

Finding your Way through the Snowstorm: Mortality as Teacher

By Peter Labanyi

Because I would not stop for death / he kindly stopped for me.

Emily Dickinson

Perhaps we shouldn't always avoid the obvious: 'I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.' Yet, ironically, 'being there' may be just what is needed: 'Oh God! May I be alive when I die' (quoted in Phillips, 1988: 19). Which do we prefer, Woody Allen's aversion or Winnicott's embrace, stoicism or despair, resolution or paralysis, in our response to mortality? Or perhaps open and quite understandable denial: 'I'm glad I don't believe it/For it would stop my breath - ...' (Dickinson, 1960: 41)? My own fear of death is by no means new. The immediate motive for this essay was re-reading a couple of my favourite novels, *Anna Karenina*

and *The Magic Mountain* - a convalescence from a Christmas flu that led to the cancellation of an elaborately-planned trip to India: the 'holiday of a lifetime' had to be put back in the dream cupboard. As a relatively benign though expensive reminder that, no matter what we may believe, we are never ultimately in charge of our lives, this too served as a *memento mori*.

The question is, assuming that the route of religious belief and after-life is closed, where do we turn for help in coping with our mortality? Certainly not to the Irish Zen teacher who could stand at his lectern and pronounce to a large audience

that death was 'no problem'. His dismissiveness is echoed by the hubristic title of Julian Barnes's book about mortality and the joys of atheism, *Nothing to Be Frightened of*. The grandiose macho posturing apart, how can anyone claim this when fear of death is hardwired into all living creatures as a survival mechanism? Neither would there be much point trying the facilitator of one of my first psychotherapy trainings. One day, some twenty-odd years ago, I recklessly asked in the group how one could keep going with one's motivations and attachments in the knowledge that it would all be obliterated by death. The answer was, at least, concise: 'We all have

to deal with that', whereupon the group process was redirected to more tractable matters.

Tolstoy lived a long and fertile life, fathered many children, and received universal acclaim as not just perhaps the greatest novelist of all time but also, in later life, as a sage with enormous global influence – notably on Gandhi and on a whole tradition of non-violent resistance. Despite such immense achievements, he struggled ceaselessly with his fear of death. It haunts all Tolstoy's fiction: from his earliest works, via the breath-stopping *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, right down to his last novel *Resurrection*. In its closing pages, the hero contemplates a corpse in a mortuary: "Why had he suffered? Why had he lived? Does he understand now what it's all for?" ..., and it seemed to him there was no answer, that there was nothing but death, and he felt faint' (Tolstoy, 1966: 561).

By the time he was ten, both Tolstoy's parents and his grandmother had died. But his paralysing dread ('felt faint') dates, rather, from one night in 1869 - shortly after the triumph of *War and Peace* and during the prime of his life - when he was staying at an inn in Arzamas. When Tolstoy asked himself what he was so afraid of, out of the blackness of his bedroom came the reply: 'Of me..., I am here' (quoted in Troyat, 1970: 445). Death itself had appeared to him, and had at a stroke rendered everything meaningless: the dread was never to leave him. So in addition to its relationship dramas, *Anna Karenina* is a novel about death: not just the events that lead to the increasingly trapped Anna's suicide but, equally, the existential torments of Tolstoy's alter ego, Levin: "Without knowing what I am and why I am here, it's impossible

for me to live. And I cannot know that, therefore I cannot live'" (Tolstoy, 2001: 819). This forces Levin to recognize both the limits of reason and the need for humility in the face of ultimate mystery: birth and death are 'like holes in this ordinary life, through which something higher showed' (ib. 741). But the acceptance that Levin appears to achieve is precarious. This is because it depends on his decision to stop asking the questions that make him so unhappy and revert (regress?) to an unquestioning Christian faith.

We all recognise such an image of death, armed archetypally with scythe and hourglass. Mowing down everyone and everything without distinction, the great leveller reminds us that the clock is ticking. This 'countdown' dynamic has been enlisted, notably by existential therapy, to drive us not just to value more the lifespan we are given but to see mortality as both a challenge and an opportunity. Heidegger is a classic source here. His strategy is to link mortality with another core existential issue, aloneness. To hide our fear of death from ourselves, he claims, we take shelter within the collective, which for him is the realm of conformity (what he calls 'the They'). The price I pay for such false comfort – false because temporary, for I will still have to die alone – is that I give up my freedom for a 'belonging' that may negate my real self. Yet it is precisely my death that is most uniquely mine. Therefore, Heidegger argues, it is only when I fully embrace what he calls my 'being-toward-death', that I can begin to claim my authenticity.

There are, however, several difficulties with existential

approaches to mortality. Firstly, by using the countdown model – and our helpless 'thrownness' in space and time into a world not of our making is one of Heidegger's great themes – the 'therapeutic' urgency may increase the panic that I already feel to such a degree that I want to simply pull the duvet over my head. Such a shrill wake-up call is contraindicated for anyone not living in the most blatant denial. Secondly, existential approaches offer valuable *descriptions* of our predicament. When it comes to solutions – such as they are – these rely on reframings of perceived issues: just change the way you see things. Such cognitive tricks cannot meet the powerful emotional and archetypal energies involved. As the novelist Richard Powers has acidly observed: 'Philosophy never consoled anyone' (Powers 2011: 81). As I will argue, a more embodied and indeed relational approach is needed for existential issues too.

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The doyen of existential therapists, Irvin Yalom, does recognize that fear of death is biological. This is why he subtitled his book 'overcoming the *terror* of death' (italics added): perhaps my terror can be reduced to fear, but my fear can never be 'overcome'. And even he is forced to admit that sometimes ideas are no help at all. Take for instance that tired old chestnut: because we won't be around to know that we are dead, therefore death can't

be frightening. In place of the left brain's cold and vacuous games, when up against the wall with a client what Yalom offers is his full presence. This, he says, contains the implicit message: "No matter how much terror you have, I will never shun or abandon you" (Yalom, 2009: 130). Such a promise of relatedness depends, needless to say, on the therapist having reached, if not comfort, at any rate a *modus vivendi*, some accommodation with their own mortality (see my earlier example for a lesson in how not to do it).

Presence we will return to. For now, its mention brings us to the third difficulty with the existential approach, which is its authenticity-driven privileging of aloneness. This sits awkwardly with the relatedness invoked even by Yalom. To put things crudely: does aloneness have any healing role for the relational beings we are, except as a temporary expedient to recuperate after leaving a destructive situation behind? Moreover, I have a suspicion that a hard-nosed emphasis on separation in psychotherapy - teaching people to wipe their own noses, as Fritz Perls wouldn't quite have put it - is often contaminated by characteristically male fears of boundary-softening and by compensatory fantasies of granite-faced autonomy. A soldierly 'resoluteness' was, tellingly, a key concept of the early Heidegger, though he did attain a more surrendered attitude in his later, quasi-Buddhist phase.

It is our second novel that offers an alternative to such cognitive and 'heroic' approaches to - or should we say evasions of? - mortality. Over the course of his stately and no less fertile career, Thomas Mann's view of death would, unlike Tolstoy's, undergo a transformation. A turning-point

is *The Magic Mountain*, which, as its richly woven and endlessly resonant mythic fabric suggests, is a novel of initiation. By this I mean the process of 'spiritual education' that, as the Jungian Joseph Henderson has stressed, occurs throughout life, whereby each successful transition between states and stages inducts us into deeper and deeper levels of being (Henderson & Oakes, 1990). Indeed Mann uses explicitly alchemical language to describe how the base metal of his 'simple' and hence malleable young hero is transmuted into something more refined, which is to say more fully human. The vessel for this process is the Alpine sanatorium where Hans Castorp is exposed to all manner of inputs and influences, both healthy and noxious. But the crux of the initiation is his encounter with mortality - not just via the sick and dying around him but directly, through his own body. When Hans sees the skeleton of his hand in an X-ray image, he knows for the first time that he is going to die: he has been given a glimpse into his own grave. But it is the impact on the young man that is crucial. Instead of Tolstoyan panic and paralysis, he becomes more and more curious about death and - this is his initiation - thereby about life: what a human being is and, consequently, what is humane, how one should live.

Mann's vast symphonic structure may be saturated by ideas, but it is underpinned by compassion. Ideas are evaluated not for their logic but for their humanity: as the novel progresses, the focus becomes increasingly ethical. Upset by the death-denying frivolity and, especially, the egotism that prevail in the sanatorium, Hans makes a

point of spending time with the gravely ill and the dying, taking them gifts, sitting by their bedside, accompanying them on excursions. But the initiation reaches its climax when Hans undergoes a death-rebirth experience on a foolhardy solo trip up the mountain in a snowstorm: an archetypal hero's journey into the land of death and transcendence. When we are told he cannot take the same route back, this advises us that he will not return as the same person. Confronted by the physical danger of getting lost and freezing to death, Hans is made to realise his own fragility as an embodied being. No longer merely a concept, his mortality has become an experience. This engenders a compassion for himself that ultimately extends to all living beings.

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Having been orphaned in childhood, Hans had already developed an 'oceanic' affinity with death: his cathexis of the unbounded 'maternal' sea symbolizes a pre-existing softening of his ego-boundaries. This is why, unlike Levin, the thought of mortality doesn't plunge him into terror and despair. Amid a landscape as hostile as it is sublime, it is Hans's malleability that helps him to shift his identification. What now enables him to resist the seductive pull of oblivion and infinity - symbolised by the sterile 'hexagonal symmetry' (Mann, 2005: 573) of the wilderness of snowflakes - is his body's desire to survive. He thereby discovers his affinity with

the organic: with that which is alive but – or rather therefore – also destined to die and decay. Life and death form a unity; but Hans's crucial insight is that only 'love stands opposed to death – it alone, and not reason, is stronger than death' (ib. 588).

What does all this imply for our search for an adequate response to mortality? The problem with the existential approach is not just that it is disembodied but that, by foregrounding and even making a virtue out of our isolation, it may increase our narcissism. This is in part what makes Levin's 'solution' regressive and contractive: it's all about him, the fate of his small, egoic self. By contrast, Hans's less-defended psyche is capacious and expansive. Hence his initiatory peak experience in the snowstorm takes on a transpersonal slant. He intuits that his dream-vision not only belongs to him but is equally the work of the collective 'great soul' dreaming through him. This enables him to achieve a relativising balance of identification. Indeed for Mann, as for Jung, human beings are defined by their capacity to contain and potentially transcend opposites. Thus although Hans naturally feels fear when he is in danger, what he does not feel is victimized. This is because, when his small self is no longer the absolute criterion, he is able to see his fate as *typical*: this is the kind of thing that happens. What this implies is that, although I cannot escape my mortality, I do have some freedom as to how I respond. But such freedom depends on how I conceive of myself.

As fish live in water, so do human beings inhabit time: it is both the stuff of our lives and the medium through which we experience the process of

living. As Heidegger knew, time therefore has profound existential implications. My sense of time passing and my awareness of my mortality are inseparable, which is why *The Magic Mountain* is as much about time as about death. If I put my focus on linear time – the countdown model – death will always be the future that rushes towards me and infects my present with panic. However if I redirect my attention, I can revision mortality not as a gun pointing to my head but as a teacher. This requires that I see my existence as not just a point on a timeline that is running out, but as having *depth*. Accordingly, it is not enough simply to 'live in the moment'. The real question is, who is living in that moment, which part of my psyche? If I am open to being taught by mortality, I can be initiated – like Hans – into deeper levels of my being, a larger sense of who I am. As the example of Mann's expansively identified young hero shows, because our trans-egoic self transcends the timeline, it lives as it were outside of time. Consequently, to the degree that I can expand my identification beyond my small self my fear of death may be assuaged.

As Yalom suggests, presence is the core of any *adequate* response to mortality. By 'adequate' I mean a response that I can experience as not just realistic but as healing: as something that furthers my wholeness. Mortality is generally classified as 'existential' – that is, as inseparable from the human condition. However – following the axiom that we cannot make progress with psychic issues at the level from which they originate – any effective response has to be 'spiritual' – by which I mean the larger frame within which we hold our human condition. So this is about finding not an external

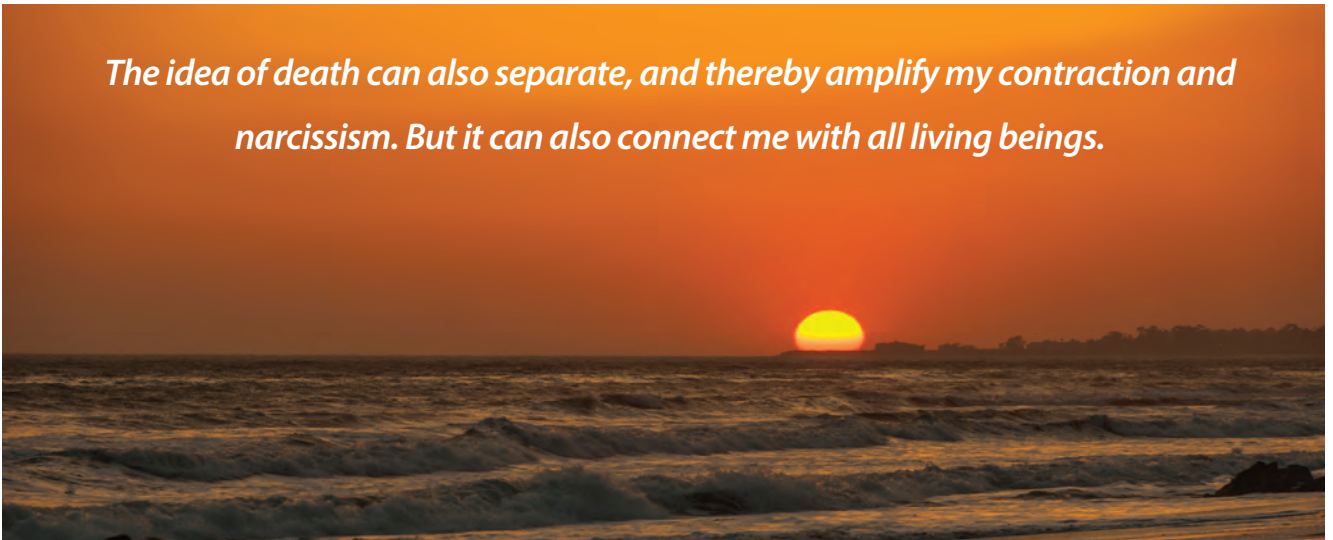
answer but, rather, a place *within myself*. The real question is about identification: not what do I need to do but who do I need to become to face my inevitable end, what inner resources can I draw on (such as Hans's acceptance, ego-softness and beginner's mind)?


Although we have no cure for mortality, it is workable: there is work we can do. At first glance, the classic Buddhist response – 'it's only the ego that dies' – may look like just another cognitive trick to persuade us that 'death is no problem'. On the contrary, as we have seen, such a realisation is about – well, realisation. Fully to awaken to this, to shift our identification, may require decades of spiritual practice. Moreover, this realisation is anything but cognitive. As Hans's experience in the snowstorm shows, what makes him present to himself is his heart-based embodiment. Such presence reveals what, in our deepest nature, we already are: it is both necessary and sufficient. Presence is, in itself, what we are looking for. For example, the work of the remarkable Buddhist psychotherapist Tara Brach is not mere 'teaching' but energetic transmission. She models her own principle that the more we can *become* this 'natural presence', the more our acceptance, love and compassion will naturally flow.

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The reality of death will separate me from everyone and everything I love. The idea of death can also separate, and thereby amplify my contraction and narcissism. But it can also connect me

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with all living beings. Through the initiation of its hero – his homecoming to a fuller sense of self - *The Magic Mountain* shows how compassion for self and other are interdependent. This reminds us that mortality is ultimately not about death but about life, about how we are to live. As Heidegger claimed, it can reveal what is of real concern to us. Therefore any attempt, however subtle, to use mortality as a justification for defensively withdrawing our libido from this life and from connection with others, will merely result, as Nietzsche warned, in a sin against life, in a kind of dying before death. ‘Transcending’ modes of spiritual practice need to guard against such a danger and the dissociation and depression it can spawn – something to which even Buddhists can be prone if they interpret ‘non-attachment’ too mechanically. Instead of withdrawing from life, what we need is to engage more fully, to be embodied and present, so that we can get in touch with our warm, beating but vulnerable heart, as did Hans Castorp that afternoon on his snow-covered mountain. 



Peter Labanyi

Peter Labanyi has been German Editor at the Times Literary Supplement and has lectured in German Studies at the University of Limerick. He has written extensively, for both weeklies and academic publications, on German literature and thought. Having taken early retirement, he became a psychotherapist. His current interests

are in integrating literature and philosophy with psychotherapy: his Reading for Your Life adult education course in UCD draws on these elements

Peter Labanyi will be facilitating an eight week course, ‘The Novel as Spiritual Journey’ (*The Magic Mountain*), in the UCD Adult Education Programme, beginning 6th February 2014.

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