hours unquiet sleep, but that so cooled and settled her head that when she knew none else so as to speak to them, yet she knew Jesus Christ and could speak to him, and therefore as soon as she awakened out of sleep she brake out into a most heavenly, heartbreaking prayer after Christ, her dear redeemer, for the spirit of life, and so continued praying until the last hour of her death—Lord, though I unworthy; Lord, one word, one word, etc.—and so gave up the ghost. (73; quoted in Geddes 170) Geddes also points to poems on the death of children, which I discuss above.
writes Norton, “that multitudes beheld it, not without making extraordinary mention thereof” (Abel Being Dead 33). Although his final hours, particularly in Mather’s account, seem to have been a proleptic lying-in-state (“[w]hile he … lay sick, the magistrates, the minister of the country, and Christians of all sorts, resorted unto him, as unto a publick father, full of sad apprehensions at the withdraw of such a publick blessing” [Magnalia Christi 1: 272]), the moment of Cotton’s death itself, as we have seen, took place in total privacy, after hours of speechlessness and behind a curtain. It reaffirmed that grace “falls outside the register of sight” and, as a result, “takes secrecy beyond the secret” that may be revealed or uncovered (The Gift of Death 90).

Cotton’s last words, his peaceful bearing on his deathbed, and most importantly, the attitude towards death that he struck throughout his life, clearly demonstrate the manner in which those who are saved must behave. Yet the fact that every individual’s death is completely distinct (or, in Derrida’s words, that “tout autre est tout autre” [82])

means that whatever is profitable in John Cotton’s example has no currency, no transferability. That which guarantees the imitability of saints such as Cotton is itself utterly inimitable and invisible. One might re-enact his dying scene to the last detail, follow the prescriptions of an ars moriendi to the letter, yet if the Holy Spirit is not singularly and uniquely present in one’s soul, then these efforts are in vain. Here Puritanism is faithful to a theme that runs through the New Testament, appearing in both the Gospels and the Epistles: the secrecy of the relationship between God and the believer. In

22 In French, this phrase carries (at least) two meanings: every other individual is different from me in every sense and every individual stands for every other person in my relations with them (The Gift of Death 87). Derrida observes that one could replace one of the “every others” with “God” and retain the same essential meaning: “Every other (one) is God,” or ‘God is every (bit) other.” He adds that this linguistic play between the concepts of alterity, singularity and universality is central to the “economy” of salvation. Finally, the fact that the phrase is not “in its literality … universally translatable” (English, for instance, cannot preserve the pun) means that it is “a kind of shibboleth, a secret formula … [that] can be uttered only in a certain way in a certain language” (87-88). I shall return to Derrida’s thinking about translation in a moment.
Matthew, Christ famously speaks against public alms giving, stipulating that those who give privately, without calculation (“let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth”), will be rewarded by their “Father which seeth in secret” (6:3-4). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes: “Set your affection on things above, not on the things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (3:2-3). These passages suggest that Cotton’s death and spiritual life were exemplary because they were beyond sight. The elders of the church present in his bedchamber did not witness his passing directly: he lay, as we have heard, behind a curtain. Even if their gaze could have penetrated this veil, they would not have seen his death. Figuratively (and spiritually) speaking, Cotton was already dead: his “life is hid with Christ in God,” as Paul has it; he has been in “Heaven” ever since his conversion, according to Norton (5).

For Norton’s readership, the minister’s death is both visible and invisible. They read of the external circumstances, so similar to the way in which they aspire to die, but they cannot see into his soul, where his salvation is safely sealed away.

In “Des Tours des Babel,” his commentary on Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator,” Derrida speaks of the “transferability” of the “sacred text” as that which “[gives] at the limit the ideal measure for all translation” (132). Through its very singularity, through its claim to divulge divine secrets, the sacred text demands translation ahead of any other work. However, because its holy status depends on the mysterious relationship between its specific linguistic form and its content, since the “meaning and literality” of the text cannot be distinguished, it cannot be translated. For the Puritans, the most sacred text imaginable (outside of the Bible itself) was the inner life and death of the believer. “You may beleeve it,” Norton writes, “what God hath done for the Soul of the least Saint of some few years continuance, were it digested into Order, would make a volume full of temptations, signes, and wonders: A wonderful History, because a History of such experiences, each one whereof is more than a
Wonder” (Abel Being Dead 5). The conditional mood of this sentence is noteworthy. Although it forms part of Norton’s prelude to his account of Cotton’s spiritual life, it implies that it may not be strictly possible to write such a book. Furthermore, the paragraph in which it appears begins in the future tense, prospectively anticipating the day when “[t]he Mystery of God, concerning all the transactions of his eternal purpose upon the Theatre of this World, throughout the whole of time” will be “fully accomplished and revealed.” Even as he argues for the great value of the text that is about to translate from the memories of those “who have known [Cotton’s] doctrine, manner of life, purpose [and] Faith” (6), Norton cannot help but cheapen it. He suggests that the text of Cotton’s (and every saint’s) life will only be fully legible at the end of days, acknowledging that we cannot see “so much” of it, as we “shall be [able to] then.” At that time, however, it will have lost its worth entirely, for the appeal of the account of Cotton’s “obedience, both Active and Passive unto the Death,” depends upon its reader remaining on the hither side of death himself. In heaven, we shall no longer need the reassurance about mortality that the life of Cotton might provide. We will have already received our last reward. Consequently, our deaths will have shed their indeterminacy—we will know for certain that we died full of grace. The impulse to break open the sealed text of Cotton’s death, runs into all three aporias that govern thinking about mortality. The indeterminate quality of our own deaths encourages us to look to his for inspiration, yet the radically singular nature of mortality means that we cannot decode it secrets. This practice, moreover, expresses the aporetic finality of death. Despite being deceased, John Cotton speaks. This seems to challenge the notion that the dead are already in their final resting place. On the other hand, the text implies that we shall only be able to understand what he says when we ourselves have reached our ultimate destination, by which time it is always, already, too late for us.
Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh and Magnalia Christi Americana both offer comfort and reassurance to the dutiful reader. Norton’s text expresses the traditional Christian fear that the death of a holy man will presage a period of suffering, persecution or dissension within the Church (“Thus are our trials increased, and our strength decreased, that we might learn to trust in God. What the counsel of the Lord is concerning the bereaved Churches of New-England, is a solemn and awful meditation” [46]), but it still rejoices that Cotton has taken his rightful place in the firmament of saints. The colony may have lost his pastoral care, but it has gained his example. Mather announces his intention to shame his contemporaries with the memory of New England’s founding generation: “I’ll shew them the graves of their dead fathers; and if any of them do retreat unto a contempt or neglect or learning, or unto the errors of another gospel, or unto the superstitions of will-worship, or unto a worldly, a selfish, a little conversation, they shall undergo the irresistible rebukes of their progenitors, here fetched from the dead, for their admonition” (Magnalia Christi 1: 249) Yet he also reminds them that they are part of a history greater than any other (29), the flourishing of Christianity in the “American wilderness” (248). In this way each author seeks to lessen what Max Weber called the “unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual” within Calvinism (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism 61). The reformed Christian in America, they claim, is right at the centre of a bitter conflict between the righteous and the wicked that will soon end in victory for God’s chosen people. The trials that Cotton and the other saints overcame are the same as those that they must undergo. The very means by which Norton and Mather make these assertions, however—the rhetoric of imitation and example—also works, as I have argued, to reinforce the isolation of the individual in his own unique mortality.
A Salve For A Sicke Man

Where Cotton needed an amanuensis in order to speak whilst “being dead,” his colleague Thomas Shepard could recount his life story more directly after his death, albeit to a smaller audience. His *Autobiography*, which remained in manuscript until 1832 (McGiffert 29), was written primarily for the benefit of his son, as its dedication makes clear:

TO MY DEAR SON Thomas Shepard with whom I leave these records of God’s great kindness to him, not knowing that I shall live to tell them myself with my own mouth, that so he may learn to know and love the great and most high God, the God of his father. (35)

Psychoanalysts, doubtlessly, would be fascinated by the final part of this sentence: for “the God of his father,” they would likely read “the God your father is to you.” To me, however, the fact that Shepard speaks of this account of his own life as a record of God’s “great kindness” to his *son* seems more significant. Since the text narrates the death of an elder brother of the same name (as well as Shepard’s two wives and two other sons), we might suppose that the kindness in question is that Thomas Shepard Jr. has survived to read it. Alternatively, this rhetorical trick may enact the spiritual aim of the work as a whole: that the son should re-enact the pious rigour of the father in his own personal life, so that God might show him the very same “kindness.” Since young Thomas was only eleven years old when the *Autobiography* was written, Shepard trusts that the text will pass on the secrets of his inner life, in the event that he should die before his son is old enough to understand them fully. The death of the father threatens to interrupt the transmission of his religious knowledge: we might add that even if Shepard did choose to speak in person on this subject (Thomas Jr. was fourteen when his father died), his death would still intervene, preventing him from communicating all that he wanted. The radical difference

23 In his reading of the *Autobiography*, Michael Colacurcio wryly observes that “Freudian outrage is only one avenue by which to approach [the text]” (*Godly Letters* 112).
between the death of every individual means that something must remain concealed, even as a father discloses his secrets to his son: Thomas Jr. can never die the same death as his father, Thomas Sr. cannot die on behalf of his son. At the same time, the father’s death is the very thing that makes his autobiography worth reading, that signs, seals and delivers the text. It is only as a mortal being that Shepard is significant to his reader, no matter who that reader might be. The choices that he makes through the course of his life (including the central decision to emigrate to New England) are only meaningful because he has a limited amount of time at his disposal. His account of his life is only valuable because he, like his reader, faces inevitable death.

Shepard’s Autobiography encounters the same impasse as the biographies of Cotton: it cannot obviate the aporetic singularity of death. In this section, I’d like to consider a different form of Puritan autobiography—the practice of privately writing or thinking about one’s life and death for one’s own benefit. In sermons and tracts that gave practical advice about preparation for death, ministers encouraged the individual to visualize their demise and to imagine how they would feel if this very moment were to be their last. For instance, at the beginning of Manuductio ad Ministerium (1726), his handbook for students preparing to enter “the work of Evangelical MINISTRY” (1), Cotton Mather declares: “the Contemplation of DEATH shall be the FIRST point of the Wisdom that my Advice must lead you to” (1-2). He argues that “[t]he Apprehensions of a Dying Person are usually so Wise, and so much have the Right Thoughts of the Righteous in them, that the best Counsel which can be given you, is, Child, Make haste into them!” (2). Accordingly, he advises his reader to “[p]lace [himself] in the Circumstances of a Dying Person; your Breath failing, your Throat rattling, your Eyes with a dim Cloud, and your Hands with a damp sweat upon them, and your Weeping Friends no longer able to retain you with them.” This meditation “must needs inspire” them to “entertain” the right “Sentiments of this World, and of the Work to be done in [it].” To die without having died before (in this
figurative sense) is to die “without Wisdom.” In one of his Tuesday afternoon sermons on the Westminster Assembly’s *Shorter Catechism*, delivered at the Third Church in Boston on February 13th, 1699, Samuel Willard urged his audience to “make the Death of [their] Body very comfortable, whencesoever it comes,” through anticipation of the “privileges” which it will enjoy, as the body of a believer (*Compleat Body of Divinity* 539).

“I am the only who can testify to my death—on the condition that I survive it” (*Demeure* 45)—this observation of Derrida’s (which is taken from his reading of Maurice Blanchot’s story “The Instant of My Death”) encapsulates the thinking behind this Puritan strategy. If the individual is able to imagine the circumstances of his own passing, then he will have bypassed the aporia of singularity that frustrates biographical writing about death, by collapsing the three roles of biographic subject, biographer and reader into one. He would, of course, survive this imagined death, and be able to apply what it had taught him to the rest of his spiritual life. It’s important to note that this process was only necessary and desirable because the Puritans believed that one survived one’s *actual* death. Although they saw death as a terrifying moment of rupture, when the soul would be divided from the body, they knew that the consciousness of each and every individual would live on after their demise. This, of course, constitutes a major point of difference with Derrida. For him, death is an “unexperienced experience” (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 67; qtd. in *Demeure* 47). The notion of bearing witness to one’s own death is the impossible possibility that underwrites both testimony and literature (because both of these discourses depend on the understanding that the speaker and his speech are irreplaceably singular and universally translatable (or “universalizable” [*Demeure* 41]) they must be uttered or created by a mortal, someone who has survived yet is going to die (45), since death is both universal and irreducibly singular). The Puritans, on the other hand, wanted to believe in the possibility of the impossible: that a man or woman really can anticipate the sensations that they
will feel as they die. I shall return to Derrida’s thinking about the relationship between death and autobiography at the end of this section, where I shall use it to investigate the flaws in this Puritan approach.

First, however, I would like to examine the text where the strategy of prospective autobiography finds its fullest expression: William Perkins’ *A Salve for a Sicke Man* (1596). Perkins, as we have seen, died in 1602, some time before either the Plymouth or Massachusetts Bay Colonies were established. His writings, nevertheless, were extremely influential in seventeenth-century New England, not least on the thought of John Cotton, whose conversion his death had helped bring about (according to Cotton Mather, Cotton thought that “one great reason why there came so many excellent preachers out of Cambridge, in England, more than out of Oxford, in some former days, was the ministry of Mr. Perkins in that university” ([Magnalia Christi Americana 2: 41; after Wright 194]). At Cambridge, he was famous for his fearsome preaching style: “he would pronounce the word *damn* with such an emphasis that [it would remain] a doleful echo in his auditors’ ears a good while longer” (Fuller 68). From the pulpit, he sought to stir men’s consciences; in his theological writings, he aimed to set them at ease, producing many works designed to diagnose whether their reader resided in a state of election or damnation (including *A Treatise Tending Unto a Declaration Whether a Man Be In The Estate of Damnation or In The State of Grace* (1589)\(^{24}\) and *A Case of Conscience, The Greatest That Ever Was: How a Man May Know Whether He Be The Child of God, or No* [1592]). *A Salve for A*

\(^{24}\) Although “[t]he first edition” of this text “is undated[,]” Louis B. Wright notes that the dedication “is signed by Perkins ‘From Cambridge this 24. Of November. 1589’” (“William Perkins” 175n.8).
“Sicke Man,” one of his most popular works,\footnote{David W. Atkinson notes that “not only did the Salve appear in at least six separate editions between 1595 and 1632, but it was included in the many editions of Perkins’ complete Workes published during the first half of the seventeenth century” (“William Perkins’ Contribution to the Ars Moriendi” 409).} partakes of the practical quality of these texts: here, as there, theoretical questions are explored through the experiences of the dutiful Christian. In keeping with his prevailing interest in matters of conscience, Perkins’ *ars moriendi* focuses on the internal, personal aspect of death. From the outset, he warns that one cannot and should not draw conclusions about an individual’s salvation from one’s impression of their death: “we must not judge of the estate of any man before God by outward things, whether they be blessings or judgements, whether they fall in life or death” (13). It is possible that “a man may die like a lambe, and yet go to hell: and one dying in exceeding torments and straunge behaviours of the body, may go to heaven” (17). Since “[a]ll the works of God are done in and by their contraries”—he created the world “of nothing” and brings us life through Christ’s death (14)—it is quite plausible that when he would “send his owne servants to heaven, he [should send] them a contrary way, even by the gates of hell” (15). Perkins’ primary purpose here is to reassure his readers that a difficult death is not necessarily an “extraordinary judgement of God.” Although disease may “deprive man of his health, and of the right use of parts of his body, and of the use of reason too: yet [it] can not deprive his soule of eternall life” (16). Nevertheless, his argument has another, disquieting consequence. If the deaths of the wicked and the righteous may be exactly alike in their external circumstances, then we cannot be certain that even the most godly minister or saint has truly made a good death. This insistence that the reality of death is invisible to the eye—of both the reader of biographies and the first-hand observer at the bedside—effectively robs the Christian of one of his most cherished supports: the exemplary death which he hoped to make his own.
Instead, Perkins urged his readers to look to their own deaths. In that moment, he insisted, they would find sure proof of their salvation. When the elect man or woman comes to die, he or she will enjoy the support and comfort of Christ. Not only will he moderate their physical “paines & torments,” but his presence will also provide “an inward and unspeakable comfort of the spirit” (*A Salve for a Sicke Man* 69). While to others they may appear to suffer, secretly and silently God’s angels will minister to their needs (70). No matter if speech should desert them at the last: “[t]he very sighes, sob, & grones of a repentant and believing heart are prayers before God, even as effectuall as if they were uttered by the best voice in the world … [he] lookes not vpon the speech but upon the heart” (90). According to Perkins, this comfortable death was a reward of a lifetime’s preparation—“[f]or the life of a Christian,” he wrote, “is nothing els but a meditation of death” (35). Even “the most notorious and wicked person that ever was” will pray on his deathbed, pledging reformation and repentance if only he might live (42). Perkins demands that we “be carefull to doe this every day” (42), and that we “recken with our selves when we go to bed as though we should never rise again, and when we rise, as though we should never lie downe againe” (35). We must not only keep our dying moments constantly in mind, but imagine ourselves decaying in the grave. When we do so, we must try to see “with the eye of faith” rather than our “bodily” sight (24). Physically, the corpses of the elect are indistinguishable from the cadavers of the damned, equally susceptible to the indignities of rot and decay. Spiritually, the former have been “altered & changed by the death & burial of Christ.” He has “sweetned & perfumed” the stench of our graves, reworked these “stinking and lothsome cabbines” into “princely palaces, and beddes of most sweet and happie rest, farre more excellent then beddes of downe” (24-5). No matter if our bodies be pulled apart or burned into dust (26), no matter that they must be “cruelly” parted from our souls (28)—they will remain safe and secure with Christ until the day of resurrection. Only we can discover if this is the happy fate that
awaits us, only we can know, through the “testimony of [our] sanctified conscience” and our “experience,” whether Christ truly “govern[s] [our] thoughts, will[s], affections, and all the powers of body and soule, according to the blessed direction of his holy will” (44).

_A Salve for a Sicke Man_ valorises a self-sufficiency that is classically Puritan. While Catholics must hope that their priests will administer last communion and extreme unction,26 Perkins expects Protestants to apply the remedy themselves. I have established that any discussion or description of death is inevitably compromised by the unbridgeable divide that surrounds the death of every individual. If the author and audience are the same person, then this difficulty would seem to disappear. Through careful, quotidian meditation, the Christian may effectively anticipate the _quality_ of his own death, if not the date or the hour. Although we must always reserve judgment on the spiritual biography of another, the autobiography that we compose for ourselves can reveal everything. Perkins promises that our final moments will follow the script that we write for them: if we live in Christ then we shall die in Christ. By asserting the underlying identity of the living and dying believer, he seeks to side step the finality and indeterminacy of death. Figuratively speaking, the saint is dead to the world long before he dies: “the saying is true,” Perkins notes, that “he [who] would liue when he is dead, must die when he is aliue, namely to his sinnes” (42). What’s more, if one approaches death as a gradual process rather than a final reckoning, then it loses much of its terror. He encourages his reader to “inure” himself to mortality by “dying by litle and litle so long as [h]e live[s] here upon earth,

26 Perkins, unsurprisingly, criticises both of these practices, along with deathbed confession to a priest (“[s]acramental confession” [49]) and the catechizing of the dying. “[T]he supper of the Lord,” he writes, “is no private action … and [is] therefore to be celebrated in the meeting and assembly of Gods [sic] people” (51). “[T]here is,” moreover, “no reason why we should thinke that sicke men should be deprived of the comfort of the Lords supper, if they receive it not in death; because the fruit and efficacy of the sacrament once received … extends it selfe to the whole time of mans life afterward.” The Apostles only anointed the bodies of the sick “when they put in practise the miraculuous gift of healing, which gift is now ceased” (54). Extreme unction, as a result, is nothing more than a superstition.
before [h]e come[s] to die indeed” (46). His “sicknesses in body,” his “troubles in mind,” the loss of possessions, friends and “good name” are all “little deaths”—the “beginnings,” even, “of death it self” (47). As for death’s indeterminate and opaque nature, Perkins believed that his method could render it transparent. A gracious death, one that secured the dying person a place in heaven, would be marked by the “speciall, blessed & comfortable presence [of God]” (68). Consequently, when the believer was able to testify that he was “redeemed, justified [and] sanctified by Christ” (99) he anticipated the instant of his death and revealed that he had nothing to fear. When he came to die, he would feel the same reassurance, the same sense of the safety of his soul as he had felt when giving witness in life: grace would make each of these moments, living and dying, as one.

At this point, I want to make it clear that the two strategies for coping with death that I have been discussing—the self-reflexive testimony of *A Salve for A Sicke Man* and the exemplary witness of Norton and Mather’s biographies of Cotton—should not be considered as being somehow contradictory, or mutually exclusive. The same Puritan clergymen could make use of either of them, depending on the context of his writing. In funeral sermons and biographies, he would have spoken of the importance of imitating the departed saint, in tracts and homilies on the art of dying, he would have counselled his readers to contemplate their own death above all else. On occasion, he might employ both strategies. In his 1683 sermon *The High Esteem which God hath of the Death of his Saints*, which was “[o]ccasioned by the death of the Worshipful John Hull Esq.,” Samuel Willard told his congregation at Boston’s Third Church that while “God’s Saints must dye” (2), they enjoy “a priviledge above other Men in their Death” (3). Shifting into the first person plural, he encouraged the mourners to look ahead to their own dying day: “Death is not in it self a thing so formidable as Men think it to be, but only the manner of dying; it is no hurt to die if we die Saints” (3). Towards the end of the text, he spoke of “the
exemplariness of [Hull’s] Life and Converse among Men,” observing that the “the honourable respect he bore to God’s holy Ordinances, by diligently attending upon them … was very great” (17). Hull’s heart was hidden, like John Cotton’s, in heaven: “his living above the World, and keeping his heart disentangled, and his mind in Heaven, in the midst of all outward occasions and urgency of Business, bespake him … [to be] but a Pilgrim on the Earth, a Citizen of Heaven.” This part of the sermon may seem rather perfunctory, formulaic even—Willard never refers to Hull by name. It’s almost as if the description of the deceased is only present to add ballast to the text’s central message: that we must take care that we die as saints, that God may take a “special care” over the “manner” of our deaths (9). We must remember, however, that Hull is singular for Willard only in the extent to which he embodies the typical qualities of a Puritan saint.

Willard’s sermon demonstrates how each of these strategies tends to demand, or even produce the other. Both speak, with certainty, of salvation, although in neither case does this assurance produce rhetorical closure. In the biographies, John Cotton’s desire for privacy on his deathbed, together with his consuming obsession with his own salvation, suggest that a solipsistic concern for one’s own death is more productive than the imitation of other saints. Towards the end of A Salve for a Sicke Man, Perkins appends a summary of the last words of a substantial number of Biblical figures, early church fathers and reformers for “instructions sake and for imitation” (90-1). According to the letter of his argument, this should be unnecessary: genuine personal conviction of one’s salvation should be enough to secure a good end. The real value of each discourse, then, may be that it demonstrates the incompleteness of the other. As I mentioned earlier, there must be a gap in any Puritan theory of death, a split for grace to break through.
Derrida’s work on the relationship between writing and thinking about oneself and death can provide us with a helpful insight into the aporia that compromises the Puritan strategy of prospective autobiography. His analysis of the preface to Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* raises the possibility of an autobiographical writing that is not simply the “story of … past life,” told to other people, but the means by which the “I” of the text constitutes itself, through the process of “saving” those elements of one’s life that are “immortal” and “burying” the rest (*The Ear of the Other* 12-13). Nietzsche, Derrida points out, addresses the text to himself: “he tells himself this life and he is the narration’s first, if not its only, addressee and destination—within the text.”

Here there is a clear confluence between Nietzsche and Derrida’s thought and Perkins’: in each case, a writing that is aimed at the self (an “auto-biographical” writing as Derrida has it [13]) secures a kind of victory over death (although, for the Puritan, the immortality at stake was literal and spiritual, rather than figurative and textual).

At this juncture, however, the differences are more significant than the similarities. Puritan auto-biography, as I have shown, is founded on the premise that one experiences one’s death. More than this, it suggests that one can use the prospect of this experience to order one’s life up until one’s dying moments. For Derrida, conversely, death always eludes our attempts to encompass it, ensuring that our knowledge of our own lives is always incomplete. His own autobiography, *Circumfession*, unravels across the margins of Geoffrey Bennington’s work *Derridabase*. The expectation is that it will contradict, even frustrate, the Englishman’s attempt to “systematize” Derrida’s thought without directly quoting from it (Bennington 1). Derrida observes that Bennington’s project threatens to render him obsolete, since a perfect replication of the network of ideas underpinning his past work would theoretically embrace any ideas he might generate in the future (*Circumfession* 30). If he is to survive (or achieve “salvation” [39]), he must produce “improbable things” that can “destabilize” or “disconcert” Bennington’s
“program” (30). Yet despite the secrets that he reveals—his Jewishness, the deaths of his two brothers, his expulsion from his Algerian Lycée on anti-Semitic grounds, his Godless religious faith—it is Derrida who is most surprised in the writing of this book, by his mother’s fall into terminal illness. Her death, in its unexpected imminence “would come to sculpt [his] writing from the outside, give it its form and its rhythm from an incalculable interruption” (207).

“Never,” he confesses, “will any of my texts have depended in its most essential inside on such a cutting, accidental and contingent outside, as though each syllable, and the very milieu of each periphrasis were preparing itself to receive a telephone call, the news of the death of one dying.” Derrida discovers, as he prepares a book that is supposed to summarise his life definitively, that something has always been missing—he has never understood dying before: “dying is the word I discover at the age of 59, a sort of verbal adjective whose tense I had not yet known how to read” (208). His mother’s mortality comes to stand for his own and for the way death interrupts our knowledge of ourselves: “I shall never know the whole of me, nor you, … with whom I have lived … this remains hidden from myself, more secret than all the secrets with which I know that I shall die without knowing if I shall know how to die” (217). Derrida’s point is that we must not unthinkingly privilege autobiography over biography, that we do not necessarily have any more access to our own secrets than anyone else’s. The “autobiographical,” he writes elsewhere, “is the locus of the secret, but not in the sense – as some would have it – that it holds the key to a secret, be it conscious or unconscious” (A Taste for the Secret 57). There is, instead, an “absolute secret” we which all share, “that we speak of but are unable to say … There may be an unlimited consensus on the subject, but the consensus is of no use, since it is a consensus on the fact that the singular is singular, that the other is other, that tout autre est tout autre” (58). He adds that “the most tempting figure for this absolute/secret is death, that which has a relation to death, that which is carried off by death – that which is thus life itself.” Elsewhere, speaking in a religious
context of the “dissymmetrical” relationship between the believer and God, he proposes that “my secret self, that which can be revealed only to … God[,] … is a secret that I will never reflect on, that I will never know or experience or possess as my own” (*The Gift of Death* 92). The “secret of secrecy,” he adds, is “that it is not a matter of knowing and that it is there for no-one. A secret doesn’t belong, it can never be said to be at home or in its place” (92).

In *A Salve for a Sicke Man*, William Perkins writes to assert “the excellencie of death” and to reassure his reader that “[th]e death of the righteous, that is, of every beleeving and repentant sinner, is a ... blessing of God.” Nevertheless, he acknowledges that human mortality is a painful and mysterious thing. In the afterword, he warns that “the last combat with the devill in the pang of death, is oftentimes [the] most dangerous of all” (109), and then goes on to recount the terrible temptations that plagued even John Knox in his final moments, before closing with Luther’s advice for those who find, in the end, that they “doubt their salvation” and “fear to enter into an other life” (111). The elect often find themselves travelling to heaven “by the gates of hell” (15). That which protects them on this journey is a secret that they carry with them—the “inward and unspeakable comfort” of the Holy Spirit. This promises to transform their experiences inwardly, beyond the perception of any observer. The “sighes, sobs, & grones” of their dying moments are secretly transformed into the most pious and decorous “praiers before God, [which are] even as effectuall as if they were uttered by the best voice in the world” (90). Redemptive death must be secured by a regenerate life, one that was founded on preparation for one’s passing. While he never quite articulates it directly, Perkins’ argument implies that the Christian would know that he would be saved if he felt the stirrings of grace when he meditated on his death. He could then hope to feel that grace at the last. For if he were but “certenly assured in conscience of [his] being in Christ” then he would “remaine in ... covenant” with God, “let death come when it will” (28). Although it was intended to be reassuring, this approach to death
threatened to become a source of considerable anxiety. Since the ministrations of the spirit were “unspeakable” it was quite possible that they might be confused with some other sensation: if the believer was unable to articulate them, even to himself, then how was he to determine whether they were genuine? Perkins spoke of the “love of God” as being “like a sea, into which when a man is cast, he neither feels bottom nor sees banke” (15). Through this simile, he sought to soothe concern about the possibility that elect men and women might feel pain or despair on their deathbed—they were quite secure, even if they could not tell that they were. By extension, however, the image suggests that it was virtually impossible to know whether one was part of this fortunate crew. To borrow Derrida’s terminology, the Puritan practice of prospective autobiography was founded on the principle that salvation was hidden within the individual. It was not, however, a secret for him, since he could not share it, even with himself. Instead, it was a secret for God (or “for the other,” as Derrida has it) who could see into him in secret (The Gift of Death 91). As a result, the reformed Christian could “never know or experience or possess [his election] as [his] own” (92).

To deny that the Puritans were ever able to possess the secrets of their own deaths is to effect a deconstruction of their entire culture. Although it may perhaps only take place retrospectively, this critique need not depend upon modern philosophy, need not assert the existential inauthenticity of their belief in life, and judgment, after death. It is, instead, possible to produce this deconstruction entirely on their culture’s own terms. The Puritan individual in New England witnessed or read about the deaths of great saints. He was told that he should imitate these men and women, that he must find the “Infallible Signs of a Regenerate State” (Cotton Mather, The Scarlet Cord 17) imprinted on his heart, just as they once did. However, even as he clutched at this secret, it eluded his grasp—the difference between a regenerate and unregenerate death was too slight to take firm hold of. He found then that his own death was no
less of a mystery to him than the death of the other. Indeed, the notion of death on which his meditations on his own demise were based must, in any case, have been derived from the other’s death: the only death that he ever actually experienced. In this telling, the Puritan’s spiritual quest takes on a rather quixotic quality: he searches for something that he cannot make use of, for a road that will lead him back to where he began. David Stannard proposes that the New-England Congregationalists never achieved the assurance of salvation that they searched for. He criticises Perry Miller’s suggestion that the “expectation of immortality” was “so axiomatic” amongst them as to preclude any doubt or “discussion” of their eternal reward (The Seventeenth Century 37-8; The Puritan Way of Death 78). To the contrary, he asserts that “the Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death” (The Puritan Way of Death 79). This might imply that their project was a failure, since a soothing of man’s disquiet at his mortality was unquestionably one of the central purposes of Puritan spirituality.

On the other hand, this failure might equally be termed a success: the man who failed to fear death would most likely be damned for his comfortable presumption. The Puritan culture of death was founded on a search for what is impossible: an understanding of our own demise, the

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27 In Aporias, Derrida deconstructs Heidegger’s assertion that “impossibility as death—the impossibility of death, the impossibility of the existence whose name is ‘death’—can appear and announce itself” only “for Dasein,” only for man as a “being there” which may speak (74). If it is only through the name of death that man (as Dasein) can gain access to his own death as such, then “[w]ho will guarantee” that this is possible? Might not “the ability to name death [which animals do not possess] … participate as much in the dissimulation of the ‘as such’ of death as in its revelation?” (76). Derrida suggests that the “only death that is named in the syntagm ‘my death,’” is, in fact, the death of the other—the only death which I may witness for myself. “The death of the other thus becomes again ‘first,’ always first”—it is mourning, rather than the anticipation of my own death, “that institutes my relation to myself and constitutes the egoty of the ego.”

28 On the other hand, he adds that they “simultaneously [clung] to the traditional Christian rhetoric [which viewed] death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul” (The Puritan Way of Death 79).

29 Speaking more broadly, the notion of the secrecy of the secret of death, which Derrida traces through Judaism, Christianity, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Levinas and Heidegger calls into question the entire intellectual history of the West, in so far as it is founded on the Socratic command “Know Thyself” and Kant’s understanding of the moral “autonomy” of the individual. By asserting that I am accountable for my ethical decisions even though I am commanded to make them by my dissymmetrical relationship with the other (or God), the secrecy of the secret breaks the Socratic and Kantian association of ethical responsibility with self-knowledge.
right balance between fear and assurance. To insist on the possibility of the impossible—this is what it meant to be a Puritan.

Cotton Mather’s Angel

Cotton Mather’s autobiography, *Paterna*, ties together many of the threads that I have picked up here. Mather began work on this text around the birth of his son Increase in 1699, likely completing the first part in 1702 (Bosco xix). He seems to have taken it up again in 1717, with the intended recipient now being his younger son Samuel, rather than the wayward “Creasy” (xviii). The punning title (*Paterna* suggests both “father” and “pattern”) emphasises the close connection between familial relationships and the Puritans’ imitative impulse. Like *Magnalia Christi Americana*, this work commands the younger generation to follow the example of their fathers, to imitate their imitation of Christ. Unlike that longer text, *Paterna* is a deeply private document: not only did Mather take no steps towards publishing it in his lifetime, he also wrote anonymously, carefully excising many details that would have given away his identity.

The marrow of Puritan devotion, the key to the imitation of Christ, *Paterna* insists, is in one’s secret, inner life. “I see,” wrote Mather, “my Saviour Leading an *Hidden Life*, and Passing thro’ *Obscure Circumstances*, while he sojourned among us. I feel the *Power* of it, in my being *Willing to have my Walk with God* carried on with all possible *Concealment* upon it” (*Paterna* 294). The text is replete with references to “secret prayer.” In addition, Mather discusses his practice of holding “Dayes of Thanksgiving, alone in [his] Study” (81), providing his son(s) with a detailed model of one of these private sessions. The fact that *Paterna* is shrouded in a double veil of secrecy underlines Mather’s belief that “[t]he Life of the Godly Man is *Hid with CHRIST in GOD*” (286). Although he feels able to reveal certain secrets to his son(s) (such as the fact that he anonymously donated packets of money, together with short devotional tracts, to neighbouring clergy, in order that they might distribute them to the deserving poor in their
charge [199]), he is aware that “[t]he life he has been describing at great length must remain hidden” (Post 46). Just as _Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh_ both reveals and conceals John Cotton’s life and death, _Paterna_ contains a curious mixture of disclosure and discretion. At one juncture, for example, he divulges that “I made it a Special Errand of my Praying with Fasting before the Lord, often in this Lustre of my Life; That He would prosper my Studies upon the Apocalypitical Affairs, and accept me in some Service of proclaiming unto the World ye Approaches of the Glorious Things, that are Spoken about the City of God” (Paterna 100). Although, he continues, “[he has] had Some Signal and Wondrous Answers to these … poor Supplications” (101), he “must not mention them.”

The centrepiece of the autobiography—the most important episode in Mather’s private spiritual history—is the miraculous appearance of an angel to the author. Despite his assertion that “it is not Lawful for me to utter … the marvellous and amazing Favours, which I have … received from ye Blessed Angels” (110), Mather goes on to describe two incidents of angelic intervention in his life. The first occurred shortly after a whole “Day of Prayer” asking for just such a blessing: prevented by a sudden illness from preaching to a party of soldiers recently returned from the West Indies, he avoided contracting a more dangerous malady which the squadron was carrying. “I have cause to think,” he confides, “[i]t was a Good Angel, which then struck me Sick, & so Sav’d my Life” (111). Mather is more cautious in his account of the second, more significant episode. He narrates this encounter in Latin, restricting the number of people who would be able to understand it, in case the book should achieve a wider circulation than he intended. In an even more unusual gambit, he splices into the middle of the Latin an English approximation of the angel’s message, reworked from Ezekiel (31: 3-5, 7-9). The rhetorical complexity of this passage is astonishing. Mather professes to speak secretly. Not only does he render his story in Latin, but he refuses to recount the angel’s words exactly: “Quamplurima
retulit hic Angelus, quae hic Scribere non fas est” (112). Nevertheless, he does offer his son(s) a tantalizing glimpse, in richly metaphorical Biblical English, of the glory which the angel predicts for him: “Behold, He was a Cedar in Lebanon, with fair Branches, and with a Shadowing Shroud, & of an High Stature, and his Top was among the Thick Boughs.” The information that Mather learns from this spiritual messenger (that he will go on to have great influence in the Church, that he will fulfil his highest potential) is of the same order of secrecy as his death. The angelic visitation, which takes place in private, seems to confirm that all of Mather’s secret devotions have reached God’s attention. Here he appears to have sure proof that he will be saved. He need no longer fear his passage into the next world (shortly before his account of the angel’s appearance, Mather observes that God has transformed his attitude towards dying. Whereas he had been subject “unto Some Terrors and Recoyles, in ye Thoughts of Death,” he has learned to view his demise with “a Strange Kind of Pleasure” and the expectation that “it will be Natural, and Sudden, and Easy” [98]). Just as he cannot hope to articulate the secret of his own death, Mather must draw a veil over the details of his conversation with the angel. He closes his account of the incident, however, with the hope that his son(s), too, may merit a secret visit (and, by extension, a happy death): “At another Time, and in another place, tis possible, My Son, I may tell you more. All that I will here Say, is; Be sure to Beleeve, That there are Holy Angels, and Behave yourself so Holily that ye Good Angels may take pleasure to do you Good” (113).

Cotton Mather’s angel appears to provide him with a passage through the aporias of mortality. Assurance of salvation and the guarantee of a comfortable death no longer seem impossible to achieve, since the apparently impossible—a face-to-face conversation with one of
God’s angels—has already occurred. The angel threatens to render Mather’s work in *Magnalia Christi Americana* redundant: why would one devote one’s life to the imitation of John Cotton, or John Winthrop, if it is possible to receive a direct, private divine blessing? More troublingly, the vision (and Mather’s decision to disclose it confidentially to his son[s]) raises the prospect of a secret spiritual aristocracy within the Puritan church. What’s more, as Constance Post points out, this extraordinary experience contradicts Mather’s father’s published opinion on angelic visitations:

> Indeed, there is not need now, as in the Days of the Old Testament, for Angels to appear visibly unto man, because the Scripture is now perfected[;] there must be no Addition made unto the Written Word of God, which now is sufficient to direct men in all cases whatsoever, that may concern their Salvation and Consolation. (Increase Mather, *Angelographia* 63; qtd. in Post, 50)

Mather’s angel not only provides him with a fresh, personal revelation, but promises to carry his response back to Christ himself: “Dixitqum hic Angelus, a Domino JESU Se missum, ut Responsa Cujusdam Juvenis Precibus articulatim afferat” (*Paterna* 112). This is nothing less than a (mediated) conversation with God! Mather did well to keep the event a family secret. Despite his impeccable credentials and impressive record of ministerial service, he may well have been charged with enthusiasm if he had made it public (Post 55).

> The Puritans, as I have shown, took a keen interest in the secret. They had a highly developed sense of the privacy of the individual’s spiritual life, his naked solitude before God. The same impulse that led them, on occasion, to seek seclusion (as John Cotton turned aside

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30 Mather’s private devotional life centred around what he termed “Particular Faiths”—prophetic revelations concerning specific causes or persons that were especially dear to him. These Particular Faiths were often connected to death. He was convinced for a number of years that his father would undertake “an important mission [to England] before going to heaven” (Levin 294). The appearance of the angel, David Levin notes, convinced him that this expectation would be fulfilled (295). Another Faith was more troublesome. During the long illness of his first wife, Abigail Phillips Mather, he received word from God that she would be spared (301-2). When, after a six-month struggle, she eventually succumbed, he was forced to conclude that her own private desire to die had overridden his conviction regarding her recovery (308).
from William Perkins’ death, and asked for silence in his own dying moments), prompted them to pry into the lives and deaths of others, to imitate that which was concealed from them. The angelic mysteries into which Cotton Mather prayed so vigorously to be admitted were of a different order of secrecy altogether. No need for him to listen for voices from beyond the grave, or imagine how he will feel at the instant of his death. Here, it seemed, was direct access to God, incontrovertible evidence of his favour. A closer inspection of *Paterna*, however, reveals that Mather knew that he must keep a cautious attitude towards the most extraordinary event of his life. The angel, you will remember, appeared to quote from Ezekiel as he prophesied the future greatness of the young man before him. In its scriptural context, the passage in question refers to the transience of the glory of pagan kings and their kingdoms. The mighty “Cedar in Lebanon”—the king of Assyria—will, God decrees, be the last tree to reach such an exalted height (31:14). The king of Egypt, who seems to have reached a similar stature, will be cut down, “delivered unto death, to the nether parts of the earth … down to the pit” (31:14). Constance Post assumes that Mather simply “ignores the disagreeable features of the prophecy” (*Signs of the Times* 125). She insists that his writing tends to emphasise the tropological meaning of Biblical episodes, at the expense of their “literal or historical” significance. Here the Assyrian king is merely a type of the earthly power and influence which the angel claims Mather will soon attain. Conversely, it is quite possible that the Biblical context *is* significant, that coded within the angel’s words is a warning about the dangers of ambition. Could Mather or his son(s) have ignored the troubling provenance of the Cedar quite so blithely? Turning to the end of the second Latin passage, we find more direct evidence of Mather’s wariness: “*Domine JESU! Quid sibi vult haec res tam Extraordinaria? A Diabolicis Illusionibus, Obsecro te Servum tuum Indignissimum, ut Liberes ac defendas*” (113). “Lord JESUS,” he pleads, “[w]hat does this most extraordinary thing mean? From the Devil’s games, I pray you, protect and deliver your most unworthy servant”—here he
admits that he cannot be certain that the angel, whose visit could validate his life-long programme of private devotion, was sent from the Lord. This concession perfectly encapsulates Mather’s Puritanism: even the most direct revelation may be an illusion; salvation is a secret kept until death.
The Valley of Decision

During his twenty-one year tenure as senior minister of the church at Northampton in western Massachusetts, Jonathan Edwards presided over two important awakenings. The first, which lasted from the spring of 1734 to the summer of the following year, was initially a local and then regional affair. To a large extent, Edwards engineered this revival himself: he targeted the wayward youth of the town, encouraging them to hold private prayer meetings, rather than indulging in games and frolics (Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening*” 64; Marsden, *A Life* 152). The young people’s restlessness had, as George Marsden argues, an economic basis. The expanding population, together with “the ever-present threat” of conflict with the Indians along the frontier, led to a shortage of new land (*A Life* 151). More men were “living with their parents well into their twenties,” delaying their marriages until, on average, “twenty-eight or twenty-nine.” Although they were expected to muck in with the work on the family farm, these unsettled sons enjoyed more free time than was good for them. Free time, of course, meant flirtation with the opposite sex, or worse, fornication. “[I]t seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion,” Edwards would later recall, “licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night-walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example exceedingly corrupted others” (*A Faithful Narrative* 146).

If the material cause of the revival was the restiveness of the unmarried youth, the efficient cause was death. In April “a young man in the bloom of his youth” was “violently seized with a pleurisy” and died, delirious, after just two days (*A Faithful Narrative* 147). This
tragedy was also an opportunity. In the sermon that he preached on this occasion, “In The Morning They Are Like Grass Which Groweth Up” (Ps. 90.5-6), Edwards spoke of the brevity and fragility of human life. When man “flourishes in the bloom of youth” death seems distant: “he is in his full strength … the body is in its greatest beauty and comeliness [and] there is no sign of any withering.” Like Christ, death arrives as “a thief in the night”—flowers that stand tall in the morning are mown down by dusk. While no more “liable to sudden death” than anyone else, young people are arguably at a greater risk: death may catch them unawares, in the midst of their follies and indiscretions. Then, the “lewed tongue addicted to vain talk [will] be Locked up in Eternal silence.” In the face of this awful possibility, Edwards counsels that the sons and daughters of Northampton redeem their time wisely. Whereas a foolish “beast” will “Regard nothing but what is present,” a “Rational Person will … Consult his own future Interest.” They must get ready to die immediately, spending their youth in “such Religious Exercises and Pleasures” whose value death cannot reduce. If they are reconciled to Christ, death cannot hurt them, no matter how suddenly it should come: “Tho your body shall fall & wither [l]ike the grass and flowers that are Cut … yet your soul will not wither but … flourish as the Palm tree & Grow as the Cedar in Lebanon.” These strong words took hold: from this point on, “religious concern” gripped the parish (A Faithful Narrative 148). Dramatic conversion experiences spread through the young people to their elders, from professed Christians to the previously faithless (150). In the early days of summer another untimely death took place: “a young married woman” (148) passed away. This, Edwards maintained, was a rather less sorrowful affair than April’s fatality. Although the woman “had been considerably exercised in mind about the salvation of her soul before she was ill, and was in great distress in the beginning of her illness … she seemed to have satisfying evidences of God’s saving mercy to her before her death.” The fact that “she died very
full of comfort” encouraged the parishioners in their spiritual endeavours. Religious awakening, it seemed, could salve death’s bitter sting.

By the spring of 1735, the revival had extended to the neighbouring towns in the Connecticut Valley, gaining in strength for a while as it proliferated: “as what other towns heard of [the awakening at Northampton] … was a great means of awakening them, so our hearing of such a swift and extraordinary propagation and extent of this work did doubtless for a time serve to uphold the work amongst us” (A Faithful Narrative 153). An inevitable period of religious torpor followed: by the time A Faithful Narrative, his account of the extraordinary events in Northampton, was published in London in 1737, Edwards was embarrassed by the discrepancy between the text’s dynamic representation of his church and the recent reality. This state of declension did not last for long, however. In October 1740 the charismatic Anglican George Whitefield roused the town from its slumber: even Edwards, well known for his reserve, wept throughout the preacher’s Sunday morning service (Bushman 32). Although he had invited Whitefield to Northampton in the first place, this new awakening was far beyond Edwards’ control. The first movement had not reached Boston: the second shook the colonial “cultural capital” and made waves across the Atlantic. Religion seemed now to be in the hands of itinerant preachers, Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, rather than the local pastors (Marsden, A Life 214-5). This revival was an altogether louder affair: “sermons were now typically punctuated by outcries of anguish or of joy … by convulsions, rages, seizures, and faintings. Sometimes preachers could

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31 A Faithful Narrative was based on a letter that Edwards sent to Benjamin Colman in May 1735, seeking to convince the influential Bostonian minister of the legitimacy of the Connecticut Valley revival. He succeeded quite handsomely: Colman was so impressed that he forwarded Edwards’ account to the Rev. Dr. John Guyse, a friend in London. Guyse asked if he might publish the text, and Colman, in turn, encouraged Edwards to expand the original text (Goen, “Introduction” 32-4).

Informed by Colman of the success of the book in England, Edwards replied: “it is a great damp to that joy to consider how we decline, and what decays that lively spirit in religion suffers amongst us, while others are rejoicing and praising God for us” (Letters 67; after Marsden, A Life 184).
not continue until the ecstatic were carried off” (218). While many ministers revelled in this amplified spiritual uproar, more conservative clergy became concerned at the increasing social disorder in the province—some spoke darkly of enthusiasm.

In Northampton, the awakening was marked, again, by death. In February 1741 a popular and religious young man, Billy Sheldon, was struck down. Soon afterwards, Edwards preached “Youth Is Like a Flower That Is Cut Down” (Job 14.2) to a private gathering of the town’s young people. This sermon refined the argument and rhetoric of “In The Morning,” with which it shared its governing horticultural metaphor. Here Edwards explicitly associates the recent revival with death: “‘Tis to be remarked in the death of this young person that he was taken away in the midst of a time of awakening amongst many young persons in the town, to show you what need you have to improve such times to your utmost” (327). While they are often described as a second birth, religious conversions are always ordered towards death. They must take place before death: prior to the time of one’s demise, and with death at the forefront of one’s thoughts. Young Billy Sheldon was lucky. Before there was any sign that his final moment was approaching, while his death was still a secret from him, he made a convincing confession of faith: “when he lately stood up to make open profession of the Christian religion … [w]hat appearance was there of his being so near to eternity? He knew not of it. None of his friends knew anything of it. None of you could see any more signs of approaching death in him than in you or in others” (326). An awakening, it appears, was a period when eternity was especially near, when God’s judgment threatened—Edwards warned his audience that it was “uncertain” that they should “live through this time of awakening” (327). It was also a respite from death: a pause, a rest, “a day of grace” (328) on which it was still possible to secure salvation. Sheldon

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32 In his preface to The Distinguishing Marks, William Cooper referred to conversion as “the new birth” (220).
had hurried to make the most of this “opportunity” while he still could: “[h]e was much concerned to get ready for death and eternity, and doubtless would have been much more distressed if he had known it had been so nigh at hand, if he had known that there was but a step between him and eternity” (327). How could his friends—whom Edwards addresses as “you that are yet alive”—fail to take advantage of their position? “What a pity it is,” their minister tells them, “that you have lost so much time as you have … therefore lose no more time,” hesitate no longer, “make haste and be violent for the kingdom of heaven” (328). Seven years later, in the same winter month, he would make the same plea to a new group of young people: those left bereft, with him, by the death of his daughter Jerusha. Edwards adapted the sermon, of course, to reflect both his personal grief and Jerusha’s feminine modesty. While these differences may be of keen interest to biographers and students of gender politics in eighteenth-century America, those aspects of the text that do not change are of more significance here. By 1748 the second revival had long passed, and Edwards was embroiled in a long-running feud with many of his parishioners (over both his salary and the slipping standards of sexual morality in the town). Northampton, moreover, was garrisoned against Indian attack. Despite the contrasting circumstances, the call to conversion remains the same—seize this opportunity in the face of death: “Many young people have died, but yet we have continued. O that this instance of death {of a young person} might be a means of awakening the young people {among us}!” (338). The time for awakening is always now.

The awakening sermon is the most obvious index of the eighteenth-century Calvinists’ development of the Puritan approach towards death. Despite its structural and theological

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33 George Marsden claims that Edwards “had already become disillusioned” with the spiritual comportment of “some of his people” as early as spring 1742 (“Biography” 30). Although the debate over the second wave of revivals would continue for many years, “[b]y 1743 the awakening itself was beginning to abate in New England.”
complexity, the preaching of the seventeenth-century Congregationalists had appealed to the affections of its auditors as well as their intellects. Once his audience had been convinced of the rational and logical truth of the doctrine in question, the homilist had a duty to imprint it on their hearts (Miller, *The Seventeenth Century* (289-99). In *The Way of Life* (1641) a collection of sermons on conversion that he delivered during his career in England, John Cotton spoke of the pastor’s obligation to “[drive] nayles [upto] the head … [in]to the hearts of sinners” (133-4). Here he demonstrated the influence of William Perkins, who, in *The Art of Prophecying* (1606), had written at length “on the need for threats and terror to bring a man to Christ” (Pettit 130).

Notwithstanding these precedents, texts such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” with their sustained focus on the awful imminence of death, represented a new form of affective preaching. Although this now infamous sermon—read for the first time to the people of Northampton in June 1741—is unrepresentative of Edwards’ preaching style, it does encapsulate many of the key elements of the New-England awakening. In an attempt to imitate the dramatic style of George Whitfield, Edwards filled “Sinners” with violent, arresting imagery. God’s judgment is an “arrow made ready on the string,” a “fiery flood” that threatens to break through its dam, a “black [cloud] … now hanging directly over [our] heads” (410-1). Although, unlike Whitfield, he preached in a measured monotone, this sermon so terrified the people of Enfield (where Edwards read it for the second time) that he was obliged to break off before he had finished. Why did the text have such an unsettling effect? “[O]ther sermons,” George Marsden

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34 We know this from the Reverend Stephen Williams’ account of the occasion in his diary: Went over to Enfield, where we met Dear Mr. Edwards of Northampton who preached a most awakening Sermon from those words Deut 32:35 – and before ye Sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying throughout ye whole House. What shall I do to be saved – oh I am going to Hell – oh what shall I do for a christ etc.etc. – so that ye minister was obliged to desist. [The] shrieks and crys were piercing and Amazing. After some time of waiting the congregation were still so that a prayer wa made by Mr. W – and after that we descended from the pulpit and
observes, “were more lurid in [their depiction] of hell’s agonies” (*A Life* 221). “Sinners” was shocking because it spoke of damnation as a present possibility, of hell as no more than a heartbeat away. Edwards insists throughout that God has to restrain himself *actively* and *continuously* from sending every living sinner into eternal torment:

‘tis to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep: and there is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God’s hand has held you up; there is no other reason to be given why you han’t gone to hell since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship; yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you don’t *this very moment drop down into hell* (412, my emphasis)

Only conversion can save us from this ever-present peril. “[E]very soul in this congregation,” Edwards explains, “that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious they may otherwise be,” is “daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath, and infinite misery!” (416). Here we arrive at the sermon’s turning point (one wonders whether Edwards got this far on that summer’s day in Enfield). Here he releases the pressure, the terrible sense of inevitability that has been building up:

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are in now an happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! (416-7)

discoursed with the people – some in one place and some in another. And Amazing and Astonishing [was] ye power. God was seen and several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night and oh ye cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances – that received comfort. Oh that God would strengthen and confirm etc. We sung an hymn and prayed and dispersed ye Assembly. (qtd. in Stout, “Edwards as Revivalist” 140)
This is the same rhetoric that we saw in “Youth is Like a Flower That is Cut Down”—a declaration that there is almost no time left to repent, an insistence that now, at this very moment, here, in this very place, is the best hope of salvation. A little later, Edwards goes on to underline this exciting, yet frightening idea. “God now seems to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land,” he observes, adding that “probably the bigger part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time … it will be as it was on that great outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles’ days” (417-8). Those not amongst this happy number, he warns “will wish that [they] had died and gone to hell” before they had lived “to see such a season of the pouring out of God’s Spirit” and failed to participate in it (418).

As I demonstrated in the last chapter, seventeenth-century New-England Puritanism expected its adherents to prepare to die throughout their lives. It never expressed the urgency of this task, however, in quite the same degree as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Here, Edwards appears to shorten the length of the season of opportunity, during which sinners might be spared, from a few months to a few hours: “it would be a wonder if some that are now present, should not be in hell in a very short time, before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some person that now sits here in some seat of this meeting house in health, … should be there before tomorrow morning” (418). In terms of doctrine, and even style, the differences between this kind of preaching and that of his Puritan forebears were slight. Yet the reaction that the sermon earned in Enfield—the “great moaning and crying” of the congregation (see note 49, above)—could never have happened a hundred years previously. The panic that Edwards stirred up that day may have been due to the immediate context around his preaching: Enfield had thitherto proven resistant to revival, and he had been invited to visit in order to rouse the town from its spiritual slumber. He revised the sermon before its second reading. Its first incarnation “was quite different[:] milder, and more pastoral” (400). It’s quite possible, then, that he chose to
increase its intensity in order to remind the people of Enfield that they had stumbled where their neighbours had recently succeeded. Furthermore, when he addressed those “that are here present, that yet remain in an unregenerate state” (413, my emphasis), he reminded the congregation that they had already spurned the revival of 1734-5. A key part of any religious awakening is the sense that one is missing out on an opening of which others have already taken advantage.

The theological and rhetoric constituents of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” had been present in Puritan culture for years, but they had not been combined in quite the same way before. One could say the same thing of the New-England awakenings in general. The Puritans were accustomed to the idea of public testimony: the Congregational Church, after all, had required new members to provide an account of their conversion before the assembled saints of the parish. Yet they had not seen so many believers bearing witness to the power of the Spirit, or rendering the hidden workings of grace visible and audible in such impressive fashion. Cotton Mather spoke of special providences and particular days, months and years that would prove crucial to the success of reformed religion in the New World. He had predicted, too, that if the colony remained faithful to God’s purpose, the millennium could arrive in New England “before all our First Planters are fallen asleep” (The Present State of New England, qtd. in Levin 174). But he had not lived to see his chiliastic vision adopted by thousands of people, from New England to the Old, or to share Edwards’ sense that “the bigger part of adult[s]” to be saved in the history of the world, would reach salvation now or “in a little time.” The Puritans often wrote for an audience of young people. Three of the biographical texts that I discussed in the previous chapter, Magnalia Christi Americana, Thomas Shepherd’s Autobiography and Mather’s Paterna, are explicitly addressed to the next generation, in the hope that they may emulate their fathers and the fear that they may not. As soon as children could reason they were ripe for conversion, as soon as they could read they were reminded of their mortality. But programmes of preaching like
the one that Edwards instituted in Northampton were unprecedented. During the second awakening in the town he held a series of private meetings for young people, working them over with “warnings and counsels” that were “proper for their age,” until the spirit took hold of them (Letters 117). The affections raised up in these meetings were so powerful, he told his correspondent Thomas Prince (in a letter that I will return to below), that it was common for some adolescents “to stay all night at the house where they were” because their “bodies [had been] so overcome” (118).

Edwards hoped and expected that the awakenings would “revive” Puritan religion in Northampton and New England. During the revivals, as I have noted, he strove to instil a greater sense of personal morality in his young parishioners. In the following years, he would seek to initiate a “conservative revolution” in the rules of church membership (Marsden, A Life 345). Since the awakenings had theoretically led to an increase in the number of genuine converts in the parish, Edwards proposed that his church should implement the original American Puritan stricture that only “visible and professing saints” be allowed to join the congregation (An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God 182; qtd. in Noll, America’s God 45). This chapter contends that his brand of revivalism was also rooted in the Puritan belief that religious life was an (impossible) attempt to come to terms with one’s mortality. As I have already suggested, Edwards did not simply re-use Norton, Mather and Perkins’ textual strategies for dealing with death. Instead, he both compressed and expanded the scope of their ideas. The individual would now have even less time in which to receive conversion: the rhetoric of revivalism implies that the opportunity will be limited to the current period of religious concern, or even to the duration of the present meeting. Yet their awakening would be part of a larger narrative, a worldwide movement that would presage the arrival of the millennium. My argument, therefore, must engage with a longstanding academic controversy: does the New-England revivalism represent
the final flowering of Puritanism or the first shoots of a new American religion? For Perry Miller and Alan Heimert, the “Great Awakening” marked both “the dying shudder of a Puritanism that refused to see itself as an anachronism” (The Great Awakening xiv) and the birth of American democracy (lx-lxi). More recently, Jon Butler has not only poured scorn on the putative relationship between the awakenings and the revolution (“The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction” 324), but asserted that “the revivals had [only] modest effects on colonial religion” (323). Although I have followed Butler’s suggestion that the term “Great Awakening” should be discarded,35 I do not hold with his dismissal of the lasting religious significance of the New England revivals. Instead, I agree with Mark Noll (America’s God 42-4) and Allen C. Guelzo (“God’s Designs” 159-64) that the awakenings effected a considerable change in American religion and society. Noll casts Edwards as both conserver and innovator, claiming that his return to stricter standards for church membership and “great stress on conversion” (America’s God 45) led, ultimately, to the loosening of the Congregationalist Church’s grip on New-England society (44-50). In this sense, he was more puritanical than his Puritan forebears. Abolishing the half-way membership that his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had pioneered, he left the individual with no place to hide: one was either within the church or without it. Noll claims that this hard-line approach severed the close symbolic connection in New England between the church of the saints and a generally “virtuous society” (47). After Edwards and the eighteenth-century revivals, American Protestantism would undergo a series of significant changes. It would become an essentially “lay[.]” rather than “clerical” religion, its ministers would be seen as “self-

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35 Butler argues that “[h]istorians should abandon the term ‘the Great Awakening’ because it distorts the character of eighteenth-century American religious life … it is a deus ex machina that falsely homogenizes the heterogeneous” (“The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction” 322). For simplicity’s sake, I have chosen to refer to the events of 1734-5 and 1740-2 as the New-England awakenings, while remaining mindful of the fact that the first revival was primarily a regional affair and the second a transatlantic and international phenomenon.
empowered mobilizer[s]” instead of “inherited authority figure[s]” and it would abandon the ideal of maintaining “a state church encompassing all of society” in favour of “a gathered church made up only of the converted” (44). In ecclesiological terms, then, his thought represents a line of continuity from Puritanism to evangelism and a point of rupture between them. I will argue that one can say the same thing about Edwards’ approach to death. Even as he attempted to re-inscribe the Puritan thanatology onto New-England culture, he helped to ensure that a very different approach to death would come to prominence in America.

The next two parts of the chapter investigate the issues that confronted Edwards as he attempted to imbue the revivals with conceptual and organizational shape. I demonstrate how the old aporias of singularity, indeterminacy and finality created a new set of theoretical issues for him. The first section examines his treatment of the instant of awakening and the second his conception of life after conversion. In the former, I consider Edwards’ response to James Davenport, a rogue preacher who assumed that his rebirth meant that he was certain to be saved. As he travelled around the colonies between 1740 and 1743, his claim that he could distinguish the elect from the reprobate caused a great deal of controversy. The key figure in the latter is David Brainerd, the missionary who came to embody Edwards’ notion of the ideal Christian life. Unlike Davenport, he displayed the deep humility that was an important sign of the authenticity of the individual’s faith. Though Brainerd was a paragon and Davenport, before his recovery, a pariah, each man represented one of the two complications that threatened to compromise Edwards’ theory of revivalism. Edwards always insisted that conversion effected a dramatic change within the person in question, “changing [their] heart and infusing life into [their hitherto] dead soul” (A Faithful Narrative 177). At the same time, he warned that the graciousness of an individual’s rebirth must remain uncertain until their death (underlining, in this way, the aporias of indeterminacy and finality). Davenport’s insistence that every awakening
must be accompanied by dramatic external affections gave a misleading impression about the
nature of conversion. It suggested that revival caused too great a transformation, or rather, a
transformation of the wrong kind. He mistook his strong impression that the Holy Spirit was
working within him for absolute proof of divine favour. As a result, he assumed that he might
anticipate the destination of his soul after death, a privilege that the Puritans reserved for God
alone. Edwards played a significant part in Davenport’s reformation. He could not convince
every New Light radical, however, that their conversions were no more than provisional
indications that they were saved. Brainerd presented Edwards with a contrasting problem. Before
his regeneration at the age of twenty-one, he had suffered from depression and was horrified by
the prospect of death. Afterwards, he discovered that these unproductive and solipsistic emotions
had their spiritual counterparts: “godly sorrow” at one’s sinfulness and Christian reconciliation
with one’s mortality. In his edition of Brainerd’s journals, Edwards admitted that the missionary
was still prone to despairing moods after his revival, but claimed that he learned to distinguish
between them and real religious affections. The difference, of course, was the presence of grace.
Yet grace was evanescent and impossible for men to identify with any certainty. Implicitly,
Edwards was forced to concede that the demeanour of the converted saint was virtually
indistinguishable from that of the hopeless melancholic.

During the awakenings and in the years of controversy that came after, Edwards fought
against the conservative critics of revivalism and those radical itinerants who supported it too
incautiously and indiscriminately. The former group, from his perspective, tended towards
Arminianism, the latter were in danger of endorsing or propagating enthusiasm. Against the
conservatives, he argued that religious affections were essential to salvation, since without them
the Christian could only “understand” the truths of the scriptures in a “notional” sense, rather
than comprehending them sensibly, emotionally and rationally (Religious Affections 272).
Against the radicals, he insisted that the fact that an apparent awakening was accompanied by “very high” affections or “great effects on the [individual’s] body” was no sure sign that it was genuine (127, 131). This meant that he had to guard against the two extremes figured by Davenport and Brainerd: the belief that conversion raised the believer too high, to the extent that he was no longer merely a man or a mortal, and the possibility that it did not really change him at all. Consequently, his theory and practice of revivalism depended on a series of delicate distinctions. He asserted that awakening altered the quality of the convert’s religious affections, rather than the quantity, that although conversions took place in secret, their effects were public and visible, and that while the authenticity of a particular regeneration must remain indeterminate until the individual’s death, ordained ministers had the authority to declare whether it was likely to be real or not. The immense amount of scholarly writing that Edwards produced granted the revivals intellectual credibility. The complexity of his ideas, however, ensured that the future of popular evangelical Protestantism lay outside his Calvinistic conception of religion.

The fourth section of this chapter, therefore, examines what I have called the “afterlife” of Edwards’ thinking about the awakenings and death. In the first place, I analyze the “new measures” evangelism of Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) through a close reading of his account of his own conversion in his *Memoirs* (1876). I then turn my attention to three of the post-Christian religions that grew out of evangelical Protestantism during the nineteenth century: Mormonism, Oneida Perfectionism and Christian Science. Finney, I argue, challenged the central position of mortality in Edwardsean revivalism. His system suggested that it was possible for the reborn Christian to enter into a sinless state. Since the convert could confidently assert that he was on his way to heaven, his rebirth in the revival tent effectively usurped death as the instant in which his fate was fixed. Joseph Smith, John Noyes and Mary Baker Eddy carried this line of
thinking to its logical conclusion. Mormonism, Oneida Perfectionism and Christian Science all proposed that it was possible for man to transcend his mortality altogether. Through manipulation of the awakenings, Edwards had intended to reawaken the Puritan approach to (and respect for) death in New England. However, his intellectual defence of revivalism would help to create an evangelical attitude towards religion that, in some of its incarnations, would suggest that true believers never really had to die.

James Davenport

In December 1743, Edwards wrote to Thomas Prince, minister of the Old South church in Boston. Earlier that year, Prince had founded *Christian History*, a weekly journal dedicated to the international progress of revivalism. In his letter, which Prince published, Edwards provided an account of the early days of the most recent awakening in Northampton. While he acknowledged the importance of Whitefield’s visit to the town, he placed greater emphasis on a number of private meetings that he himself had organised amongst the children and young people. After Edwards had preached to one of these groups “one or two persons [present] … were so greatly affected with a sense of the greatness and glory of divine things, and the infinite importance of the things of eternity, that they were not able to conceal it; the affection of their minds overcoming their strength, and having a very visible effect on their bodies” (*Letters* 117). This remarkable “affection” passed swiftly through the assembled company: “many of the young people and children that were professors appeared to be overcome with a sense of the greatness and glory of divine things … and many others at the same time were overcome with distress about their sinful and miserable state and condition; so that the whole room was full of nothing but outcries, faintings and such like.” Soon afterwards, this surge of spirituality had “overpowered” most of the town. With this anecdote, Edwards reminded Prince that the international movement that he sought to celebrate had sprung from events such as this. The
awakening might produce astonishing public events, mass conversions, but it irradiated outwards from privacy, an individual’s encounter with his or her mortality, with “the infinite importance of the things of eternity.” Turning back to Edwards’ stories of the first revival in Northampton, we find the same dynamic at work. In *A Faithful Narrative*, Edwards discusses a conversation that he had with a young woman, “who had been one of the greatest company-keepers in the whole town” but now claimed to be converted (149). Convinced by her relation that “God’s infinite power and sovereign grace” were at work within her, Edwards allowed news of her rebirth to filter out. The result was extraordinary: “a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and all ages; the noise amongst the dry bones waxed louder and louder.” The entire mood of Northampton was changed:

The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world; it was treated amongst us as a thing of very little consequence ... The only thing in their view was to get kingdom of heaven, and everyone appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid; it appeared in their very countenances. It was then a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons’ minds were intent upon was to escape for their lives, and to fly from the wrath to come. All would eagerly lay hold of opportunities for their souls; and were wont very often to meet together in private houses for religious purposes: and such meetings when appointed were wont greatly to be thronged. (150)

This great public work of religion is underwritten by private affection—its witness being the devotion that rises from the heart to shine out from the face. Without this personal commitment to learn how to die for the sake of one’s life (“to escape”), the awakening would be worthless.

The analytical approach that Edwards uses here is essentially the same as that which he employed in his five major works on revivalism: *A Faithful Narrative* (1737), *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival* (1743), *Religious Affections* (1746) and *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749). In each of these texts, he
argued that the external signs of religious conversion must be underwritten by internal, private affections. The letter to Prince exhibits Edwards’ excitement at pride at the organic means by which the awakenings proliferated in Northampton. Here, he was at pains to demonstrate that this was truly a popular movement, with conversion moving from person to person like a virus. On the other hand, Edwards also reveals the extent to which he and other ministers stimulated and guided the revival in the town. He discusses Whitefield’s role at some length, as I have just noted, and outlines the “very extraordinary effects” of the “labors” of the Reverend Samuel Buell, who had visited Northampton in the February of 1742, while he was away for a fortnight (120). When Edwards returned, he writes, he “found the town in very extraordinary circumstances, such in some respects as [he had] never [seen] it in before.” He goes on to report that “there were some instances of persons lying in a sort of trance, remaining for perhaps a whole twenty-four hours motionless, and with their senses locked up; but in the meantime under strong imaginations, as though they went to heaven, and had there a vision of glorious and delightful objects” (120-1). Only the intervention of an experienced clergyman had been able to raise the religious affections of the people to these heights. Even more importantly, Buell and Edwards’ judgment and discretion were needed to manage the inflated expectations that this episode created, and to combat the intervention of Satan, who was always liable to interfere when revivals reached their peak: the letter notes that “a great deal of caution and pains were found necessary to keep the people, many of them, from running wild” (121). The five longer works all treat this second theme: the minister’s obligation to imbue popular awakenings with organizational and symbolic order. The sheer length of Religious Affections, in particular, is testament to Edwards’ sense of the seriousness and difficulty of this task. In that book, his definitive statement on the nature of revival, he argued that although the final truth about the individual’s conversion was hidden within them, there were twelve visible signs that might be
used as a guide to determine whether it was likely to be genuine (Religious Affections 193-7).

Turning back to the 1843 correspondence with Prince, one observes this difficult distinction in operation. At times, indeed, it threatens to become a paradox. Each awakening is internal and personal, yet it may be clearly discerned: the second outpouring of the Spirit amongst Edwards’ parishioners has had a more perceptible effect on their souls than the first:

One circumstance wherein this work differed from that which had been in the town five or six years before, was that conversions were frequently wrought more sensibly and visibly; the impressions stronger, and more manifest by external effects of them; and the progress of the Spirit of God in conviction, from step to step, more apparent; and the transition from one state to another more sensible and plain; so that it might, in many instances, be as it were seen by bystanders. (Letters 119-20)

What’s more, the revival was notable for the number of private meetings that took place in the town, but it was also marked by the fact that “visible conversions” occurred “more frequently in the presence of others, … where the appearances of what was wrought on the heart fell under public observation” (120). The letter’s sense of what constitutes a “private” gathering is somewhat elastic. It suits Edwards for the meetings that he describes to have been both private and public, spontaneous and supervised, just as the rebirths that happened during them were visible and invisible, utterly singular and yet subject to analysis and interpretation.

When he wrote about the awakenings, Edwards had to hold the middle ground between Old-Light conservatives and separatist New Lights. The former group, led by Charles Chauncy, minister of the First Church, Boston, were concerned about the latter’s attacks on conservative clergy. The chief offender in this regard was James Davenport, the volatile young pastor of Southold, Long Island, who worked his way across New England as an itinerant preacher

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36 Twice in the letter, Edwards refers to particular meetings that he convened himself (117, 118). However, in his description of the gathering that produced the most violent affections in its attendees he uses the passive voice in order to deemphasize his own role in the proceedings (his account of that occasion begins as follows: “In the month of May 1741, a sermon was preached to a company at a private house” [117]).
between 1741 and 1743. Speaking in New Haven in the autumn of that first year, Davenport had described Joseph Noyes, the pastor of the church where Yale students were obliged to worship, as “an unconverted hypocrite and the devil incarnate” (The Great Awakening 52). He was convinced that the genuine convert’s connection to the Holy Spirit was so strong that it must be evident in his bearing and conduct. In the spring of 1742 he was arrested in Connecticut and charged with preaching without a license. Found guilty, he was deported from the colony and returned to Southold (the Assembly had decided to take a forgiving view of his transgression, since it thought him to be “under the influence of enthusiastic impressions and impulses, and thereby disturbed in the rational faculties of his mind” (Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut. Ed. Charles J. Hoadly. Hartford, 1874. 8 [1735-43]: 483; qtd. In Goen, Revivalism and Separatism 23). Undeterred, he turned up in Boston soon afterwards, “freely announcing that Chauncy and other leading clergy were unregenerate” (Marsden, “Biography” 29). In an open letter to Davenport (published in the same volume as the sermon Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against), Chauncy upbraided him for the public disorder that he had caused. As regards Davenport’s claims about the spiritual state of Boston’s ministers, he offered him this warning: “we have no way of judging [others] but by what is outward and visible: Nor are we capable of judging any other way. And to leave this way, and to go into that judging from men’s hearts; it tends to nothing, in the nature of things, but to destroy the peace of churches, and fill the world with contention and confusion” (“Letter to Davenport” v). Chauncy conceived of religion as an essentially public affair. He contrasted the “public standing” of the Holy Spirit’s revelations, as recorded in scripture, with the “private” and likely delusional impressions to which enthusiasts were subject (Enthusiasm Described 7). The outward deportment of the individual, as he told Davenport, was the means by which one might ascertain whether they were likely to be a true Christian. This meant that he stressed the internal and private nature of faith
and salvation. For the sake of order, decorum and charity, men must be satisfied that their neighbour’s inner lives must retain a degree of mystery. Davenport, conversely, believed that the vital part of Christianity was in the individual’s personal relationship with God (in a poem, published in Boston in 1742, he boasted that God “hast to me reveal’d … Such hidden Manna, hidden Pearls, / As Worldlings do not know” [A Song of Praise 2]). As a result, he claimed that the elect had a duty to disseminate their faith as loudly as possible. Believers, furthermore, had the right to inquire how their minister knew that he was saved, as Davenport had, impertinently, of Chauncy in his own house.\(^{37}\) Salvation, after all, should be a matter of public record.

Edwards rejected both of these positions. As a defender of the awakenings he had to give some credence to external evidence for the individual’s salvation. Otherwise he would be vulnerable to Chauncy’s claim that the great majority of the recent conversions were expressions of deluded enthusiasm. As a moderate and socially conservative man, however, he was loath to accept the belief that extraordinary, perceptible signs must accompany a true rebirth. If this premise were accepted, those individuals who had exhibited all the appearances of possessing powerful religious affection would be able to exercise an undue influence over their fellow men. The authority of New England’s ministers, and the social stability of the colony, would be under considerable threat. His compromise rests on two delicate distinctions. In the first place, he argued that there were certain aspects of an awakening experience that were “no sign, one way or the other,” that an individual’s “affections [were] gracious, or that they [were] not” (Religious Affections 127). The Distinguishing Marks enumerates five such inconclusive symptoms (including the fact that the phenomena in question are “very unusual and extraordinary” (228) or

\(^{37}\) In Chauncy’s words, Davenport had visited, “to inquire into the reason of the hope that was in me” (“Letter to Davenport” i).
that the conversion produces physical effects, “such as tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of the body, or the failing of bodily strength” [230]), Religious Affections, at somewhat greater length, discusses twelve. Each text then goes on to outline those things that “are the, distinguishing … marks of the work of the Spirit of God” (Distinguishing Marks 248). Here we come to the second distinction, which Edwards makes in Religious Affections, the later work. Before articulating the twelve positive signs of the presence of God’s grace, he warns that he was “far from undertaking to give such signs of gracious affections, as shall be sufficient to enable any[one] certainly to distinguish true affection from false in others; or to determine positively which of [one’s] neighbors are true professors, and which hypocrites” (193, my emphasis). The worst of Davenport’s excesses, which had occurred after he had published The Distinguishing Marks, doubtlessly contributed to Edwards’ decision to insert this caveat. The imperfection, he continued, was not in the signs themselves, which were “certain and infallible” (194), but in the sight of those perceiving them. In this way, he sought to quell the disagreement between the radical New Lights and the conservative sceptics: the internal marks of grace were externally visible, he argued, but because their eyes were clouded with sin mankind were unable to make them out (Edwards compared the task that faced him with an attempt to instruct a man “how to distinguish [between] visible objects in the dark: the things themselves may be very different, and their difference may be very well and distinctly described to him; yet all is insufficient to enable him to distinguish them, because he is in the dark” [195]).

The last part of this argument has much in common with Puritan thinking about death. The question of the authenticity of an individual’s conversion was essentially the same as that of the nature of his death—no one could hope to die in a gracious state without having experienced a genuine conversion. Just as the inner affections of the saint seemed to flicker in and out of visibility, so the truth about his death was both imperceptible and all too apparent. The two
strategies for coping with mortality that I examined in the previous chapter sought to pass beyond the aporias that impede our approach to death. Despite this, I suggested, they tended to reassert the opacity and impenetrability of mortality. Edwards’ thinking about revivalism follows this same pattern. The lengthy third section of *Religious Affections* consists of an exhaustive and apparently definitive discussion of those qualities that a truly reborn Christian should possess. This section is preceded, as I have shown, by an introduction that stresses the indeterminacy and singularity of individual salvation and insists on the finality of God’s judgment on the matter. There Edwards notes that the Bible “abound[s] with rules … [that] may be very serviceable” to those people who wish to examine “their spiritual and eternal state[,]” but concedes that [it is] also evident … that it was never God’s design to give us any rules, by which we may certainly know, who of our fellow professors are his, and to make a full and clear separation between sheep and goats” (193). Since God intended to “reserve this [discernment] to himself, as his prerogative, “no such distinguishing signs as shall enable Christians or ministers to do this, are ever to be expected to the world’s end.” Such is his caution in this regard, that Edwards articulates that which was only implicit in the Puritan thanatology: the state of the individual’s soul is a mystery for him as well as for others, a secret that he keeps within him, without possession. While he expected that his readers should test themselves against the twelve signs that he had identified, he observed that no “living” saint could hope to discover that they were in a “good estate by them” (194). \(^{38}\) That first adjective is the operative word here: in death, of course, all would be revealed.

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\(^{38}\) Edwards added that his rules would be of no help to the great majority of enthusiastic hypocrites, who had misguided claim to genuine affections. These men and women “[were] so conceited of their own wisdom, and so blinded and hardened with a very great selfrighteousness … and … invincible … fondness … of their great exaltation” that it was hopeless “to lay before them the most convincing evidences of their hypocrisy” (196). This claim opened up an irresolvable difficulty with his argument—if these hypocrites were utterly oblivious to their hypocrisy, then how could his readers be certain that they were not among this number?
Edwards’ brand of revivalism embraced two contrasting attitudes towards mortality. In sermons such as “Youth is Like a Flower that is Cut Down,” “In The Morning They Are Like Grass Which Groweth Up” and “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” he spoke of death as an utterly unpredictable intervening force, stressing mankind’s vulnerability to its depredations. During the private meetings that he mentions in *A Faithful Narrative* and the 1743 letter to Prince, he encouraged his parishioners to prepare for life, and judgment, after death—to fix their attention on “the great things of the eternal world” (*A Faithful Narrative* 150). While this rhetoric emphasised that death was to be feared and respected, it also offered the believer an outlet for his anxiety: through repentance and authentic conversion, he could make certain that he would be ready for the awful moment when it came. Technically speaking, of course, all conversions originated with God. The Christian, nevertheless, had to be open to the suggestion of the Spirit. Although Edwards would not have countenanced the thought, his writing implies that the revivals might grant humanity some influence over their mortality. Speaking of the first awakening in Northampton, for example, he noted: “it was the most remarkable time of health, that ever I knew since I have been in the town. We ordinarily have several bills put up every Sabbath, for persons that are sick; but now we had not so much as one for many Sabbaths together” (*A Faithful Narrative* 205). The suggestion was that for as long as the parish maintained its heightened interest in the search for salvation death and the devil were “restrained.”

What’s more, the affections that accompanied revival appeared to offer some

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39 Even in the years of declension that followed, it seemed that the population was still protected—when, in March 1737, the balcony of the decrepit meeting house collapsed in the course of a Sunday service, there was not so much as “one bone broken” amongst the congregation (*Letters* 66). A few months later, Edwards informed Benjamin Colman that despite the increasing absence of “the lively spirit in religion” (67), Northampton had been “remarkably preserved from the throat distemper, which has been so terrible in multitudes of towns in the land” (*Letters* 68). “Many in the town,” he added, “seemed to be greatly affected with the late marvellous preservation of so many of us, when so exceedingly exposed to immediate death [during the accident at the meeting house].” Although some
individuals a foretaste of eternal life with God. In *Some Thoughts*, Edwards described the most impressive instance of religious awakening that he had encountered. While he was careful to protect her identity in the text, the person in question was his wife, Sarah. On a number of occasions, for several hours at a time, she had felt that she was living “in a kind of heavenly Elysium” (332). Whilst she retained all her mental faculties—Edwards notes that she was not “in any trance” and was not “at all deprived of the exercise of [her] bodily senses”—she appeared to take on some of the physical properties the dead. We read that “the strength of [her] body [was] taken away, so as to deprive of all ability to stand or speak … sometimes [her] hands clinched, and [her] flesh [turned] cold.” Internally, moreover, it was as if her “soul dwelt on high, and was lost in God, [having] seemed almost to [have left] the body.” Edwards goes on to stress that his wife did not rest complacent in this special privilege, confident that she was certain to be saved: instead, he informs us, she “[took] pleasure in the thoughts of watching and striving against sin, and fighting through the way to heaven, …filling up this life with hard labor … [and] desiring to rest [from this work] till arrived in heaven (338).” The fact that he felt obliged to make this additional point, however, demonstrates that Edwards recognised that unusually high-pitched affections such as these threatened to work against his attempt to use the revivals to reinforce the place of Puritan thanatology in New England’s culture. The danger was that misguided individuals could come to take their awakening, rather than death, as the instant in which their election was confirmed. Stripped of the doubt that was essential to life as a Reformed Christian, they would cease to be Puritans.

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individuals recognised the hand of God in this deliverance, Edwards feared that the people were not set to seize this chance and live out the rest of their lives in a godly manner.
James Davenport, from Edwards’ perspective, seemed to have fallen into precisely this trap. The origin of the controversy that he caused was his assurance that he was on his way to heaven. He behaved, indeed, as if he was certain as to who would be accompanying him thither and who would be going to the other place (on one occasion in Southold, he “gathered his parishioners together and addressed them feverishly for almost twenty-four hours straight” (Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism* 20) before collapsing. Upon regaining consciousness, he confidently divided his congregation into the saved and the unconverted). His radical career culminated on Sunday, the 6th of March 1743, when he led a book burning by the dockside in New London, Connecticut. After the flames had consumed works by both Charles Chauncy and Benjamin Coleman (Edwards’ correspondent and an outspoken apologist for the awakening), the frenzied preacher instructed his followers to burn those items of clothing to which they were most attached. With this the ceremony seemed to descend into farce: the *Boston Weekly Post-Boy* gleefully pictured the self-appointed prophet presiding over a pile of “Cloaks, Petty Coats and Breeches” (Bushman 52). Following this unhappy incident, Edwards seems to have resolved to rehabilitate Davenport. In July 1744, he informed the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock of his charge’s progress:

> Mr. Davenport is truly very much altered; I am affected to see the happy alteration and change in him; he is quite another man. It has been moving to me to see the grace of God in so subduing, humbling, and enlightening him. He really shows an excellent spirit much, to the honor and glory of God; and I believe he is now much fuller of the Spirit of God than he was in years past, when he seemed to have such a constant series of high elevations and raptures. (Letters 145)

Shortly afterwards, Thomas Prince published Davenport’s *Confession and Retractions*, a text prepared under Edwards’ guidance (Marsden, *A Life* 276). There, the chastened young clergyman apologised for “making [his] private Judgement, the ground of public Actions [and] Conduct” (Davenport, *Confession* 4-5). The problem was not that he had sought to broadcast the workings of his conscience—the Edwardsean model of revivalism required that the individual’s
internal affections should be expressed through their external demeanour and conduct. Davenport, however, had merely made his opinions about others public, rather than demonstrating a genuine concern for the care of his soul. In this regard, he admitted, he had “[laid] the greatest Stress on Externals, [and] neglect[ed] the Heart” (7), despite his great confidence in his own inner sanctification.

This last line Davenport quoted from another expression of contrition that he had recently published: his letter to Jonathan Barber, minister of Bethesada, Georgia. It is in this text, I believe, that the repentant radical demonstrates the corrective influence of Edwards’ thought most powerfully. Here Davenport focuses on the period after “the Awful Affair of Books and Cloaths at New-London” (which still “Afford[ed] [him] … deep and lasting Humiliation”) (Letter to Barber 3). Having made a “free and full Confession” of his sins to God, his “poor ill Deserving Soul” was “refresh’d” by the exercise of “Free Grace” within him (4,6). This spiritual recovery was followed by a period of debilitating physical illness: his fever and the distemper in his leg grew steadily more serious, until, one Friday night “near the Middle of March,” he lay in bed “[expecting] nothing but to die, and that soon” (7). This “Foretaste of Death” (8) would prove to be sweet, rather than bitter. It showed Davenport what had been missing from his devotions: the understanding that genuine conversion is intimately bound up with mortality. He came to see that preparation for death was the basis of all religious affection. It didn’t matter if “the World,” or “even … Most Christians[,]” should look upon his demise “an Immediate Judgement of Heaven” or that he might “die in their Eyes as a Hypocrite and Malefactor” (7). The truth about his passing, his “secret inexpressible” desire for it, would rest secure with God. Most importantly of all, Davenport learned to accept the fact of his survival. He tells Barber that he cannot express the bliss that he enjoyed “when [he] thought thus: Oh! I am indeed within a few Days, or a few Hours of Eternity, blessed Eternity! … so near the End of all sin, that which
my Soul could not bear, and longed to be freed from above any Thing else!” (7-8). Although he admits that “it was truly hard” to leave this state of near-death, he consented to God’s decision “to order [him] to return” to life (8). In doing so, he implicitly acknowledged that the greater part of Christian life was that which came after conversion, the struggle to live in the spirit of revival until the end. What’s more, he made it clear that awakening was no substitute for a gracious death. His closing caution to Barber—“Oh be humble through Grace, and be not Proud of the Gifts and Graces, the Lord has given or may give you” (11)—can be read also as warning to himself: It was always possible, as “vile mortal[s]” (10), that men might stray too far on either side of the “Path of Duty” (11), into false assurance or despair. With Edwards, Davenport accepted the finality, singularity and indeterminacy of death. Although confident in his justification, he realised that the truth of his election would not be revealed until the end of his life. Embracing his own weakness and accepting the persistence of doubt had turned him from an enthusiast back into a Puritan again.

**David Brainerd**

Eight years before his rehabilitation of Davenport, Edwards had been faced with the opposite predicament: an individual who was too preoccupied with his sinfulness and mortality. In the spring of 1735, the first Northampton revival was at its height. While those around him took solace in their newfound faith, one man felt only despair. “[E]xceedingly concerned about the state of his soul” since the beginning of the awakening, “he grew much discouraged” as this “extraordinary time” wore on (*A Faithful Narrative* 206). On Sunday June 1st, delirious from lack of sleep, he cut his throat and bled to death. The man was Joseph Hawley, a merchant by trade, prominent and prosperous citizen of the town. He was Edwards’ uncle by marriage. As he looked back on this tragic event two years later, in the process of compiling *A Faithful Narrative*, Edwards saw it as the beginning of the revival’s decline. After Hawley’s death, “instances of
conversion were rare” and the “engaged, lively spirit in religion” gradually left the people (207). While “the Spirit of God was … withdrawing” from Northampton, “Satan seemed to be … let loose, and raged in a dreadful manner” (206)—the devil, unquestionably, had encouraged his Uncle’s disturbed thoughts.

With a little more hindsight, it seems that the danger of suicide was (and is) integral to revivalism. In Some Thoughts, Edwards was forced to admit that not only “awakening preaching” but “the Bible itself” had been responsible for “hundreds, and probably thousands of instances … of persons that have murdered themselves under religious melancholy” (393). He vigorously denied, on the other hand, that preachers were morally culpable for the unhappy consequences of their sermons:

‘Tis as unjust to lay the blame of these self-murders to those ministers who have declared the awful truths of God’s Word, in the most lively and affecting manner they were capable of, as it would be to lay the blame of hardening men’s hearts, and blinding their eyes, and their more dreadful eternal damnation, to the prophet Isaiah, or Jesus Christ, because this was the consequence of their preaching with respect to many of their hearers. (393)

Yet the fact remains that Hawley, and others who took the same path, were following the logic of the awakening to its natural conclusion. Edwards, as we have seen, urged his congregation to treat the present moment as if it were their last, to grasp this potentially final chance to save themselves. The two exemplary converts whom he described in A Faithful Narrative—a sickly young woman and a four-year-old girl—both expressed their spiritual rebirth through their willingness to die immediately. 40 Was Hawley’s case so different? He may have lacked a saving

40 Of the young woman Edwards recounts that “[s]he had great longings to die, that she might be with Christ; which increased till she thought she did not know how to be patient to wait till God’s time should come” (A Faithful Narrative 196). Concerning the little girl he notes:

She sometimes appears to be in doubt about the condition of her soul, and when asked whether she thinks that she is prepared for death, speaks something doubtfully about it. At other times [she] seems to have no doubt, but when asked replies ‘Yes’ without hesitation. (205)
conviction, but he showed that he was prepared to die for the sake of his soul. Indeed, one could argue that he showed greater courage, greater faith, than Edwards’ two notable converts. They were prepared to face death only because they felt sure that they were saved; he ended his own life even though he doubted he would ever reach heaven. Edwards was sure that his Uncle’s death was related to an inherited disposition towards melancholy. He was less certain about the subsequent surge of suicidal feeling in the area:

The news of this extraordinarily affected the minds of people here, and struck them as it were with astonishment. After this, multitudes in this and other towns seemed to have it strongly suggested to ‘em, and pressed upon ‘em, to do as this person had done. And many that seemed to be under no melancholy, some pious persons that had no special darkness, or doubts about the goodness of their state, nor were under any special trouble or concern of mind about anything spiritual or temporal, yet had it urged upon ‘em, as if somebody had spoke to ‘em, “Cut your own throat, now is good opportunity: now, NOW!” So that they were obliged to fight with all their might to resist it, and yet no reason suggested to ‘em why they should do it. (A Faithful Narrative 206-7)

The last part of this passage holds the answer that eluded Edwards. It was the revival’s unrelenting emphasis upon instantaneous results that pressed so hard upon these people. As with suicide, the only “good opportunity” to convert is “now, NOW!” C. C. Goen ably summarises the line of thinking that may have led to self-murder: “I shall know certainly whether I am saved or not only when I die and face God at judgement; according to some of the exhorters I’ve heard, if I’m saved I’m ready to meet God now; if I’m not I probably never will be, and the longer I live the more I sin and increase my guilt: therefore I must settle the matter now by committing suicide” (“Introduction” 47). For Edwards, of course, this reasoning was a cheat. Not only was suicide a heinous sin, but it skipped over revivalism’s greatest challenge: the preservation of one’s new spiritual state once the initial fervour of conversion had subsided. Revival might take

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41 He observed that Hawley “was of a family that are exceedingly prone to the disease of melancholy,” adding that “his mother was killed with it” (A Faithful Narrative 206).
place in the instant, in the face of imminent death, but it must be sustained for the rest of one’s
life. Death’s immediacy must remain figurative, until God should decide otherwise.

By the time that Edwards came to write his last texts on revivalism, *Religious Affections*
and *The Life of David Brainerd*, the colony’s established churches had not experienced an
awakening for some years (Marsden, “Biography” 30). These books, as result, had a different
emphasis than much of his earlier writing on the subject. Although *Religious Affections* spends a
great deal of time discussing the moment of conversion, the time when spiritual experiences are
at their height, its conceptual focus rests on the period that comes after—the rest of one’s life.
The twelfth sign of the authenticity of a convert’s affections resides in their daily Christian
practice. Edwards devotes more space to this indication than to any of the preceding eleven, so
determined is he to illustrate that it is “the chief of all of the signs of grace” (406). The true
saint’s “behavior … in the world,” he asserts, will be “directed by Christian rules” in every
particular (383). He will “[make] a business of such a holy practice above all things,”
prosecuting it “with [the] highest earnestness and diligence.” Finally, he will “[persist]” in [this
practice] to the end of life: so that it may be said, not only to be his business at certain seasons,
the business of Sabbath days, or certain extraordinary times, or the business of a month, or a
year, or of seven years … but the business of his life” (383-4). Here Edwards implicitly rebukes
those selfish enthusiasts who “rest satisfied” in their first religious experience (376). The
counterfeit saints who assume that “all their striving and wrestling” is over once they are
converted, and hope “[to have] an easy time of it afterwards, to sit down and enjoy their sloth
and indolence” (382). A little later he attacks them more directly—as they fall back into sin they
are as a dog that must return to his vomit (405), or a “washed … swine” that still yearns to
“wallow in the mire” (395). Most damningly of all, they are like those “false disciples in Christ’s
time, [who] followed him for a while,” but failed to “[follow] him to the end,” to the place of the skull. Genuine converts would live with death until death.

In the life of his friend David Brainerd, Edwards found a model for this ideal form of Christian piety. Brainerd was born in 1718 in Haddam, Connecticut. His father, Hezekiah, who had been a member of the King’s Council “for that colony” (*Life of David Brainerd* 99), died in 1727. By the time he was fourteen, both his parents were dead (35). Brainerd was acutely sensitive to death from an early age—at “seven or eight,” he revealed in his diary, “I became something concerned for my soul, and terrified at the thoughts of death, and was driven to the performance of duties” (101). Although this period of “religious concern” would prove to be “shortlived” (Brainerd observes that he cast it aside because it “destroyed [his] eagerness for play”), it set the tone for the rest of his life. Throughout his youth, proximity to death caused him to rekindle temporarily his “melancholy” form of faith. In the summer of 1739, after acknowledging that “it was impossible for [him] to do anything towards … delivering [himself]” from his sinful state (131), he was finally converted. Later that year, he matriculated at Yale, intending to study to become a minister. At New Haven, during the second New-England awakening, he fell under the influence of James Davenport and became embroiled in the controversy between the conservative faculty and separatist undergraduates (this would eventually lead to his expulsion from the college in 1742). His conduct during this period would later cause him some regret—Edwards notes that “when he lay on his death-bed, he gave order (unknown to me until after his death) that [the] two volumes [of his diary pertaining to these years] should be destroyed” (153). The inscription that Brainerd added to the beginning of the next volume was significant. There he wrote that anyone who was “desirous to know how the author lived, in general, during [his time at Yale]” should read the first part of the following period of his life (154). In that section, they would find a “specimen of his ordinary manner of
living” in his undergraduate days, “excepting that here he was more refined from some imprudencies and indecent heats, than there.” Even before Edwards came to edit his journal, Brainerd had come to the same conclusion that his friend would. What was most admirable in his religious life was not the great passion of his early adulthood, but the quiet, private encounter with his mortality, frailty and depravity that occurred every day. His diaries reveal not only that he had a strong sense of his responsibility towards his own death, and a longing to make a good end, but that he was determined to remain “faithful to the death” (276) and “desirous to labor for God to the utmost of [his] strength” (353). One striking passage expresses both of these desires simultaneously:

My soul longed exceedingly for death, to be loosed from this dullness and barrenness, and made forever active in the service of God. I seemed to live for nothing and to do no good: And oh, the burden of such a life! Oh death, death, my kind friend, hasten and deliver me from dull mortality, and make me spiritual and vigorous to eternity! (David Brainerd 272)

Here Brainerd’s concern for his salvation and selfless interest in the “service of God” appear to resolve themselves into a paradox. He wishes that he were dead in order that he could be more “active” in his spiritual life, and, by extension, that the matter of his redemption were settled so that he might work more strenuously towards it. Like Edwards, Brainerd realised that it was the Puritan’s duty to pursue the impossible.

The missionary’s diaries (which form the greater part of the *Life of Brainerd*) were useful to Edwards in a number of ways. They provided him with one final case study of a Christian life, a longer-form companion to the portrait of his wife in *Some Thoughts*. “In the following account,” he wrote in the introduction to his edition, “the reader will have opportunity to see, not

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42 This last remark was made during one of the many bouts of serious illness that punctuated Brainerd’s missions to the Indians.
only … the wonderful change that [Brainerd] experienced in his mind and disposition … [and] the manner in which that change was brought to pass, [but] how [his new nature] continued, [and] what were its consequences in his inward frames, thoughts, affections, and secret exercises, through many vicissitudes and trials, from [his conversion] for more than eight years, till his death” (91). The diaries also allowed Edwards to address the problem of melancholy—an issue that, as I have shown, had haunted his thinking about revivalism since the first awakening in Northampton. In the introduction, he discussed Brainerd’s disposition towards depression quite plainly. Although he described it as an “imperfection in him” (91), Edwards suggested that it enabled Brainerd to distinguish very accurately “between real solid piety and enthusiasm, between those affections that are rational and scriptural, having their foundation in light and judgment, and those that are founded in whimsical conceits, strong impressions on the imagination, and those vehement emotions of the animal spirits that arise from them” (92). This was because he “gradually” came to understand that his own despondency was usually a product of the “disease of melancholy[,]” rather than being in a state of “spiritual desertion” (93). Brainerd, then, added an important caveat to Edwards’ earlier arguments about the relationship between awakening and death. It was not sufficient to face up to one’s mortality, or even to recognise that one needed to be converted: Brainerd had done these things in the early part of his life, before he had been truly saved. One needed to move beyond a simple preoccupation with one’s own fate, and take an interest in the broader destiny of humanity as a whole. In the reflective essay that he appended to the diaries, Edwards observed that while the “chief end” of many people’s devotions “is to extinguish their fears of hell and give ‘em confidence of the favor of the Lord,” Brainerd’s “longings” were not so self-serving (509). He did not hope for a “clear [view] of his title to … eternal honors in heaven,” but after “more of present holiness, an heart more engaged for God to love and exalt and depend on him” and “the enlargement and
advancement of Christ’s kingdom in the earth” (509-10). The missionary work to which he devoted his professional life was Brainerd’s means of making good on this last aspiration. In ministering to the Mohicans in western Massachusetts, and the Delawares in Pennsylvania and New Jersey (Conforti 66) despite the ever-present threat of violence and his failing health, he demonstrated how lightly he held his personal safety and interest. Even as he showed that his own salvation was not his primary concern, he ensured that he would be saved.

Although he was immensely saddened by the premature passing of such an important servant of God, Edwards rejoiced that he had had the good fortune to witness it. Or, rather, that “Providence” had so ordered the missionary’s final days that the Edwards family (who lived “more than 200 miles distant” from Brainerd’s “ordinary place of abode”) should “see his dying behavior, … hear his dying speeches, … receive his dying counsels, and … have the benefit of his dying prayers” (Life of Brainerd 541). Taken gravely ill in Boston (where he had hoped to gain some respite from the poor health that had cut short his mission to the Delaware Indians), Brainerd had travelled to Northampton in July 1747, in the company of Edwards’ daughter Jerusha (Marsden, A Life 326; Life of Brainerd 455, 457). He would remain under her care, in her father’s house, until his death on Friday, the 9th of October (Life of Brainerd 476). Edwards gratefully exploited the opportunity to record the death of a man who had lived in the Spirit until the last: not only did he encourage the initially reluctant Brainerd to publish his journals (the last entry in which being but a week shy of his death), but he added to the edition his own observations of the missionary’s final moments, together with further reflections in the appendix and excerpts from letters written while he was dying. While the lengthy funeral sermon that he preached was not included in the volume, Edwards ensured that it was published separately and “hope that it would be widely read” (543n.1).
Together, these materials constitute the only extended description of a faithful death in Edwards’ writings—the closest that he came to compiling an *ars moriendi*. They reveal that Brainerd, like many of his Puritan predecessors, had a growing desire for death as it drew nearer. “I am almost in eternity[,]” he observed less than two weeks before the end, “God knows, I long to be there. My work is done: I have done with all my friends: All the world is nothing to me” (549). While he “looked death in the face” (548), throughout his long final illness, he was never preoccupied with himself or his own situation. The welfare of Christendom, or “the prosperity of Zion,” was Brainerd’s dearest wish at this time:

How did his soul long for it and pant after it! And how earnestly and often did he wrestle with God for it! And how far did he, in these desires and prayers, seem to be carried beyond all private and selfish views! being animated by a pure love to Christ, an earnest desire of his glory, and a disinterested affection to the souls of mankind. (532)

What’s more, he confided to Edwards that “he had his heart … unusually, and beyond what had been before, drawn out in longings and prayers for the flourishing of Christ’s kingdom on earth, when he was in the approaches of death.” The conversation of his last few days, accordingly, was of the future of the church. The week before his death he led his hosts and some visitors in a prayer for “the reviving and flourishing of religion in the world” (473). On the eve of his passing, “the interest of Zion lay still with great weight on his mind,” despite the great “bodily agonies” which he endured (476). He spoke with a local minister, Edward Billing, “concerning the great importance of the work of the ministry,” and with his brother John about “his

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43 As I argued in the last chapter, John Cotton’s demand for silence in his death-chamber suggested that he was eager to be finished with this life and its demands. Other first-generation leaders expressed a similar wish in their last hours. “[O]n his deathbed[,]” John Winthrop was asked “to sign an order banishing a dissenting.” “Tradition has it … [that] the aged governor refused, saying ‘he had done enough of that work already’” (Geddes 73; qtg. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. 104). Similarly, Cotton Mather records that Thomas Hooker was asked, “[i]n the time of his sickness[,]” if he could “utter his apprehensions about … the state of New-England” (*Magnalia Christi* 350). “I have not that work to do now[,]” the minister demurred, “I have already declared the counsel of the Lord.”
congregation in New Jersey and the interest of religion among the Indians.” Just as his revival had been caused by an overwhelming concern for his mortality, so his death was marked by a selfless interest in revivalism’s prospects.

The fundamental message of all this biographical and autobiographical material was that Brainerd stood so close to his death that he was able to see past it. Death’s approach did not disturb him, since he had been ready to depart all his life. In this regard, he was quite different from Joseph Hawley, that other melancholic in Edwards’ life. However tragic Hawley’s suicide had been, it was also selfishly motivated. The despairing man could not see beyond his own sinful nature. The idea that he was destined to be damned completely overran his thoughts. Brainerd, on the other hand, was able to view salvation more impartially. “My idea of heaven[,] he wrote in his diary in the month before his death, “is to please God and glorify him and give all to him, and to be wholly devoted to his glory. That is the heaven I long for, that is my religion, and that is my happiness and always was, ever since I supposed I had any true religion” (465). Nevertheless, he was as confident of his own salvation, in his own way, as James Davenport, at the very height of his enthusiastic excesses, had been of his (that same passage continues with the remark that Brainerd expects to meet “all those that are of that [same, selfless] religion” as he when he arrives in heaven (465-6). The distinction between the missionary and enthusiasts such as the pre-rehabilitation Davenport was that he “greatly nauseated” the practice of making “[too] much noise and show in religion” (547). Brainerd, in Edwards’ portrait of him, is always perfectly humble: ever ready to acknowledge that he has fallen short of God’s expectations of him. In a lengthy footnote to the published version of his funeral sermon, Edwards records the means by which Brainerd demonstrated the operation of grace within him. This substantial catalogue, which was gleaned from a closer “acquaintance with his private journal,” includes several instances of the disinterested benevolence that I have just discussed: we read of his
“earnest desires that God might be glorified, and that Christ’s kingdom might be advanced in the world[,]” as well as his “compassion to the souls of men, and earnest intercessions in secret for them” (546n.2). The greater part of the list, however, consists of emotional and mental dispositions that might be described as melancholic. Edwards describes Brainerd’s “most abasing sense of his own vileness[,]” his “deep sense of indwelling sin, which … was most evidently, by far, the greatest burden of his life,” and the “great brokenness of [his] heart before God.” He adds that Brainerd continually “long[ed] after full deliverance from the body of sin and death” and that he had such a “clear [view] of eternity, [that it was] almost as though he were actually out of the body and had his eyes open in another world.” This footnote suggests that there is a certain circularity to Edwards’ thinking about the meaning of his friend’s devotional life. He argued that Brainerd was different from self-indulgent and suicidal melancholics because so much of his faith was directed outwards and put into practice. Yet he distinguished him from hypocritical antinomians, whose religion was also extroverted, by appealing to his distinctly melancholic desire to escape this world as quickly as possible.

With this in mind, it’s possible to interpret the considerable amount of text that Edwards devotes to Brainerd’s depressive tendencies as an index of his discomfort with the topic. He is never able to provide a satisfactory definition of the dichotomy between “melancholy and godly sorrow” (93), an improper and proper appetite for death. In his preface to *The Life of Brainerd*

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44 Edwards had had to grapple with this question in his own personal life. As a young man, he, too, had suffered from periods of depression. Nevertheless, he had pledged, early in his career as a clergyman, that he would “think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death” and “never … do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life” (Letters 753). On the other hand, he recorded in his diary his determination not to allow his private devotions to take a morbid turn: “My mind at present is, never to suffer my thoughts and meditations, at all to ruminate” (789). According to Gail Parker this is the “only indication” that his personal writings give “that [Edwards] was thinking about the implications [that] melancholy might hold for the conduct of religious life” (“Jonathan Edwards and Melancholy” 199). While this may be true, his work on Brainerd indicates that it was a subject that he was preoccupied with.
he is simply forced to assert that one is gracious while the other is not. As in “the exercise of devout [King] David, and the apostles Peter, John and Paul … [t]here was undoubtedly … some influence of his natural disposition to dejection in [Brainerd’s] religious mourning, some mixture of melancholy with truly godly sorrow and real Christian humility” (95-6). Edwards concluded that “it ever was and ever will be [thus] with the saints[,] while on this side [of] heaven” (96). It should be “easy[,]” he noted, “for the judicious reader to observe” that Brainerd became ever more adept at determining those parts of his affections that were gracious and those parts that were not. The implication, of course, is that the reader themselves must understand the nature of true grace, in order to interpret the diaries accurately. At the beginning of his discussion of Brainerd’s depression, Edwards takes aim at the rationalist Old Lights with whom he had fought throughout the New-England awakenings. “There are some[,]” he writes, “who think that all serious strict religion is a melancholy thing, and that what is called Christian experience is little else besides melancholy vapors disturbing the brain, and exciting enthusiastic imaginations” (91). While he anticipated that Brainerd’s example would prove these sceptics wrong, he was unable, as I have shown, to present a convincing argument to refute them. As with the Puritan *artes moriendi*, there had to be a break in his argument that would allow grace to flood in.

“I See No Death Before Me”

The New-England awakenings of the mid-eighteenth century transformed American religion, creating a new, evangelical strain of Christianity. Edwards played a critical role in this process, granting revivalism social respectability by defending it from the scepticism of its conservative enemies and the excesses of its more extreme proponents. Douglas A. Sweeney identifies his premise that “[t]here is such a thing as conversion, and ‘tis the most important thing in world” (*The Reality of Conversion* 83, 92) as the “hallmark of the evangelical movement,” that which “distinguish[es] it from other forms of traditional Protestantism” (‘Evangelical
Tradition in America” (217). Sweeney goes on to argue that Edwards’ conception of the freedom of the will (as set out in the 1754 tract of the same name) enabled Calvinists to overcome their objection to “indiscriminate” evangelism (218). Since it was traditionally assumed that God would only grant salvation to a select view, many Congregationalists saw little point in trying to expand their numbers on a large scale and were consequently reluctant to preach outside their churches. Edwards’ argument that the damned are morally unable to want to be converted meant that evangelical Calvinists need no longer worry about drawing their nets too widely (the predestined distinction between the elect and reprobate would always stand). In the years immediately after his death in 1758, Edwards’ stock would remain low. During the so-called “Second Great Awakening” of the early nineteenth century, however, he would come to be recognised as the father of American revivalism. The New Divinity ministers, Edwards’ closest theological successors, would seek to assert their control over the awakenings through “the creation of an Edwardsian religious tradition” and “the elevation of the theologian to the status of major cultural authority” (Conforti 40). Thanks to their efforts, his writings would continue to be republished through the nineteenth century: the American Tract society’s edition of the Personal Narrative, his account of his conversion and private devotional life, reached one hundred and twenty-four thousand readers between its publication in 1827 and 1875 (41). The popularity of this particular text, alongside his great-grandson Sereno Edwards Dwight’s biography (1829), suggests that Edwards was more influential as a symbolic figurehead, an embodiment of the saintly life, rather than as a religious thinker or theorist of revival.

Other denominations too, sought to bolster their position by adapting Edwards’ texts to support their ideas. Conforti notes that “moderate Congregationalists, Old and New Side Presbyterians, and even Methodists … [co-opted] the New Divinity’s exclusive claim to Edwardsian tradition” (Religious Tradition 41). In order to effect this, they “[bypassed] the metaphysical Edwards” in favour of his more accessible, pietistic works. Although he vehemently disagreed with much of Edwards’ thinking, John Wesley recommended The Life of David Brainerd for the library of “every preacher” (68-9).
In his writings on the awakening and in his revivalistic practice as the pastor of Northampton, Edwards set an exacting standard for Christian conversions. He argued that truly awakened individuals would be utterly transformed, both in their souls and their moral and religious practice. Just as the individual should carefully scrutinize his experience for signs that it was truly gracious (using *The Distinguishing Marks* and *Religious Affections* as their guides), so, in the old (pre-Halfway-Covenant) Puritan fashion, each congregation must demand that new members provide an account of their acquisition of saving faith (Noll, *America’s God* 45). His arguments about the nature of genuine conversion would prove too precise, too delicate for many of his successors. The “searching thoroughness” of Edwards’ “delineation … of true godliness” in *Religious Affections*, for instance, seemed “almost … to remove [it] from the realm of practical realization” (Stoever 96). How could anyone hope to identify all twelve signs of saving grace in his religious experience? The fact that between 1744 and December 1748 no new candidates came forward for church membership in Northampton is extremely telling in this regard. It is hardly surprising that people were reticent to undergo examination by a man who had published such a rigorous exposition of the Christian life. Nineteenth-century evangelists, determined to spread their religion as widely and diversely as possible could not brook this uncertainty and indeterminacy concerning conversion. Where Edwards left so much in the hands of God, they increasingly emphasised human agency in the propagation of revivals. His theory of revivalism was retrospectively “Methodized”—evangelists stressed the practical, organizational aspects of his work at the expense of his more difficult metaphysical thinking (Conforti, *Religious Tradition* 49-51). The *Religious Affections*, for example, was widely distributed in heavily edited form. The American Tract Society excised the more difficult aspects of the book (including Edwards’ “aesthetic” appreciations of “the spiritual beauty of regeneration”), reworking it “into a condensed and easily decipherable work of practical divinity” (33). This
tendency reached its apogee in the frontier revivalism of Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). Although the *Lectures on Revivals on Revivals of Religion* (1835), his definitive articulation of his approach to evangelism, would draw on Edwards’ writings, Finney was far from a being Calvinist. He argued that awakenings were not “miracles” but “the result of the right use of the appropriate means” (*Lectures on Revivals* 5), and developed his “new measures” as a set of practices that would, if implemented correctly, incite a revival. The individual who had come through the ordeal of the “anxious seat”—the bench at the front of the congregation where prospective converts were asked to sit, so that they could be directly addressed by the preacher—could be sure that they had been reborn (the very fact that they were willing to sit on the seat, Finney claimed, was a “public manifestation of [their] determination to be a Christian” (*Lectures on Revivals* 178).

Edwards’ influence over nineteenth-century American Protestantism was split. His more difficult, “Calvinist” works continued to be read in orthodox Congregationalist seminaries (Andover, the first postgraduate seminary in America, founded in 1808, was a bastion of conservative Edwardseanism [Conforti, *Religious Tradition* 20]). Members of popular evangelical churches, on the other hand, saw him as an exemplary saint, preferring to read abridged editions of *Religious Affections* and the *Life of Brainerd*. In this context, I’d like now to consider the afterlife of Edwards’ ideas about the place of death within revivalism. This chapter has outlined some of the contradictions inherent in Edwards’ thinking on this matter. He preached that a time of awakening offered the Christian the chance to take possession of his or her death, to ensure that it would be comfortable and gracious whenever it arrived. At the same

time, the rhetoric of his revival sermons, as well as the context in which they were often preached—the death of a young person—reminded believers of the fragility and brevity of human life. He also claimed that the task of preserving one’s spiritual rebirth until death necessitated the striking of a delicate balance between self-critical introspection and outward optimism about the prospects of evangelical religion. However, he could not articulate an effective method of distinguishing “godly sorrow” about one’s sinfulness and mortality from unproductive, self-pitying melancholy. I’ve already observed that most nineteenth-century evangelists substantially simplified Edwards’ theory of revivalism. His ideas about the relationship of death to awakening were similarly transformed. Death still played a significant role in the rhetoric of religious conversion, but it did not retain the full aporetic complexity that it possessed in Edwards’ thought.

In his *Memoirs* (1876), Finney recalled the day that he was converted, back in the autumn of 1821. He had resolved, one Sunday evening, to “settle the question of [his] soul’s salvation,” setting aside all other “business” and devoting himself “wholly” to the performance of this “work” (12). The following Tuesday night, he felt that he was reaching the critical moment. “I had become very nervous[,]” he writes, “and in the night a strange feeling came over me as if I was about to die. I knew that if I did I should sink down into hell” (13). Early the next morning, he set off into the woods around Adams, New York, the small town in which he was studying to become a lawyer. An inner voice asked him whether he would accept conversion that day. “Yes; I will accept it to-day,” he replied, “or I will die in the attempt” (14). Finding a “place where some large trees had fallen across each other,” he made it into “a kind of ‘closet’ and knelt down to pray (15). At this point, he reiterated the vow that he had made earlier: “I will give my heart to God before I ever come [out of the woods] again.” After an arduous day of prayer and anxiety, Finney eventually received that which he had set out to acquire. Returning to his office at night,
he found that he was “justified[,]” completely in his faith: “I could see that the moment I believed, while up in the woods[,] all sense of condemnation had entirely dropped out of my mind; and that from that moment … [m]y sense of guilt was gone; my sins were gone; and I do not think I felt any more sense of guilt than if I never had sinned” (23). I have quoted this passage at length because it seems to me to be almost entirely at odds with Edwards’ understanding of death’s part in conversion. Finney appears to be entirely in control of this process: it is he who decides that he will die if he fails to be reborn. In the Puritan model, the believer must humbly recognise that death and grace are impassable aporias, before attempting, nevertheless, to traverse them. Finney, though, did manage to pass through them, in a symbolic sense at least. He assigned a place and time—the gap between two fallen trees, early on a Wednesday morning—and declared that there and then he would either be received into grace or pass away from this life. Because he did not die, he could be completely certain that he had been reborn. In Finney’s theology, redemption is no longer indeterminate. Although, technically, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that accomplishes his salvation, the individual has the agency to decide that he will be saved. As a result, mortality also loses its indeterminacy: it is all too easily passed over in the instant of conversion. When Finney’s followers sat on the anxious seat, they died a supplementary death. The end of their lives would be marked only by a biological demise. Their deaths, that which determines the destination of the soul, would have already taken place.

The doctrine of sanctification provides another way in to this difficult, but important point of distinction between Edwards and Finney. Edwards believed that the awakened

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47 This was the process by which the saint became holy, a new man in the Spirit, as opposed to justification, which was “God’s forgiveness of the sins of the elect” (Sleper 435). The relationship between these two phenomena, particularly the order in which they occurred, had been the subject of considerable controversy in colonial New England. John Cotton proposed that they occurred simultaneously, whereas Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard and Peter Bulkeley saw them as part of complex sequential process of “preparation” for salvation, in which justification...
individual was entirely made anew. “The change that is wrought in conversion,” Religious Affections argues, “is an universal change: grace changes a man with respect to whatever is sinful in him: the old man is put off and the new man put on: [he is] sanctified throughout … and becomes a new creature … all sin is mortified” (341). This didn’t mean, however, that the convert was immediately rendered sinless. Instead, he became more and more disinclined to sin. Those offences that he was particularly inclined towards before his rebirth—be they “lasciviousness, … drunkenness, or maliciousness” (342)—would still tempt him afterwards. “[Y]et they shall no longer have dominion over him[,]” Edwards claims, “nor will they any more be properly his character.” Sanctification then, was a gradual process, a sloughing off of sin “continued and carried on [by Christians], to the end of life.” “[E]ven after … conversion[,]” he wrote elsewhere, “man remains still in a state of probation for heaven” (Miscellanies 833-1152 74). Superficially, Finney’s teachings on this subject were similar. He warned his converts of the dangers of “backsliding in the heart” (Lectures on Revivals 294-306) and insisted that they continue to grow in grace, “taking on a greater fullness of the Divine nature” every day (310). Unlike Edwards, however, he argued that it was possible for believers to achieve “entire sanctification … in this life” (Systematic Theology 319). Reaching this permanent state of “full obedience” and “entire consecration to God” (318) was the central goal of Christian life. It was unimportant, Finney insisted, whether anyone had ever entered into this condition before (“the attainability of this state in this life may be abundantly established,” he asserted, “entirely precede...
irrespective of the question whether this state has ever been attained” [318]). All that mattered was that this present time—the age of revival—presented the best opportunity yet to the biggest number of the faithful: full sanctification had never been this accessible before. This did not mean that it was easy to reach, or that life of the sanctified man or woman was free from all care and every difficulty. They would still “struggle … with temptation” and would still be able to sin. Crucially, though, they would not. Finney did not argue “[t]hat a soul entirely sanctified cannot sin, but that as a matter of fact, [it] does not, and will not sin.” This small change of emphasis was symbolic of Finney’s break with Calvinism. It meant that he was a perfectionist, someone who held, with John Wesley, that religion should enable mankind to enter into a higher form of being. When Wesley preached the doctrine of perfection in mid-eighteenth century England, some groups had interpreted his words too broadly and declared themselves to be without sin. One hundred years later, Finney faced the same problem—across America, small communities of extreme, antinomian and Utopian perfectionists were starting up. Despite his distaste for these people and their line of thinking, Finney may not have been so different from them as he liked to think. In practice, the distinction between asserting that the sanctified

48 In one lecture “Paul Entirely Sanctified,” Finney offered Paul as an example of a man who had achieved sanctification and Christian perfection. Having analyzed the apostle’s writings, he determined that “if he was not sinless, he was an extravagant boaster (Systematic Theology 340)” and warned that it would be “doing dishonor to God, to maintain … that Paul had not received the blessing of entire sanctification.”

49 While Wesley “had maintained this teaching from early in his public career,” (most notably in his Plain Account of Christian Perfection) he was forced to provide a “more careful definition” in later years, as “more Methodists in local societies claimed … to have been ‘cleansed from all unrighteousness’” (Wesley, Journal 4: 366; qtd. in Noll, The Rise of Evangelicalism 146).

50 Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe observes that while Finney was fascinated by all forms of perfectionism, and had “personal contact” with John Noyes (one of antinomian perfectionism’s most famous proponents) “on at least two occasions,” he was, “[i]n general, … appalled by [Noyes’] offbeat religion” and “tendency towards antinomianism” (182). It’s interesting to note, on the other hand, that the evangelist often felt compelled to stress the distinction between his theology and that of “modern Perfectionists” (see, for instance “Christian Perfection” parts one and two in Lectures to Professing Christians [1837]). The fact that Finney feels the need to reveal that he has “read … [the] publications” of “modern Perfectionists[,] … had much knowledge of them as individuals, and … cannot assent to many of their views” (185), suggests a certain anxiety about the similarity between his thought and theirs.
would not sin and that they could not was too slight to make much difference. What’s more, his emphasis on the active participation of the individual in their conversion had abrogated the significance of death in awakening. Once the moment of revival had replaced death as the crucial event in salvation, it was easy to move one step further and declare that conversion rendered the subject immortal. The elect would not enjoy everlasting life after death: they would never die.

The post-Christian sects founded in the middle years of the American nineteenth century all sought, in various ways, to conquer death. According to Mary Baker Eddy, man was not matter, but immortal spirit (Science and Health 475). Like sin and sickness, death was an illusion—the “real man” was “incapable” of them. “Man is immortal,” she wrote, “and the body cannot die, because matter has no life to surrender. The human concepts named matter, death, disease, sickness, and sin are all that can be destroyed” (426, my emphasis). Her religion of Christian Science sought to eradicate both sin (through virtuous life) and illness (largely by ignoring it). As these two illusions faded away, she anticipated that death, too, would become “more and more unreal” (485). In April 1843, Joseph Smith predicted that “[t]here are those of the rising generation who shall not taste death till Christ comes” (Shepherd and Shepherd 268n.11). He added that a heavenly voice had once informed him that if he lived to the age of eighty-five, he too, would witness Christ’s return. This prophecy did not come to pass, but the new religion that Smith founded would work to defeat death through ritual. Calvinism granted the individual just one brief lifetime in which to reach redemption; Mormonism provides people with a second chance. The immense genealogical archive at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City continues to grow, as Mormons dutifully baptise their dead ancestors, securing the salvation of the family tree (Ostling 190). John Humphrey Noyes, the father of Oneida Perfectionism, expected that successful reform of man’s relationship with God, the redemption of capitalist society through socialism and the establishment of a “true union of the sexes”
(unsullied by monogamous marriage), would result in a final “victory over death” (*History of American Socialisms* 630). In his sixtieth year, he wrote to one of his followers that “we are so near a second coming, or something like it, that I see no death before me” (qtd. in Klaw 128).

Although Noyes may have ceased to believe that this was literally true some years before (Spencer Klaw notes that it was “politically expedient for Noyes to discourage talk about his death” [128]), his statement is telling: he did not see death before him because he was not looking for it.

This perspective, of course, was diametrically opposed to Edwards’ understanding of evangelical religion as an encounter with mortality. Needless to say, the eighteenth-century theologian would also have been horrified by Eddy’s claim that sin and death were not real and disgusted by Mormonism’s contention that the living could alter the spiritual destinies of the dead. Nevertheless, it’s possible to trace the genealogy of Oneida Perfectionism, Christian Science and Mormonism back to Edwards: in a sense, they were his grandchildren. Through his successful intellectual defence of revivalism, he had fathered, however inadvertently, the popular evangelism of the late colonial and revolutionary eras. In the next century, this increasingly fragmented and theologically diverse movement gave birth to these sects—new religions that could scarcely be termed Christian. Harold Bloom has argued, indeed, that they are not. For him, they are both younger and older than Christian orthodoxy: expressions of America’s modernity or “lateness” and reformulations of ancient Gnosticism (*The American Religion* 3-66). He follows Jon Butler in arguing that the revivals of the early eighteen hundreds constitute the crucial turning point in the development of modern American religion. The awakenings of the previous century, and by extension, the influence of Puritanism on modern evangelism and fundamentalism, are far less significant than scholarship has made them out to be. While I agree, to a certain extent, with Bloom’s contention that contemporary American religion is post-
Christian, I am far less certain that it has little in common with the Calvinism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even Eddy, Noyes and Smith’s most unconventional beliefs about mortality, for instance, have their antecedents in Edwards’ teachings about death and revivalism. He was wary of the dramatic religious affections of the more radical revivalists, their visions, raptures and trances. Although a genuine revival might have a great effect on the subject’s body, awakening was primarily mental and spiritual, an “enlightenment” by which “the mind” would come “to understand or apprehend divine things” (Religious Affections 266). Similarly, Eddy refuted both Spiritualism and Animal Magnetism, two popular forms of occultism that sought to manipulate unseen forces by placing people into semi-conscious states (Science and Health 70-106). Prayer, for her, was a form of scientific investigation, a process by which men could come to understand the truth about God, and thus conquer sickness and death. In clear contrast to Edwards, she believed that the faithful would not die (“Death,” she asserted, “is not a stepping-stone to Life, immortality and bliss” [203]). In each case, however, the exercise of reason is central to conversion. John Noyes’ and Joseph Smith’s early confidence that their followers would escape death finds its equivalent in Edwards’ notion that fatalities were less common during the time of revival (see above). In his writing, this suggestion is primarily a rhetorical strategy, a means of underlining the extraordinary and ephemeral quality of the opportunity that an awakening presents. Noyes and Smith literalized this essentially intellectual concept, expanding a brief period into a new era of history.\(^5^1\) Where Edwards offered his parishioners the

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\(^5^1\) The difference between Edwards and his post-Christian successors on the question of death’s relation to conversion may be aptly expressed through a brief consideration of their contrasting approaches to eschatology. Edwards did suggest that the New-England revivals might constitute the “dawning, or at least a prelude” of the millennium, “that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind” (Some Thoughts 353). He was, however, strictly postmillennial in his theology, which meant that he believed that Christ would return at the end of a golden period of great justice, righteousness and faithfulness in human society. In the nineteenth century, American evangelism (as well as the post-Christian sects that grew out from it) took an increasingly premillennial view, believing that the Messiah would come back before
fleeting chance to come to terms with death before they came to face it, they proclaimed, in the infancy of their new religions, that their acolytes would now be able to avoid it altogether.

In the previous chapter, I examined Jan Patočka’s account of the relationship between Christianity and the orgiastic, pagan religion that preceded it in the West. He argues that paganism sought to triumph over the bare fact of human existence, the struggle with work and suffering that he calls the “everyday” (98). It achieved this victory sporadically and temporarily, through rituals performed on festival days (98-99). These rites were not simply a means of escape from the responsibilities of daily life, but an evasion of responsibility itself. Indeed, they were not really a “means” at all, since that would imply that the human participant was in control of the process. Instead, they were moments in which “something more powerful than … [human] responsibility, seem[ed] to break into [the pagan’s] life and bestow on it meaning which it would not know otherwise” (99). Christianity provided mankind with a new way of “overcoming … everydayness” (108). The believer took “care [of] the salvation of [his] soul” and achieved “a moral transformation … in the face of death and death eternal” (108). While Christianity asked its adherents to assume full accountability for their own lives (and deaths), the concept of grace meant that the religion retained an element of paganism’s “demonic” renunciation of responsibility. In the act of saving himself, the saint must become selfless. Although, in contrast to the pagan, he will retain his personal identity throughout eternity, he deserves his salvation insofar as he practices “a self-forgetting goodness” towards his fellow man and expresses “a self-denying … love” of a mysterious God (Patočka 106). What’s more, he must accept the fact that the millennium. This meant that it began to conceive of conversion as a means of cheating death, where Edwards had seen it as the only way through which death might be redeemed.
he may not be saved at all, thereby submitting himself to the “mysterium tremendum” of God’s “inscrutable” purpose. Some of the revivalistic practices that I have been discussing here—Davenport’s fainting fit, the terrors of sinners on Finney’s anxious bench, even the raptures of Sarah Edwards—seem to encapsulate the demonic aspect of Christianity particularly clearly. According to Edwards, powerful affections were supplementary to the real, internal experience of awakening. From a Patočkan perspective, on the other hand, enthusiastic excesses such as these appear to form the central strand of evangelism. In these phenomena, believers found a refuge from their duty to learn how to die individually, experiencing a momentary dissolution of the self into the sacred frenzy of a communal movement. Christian revivals, in this light, appear rather similar to Pagan festivals: both are holiday periods in which an inscrutable divinity breaks through the usual routine of religious life. The periods of consolidation that Edwards sought to append to the revivals in Northampton (in which the moral life of each convert and of the town as a whole would be transformed) were extraneous, rather than essential, to their real purpose.

In his 1743 letter to Prince, Edwards set out the terms of a “covenant” that he had asked his parishioners to “consent to” after the second awakening in the town, in an attempt to force them henceforth to take greater responsibility for their ethical behaviour (121). Nine months later, it seemed that this measure had been a success. The “party spirit” in the town appeared to have abated (127), and its moral and religious character greatly improved. Edwards confessed, however, that the very revival that had given rise to this positive development was also notable for the number of people whose awakenings were only temporary, despite producing violent

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52 “There has been vastly more religion kept up in the town, among all sorts of persons,” Edwards informed his correspondent, together with “a more general seriousness and decency in attending the public worship” (115). The behaviour of the “youth of the town” had also improved significantly, “with respect to reveling [sic], frolicking, profane and unclean conversation, and lewd songs.” “[I]nstances of fornication[,]” he added, “have been very rare.”
affections. The “temper” of these individuals after their conversion, “together with some things in the kind and circumstances of their experiences,” made Edwards “very much afraid lest … a considerable number [of them had] woefully deceived themselves” (126-7). This aspect of the revival was the work of the devil: Edwards observed that, at the “height” of the affair, the “interposition” of “Satan … in many instances soon became very apparent” (121). This admission appears to anticipate Patočka’s argument, acknowledging, in its own way, that there are certain aspects of Christian devotion that are or may become demonic. Although Edwards reassured Prince (and himself) that there were a “great number whose temper and conversation [was] such” as would “justly [confirm]” the high opinion in which the spirituality of Northampton had come to be held (127), he could not guarantee that the awakenings had saved more people than they had damned. Potentially, therefore, it (and the process of revival in general) constituted a collective rejection of ethical responsibility, instead of an acceptance of it.

Patočka’s thought (together with Derrida’s development of it) raises the possibility of a further critique of Edward’s approach to revivalism. While he acknowledged that many, or even the majority, of conversions in the New England awakenings might have been ineffectual, the theologian was confident that his writings could help to identify those that were gracious. He insisted, as I have shown in this chapter, that genuine conversions were founded in the individual’s reconciliation to his own mortality. The regenerate believer, Edwards anticipated, would be less troubled by the uncertainty of death, since he had been granted a strong indication that he was among the elect. This structure, however, simply replaced the aporia of mortality with another. In The Gift of Death, Derrida warns that “one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of forming it” (61). This raises the possibility that the very act of assuming responsibility for oneself is also an abrogation of responsibility, in as much as it occludes certain complications that accompany this term. Writing in the context of
Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac, he observes that responsibility “demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence and secrecy.” Edward’s ideal convert would have undergone religious affections that were absolutely singular, yet they also had to submit their experiences to his general rule. Notwithstanding his concession to the indeterminacy of grace, in practice his readers would effectively cede the responsibility of classifying their conversions to him. And while *Religious Affections* and *The Life of David Brainerd* urged them to remain spiritually active after their awakenings, to prove they were truly regenerate through their Christian practice, the latter text suggested that there was little difference between true devotion and melancholy. While this may have been a rhetorical flourish on Edwards’ behalf, it also (unwittingly) makes a serious point. The convert would not be able to determine the authenticity of the responsibility that they had exercised (in both laying themselves open to the operation of the Holy Spirit, and attempting to live in the spirit of revival for the rest of their lives) until death. I have shown how the Edwards was suspicious of the enthusiastic tendencies that may have lain behind the most spectacular external affections. The aporia of responsibility however, suggests that the very “core” of his conservative Calvinist approach to revivalism—the individual’s impossible attempt to come to terms with their mortality—may have been marked by what Patočka calls the pagan and demonic, insofar as it (unintentionally) encouraged Christians to lose themselves in hubristic pride or melancholic despair. My interpretation of Edwards’ approach to death suggests that it is possible to go beyond Bloom (who suggests that in the nineteenth century America exchanged Christianity for Gnosticism) and assert, with Patočka, that there was always something heretical about Christian orthodoxy.
Thoreau’s Visions of Death
Chapter Three

Sentimental Death

Through the course of the nineteenth century, the American understanding of death underwent a considerable change. The Colonial Puritans, I have shown, emphasised the radically singular, individual aspect of mortality. They thought of the moment of death in terms of separation: the deceased removed from his family, the elect winnowed out from the damned. The entirely unique way in which the individual related to his death defined him as a moral agent. Although they were eager to anticipate the manner in which they would die, Puritan believers accepted that this secret must remain indeterminate until the last. While they were completely certain that every dying man, woman and child would regain consciousness after death, they acknowledged that the living could never hope to understand the new world that would be discovered there. In the nineteenth century, Americans would no longer tolerate this uncertainty. They developed “a powerful intimacy with death” (Saum 35), a familiarity not only with the process of dying, but, in some cases, with life beyond the grave.

Tracing the transformation of death across a whole century is a task far beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, I’d like to outline a few of the most important developments. The Puritans believed that the Holy Spirit would succour the saved on their deathbed. They anticipated, however, that for most people dying would be physically and mentally excruciating (William Perkins stressed that from the onlooker’s perspective, even the most peaceful and holy death might appear painful). The increasingly liberal theology of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, assured Christians that death was not to be feared. The influential Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) grew up in a traditional Calvinist household (his
father, Lyman (1775-1863) was a prominent evangelist and student of the Edwardsean Timothy Dwight). The Puritan conception of death made a strong impression upon him. Indeed, one might say that his entire theology was a response to it. “I would not, for the world, bring up a child to have that horror of death which hung over my childhood,” he told his Brooklyn congregation (From Plymouth Pulpit 194). “I think I never came nearer to swooning than when I heard of the death of one of my young companions,” he continued, “I walked in a shadow for two days, hardly able to tell whether I was in the body or out of it … The toll of the funeral bell would cheat me out of my most desired meal. To my imagination its stroke was always thus: ‘Death! hell! Damnation!’” In sharp contrast to Edwards, who urged his congregation to see that death was before them at every moment, Beecher preached that “[i]t is not desirable that we should live as in the constant atmosphere and presence of death; that would unfit us for life” (Life Thoughts 234-5). Instead, we should, “now and then … talk with death as friend talketh with friend,” in order “to anticipate the experiences of that land to which it will lead us” (235). What was, for Edwards, an unceasing obligation has become an occasional exercise for Beecher (it’s also difficult to imagine the great revivalist describing death as a “friend”). Although he struggled with the concept of hell, Beecher reaffirmed its existence.53 He warned that “no man [should] dare to think, ‘God, the gentle and merciful, will save me, whether I come to his terms or not’” (130). He made it quite clear that all his talk of death as a comfortable, blessed thing was

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53 “I would pave hell with doubts[,]” Beecher told his congregation,” yea, I would so fill and choke it up with doubts that it could contain nothing else, could I by that undo the reality of it, and necessity for it” (From Plymouth Pulpit 104). Elsewhere, he was even more forthright about the extent of his distress at damnation and the certainty of his belief in it:

Unutterably dreadful is the thought of eternal death. Eternal! It is absolutely suffocating. I have felt my whole nature revolt against the horror of the conception; and I would have disbelieved it if I could. But no! it is true—it is an awful truth, and the mentions of it in the Bible are not so much threats as merciful disclosures of what lies at the end of the sinner’s course, that he may be induced to flee for refuge to the hope set before him. Even if the passages regarding hell could be made to mean something else it would not unsettle my faith in this doctrine. (131)
directed only to the Christian. For the “impenitent” it was “a pass at which no mistake can be rectified[,]” the beginning of an eternity of alienation from God. Middle-class culture, however, paid less attention to this residually Calvinist aspect of his theology. A peaceful death and happy afterlife became privileges afforded to more or less everyone.

“Death is only God’s call, ‘Come home’” (From Plymouth Pulpit 274)—this dictum of Beecher’s might have been the motto of the popular approach to mortality in nineteenth-century America. Ann Douglas’ fascinating survey of the consolation literature of the Northern United States between 1830 and 1880 emphasises death’s domestication. While seventeenth and eighteenth-century texts centred around the individual’s prospective relationship with his or her own death, “[nineteenth-century] American death manuals [were] directed toward the actually and recently bereaved parent, husband or wife seeking reassurance. Private, particular grief … was their declared starting point and raison d’être” (“Heaven Our Home” 54). As American society solidified around the nuclear family, it looked for confirmation that family ties would not be loosed by death. Accordingly, the authors of consolation literature “depicted … heaven as a continuation and … glorification of the domestic sphere” (55). Under the influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), whose Concerning Heaven and Its Wonders was published in Boston in 1844, some “daring souls” started to write novels that directly represented life in heaven (66). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ Gates Ajar (1868) is the most famous work in this genre (and, aside from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “the best-selling book of the nineteenth century” [Faust 185]). There, a bereaved family learns that heaven will look like Kansas, that there will be cookies to eat and pianos to play (68). In her verse collection Songs of the Silent World (1885), she ventriloquized the voices of the dead, who returned to reassure their loved ones that they had never really left: “I lean above you as before, / Faithful, my arms enfold, / Oh, could you know that life is numb, / Nor think that death is cold!” (qtd. in Douglas 67). Spiritualism, which grew increasingly
popular from the mid-century, promised its adherents near-direct contact with relatives in the world beyond. The new, rural-style cemeteries provided mourners with a less dramatic means of communing with the dead. Families could stroll across the neatly trimmed lawns content that their loved one had found peace. Like the home, the garden cemetery was a “sanctuary” from the squalor and confusion of the world outside (Douglas 61). The elaborate family tombs and crypts that the wealthy erected did not simply memorialise their departed relatives: they testified to their continuing presence and influence in the world of the living. Daguerreotype death-portraits, in which the deceased was usually depicted as if asleep, fulfilled a similar function (Steiner 75).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, another perspective on death came to prominence, as more Americans saw the world from a scientific point of view. Even before the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, naturalists had already begun to question the idea that humanity was somehow superior to nature. Once the theory of evolution had gained credence, the popular understanding of mortality was transformed. Natural selection understood life, or survival, as an end “in itself,” rather than a means by which immortality might be obtained, or God glorified (Farrell 48). Death, as a result, was no longer a divine punishment,
Adam’s curse, but a purely “natural phenomenon” (44). Belief in “[t]he immortality of individual human beings” may have “diminished,” but there was “a growing conviction that the universe and its natural order formed a greater kind of immortality” (Steiner 115). A new optimism concerning mortality emerged. While the idea that “moral purity” could lead to immortality was discredited (117), advances in immunology and medicine meant that death could be postponed through a healthy lifestyle. The naturalist understanding of death developed in parallel with the sentimental approach. Despite their marked differences, both were part of the slow secularisation of death in America. Although they recognised it as a necessity, an inevitable part of the fallen world, the Puritans viewed death as a *rupture* and an *impasse*. Through the texts that I examined in the first chapter, Congregationalist ministers worked to mitigate anxiety concerning mortality, yet they never sought to erase it entirely. A certain amount of respect, even trepidation, towards death was essential. The Puritan believer, as I have argued, was obliged to accept an impossible task: comprehending the inscrutable and articulating the inexpressible. In the nineteenth century, these goals no longer seemed to be entirely out of range. This was because both the naturalist and sentimental conceptions of death placed their emphasis upon different forms of *continuity*: the deceased was close at hand in the spirit world, ready to reassure his loved ones of his persistent presence; separated families would be reunited in heaven; individuals achieved earthly immortality through their descendants, or through their body’s participation in the natural cycle of decay, death and growth. All of these beliefs were predicated on a certain *familiarity* with death. They portrayed it as a natural process, an integral part of life that was painless, even beautiful. Death was no longer an aporia, but an easy passage to peace.

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56 In his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (1755), Edwards had argued that the purpose behind all creation was the praise and glorification of God.
This chapter will examine Henry David Thoreau’s writing about death, in the context of the cultural upheaval of the nineteenth century. Thoreau’s corpus offers a challenge to every reader, scholar and would-be interpreter. While *Walden* (1854) is indisputably his best-known and most highly praised book, the relative importance of his other works is highly controversial and unclear. His journals, for example, contain much of his most interesting writing. By its very nature, this work is occasional, governed by seasonal observations and self-contradictory. Many of his major books had substantial gestation periods; several of them (including *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865) and *A Yankee in Canada* [1866]) were published after his untimely death in 1862. It can be rather difficult, as a result, to trace the development of his thinking. At the risk of simplifying a complex combination of conflicting ideas, observations and beliefs, I have chosen, for clarity and concision’s sake, to focus on two contrasting treatments of death in Thoreau’s writings. Both reached their fullest expression in two late works: “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859) and *Cape Cod*. Indeed, these approaches seem to have co-existed in Thoreau’s mind for the entire course of his career—we can find traces of both of them in *Walden* and throughout his *Journals*. In one Thoreau resisted the prevailing contemporary understanding of mortality, engaging with the Puritan thanatology that I have discussed in the previous two chapters. This line of thinking treats death as a both an aporia and as a moral opportunity. It acknowledges that the contemplation of death necessarily raises paradoxes and contradictions. Nevertheless, it asks that the individual confront these difficulties and seek to take full responsibility for his mortality. If he is able to do this, then a gap will open up between the ethical and biological components of mortality, between his death and his demise. The other approach, by contrast, was broadly in step with the nineteenth century’s sentimental attitude to death. In what I have termed his naturalist writings, Thoreau suggests that there was nothing mysterious or aporetic about human mortality. He challenges his peers to accept that their deaths
are simply a natural process and that there is no difference, after all, between ethical death and biological demise.

A provocative journal entry from 1851 expresses both of these conflicting attitudes:

If it were not for death and funerals, I think the institutions of the Church would not stand longer. The necessity that men be decently buried—our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters and children (notwithstanding the danger that they be buried alive)—will long, if not forever, prevent our laying violent hands on it. If salaries were stopped, and men walked out of this world bodily at the last, the minister and his vocation would be gone. What is the churchyard but a graveyard? Imagine a church at the other end of the town, without any carrion beneath or beside it, but all the dead regularly carried to the bone-mill! The cry that comes up from the churches in all the great cities in the world is, “How they stink!” (Journal 3:120)

Here Thoreau registers his over-riding preoccupation with the biological side of mortality. The idea that funeral and burial rituals might be replaced with a trip to the “bone-mill” speaks of a desire to strip death down to its material reality, exchanging empty cultural gestures for practical measures (ground-up bones would fertilise the fields that their owners worked over in life). There is a certain amount of black humour here, but the notion of the human bone-mill and the prospect of mankind stepping “out of this world” still in their bodies reveal the author’s earnest desire for a “clean” and natural way of dying. The anti-clerical tone of the passage is unmistakable, as is its scepticism towards the doctrine of immortality. Despite its bombastic rhetoric, however, I do not think that it should be read as a declaration of radical atheism or nihilism. Instead, it exhibits Thoreau’s determination to move past the Calvinist model in which mortality is the cause for anxiety and to treat death as a purely natural and entirely positive phenomenon. And yet, this sketch also acknowledges that Christianity still exercises a tremendous power over death and will perhaps retain it “forever.” The venom of Thoreau’s attack here could be indicative of a quintessentially Puritan motivation: the will to reform the institutions of a church that is failing to live up to its duties. As improbable as it sounds, a
Puritan minister might have conceded that its opening statement—"if it were not for death and funerals, I think the institutions of the Church would not stand longer"—was true, for this is another way of saying that preparing the believer for death is religion’s most serious purpose. Each of Thoreau’s two approaches to mortality, then, sought to revise the traditional thanatology of Congregationalist New England. One sought to pass beyond it altogether, the other to render it more Puritan than it had ever been before.

A number of scholarly studies have considered Thoreau’s conception of death, all identifying an underlying ambivalence or confusion in his thought. In *Thoreau’s Seasons*, for example, Richard Lebeaux argues that there was a tension in his writing between a cyclical and linear model of human mortality. Disturbed by his older brother John’s sudden and premature death from lockjaw at the age of twenty six, he aimed, as a young man, to “transcend death” through his art (31). In later years, he came to understand human life as seasonal, part of nature’s round of decay and rebirth. As he neared the end of his life, he sensed that he was “ripe for the Fall,” ready to take his place in the soil (297-8). Still, “this vision sometimes wavered” (173). On occasion he would again see human life as “a linear contrast to nature’s circularity” (298), a progression towards symbolic immortality or “personal annihilation” (173). Richard Bridgman’s *Dark Thoreau* characterises Thoreau’s life as a battle between an overwhelming pessimism, which expressed itself in a morbid obsession with death and destruction, and a more fragile optimism, which intimated that humanity was destined for immortality. Mary Elkins Moller posits a dichotomy between a deep-seated disgust with and fear of death and self-consciously
manly attempts to “outface” it (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 233). Joel Porte, finally, speaks of a “tragic struggle” between “momentary ecstasies,” achieved through the contemplation of nature and the grim prospect of inescapable death (Emerson and Thoreau 201, 199-200). Each of these investigations ultimately argues for the primacy of one of Thoreau’s contrasting views. Porte and Bridgman, for instance, claim that his depressive tendencies ultimately got the better of him. While he would preach, in certain moods, on man or nature’s defeat of death, he never truly believed in this sermon (Bridgman 286, Porte 188-90). All he could do was live in the present, attempt to keep mortality and its symbols (the house, the tomb, the fungus) out of mind (Porte 186-8). Moller, on the other hand, maintains that the author’s “stoicism” won out in the end: “the record, offered by the Correspondence and the anecdotes of friends, shows that Thoreau approached his own imminent death, at the early age of forty-five, serenely and even cheerfully” (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 238). According to Lebeaux, his attempts “both to accept and transcend death” were “ultimately complementary” (Thoreau’s Seasons 31). The seasonal view of death was strong enough to contain his desire to bequeath something to posterity: just as his decomposing body would help to enrich the earth, his words “would continue to fertilize the readers of the future; in them he would be remembered and brought back continually to life” (298).

My analysis of Thoreau’s treatment of death will not seek to identify his underlying view on the subject. I will refrain, moreover, from making too many arguments from the author’s biography, as criticism on Thoreau has a tendency to do. Instead, I will provide a close reading of each group of texts, examining them in the context of the changes in American attitudes to

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57 In a more recent paper, Randall Conrad traces Thoreau’s attempts to work through the horror of the mill explosion, which, he argues, had a greater effect on the author than the first journal entry suggests (“I Heard a Very Loud Sound”” 83-88).
death that I have summarised in this introduction. The first set finds Thoreau in rebellion against the prevailing wisdom of his day. “A Plea for Captain John Brown” and certain parts of *Walden* insist that death is an aporetic mystery, stressing its singular, final and indeterminate qualities. In so far as he argues that each individual has an ethical responsibility towards his or her mortality, a duty to prepare for death, that which resists and defeats all preparation, he calls for a return to Puritan values. The second set, comprising *Cape Cod, Autumnal Tints*, some journal entries and the naturalist passages of *Walden*, expresses Thoreau’s acquiescence to nineteenth-century thought about mortality. Through contemplating and analyzing the cadavers of humans and animals, he believed that he might arrive at a philosophical understanding of death. While this interest in decaying bodies—the material corollaries of mortality—may seem macabre, it reflects the contemporary notion that death was little different from any other natural process. The clear distinction between these perspectives reinforces the distinction between the Puritan conception of death and that of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the fact that Thoreau, a nineteenth-century writer, could still articulate an attitude to mortality that had much in common with Puritan thanatology calls this cultural boundary into question. Evidently, the shift towards thinking about death as knowable phenomenon was not absolute. At least one thinker, some of the time, was able to view it as a moral and intellectual conundrum.  

In the final section of the chapter, I will investigate what these two approaches have in common. Although their arguments are mutually exclusive, they are *strategically* the same. Each constitutes an attempt to invest human death with dignity, to come to terms with it, albeit in very different ways.

58 My next chapter will propose that Stephen Crane may be added to this number.
The First American to Die

“Economy,” *Walden*’s first chapter, finds Thoreau much concerned with the similarity between the house and the tomb. Observing his contemporaries’ struggles to secure shelter with a satirical eye, he remarks that they would be better off living rent-free in a large wooden box, “six feet long by three wide,” which he “used to see … by the railroad” at Walden (*Walden* 345). Chained to the farms and estates they have inherited, these hapless souls have been “digging their graves” from the moment they were born (326). They waste their lives in pursuit of comfort, building a dwelling festooned with unnecessary “geegaws” and “baubles,” when a simple cellar would suffice (352-3). Thoreau argues that most houses in New England are constructed in accordance with “the architecture of the grave” (360). Their appearance may suggest a certain durability, but this is an illusion: a “September gale would strip … off” most of their “hollow” ornamentation. Like the elaborate tombs that some families had begun to build, these dwellings create a false impression of continuity, masking man’s mortality. Consumed by our quest for this delusory permanency, we forget that our lives are the more precious, and limited, resource. The author complains: “We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb. The best works of art are the expression of man’s struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten” (352). The “higher state” which Thoreau mentions here is not immortality, but a life lived to the fullest, in full consciousness of death.

*Walden* is often figured as a flight from domesticity. 59 Thoreau complains that humanity has become so comfortable in its domestic and economic routines that it cannot imagine any

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59 Cecelia Tichi, on the other hand, has found a confluence between Thoreau’s book and the domestic manuals that were popular in mid-nineteenth-century America (“Domesticity on Walden Pond” *passim*). *Walden*’s “emphasis on
other mode of life: “[w]e now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven. We have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of _agri-culture_” (352). “Economy” envies “the simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive ages.” Principally nomadic, early man was “still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world.” Although he built his simple abode from wood and brick, _Walden_ documents Thoreau’s attempt to live as if in a tent. Free from the constraints of domesticity, he will cultivate “a taste for the beautiful … out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper” (353). The fresh air, he hoped, would sweep away the dust which accumulated indoors (351), disperse the cloud of “quiet desperation” that hung over both the village and the city (329). The “bravery of the minks and muskrats” would “console” him, even as the “unconscious despair” of life in Concord distressed him. Thoreau sought to become a “sojourner in nature” in more ways than one. Living in an airy shack in the middle of the woods he is but lightly settled. Having chosen to live simply, he may while away the hours at his leisure—with few expenses, he has little need to work. “Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures[.]” his “Good Genius” seems a household economy of sufficiency over and against one of unaffordable extravagance,” for example, places it “in accord with … domestic advice texts” such as Catherine Beecher’s _Treatise on Domestic Economy_ (1841) (107, 96). Rather than an outright rejection of domesticity and family life, Tichi concludes, “Walden [is] arguably a manual for the siting, construction and maintenance of a morally principled house and household” (116). Her argument supports the contention of the second part of this chapter: Thoreau’s conception of death’s role in nature was ultimately sentimental.

60 This is the point which Thoreau attempts to communicate to John Field, the poor Irish bogger he visits in the “Baker Farm” chapter of _Walden_: “[i]f he and his family would live simply, they might all go a-huckleberrying in the summer for their amusement” (_Walden_ 487). He comes to Baker Farm as an evangelist, one who has discovered the right way to approach life and death and wishes to impart it. A tart, xenophobic witticism predicts that his mission will be unsuccessful: “One who visited me declared that the shadows of some Irishmen before him had no halo about them, that it was only natives that were so distinguished” (484). John Field cannot be redeemed. He will never escape his tumbledown shack because he is living above his means. Convinced that the ready availability of tea, coffee, butter, milk and meat is the best thing about America, he spends all his time working to earn these goods (486). In doing so, he enters a debilitating cycle of debt and exhaustion: working hard to put food on the table, he
to tell him, “[I]et the noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee every where at home” (488). He was also a sojourner in a more significant, figurative sense. Unlike those men who toiled for posterity, he lived life in awareness of its brevity and singularity, with the knowledge that death was final: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear” (394). Like the Puritans, he is but a pilgrim on this earth, determined, at every moment, to make the most of his limited time: “In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (336).

The popular imagination of Thoreau’s time also believed that life unfolded on the edge of eternity. But where 
Walden inscribed a limit between the present moment and the unknown future, many of his contemporaries thought that the boundary was more porous. He only wished to “toe that line.” Spiritualists believed that they could cross it. As mediums, they claimed that they could transmit messages from the next world. Typically, these would consist of messages of reassurance from departed loved-ones, but spiritualism also had a political dimension. In the spirit world factional conflict and ideological strife were already over. There, every individual, black or white, male or female, was free. The Fox sisters, the nation’s most celebrated clairvoyants, revealed that senator John C. Calhoun had, in death, embraced the abolitionist

“[has] to eat hard again to repair the waste of his system.” Field squanders more than his material and physical resources: “he [is] discontent and waste[s] his life into the bargain.” He lives above his ethical and spiritual means too, frittering away time in which he might confront life directly, take genuine responsibility for himself, in pursuit of superfluous luxuries.
cause he had opposed so bitterly while alive (Castronovo 134). In the first edition of the *Spiritual Philosopher* newspaper (which went to press in July 1850), its founder La Roy Sunderland, an abolitionist, spiritualist and former Methodist minister, argued that “human society” should attempt to imitate the beauty, the justice, the harmony and happiness, of the innumerable societies which make up the spheres above” (qtd. in Capron 207). For Russ Castronovo, these beliefs express the “political necrophilia” of nineteenth century America (*Necro Citizenship* 130). Death was politically exciting because it rendered the individual invulnerable to the social and political unrest of the day. American citizens, he argues, were not merely fascinated by the dead and the possibility of communicating with them: they sought to live as if they were half-dead themselves. They delighted in the somnambulistic and mesmeric trances of young women (which turned the subject into a “half-living corpse”) because they wished to be as young women themselves: passive, innocent, and free from social, economic and political contingencies (125-31). *Walden* registers Thoreau’s resistance to this tendency. He was troubled by his compatriots’ interest in tombs, their fetishization of death-like stupors. He would brook no indistinction in matters of life or death, as “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” the book’s second chapter, makes clear: “Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel the cold in our extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business” (400). This suspicion of death-in-life he shared with the Puritans. They may have exhorted believers to prepare for their demise on a daily basis, but this was a devotional process performed by a keen, conscious mind. They preached that division between death and life was narrow: anyone might die at any minute. Still, from their perspective there was a clear gap between the two states, one that could only be traversed in one direction. When the individual finally comes “face to face to a fact,” Thoreau writes, “[he] will feel its sweet edge dividing [him] through the heart and marrow, and so [he] will happily conclude [his] mortal career” (400).
The implication here is that mortality knows no half-measures. Despite the blandishments of spiritualists we can never enter into an intimacy with death during our lives. Death, as the Puritans preached, is final: it cannot be pre-empted; it will only arrive at the end of one’s life.

There is, then, a certain Puritanism at work in *Walden*. Interestingly, this Puritanism chiefly expresses itself through antipathy towards organized religion, including Calvinism. In “Reading” Thoreau criticises the born-again Christian’s conception that his faith has a monopoly on the truth: “[t]he solitary hired man on a farm on the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is driven as he believes into silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal and treated his neighbors accordingly” (409). Let us “humbly commune”, Thoreau suggests, with the wisdom of both Zoroaster and Christ “and let ‘our church’ go by the board.” At the end of “Economy” he is even more indignant: “[o]ur manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever. One would say that even the prophets and redeemers had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man. There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God” (384). As these last lines suggest, however, he is also concerned with the retrieval or redemption of a certain kind of Christianity. He laments that the religion has become nothing more than “an improved method of agrí-culture” (or “agree-culture”), another way in which men cultivate the earth rather than themselves. Like art, faith is supposed to make man somewhat restless, to express his “struggle to free himself from [his low] condition” (352). Instead, it has made him comfortable, reassured him that the next world will be a perfected version of this. Thoreau sensed that liberal American religion, with its sentimental approach to death, had vitiated Christianity’s message to some degree. “The religion and
civilization which are barbaric and heathenish build splendid temples,” he wrote, “but what you might call Christianity does not” (368). His country, he feared, had been seduced by pagan Egypt and Thebes. It was now busy “[burying] itself alive” in elaborate modern-day mausoleums: empty gestures towards a false eternity (notice that here again Thoreau is uncomfortable with a condition that seems to conflate life and death). The author’s irreverence towards the wonders of the ancient world belies an important message. Those who you “might call” Christians were “above such trifling” (368-9). They sought, on the contrary, “to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” (394), to live in the present without denying or disguising the ultimate fact of death.

Thoreau did not advocate a return to the stringent Calvinism of New England’s past. He showed little interest in the possibility of an after-life, as one of Walden’s most famous aphorisms suggests: “Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth” (482). Although he often gestured towards a divine power at work in nature, he refused to place God at the centre of his cosmology—outlining his experiment by the pond in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” he noted that “most men … have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’” (395). I will argue, nevertheless, that he adopted (in a philosophical, rather than simply rhetorical, sense) certain aspects of the Puritan approach to death. Much of Thoreau’s writing about mortality is intended to shock. He looks to undermine society’s comfortable assumptions concerning death, to jolt his contemporaries out of their

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61 Thoreau argued that “[o]ne piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon. I love better to see stones in place” (368). “The grandeur of Thebes was a vulgar grandeur,” he continued: “[m]ore sensible is a rod of stone wall that bounds an honest man’s field than a hundred-gated Thebes that has wandered farther from the true end of life.” “As for the Pyramids,” he concluded, “there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs. I might possibly invent some excuse for them and him, but I have no time for it.”
complacent view that it consists of a continuity with life, rather than a rupture. If this meant that their journey through this world was a little rougher, then so much the better: “I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria all the way” (352). In an age when mortality had become morally neutral, when people assumed either that all would ultimately ascend to heaven or that death was no more than a natural process, Thoreau sought to raise the stakes once more. A passage from Henry Ward Beecher’s sermons, curiously enough, is analogous here:

It has ever been a mystery to the so-called Liberals, that the Calvinists, with what they have considered their harshly despotic and rigid views and doctrines, should always have been the staunchest and bravest defenders of freedom. The working for Liberty of these severe principles in the minds of those that adopted them has been a puzzle. But the truth lies here—Calvinism has done what no other religion has ever been able to do. It presents the highest human ideal to the world, and sweeps the whole road to destruction with the most appalling battery that can be imagined. It intensifies, beyond all example, the individuality of man, and shows in a clear and overpowering light his responsibility to God, and his relations to eternity. It points out man as entering life under the weight of a tremendous responsibility; having, on his march towards the grave this one sole chance of securing heaven and escaping hell … Who shall dare to fetter such a being? Get out of his way! Hinder him not! or do it at the peril of your own soul. Leave him free to find his way to God. Meddle not with him or his rights. Let him work out his salvation as he can. No hand must be laid crushingly on a creature who is on such a race as this. A race whose end is to be eternal glory, or unutterable woe forever and forever. (From Plymouth Pulpit 83-4)

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62 This is, as Jeffrey S. Cramer observes, mostly likely a reference to “The Celestial Railroad” (1843), Hawthorne’s satirical reworking of Pilgrim’s Progress (The Annotated Walden 36n.201). Hawthorne’s narrator travels on a “railroad” that “has recently been established between [the City of Destruction] and the Celestial City” (Hawthorne 808). He is pleased to discover that this journey has become much easier since Bunyan’s Christian undertook it alone:

A large number of passengers were already at the station-house awaiting the departure of the cars. By the aspect and demeanor of these persons it was easy to judge that the feelings of the community had undergone a very favourable change in reference to the celestial pilgrimage. It would have done Bunyan’s heart good to see it. Instead of a lonely and ragged man with a huge burden on his back, plodding along sorrowfully on foot while the whole city hooted after him, here were parties of the first gentry and most respectable people in the neighbourhood setting forth towards the Celestial City as cheerfully as if the pilgrimage were merely a summer tour. (809-10)

The railroad turns out to be a ruse of the devil’s—it’s terminus is not the Celestial City but the icy waters of death. Hawthorne’s playful point—that it is perhaps becoming rather too easy to enter heaven under the auspices of liberal New-England religion—is quite similar to Thoreau’s here.
How strange that a man that posterity has cast as a liberal himself should produce an apology for traditional Calvinism! Setting the complications of New England’s theological history aside, this text is extremely useful insofar as it approximates Thoreau’s own Puritanism. He may have been comparatively unconcerned about the eternal destiny of man’s soul, but he was deeply invested in the concept of freedom. The many references to mortality in *Walden* (particularly in the first two chapters) warn its readers that they are wasting their lives in economic bondage and spiritual slavery. They have this “one sole chance” to make something from their time on earth, to avoid making the discovery, on their deathbeds, that they had not lived at all.

John Brown, the deeply pious Protestant who was prepared to murder for the sake of his cause, became the embodiment of Thoreau’s modern Calvinism. When the author read “A Plea for Captain John Brown” at the Concord Town Hall on October 30th, 1859, his first task was to convince his audience of the legitimacy of the abolitionist’s violence—in the course of the raid on Harper’s Ferry on October 16th, one of Col. Robert E. Lee’s United States Marines and ten of Brown’s men had been killed (DeCaro 265). Although there was a great deal of anti-slavery feeling in transcendentalist Concord, many of the townspeople most likely shared in the general “dismay and disapproval” that greeted Brown’s actions, even in the North (Peterson 11). Thoreau defended “his … doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 413). Since the slaveholder held his human chattel by force, force could be used against him for the cause of freedom: “I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave.” Indeed, it was not only the liberty of the slave that was at stake. Ten years earlier, in “Civil Disobedience” Thoreau had chronicled his own act of resistance to the unjust government of the United States. Although he had “quietly declare[d] war with the State” through his refusal to pay poll-tax (219), he could anticipate a time in which more aggressive
measures might prove necessary: “suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now” (214). “I do not wish to kill or be killed,” he told his listeners in 1859, “but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 413). Brown, and the state of national emergency that he had precipitated, reminded Thoreau that political crises were, in a certain sense, illusory. Every individual’s life was always in crisis; his freedom was always on the line.

“I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous,” Thoreau had written, only a few paragraphs into Walden, “as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself” (328). He pointed to the “teamster on the highway” wasting his life in the drudgery of manual labour. This man’s “highest duty” he observed, was “to fodder and water his horses! … How godlike, how immortal is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself.” This passage, counter-intuitively perhaps, cuts to the heart of “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” Clearly slavery was not a “frivolous” issue there, but neither was it at the very centre of the controversy that the speech addressed. Thoreau did not have to convince his audience of the justice of Brown’s cause, but of the soundness of his methods. They questioned Brown’s readiness to die, adducing that it was evidence of his insanity. “When we heard at first that he was dead,” Thoreau reports, “one of my townsmen observed that ‘he died as the fool dieth’” (402). “Even the Liberator,” he complains, “called [Harper’s Ferry] ‘a misguided, wild, and apparently insane … effort’” (405). In the face of this disparagement, Thoreau insists that
Brown’s death will be meaningful, that he has not thrown his life away. “Which way,” he asks defiantly, “have [his critics] thrown their lives, pray” (402)? Brown enjoyed the kind of freedom that Beecher spoke of as the prerogative of the Calvinist. In stark contrast to Walden’s teamster, he had fulfilled his highest potential as a human being, he had seized “the one sole chance” afforded him. His example was precious, not merely because he had sacrificed himself for the sake of all American slaves, but because he had demonstrated how to live life to the fullest. To paraphrase Beecher, he showed that man enters life “under the weight of a tremendous responsibility.” Each individual is accountable for his actions because he must die: everything he does takes place in light of “his relations to eternity.” If Brown had buckled under this responsibility, if he had failed to act in the way that he did, he would have done far worse violence to himself than he ever inflicted on the slaveholders of Missouri, Kansas or Virginia. He would not have died, but rather, like the teamster, never really lived.

Thoreau presented Brown’s actions as a tonic for the desperate and depressed: “How many a man who was lately contemplating suicide has now something to live for!” (414) It is quite possible that he counted himself amongst this number. Death had been on his mind throughout 1859. On February 3rd, his father had died after a long illness. As John Thoreau Sr. sickened and grew weaker, his son wrote that he understood “why so many commit suicide, life is so barren and worthless; we only live on by an effort of the will” (Journal 10: 227-8). A week and a half after the death of his parent, Thoreau struggled with a bleak vision of his future:

Sometimes in our prosaic moods, life appears to us but a certain number more of days like those which we have lived, to be cheered not by more friends and friendship but probably fewer and less. As, perchance, we anticipate the end of this day before it is done, close the shutters, and with a cheerless resignation commence the barren evening whose fruitless end we clearly see, we despondingly think that all of life that is left is only this experience repeated a certain number of times. (Journal 11: 445)
In this humour, he was no different than the poor souls whom he critiqued in *Walden*—locked into the daily grind, trapped within the confines of domesticity. Mortality here has no moral significance, death is not a dramatic rupture but slow, debilitating process of decline. It’s interesting to note, furthermore, that Thoreau’s first responses to the death of his father were strikingly sentimental. On February 3rd itself he wrote:

> I have touched a body which was flexible and warm, yet tenantless,—warmed by what fire? When the spirit that animated some matter has left it, who else, what else can animate it?

> How enduring are our bodies after all! The forms of our brothers and sisters, our parents and children and wives, lie still in the hills and fields round about us, not to mention those of our remoter ancestors, and the matter which composed the body of our first human father still exists under another name. (*Journal* 11: 435)

A little later in the same journal entry, he made another observation:

> I perceive that we partially die ourselves through sympathy at the death of each of our friends or near relatives. Each such experience is an assault on our vital force.

> It becomes a source of wonder that they who have lost many friends still live.

> After long watching around the sick-bed of a friend, we, too, partially give up the ghost with him, and are the less to be identified with this state of things. (438)

The survivor’s wish to accompany the deceased into the next world is little different from the urge to prove that the dead had not really departed. Both fantasies resist the idea of death as a separation, a radically singular event in which the dying individual leaves all personal connections behind. Thoreau’s reaction to his father’s death then, was quite typical of mid-nineteenth century America. Hurting at the passing of a close relative, suddenly reminded of his own looming death, he searched for a sense of continuity, a persistent connection with what he had lost. John Brown’s death later that year seemed to be of another order altogether, not a loss but a gain. Without actually dying (on the day on which Thoreau first delivered his address), Brown had taken possession of his death, drawn the greatest possible profit from it. Harper’s

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63 This constitutes an excellent example of the “everydayness” that, in Patocka’s thought, it is religion’s task to overcome (“Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?” 108).
Ferry and its aftermath reminded Thoreau that life was more than the same “experience repeated a certain number of times.” One’s expectations could always be exceeded or contradicted: the day, and one’s life, would not always end in the manner that one anticipated. Moreover, the prospect of Brown’s execution proved that dying was not necessarily just a process of physical and mental decay. Where his father’s death had drained Thoreau’s “vital force,” Brown’s imminent demise had reinvigorated him. It proved that, under certain circumstances, death was not only the means by which one left the world. It could exert an ethical and political force on that world as well. In short, Brown was an avatar of the “Puritan” way of dying that Thoreau had valorised since Walden.

A Plea for Captain John Brown” explicitly describes the abolitionist as a Puritan. Thoreau writes: “[Brown] was one of that class of who we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all—the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him. He died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he reappeared here. Why should he not? Some of the Puritan stock are said to have come over and settled in New England” (398). Thoreau’s wry understatement here cannot conceal his serious point. If New England has a Puritan heritage, if it is still home to those “straightforward, prayerful” men who believe in Godly governance, where are they? He presents Brown as a return to an authentic Puritanism. The observation that “[i]t would be in vain to kill him” suggests that Puritan values must and will persist. This may seem a little surprising, given the hostility towards Christian tradition which Thoreau expresses elsewhere. “The wisest man,” he wrote in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, “preaches no doctrines; he has no scheme; he sees no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens. It is clear sky … To see from earth to heaven, and see there standing, still a fixture, that old Jewish scheme! What right have you to hold up this obstacle to my understanding you, to your understanding me? You did not invent it; it was imposed on you” (57). In his reading of Walden, Stanley Cavell argues that
“[t]he more deeply [Thoreau] searches for independence from the Puritans, the more deeply, in every step and every word, he identifies with them” (*The Senses of Walden* 10). I would add that this process is even more pronounced in “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” For in John Brown’s faith, Thoreau found a Puritan ethic so rigorous that he wished simply to emulate, rather than surpass it.

Examining Thoreau’s speech more closely, we find that it draws on both the Puritan and revivalist conceptions of death. Just as the Puritan’s moral life and future salvation were founded on his responsibility for his death, so Brown’s entire career as a political activist hangs upon his “last act” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 401). Although Brown did not perish at Harper’s Ferry, he was fully prepared to do so. This firm resolution, Thoreau argues, was the reason for Brown’s earlier successes, including his mission to Missouri in the winter of 1858-9. Entering the state in December, in response to an appeal from a slave whose family was due to be separated at auction, Brown carried off eleven slaves, following a violent and fatal confrontation with the slaveholders. Having taken refuge in Kansas “for several weeks,” the party moved slowly through Iowa towards Chicago, then on to Detroit and the crossing to Canada (DeCaro 254-5). This was quite a feat, as Thoreau tells it: the emancipator travelled “by broad daylight, for weeks if not months, at a leisurely pace … for half the length of the North, conspicuous to all parties [and] with a price set upon his head” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 400). It was not the “star” of destiny, but his own death that guided him along the way (401). Thoreau refers to Brown’s belief that “the reason why such greatly superior numbers quailed before him” during the Missouri mission was that “they lacked a cause—a kind of armor which he and his party never lacked.” “When the time came,” he continues, “few [of his enemies] were … willing to lay down their lives in defence of what they knew to be wrong; they did not like that this should be their last act in this world.” Brown was far from suicidal—he wanted to make his life count. Just
as the Puritan forebears strove to be ready for death at any moment, so he calmly accepted that every armed action might be his last. Like them, he was always thinking of death, always hoping to be reconciled to it. Whereas the Light Brigade at Balaclava automatically responded “to a blundering command, proving what a perfect machine the soldier is” (402), Brown’s bravery in Missouri and Virginia was quite conscious and wilful. What’s more, it was no different from the courage in the face of death that he displayed every day. His charge “against the legions of Slavery,” Thoreau argued, had lasted “some years.” Given that it took place “in obedience to an infinitely higher command” than that of the inept British officers in the Crimea, it is “as much more memorable than [the charge of the Light Brigade], as an intelligent and conscientious man is superior to a machine.” That “higher command,” ultimately, was not freedom, but death and its call to individual moral responsibility.

According to Jonathan Edwards’ model of revivalism, genuine religious awakenings tended to begin with a number of believers coming to appreciate “the infinite importance of the things of eternity” (*Letters* 117) through an encounter with their own mortality. These individual experiences, he contended, were contagious. Once a small number of people understood the brevity of human existence, a whole community could quickly follow. Each of the two revivals that he led in Northampton grew out from one or more premature, youthful deaths. Thoreau hoped and expected that John Brown’s death would have a similar effect: “If this man’s acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. It is the best news that America has ever heard” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 414). Although there are, at his estimate, “at least as many as two or three individuals to a town throughout the North” who feel the same way about Brown as Thoreau, most of the nation is asleep. Like the complacent inhabitants of Edwards’ Connecticut Valley, Thoreau’s Americans only go through Christianity’s motions. They may understand the principles of the religion, but
they fail to put them into practice. Just as Edwards accused Christian hypocrites of lacking saving religious affections, so Thoreau speaks of a “woodenness of both head and heart” and a “want of vitality” (403). The tepid faith of the nineteenth-century American believer, he proposes, is a result of his sentimental approach to death: “The modern Christian is a man who has consented to say all the prayers in the liturgy, provided you will let him go straight to bed and sleep quietly afterward. All his prayers begin with ‘Now I lay me down to sleep,’ and he is forever looking forward to the time when he shall go to his ‘long rest.’” Because he sees death as a comfortable slumber, a peaceful refuge from the cares of the world, the lukewarm professor sleepwalks through life. He lacks the radical sense of moral agency and urgency that accompany a true appreciation of personal mortality.

Above all, John Brown’s death was valuable because it unexpected and unprecedented. Like a religious awakening, it promised to break through the dull routine of everyday life and challenge conventional assumptions about human existence. A certain tendency in Nineteenth-century American culture, I have been suggesting, sought to normalize death, entirely stripping it of its power to cause shock, fear and pain (Thoreau’s withering attack on “the modern Christian man” summarises this propensity perfectly). In response, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” emphasises the paradoxes and aporias that arise when one attempts to think about mortality carefully. At one juncture, for example, Thoreau addresses the fact that although he has “all along found [himself] thinking and speaking of [Brown] as physically dead[,]” as he speaks the abolitionist is “still … alive in the hands of his foes.” Here he engages with the idea that although the death of the individual is dependent on his demise (the cessation of biological
existence), the two are irreducibly distinct. In some special cases, indeed, they need not even occur at the same time. Puritan authors such as William Perkins had encouraged their readers to live through their deaths in preparation for their physical demise. This impossible practice, it was hoped, would prove that their actual decease would be gracious. Thoreau follows a similar chain of thought regarding John Brown. The extraordinary context of the man’s death—the fact that he had sacrificed himself for an ethical cause—meant that it mattered little whether his heart had yet to stop beating. In this instance, Thoreau was prepared to set aside his reservations about building monuments and blurring the lines between the living and the dead. “I do not believe[,]” he proclaimed, “in erecting statues to those who still live in our hearts, whose bones have not yet crumbled in the earth around us, but I would rather see the statue of Captain Brown in the Massachusetts State-House yard, than that of any other man whom I know.” In “The Last Days of John Brown” (a speech written and delivered in 1860, after Brown’s hanging) Thoreau approached the mystery from a different perspective: “On the day of his translation, I heard, to be sure, that he was hung, but I did not know what that meant; I felt no sorrow on that account; but not for a day or two did I even hear that he was dead, and not after any number of days shall I believe it” (428). Once again, he stresses the distinction between death and demise, although, in this case, the physical decease comes first. Thoreau goes on to reinforce the point that Brown may not be dead at all: “Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who had not died … I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than ever he was. He has earned immortality.” Far from being purely biological occurrences, human deaths may produce miracles. Accordingly, Thoreau opened the speech with the observation that “John Brown’s career for the last six weeks of his life was meteor-like, flashing

64 Here Thoreau anticipates Heidegger’s distinction, in Being and Time, between death itself (the subject of ontological / existential analysis) and the end of life (the subject of biological / ontical investigation) (290-2).
through the darkness in which we live. I know of nothing so miraculous in our history.” The moment of his death itself had produced “a revolution in public opinion.” Many of those who had believed that the “abolitionist ought to be hung” were then convinced of the justice of his actions.

The most powerful passage of “A Plea for Captain John Brown” makes the same point as “The Last Days,” although it uses precisely the opposite argument. Here, Thoreau directly inverts the traditional Puritan rhetoric of death. While Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards continually reminded their congregations of the universality and imminence of death, this excerpt suggests that Brown is the first American to die:

This event advertises me that there is such a fact as death—the possibility of a man’s dying. It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived. I don’t believe in the hearses and palls and funerals that they had had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off, pretty much as they had rotted or sloughed along. No temple’s vail [sic] was rent, only a hole dug somewhere. Let the dead bury their dead. The best of them fairly ran down like a clock. Franklin—Washington—they were let off without dying; they were merely missing one day. I hear a good many pretend that they are going to die;—or that they have died for aught I know. Nonsense! I’ll defy them to do it. They haven’t got life enough in them. They’ll deliquesce like fungi, and keep a hundred eulogists mopping the spot where they left off. Only half a dozen or so have died since the world began. Do you think that you are going to die, sir? No! there’s no hope of you. You haven’t learnt your lesson yet. You’ve got to stay after school. We make a needless ado about capital punishment—taking lives, when there is no life to take. Momento mori! We don’t understand that sublime sentence which some worthy got sculptured on his gravestone once. We’ve interpreted it in a grovelling and snivelling sense; we’ve wholly forgotten how to die. (414)

Mary Elkins Moller describes this as “one of the most ineffably comic passages in American literature” (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 226). She warns that readers, “[s]urprised by its wit and flourish[,] … may miss the intense and unabated anger that surges through [it].” The author felt this rage, she surmises, both at the prospect of “Brown’s imminent death” and at the idea of death itself. While I agree that the humour here is spiced with a certain amount of
righteous indignation, I’m not convinced that death in general (or “Death” with a capital “D” as Moller has it) is the object of Thoreau’s ire. He may have privately raged at death on occasion (after he lost his brother and father, for instance), but Brown’s execution, as we have seen, filled him with intense excitement at the ethical possibilities that an authentic death brought to bear. When there really was death “in the case,” then there had been life—a life lived in accordance with mankind’s maximum moral potential. In his political writings, from “Civil Disobedience” (1849) through to *Walden* (1854), “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854) and “Life Without Principle” (1854), Thoreau had challenged his readership to take full responsibility for every consequence of their actions. If their State condoned slavery anywhere within the union, for example, then “each inhabitant of the State [must] dissolve his union with her” (“Slavery in Massachusetts” 343). If their taxes were supporting an illegal war, then it was better to go to prison than to pay them: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles” (“Civil Disobedience” 213). “A Plea for Captain John Brown” marries this logic to the Puritans’ austere approach to death. If a man never acted independently in life (fully thinking through the implications of his behaviour), then why should we treat his passing as a unique event? It is, rather, a mechanical or biological process: the stopping of a clock or the rotting of a fungus.

Moller is right to argue that the speech rebels against the *circumstances* of Brown’s execution (specifically, that its author is “enraged by the timidity [and] indifference of most of his contemporaries in this crisis” [“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 226]). Thoreau is furious at the Federal and Northern State governments’ complicity in Virginia’s capital sentence: “Who is it whose safety requires that Captain Brown be hung?” he asks, “[i]s it indispensable to any
Northern man? ... While these things are being done, beauty stands veiled and music is a screeching lie.” He does not complain, however, about the fact of Brown’s death, or against the “possibility” of death itself. Instead, Thoreau examines one of mortality’s most intriguing paradoxes: death enters our lives from a region that is utterly beyond, we are completely defenceless against it, yet it is only as mortal beings that we possess any moral agency. This contradiction lies behind the deliciously ironic pedagogical metaphor that Thoreau produced at the end of the screed quoted above: “Do you think that you are going to die, sir? No! there’s no hope for you. You haven’t got your lesson yet. You’ve got to stay after school” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 414). The idea that one might need to practice to bring about one’s death is transparently ridiculous, particularly in the context of the irresistible fates and powers that have brought about John Brown’s demise. Death has a habit of tracking one down, regardless of whether one is ready for it, or one deserves to die in this particular way or at this particular time. Thoreau, however, quickly casts aside the sarcasm of his first apostrophe to the errant listener, and offers them a genuinely urgent injunction: “But be sure you do die, nevertheless. Do your work, and finish it. If you know how to begin, you will know when to end.” This reminds the reader that although he cannot exercise any control over how or when he will die, he does have the ability to change the quality of his death. If he spends his life preparing for death, aware that each of his ethical decisions is coloured by his mortality, then he will ensure that his end, whenever it arrives, will have a singular meaning, unique to him.

Although Cotton Mather, we may suppose, never instructed his congregation to die, he would have recognised this as an authentically Puritan sentiment. He and Edwards warned that only a few would be granted eternal life; Thoreau speaks of death itself as a rare distinction. While these positions may seem contradictory, they have much in common. Both insist that in order to be saved we must confront our mortality in the midst of life; both figure death as a
punishment that may become a victory. What, then, are we to make of Thoreau’s antithetical expression of this Puritan ideal? Is it simply a rhetorical flourish, a sardonic attempt to hold his audience’s attention? Or does Thoreau’s inversion suggest a serious break with Puritan tradition?

To begin, it’s important to acknowledge that he did not believe in the resurrection of the body or an individuated, personal eternal life. Whenever he makes a gesture towards immortality it refers either to the symbolic survival of a man’s reputation, a set of values associated with his name (as in the case of John Brown), or to the biological persistence of the body’s matter (as in the journal entry he made on the day of his father’s death). Given that the Puritan view of death was predicated on the belief that man was made to live forever, it may seem strange to speak of Thoreau as part of the same tradition. However, on an ethical, if not a metaphysical level, the association is quite plausible. In an ethical sense, only an immortal—someone who can conceive of universal values that will outlast his own existence—can die. In his critique of the ethic of human rights, Alain Badiou objects to the fact that it “defines man as a victim” (*Ethics* 10), or, rather, an animal (11). “If ‘rights of man’ exist,” he writes, “they are surely no rights of life against death, or rights of survival against misery. They are the rights of the Immortal, affirmed in their own right, or the rights of the Infinite, exercised over the contingency of suffering and death. The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man’s identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him” (12). Badiou’s contention that “every human being is capable of being this immortal … be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary” is the very idea that underlies “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” The abolitionist’s critics assume that a man’s death is always a “failure, and his continued life, be it of whatever character, [necessarily] a success” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 415). To them, Thoreau speaks quite bluntly: “You don’t know your testament
when you see it” (417). The Harper’s Ferry raiders, he argued, “have … taught us how to live” by “teaching us how to die” (414). Brown’s message, then, is not simply that slavery is reprehensible, but that the preservation of existence is not life’s highest goal. Death is not just the end of life, but the standard against which one’s behaviour must be judged. Although the “truth” for which the abolitionist dies is undoubtedly “important” in Thoreau’s eyes, it is in fact “secondary” to his purposes here.

“A Plea for Captain John Brown” anticipates Badiou’s argument in one other significant way. Thoreau may favourably compare his subject to those lesser men who die a “merely” physical death (414), but he makes no attempt to imply that Brown’s consciousness survives, or that his body is any more than “dust” (Badiou 12). While the speech is a continuation of the Puritan way of thinking about death, it also constitutes a break with that tradition. Thoreau’s playful assertion that Brown is the first American to die can be read as an implied criticism of Puritanism on a practical level. The old Calvinist ministers may have encouraged their charges to face up to their mortality, but it seems that this part of their project was a failure. Implicit within the piece is the suggestion that the Puritan belief in the immortality of the soul may account for their lack of success in this regard. May a man truly be said to have died if he was expecting to regain consciousness on the other side? May he truly be a Christian if he expects to receive an eternal reward for his actions on earth? These questions speak through Thoreau’s writing about Brown, resonating in the divide between his scepticism and the abolitionist’s orthodox belief. The author does not directly address the disparity between the abolitionist’s belief in an afterlife and his own lack of faith. The fact that he portrays Brown as the consummate Puritan and the
possible founder of a new religion registers his anxiety on this account. Thoreau’s critique (in “A Plea for Captain John Brown”) of self-satisfied Protestant charities such as “The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions” does address the issue of mortality, however obliquely. The “Northern men, … women, and children” who buy a “life membership’ in such societies as these” are really purchasing “a life-membership in the grave!” (403). Assured of their own salvation, they fund expeditions to far-flung territories, in the hope that the natives will be given the gift of eternal life. In their own way, they are no better than the smallholders critiqued in Walden. They too, have mortgaged the present for an illusory posterity. Because they have their minds on “foreign countries,” and already have one foot in the next world, they fail to notice the miracle that has taken place right in front of them: John Brown, an American man, has died, free from any self-interested motivation or calculation. New England, Thoreau argues, has been “curse[d]” by the “worship of idols, which at length changes the worshipper into a stone image himself[,]” fixed in his assumptions, interests, sympathies and superstitions. Immortality, we may presume, was one of the totems worshipped there: Puritans and their evangelical liberal successors were, perhaps, more concerned with saving their souls than praising the divinity. Brown “was an exception, for he did not set up … a … graven image between him and his God.”

The colonial New-England Calvinists had also assumed that they had dispensed any authority that sought to intervene between the individual and the divine, in breaking with the Churches of England and Rome. This reminds us that Brown was, from one point of view, more Puritan than the Puritans. He had not only rebelled against the State when it had interfered with

65 “It is remarkable, but on the whole it is well,” Thoreau wrote, “that [the abolitionist’s death] did not prove the occasion for a new sect of Brownites being formed in our midst” (“The Last Days of John Brown” 423). His ambivalence about the value of such a religion may be ascribed to the fact that he was careful to portray Brown as a man above factional politics, secular or religious. In “A Plea for Captain John Brown” he described him as “such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; [he was] no mock hero, nor the representative of any party” (415).
his religious principles, but had set aside any self-concern, searching for justice for others rather than his own redemption. Thoreau made a great deal of Brown’s equanimity and selflessness in the face of death, reporting the Governor of Virginia’s assertion that the abolitionist was “cool, collected, and indomitable” during the action at Harper’s Ferry (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 409). He also quoted a portion of Brown’s response to the questions posed to him by his captors\(^{66}\) when he had “regained consciousness” after his defeat (DeCaro 266): “I wish to say … that you had better, all you people at the South, prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question, that must come up for settlement sooner than you are prepared for it. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled—this negro question, I mean; the end of that is not yet” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 417, my emphasis). Just as David Brainerd, on the verge of death, was occupied by the future of the Church, so Brown, at the beginning of his last days, looked past his own fate (which he knew to be settled) towards his cause. In doing so, of course, the chances were that he had achieved salvation, finding it because he was not looking for it. “I am here to plead his cause with you[,]” Thoreau told his audience: “I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least” (416). As these lines reveal, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” has all the hallmarks of a classic Puritan biography, including, I might add, the irreducible tension between the death of the exemplar and that of the reader. At the same time, it makes no guarantee that the salvation of which it speaks will involve literal immortality. In this regard, it becomes a Jeremiad, an example of that most Puritan of textual genres. Brown is a voice crying in the wilderness, the

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\(^{66}\) Governor Wise, senator J.M. Mason and Robert E. Lee were present, as well as “bystanders, militia men and curious onlookers” (DeCaro 266). Brown, DeCaro points out, was well aware that “his remarks would be reported by journalists.”
first American, in Thoreau’s account, to search for salvation without holding immortality as his chief concern. As a Jeremiad, the speech’s rhetoric must be rooted in a contradiction: even as it complains that “true” Puritanism is nowhere to be found, it is itself an expression of that value system. Similarly, while Thoreau complains that in nineteenth-century America death is entirely taken for granted, assumed to be a settled question, his own argument reveals that, for him, at the very least, it is not.

Ready for the Fall

In 1853 Thoreau recorded an unpleasant dream in his journal: “Yesterday I was influenced with the rottenness of human relations. They appeared full of death and decay, and offended the nostrils. In the night I dreamed of delving amid the graves of the dead, and soiled my hands with their rank mold. It was sanitarily, morally, and physically true” (Journal 4: 472). This passage is indicative of a very different line of thinking about death than that which Thoreau employed in his writing about John Brown. There, the dying abolitionist proved himself “superior to nature” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 415). Here, Thoreau is concerned that the way in which humans died left a stain on the natural environment. “How may a man most cleanly and gracefully depart out of nature?” (Consciousness in Concord 188), he asked in an earlier entry. “At present,” he continued, “his birth and death are offensive and unclean things. Disease kills him, and his carcass smells to heaven. It offends the bodily sense, only so much as his life offended the moral sense. It is the odor of sin” (188-9). “A Plea for Captain John Brown” gave little thought to the abolitionist’s physical body, soon to be a-mouldering in the grave. And while the Puritans loathed the decay of the flesh, they accepted that it was inevitable. Before death, William Perkins wrote, we must do all that we can for the health of our bodies, afterwards, he insisted, there was nothing we could do: the bodies of true believers, in the end, were
indistinguishable from the cadavers of the damned. Thoreau, on the other hand, longed here for a purer way in which to leave the world, a cleaner way to dispose of the dead:

May we not suffer our impurities gradually to evaporate in sun and wind, with the superfluous juices of the body, and so wither and dry up at last like a tree in the woods, which possesses a sort of embalmed life after death, and is as clean as the sapling or fresh buds of spring. Let us die by dry rot at least. The dead tree still stands erect without shame or offence amidst its green brethren, the most picturesque object in the wood. The painter puts it into the foreground of his picture, for in death it is still remembered. (Consciousness in Concord 189-90)

The gap between the individual’s death and his biological demise that underpins the John Brown material seems, in this instance, to have completely vanished. There is little concern here for the destination of the soul after death. Nor does Thoreau speak of the way in which a man’s concern for timeless ethical values may render his death meaningful. Instead, he argues that the material practicalities of mortality are its most moral dimension, wondering when we will be “judged … by what we leave behind us, [rather] that what we bring into the world” (189). “The guest,” he adds, “is known by his leavings.” Having suggested that we cleanly wither away like a wild tree in the forest, Thoreau suggests another non-human model for our deaths: “May not man cast his shell with as little offence as the muscle [sic], and it perchance be a precious relic to be kept in the cabinets of the curious?” (190). These ideas, as Moller observes, are not literal “proposals for the disposal of the dead” (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 228). Rather, they register Thoreau’s desire that we should stop thinking about human death (and life) as somehow separate from nature. Graveyards, the most tangible representation of this line of thinking, distressed and irritated him, as I have already discussed. A blot on the landscape, a waste of fertile ground, they symbolised man’s desire to close off his mortality from the rest of the environment. How much better to cremate the dead, to spread our remains back into the soil: “[t]he ancients were more
tidy than we who subjected the body to the purification of fire before they returned it upon nature.”

In the group of texts that I will analyze in this section, Thoreau considers death in the wild. Here he approaches it as a physical phenomenon, the ultimate natural fact. Human mortality may have a moral significance, but it is inseparable from the wider moral meaning of nature. “We need the tonic of wildness,” he wrote in *Walden*, “[w]e can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-cost with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets” (575). As this passage suggests, Thoreau found the destructive aspect of nature just as invigorating as its procreative, regenerative side. In the excerpts that I will discuss below he takes a keen interest in the material details of both animal and human death. It is tempting to see a certain radical materialism at work in these texts: here, Thoreau seems to undercut the idealist, “Puritan” approach to mortality of “A Plea for Captain John Brown” and parts of *Walden*; here, he exposes the nineteenth-century conception of “the beautiful death” as a sentimental fiction. I will argue, however, that these are misleading assumptions. While Thoreau’s materialism was at odds with his “supernatural” interpretation of death in “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” it was not radical or even realist. “Autumnal Tints”

67 Thoreau’s interest in cremation may be linked to his sympathy with Hinduism and other eastern religions. In an early draft of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* he took up the subject again:

> Some nations … make it a matter of religion to bury their dead in the earth, and would think it sacrilege to treat them otherwise; but to my imagination the ancient practice of burning the dead is, on the whole, more tasteful and beautiful, for the so the body is most speedily and cleanly returned to dust again, and its elements dispersed throughout nature. Those saints who have been burnt at the stake, and their ashes cast into some stream, have made the cleanest departure. (*Consciousness in Concord* 69)

His own country was amongst those who preferred to inter their dead: America’s first crematory did not open until 1876 (Farrell 164). The Puritans, of course, could not countenance cremation because they believed in the resurrection of the body. Their influence on American religion doubtlessly played a part in the slow progress of the “cremation movement” (166). In contrast to their insistence on the persistence of individuality, in both material and spiritual senses, here and in his journal entry Thoreau speaks of the dispersal of the dead into nature.
argues that mankind should die as gently and gracefully as the red and gold leaves of the New-
England fall. *Cape Cod* (1865), in common [with] several passages from the *Journals*, takes a
grim delight in the mutilated, decaying bodies of men and animals who have suffered violent
deaths. In each case the underlying ideal is the same: death should be treated as a purely physical
process, the redistribution of matter back into nature, a *return home*. Furthermore, there is little
suggestion in any of these texts that there is anything inherently mysterious or difficult about
death. Mortality is but a light burden to bear, if only men could learn to accept it more easily.

Roughly a year before Harper’s Ferry, Thoreau began to rework some of his journal
entries on autumn into an essay. “Autumnal Tints” would not be published until 1862, when it
“appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* … shortly after [his] death” (Hoag 152). It begins with a
chauvinistic flourish: the “brilliancy” of New England’s “autumnal foliage” is unrivalled by the
trees of Europe (“Autumnal Tints” 367). Thoreau complains that this glorious “change” has yet
to make “a deep impression” on American literature. This may be due to European convention:
since the leaves of England “acquire but few bright colors” before their fall, English literature
presents autumn as a twilight season, a period of decline and decay. Even the urban denizens of
the North East are not aware of, or do not understand this phenomenon: “[m]ost appear to
confound changed leaves with withered ones, as if they were to confound ripe apples with rotten
ones.” There is more than regional pride at stake here, however. The ruddy colour of the “Poke
or Garget,” for example, “is the emblem of a successful life concluded by a death not premature,
which is an ornament to Nature. What if we were to mature as perfectly, root and branch,
glowing in the midst of our decay, like the Poke!” (371). The essay is as much a meditation on
mortality as a celebration of the New England fall. The “brownish-yellow” leaves of the Elm
trees that line the streets of Concord are “perfectly ripe” (377). Thoreau searches for an “an
answering ripeness in the lives of the men who live beneath them.” What did he mean by this?
He may have wished that the running of the human life cycle was as regular as the turning of the seasons: how satisfying it would be if every individual were to die at their peak, having reached their maturity! I think, however, that Thoreau was concerned here with the manner of death, rather than its timing. He admires the easiness, the lightness of the leaves’ “death,” how they fall gently “at the first earnest touch of autumn’s wand, making a sound like rain” (378). “How beautifully they go to their graves![,]” he writes, “how gently [they] lay themselves down and turn to mould” (381). The simplicity and honesty of their demise makes a mockery of human rituals and pretensions:

So they troop to their last resting-place, light and frisky. They put on no weeds, but merrily they go scampering over the earth, selecting the spot, choosing a lot, ordering no iron fence, whispering all through the woods about it,—some choosing the spot where the bodies of men are mouldering beneath, and meeting them half-way ... When the leaves fall, the whole earth is a cemetery pleasant to walk in. I love to wander and muse over them in their graves. Here are no lying nor vain epitaphs. What though you own no lot at Mount Auburn? Your lot is surely cast somewhere in this vast cemetery, which has been consecrated from of old. (381, 382)

The leaves, in short, “teach us how to die” (382). They know no anxiety, no fear, and no unfulfilled promise. If only we could learn to cast aside our bodies so easily: “One wonders if the time will ever come when men, with their boasted faith in immortality, will lie down as gracefully and as ripe,—with such an Indian-summer serenity will shed their bodies, as they do their hair and nails.”

The raid on Harper’s Ferry took place in mid-October; Thoreau first read his speech in defence of Brown on the penultimate day of that month (and would go on to deliver it on several other occasions before Brown’s execution on December 2nd). The time of year, then, may explain

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68 Richard Lebeaux suggests that the author’s valorisation of ripeness and maturity is connected to the premature death of his brother. He claims that “the family history of tuberculosis” and Thoreau’s tendency towards illness “made him sensitive to the possibility that he could die young” (Thoreau’s Seasons 299).
why he was moved to describe the abolitionist and his companions as “ripe for the gallows” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 412). Alternatively, this brief remark may register the author’s desire to square Brown’s violent ethical courage with the peaceful conception of death advanced by “Autumnal Tints.” There is, indeed, a certain sympathy between each text’s understanding of the ethics of death. Although John Brown transcends the physical component of death, he lays his life aside as meekly and serenely as a falling leaf (even as Thoreau contrasts Brown’s individual agency with the mechanical obedience of the Light Brigade, he implies that there may have been something instinctive about the man’s fearlessness in the face of death: “when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable … when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up” [402]). The foliage of New England’s trees takes on a “higher color” in the autumn months, as the leaves move towards “a late and perfect maturity” (“Autumnal Tints” 367). During this time, every leaf “commences a more independent and individual existence, requiring less nourishment from any source, and that not so much from the earth … as from the sun and air” (367-8). The last phase of John Brown’s career exhibited a comparable self-sufficiency, as he and his followers lived on the run and beyond the law, “sleeping and waking upon” their cause (“A Plea For Captain John Brown” 412). He, too, took on a more vibrant colour in October: at Harper’s Ferry, during his “last act” (401), his virtue came into its fullest flower. Notwithstanding these rhetorical analogies, I shall argue that the guiding philosophies of each essay are broadly opposed. In “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” the bodies of Brown’s inferiors rot away like vegetable matter. Here Thoreau associates the material decay of the body with lives that have failed to come to ethical fruition and demises that do not even merit the name of death. “Autumnal Tints,” by contrast, suggests that a willingness to confront

69 These similarities may prepare the way for my concluding discussion of the connection between Thoreau’s transcendentalist and materialist approaches to death.
and accept the materiality of death is a mark of moral *superiority*. How much wiser the man, it argues, who allows his body to decompose beneath the forest’s canopy, than he who holds his death above nature.

Both texts, then, present an ideal, *authentic* version of death. But where “A Plea for Captain John Brown” attacks the contemporary attitude towards death quite forcefully, “Autumnal Tints” is broadly in step with it. The passage examined above, certainly, gently critiques the increasingly ornamental and expensive monuments erected in New-England cemeteries. But even as he contrasts the purity and honesty of the autumn forest with the artificial fussiness of the cemetery, Thoreau underlines their fundamental similarity. He simply replaces the domestic sentimentality of his peers with a pastoral form: “The Loose-strife shall bloom and the Huckleberry-bird sing over your bones. The woodman and hunter shall be your sextons, and the children shall tread upon the borders as much as they will. Let us walk in the cemetery of the leaves,—this is your true Greenwood Cemetery” (382). Like “the lying [and] vain epitaphs” which Thoreau mocks, the carpet of leaves gestures towards a *continuity* through death. Where they speak of the reunion of friends and family in heaven, the fallen foliage suggests a biological immortality: “[t]hey that soared so loftily, how contentedly they return to dust again, and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of the tree, and afford nourishment to new generations of their kind, as well as to flutter on high!” (381-2). It may be tempting to interpret these moments where Thoreau “reduces” human life and death to a biological level as evidence of a scientific or materialist frame of mind. This temptation must be resisted, however. The leaf’s death stands for *comfort* above all else—the avoidance of pain, the

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70 This is a punning allusion to Baltimore’s Green-Wood Cemetery, established in 1838 as “New York’s first rural cemetery” (Steiner 96). It was part of a series of pastoral burying-grounds inspired by Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery (94-5), to which Thoreau made reference a few sentences earlier.
reassuring thought that our lives will continue, in whatever form. Earlier in the chapter, I examined Thoreau’s response to the death of his father. On that occasion, he drew some solace from the notion that the matter that made up the “[t]he forms of our brothers and sisters, our parents and children and wives, lie[s] still in the hills and fields round about us” (Journal 11: 435). “Autumnal Tints” emerges from this sentimental line of thinking just as much as from the observation of nature. The essay, moreover, was not the first place that Thoreau had expressed a desire to live and die like a leaf. He made the following resolution in January 1842, shortly after the death of his brother:

I must receive my life as passively as the willow leaf that flutters over the brook. I must not be for myself, but God’s work and that is always good. I will wait the breezes patiently, and grow as Nature shall determine. My fate cannot but be grand so. We may live the life of a plant or an animal, without living an animal life. This constant and universal content of the animal comes of resting quietly in God’s palm. I feel as if [I] could at any time resign my life and the responsibility of living into God’s hands, and become as innocent, free from care, as a plant or stone. (Journal 1: 326-7)

Sixteen years later, Thoreau still read the same sermon in the splendour of the New-England autumn. Death should not be a struggle, or a source of intellectual anxiety and uncertainty, but the peaceful expression of a natural imperative. To accept one’s mortality is to “resign,” rather than accept, responsibility for one’s life.

Thoreau’s usual vision of the wild was rather more violent than that of “Autumnal Tints.” As Richard Bridgman observes: “[t]hroughout his life, the mutilated bodies of men, animals, birds, and reptiles, the battered remnants of destroyed life, repeatedly absorbed Thoreau’s attention” (Dark Thoreau xi). While he was occasionally disturbed by individual incidents,71 his

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71 The fate of a rabbit that had starved to death in a box trap that a hunter had misplaced affected Thoreau greatly: “What a tragedy to have occurred within a box in one of our quiet swamps! … After days and nights of moaning and struggle, heard for a few rods through the swamp, increasing weakness and emaciation and delirium, the rabbit
usual reaction to this carnage was dispassionate and considered. Unlike Emerson, he was never compelled to deny the reality of pain and suffering in nature (xii). In common with many scientists of his time, he practiced what Laura Dassow Walls has termed “empirical holism.” This meant that he thought the universe knowable only through close study of its constituent parts (Seeing New Worlds 84-5). Although one might never comprehend it in its totality, empirical analysis of the components of the cosmos would reveal traces of an underlying law. When Thoreau saw a “flattened toad on the sidewalk” or a decapitated rooster, floating on the water with its “red stump sticking out” (Journal 6: 171, 181), he saw no evidence that nature was “inherently malignant, nor even … indifferent” (Walls 225). Instead, these deaths reminded him of the purity of nature, its happy balance between order and chaos. The law of death remained constant, but was always being enacted in new ways.

Sometimes, admittedly, the unpredictable nature of death would shake Thoreau from his composed, scientific pose. In April 1852, for example, he marveled at “a dead sucker floating on the water” (Journal 3: 417). This sight seemed “so recent—so unexpected” that it restored his faith in the world: “While so many institutions are gone by the board and we are despairing of men and ourselves there seems to be life even in a dead sucker—whose fellows at least are alive. The world never looks more recent or promising—religion philosophy poetry—than when breathes its last” (Journal 10: 77-8). His next remark has more than a touch of melodrama about it: “They tell you of opening the tomb and finding by the contortions of the body that it was buried alive. This was such a case.”

72 At the end of Nature, Emerson asserted the primacy of the mind. If only we were to frame our lives in the right way, then all that is “evil” would disappear:

Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall no more be seen. The sordor and filths of nature, the sun shall dry up, and the wind exhale. (48-9)

For him, the mind, or spirit, was what was real. The natural world was a reflection of its perceiver’s psyche.
viewed from this point.” Human mortality may seem to be a punishment, a curse upon ourselves and the earth. The sucker’s, on the other hand, stands for survival, the ultimate triumph of life:

“To see a sucker tossing on the spring flood—its swelling imbricated breast heaving up a bait to not-despairing gulls— It is a strong & a strengthening sight. Is the world coming to an end?— Ask the chubs.” In the “Spring” chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau spoke with relish of the storm of violence and death that the season unleashed:

We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation of this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,— tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. (*Walden* 575-6)

However morbid this accumulation of gruesome anecdotes might seem, they offer a tangible “compensation”—they remind us of the “innocence” of nature. If she can afford to spare “myriads” of animals, fish, birds and insects, then why should we reckon the individual human life so important? Where “Autumnal Hints” drew reassurance from the idea that mankind might mature, ripen and fall away in the same slow and predicable pattern as New England’s flora, it is the very contingency, the accidental quality of death that is comforting here. Counter-intuitively, in each case, Thoreau’s point is the same. Death is not an ordeal, but an innocent process. For the Puritans, death was a radically singular event, the moment when the individual’s personal destiny would be revealed, for better or worse. Although they warned that death could strike at any time, they tended to imagine the material circumstances of every death in the same way: the dying person surrounded by friends and family, but ultimately alone before God (and the devil).

In Thoreau’s naturalist writings, by contrast, death is a universal phenomenon. Each man,
woman, animal or plant’s demise has the same outcome: the redistribution of their body’s matter into nature. Even the most gruesome of demises could be redeemed if viewed in this light.  

On the 7th of January 1853, Thoreau was granted an opportunity to test this theory in the aftermath of an unexpected, shockingly violent event. Around ten o’clock that morning a powder mill just outside Concord exploded. The author hastened to the scene and recorded what he saw in precise and unflinching detail. He noted the quality and movement of the cloud created by the explosion and the state of the buildings which had been destroyed, before turning his attention to the remains of the mill workers: “[s]ome of the clothes of the men were in the tops of the trees, where undoubtedly their bodies had been and left them. The bodies were naked and black, some limbs and bowels here and there, and a head at a distance from its trunk. The feet were bare; the hair singed to a crisp” (Journal 4: 455). Thoreau might have been describing the carcasses of dead animals or the husks of decaying plants. As Randall Conrad observes, it is interesting to read his flat, emotionless response alongside the Concord Freeman’s account of the accident. “It was heart rending,” wrote the newspaper’s reporter, “to behold these poor relics of man, so torn, 

73 In “Thanatopsis” (1817, revised 1825), one of his most popular poems, William Cullen Bryant offered this fact as a consolation to those disturbed by “thoughts” of their “last bitter hour” (122). He reminded his reader that they would not “retire alone” to their “eternal resting place.” “Thou shalt lie down[,]” he wrote, “With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings, / The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good, / Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past, / All in one mighty sepulchre” (122-3). The first version of the piece was published in The North American Review alongside “A Versification of a Remark by Pliny” by Lydia Sigourney, a sentimental poet with “a lugubrious preoccupation with death” (Hart & Leininger 606). Albert F. Mclean acknowledges that Bryant used the same overarching metaphor as Sigourney: in both verses death is a comfortable sleep (William Cullen Bryant 54-5). He claims, though, that Bryant rejected her “sentimental assumptions[,]” since in his work the dying individual must reassure himself of death’s painlessness, rather than passively accepting the ministrations of an anthropomorphized mother earth (55). It seems to me, however, that the boundary between Bryant’s “literary” poem and Sigourney’s popular composition is not so easily defined. Like Thoreau, Bryant participated in the sentimental culture of death that one might have expected him to disdain.

74 Popular reaction to the Civil War would confirm this opinion. Drew Gilpin Faust writes that while the “horror” of the conflict led to the “proliferation of irony” in America, the adoption “of a posture of distance and doubt in relation to experience[,]” the “predominant response to the unexpected carnage was in fact a resolute sentimentality that verged at times on pathos” (194). Through the sentimental literary texts and religious beliefs that I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the nation worked to “redeem” the excessive violence that it had witnessed.
so mangled, so burned, and blackened, and so suddenly changed from the beauty and vigor of confident manhood to the shattered form of loathsome death” (qtd. in Conrad 86). Where the *Freeman* recoiled at the “miserable fragments of humanity” hanging from the trees, Thoreau seemed only to see pieces of matter. Every scholar interested in Thoreau’s perception of death has written on this passage. Mary Elkins Moller’s reaction is typical. She “sense[s] the presence of revulsion and pain in the very absence—[or rather] avoidance—of emotionally colored words and of moralizing” (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death” 235). Thoreau must have repressed his horror at the carnage—how else could he have continued with his observations about “winter birds … after the holocaust he had witnessed in the forenoon[?]” Two days later, he finally faced up to the “moral implications of the explosion” (236). At the end of a journal entry on the redemptive feelings that the vibrations of the telegraph wire aroused in him, he looked back on the disaster: “Day before yesterday I looked at the mangled and blackened bodies which had been blown up by powder, and felt that the lives of men were not innocent, and that there was an avenging power in nature. Today I hear this immortal melody … Are there not two powers?” (*Journal* 4: 459). Moller suggests that the men were not innocent because they had “misuse[d]” nature’s materials “for destructive purposes” (“Thoreau and the Problem of Death 236). I think that Thoreau’s words here have a more general and fundamental significance. Conrad, rather acidly, remarks that this second response “preach[es] and scold[s] almost as severely as if Calvinism were still alive and flourishing in Concord” (“I Heard a Very Loud Sound” 87). In the preceding part of this chapter I have argued that, in a very particular way, it was—in Thoreau’s own notion of death as the foundation of moral responsibility. The difference between the two accounts of the powder mill explosion then, represents the dichotomy between the Thoreau’s two approaches to death. His initial reaction captures his desire to encounter death in the wild, to see it as an innocent, natural process. His second perspective casts mortality as an ethical event.
True, unlike John Brown, these men did not defeat nature through their demise. It was, instead, the “avenging power” that had triumphed, suddenly and shockingly, over them. They were, nevertheless, still engaged in a moral contest. According to Conrad and Moller, the second response is the more genuine. Thoreau was “haunted” by what he had seen at the mill (Conrad 87), and it was some time before he could recover his transcendental optimism (Conrad 82-3; Moller 236-8). I’m not convinced that either reaction was more authentic, as such. Instead, they reflect two distinct attempts to deal with the problem posed by death. According to the first, all uncertainty about death is a product of human anxiety and fear. If only one were to consider death in the right way, one would realize that it was merely a natural phenomenon. The second, on the other hand, embraces the ambiguity of human mortality, asking questions, rather than providing answers. Thoreau’s speculation about the “two powers” in the world opens up the possibility that there may, after all, be a divide between biological demise and death (the “avenging power” seems out to punish mankind for their hubristic belief that they are anything more than material substances. The other suggests that it is possible for men to die, rather than simply cease to exist, and that as a result they may become “immortal,” in Badiou’s figurative sense). These approaches may be rhetorically and theoretically incompatible, but they are both invested in the same strategy. Each seeks to make sense of death, to gather some kind of intellectual and emotional control over it.

Before I come to discuss this connection more fully, I’d like to examine Cape Cod (1865), a travel narrative in which Thoreau pushed his physical interpretation of death to the very limit. The wilderness that he encountered in his 1849 journey along the peninsula with William Ellery Channing, was far more provocative than the pastoral, semi-civilised landscape around
Here, the tension between his two views of mortality became even more pronounced. Because Thoreau worked on the book until his death in 1862 (Sophia, his sister, and Channing, his travelling companion oversaw its publication (Gura 143), it was very much an ongoing project during the dramatic events of late 1859. His excitement over the John Brown affair had little impact on the text, however. Indeed, Cape Cod critiques the Puritan approach to death more extensively than any of Thoreau’s other works. Despite the breezy, confident tone in which the author describes his travels, the book repeatedly underlines the fragility of human life and the blank neutrality of nature. These revelations are not necessarily disturbing, however. As I have argued above, Thoreau took comfort from the idea that our deaths were no more than a part of the ecosystem. Cape Cod revels in the freedom from ethical responsibility that this entails.

The first chapter, “The Shipwreck” begins with Thoreau noticing a “handbill headed, ‘Death! one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset!’” (852). Hearing that a ship “laden” with Irish immigrants has been wrecked on the rocks there, he and Channing join the crowds heading for the coast (852-3). While the Irish, in “sober” fashion, search the recovered bodies for their friends and relatives, Thoreau finds a certain beauty in the scene. His eye rests for a time on the “livid, swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl,” which he almost seems to take pleasure in describing. This corpse is little more than an object to him, “the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk,” the animal counterpart to the shattered brig (853). She was “gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white,—with wide-open and staring eyes, … lustreless, dead-lights … like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand.” “Many days [later],” Thoreau reports, “something white was seen

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75 The book also draws on later visits that he made in 1850 and 1855 (Cape Cod 851; Gura, “Thoreau’s Cape Cod 143”).
floating on the water by one who was sauntering on the beach. It was approached in a boat, and found to be the body of a woman, which had risen in an upright position, whose white cap was blown back with the wind” (857). While he appreciated that these bodies meant that “the shore was wrecked for many a lonely walker there,” he argued that, on deeper reflection, they would “perceive … how its beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this.” Looking back over the shipwreck, Thoreau found that “it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected” (856). His sympathies lay with “the wind and waves,” rather than the dead stretched out on the beach: “If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity? If the last day were come, we should not think so much about the separation of friends or the blighted prospects of individuals. I saw that corpses might be multiplied, as on the field of battle, till they no longer affected us in any degree, as exceptions to the common lot of humanity” (856-7). Here Thoreau seems to question the Puritan belief in the priceless value of the individual—death is a natural process, a part of the world’s eco-system. “Why care for these dead bodies?” he asked, rhetorically, “[t]hey really have no friends but the worms or fishes” (857). He is as careless of the dignity of the dead as the seaweed pickers who keep up their work in the waters around the wreck, pausing occasionally to “separate fragments of clothing” from their harvest: “[d]rown who might, they did not forget that this weed was a valuable manure” (854).

“The Sea and the Desert,” the book’s penultimate chapter, challenges the Puritan conception of death more directly. Here Thoreau walks the desolate stretch of the Outer Cape between Truro and Provincetown. From the western shore of this narrow sleeve of land, “the laziest [man] may look across the Bay as far as Plymouth at a glance” (977). Turning eastward, he can gaze “over the Atlantic as far as human vision reaches, merely [by] raising his eyelids” (977-8). These two vistas are richly significant. Plymouth stands for Plymouth Rock, for the Puritan settlers who are on Thoreau’s mind throughout Cape Cod. When the Mayflower landed
at Cape Cod Harbour the Pilgrims found it (according to *Mourt’s Relation*) a pleasant and fertile place, “compassed about to the very sea with oaks, pines, juniper, sassafras, and other sweet wood” and covered, to “a spit’s depth, [with] excellent black earth” (*Cape Cod* 1024-5, after *Mourt’s Relation* 10). For Thoreau, it was a barren, desolate spot, with “no soil to speak of” and “scarcely anything high enough to be called a tree” (*Cape Cod* 1026). The Atlantic is a world of death. This is an inescapable fact. Even if the stroller on the shore is “too lazy” to look out to sea, “he can hardly help *hearing* the ceaseless dash and roar of the breakers. The restless ocean may at any moment cast up a whale or a wrecked vessel at your feet” (978). To walk along the beach then, is to be reminded of mortality at every turn. More than this, the flotsam and jetsam on the strand reveals that human death is no different from animal—or fish—death:

[This] is a wild, rank place, and there is no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor-clams, and whatever the sea casts up,—a vast *morgue*, where famished dogs may range in packs, and crows come daily to glean the pittance which the tide leaves them. The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately up upon its shelf, rotting and bleaching in the sun and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them. There is naked Nature,—inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the clifffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (979)

Thoreau describes the “sea-shore” as “a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world.” Society here is no more than a thin top-soil, easily swept away by the ocean breeze. Life is an instinct, a hard-fought battle. “Creeping along the endless beach amid the sun-squawl and the foam,” the author and his travelling companion are reminded [of] their consanguinity with the sea’s insentient, primitive life-forms: “it occurs to us that we, too, are the product of sea-slime.” Thoreau suggests that it was the Pilgrims’ “greenness” which “caused them to see green” on the Cape (1026). Exhausted by their long voyage, excited by the prospect of a New World, they painted this sandy desert a more appealing colour: “[t]hey saw literally, as well as figuratively, but one side of the Cape.” The intermingling of the bones of “men and beasts together” along the strand suggests that these early settlers’ vision may have
been defective in another sense. If our deaths are no different than the whale or crab’s, then why should we spend our lives in pursuit of moral continence and grace? Why not live like the oysterman whom Thoreau visits at Wellfleet, further back down the Cape and a few chapters earlier in the book? This grizzled old man is, we are told, “deeply impressed with a sense of his own nothingness, and would repeatedly exclaim,—‘I am a nothing’” (906). What’s more, he draws his fatalistic philosophy from the same scriptures that the Puritans read: “What I gather from my Bible is just this: that man is a poor good-for-nothing critter, and everything is just as God sees fit and disposes.” The oysterman tells Thoreau the “story of the wreck of the Franklin, which [had taken] place there the previous spring” (913). Informed that the ship was sinking, he “first ate his breakfast, and then walked over to the top of the hill by the shore, and sat down there, having found a comfortable seat, to see the ship wrecked.” The sea was too stormy and he too old to be of any help to the doomed passengers and crew, but one wonders whether this man would have helped them in any case: from the Cape, you see clearly that death is inevitable, a natural necessity.

John Brown’s death was an event of such magnitude that it threatened, for a while at least, to overthrow the whole natural order. After the execution, Thoreau wrote in his journal:

I have been so absorbed of late in Captain Brown’s fate as to be surprised whenever I detected the old routine running still,—met persons going about their affairs indifferent. It appeared strange to me that the little dipper should be still diving in the river as of yore; and this suggested that this grebe might be diving here when Concord shall be no more. Any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects. (Journal 12: 447-8)

In “The Last Days of John Brown” (1860), he reworked this observation, strengthening it. “For my own part,” he confessed, “I commonly attend more to nature than to man, but any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects. I was so absorbed in him as to be surprised whenever I detected the routine of the natural world standing still” (422). Cape Cod is founded
on precisely the opposite conceit. How, Thoreau wonders, can human beings go about their business in such close proximity to the overbearing indifference of the ocean? In “The Plains of Nauset,” he recounts the ecclesiastical history of Eastham, a small town on the peninsula. “Let no one think that I do not love the old ministers,” he proclaims, a little disingenuously, “[t]hey were, probably, the best men of their generation, and they deserve that their biographies should fill the pages of the town histories. If I could but hear the ‘glad tidings’ of which they tell, and which, perchance, they heard, I might write in a worthier strain than this” (Cape Cod 887). Thoreau cannot hear the promise of salvation (or the threat of damnation) because the sound of the sea is deafening. On the Cape, nature reigns. Here, all “man’s works are wrecks,” especially his intellectual and transcendental ones—there is no place for the supernatural. Nevertheless, the “reality” which Thoreau encountered on the Cape was ultimately reassuring. Compared to the horrific vision of hell that dominated the preaching of the Reverend Samuel Treat, the “first minister settled” in Eastham (882), the prospect of ending one’s days as a pile of bones on the strand was genuinely appealing. In Treat’s hell, the damned would wade deeper and deeper into sin: no relief there from moral responsibility.76 On Thoreau’s shoreline, the corpses of the innocent dead would slowly sink back into nature, entering into an “understanding” with the material world that the living could never comprehend (924).77

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76 Thoreau quotes from Treat’s “Discourse on Luke xvi.23, addressed to sinners”:

Some people think sinning ends with this life; but it is a mistake. The creature is held under an everlasting law; the damned increase in sin in hell. Possibly, the mention of this may please thee. But, remember, there shall be no pleasant sins there; no eating, drinking, singing, dancing, wanton dalliance, and drinking stolen waters: but damned sins, bitter, hellish sins; sins exasperated by torments, cursing God, spite, rage, and blasphemy.—The guilt of all thy sins shall be laid upon thy soul, and be made so many heaps of fuel. (qtd. in Cape Cod 883)

77 Although Thoreau placed this observation in Cape Cod’s chapter “The Beach Again,” it refers to his 1850 visit to Fire Island, off Long Island, New York to recover the body of Margaret Fuller on Emerson’s behalf (Lebeaux, Thoreau’s Seasons 124-5). The body to which he refers here (which was not Fuller’s) were innocuous at first, “singularly inoffensive both to the senses and the imagination. But as I stood there they grew more and more
“I did not intend this for a sentimental journey,” Thoreau reminds his readers at the end of “The Beach” (903). His travels along the Cape were an escape from domesticity, from the comforts of inns and hotels. He aimed to experience “the thing itself,” not an image on a map, or a view “seen from the stage-coach” (893). It’s interesting to note however, that Thoreau’s account often dwells on the few habitations that he did encounter along the peninsula. He delights in the snugness of the Highland Light lighthouse (971) and admires the hardiness of the Wellfleet oysterman and his spouse (the oysterman’s habit of spitting his tobacco into the fire where food is cooking does seem to disturb the normally unflappable author, however [917-8]). A charitable house, built as a shelter for shipwrecked sailors, is an object of some fascination for him. According to Thoreau’s guidebook, each of these huts is equipped with straw and matches, that the unfortunate mariners might have some heat and light. Spying into one through a knothole in its door, he discovers that it is lacking even these essentials. What is supposed to be a place of refuge prior to rescue seems to be “but a stage to the grave” (900). Is this observation indicative of Thoreau’s general attitude towards the domestic? In the first set of texts that we examined, the home is a byword for an inauthentic, irresponsible attitude to death. Like the ornate monuments of the parkland cemetery, it implies the persistence of family identity through death, preventing the individual from confronting the radically singular nature of their mortality. Although I have termed the second set of texts an encounter with death in the wild, an attempt to escape from civilisation, they also represent a search for a “pure,” natural domesticity. I have already noted how “Autumnal Tints” turns the forest into another Mount Auburn. A journal entry from October 1857 is equally revealing:

imposing … That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it” (Cape Cod 924).
These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be—they were at first, of course—simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me. I see not a dead eel or floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life and is like a line or accent in its poem. Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks again, were I not here. After a while I learn what my moods and seasons are. I would have nothing subtracted. I can imagine nothing added. My moods are thus periodical, not two days in my year alike. The perfect correspondence of Nature to man, so that he is at home in her! (Journal 10: 127; qtd. in Lebeaux 293)

This is the impulse that lies behind Thoreau’s fascination with accidental human and animal death. If he could achieve sympathy with the “dead eel” and “floating snake,” then he would prove that nature was his home. His own death, then, would be nothing other than a homecoming. The ocean might be bottomless, “awful to consider,” with “no [apparent] relation to the friendly land” (935), but it too, could become his abode. Thoreau wished, after all, “to put up at the true Atlantic House, where the ocean is land-lord as well as sea-lord” (893).

Directly after one of Cape Cod’s most provocative statements on the wreck of the St. John—“Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes”—Thoreau makes a strident declaration of faith in the after-life. Even as the “empty hulks” of the passengers’ bodies drifted to shore, “they themselves … were cast upon some shore yet further west, towards which we are all tending, and which we shall reach at last, [albeit] through storm and darkness, as they did” (857). Having been wrecked just short of the New World—“they were within a mile of its shores”—they have “emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence—though it has not yet been discovered by science—than Columbus had of this.” Richard Bridgman casts this passage as an “antidote” to the apparent morbidity of the description of the wreck. Having tried to outface his fear of mortality with some unwarranted remarks on the beauty of the bodies of the drowned, Thoreau now makes some unfounded, clichéd assertions about the reality of the next world (Dark Thoreau 165). The author, Bridgman
claims, “was driven to this sentimental expedient because he could derive no validation of a harmonious life from nature, since nature proved at times to be amoral, cruel, repugnant, indifferent” (166). I agree that the passage stands out—here Thoreau treats death as a spiritual, rather than natural phenomenon (“Infants by the score dashed on the rocks by the enraged Atlantic Ocean! No, no! If the St. John did not make her port here, she has been telegraphed there. The strongest wind cannot stagger a Spirit; it is a Spirit’s breath” [858]). There is, however, a certain confluence between this quintessentially sentimental approach to mortality and Thoreau’s encounter with death in the wild. Both assume that the dead are innocent and passive: there is no moral imperative at work here, no call to take responsibility for one’s mortality. Both emphasise continuity rather than rupture: the material substance of the decaying body provides sustenance for animals and fertiliser for plants, the spirits of the passengers arrive safe at port after all (only in a better place than “Boston Harbor” [857]). Both are part of nineteenth-century America’s challenge to its Puritan heritage: above all, they treat death as a universal phenomenon. While the Puritans continually stressed that every living creature must die, they made no guarantees that death would be the same for everyone. In his final moments, the saint might cry out as fearfully as the sinner, but his experience of death would be radically different. In the nineteenth century, naturalists and sentimentalists alike insisted that all human beings would arrive at the same destination: either over our heads or beneath our feet.

Is man’s death inside or outside nature? Is it no more than a natural process, no different than the death of an animal, or does it have another, invisible dimension? Although he never explicitly formulates it, this is the question that runs through Thoreau’s later writing. According to the Puritans’ understanding of the world, man stands at the centre of creation. While every plant and animal had a particular place in God’s plan, only man was rational, capable of moral action. As Samuel Willard puts it, man in “his Bodily and Sensible part, participates in the same
*Genus* with his fellow Animals, being a living Creature with a Compound Life; but as to his better part is an Immortal Substance, and Akin to the Inhabitants of the other World” (*Compleat Body of Divinity* 122). From this privileged (and yet precarious) position, he could scrutinize nature for evidence of God’s providence, the power which brought order and stability to the universe. Through his “*Faculties of Understanding and Will … which Brutes have not,*” he “is able to Read the Book of the Creature, to see into the Nature of things, to discern the Beams of Divine Wisdom shining in the Frame of the World, and treasure up the Knowledge of it within it self” (123). More importantly, if he looked closely, with careful reference to the Bible, he would see that “every single [natural] fact was a symbol, not only of the law governing things, but of the laws of the spirit” (Miller, *The Seventeenth Century* 213). As Perry Miller notes, “[e]very particular creature was held to contain a moral import over and above the scientific laws of its particular nature.” This allegorical understanding of nature was the foundation of Jonathan Edwards’ interest in biology, natural history and physics. In the notebooks later published as *Images and Shadows of Divine Things* (1948), he recorded the spiritual significance of the natural phenomena that surrounded him in rural Massachusetts. Emerson’s symbolic reading of nature was a revision of this same interpretative tradition. He argued that “every natural fact is trivial until it becomes symbolical or moral” (qtd. in Porte 61). It is we, rather than God, who create the world—the poet, the philosopher and the physicist have “dissolved” the “solid seeming block” of material reality with their “thought” (*Nature* 36). They have shown that nature

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78 Joel Porte argues that Emerson was not a “typologist” in his interpretation of the natural world (*Emerson and Thoreau* 61). Rather than reading nature according to scripture, he read it as a kind of holy text, one that reflected ethical, rather than revealed, truths (62, 66). In contrast to Perry Miller, he emphasises Emerson’s debt to Plato over his place in the Puritan tradition (62). I think that Miller is right, however, to find, at the very least, a rhetorical or literary connection between Emerson’s theory of correspondence and Puritan typology: “[t]he disposition to read sermons in brooks and morals in stones seems thereby to have become ingrained in the New England nature, and to have persisted as a habit beyond the demise of Puritan theology, until it could at length be transmuted into art by Nathaniel Hawthorne or given new philosophic expression [by Emerson]” (*The Seventeenth Century* 214).
lies under "the immense shadow of man" (Letters 23). From Emerson and the Puritans’ viewpoint, the death of a plant or animal is only significant in a symbolic sense, how it relates to human mortality ethically or exegetically. In his naturalist writings Thoreau challenged this position, transgressing the border between humanity and the rest of the ecosystem. His reading of nature was primarily metonymic, rather than symbolic or metaphoric. He was just as interested in the vehicle as in the tenor: indeed, for him they were the same thing. The natural world does not correspond to the cultural or spiritual world of man. They are, instead, different parts of one whole. When he likened human bones to the remains of fish, to flotsam and jetsam, he had no nihilistic agenda. He did not seek to undermine the dignity of the departed, but to reinforce it: they had, after all, finally returned home.

The View from Ktaadn

The term “dignity,” which is commonly associated with death today (both war heroes and euthanasia patients are said to “die with dignity”), is the key to understanding the connection between Thoreau’s two visions of mortality. “A Plea for Captain John Brown” argues for the valour and dignity of the abolitionist’s demise in the face of the public opinion that declared him “‘Misguided!’ ‘Garrulous!’ ‘Insane!’ ‘Vindictive!’” (416). The heroic quality of Brown’s death placed him in the most dignified company: “The Martyrdom of John Brown,” the brief address that Thoreau read at Concord town hall on the day of Brown’s execution, argues that “transcendent moral greatness” in any context is “nearly identical with greatness everywhere and in every age,” just as “a pyramid contracts the nearer you approach its apex” (418). Accordingly, on this occasion, “[a]lmost any noble verse” seems dedicated to John Brown. No matter its subject, it may be read “either as his elegy, or eulogy, or be made the text of an oration on him.” If Brown’s death is singular, it is not entirely unique: other men and women have died in the same mode as him, offering up their lives for an ethical cause. The whole premise of “A Plea for
Captain John Brown” is that the martyr may prove an example to desperate men. He is more than a “momento mori”; he may teach us “how to die” and “how to live” (414). Yet the sense persists, throughout Thoreau’s writings on Brown, that the abolitionist will be rather difficult to emulate. In the “last six weeks of his life[,]” we read, Brown was as a “meteor … flashing through the darkness in which we live” (“The Last Days of John Brown” 422). If this man had really performed a miracle (Thoreau observes: “I know of nothing so miraculous in our history”), then how could individual Americans hope to repeat it? Even as he demands that his fellow countrymen imitate Brown, Thoreau reinforces the notion that he was inimitable: the Kansan was either the only one of his “contemporaries … who had not died” (“The Last Days of John Brown” 428), or the only American who had ever tasted death (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 414). What’s more, the Puritan approach to death that Brown embodies is featured in a relatively small proportion of Thoreau’s writing about mortality: the three essays that address the abolitionist directly and a number of passages in Walden. Elsewhere, Thoreau searches for a different form of dignity in death. The prospect of dying passively, as nothing more than an object in nature, held a powerful appeal for him. John Brown’s transcendental death was the prize of a concerted ethical and physical effort. This other approach to mortality, by contrast, was merely a question of coming to terms with a material truth: that our deaths, like that of any other animal, are simply the beginning of a physical process of decomposition. While only a few exceptional individuals might make a moral stand through their demise in the manner of Brown, anyone could take comfort from the realisation that death bore no meaning and carried no pain.

The dignity that each of these attitudes bestows is earned at the expense of the other. “A Plea for Captain John Brown” mocks the manner in which most men depart from this world. John Brown dies because he has lived. Other people do not die at all, because they have not lived in an ethically responsible way. Their actions have been entirely automatic: they have made no
individual mark upon this earth. Since their existence has been scarcely more significant than that of an animal or vegetable, there is little grandeur in their passing: “they merely [rot] or [slough] off, pretty much as they had rotted or sloughed along” (“A Plea for Captain John Brown” 414). In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau makes a similar point about unthinking servants of the state. “The mass of men,” he writes, “serve the state … not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies” (205). Whether they are employed directly by the government or not, “[t]hey are the standing army, … the militia, jailers, constables [and] posse comitatus,” because they never question their position in society, or the implicit assent that they give to the injustices that it perpetrates. In doing so, “they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well.” Since they make no use “whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense[,]” they “command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt … [and] have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs.” This invective does differ from that of “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” in that it portrays the inadequate majority as the living dead: “laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniments.” The underlying point, however, is the same. The mortality of the morally irresponsible is vitiated and less than fully human; they are “mere shadow[s] and reminiscences[s] of humanity” (“Civil Disobedience” 205). Cape Cod, by contrast, ridicules the notion that there is any moral hierarchy of death. In that book, Thoreau sees human mortality as but a part of the world’s ecosystem. One of the most striking images in the text is that of the men of Cohasset nonchalantly harvesting seaweed from the wreckage of the fatal shipwreck of the St. John, careless of the fact “that they might at any moment [find] a human body under it” (854). Death here is not an event of any particular significance: “[t]his shipwreck[,]” Thoreau observes, “had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society.” The funeral procession for the drowned, the means by which
men seek to commemorate the individuality is not a particularly “impressive … scene” (896).
The author finds the amoral disinterest of the seaweed gatherers far more compelling. As we
have seen, Cape Cod also has some fun at the expense of the Puritan understanding of death (on
which Thoreau’s ethical approach to the subject draws heavily). The doctrinal disputations of the
former ministers of Eastham, for instance, seem petty when set beside the indifferent, death-
bringing ocean (885-7). The grounds of the Millennium Grove revivalist camp are littered with
“heaps” of the “clam-shells” that attendees have devoured in summers gone by (882). The lofty
aims of the camp meeting (conversion, revival and salvation from death) are undercut by these
piles of detritus, which remind us of the materiality of mortality.

Every attempt to understand death must be compromised in some way. The value of John
Brown’s death, as we have seen, is undercut by its very singularity. In Thoreau’s account,
Brown’s demise has a supernatural and transcendental quality. If this man has set the standard
for the way in which human beings must die, then that standard, paradoxically, is superhuman.
The author’s “naturalist” approach to death is similarly flawed. Even as Thoreau draws our
attention to the similarity between human and animal death, he must reassert the irreducible
distinction between mankind and beast. The very act of making this assertion reminds us that
man is the self-conscious, “symbol-using animal” (Burke, Language as Symbolic Action 3). If we
were truly no different from our animal relations, then we would not be cognisant of our
mortality and would have no reason to claim this likeness. Moreover, despite the appeal of
animal life and death, Thoreau occasionally registers an anxiety towards becoming bestial and
impure. Consider, for instance, the passage from his journal that I quoted earlier. There, he
asserts that “[w]e may live the life of a plant or animal, without living an animal life (Journal 1:
326).” In the “Higher Laws” chapter of Walden, he speaks of the “reptile and sensual” element of
human life, that “perhaps cannot be wholly expelled … Possibly we may withdraw from it, but
never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure” (Walden 497). These difficulties, as I suggested just now, are inevitable. Death itself, by definition, must remain unknown and unknowable. Any approach to mortality that attempts to smooth out its contradictions would seem to offer us little more than fantasy. It’s easy to dismiss the nineteenth century’s sentimental treatment of the subject as a vain dream. Spiritualists consoled the bereaved with visions of another world that was nothing other than a perfected version of this one. The unknown country, most Americans expected, would hold few surprises for them. Thoreau’s naturalistic understanding of death, I have argued, reflected this broader cultural tendency. He may not have believed in the persistence of consciousness, but he, too, while in this mode, saw death as a return home and a descent into peace. The “Puritan” approach of Walden and the John Brown writings is more explicitly paradoxical and ambiguous. It suggests that while the mass of men are half-dead in the midst of life, the independent and singular individual may be most alive after his death. It implies that no one ever really dies: either one passes away in an insensible, material manner, in which case one’s demise does not deserve the name of death, or one lives on after death through one’s engagement with immortal ethical ideals. One could argue that the complexity of this line of thinking is itself a way of coping with the inscrutable otherness of death. It turns the mystery of mortality into an intellectual puzzle—a problem, rather than an aporia. From a certain perspective, any attempt to understand death is a flight into fantasy.

Although he spent much of his career investigating two contradictory conceptions of death, Thoreau may have occasionally ascribed to this third point of view. In the posthumously published travel narrative The Maine Woods (1846), he told of his assault on Mt Katahdin (or “Ktaadn”), the highest peak in Maine. Making the final ascent alone, the author encounters nature in her raw state, “savage and awful, though beautiful” (645). “This,” he writes, “was the
Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night.” Some hardy souls, as we have seen, had managed to cultivate the sandy soil of Cape Cod—Ktaadn was a region resolutely resistant to husbandry and settlement: “Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandselled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mean, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever.” Thoreau feels “the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man,” inert matter’s resistance to intellectual explication. The mountain, he asserts, “was Matter, vast, terrific,—not [man’s] Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate.” Here, perhaps, is the nihilism that Thoreau’s other works refuse to partake in. From Ktaadn, mankind seem homeless: although their bodies are moulded from clay, the raw earth will not receive their bones. Death is not a return home. It has no symbolic value, no meaning whatsoever. This passage casts an interesting light on the two approaches to mortality that we have been analysing here. It reveals that, despite their differences, they have one thing in common: both attempt to situate death within a narrative. Each invests human death with dignity through associating it with something that is other than human: the transcendental or the natural. The episode on Ktaadn suggests that these associations cannot hold, that such a story cannot be written. The immensity of the mountain stands for the opacity of death. Both elude our grasp: we cannot enter into a relation with either. This fleeting thought, which will not permit itself to develop into a position or an approach, may lead us to recalibrate our interpretation of Thoreau’s naturalistic approach to death. Cape Cod values the morally neutral, irresponsible deaths of animals. But it does so from the position of a human subject. In its final line, Thoreau reflects that “[a] man may stand there [on the Cape] and put all America behind him” (1039). The Puritan approach to death, I would argue, is a significant part of the America that is rejected or superseded here. Thoreau longs to be as a pile
of bones thrown up by a shipwreck, nothing more than “a slight inequality in the sweep of the shore” (924). Then, perhaps, the “hollow roar of the sea” will be directly “addressed” to him, rather than a sound that he happens to overhear. It seems significant, however, that the book closes with a reassertion of humanity: a man staring out to sea. It reminds us that the many images of death in the text—the mixture of fish and human bones on the beach, the blank vastness of the ocean—are dependent on the individual who gazes at them (on Ktaadn, by contrast, an encounter with mortality precipitates the fragmentation of the subject: “I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them” [646]). What’s more, the notion that the repudiation of the Puritan understanding of mortality might be part of a conscious effort to “put … America behind” suggests that this process might necessitate a certain acceptance of ethical responsibility. To want to deny responsibility for one’s mortality, after all, is to accept that such responsibility exists.
“Not a Plaything”

When Stephen Crane was eight years old, his father died. The Rev. Dr. Jonathan Townley Crane was a socially conservative but theologically liberal Methodist minister who had converted to Methodism at eighteen, having grown appalled at the “repulsive” Calvinist teachings of the Presbyterian Church in which he had been raised (J. T. Crane, “Another Diary of the Reverend Jonathan Townley Crane” 40). According to Thomas Beer, the young Crane was traumatized by this event. He pictures him at the wake, his hand “somehow … brush[ing] the cold silver handle of the coffin” (41). In this moment, we read, “the full horror of Christian death smashed on the lank child’s consciousness.” Looking back on this incident, the mature Crane poured scorn on religion’s hypocritical attitude towards death: “[w]e tell kids that heaven is just across the gaping grave and all that bosh and then we scare them to glue with flowers and white sheets and hymns. We ought to be crucified for it … I have forgotten nothing about this, not a damned iota, not a shred” (41-2). Both the incident and this reminiscence are unattested elsewhere—we may be confident, therefore, that they are both fictitious. Beer, Crane’s first biographer, is notoriously unreliable. Although parts of his book (Stephen Crane, published in 1923) are “verifiable,” we know now that he invented many episodes and omitted others that did occur (Clendenning 27). Only one of the many letters that he quotes is extant (Wertheim and Sorrentino, Correspondence 13n.8), and it seems that he composed most or all of the rest himself (Benfy 8). As early as 1950, John Berryman remarked on the “grand inaccuracy, expurgation, and distortion” that mar Beer’s book (Berryman xii). Nevertheless, he acknowledged that his own biography’s “debt to … Beer’s work [was] very considerable” (xiv), guilelessly observing
that “[m]ost of the bulk of letters upon which he relied … have disappeared, or are not to be found among his papers.” The episodes that Beer concocted proved too entertaining, too “colourful” (xii) for Berryman to resist—they helped him understand where Crane’s great artistry “[came] from” (298). The encounter with the coffin was amongst the incidents that caught Berryman’s fancy. His own account elaborates on Beer’s: “the house was full of people. The whispering, the hymns, the heavy odors, the darkness, his tall brothers in black, were ghastly to a thin small boy, and he was terrified when one of his hands brushed a handle of the coffin, cold and silvem” (12).

Why did Beer concoct this particular event? Why did Berryman, despite his suspicions, accept it as genuine? The answer, I think, is that this moment, together with the invented recollection, seems to explain a great deal about Crane’s literary output. Crane, as we shall see, was fascinated by death, as both a physical phenomenon and a moral question. A traumatic, early encounter with mortality would help to account for this. Moreover, the majority of his critics have cast him as a rebel, the \textit{enfant terrible} determined to break away from his restrictive religious upbringing. His mother’s side of the family was profusely clerical. George Peck, his grandfather, was a pastor of a rather different temperament to his meek father, a stern evangelist of the old frontier style. Jesse T. Peck, his great-uncle, also a Methodist minister, was the author of a fiercely conservative evangelical tract entitled \textit{What Must I Do to Be Saved?} (1858). A writer as perceptive as Crane, we suppose, whose work is suffused with such a sharp sense of irony, must have seen right through the religion of his family. He must have understood from an early age that traditional American Protestantism exploited humanity’s fear of death. Marston Lafrance, for one, ascribes to this line of thinking. His 1971 study of Crane argues that the author was soon aware that Christianity simply imposed an “illusory” structure on the meaninglessness
of the world (A Reading of Stephen Crane 7-8). The Methodism of the 1880s, he writes, “was far too narrow, too anachronistic, to provide acceptable nourishment for a precocious boy growing up … in urban Asbury Park” (4). In support of this contention, he quotes “a reminiscence” which Crane “dictated the year before his death: ‘I used to like church and prayer meetings when I was a kid but that cooled off and when I was thirteen or about that, my brother Will told me not to believe in Hell after my uncle had been boring me about the lake of fire and the rest of the sideshows’” (5). This account of what he terms “Crane’s conversion,” however, is another of Thomas Beer’s fabrications. Lafrance, like Berryman before him, is prepared to credit Beer when it suits him to do so.79

I’d like to suggest another explanation for the strange persistence of these inventions. Crane’s apparent disgust with the Puritan approach to death and the doctrine of hell helps to place him as a child of his time. Between the eighteen nineties and the First World War much of American literature took on a cynical and sceptical tone. Humorists and literary naturalists alike questioned traditional values, reserving particular disdain for the Christian interpretation of the world. Biological necessities, not spiritual or ethical ideals, drove human society, and death was chief among them. In his Devil’s Dictionary (first published in 1906 as The Cynic’s Word Book) Ambrose Bierce defined “extinction” as “[t]he raw material out of which theology created the future state” (75). “Existence” he describes with a cheery piece of doggerel: “A transient, horrible, fantastic dream, / Wherein nothing is yet all things do seem: / From which we’re wakened by a friendly nudge / Of our bedfellow Death, and cry: “O fudge!” (74). 80

79 It should be noted that although Lafrance never mentions the doubts concerning Beer’s veracity, he draws on his material far less frequently than Berryman.
80 The entry for “Life” also makes interesting reading: “[a] spiritual pickle preserving the body from decay. We live in daily apprehension of its loss; yet when lost it is not missed” (150).
Twain’s *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (begun in 1898, completed in 1908, published posthumously in 1969) paints a similar picture. There, No. 44, the satanic printer’s devil, reveals that not only is there “no other” existence after death, but that earthly “life itself is only a vision, a dream” (186). Finally, in *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), Jack London puts his antagonist, the “blond beast” Wolf Larsen, through an agonizing and protracted death. Crippled by a stroke, he can communicate only through pen, paper, and the pressure of his hand. When, in his final moments, the heroine asks him if he believes in immortality, he strains to write his reply, as if he were a spiritualist transcribing a message from the next world (*The Sea-Wolf* 320). The answer he slowly transcribes, his “last word,” is the same as that which Thomas Beer’s version of Stephen Crane offered to the Christian funeral ritual: “B-O-S-H.” To the “materialist” Larsen (74), religion is little more than a hollow sham, an empty joke. It is rendered ridiculous by death, the very thing from which it claims to offer redemption. Each of these authors engages with the great tradition of American Calvinism—Twain and Bierce in particular exhibit a deep pessimism about the moral and physical corruption of the human race.

Nevertheless, they are devoted to the demystification of the religious impulse. In their hands, life becomes a shaggy-dog story, a joke without a punch line: its end, when it finally comes, is utterly meaningless. Implicitly, their understanding of American religious history follows a similar pattern. Set against the blankness of death, the Puritan project and the dramatic revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seem entirely futile.

If we take Beer’s biography as read, Crane appears to sit quite easily in this company. What’s more, a considerable number of his compositions seem to suggest the same. *The Black*  

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81 For an interesting discussion of the Calvinist flavour of Twain’s comedy see Michael Dunne, *Calvinist Humor In American Literature*, 82-100.
Riders (1895), his first collection of poetry, is quite self-consciously blasphemous: penance, judgment and the afterlife are amongst the Christian doctrines that it mocks. A complimentary contemporary reviewer of the volume described Crane as “a bold—sometimes too bold—original, powerful writer” of “skeptical, pessimistic, … cynical” verse (Peck 65). “The Open Boat” (1897), his most celebrated short story, places four shipwrecked men in the choppy waters off the Florida coast. The viciousness of the tide means that they are able to steer their dingy very close to the shore without daring to land it. Seeing a man signalling to them from the beach, they assume that a lifeboat is on its way (78). Soon, however, they realize that what they have taken for the lifeboat is a “winter resort hotel omnibus” (80). The man’s signals, furthermore, “don’t mean anything.” He has mistaken them for pleasure boaters, and is “just playing.” The mariners, disgusted that anyone could think that they were “out [there] for sport” (78), incredulous, indeed, that anyone could think it “amusing to row a boat” (74), struggle to sustain the hope that they will survive. The narrator does not offer us a direct insight into their thoughts, but speculates that they “would conclude that it was really the intention of the seven mad gods [of the sea] to drown [them], despite the abominable injustice of it all” (84). To work so hard, to come so close to land, and still be drowned!—they seem to be pieces in a cruel game that nature, or God, is playing. The standard reading of the text claims that this perspective is then replaced by the realization that the universe is utterly indifferent to their plight (see Wertheim, Stephen Crane Encyclopedia 248-9). “The Open Boat,” then, suggests that life is indeed like a bad joke: it has a most unsatisfying conclusion. The story offers no justification of the fact that three of the crew survive, while the oiler—the most able swimmer—is killed. Lastly, consider the situation of “The Upturned Face” (1900), one of four stories that Crane wrote about a regiment in the army of the fictional country of Spitzbergen. Here, two officers are confronted with the task of burying the “body of their comrade,” while the “chalk-blue” face of the corpse stares up at them
(297). Under heavy rifle-fire they dig him a hole, recover his possessions, and lay him in the ground. Resolved to bid farewell to “old Bill” while “he can still hear [them]” (298), they struggle to remember the words of their funeral service over the open grave. Spoken in the midst of battle, the few lines that they can remember—“O Father, our friend has sunk deep in the waters of death, but his spirit has leaped toward Thee as the bubble arises from the lips of the drowning. Perceive, we beseech, O, Father, the little flying bubble and—” (299)—seem inadequate, even comic. The possibility that either man may be cut down by the enemy sharpshooters at any time renders their situation absurd. Who would stop to bury them if they were both shot? It becomes apparent that the half-forgotten liturgy, with its peculiarly nautical imagery, is a means of repressing, rather than accepting, the reality of death. When it is time to cover the body, the lieutenant is disturbed by the idea that a shovel-load of earth might land on the upturned face, for this will confirm the finality of the cadaver’s demise. The onomatopoeic monosyllable with which the story closes—“plop”—figures both the materiality and the emptiness of death. This horrifying, yet comic, narrative concision (there is no need for Crane to tell us where the piece of sod has landed) makes the words of the service, and the men’s nervous conversation, seem like worthless prattle. The dead are buried, not for decency’s sake (“you can’t, you know leave your intimate friends rotting on the field” [300]), but to conceal them from our eyes, lest they unmake our illusory understanding of the world.

If we must always be cautious of allowing an artist’s biography to direct our reading of their work, we must be especially wary in the case of Stephen Crane. Outside of a few personal letters, his short life produced little autobiographical documentation. He seems to have kept no diary, written no memoir reflecting on his private life (Benfey 10). This has led critics and biographers (Beer being but the first of many) to attempt to fill in the blanks with episodes from his work. The poetry, journalism and fiction become intertwined with the more colourful
incidents in his life: his bohemian days in the slums of New York, his misadventures as a war correspondent, his affair with Cora Taylor, a former madam of a Jacksonville bordello. That there are connections between certain events and texts is indisputable (most obviously the thirty hours Crane spent in a dinghy after the sinking of the *Commodore*, and “The Open Boat”), but the urge to fit his compositions into some biographical pattern or development can be seriously misleading. Likewise, although it makes perfect sense to examine his work in the context of the American intellectual culture of his time, we must be careful not to smooth away its contradictions and complications in the process. When it comes to death, for instance, critics have tended to place Crane in the company of the cynics whom I mentioned above (Marston LaFrance’s book, *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (1971), is a good example of this to which I shall return in a moment). The position that I outlined in my brief readings of “The Open Boat” and “The Upturned Face” comes to stand as Crane’s final word on mortality: the universe is uncaring, death has no meaning and any attempt to justify or explain it is laughable. This is a serious misrepresentation of Crane’s approach to death. The aforementioned stories present the idea that death is senseless and ludicrous, but only through the thoughts of their characters. In the “Open Boat,” for example, the dark notion that “nature does not regard [the individual] as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him” is offered as an example of what a castaway might be thinking on such a “dismal night” (84-5). A little later, Crane writes that “[t]he men in the dingey had not discussed these matters, but each had, no doubt, reflected upon them in silence and according to his mind” (85). The last modifier here is crucial: if the men were, indeed, thinking in this way, then their thoughts would simply reflect their present state of mind, rather than an objective truth. The horror—and comedy—of “The Upturned Face,” meanwhile, depends on the peculiar position in which the protagonists find themselves: reading a delicately worded funeral liturgy in the middle of a battlefield. In both
pieces then, the attitudes towards death that are discussed are contingent on both the individuals in question and the specific situation at hand. There is no suggestion that the stories carry an allegorical significance, or that the text provides a definitive statement on mortality. For Crane, death has a multiplicity of meanings, rather than none.

In this final chapter, I will argue that Stephen Crane’s writing offers an indeterminate view of death. Further, that it seems to revel in this indeterminacy, to extract an intellectual pleasure from the presentation of contradictory perspectives. A large proportion of his works in every medium—fiction, poetry and journalism—centres around the dead and the dying or those who feel (however accurately) that they have had a brush with death. Each of the texts that I will select from this group treats mortality as a mystery: the inevitability of death is the only certainty. When his studies present two (or more) competing points of view they are left in suspension, with neither being given precedence. I will suggest that this play of alternatives becomes for Crane a source of enjoyment, even entertainment. This part of my argument engages with Derrida’s treatment of play in his early works (particularly in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” [1967]). Derrida defines play in a narrow semiological sense—“Play is the disruption of presence … Play is always the play of absence and presence” (“Structure, Sign and Play” 292). He argues that the play of writing (which Plato’s Phaedrus dismissed as “childishness” next to the “adult gravity of speech”) “is not a play in the world, as it has always been defined, for the purposes of containing it, by the philosophical tradition,” but “the game of the world” (Of Grammatology 50; qtd. in Brown 107, 286n.7). In other words, the play of presence and absence in language, the difference and deferral necessary to the production of meaning, is not a game like any other, a process taking place within the world in which we may choose to take part. Instead, it is the very means by which the world comes into existence, that which “enables ‘reality’ to appear” (Brown 107). In Crane’s corpus, however, the play
between the presence and absence of meaning in death is closely connected to play as amusement and recreation. This means that Crane treats the ambiguity of death as a game, a puzzle that may be savoured though never solved. Moreover, there is a striking association, across his work, between the fatal and the recreational: leisure time is liable to be interrupted by death; deadly situations are frequently mistaken for, or treated as, games. This ludic treatment of mortality was licensed, to an extent, by an increasingly secular understanding of death in Crane’s America. The possibility, identified by Twain, Bierce and London, that death might be a hollow jest, adds a certain poignancy and urgency to Crane’s play. On the other hand, this play does not constitute a total rejection of the Calvinist treatment of death. Indeed, I would like to suggest that it is in those moments when he is at his most playful and irreverent that Crane comes closest to the Puritan conception of death.

Play, in the early Derrida’s sense of the word, has a certain relevance to the Puritan’s approach to mortality. Grace’s presence, for instance, is really a kind of absence: believers can never possess it, acquire it, or even articulate its impact on their lives. Until death, it must remain in play—there is always the possibility that an apparently saintly individual may be damned, a sinner saved. Grace promises that there is a way out of the morass of uncertainty, instability and corruption that is this life. In this regard, its operation appears to contradict Derrida’s early definition of play as the “limitless” substitution of one sign for another, licensed by “the absence of the transcendental signified” (Of Grammatology 50). For the Puritans grace cannot be a

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82 This part of my argument is indebted to The Material Unconscious (1996), Bill Brown’s compelling investigation of Crane’s relationship to the popular and material culture of the American eighteen-nineties. Brown argues that Crane’s texts are situated on the margin between an “idealized,” intellectual conception of play for its own sake and “its material correlative, commodified amusement” (11). They challenge Derrida’s distinction between philosophical play and “mere amusement” (286n.9). The game of the world, “in which man does not play but is played” is “staged” in Crane’s accounts of popular recreations: “football games, amusement parks, … games of cards and dice” (107). These simple pastimes partake in philosophy’s most complex questions.
symbol because it is nothing less than the presence of the divine in the mortal sphere. While they allowed that there were potentially many signs of grace, both material (tongues of flame) and verbal (a Congregationalist’s profession of faith), they would not condone the idea that grace could stand as a sign for something else. Derrida’s deconstructive play, on the other hand, was dedicated to the disruption of this kind of “onto-theology and … metaphysics of presence.”

Nevertheless, I would suggest that the ineffable and inexpressible quality of grace in the Puritan account mitigates these discrepancies to a large extent. As we saw in the first two chapters of this study, it was considered impossible that any believer should receive certain proof that they were in possession of saving grace. Consequently, they were obliged to indulge in an endless search for grace that could be described as a form of play, insofar as its object might be present when it seemed to be absent and vice versa. Their attempts to pin down this elusive quarry might be an example of what Derrida calls “writing.” The texts that they produce for this purpose, especially the texts about gracious death, cannot be considered to be discrete or “finished” (“Living On”) because they can never definitively describe the grace of which they attempt to speak. Instead they are part of a “differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself”—you will remember my first chapter’s contention that the very process of articulating one of the two Puritan strategies for coping with death tended to elicit demand for

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83 Spivak’s translation of Of Grammatology has “destruction” here. I’ve altered this because it might suggest a hostility towards Christianity that I don’t think that Derrida’s work possesses.

84 Elsewhere, Derrida writes that there is no “question of choosing” (“Structure Sign and Play” 293) between these two approaches to “play” and “interpretation”: the “one [that] seeks to decipher … a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign[,]” which one might associate with Puritanism and Christianity in general, and the “other, … to which Nietzsche pointed the way[,]” that “affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, … man being … that being who, throughout … his entire history[,] … has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play” (292). Deconstruction, he intimates, must attempt “to conceive of the common ground” where the two overlap, whilst acknowledging that there is an “irreducible difference” between them (293). My deconstruction of Puritanism over the course of this study has suggested that it must partake of this second attitude to a certain extent, since its attempt to comprehend the “full presence” of grace must necessarily fail on an intellectual level.
the other. In a 1989 interview on the subject of his interest in literature Derrida outlined the “jeu” (which translates as both “play” and “give”) of the text as “not simply” something that carries “the sense of ludic,” but as analogous to that which “[spaces] … the pieces of an apparatus” and “allows for movement and articulation” (“This Strange Institution Called Literature” 64). “This play[]” he continued, “is … what allows the machine to function normally, but sometimes the same word designates an articulation that is too loose, without rigor, the cause of an anomaly or a pathological malfunctioning.” This definition, it seems to me, is particularly pertinent to the play of grace within the Calvinist thanatology. The uncanny properties of grace—its movement between invisibility and visibility, being speakable and unspeakable, absent even when present—necessitate the lengthy expositions provided by Puritan writing about death. At the same time, this undecidability renders this body of literature forever inadequate and incomplete.

For the Puritans, of course, the contemplation of mortality was always a most serious undertaking. It was the work with which the Christian staved off spiritual torpor, the antithesis of idle play and pastime. As I noted at the beginning of chapter two, Jonathan Edwards sought to bring the youth of Northampton to awakening by holding meetings at the very evening hours that they were wont to visit taverns and engage in dangerous flirtations. The message that he disseminated at these meetings was quite simple: your time is running out. Cotton Mather warned that “None goes to Heaven on a Feather-bed[,]” having slept through their life in comfortable “Carnality. Sensuality, Worldly-mindedness [and] Slothfulness” (A Midnight Cry 28). His autobiography, as we saw in chapter one, reveals that he kept a series of secret “Days of Prayer” during which he meditated on particular aspects of his own sinfulness, mortality and God’s mercy. These occasions, one might say, were personal, private holidays for the minister: his way of attaining spiritual, mental and physical refreshment (his meditations were often accompanied by a “secret fast”). Crane’s engagement with death, by contrast, appears to be an
entirely less urgent affair. The stakes, for him, are much lower. He seems to be intellectually curious about mortality, more concerned with the aesthetic problem of portraying death than the possibility of saving his soul.

Derrida’s ideas call this easy distinction into question. In his later work, he presented a different take on the relationship between philosophy and play. “Freud’s Legacy” examines the episode in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where Freud builds up an exposition of the economy of pleasure from his observation of his grandson’s play with a spool of string (the now-famous *fort/da* game). Elsewhere (in a roundtable discussion at the University of Montreal), he suggests that Freud’s discussion of the game is a recreation of it, a form of play in its own right: “[h]is own writing, his own deportment in this text is doing *fort/da* … [playing] a game [that] is … very serious and demands great concentration” (*The Ear of the Other* 70). The boundary between play in the world and the play of the world, which seemed so distinct in *Of Grammatology*, here begins to blur a little. Derrida observers that “every time Freud encounters something called play, he is very anxious to … comprehend [its] meaning … He does not believe that play is insignificant, that it is purely a game. He believes, then, that there is a limit to play, some operation, some desire, the quest for some profit or gain” (67). He goes on to claim that his own approach to play is analogous to Freud’s, noting that he is wary of the temptation to describe any game or recreation “as gratuitous, play for the sake of play” and to conclude that “it means nothing, it’s pure expenditure” (68). Play in the world, in other words, may necessarily subsume the play of the world. This, it seems to me, is a subtle revision of Derrida’s earlier position, in so far as it seems to license the study of play and games, rather than dismiss it in favour of analysis of the semiotic or ontological play of the world. It suggests, moreover, that we should not view Crane’s treatment of death as a pure or “gratuitous” play. At the end of this chapter, I shall return
to this notion. I will suggest, furthermore, that Derrida’s thought allows us to view Puritan’s more “serious” engagement with death as play.

Of the post-Puritan authors I have discussed in this study, Crane is the first to have written for the diversion of a popular audience. Reformed Christians may have taken solace in Jonathan Edwards’ writings, the intellectually curious may have found Thoreau’s work pleasurable, but neither man was involved in the mass entertainment industry. Crane, on the other hand, was a journalist throughout his short career. His literary work, as well as his journalism, was produced for newspapers and magazines: the serialization of The Red Badge of Courage in publications across the country made him into something of a national celebrity. These facts are significant for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as a writer of imaginative literature, he was not constrained by any theological doctrines or logical strictures. Neither was he obliged to set out his own beliefs or opinions about the subjects on which he wrote. “Literature[,]” as Derrida has it, is “the institution which allows one to say everything, in every way” (“This Strange Institution” 36). Secondly, as a journalist, Crane did not seek to provide an objective picture of reality, but a series of subjective impressions, an individual perspective on a particular episode or scene (I shall return to the idea that Crane was an impressionist at the end of this chapter). He was always aware, moreover, that writing is more than a process of mimesis. The image of an event presented in print inevitably bore the traces of its reproduction. That is to say, the fact that writing recreates an incident for an audience must mark the version of incident that it presents, just as the frame of a photograph always reminds the viewer that its contents are part of a composition. While this is true of every text, Crane’s work is particularly sensitive to this effect. Both his journalism and fiction frequently focus on observers as much as events. What’s more, those figures viewed by the
reader (and by spectators within the text) often seem to stare back, embodying the voyeuristic
gaze that threatens to turn them into a spectacle. According to Giorgio Mariani, Crane’s
accounts of the slums of New York City (comprising his two Bowery novels, *Maggie: A Girl of
the Streets* (1893) and *George’s Mother* (1896) as well as several short stories and “sketches” of
real life) register “the fact that there is something quite troubling about conceiving of human
suffering as a source of entertainment” (*Spectacular Narratives* 83). I will argue that his
explorations of death express the same anxiety. The dead faces to which they incessantly return
are often half-alive, as if preparing to address those who are looking at them. At the same time,
Crane’s accounts of violence and death compulsively make reference to sport and recreation, as
if to remind the reader of their complicity in the glamorisation of traumatic or fatal occurrences
(the most famous instance of this tendency is the narrator’s observation, in “The Open Boat,”
that “[a]n overturned boat in the surf is not a plaything to a swimming man” [91]).

Thirdly (and notwithstanding my earlier warning about the pitfalls of the biographical
approach to literature), Crane’s career takes on an interesting dimension in relation to those of
his immediate relatives. His mother was a campaigner against alcohol abuse, an enthusiastic
member of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (Benfey 34-5). His father preached
tirelessly against the dangers recreation in general posed to people of faith. In *Popular
Amusements* (1869), he noted that “[n]o intelligent Christian will fail to see that he must be as
conscientious in his play as in his work” (22). A certain amount of “rational recreation” was
desirable. It allowed the believer to “lay aside the more serious avocations of life for a brief
space” in order to “resume them with new vigor” (32). Dancing, theatre going and gambling of

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85 Georgio Mariani figures this exchange of glances as a violent event. In Crane’s urban sketches, he argues, “the
eyes of the … poor are threatening in that they mirror the violence of the spectating gaze of the bourgeois spectator” (89).
all kinds, on the other hand, were liable to corrupt and should be shunned by the righteous (baseball, interestingly, was acceptable as long as it was played casually and not for the delectation of spectators [77-9]). Jonathan Crane’s attitude towards fiction was more nuanced. He acknowledged that some fictional works might be beneficial to the reader, in so far as they accurately depicted “genuine, honest [and] rational love” (122). In general, however, he complained that “novel-reading has become one of the great vices of our age[,]” and counselled that “the safest rule, in whose application the fewest mistakes will be made, is that of TOTAL ABSTINENCE” (123-4). This attitude, while fundamentally hostile to creative fiction, was far from that of his wife’s uncle, Jesse Peck, whose guide to female conduct had featured this screed: “Novel reading is a crime. It murders the heart, the intellect, and the body. It vitiates the taste, destroys time, and rejects God from the control of the thoughts, the affections and the world” (*The True Woman* 154). Still, one wonders what the Reverend Crane would have thought of his son’s literary productions, had he lived to read them (he would have been hard pressed to justify the bold blasphemies of *The Black Riders*, in particular). The environment in which the widowed Helen Crane brought up her youngest son is also suggestive. Three years after her husband’s death, she moved the family from Port Jervis to Asbury Park, New Jersey. Along with neighbouring Ocean Grove, this coastal resort was founded to offer a godly alternative to Long Branch, a popular pleasure beach six miles to the north (Brown 36). Although drinking and gambling were not permitted in either town (38), Asbury Park offered its visitors more entertainment than Ocean Grove, which stayed true to its origin as a revivalist camp meeting (39-41). It seems fitting that Crane’s literary career should begin in these two resorts, in which Jonathan Crane’s theoretical ideas about rational recreation were worked out in practice. 

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86 James Bradley, the Methodist layman who founded Asbury Park in 1871 defended “rational” pleasures in his
articles for his brother Townley’s news bureau (written during the summer holidays between 1890 and 1892) demonstrate that even as a teenager Crane had a sharp understanding of the ironies and absurdities of life. One of these pieces is of particular interest. Walking through Asbury Park, the young reporter is struck by the resort’s rapid accumulation of fairground rides. He offers his readers a description of the latest to be built, “an arrangement called a ‘razzle-dazzle’” (“Crowding into Asbury Park” 510). “Just what this will be is impossible to tell[,]” he notes, adding that “[i]t is, of course, a moral machine. Down by the lake an immense upright wheel has been erected. This will revolve, carrying little cars, to be filled evidently with desperate persons, around and around, up and down.” It’s striking that Crane sees the pleasure machines of Asbury Park in terms of the Calvinist rhetoric of Ocean Grove. A ride that spins its passengers around in such a fashion seems more like a punishment than an entertainment; entirely fitting, then, to term it a “moral machine” and to use the language of evangelical homily to describe its wretched occupants. This sketch’s wilful confusion of the religious and the recreational sets the tone for much of Crane’s work. He turns writing about death—the most serious and significant form of Puritan discourse—into a pleasant pastime.

In each of the texts that I will examine in this chapter, Stephen Crane plays with and around the concept of death. *The Black Riders* (1895), a collection of free-verse poetry, discusses Calvinism’s approach to life and death with a strident irreverence. The volume itself, I will argue, plays a game with its reader, daring him to dismiss its sentiments as mere jest, or, more
shockingly, to take them seriously. His war journalism focuses on the soldier as one who routinely witnesses the deaths of others and is keenly aware of his own mortality. At the same time, his dispatches emphasise their status as pieces of entertainment through frequent reference to the world of amusement. It is with his most successful novel, however, that I would like to begin. *The Red Badge of Courage* plays with the conventions of military fiction and reporting. The book famously isolates the experience of a young private in the Union army from its historical context. We are given little indication of the location of the battle in which he participates, none of the dates on which it takes place and no information concerning the strategic objectives at hand or the commanding officers involved. Instead, the text focuses on the sensory disorientation that war causes, presenting battle as a series of disconnected scenes: explosions, charges, retreats, long nights of boredom in camp. The narrator rarely presents an “objective” view of the battle. Instead, his discourse tends to reproduce the perspective of the protagonist. This means that the narration is a compendium of the stories through which the young soldier attempts to make sense of the battle. Through this complex textual play, Crane examines death on the battlefield and the uncanny properties of the human corpse. The inscrutable nature of death and the dead, as we shall see, is that which is most disconcerting and distressing about military combat.

**Private Fleming’s Progress**

The central sequence of *The Red Badge* finds the rookie Henry Fleming in flight from his first day of fighting. Away from the artillery’s “rumble of death” he stumbles into a “chapel” in the woods, a clearing, silent in its “religious half light” (46-7). The corpse of a Union soldier, “seated with his back against a column-like tree” (47), blasphemously disturbs the tranquility of the place. It seems as if some critical event is about to take place. As in several other Crane stories, the cadaver appears to flicker between life and death: it stares back at the youth, its
mouth open as if intending to speak. Neither alive, nor yet quite dead, both man and inanimate “thing,” the body is both active and passive. Although it sits quite still as ants swarm over its face, Fleming fears that it may “spring up and stealthily pursue him” if he turns his back (48). When he does eventually lose his nerve and run away, we read that the “sight” of the “gray face” (which is now “swarming” with “black ants”) “pursue[s]” him, even as the corpse rests in place. What does the young man learn from this peculiar meeting? Moments later he is travelling once more towards the noise of battle, repeating the movements that he had made earlier that day with his regiment. “Reflecting” on his first skirmish that afternoon, he finds “a sort of humor” in the seriousness with which he “and his fellows” had approached the exercise, which would doubtless merit only passing mention in the newspapers (49). Nevertheless, he soon returns to the visions of glory that had filled his head before his first taste of combat, forming “pictures of stupendous conflicts” in his mind (50). His conference with the corpse, though apparently traumatic, has had almost no effect on him.

For Marston Lafrance, conversely, the scene in the forest is a turning point in the novel (A Reading of Stephen Crane 112), the place where Fleming’s conception of the sacred, mysterious quality of death begins to crumble. Immediately before his first exchange of fire with the enemy, we are granted an insight into the youth’s understanding of mortality: “[o]nce he thought he had concluded that it would be better to be killed directly and end his troubles. Regarding death out of the corner of his eye, he conceived it to be nothing but rest, and he was filled with a momentary astonishment that he should have made an extraordinary commotion over the mere matter of getting killed. He would die; he would go to some place where he would be understood” (The Red Badge of Courage 27-8). Crane’s consistently ironic treatment of Fleming’s hopes and fears has prepared the reader to recognise the foolishness and naivety of these thoughts. Once the youth encounters the corpse in the clearing, Lafrance argues, he too will
start to realise that he has misunderstood death. He enters the “chapel” full of reverence for nature. The peaceful rural landscape, symbolic of “the religion of peace,” reassures him that life will always triumph (*Red Badge* 46). The body that he finds there, this piece of “putrid matter being eaten by ants” reveals that death is nature’s governing force, that spiritual extinction and physical decay are all that await us at the end (Lafrance 112). According to Lafrance, the dead soldier in the clearing makes manifest the meaning that the novel has hitherto left unspoken. Even here the narrator need not intervene—the juxtaposition of the abhorrent rotting object and the holy place that Fleming’s mind has constructed speaks for itself. From now on, the youth understands that human mortality is an intrinsic part of nature and that nature is utterly indifferent to it. Two chapters later, having joined a column of wounded soldiers in retreat, he witnesses the horrifying death of his friend Jim Conklin, the tall soldier. There is “absolutely no irony,” LaFrance claims, “in [Crane’s] portrayal of [his protagonist] in this passage” (113). The author entirely empathises with his hero’s “rebellion” against the emptiness of death and the meaninglessness of the universe. Dead bodies, then, exist at the limits of irony. Lying on the battlefield, or sprawled out on the shore they seem to mock our best intentions, our noblest ambitions. Any human endeavour is ironically undercut by the mortality of its prosecutor. Corpses themselves, however, cannot be interpreted ironically, since death has only one meaning: annihilation. Once we have accepted this truth, we must speak literally, resisting any inclination to imbue the cadaver with any second significance.

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87 Lafrance points to a passage in the manuscript that Crane struck from the published versions of the text in which “[the symbolic function of [the soldier’s] corpse is spelled out” (112n.16). There we read that the sight of the decaying body put “the youth” into “despair. Nature no longer consoled with him … He thought as he remembered the small animal capturing the fish and the greedy ants feeding upon the flesh of the dead soldier, that there was given another law which far over-topped it-all life existing upon death, eating ravenously, stuffing itself with the hopes of the dead” (*Crane, Omnibus* 276). This nihilistic interpretation of the cadaver, however, is not presented as the narrator or Crane’s perspective on death, but as a passing fancy of Fleming’s.
Lafrance identifies Crane’s irony as a method, a tool with which the author punctured the moral pretensions of his culture. He claims that all of Crane’s fiction conforms to the same essential structure, which he terms the “one-trump” pattern:

[the protagonist] is faced with an unknown quantity or situation which, for some reason, he soon has to experience; because he is apprehensive about what he does not yet understand, his imagination, in anticipation of the coming experience, becomes excited to the creation of terrifying illusions; these illusions become the immediate cause of fear, and both fear and illusions increase in intensity until the moment when the unknown becomes experienced; then, as reality never measures up to the imagination, the prosaic fact both dissipates fear and reveals illusion for what it is; only the remembrance of both fear and illusion is left, and ideally this remembrance should make the protagonist ashamed of himself. The obvious implication of the final step is that if a man is sufficiently honest and intelligent enough to be ashamed of his own weakness he will eventually be able to understand himself and accept his place in a world full of other fallible human beings. (A Reading of Stephen Crane 34-5)

Death, of course, is the ultimate “unknown quantity,” the cause of so much fear, so many illusions. Although we may not “experience” it in the same way that we may other unknowns, it is something that we all have to confront eventually. The protagonist of The Red Badge of Courage does not die, but, according to Lafrance’s model, he does have his illusions about death dispelled. A superstitious, foolish belief gives way to an “awareness of reality” (34). Henry Fleming realizes that death is utterly other from life, rather than a fulfilment of it: he must not “look to the grave for comprehension” (Red Badge 28). Neither the pessimistic nor optimistic views of mortality are accurate: death is not the gateway to punishment, reward or rest. It is, rather, a natural process, something that happens to a body, not a soul. Lafrance’s Crane is a proto-existentialist, a demystifier. His characters are trapped in a world of “amoral matter” governed by “chance” and “violence” (A Reading of Stephen Crane 243). Once they recognise this fact, the best that they can achieve is a kind of personal control over their own morality, a fidelity to their own best possibilities. “This perception,” Lafrance claims, “underlies everything Crane wrote.”
I must disagree with almost every aspect of this analysis. *The Red Badge* makes no fixed claims about the nature of death and reality. Irony in the novel does not revolve around the disclosure of a secret second level of meaning, but the play of indeterminacy over dead and dying bodies and within Private Fleming’s consciousness (this means that the most common reading of the text, which suggests that the narrator ironically undercuts Fleming’s new-found maturity at the end of the battle, is misleading). In this regard, Crane’s book is quite distinct from Ambrose Bierce’s writings on the Civil War. “What I Saw of Shiloh” (1881), the latter’s most famous military memoir, provided an avowedly “partial and personal” account of the battle, “contrast[ing] sharply” with more populist Civil-War “reminiscence[s] and hagiograph[ies]” (Faust 197). Bierce criticises the human tendency to view the past as a “Wonderland” and romanticise life’s most traumatic episodes. His description of the engagement repeatedly dwells on the distance between the virtuous ideals for which the war was supposedly fought and the almost unspeakable violence of the fighting itself. He relishes the irony, for instance, of the fact that a small “Christian Church[,]” located in the heart of the swampy “solitude” in which the combat took place, should have “giv[en] [its] name to a wholesale cutting of Christian throats by Christian hands” (“What I Saw of Shiloh” 251). Describing the movement of the Federal army preparing to meet the enemy, he notes that there was “no braying of brass … no fifing and drumming … no ostentation of gaudy flags … no nonsense. This was a matter of business” (253). Death is what this business is all about. Bierce provides two explicit depictions of landscapes filled with the dead. In one he focuses on a dying “Federal sergeant” whose brain

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88 Linda Hutcheon reminds us that “irony [is not] what it is usually claimed to be: a simple antiphrastic substitution of the ‘unsaid’ ([or] ‘ironic’ meaning) for its opposite, the said ([or] ‘literal’ meaning)” (*Irony’s Edge* 12). Instead, it takes place “in the space between … the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen.”

89 The building, of course, was called “Shiloh Chapel.” It’s entirely possible, if far from certain, that this fact may have influenced Crane’s portrayal of the “chapel” of trees in *The Red Badge of Courage*. 
oozes out “in flakes and strings” from a “[bullet-]groove in his skull” (255). The other sketches a wooded ravine in which the wounded have been deliberately burnt to death:

Their clothing was half burnt away--their hair and beard entirely; the rain had come too late to save their nails. Some were swollen to double girth; others shriveled to manikins. According to degree of exposure, their faces were bloated and black or yellow and shrunken. The contraction of muscles which had given them claws for hands had cursed each countenance with a hideous grin. Faugh! I cannot catalogue the charms of these gallant gentlemen who had got what they enlisted for. (262)

In moments such as this, Bierce comes closer to Lafrance’s conception of Crane than Crane himself ever does. Here death is not only “the fundamental reality of war[]” as Drew Gilpin Faust has it (198), but of life itself. There is no meaning or purpose in the universe other than the “monstrous inharmony of death.” Although both compositions present fragmentary recollections of a Civil-War battle, The Red Badge of Courage is a very different kind of text than “What I Saw at Shiloh.” The latter, of course, is factual and autobiographical, the former fictional and speculative. While Bierce’s work engages with the vagaries of the memory (specifically its propensity to accentuate the benign aspects of the past and repress the violent and troubling) and reveals that even the most robust language cannot adequately capture the horror of the disfigured corpse (see the passage quoted above), it implies that an objective truth about what

90 Drew Gilpin Faust observes that Bierce “eschews any effort[s] at synthesis or claim to omniscience” in his writings about the war, adding that “[h]e trusts his knowledge only of what he has directly experienced” (207). His fiction, by contrast, was more exploratory. There he examined the uncanniness of death, producing a number of stories about cadavers that appear to move (including “A Watcher by the Dead” (1889) and “A Tough Tussle” [1888]), as well as his masterpiece “An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890), in which the instant before death produces a lengthy hallucination in the protagonist’s mind. Even in these texts, however, the stark (and quite commonplace) reality of death tends to reassert itself in the end. Crane’s works on death retain their ambivalence and indeterminacy to the last: the hero typically remains alive to the last, often uncertain as to whether he has had a real encounter with death or not. In all of these stories of Bierce’s, on the other hand, the protagonist lies dead at the close.

91 “Is it not strange[,] asks Bierce in his conclusion, “that the phantoms of a blood-stained period have so airy a grace and look with so tender eyes?—that I recall with difficulty the danger and death and horrors of the time, and without effort all that was gracious and picturesque?”
happened at Shiloh does exist. That truth is death, and death is utterly meaningless. The Red Badge, on the other hand, suggests that death completely disrupts any attempt to narrate it, and resists any attempt to grant it a fixed meaning (including that of meaninglessness).

Early in the text, as Fleming’s regiment advances, they come across “the body of a dead soldier” (24). “The ranks,” Crane writes, “opened covertly to avoid the corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself.” Like the body in the forest grove, this cadaver seems half alive: “The wind raised the tawny beard. It moved as if a hand were stroking it.” As in that later encounter, Fleming is fascinated by the visage of the dead man, “look[ing] keenly as the ashen face” as he passes. “He vaguely desired, “ Crane adds, “to walk around and around the body and stare, the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question.” This vignette encapsulates The Red Badge of Courage’s handling of death. Here we find two kinds of movement described: the actual progression of the “line” of troops away from the body and the circling motion around it that Fleming wants to make. The text itself is both drawn towards the dead and repulsed by them (this repulsion not being a product of disgust, but of the unintelligible quality of death). As the higher-ranking officers of the Union command (who appear so rarely in the text) attempt to herd their “mule-drivers” (101) towards a decisive encounter with the enemy, so the novel appears, at times, to be moving towards some climatic event of courage or cowardice. Instead, however, we are presented with a series of crises, each threatening to wipe

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92 In Patriotic Gore (1962), his classic study of the literature of the Civil War, Edmund Wilson wrote that “[d]eath may perhaps be said to be Ambrose Bierce’s only real character. In all [of his] fiction, there are no men or women who are interesting as men or women – that is, by reasons of their passions, their aspirations of their personalities. They figure only as the helpless butts of sadistic practical jokes, and their higher faculties are so little involved that they might almost as well be trapped animals” (622-3). He goes on to conclude that Bierce’s “obsession with death” renders many of his “horror stories … tiresome” (623). A large number of them tend to follow the same structure: after the scene is set, “[t]he executioner Death comes to us from outside our human world and, capriciously, gratuitously, cruelly, slices away our lives.” The fixation with mortality is still present in his war writing, but there “he is able to combine a ceaseless looking [of] Death in the face with a delight in the wonder of the world.
out Fleming’s memory of the last (as Donald Pease observes, the war itself “seems … to start from the beginning with each encounter” [“Fear, Rage and the Mistrials of Representation” 157]). In their own way, these exigencies all revolve around death. Fleming stumbles across the dead, dying and wounded, panics under fire and leads a ragged charge from which he is not expected to return. Even if the youth thinks he has gleaned something from these experiences, the text provides him, and the reader, with no definitive answer to “the Question.” Consider, for instance, one the most memorable scenes in the text: the prolonged, agonizing death of Jim Conklin. Lafrance, as we have seen, holds that this is a crucially significant incident in Fleming’s development, the moment when he understands the absurdity of life and the gross injustice of mortality. Having watched, “spellbound,” as death spasms force Conklin “to dance a sort of hideous hornpipe,” Fleming goes over to examine the body’s “paste-like face” (58). He finds that the mouth is “open,” showing its teeth “in a laugh.” Suddenly, he is furiously angry—at the manner of his friend’s demise perhaps, or because the laughing corpse appears to mock him for living still. Shaking his fist, he seems “about to deliver a philippic,” an expression of his “rebellion,” as Lafrance would have it, “at this grotesque and meaningless death of a man he has known since boyhood” (A Reading of Stephen Crane 113). But after blurtling out his beginning—”Hell”—Fleming can utter no more. Inarticulate in his anger, he is interrupted by the most famous image in the work—”the red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer”—and then the end of the chapter.

As he reminisces, in the book’s final pages, over his first experience of combat, the young soldier congratulates himself on his newfound wisdom. In becoming a veteran, he has set aside the illusions of the greenhorn (“the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels” (135), as Crane puts it). What’s more, he has triumphed over the fear of death itself: “He had been to
touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.” Most critics are so distracted by the question of Crane’s sincerity here (has Fleming achieved ethical maturity or not?), that they overlook the tautology of this statement. The great death is still the great death. Mortality retains its uncanny power to unsettle Fleming’s perception of the world. As several scholars (Mariani, Pease, Kaplan and Brown) have noted, the narrative repeatedly draws attention to its own inability to accurately depict the bedlam of the battlefield. Since death, the real business of war, cannot be portrayed, the narrator (and protagonist) must find recourse in a range of literary styles, plots and structures in order to produce something resembling a coherent story. For instance, Fleming’s naïve expectation that he will participate in “Greeklike struggles” (8) is fulfilled, rather than frustrated, by his experience of combat (Mariani 157). A close-range skirmish with the enemy, which takes place long after he is supposed to have had his idealistic fantasies about war crushed, is straight from a stirring military romance: “The two bodies of troops exchanged blows in the manner of a pair of boxers. The fast angry firings went back and forth. The men in blue were intent with the despair of their circumstances and they seized upon the revenge to be had at close range. Their thunder swelled loud and valiant. Their curving front bristled with flashes and the place resounded with the clangor of their ram-rods” (The Red Badge of Courage 114).

Donald Pease has argued convincingly that the fear that occasions Fleming’s initial desertion and the shame that it produces are the very narrative strategies by which he attempts to orient himself in the chaos around him (“Fear, Rage and the Mistrials of Representation” 162-8). I would like to add that the guilt that arises from the manner of his head-wound and, most of all, his abandonment of the tattered man, fulfils the same

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93 The aftermath of this fight, moreover, is presented as if it were the finale of a theatrical spectacle: “The men saw a ground vacant of fighters. It would have been an empty stage if it were not for a few corpses that lay in thrown and twisted into fantastic shapes upon the sward. At the sight of this tableau, many of the men in blue sprang from behind their covers and made an ungainly dance of joy” (192).
The butt of a stranger’s rifle realizes the youth’s desire for a “red badge” of his own; the tattered man provides a focus for his confused feelings and thoughts about death. Both cause him pain, yet each is also, perversely, a source of comfort to him.

After leaving the tattered man, Fleming, like Bunyan’s Christian, is burdened with “the black weight of his woe” (64). Seeing a column rush past him towards the fight, he “[feels] that he [is] regarding a procession of chosen beings. The separation was as great to him as if they had marched with weapons of flame and banners of sunlight. He could never be like them. He could have wept in his longings.” His journey back to his regiment, then, becomes a kind of Pilgrim’s Progress, complete with horrible portents (the wounded and the maimed), monstrous foes (“the dragons were coming with invincible strides” [69]) and a mysterious well-wisher who sets him on the right track. There is something of the Puritan about Fleming in the last part of the book. Just as Thomas Shepard, in his Journal, oscillated between confidence in his justification and virulent self-loathing, so the young soldier moves from joy to despair and back again. In his brighter moods, he begins to reckon himself amongst the elect: “a faith in himself had secretly blossomed. There was now a little flower of confidence growing within him … how could they kill him who was the chosen of the gods and doomed to greatness?” (86-7). In these moments, even his flight takes on a saintly quality: “He remembered how some of the men had run from the battle … They had surely been more fleet and more wild than was absolutely necessary. They were weak mortals. As for himself, he had fled with discretion and dignity.” At other times, he despairs of ever joining the righteous dead: “Again he thought that he wished he was dead. He believed that he envied a corpse … They might have been killed by lucky chances, he said, before they had had opportunities to flee or before they had been really tested. Yet they would receive laurels from tradition. He cried out bitterly that their crowns were stolen and their robes of glorious memories were shams” (67). Robes and crowns, of course, are part of the Christian
imagery of salvation. In my first chapter, I demonstrated that the Puritans could never achieve sure proof of salvation this side of the grave. The meaning of their death remained indeterminate until the final moment when it was always, already too late. Similarly, Private Henry Fleming’s encounter with his mortality is never fully resolved. The final pages of the book find him dreaming of prosperity and peace. The narrator assures us that the youth’s mind has finally been able “to cast off its battleful ways and resume its accustomed course of thought” (133). This statement, I would suggest, is misleading. The figure of the tattered man, for whom Fleming should now have no use, keeps returning. The strange persistence of this twisted, “gored” body reveals that normal narrative service has not, in fact, resumed. Even now, with the fighting apparently finished, Fleming clings to his comforting guilt. The idea that he has committed some “sin” that will “stand before him all of his life” seems terrible (135). Yet it is simply another coping strategy, another means of giving shape to his anxiety. For, on a more visceral and visual level of meaning, the “pursuing recollection of the tattered man” (135) signifies not guilt, but the immutable indeterminacy of death.94

“God, God!”

In *The Black Riders*, Crane confronts his Calvinist inheritance more directly. Witness, providence, sin, damnation and salvation—these concepts loom over the stark moral landscape of the poems, which were composed in the months following his mother’s death. Although it’s unclear why the author suddenly began to write poetry (Stanley Wertheim observes that “[t]he beginnings of Crane’s poetic impulse are obscure,” adding that “only two or three uninspired

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94 Fleming, arguably, never quite manages to fit the tattered man into his chosen narrative. The guilt that he feels seems incommensurate with his offence, given the danger and confusion of the situation. The young soldier, too, feels little guilt over other misdemeanours in circumstances over which he has more control—his cruel and deeply hypocritical attitude to his friend Wilson’s fear of death, for instance (see 85-88).
earlier poems are extant” [Stephen Crane Encyclopedia 27]), there is a certain continuity between the verses and his earlier journalistic career. One of his first newspaper articles had cast a satirical eye over ministers arriving for a summer conference at Ocean Grove. Crane clearly relished the pomposity of these men of God, black-clad in the heat of July: “The sombre-hued gentlemen who congregate at this place in summer are arriving in solemn procession with black valises in their hands and rebukes to frivolity in their eyes. They greet each other with quiet enthusiasm and immediately set about holding meetings” (“Meetings Begun at Ocean Grove” 508). The black horsemen of the title poem make a rather more dramatic entrance than the holidaying pastors, rushing “from the sea” with “clash and clash of hoof and heel.” Nevertheless, there may be a connection between the riders and the clergymen. Several poems in the collection reprise the article’s mischievous treatment of religious leaders, although their tone is often harsher, their attitude more aggressive. Indeed, those critics who follow Thomas Beer in emphasising Crane’s rebellion against Christianity tend to hold The Black Riders in particular importance. These provocative verses, they maintain, hold the key to unlocking Crane’s conception of the world, his understanding of life and death. For Marston Lafrance, the lines express Crane’s “moral norm,” the “moral reality which his ironic awareness [of the absurdity of human life] allowed him to accept” (A Reading of Stephen Crane 131). Crane’s own comments on the poems, it should be admitted, offer support for their special significance. Reflecting on his career in 1896, he observed: “I suppose I ought to be thankful to ‘The Red Badge,’ but I am much fonder of my little book of poems, ‘The Black Riders.’ The reason, perhaps, is that it was a more ambitious effort. My aim was to comprehend in it the thoughts I have had about life in general, while ‘The Red Badge’ is a mere episode in life, an amplification” (Correspondence 233). Notwithstanding these remarks, we should be wary of Lafrance’s claim that “any critique of Crane’s fiction which ignores the poetry is likely to be inadequate; any conclusions about his
fiction which run contrary to the values set forth in the poems are likely to be wrong” (A Reading of Stephen Crane 131). There are two problems with this perspective. Firstly, it assumes that there is a single underlying “ironic pattern” running through Crane’s work. Secondly, it suggests that The Black Riders itself presents a coherent philosophy, a consistent view of the world. According to Lafrance, that philosophy is as follows: nature is morally blank, and anyone who believes otherwise is an “arrogant fool” (134). It falls to man to develop an “inner [ethical] reality” to which he must remain faithful. He must renounce the concept of God, belief in divine judgement, punishment and reward (146): the only return which moral behaviour will earn is the satisfaction of “upheld personal honesty” (149). Many of the sixty-eight poems in the collection strike an undeniably hostile attitude towards God and Christianity; some are unrepentantly blasphemous. Lafrance’s reading, however, smoothes away too many of the contradictions in the volume.

I want to present a different interpretation of the book. For me, The Black Riders is not an outright rejection of Protestant Christianity, but a mischievous speculative experiment. Individual poems may strike hard against certain aspects of Christian belief, but the contradictory character of the collection as a whole militates against interpreting it as an anti-religious screed. This is Crane’s Bible, a fragmented, ambiguous work that parodically reprises the intellectual inconsistency of the original. Just as Christianity offers us no clear answers, failing (or refusing) to provide even a uniform characterisation of God, so the poet presents a thoroughly equivocal interpretation of the world. The Black Riders even echoes the generic diversity of scripture: here we have jeremiad, parable, canticle and apocalypse. The pervading mood of the poems is pessimistic, certainly. Many of them betray scepticism towards the central tenets of the Christian religion: the benevolence and justice of God, the heavenly reward of the righteous. But nowhere do we find an unequivocal denial of the existence of God and the supernatural. Even if we were
to argue that one poem in particular was irrefutably atheist or materialist, would that justify a similar reading of the entire book? The Bible, after all, includes the Book of Ecclesiastes, whose scepticism and rationalism are hardly typical of the Christian and Jewish scriptures.

Irony here depends upon the confluence of contradictory perspectives, both between and within the poems. In poem thirty-five, for instance, a man sees “a ball of gold in the sky” and decides to climb towards it. When he “achieve[s] it,” he discovers that it is no more than “clay” (Complete Poems of Stephen Crane 37). The second stanza, which has him gaze at the ball from earth once more, runs as follows:

Now this is the strange part:
When the man went to the earth
And looked again,
Lo there was the ball of gold.
Now this is the strange part:
It was a ball of gold.
Aye, by the heavens, it was a ball of gold.

If it were Crane’s intention simply to debunk the man’s idealism, this return to earth would seem superfluous. The audience would understand that the ball’s golden hue was a trick of perspective. Why too, should the poet repeat that now “it was a ball of gold” again, as if we should be surprised by this? It is significant that this line is not qualified in any way. The ball does not appear to be golden—instead, it is. The poem does not claim that the clay version of the ball is the real one. We are left instead with the “strange” prospect of an object that is both clay and gold, alluring and banal. If the man’s realisation that the ball is clay to the touch mocks his earlier belief that it is precious, the second stanza’s reversal undermines his new confidence in its worthlessness. The ball may represent heaven, God, or some other idol, but it is the revelation that belief and doubt can co-exist that is most significant. Poem forty-nine gives the same subject a more urgent, dramatic treatment. Here the speaker stands “musing in a black world,” uncertain “where to direct [his] feet” (52). A “quick stream” of men passes by him, hurrying towards some
distant goal in “[a] torrent of desire.” Unable to see what they are striving for, he cries out to them: “Where do you go? What do you see?” “Look! Look! There!” they respond in unison. At first he sees nothing, but then an image appears on the horizon: “lo! in the far sky shone a radiance / Ineffable, divine,— / A vision painted upon a pall.” This light seems to flicker in and out of visibility. “And sometimes it was,” we read, “[a]nd sometimes it was not.” The crowd are “[i]mpatient” with his hesitation, commanding him to look up again. And so he does:

So again I saw,
And leaped, unhesitant,
And struggled and fumed
With outspread clutching fingers.
The hard hill tore my flesh;
The ways bit my feet.
At last I looked again.
No radiance in the far sky,
Ineffable, divine,
No vision painted upon a pall;
And always my eyes ached for the light.
Then I cried in despair:
“I see nothing! Oh, where do I go?”
The torrent turned again its faces:
“Look! Look! There!”

And at the blindness of my spirit
They screamed:
“Fool! Fool! Fool!” (53)

The poem differs from thirty-five in that it examines the role that social pressure plays in faith: the solitary agnostic is set against a thousand firm believers. While it may be tempting to assume that the speaker has seen through the hypocrisy of the multitude and exposed the fact that the object of their veneration is an “illusion” (LaFrance 134), the text itself offers little support for this reading. As in the previous poem, we are not presented with a straightforward discrepancy between appearance and reality. Instead, the protagonist and his audience are haunted by an intermittently visible image. The closing scream of the faithful seems final. The “divine” vision, the reader may feel, has disappeared for good. Nevertheless, the repetition of the crowd’s
command ("Look! Look! There!"), suggests that the “radiance” may return again: twice already in the poem those words have presaged its appearance. The speaker’s lack of faith pains him, as the penultimate stanza makes clear, but there is no clear indication that he will ever abandon his quest for belief. Although the line “[a]nd always my eyes ached for the light” is narrated, like the rest of the piece, in the past tense, the use of the word “always” implies that the ache will continue beyond the bounds of the text. Other poems in the collection may mock religious faith, but that fact has no direct bearing on these lines. Indeed, the speaker’s predicament here has a distinctly Calvinist aspect: the sure faith of the other men has no currency for him; he must uncover grace for himself.

I’d like to turn now to the verses in the volume that deal with death. In poem thirty, the speaker rejects the Christian idea of posthumous compensation for a virtuous existence:

Supposing that I should have the courage
To let a red sword of virtue
Plunge into my heart,
Letting to the weeds of the ground
My sinful blood,
What can you offer me?
A gardened castle?
A flowery kingdom?

What? A hope?
Then hence with your red sword of virtue. (Poems 32)

As my first chapter observed, Puritan ministers figured the Christian way as a kind of death-in-life: the saint should be dead to the world and its temptations (according to Norton, John Cotton’s life was “hid in Christ with God” from the moment of his conversion [Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh 5]). Here Crane uses the same metaphor, likening conversion to suicide. Moreover, the negligible “hope” with which the speaker is so disgusted was all that Puritan homilists could offer their congregations, since salvation was dependent on the invisible and unpredictable movement of grace. If this poem critiques the idea that death may have an ethical significance,
number seventeen offers a different viewpoint. Its first stanza describes a group of pilgrims who draw solidarity from each other: “There were many who went in huddled procession, / They knew not whither; / But, at any rate, success or calamity / Would attend all in equality” (19). Crane then depicts a man who is prepared to walk by himself: “There was one who sought a new road. / He went into direful thickets, / And ultimately he died thus, alone; / But they said he had courage.” This lone traveller exercises the “courage” that the speaker of poem thirty rebuffs. Like the Puritans, he accepts that death is a solitary business, rejecting the false reassurance of the group. As he takes full responsibility for his own demise, he is able to draw a moral value from mortality.  

His situation is similar to that which Henry Fleming faces on his first day of combat in *The Red Badge of Courage*—though Fleming, of course, beats a lonely retreat from death, expressing his individuality through cowardice, rather than bravery (it’s interesting to note besides that the gathering of wounded soldiers that Fleming joins after his desertion is also described as a “procession” [*The Red Badge of Courage* 130, 133]).

Sixty-eight, the final poem, is amongst the most provocative in the collection. Here, we read how “[a] spirit sped / Through spaces of night; / And as he sped, he called: “God! God!” *(Poems* 72). He continues his quest for the divine through the dark places of the earth, “valleys” filled with “black death-slime,” the primordial mud, perhaps, which evolutionary biology now spoke of as the ultimate origin of mankind. Creation seems utterly empty: the hollow “crevice and cavern” mock him with their echo, throwing his appeal back at him. God, it seems, is no

95 In his analysis of the volume, Daniel Hoffmann argues that *What Must I Do to Be Saved?*, which was in Crane’s library at the time of his death (Hoffman 54-5), provides an important analogue for *The Black Riders*. In that tract, Peck repeatedly stresses the individual’s singular responsibility for his own soul: “You must go alone to the bar of God … You must answer for your own life of guilt, and you yourself must, if finally impenitent, obey the terrific words, ‘Depart ye cursed, into everlasting fire.’ You alone must suffer for your obstinate rebellion” (Peck 34; qtd. in Hoffman 72). While it is highly unlikely that Crane entertained any belief in hell, this Puritan sense of the radically personal nature of both morality and mortality suffuses *The Black Riders*. 
more than a human construct, an idol built in denial of the underlying chaos of the universe. When the spirit reaches “the plains of space,” he finds them as blank as the speaker of poem sixty-six imagined them to be, “[e]choless, ignorant” (70). “Mad,” now, in his “denial,” he screams out: “Ah, there is no God!” (72). An extraordinary thing then happens, in the four alliterative lines that close the poem and the volume. “A swift hand,” we read, “A sword from the sky, / Smote him, / And he was dead.” I spoke earlier of the problem with putting too much stock in any one of the collection’s conflicting viewpoints, yet this poem’s final position must grant it a certain precedence amongst its fellows (it certainly seems strange to produce an interpretation of *The Black Riders* and scarcely mention it, as Lafrance does). After all the blasphemy, all the bitterness towards religion and God—“I hate Thee, unrighteous picture; / Wicked image, I hate thee” (14)—here we find confirmation of God’s existence, his power over life and death. Or so it seems. The action of last four lines remains ambiguous: the hand that cuts the spirit down may be God’s, or it may represent chance, coincidence. Death, for Crane, is never quite final. It may mark the end of the volume—“dead” being the last word of *The Black Riders*—but it is the beginning of the debate: the meaning of mortality is never fixed. There are a number of games being played here. From one perspective, God plays peek-a-boo with the protagonist, refusing to respond to his call, and then manifesting himself in response to his denial. In this case death stands for the inscrutability and ineffable otherness of the divine. Another view would hold that the readers play themselves when they leap to this conclusion: the death that follows the spirit’s statement of defiance is meaningless, the kind of coincidence that

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96 LaFrance, most likely, is uncomfortable with the poem because it appears to contradict his reading of the collection as an expression of resolute atheism. He claims that it is about the spirit’s denial of the quest for the “ideal,” the “pursuit” that gives shape to human life (137). This seems a little strange to me—doesn’t the text specify that the spirit carries his search for God to the very limits of space? It is not the process, the pursuit itself that is significant here, but the divinity’s apparently perverse response to it.
leads credulous people to belief. Finally, this last poem implies that *The Black Riders* is a game that the author is playing with his audience. How seriously, we may ask, are we supposed to read this verse? Taken on its own terms, it seems to undercut the bold, iconoclastic tone of so many of the other poems. The atheistic browbeating and philosophical speculation of the rest of the collection appear to be no more than posturing when set against the stark fact of death. If, however, we read it in the spirit of those other texts, as a continuation of their rebellion against religion, its conclusion takes on a different complexion. If God’s power exists, the speaker then implies, it is essentially destructive, difficult to distinguish from the natural forces of the earth. Why should we worship a God who is no more just than a bolt of lightning? Both of these assertions have quite grave consequences—death is the portal either to stern judgement or the empty void—yet each has a certain comic quality. One mocks humanity, for expecting God to ascribe to human conceptions of justice, the other laughs sardonically at the deity, for failing to do just that.\(^7\) The play between these two irreconcilable positions, one suspects, is a kind of joke at the expense of Crane’s readers, a rejoinder to those who would find a fixed moral foundation beneath the pages of *The Black Riders*.

The physical form of the volume’s first edition, published by Copeland and Day in 1895 has two rather mischievous aspects. As Christopher Benfey points out, the design of the front cover—an orchid outlined in black on a soft grey background—“promised” its purchaser...
“elegance and a certain luxury” (*The Double Life* 125). Instead, they were confronted with harsh, disturbing poetry. The layout of the text, moreover, was as striking as its content. Each poem was “untitled, identified only by Roman numerals. They were printed high on the page, so that the shortest ones, of three or four lines, seemed suspended over a gulf of white, with wide margins on the sides” (125). What’s more, every letter was a block capital: “BLACK RIDERS CAME FROM THE SEA,” the first words read. For Benfey, this design decision is closely connected to Crane’s day-job: each line scans like a newspaper headline (127). This, it seems to me, is another aspect of the game of this volume. News reports, as Crane knew all too well, were ephemeral, swiftly discarded. They were also, as a rule, intellectually insubstantial, rarely touching on the weighty issues at stake in *The Black Riders*: the hypocrisies of religion, the nature of God and the meaning of death. The tension between the seriousness of the subject matter and the playfulness of the presentation runs throughout the volume.\textsuperscript{98} One poem deals with this dichotomy directly. The speaker encounters “a sage” sitting “[i]n a lonely place … [r]egarding a newspaper” (*Poems* 13). When this man asks him what the newspaper is, he realises that he is “greater / Aye, greater than this sage.” The speaker’s reply—“Old, old man, it is the wisdom of the age”—can be read in several different ways. We might, for example, interpret the remark sarcastically, as a critique of modern journalism: this rag is the best that our culture has to offer. Conversely, we could take the speed of the speaker’s response (he tells us that “[he] answered him at once”) as evidence of his sincerity. Learning reckons little if it is not up to date. Then again, the smug self-satisfaction of the protagonist may undercut his easy confidence in his own opinion. Unwittingly, he speaks

\textsuperscript{98}While Crane had little to do with the design of the volume (Wertheim, *A Stephen Crane Encyclopedia* 65), I think that Christopher Benfey is right to argue that the layout, as the publishers Copeland and Day conceived it, picked up on a certain journalistic flavour in the writing. Crane, he notes, “insisted on calling his poems ‘lines,’” as if to emphasise the “materiality” and practicality of the text (126-7). Even Wertheim, who criticises Benfey for this supposition, acknowledges that the publishers “did … achieve a happy synergy of content and form in the book” (65). In any case, the published text, rather than the intention behind it, is of most significance here.
the truth: the newspaper, with its inconsistencies, errata and disposability is, indeed, the most apt encapsulation of the “WISDOM OF THE AGE.” The fact that, in the first edition, those words were printed as if they were a headline, suggests that we may read poem eleven as a comment on *The Black Riders* itself. Crane elides the distinction between high and mass culture, daring his readers to place the text on either side of the divide, to take his bluster seriously or to discard it as sensationalist trash.

Through this brief analysis of *The Black Riders*, I hope to have shown that the world of the volume is not as unremittingly grim as may first appear. Even if “charity” should prove “a lie,” religion a hollow sham and life a violent struggle, we will always, Crane suggests, have play—the word here bearing two related, but distinct meanings. The philosophical imponderables at stake (God, death and love) are subject to play in a Derridean sense: an unending indeterminacy, an irresolvable oscillation between distinct, yet related, concepts. God is both absent and overbearingly present in these poems, death empty and pregnant with meaning. At the same time, Crane asks us to enjoy this openness, to treat it as a game. The final poem, as I have argued, demonstrates that death can be the beginning of a kind of play between speaker, author and reader. Another of the volume’s lyrics figures death as a pastime. Here Crane describes the murder of an eccentric “youth,” who strolls through “a grim forest” in “apparel that glittered” as if playing at being a knight (*Poems* 29). When confronted with mortality, in the form of a “dagger[,] poised quivering” in the hands of “an assassin” he is most delighted. As his killer rushes towards him, the youth politely remarks: “Sir … I am enchanted, believe me, / To die, thus, / In this medieval fashion, / According to the best legends; / Ah, what joy!” “Then,” we are told, “he took the wound, smiling, / And died, content.” Like poem sixty-eight, this peculiar composition ends with death. But where the doubting spirit is slain quite unexpectedly, the encounter between youth and assassin almost seems pre-arranged: both, after all, wear outmoded
clothing, as if engaging in an historical re-enactment. The young man’s contentment in his fate suggests that it is possible to derive enjoyment from death. This enjoyment, moreover, is closely linked to the consumption of texts: the youth is pleased because his demise conforms to the grand style set out in “the best legends.” *The Black Riders* offers its readers similarly old-fashioned pleasures. It delights them with figures drawn from the collective Calvinist imagination: a wrathful, inscrutable God, mysterious supernatural agents, and sinful men susceptible to both merciless self-examination and stiff-necked rebellion. These characters may be presented for our entertainment, rather than edification, but that doesn’t mean that we should dismiss their importance for their creator. In *Homo Ludens* (1938), his classic study of play, Johan Huizinga argues that, anthropologically, there is no formal difference between recreational play and earnest contest. Play may be taken quite seriously, so that it embraces death itself, “yet still remain play” (41). If the young protagonist of poem twenty-seven makes death into a game, this does not make his situation any less serious: he still dies. Likewise, Crane himself may mock the Calvinist sensibilities of his forebears, even blaspheme against their God, but this doesn’t mean that he rejects the structure or even some of the content of the Calvinist worldview.\(^9\)

**Regulars and Rough Riders**

While it is possible to read *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Black Riders* as expressions of fin-de-siècle cynicism and atheism, *No Place of Grace*, T.J. Jackson Lears’ influential study of American anti-modernism, suggests an alternative cultural context for both of these works. Anti-modernism, as Lears describes it, was a response to the comfortable

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\(^9\) Poems forty-four and fifty, for example, communicate a distinctly Calvinist sense of the innate depravity at the centre of each human being. In the former, the speaker regrets the sudden illumination of his innermost thoughts: “I was in the darkness; / I could not see my words / Nor the wishes of my heart. / Then suddenly there was a great light— … “Let me into the darkness again” (47). The latter exposes the foolishness of the man who claims to be without sin: “You say that you are holy, / And that / Because I have not seen you sin. / Aye, but there are those / Who see you sin, my friend” (54).
complacency of middle-class life and the softness of Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbott’s liberal Protestantism. Its various forms (which included the Art and Crafts movement, occultism, Orientalism and a new strain of American militarism) sought to re-establish individual agency in age of rationalization and mass production. Through cultivating “intense experience,” it was hoped, Americans would recover their lost independence and authenticity (xiii-xiv). Crane’s writing explores a number of anti-modernist tropes. Like Henry Adams he was fascinated by what Lears calls the “tragic” aspects of religion: death, hell and damnation (275). Like Richard Harding Davis, F.M. Crawford, Richard Hovey, Theodore Roosevelt and other literary militarists, he sought to understand humanity by examining man under the extreme pressure of the battlefield. Militarism, which, through Roosevelt, influenced U.S. foreign policy and politics as well as literary tastes, maintained that war offered men a means of “escape [from] the demands of bourgeois domesticity” (98). The works of Twain and Bierce, Frank Norris and Jack London also offered excitement and adventure, a refuge from the “feminine” realm of domestic realism. Where the militarists differed from these cynics and naturalists, however, was in their treatment of mortality. Ambrose Bierce wrote of the depredations of war, of disappearing corpses and haunted houses without ever compromising his belief in the absurdity and emptiness of death. Militarists, on the contrary, argued that the soldier’s sacrifice earned him a kind of redemption. Their fascination with violence, Lears argues, “was a groping for transcendence, an effort to restore some superhuman dimension of meaning to moral life” (124). Consider, for example, this excerpt from one of Davis’ dispatches from the Spanish-American War:

After death the bodies of some men seem to shrink almost instantly with themselves … But this man, who was a giant in life, remained a giant in death—his very attitude was one of attack; his fists were clinched, his jaw set, and his eyes, which were still human, seemed fixed with resolve. He was dead, but he was not defeated. And so Sergeant Fish died as he had lived—defiantly, running into the very face of the enemy, standing squarely upright on his legs instead of crouching, as the others called to him to do, until he fell like a column across the
trail. “God gives,” was the motto on the watch I took from his blouse, and God could not have given him a nobler end; to die, in the forefront of the first fight of the war, quick, painlessly, with a bullet through the heart, with his regiment behind him, and facing the enemies of his country. (The Cuban and Porto Rican Campaigns 159-60)

Militarism, then, had a most serious and important mission. Yet it also provided Americans with entertainment. Roosevelt’s “Strenuous Life” was itself a form of recreation: his famous speech to the Hamilton Club of Chicago contrasted “wisely used leisure” with “ignoble idleness.”100 The burgeoning readership of the nation’s newspapers thrilled to the exploits of war correspondents (of whom Crane and Davis were amongst the most popular). Finally, volunteer regiments such as Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, mustered for the war with Spain, enabled privileged civilians (as well as other groups) to play at being soldiers.

The militarism of the eighteen-nineties, one might object, explains the popularity of Crane’s writing, but not the thinking behind it. Crane, we are inclined to feel, must have been more self-conscious in his celebration of the soldier’s life than men such as Theodore Roosevelt or Richard Hovey (who attempted to write three trilogies of plays based on the Morte d’Arthur). Certainly, the journalism that he filed from the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 and the Spanish-American conflict over Cuba in 1898, often casts military action in an ironic light. “Regulars Get No Glory” (1898) takes up the cause of the humble regular soldier of the United States Army. The American public, of course, was more interested in the upper-class volunteers. Elsewhere Crane admitted that the Rough Riders were “as fine a body of men as were ever accumulated for war” (“Stephen Crane at the Front for The World” [144]). Here, he regrets that the exploits of the archetypal volunteer (to whom he bestows the exuberantly preposterous sobriquet of “Reginald

100 This dichotomy is reminiscent of the distinction between “rational recreation” and mere amusement at Ocean Grove and Asbury Park (see Brown 30-45).
Marmaduke Maurice Montmorencu Sturtevant” [171]) should overshadow the honest effort of
the regular. “[P]lain Private Nolan” furnishes the newspaper reader with no entertainment—no
“life-sized portrait” is published “in celebration of his enlistment” (171). His only appearance in
print will be as a number in a column of statistics, “a unit in the interesting sum of men slain.”
Crane sets out to rectify this discrepancy, providing Nolan with a brief memorial. For this
imaginary regular, combat is far from picturesque. Crane represents his experience through an
impressive chain of attributive participles: “sweating, swearing, overloaded, hungry, thirsty,
sleepless Nolan, tearing his breeches on the barbed wire entanglements, wallowing through the
muddy fords, pursuing his way through the stiletto-pointed thickets, climbing the fire-crowned
hill—Nolan gets shot.” With telegraphic economy he then discusses the allocation of Nolan’s
legacy (“There is a half-bred fox terrier in barracks at Reno. Who the deuce gets the dog now?”
[172]) and the emotional aftermath of his death: “Hennessy, old fool, is going around looking
glum, buried in taciturn silence, a silence that lasts two hours and eight minutes; touching tribute
to Nolan.” The irony behind Crane’s comedy is quite plain. The real regulars will not even get a
share of Nolan’s modest glory: the private, after all, is a composite figure, a stand-in for every
unknown individual soldier. “Stephen Crane Tells of War’s Horrors” (1897), a dispatch from the
earlier of Crane’s two campaigns, finds the correspondent aboard a ship carrying the wounded
and the dead away from the front. Here again his subject is the disparity between the romantic
conception of war propagated by the media and its less glamorous reality. The most striking
moment comes at Piraeus: a crowd of people at the dock ignore the “seemingly endless
procession of stretchers proceed[ing] from the ship” as they queue to purchase “the newspaper
extra” (54). “Hurrah, hurrah for war!” they cry, oblivious to the dead and suffering men set
before them. The article closes with a pathetic scene: a soldier turned away from boarding the
boat because his condition is insufficiently grave. Crane negotiates for his passage and the sick
man is welcomed aboard. The casualty’s situation turns out to be serious enough: “He was ill with fever, … shot through the calf of the leg and his knees were raw from kneeling in the trenches” (56). This sad little episode, made more poignant by the soldier’s quiet acceptance of his initial rejection, is quite typical of war, according to Crane: “[t]here is more of this sort of thing in war than glory and heroic death, flags, banners, shouting and victory.”

It would be easy, from another perspective, to accuse these articles of participating in the very process that they affect to criticise. Crane’s celebration of the dead American regular and wounded Greek is little different from other correspondents’ feting of Roosevelt and other society volunteers. Many of his dispatches simply take the militarist quest for authenticity one step further, finding it in defeat rather than victory, in the wounded rather than the inflictor of wounds.101 The refugee women that his steamer carried away from Stylidia (“Stephen Crane Tells of War’s Horrors” 55-6) were authentic icons of militarism: their lives, just as much as the combatants’, symbolised a break with the dull routines of American life. Ultimately, the regular, Rough Rider and refugee were of note because they had all come into contact with death, the ultimate guarantor of authenticity. Was Crane part of the militarist movement or an ironic commentator on it? The most exhaustive analysis of his war reports would not be able to produce a clear answer to this question. What his dispatches do demonstrate, however, is an acute awareness that they were primarily read for diversion. In their different ways The Red Badge of Courage and The Black Riders stage the problem of death as a spectacle. We might expect a war correspondent to take an opposite approach, to present his story as “the real thing,” eliding his complicity in the process of producing entertainment from fatal conflict. Instead, Crane’s war journalism abounds with references to games, sport and recreation. These allusions remind the

101 Others (including the celebration of the Rough Riders mentioned above) are more conventionally militaristic.
reader that his enjoyment of the text depends upon another man’s death and suffering. At the
same time, they reveal that writing about death is always a form of play.

Returning to “Regulars Get No Glory,” one finds that the article repeatedly draws
attention to the distinctions between representation and reality, work and leisure. “Of course[,]”
Crane begins, “people all over the United States are dying to hear the names of the men who are
conspicuous for bravery in Shafter’s army” (170-1). Literally speaking, it is the men of Shafter’s
army who are dying—this neat little piece of wordplay sets up the disparity between spectator
and participant. The newspaper-reading public are only playing at war: “[w]e are as a people a
great collection of the most arrant kids about anything that concerns war, and if we can get a
chance to perform absurdly we usually seize it” (173). Nolan, by contrast, is about the real
business of combat, as he proves through his death. His only “leisure—if he gets any” is devoted
to an impressive disquisition “on practical field operations” (172). The consumer of media, by
implicit contrast, has ample time for recreation, but wastes it in his indulgence of idle curiosity
concerning the fortunes of the rich. The piece closes with the image of Nolan as “a corpse,
attired in about forty cents’ worth of clothes,” his sacrifice apparently forgotten “because [some
other soldier] once led a cotillion” (173). Death seems to stand here as a rebuke to pastime and
pleasure; however, on closer inspection, we realize that the article destabilises the boundary
between “real,” fatal combat and the ludic. Having set up Reginald Marmaduke Maurice
Montmorenci Sturtevant as his straw man, Crane doffs his cap to him. “[I]t must not be
supposed,” he admits, “that the unfortunate youth enjoys his [idealization in the press]. He is a
man and a soldier, although not so good either as man or soldier as Michael Nolan. But he is in
this game honestly and sincerely; he is playing it gallantly; and if time to time he is made to look
ridiculous, it is not his fault at all.” This passage’s apparently casual reference to play carries
some intriguing implications. If Sturtevant and the volunteers whom he represents are playing at
soldiery, then is it not possible that Nolan and the regulars are also participants in a game? The professional soldier’s relationship to the volunteer is as the professional athlete to the amateur: he may play the game to earn his living, but he *plays* it none the less. Curiously, Crane’s earlier comment that “the American regular … doesn’t even ask whether the Americans are winning or losing” (172), so fixated is he on his own performance, now suggests that the man is inhabiting a role, playing in a match. The game at hand is not the winning of a battle, or the war, but that of being a soldier. Nolan wins this game because of his selfless devotion to the task—“[h]e goes into battle as if he had been fighting every day for three hundred years. If there is heavy firing ahead he does not even ask a question about it … When an order comes he has no more to say; he simply displays as fine a form of unquestioning obedience as there is to be seen anywhere”—and because he is acutely fixated on his individual role in the combat (“[h]e attends exclusively to himself,” as Crane puts it). Finally, Private Nolan wins because he dies: the dissolution of the self marking, paradoxically, the moment of complete self-fulfilment.

Several other dispatches create interesting effects through their juxtaposition of recreation and mortality. In one of a number of reports from the battle of Velestino in May 1897, he thrilled to the “roll of musketry fire” (“Crane at Velestino” 24):

> In the distance it sounded like the tearing of a cloth. Nearer it sounded like rain on a resonant roofing, and close by it was just long crash after crash. It was a beautiful sound; beautiful as had ever been dreamed. It was more impressive than the roar of Niagara and finer than thunder or an avalanche, because it had the wonder of human tragedy in it. It was the most beautiful sound of my experience, barring no symphony. The crash of it was ideal.

Immediately after this rapturous recollection, Crane added the following caveat: “This is from one point of view. The other might be taken from the men who died there.” This second perspective may seem to offer a rejoinder to the correspondent’s aesthetic appreciation of the encounter. He is merely an observer at the periphery of the action. The dead Turks who litter the
hillsides are at its centre; they are the meaning and purpose of the gunfire that sounded so pleasing to him (in another account of the same fight, he would observe that a Greek soldier with a head wound, travelling “the lonely road from Velestino,” “explained the distant roar” of the guns: “[h]e defined it” [“A Fragment of Velestino” 29]). The impossibility of the dead men’s gaze must give us pause, however. How can this uncanny, implausible thing be said to represent the reality of the battle? Bearing this in mind, we are forced to admit that Crane’s poetic account of the fusillade is a more accurate expression of the battle as it was experienced. The passage reveals that amusement and diversion are the real purposes of war reporting. It provides a distant readership with an almost preposterously idealised soundscape, one that employs some rather clichéd symbols of the sublime: a waterfall, “thunder” and the “symphony.” Yet it must be a more faithful mimesis than the other that Crane posits here. Even if, by some miracle, we could hear the accounts of the deceased soldiers, they would not encompass their deaths. As Paul Ricoeur observes, the dying, “so long as they remain lucid[,] … do not see themselves as dying, as soon to be dead, but as still living … what occupies [their] still preserved thoughts is not concern for what there is after death, but rather the mobilization of the deepest resources of life to still affirm itself” (“Up to Death” 13-4). Who is to say that, up until their very last seconds, the dead men did not see the fighting as Crane first saw it, “from a distance” and seeming “like a game?” (“Stephen Crane at Velestino” 24). Perhaps they died in a similar manner to the young Greek whom Crane describes in “A Fragment of Velestino.” Judging by his smart suit, tailored in the London style, this man had “evidently … been a volunteer” (39). Crane speculates that he had only recently come to the front, “on the smoke, so to speak, of the new fires of patriotism which had been immediately kindled in the village place, around the tables in front of the café.” Having come straight from the café, and with the tokens of the world of leisure still upon his person—“There was,” Crane tells us, “a rather high straight collar and a little four-in-hand scarf
of flowered green and a pin with a little pink stone in it”—this fashionable gentleman “got his ball through the chest” before he had any chance to participate in the fight in any meaningful way. Death had struck him while he was still playing at being a soldier.

Earlier I suggested that the playful quality of *The Black Riders* does not preclude the volume from making serious arguments about the nature of death. The same dynamic applies here. Without openly engaging with religious matters in the manner of that text, or even echoing *The Red Badge of Courage*’s more subtle references to Christianity, each of these reports touches on a different aspect of the problem of death that troubled the Puritans. In “Regulars Get No Glory,” for instance, Private Nolan’s moral identity is dependent on a kind of erasure of the self. He is most truly an individual soldier when he behaves virtually as an automaton. Yet even as he exhibits “unquestioning obedience” to the “appointed voice” of authority, he asserts his singularity, as Crane’s triple chain of possessives suggests: “[w]hen an Order comes he has no more to say … It is *his* sacred thing, *his* fetish, *his* religion. Nothing now can stop him but a bullet” (172-3, my emphasis). For “Order” here one could read grace—that inexpressible quality that defined the saved Christian, but was not possessed by him. Indeed, the paradox of Nolan’s individuality is reminiscent of the riddle of Puritan selfhood, which I discussed, via Sacvan Bercovitch’s formulation, in chapter one. Just as the regular expresses his uniqueness through his submission to higher command, so the Puritan’s attempted effacement of the self “betray a consuming involvement with ‘me’ and ‘mine’ that resists disintegration” (*Puritan Origins* 18). What’s more, neither the soldier nor the saint’s identity is fulfilled until his death, after which orders can no longer be disobeyed and grace no longer wasted. In “Crane at Velestino,” the correspondent wonders about the “point of view” of the “men who [had] died” during the battle (24). This speculation bears comparison with the Puritan curiosity concerning the voice of the dead. Since the deceased were not permitted to reveal the secrets of the next world, their
mourners had to content themselves with texts, such as *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh*, that claimed to speak for them. The Puritans hoped that biographies of departed believers would teach them how to live and die, even though they knew that grace, the one thing that made such a biography desirable, was itself inimitable. Similarly, Crane’s fiction and war journalism repeatedly entertain the idea of the voice and gaze of the dead, although they never quite articulate exactly what a corpse might say or see. Rather than disclosing the mystery of death, these uncanny interjections serve to reassert it: what could a cadaver tell us that we could possibly understand? Even those who have come close to death and survived have nothing to impart. The protagonist of “War Memories,” the author’s lightly fictionalized account of his experiences in Cuba, insists that it is “impossible” for his account of the war to “get the real thing … because war is neither magnificent nor squalid; it is simply life, and an expression of life can always evade us. We can never tell life, one to another, although sometimes we think we can” (222). At the very end of the piece, he makes good on this claim. There, after recounting many stories of death, including several encounters where he might have died himself, he informs his readership that “[t]he episode was closed. And you can depend upon it that I have told you nothing at all, nothing at all, nothing at all” (263).

**Child’s Play**

In this chapter, I’ve argued that Crane’s interest in death combines both a fascination with the concept of play and a sympathy with particular aspects of the Puritan approach to mortality. I suggested above that the distinction between Crane’s ludic treatment of death and the more serious play of the Puritans might be less clear than first appears. A brief consideration of Crane’s relationship to impressionism can help us to pursue this intriguing line of thought. Modern scholarship has been dominated by the idea that Crane was an impressionistic, rather than naturalist, author. It has argued that he shared the French impressionists’ idea that reality is
“ephemeral, evanescent [and] constantly shifting its meaning” (Nagel 21). Further, he believed that there was no objective reality, and that an individual’s sensory perceptions created the world for him. His literary calling, therefore, was “to convey to the reader the basic impressions of life that a single human consciousness could receive in a given place during a restricted duration of time.” Impressionism appears to warrant a relativistic approach to epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. Consequently, critics have linked Crane to the pluralism of William James (Dooley 29-31) and the fragmented world-view of the twentieth-century modernists (Nagel 174-5). These subjectivist philosophies seem to have little in common with American Puritanism, which posits the universal truth of Christ’s revelation to mankind. Impressionism itself, however, does share something with Puritanism: both stress the radical singularity and isolation of the individual. According to the impressionist, we are divided by the limits of our subjective perceptions; we each remain within our own “cylinder of vision.”

For the Puritan, death governs the border between one man and the next. While I broadly agree that Crane was an impressionist, I think that this aesthetic approach links him with his Calvinist forebears as well as his modernist successors. Puritan discourses are invariably fixated on death, because it is man’s mortality that renders salvation necessary, urgent and utterly singular. Similarly, Crane compulsively returns to the spectacle of death. In both his fiction and journalism, his narrative gaze lingers over dead bodies. He is fascinated with the sensory and moral perceptions of men who are about to taste death (or think that they are): the protagonist of “The Open Boat” registers his reluctance to die; the sheepherder in “A Man and Some Others” his determination to go out with courage and dignity; the Swede of “The Blue Hotel” a paranoid fear that there is a murderous conspiracy

102 Crane uses this term in “London Impressions” (1897), a series of sketches that satirise travel journalism. The correspondent’s first view of the city is no picturesque riverside vista, but a limited view of the dark streets from the window of his cab. Outside, the fog is so thick that “each man” is similarly stuck “in his own little cylinder of vision,” wholly ignorant of “what was passing beyond” (683).
ranged against him. Crane is interested in every possible perspective on death: that of the survivor, the mourner, the witness and the killer. But what interests him most is the very thing that frustrates impressionism’s fascination with conflicting viewpoints: the perspective of the dead themselves. When a living person stares at a dead man only one outlook on the encounter can be represented. Michael Fried suggests that the “upturned faces” of Crane’s corpses, while “particular triumphs” of his impressionistic voice (Realism, Writing, Disfiguration 117), are “disruptive” of his “‘impressionist’ enterprise” (116, 115). The sight of a dead face is transfixing, perhaps even compelling for its beholder. Yet this “overinvolvement in seeing” produces “effects of horror that by their nature are disruptive of seeing”—the cadaver seems to stare back, even to start to move, and the viewer is forced to turn aside (even more disturbingly, the “distinction” between the observer and the corpse, or “corpse-like [being],”103 can begin to disappear [117]).

If Crane’s characters pull away (117), I suggest the author himself would rather not. He keeps returning to these moments, eager to imagine the impossible, the other side of the encounter, that which would balance out the fear and curiosity of the viewer: the perspective of the dead.

My first chapter argued that the Puritan approach to death might be deconstructed on its own terms. For the Puritans, the distinction between the damned and the saved, the dichotomy that structured their entire society, was impossible to articulate. Only the individual who had died in Christ would be able to express the difference between a gracious and graceless death. They were, however, forbidden from doing so. As a result, Puritan culture centred around death and mortality. They were fixated on the deathbed scene and the hidden corruption of the corpse

103 Two of Crane’s New York City Sketches, “An Experiment in Misery” (1894) and “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers” (1894), feature unconscious or semi-conscious male bodies that take on the properties of a cadaver (Fried 117). In the former, the body in question belongs to a sleeping tramp in a Bowery flop-house, in the latter, an Italian immigrant who has an epileptic fit on the street.
within the grave. Their discourse on these subjects shares a certain quality with Crane’s impressionistic interest in death. In the same way that he produced some of his most compelling writing when confronted with the one viewpoint that he could not recreate, *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* and *A Salve for a Sicke Man* are amongst the most rhetorically complex and theologically fascinating Puritan tracts. Neither of these texts, moreover, can offer the knowledge that they seek to provide: the gracious experience of the dying saint will always elude them. They can only comfort the reader, reassuring him that those who live gracious lives are more likely to receive God’s aid at their life’s end. From a certain perspective, the act of reading these books becomes a pastime: a means of *passing the time* until one’s death. In *Popular Amusements*, Jonathan Crane wrote that “[t]ime is one of God’s most precious gifts. It is the material of which life is made, the field in which eternal destinies germinate, the Summer in which divine things grow. We have no more right to lay plans to ‘kill time’ than to kill ourselves” (42). He was speaking, of course, of the dangers of cards, carousal and novel reading, but what if his words were applicable to the consumption of religious texts? If one were to approach tracts such as *Abel Being Dead Yet Speaketh* and *A Salve for a Sicke Man* with the wrong motivation, then it would be possible to sin through reading them. The Reverend Crane adds that “[g]enuine recreation wastes no time, but, on the contrary, treasures up golden moments with a miser’s care. Diversions indulged in beyond measure cease, therefore, to be recreations, and become a criminal waste of God’s precious gift.” Only God, in the end, could determine whether an individual’s use of theological texts was productive and appropriate. If it turned out that he was to be damned, then all his devotional activities would prove to have been a waste of time. In his case, reading a religious tract would be little different from indulging in drink. Both pursuits would be a way of killing time, of taking his mind off the plight of his soul, for who could guarantee that a given reader understood the urgency of *A Salve for a Sicke Man,*
its applicability to his own life? Max Weber famously argued that modern capitalism developed from Calvinism’s obsession with work and resistance to play (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism [1905]). Alternatively, we might view the entire Puritan project as a form of play, and Puritan discourse as a means of controlling and defining different forms of play, rather than merely repressing it.

I’d like to conclude with an examination of “Death and the Child” (1898), a story based on Crane’s visit to Velestino. The protagonist, Peza, is a war correspondent, who, like his creator, has never witnessed armed conflict before. Although he has spent his life in Italy, his father was a Greek (122). Moved by the scale of the battle and the plight of the refugees who stream away from the front as he walks towards it, he decides to join the fight (123). His journey towards the front, in the company of an obliging officer, promises to earn him an authentic experience of combat. Like Henry Fleming, his expectations of war prove to be naïve. He shares something of the young soldier’s immature romanticism, his appetite for the glories of ancient Greece. Yet he is also a good journalist. He knows that war is a brutal business, one that threatens to engulf the individual and utterly destroy him. His meditations on the way to the trenches reflect this conflicted perspective. When he is rebuked by his companion for stopping to watch an argument between a peasant and some wounded soldiers over a donkey, as if he were still just a spectator in this battle, we read that “some portion of egotism left him, and he modestly wondered if the universe took cognizance of him to an important degree. This theatre for slaughter, built by the inscrutable needs of the earth, was an enormous affair, and he reflected that the accidental destruction of an individual, Peza by name, would perhaps be nothing at all” (126). Even as he seems to question the possibility of heroic individualism, he refers to the battlefield as a theatrical spectacle. As they pass through “a place where Turkish shells [are] landing,” he observes that if he were [to be] killed there at the time, it would be as romantic, to
the old standards, as death by a bit of falling iron in a factory” (127). The realism of this statement is undercut by the suggestion that Peza is still interested in achieving a glorious demise: perhaps he believes that he soon will be able to engage the enemy hand-to-hand. One might expect the “realistic” perspective to begin to predominate as Peza moves closer to the fighting, for the chaos and bloodiness of battle to reign. Instead, the narrative begins to take on a surrealistic quality. The very familiarity of the countryside seems strange when viewed in proximity to conflict: “War, a strange employment of the race, presented to him a scene crowded with familiar objects which wore the livery of their commonness placidly, undauntedly” (129).

Peza admires the vista as if it were a sublime landscape, hanging in a gallery: “[h]e was smitten with keen astonishment: a spread of green grass lit with the flames of poppies was too old for the company of this new ogre … He venerated the immovable poppies.” He feels that he is moving further away from reality, rather than closer to it. There is a veil between him and the world, which begins to break down into its constituent parts: “[i]t was as if [he were] a corpse walking on the bottom of the sea, and finding there fields of grain, groves, weeds, the faces of men, voices.” Encountering a group of “gunless and jaded” Greek troops, Peza tries to imagine how they are feeling, assuming that, like him, they have reached the “limit of their mental storage, their capacity for excitement, for tragedy” (129). He is reminded of “his visit to a certain place of pictures” (an art gallery, most likely), where the lurid and violent quality of the images had forced him to step outside and smoke a calming cigarette. One might see this comparison as evidence of decadence, or stupidity, on Peza’s behalf: here is an aesthete who is out of his depth. Since Crane is invariably more interested in ways of seeing than the people who see, I would argue that this passage signifies the way in which war (and by extension, death) resists the onlooker’s attempts to define it. The nearer that one comes to it, the more it resembles a representation of itself.
Peza, like the dead man in the tailored suit whom Crane saw at Velestino, treats soldiery as a social pastime: the narrator has a great deal of fun with the fact that he cannot stop handing out his card to everyone (124, 133). His game, however, is an attempt to pass beyond games. He wishes to move away from play in the world to the play of the world, to understand the play of absence and presence within human mortality. I shall return to this quest in a moment—a few pages into the adventure, the story cuts away to another view of the battle, a different form of play. High on the mountain overlooking the conflict, a peasant child is managing livestock figured by stick and stones (127). He has been abandoned by his parents, although he is unaware of this. He is more or less oblivious too, to the fighting going on but “four miles away” from him (127). His game utterly absorbs his attention: “[h]e was solitary; engrossed in his own pursuits, it was seldom that he lifted his head to inquire of the world why it made so much noise” (128). His understanding of the situation, typically for Crane, is a product of perspective: “The stick in his hand was much larger to him than was an army corps of the distance. It was too childish for the mind of the child. He was dealing with sticks.” The boy’s game, then, is played in utter ignorance of death, as the narrator makes explicitly clear: “[h]is tranquillity in regard to the death on the plain was as invincible as that of the mountain on which he stood.” When he does take note of the action unfolding beneath him, seeing “some men running wildly across a field,” he guilelessly strips it of its urgency and danger, incorporating only its postures and movements into his make-believe. This is the form of play that the modern world upholds as the child’s right: a pure play, free from any ideological teleology, untouched, above all, by the taint of death. The Puritans, on the other hand, would not have recognised any such privilege. As soon as they were born, children were prey to death and subject to damnation. Congregationalist ministers acknowledged that recreation, for the purposes of mental and physical refreshment, was both “lawful” and “in some cases a great duty” (Increase Mather, *Profane and Superstitious Customs*)
They were insistent, however, that play should never take anyone’s mind away from the imminence of death and judgement. It is “hainously sinful,” Increase Mather warned, to “waste … Time in any Recreation” because “Every mans [sic] Eternity in another world, will be according to his improvement of time here. What a sad account will they be able to give to the Son of God at the last Day, who have spent a very great part of that Time wherein they should have been preparing for eternity, in nothing but idleness & plays?” This counsel applied particularly to children and young people, who were more liable to “know no measure” in their approach to games and sports (Increase Mather, *Solemn Advice to Young Men* 27). In “Death and the Child” Crane follows the approach of his Puritan forebears (some of his more immediate ancestors, as I have suggested, saw the issue in the same way as Increase Mather). The story reveals that pure play is impossible. While the infant may be unaware of the danger that threatens him, the narrative makes it quite clear (Crane imagines the chaotic movement of the “battle lines” as “the agony of a sea-creature on the sands. These tentacles flung and waved in a supreme excitement of pain, and the struggles of the great outlined body brought it nearer and nearer to the child” [128]). The final section of story brings its two protagonists face-to-face; the arrival of Peza at the mountaintop disturbs its security and sanctity. “[C]overed with dust” and bleeding from his cheek, the correspondent represents mortality’s inevitable intrusion into the worlds of childhood and innocent play (indeed, the child has already “ceased his play” before he meets Peza, as “[p]art of the battle [has] whirled very near to the base of his hill” [140]). In the final paragraph, Peza, left “windless … and abject” by his experiences, sees this boy as an embodiment of inviolate life: “the sovereign child, the brother of the mountains, the sky and the
The infant, like any other mortal, lives under the shadow of death.

What, precisely, has put Peza into such a state? Broadly speaking, the failure of his own game, his attempt to set aside childish play in pursuit of a real comprehension of the world; more specifically, an encounter with a group of dead bodies. The pattern of Peza’s movement through the story is reminiscent of Fleming’s journey in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Like the soldier, the correspondent faces the same situation in several iterations. But where Fleming keeps running into corpses or moments of violence that exceed his ability to process them, Peza repeatedly finds that the battle does not measure up to his expectations. Having parted ways with his “chaperon” (130), he moves ever closer to the heart of the action. The first two sets of officers that he meets are unable or unwilling to indulge his desire to join their forces. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they mistake Peza for one who simply wishes to enjoy the spectacle of the engagement. When the first group hear of his intentions to move closer to “the mountain where … the infantry [were] engaged” they suggest that their artillery emplacement will afford a more comfortable perspective on the fighting: “The officers all tried to dissuade him from departing. It was really not worth the trouble. The battery would begin again directly. Then it would be amusing for him” (134). Likewise, the commander of the second battery offers him pleasantries better suited to an Italian belvedere, “A fine scene sir … Yes, sir, it is a fine scene,” before offering to divert him with a fresh bombardment: “I am happy to be able to entertain monsieur with a little fine practice … I am firing upon the mass of troops you see there a little to the right”

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104 Some have assumed that this is an “objective” description of the child, rather than an example of the narrator’s momentary adoption of a character’s point of view. This confusion helps to explain H.G. Wells’ criticism of “generalized application” of symbolism in the story. “The child is not a natural child[,]” he complained, “there is no happy touch to make it personally alive; it is THE CHILD, something unfalteringly big; a large, pink, generalized thing, I cannot help but see it, after the fashion of a Vatican cherub” (“An English Standpoint” 269).
Crane tells us that these first words “[were] like a blow to the chest to the wide-eyed volunteer.” Peza hopes to be taken seriously as a soldier. He knows that he must reject such dilettantism and embark on a “great encounter towards death” (126). When, after arriving at a third Greek position, he does run up against his own mortality, he finds that his expectations are frustrated: death cannot provide him with the authentic experience that he craves. The infantry officer here accepts, at last, his offer of service, indicating that he should take ammunition and a bandoleer from one of the cadavers. As soon as the cartridge belt is secured, Peza feels that its former owner “[has] flung his two arms around him” (138). When a well-meaning soldier hands him “a rifle, a relic of another dead man” he descends into a nightmare: “he felt, besides the clutch of a corpse about his neck, that the rifle was as unhumanly horrible as a snake that lives in a tomb. He heard at his ear something that was in effect like the voices of those two dead men, their low voices speaking to him of bloody death, mutilation” (139). As in *The Red Badge of Courage*, close contact with the dead leads to hallucination. Peza’s fantasy here is even more unsettling than Fleming’s in the forest grove—he thinks that the dead are speaking to him (rather than about to speak) and then that he is dead himself: “he was being drawn and drawn by these dead men slowly, firmly down as to some mystic chamber under the earth where they could walk, dreadful figures, swollen and blood-marked. He was bidden; they had commanded him; he was going, going, going.”

Death will always resist mankind’s attempts to understand it. No matter how carefully we chart the play of absence and presence that it entails (the presence of the body and the absence of the individual; the overwhelming presence in our lives of the signifier “death” and the absence of that which it signifies), something will inevitably elude us. Peza fears that he has been granted an insight into the underworld, a dead-man’s eye view. Next to this vision, his other encounters on
the battlefield seem utterly inconsequential: he was only playing before. In fact, his dream of Hades is part of his play. It visits him, after all, as he adopts the costume of the professional soldier—it is of a piece with his attempt to embody that role. His imagination grants him that which he wanted all along: the chance not merely to see fighting at close-hand, to witness the deaths of other men, but to experience death himself, to experience it, and live to recount it. He is deluded, of course: death can never be felt, much less understood. In the same way that the child’s game is marked by death, Peza’s attempt to comprehend death becomes something of a game. Turning back to Derrida’s remarks in *The Ear of the Other*, we find him speculating about the possibility of a “kind of thinking about play … [that] is no longer simply playing” (69). Deconstructive analysis, he proposes, can allow us to “think of play in a radical way,” because it challenges traditional conceptions of individual agency through “notions” such as “[the] trace and writing.” It enables us to “think beyond” the definition of play as an “activity of a subject manipulating objects according to or against the rules.” Peza’s mission is a game precisely because it attempts to set a limit to the play of death, to “dominat[e]” [it] by meaning, by its finality, … by something that surpasses and orients it” (which, in this case, is the question of authenticity). The Puritan project to interpret death, I have argued throughout this thesis, has a certain deconstructive quality—it reveals the aporetic impasses that obstruct every attempt to define mortality. On the other hand, in so far as it has a teleological purpose—to reassure the individual in his quest for salvation—it must set a limit to death’s endless play of uncertainty and contradiction (Derrida notes that “every time a philosophy or a science claims to have constituted is own coherence in some fashion, it has in fact been lead to reduce the element of play or to comprehend it by assigning it a place, to hem it in somehow” [68]). From Derrida’s point of view, Puritan thanatology, like Peza’s search, is a form of play about death.
One cannot mark out a clear division between games and recreation and the more serious pastimes of philosophy and theology. Each bears a trace of the other. Even the most innocuous and inconsequential amusement, depends, consciously or unconsciously, upon a particular understanding of the world. Christopher Benfey reads “Death and the Child” alongside Freud’s examination of his grandson’s fort/da game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Like that infant, the peasant boy has been abandoned by his parents and responds to the situation (of which *he*, the peasant child, is unconscious) with a game. Through his play, he masters his predicament, or believes that he does. In fact, his game is not an exorcism of the trauma he has undergone, but a repetition of it (Benfey 217-8). Similarly, all urgent intellectual inquiries have a ludic quality. In his deconstruction of Freud’s interpretation of the boy’s play, Derrida observes that the psychoanalyst’s writing about the fort/da game is itself a game of the same type. Just as the child draws enjoyment from the repetition of the act of throwing away the object of pleasure (the spool that represents his mother), so Freud achieves a theoretical breakthrough by casting aside the pleasure principle and then drawing it back into his thought in a new guise, as a partner of the death instinct (“Freud’s Legacy” 302). Furthermore, in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida notes that the formulation “tout autre est tout autre,” that which underwrites the radical singularity of the

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105 I use this term with caution, since Freud himself admitted that his theory of the death drive was “speculation” and that he “[did] not know how far [he] believe[d] in [it]” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 54, 53). His discovery, then, might more properly be described as a new formulation of the old aporia of death, rather than a “breakthrough.” The death instinct was to remain an theoretical impasse throughout the rest of Freud’s career, since, as Derrida observes, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* “never concludes on this point” (“Freud’s Legacy” 303).  
106 This second repetition leads to an abyssal overlap between the object of analysis (the boy’s play) and the analysis itself: “The scene of the fort / da, whatever its exemplary content, is always in the process of describing in advance, as a deferred overlapping, the scene of its own description. The writing of a fort / da is always a fort / da, and the [pleasure principle] and its death drive are to be sought in the exhausting of this abyss” (“Freud’s Legacy” 321).
individual’s mortality, his personal relationship to God and the very possibility of “salvation”, may be “just … a game,” a pun specific to certain languages (87).

Each of these examples demonstrates that the difficulties that obstruct the process of thinking about mortality threaten or promise to reduce it to a pastime. Accordingly, I would like to propose that a fourth aporia might be added to the three that I have been discussing in this study: that of the seriousness of death. Freud suggests that the purpose of organic life, since its inception, has been to “becom[e] inorganic once again” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 32). If “the aim of all life [from the simple organisms at the beginning of the evolutionary chain to homo sapiens] is death[,]” then human mortality is not such a grim and difficult subject after all. The complexities of modern life and the neuroses and passions of the human subject (including its urge to preserve itself) are reducible to a quest “to reach an ancient goal by paths [both] old and new.” Every “organism[,]” man and beast alike, simply “wishes to die … in its own fashion” (33). Death, in this model, becomes an entirely benign phenomenon: it distinguishes the “higher organisms” such as man from creatures made up of a single cell (40), and defines the individuality of each human being. However, this reduction in the seriousness of mortality is only achieved through the study of a child’s play, a “speculation” (54) that may be no more than an imaginative game itself. What’s more, the dissymmetrical structure of salvation that Derrida outlines in the last chapter of The Gift of Death, which promises to make death very serious

107 “If this were a game,” he writes, “then it would need to be kept safe and untouched” (87). Here Derrida appears to return to the approach that he set out in his earlier writings (and which I discussed above): the need to keep the play of philosophy discrete from mere recreation.
108 This being the process by which God vows to reward those people who set aside any expectation of reward for their good deeds, according to “an economy that integrates the renunciation of a calculable renumeration, [and] … of economy [itself]” (107).
indeed (a matter of eternal reward), depends upon the linguistic play of “toute autre est tout autre.”

All of the texts that I have discussed in this chapter engage with the aporetic seriousness of death. It is quite ambiguous as to whether mortality, for Crane, was an object of genuine philosophical concern, or if he simply enjoyed the challenge of attempting to write about it (I would add that this question was likely unsettled in Crane’s own mind, as well). The repeated association of the fatal with the ludic in his work (particularly in “Death and the Child” and the war reportage that I have just considered) aptly encapsulates this indeterminacy. Notwithstanding the distinction that my introduction drew between Crane as a popular literary writer and the Puritans, Edwards and Thoreau as “serious” thinkers, it is actually impossible to determine whether the stakes were lower for him when he wrote about death. He may have been just exercising his imagination over its aporias, or, alternatively, treating them as the most significant aspect of human life. As I have already argued, moreover, his writings suggest that the Puritans’ thanatology was subject to the same instability. Without realising it, they may have merely been participating in an elaborate game when they attempted to come to terms with death. Peza’s breakdown in “Death and the Child” discloses the kind of pastime in which they might have been engaged. It reveals that the impulse to comprehend death intellectually can become a kind of death wish (William Perkins seems to acknowledge this point when he warns that “all sicke persons must be carefull to preserve health and life till God do wholly take [them] away” [70]). To want to understand death is not simply to want to die, but to see the world from a dead man’s

109 Michael Fried’s complex reading of “Death and the Child” and a number of other compositions (including “The Upturned Face,” The Red Badge of Courage and the 1899 novella The Monster) argues that Crane’s chief interest was “the scene of writing” itself (120). The author would “unwittingly, obsessionally and to all intents and purposes automatically” work this theme into texts that were ostensibly concerned with different subjects (especially death). This reading suggests that Crane’s apparent fascination with death was a form of play, or else a repression of his underlying fixation with—and fear of—writing.
perspective. Only this game—that is quite impossible to play—can arrest the unending play of uncertainty and ambiguity around mortality.
Conclusion

Strictly speaking, there can be no conclusion when one is writing about death. It is not only impossible to write a history of death itself (as Derrida’s critique of Ariès makes clear), but death also destabilises the very idea of history. The human relationship to mortality may undergo substantial cultural changes, but in another sense it never changes at all. Every new approach to death—be it scientific, ethical or religious—runs up against an impasse; every new discourse on mortality is another way of not talking about it. Death also challenges the concept of belonging that is so crucial to our understanding of history. When it comes to mortality, we are all Marranos. Thanks to death, no one can be said to fully “belong” to a given culture or historical period, since mortality, which cuts across all historical and cultural boundaries, is central to the individuality of the subject. This does not mean, however, that thinking and writing about attitudes to death is worthless. The indeterminacy of mortality can undermine our most complacent and certain assumptions about the world. For instance, one might suppose that the Puritans were more fixed in their attitude towards death than modern Americans. Where they were convinced that every individual’s consciousness would survive the end of life, living for eternity in either heaven or hell, contemporary thought is less certain about what happens after death. From another perspective, however, this structure can be reversed. Many modern atheists, scorning the idea that there might be any form of existence subsequent to death, are inclined to argue that it is (or should be) a painless natural process. In this regard, they are arguably more dogmatic in their thought than the Puritans were: they maintain that we are all bound for the same fate—becoming an insentient piece of matter—where Calvinism insists that the posthumous destiny of the individual can never be anticipated. Here, I would suggest, hard-line atheists have more in common with the self-assured fundamentalists of our times. While these
groups might disagree on the reality of the afterlife, they both agree that they will not suffer in hell. Both, moreover, seem equally convinced of their own righteousness.

In recent years, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris have emerged as the spokesmen for a newly vigorous atheism. They have contended that humanity must set aside its propensity towards belief in favour of a rational, humanist and scientific view of the universe. There are a number of serious flaws in this line of thinking (not least the fact that reason and faith are inextricably intertwined: to accept a scientific or rational proposition, one must have faith in the credentials of the person proposing it, as well as the intellectual system by which they have come to their conclusion), but what interests me most about their argument is the connection that it draws between religious belief and death. Harris insists that “faith is little more than the shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave” (The End of Faith 39), and keenly anticipates a time when we are able to “mark those transitions in every human life that demand profundity—birth, marriage and death—without lying to ourselves about the nature of reality” (Letter to a Christian Nation 89). Hitchens, on the other hand, looks back to the age of secular revolutions, admiring the fact that Thomas Paine, like “[a]lmost all of the American founders[,] died without any priest by [his] bedside” (268). All three writers criticise religion in general (and Christianity in particular) for building an ethical system around the most improbable possibility: life after death. Their own approach to mortality (which rubbishes this belief and presupposes that death is the end of the self) is the more authentic and morally robust. In making this assertion, however, they have fallen into the same trap as the religious thinkers they attack: assuming that it is possible to make a definitive statement about the nature of death. There is nothing “rational” about the supposition that there is no life after death. It is, instead, just as much a matter of faith as the idea that there is. Dawkins inadvertently stresses this point
when he grafts some “strong meat” of Bertrand Russell’s into his argument: “I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego shall survive” (qtd. in Dawkins 354). The first words of this quotation, together with the title of the essay from which it is taken (“What I Believe”), undermine Dawkins’ and Russell’s attempt to adopt a purely reasonable attitude towards mortality. Russell’s anticipation of the decomposition of his body is, in its own way, just as sentimental and consoling as the “traditional humanizing myths” that he wishes to set aside. In this way, death disrupts every area of intellectual expertise and scientific endeavour,\(^\text{110}\) shaking them every bit as soundly as it trembles blind belief.

The aporia of death, then, unsettles our most axiomatic assumptions, including the notion that Christian faith must be rooted in the concept of individual resurrection. In *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century*, Perry Miller makes an interesting observation about the American Puritans’ relationship to the next world. He “find[s] it difficult to believe that the conception of the afterlife was as vivid to most Puritans as was their realization of sin or their experience of divine grace,” and notes that “there are but few sermons specifically devoted to immortality compared with the tremendous number drawing out the lessons of depravity or

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\(^{110}\) Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, for instance, gets into quite a tangle when discussing euthanasia:

> When I am dying I should like my life to be taken out under a general anaesthetic, exactly as if it were a diseased appendix. But I shall not be allowed that privilege, because I have the ill-luck to be born a member of *Homo sapiens*, rather than, for example, *Canis familiaris* or *Felis catus*. At least, that will be the case unless I move to a more enlightened place like Switzerland, the Netherlands or Oregon. Why are such enlightened places so rare? Mostly because of the influence of religion. (*The God Delusion* 357)

On first reading, the argument here seems relatively straightforward. Dawkins seeks to assert, as Thoreau sometimes did, that there is no difference between human and animal life and death. Closer examination, however, reveals that there are a number of inconsistencies and breaks in his logic. Even as he suggests that humans might be compassionately terminated like domestic pets, he cannot help but redraw the boundary between mankind and animals. Cats and dogs do not choose to end their lives in this way, of course; neither do they euthanize members of their own species. Only *Homo sapiens* may administer euthanasia. As for the passage’s first sentence, the removal of an inessential and vestigial part of an organ cannot be equivalent to the ending of the individual’s existence. What would it mean, in any case, to have one’s life “taken out,” especially if one assumes, with Dawkins, that there is no life outside the matter of the body? Lastly, the passive voice of the infinitive here (“to be taken out”) leaves the identity and agency of the operator uncertain.
analyzing in minute detail the processes of regeneration” (37). Miller speculates that “the expectation of immortality” may have been “so axiomatic that little discussion was needed” (37-8), before suggesting that “because their energies were so intensely concentrated upon the problems in hand they had few left for doubts about those to come” (38).\footnote{According to David Stannard, “[t]he evidence does not confirm [Miller’s] interpretation” (The Puritan Way of Death 79). Rather than partaking in “cosmic optimism” when it came to the end of their lives (78), “the Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while simultaneously clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as release and relief for the earth-bound soul” (79). While I think that Stannard overstates the degree of terror that the Puritans felt, this study has argued that they did approach their mortality with uncertainty and anxiety.} This line of thinking raises a startling possibility. In my introduction and first chapter I spoke of the Puritan “desire to comprehend death before it arrived.” Miller’s point implies (perhaps unwittingly) that this urge to understand death in life might supersede the aspiration to live eternally. If the individual believer were to receive a comprehensive revelation regarding the nature of his death and the place in which he was destined to spend his afterlife, would it be necessary for him to go on and live that life after death? Might Puritan redemption take the form of the search for salvation, rather than the achievement and enjoyment of salvation itself? If this were the case, it would call into question Freud’s insistence (after Marx) that religious ideas are “consolations” that work as “narcotics[.]” anesthetising mankind’s perception of the cruelty and injustice of the world (The Future of an Illusion 49). For what, in the final account, is comforting and stupefying about the prospect of an impossible lifelong struggle without any reward?\footnote{Freud’s account of the fundamental premises of religious belief also fails to do justice to Puritanism. Amongst the ideas that religion propagated when it reached the period of development that “roughly corresponds to the final form taken by our present-day white Christianity” (20) were the notions that “[d]eath is not an extinction … but the beginning of a new kind of existence” (19) and that “[i]n the end, all good is rewarded and all evil punished.” Strictly speaking, Calvinist theology finds the latter proposition to be true, but since it holds that the majority of human beings are damned, it implies that a great deal of what most assume to be good works (including the pursuit of religion itself) will turn out to have been evil actions. As for the first point, I have suggested here that Puritanism’s emphasis lies on this life, to the virtual exclusion of the world beyond the grave.} It would also disclose death’s irresistible ability to undermine our sense of history and intellectual progress, since it would
reveal that there was a certain resistance to the supernatural within Puritanism, that doctrine which, from a modern, secular perspective, seems entirely predicated on belief in resurrected life in a world to come. Although death itself must always remain an aporia, the (inevitably flawed) attempt to think and write about death may open up unexpected or unintended correspondences between historically distant philosophies or critical approaches. In this study, I hope to have uncovered a certain consanguinity between Puritanism and Derridean deconstruction. If the possibility that Perry Miller partially revealed (that the Puritans, despite themselves, were actually unconcerned with life after death) is definitive of American Puritanism, then that Puritanism, like Derrida’s thought, is predicated on the search for a transcendence that will never arrive.

In my introduction I quoted Derrida’s metaphorical description of the object of deconstruction as the “defective cornerstone” of a given text or system of thought (Memoires 72). This idea is just such a cornerstone: extrinsic to the structure of Puritanism (and certainly never openly expressed), it is nevertheless both crucial to its operation and the cause of its inherent instability.

On the Puritan side, one might name grace, death and God as those transcendental forces that are always expected yet never fully present. With Derrida, justice, democracy and death again are the ever-imminent concepts around which his work centres. Aporias, a text upon which this study has drawn extensively, is his most comprehensive exposition of the non-arrival of death. For democracy see Specters of Marx (1993) and The Politics of Friendship (1994), and for justice “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority” (1989).
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