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Children and Death

As Seen through Art and Autobiographies

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WITH SO MANY SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATIONS OR SPECULATIONS about the meaning of death to children, it may be strange that this article deals with the expression of direct experiences with death and with recorded sayings of children about death as we find them in autobiographies or in art, in stories written by children, or sayings of young children noted by observers. They shed light on children's reactions to death and their fantasies in different developmental phases.

We have deliberately excluded reports from the professional literature based on the individual treatment or observations on psychopathological situations, where the reaction to a death was the core of a developmental problem and often expressed in acting out or dramatic play. Because of the uniqueness of the times and the observers we have included a few examples of children's sayings from the Hampstead War Nurseries.

The selections from literature, art, observations, and children's work are not intended to be a representative sample. The material is much too rich and varied for that. They are

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chosen because they speak directly from emotional experience to emotional experience. Rather than being average, they are especially meaningful because they show with special clarity different ways of coping with the problem.

Our interest in this area is easily explained. One of us worked for many years as a member of the pediatric team in a hospital where death—at times expected and hoped for, at other times striking suddenly and viciously—forced us to focus our attention on life and in some ways to come to grips with our very personal reactions to the death of a child. For us, the beauty of some of the writings we have assembled in this article brought insight and relief.

The psychoanalytic literature has from Freud and Hug-Hellmuth before World War I, followed by Anna Freud's and Dorothy Burlingham's observations during World War II, led in the 1960s to many papers detailing the bereavement reactions of individual young children as well as children's reactions to the fear of dying (Solnit and Green, 1959, 1963). These were followed by Nagera's (1970) study of developmental interference through death of a close person, and Erna Furman's (1974) and her colleagues' extensive and decisive study describing the insights gained through analysis of bereaved children or counseling with the surviving parent.

Dealing with the Raw Realities of Death

James Agee (1957) poetically described how the reaction to the death of a parent is formed by the child's early attachment to them. Here is part of the passage he wrote, on the pattern of the Psalms:

> I hear my father; I need never fear.
> I hear my mother; I shall never be lonely, or want for love.
> When I am hungry it is they who provide for me; when I am in dismay, it is they who fill me with comfort.
> When I am astonished or bewildered, it is they who make the weak ground firm beneath my soul: it is in them that I put my trust. . . .

> I need never fear: nor ever shall I lack for loving kindness [p. 82f.].

But the peace of the family in this autobiographical novel is broken. Having driven to the Tennessee hills to visit the seriously ill grandfather, the father suffers a fatal accident on the way home when the steering wheel of his car malfunctioned. The very sensitive, shattered mother has to tell her two children, ages 6 and 3, of their father's death.

> "Come close"; and she touched each of them. "I want to tell you about Daddy." But upon his name her voice shook and her whole dry-looking mouth trembled like the ash of burned paper in a draft. "Can you hear me, Catherine?" she asked, when she had recovered her voice. Catherine peered at her earnestly as if through a thick fog. "Are you waked up enough yet, my darling?" And because of her voice, in sympathy and for her protection, they both came now much nearer, and she put her arms around both of them, and they could smell her breath, a little like sauerkraut but more like a dried-up mouse. And now even more small lines like cracked china branched all over her face. "Daddy," she said, "your father, children": and this time she caught control of her mouth more quickly, and a single tear spilled out of her left eye and slid jaggedly down all the jagged lines: "Daddy didn't come home. He isn't going to come home ever any more. He's—gone away to heaven and he isn't ever coming home again. Do you hear me, Catherine? Are you awake?" Catherine stared at her mother. "Do *you* understand, Rufus?"
>
> He stared at his mother. "Why not?" he asked.
>
> She looked at him with extraordinary closeness and despair, and said, "Because God wanted him." They continued to stare at her severely and she went on: "Daddy was on his way home last night—and he was—he—got hurt and—so God let him go to sleep and took him straight away with Him to heaven." She sank her fingers in Catherine's springy hair and looked intently from one to the other. "Do you see, children? Do you understand?" They stared at her, and now Catherine was sharply awake.
>
> "Is Daddy *dead?*" Rufus asked. Her glance at him was as startled as if he had slapped her, and again her mouth and

> then her whole face began to work, uncontrollably this time, and she did not speak, but only nodded her head once, and then again, and then several times rapidly, while one small, squeaky "yes" came out of her as if it had been sneezed out [p. 251f.].
>
> [The children are then sent to breakfast with a greataunt.]
>
> All through breakfast, Rufus had wanted to ask questions, but now he felt so shy and uneasy that he could hardly speak. "Who hurt him?" he finally asked.
>
> "Why nobody hurt him, Rufus," she said, and she looked shocked. "What on earth made you think so?"
>
> Mama said so, Catherine thought.
>
> "Mama said he got hurt so bad God put him to sleep," Rufus said.
>
> Like the kitties, Catherine thought; she saw a dim, gigantic old man in white take her tiny father by the skin of the neck and put him in a huge slop jar full of water and sit on the lid, and she heard the tiny scratching and the stifled mewing.
>
> "That's true he was hurt, but nobody hurt him," her aunt Hannah was saying. How could that be, Catherine wondered. "He was driving home by himself. That's all, all by himself, in the auto last night, and he had an accident."
>
> Rufus felt his face get warm and he looked warningly at his sister. He knew it could not be that, not with his father, a grown man, besides, God wouldn't put you to sleep for *that,* and it didn't hurt, anyhow. But Catherine might think so. Sure enough, she was looking at her aunt with astonishment and disbelief that she could say such a thing about her father. Not in his *pants,* you dern fool, Rufus wanted to tell her, but his Aunt Hannah continued: "A *fatal* accident"; and by her voice, as she spoke the strange word, "fatal," they knew she meant something very bad. "That means that, just as your mother told you, that he was hurt so badly that God put him to sleep right away" [p. 258].

Agee certainly was not trying to write a "psychoanalytic novel," but one can hardly imagine it written before Freud. What may seem bizarre, even gross humor is actually authenticity. Toilet training does loom that large on that developmental level, but earlier writers would not have seen it that way.

Very different, but equally eloquent is Sean O'Casey's description (1939) of the last time the 6-year-old saw his father alive:

> Once again, when the parlour door had been left open, Johnny, passing by, had ventured to peep into the room. . . . There was his poor da, or, his father, as Johnny's mother spoke of him to his brothers and sister, sitting facing the fire. . . . He must have sensed the boy peering in at him, for the head in the cricket-cap suddenly turned, and the boy caught a frightening glimpse of a white, wasted agony-lined face, jewelled with deep-set eyes now gleaming with appealing anger at the boy who was looking at him. Johnny saw the blue veins swell in the delicate hand that rested on the chair, and his ears were shocked by the sound of the low weak voice trying to shout at him, Go away, go away, you, and shut the door at once—this is no place for little boys.
>
> Johnny had closed the door quick, had run for his life through the hall out into the street, full of the fear of something strange, leaving his da, his poor da, shrinking from something that everyone thought of, but nobody ever mentioned [p. 42f.].

Soon thereafter the father died. On the day of the funeral Johnny was playing outdoors when a neighbor urged him into the house to kiss his father before they closed the coffin:

> —I couldn't, I couldn't, he sobbed. Don't ask me, mother, don't ask me to kiss him, I'm frightened to kiss a dead man.
>
> He felt a gentle, sympathetic pressure of an arm around him, and softened his sobbing.
>
> —No one'll ask you to do it, she said. I'll kiss him goodbye for you myself. Just touch the side of the coffin with the tip of your finger.
>
> She gently drew out his arm, and he shuddered deeply when he felt the tip of his finger touching the shiny cold side of the coffin.
>
> —That's the brave little son, she murmured; and now I'll give your father a last kiss from his little boy [p. 57].

In both these autobiographies the response of the sensitive mother has helped to lessen the immediate fear, though Agee

lived his rather short life under the shadow of this loss. O'Casey became a fighter for causes and did not submit to the pain and restrictions of his ophthalmologic difficulties.

Very different was the reaction of Anton Wildgans (1928) who lost his mother when he was 3½ years old. She died of tuberculosis, shortly after she had given birth to another boy. It seems from his memories that nobody took any notice of the boy or talked to him about the death. On the day of the funeral he was left alone in the dining room of a typical small middle-class apartment in Vienna before the turn of the century:

> My memory reemerges with the dusk of the day. I see myself in the dining room, and I was alone. A little pitcher half filled with milk was standing on the edge of the table where I had so often got to feel the rod because I refused to eat the soup; a roll was next to the pitcher. The moment came when I appropriated these good things, dipped the roll into the milk and ate it. So I could still my hunger, and I had no fear either: nobody had given me much care lately. . . .
>
> Today, though, the father was not here, and all was silent in the apartment. There—and to this day I feel it, bodily!—something strange and new got hold of me: an excitement out of myself, a stirring in the darkness around me! I can no longer fathom how long this lasted. But when at last there was sound again in the apartment and the father entered through the kitchen door, he found his boy sitting on the floor in the dark room. The empty glass and a little leftover of the milk-softened roll were lying beside him. He had taken off his shoes and socks and he talked—as he had sometimes done in earlier days before falling asleep in the evening—to his own feet, feverishly whispering. So I have often heard it told later, and that was the afternoon when my mother was buried [p. 5f.].

We strongly sense the withdrawal from the outside world, the use of his own body as consolation in his isolation and in the darkness. Since the father was involved in his own grief, there was nobody to turn to.

Another young boy who fits into this group is Maxim Gorky (1913) who was present at his father's death during a cholera

epidemic. His unique recollection combines the father's death and the birth of a brother:

> On the floor, under the window, in a small, shuttered room, lay my father, dressed in a long white garment I had never seen him in before. His feet were bare and the toes were strangely distended, while the fingers of his hands, resting on his breast, were curled in. The blackened disks of two copper coins covered his eyes, shutting out their accustomed, cheerful gleam. All the light had gone out of his still face. But what scared me most was the snarl his open mouth showed with the bared teeth.
>
> Beside him, on her knees, was my mother, in an undergarment. She was combing his long, fine hair back from his forehead to the nape of his neck. The comb she was using was the one with which I scraped edible shreds from watermelon rinds. As she combed away, she talked to him without stopping, through tears that fell without stopping, until it seemed that they must finally flood her eyes out of their sockets.
>
> I saw all this holding on to the hand of my grandmother, whose dark head and eyes and nose looked enormous—the nose shapeless and pitted like a sponge—but a gentle, yet vividly interesting, woman. She, too, wept with sobs that were like cadences to my mother's. Shuddering herself, she pushed me toward my father, but I was too terrified to let go and clung to her.
>
> This was the first time I had ever seen grownups cry, and I could not understand her repeated bidding, "Say good-by to your father. You'll never see him again. He's dead before his time" [p. 3].
>
> Then a policeman and some grave-diggers appeared at the door. "Get a move on!" bellowed the policeman. . . .
>
> All at once my mother dropped to the floor and immediately turned over, her hair in the dirt. Her mouth came open on her now-livid face so that her teeth were bared like my father's. In a terrifying voice she ordered me out, and the door to be shut.
>
> Pushing me aside, grandma rushed to the door crying out, "Friends, there's nothing to be alarmed about; it's not the cholera; she's giving birth. For the love of God, leave us! Good people, go away!" . . .

> I shook with fright. . . .
>
> Suddenly there was the whimper of a child. "Thank God!" grandma called out, "it's a boy!" and got up to light a candle.
>
> And at that point, I must have fallen asleep in the darkness . . . because that was all I remembered.
>
> My next memory is a solitary spot in a cemetery, in the rain [p. 4f.].

Though the primitivity of the Russian environment differs from the settings of the other memories, the message is the same. Gorky could become a self-made man and forceful writer through the support of a mother figure in a crucial situation, here his grandmother. This soothing influence was missed in Wildgans's experience. He not only lost his mother at the beginning of the oedipal period, his only comfort was his own body, his toes. In one of his poems he movingly described the warping of a character by being orphaned. Nevertheless, the traumas these four writers underwent in their childhood did not destroy them; they may in fact have contributed to the great sensitivity to others in their work.

Anton Chekhov, himself a physician, relates running from death in "The Runaway" (1887). Seven-year-old Pashka, hospitalized for surgery on his elbow, has been tricked into staying in the hospital by the doctor's promise to take him to a fair, show him a live fox, help him catch thrushes. He shares a room with a very sick old man and sees other frightening fellow patients, but trusting the doctor and looking forward to his mother's promised visit the next day, he falls asleep in peace.

> Later he was awakened by a noise. Men walked in the adjoining ward and spoke in whispers. The dim gleam of night-lights . . . showed three figures moving near Mikhailo's bed.
>
> "Shall we take him on the mattress, or as he is?" asked one.
>
> "As he is. There's no room for the mattress. Akh, he is dead at a bad hour, heaven rest his soul!"
>
> Then—one of the figures taking Mikhailo's shoulders, another his feet—they lifted him. . . . The third . . . crossed himself; and all shuffling their feet, tripping in the folds of his dressing gown, went out of the ward. . . . Pashka . . .

> looked in fright at the black windows, and jumped out of bed in panic. "Mother!" he screamed.
>
> And, without awaiting an answer, he rushed into the adjoining ward. . . . The patients, agitated by Mikhailo's death, were sitting up in their beds. Grim, dishevelled, haunted by shades, they looked like giants; they seemed to increase in size. . . . Pashka tore through the small-pox ward into the corridor, . . . recognized the banister and rushed downstairs . . . stumbling sped into the yard, in his head a single thought: to flee, to flee! He dashed around a shed into the shrubbery, stood a second in doubt, then rushed back to the hospital and ran around it. But there he stopped in indecision, for suddenly before his eyes rose the white crosses of a graveyard.
>
> "Mother!" he screamed, and turned back again [p. 312f.].

This gruesome example may not seem pertinent today—except that children still occasionally are housed on adult divisions; their number will be increased if plans succeed to cut hospital expenses by closing some pediatric units.

We experience a very different loss in the memoir (1966), characteristically entitled *Under Gemini,* by Isabel Bolton, an identical twin. At the age of 83, she writes: "When I evoke those hours of childhood to live in them once more, it is not myself I see before me—it is she, the living image of myself" (p. vii). On the last day of their summer vacation on the New England shore, the twins, just 13 years old, took a boat into the inland waters:

> . . . we swam around the boat, and then a little puff of wind—the boat was carried off and away and headed for the outlet and the sea. Suddenly filled with panic we did our best to overtake it, swimming as swiftly as was possible; but this we saw was hopeless, a futile thing to do—to waste strength necessary to swim ashore. We were lost and terrified—Grace's strength already spent. Was she clinging to me? No, she was not, she was still beside me in the water, swimming still. What was it she was saying? Clearly I heard her voice; as though I myself were speaking the words, she said, "My darling Mary, how I love you. . . ."

> Then there was silence and I saw she was not there beside me. Where was she? Where was I?
>
> I called to her, "Float, Grace, get over on your back, float, keep on floating."
>
> And where was I? What was I doing? Where was I going?
>
> "Float, Grace," I called, and with all the strength that still remained I swam, I kept on swimming towards the shore and always calling, "Float, Grace, keep floating" [p. 126f.].

In an Afterword, Bolton closes her memoir: "I am an old woman now and full of many memories, but those which I have here evoked have for me still the strange and wonderful completeness of having lived another's life that was at the same time my own" (p. 128).

Personification of Death

The skeleton has been used to represent death since ancient times, but in two different ways: as the skeleton of an individually deceased, or as personification. The distinction has been familiar to iconography at least since Lessing (1769) established it in his pioneering work. The skeleton personifying death became very popular in late Gothic art—Hans Holbein's slightly later *Dance of Death* is best known (fig. 1)—and again in baroque art. The now familiar symbols—the scythe (the "grim reaper!"), the hourglass—became fixed emblems of death.

This vogue has subsided, though Gottlieb (1959) goes too far when she says that the "modern artists do not represent death by personification because the spirit of allegory is alien to them" (p. 185). Käthe Kollwitz, who lost a young son in World War I, depicted death as a skeleton in her graphic work, sometimes as a relieving friend, but mostly as an attacker. Alfred Kubin, whom Gottlieb rightly lists among the modern artists, presented death as skeleton in his *Blätter mit dem Tod* in 1918 (fig. 2). Death so appears in Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal,* but characteristically in a medieval context.

On the whole, the spirit of personification is indeed alien to modern feeling, though children may not have followed the trend. Nagy (1948), whose paper, an early and thorough

Figure 1. Hans Holbein the Younger: "The Child"

Woodcut. From *The Dance of Death*
From the original in the Lessing J. Rosenwald
Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections
Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

study, has come to be considered a classic in American thanatology, found personification of death prominent among the reactions of the children she studied: from ages 5 to 9, "death is most often personified and thought of as a contingency" (p. 80f.)—the child's idea is that you die if Death graps you (fig. 1)—although she is here referring to both possibilities: "Personification of death takes place in two ways: death is imagined as a separate person, or else death is identified with the dead" (p. 88). We quote one example:

Figure 2. Alfred Kubin: "The Mask of Death"

Pen drawing (1918). From Kubin's *Dance of Death and Other Drawings.* New York: Dover Publications, 1972

B.G. (4,9): "Death does wrong."
"How does it do wrong?"
"Stabs you to death with a knife."
"What is death?"
"A man."
"What sort of a man?"
"Death-man."
"How do you know?"
"I saw him."
"Where?"
"In the grass. I was gathering flowers."

"How did you recognize him?"
"I knew him."
"But how?"
"I was afraid of him" [p. 90].

As Murphy (1959) pointed out, Nagy's results may well have sprung from "historical, sociocultural or specific local conditions" (p. 321f.). Her material was collected in and around Budapest, apparently in the 1930s. At that time Hungary was still a semifeudal country and medieval traditions may well have been relatively vigorous. Current observations do not seem to bear out Nagy's findings about the personification of death; it seems very doubtful whether a repetition of her study with American children of today would bring similar results.

Where personification is found in the recent literature, it does, however, touch a very responsive chord, for example, in the autobiography of Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), who lost his father as an infant. Before we quote from it a brief remark on the translation is in order. In French, as in all Romance languages, the word for "death" is feminine—*la mort.* This gives the personification of death a certain flavor and direction. We therefore refer to death as "she."

> I saw death. I was 5 years old. She lay in wait for me. In the evening she loitered on the balcony, pressed her snout against the window, I saw her but did not dare say anything. One time we encountered her on Quai Voltaire, an old lady, tall and crazy, dressed in black, she mumbled as I passed, "This child, I'll put him in my pocket." Another time she took the shape of an excavation. That was in Arcachon. . . . I was fearful because I had been told that Gabriel [our host] was sick and would die. I played horse, listlessly hopping around the house. Suddenly I noticed a dark hole: the cellar, it had been opened. Somehow that signified to me terror and solitude. I turned, and singing at the top of my voice I fled [p. 76].

The "singing at the top of his voice" clearly served as a defense against overwhelming anxiety, against the child's ego's fear of annihilation. Sartre continues:

> At that time I had a date with death every night in my bed. It was a ritual: I had to lie on my left side, with the back to the wall. Trembling I waited, and she appeared, in the conventional shape of the skeleton with the scythe. With that I had permission to turn on my right side, and I could sleep in peace [p. 76f.].
>
> What was death? A person and a threat. The person was crazy, and the threat was this: Shadowy jaws could open up anywhere, in broad daylight, and snap at me. There was a horrible reverse side of things, you saw it if you lost your mind, and to die was to drive insanity to its extreme and be engulfed by it [p. 78].

William H. Hudson (1918), best known as the author of *Green Mansions,* relates his feelings after recovering from typhoid at age 15:

> I had lived till now in a paradise of vivid sense-impressions in which all thoughts came to me saturated with emotion, and in that mental state reflection is well-nigh impossible. Even the idea of death, which had come as a surprise, had not made me reflect. Death was a person, a monstrous being who had sprung upon me in my flowery paradise and had inflicted a wound with a poisoned dagger in my flesh [p. 292].

Building up Defenses: Rejection of Death

Children who grow up in a religious family receive some consolation from the thoughts of heaven. Those who live in the Here and Now of a hostile world have to dissociate themselves in fantasy or in acting out from the thoughts of their not living forever or of accepting the death of a loved one.

In role playing, the child can become the aggressor rather than the victim and can build up good defenses to ward off anxieties. The American Halloween customs, where young children may dress as witches, ghosts, goblins, or skeletons, lessen the anxiety of the imagined danger of being attacked.

Working with preschool children in Vienna shortly after World War II, I (E. N. P.) saw a dramatic change in a young girl's behavior following St. Nicholas Day, which is December

6. The "Niccolo" comes during the night, accompanied by the "Krampus," a representation of the devil, who threatens to put children in his hopper. The Niccolo brings gifts (apples, oranges, nuts) for the "good" children's stockings, while the "bad" ones get only coal and potatoes from the Krampus. Adolescents love to dress up as Niccolo and Krampus and haunt their neighborhoods on the eve of December 6, terrifying many young children.

To counteract these fears, we suggested to the children that on December 5 they could dress up in any way they wanted, and we talked about who they wanted to be. Five-year-old Ann, whose home had been bombed, lived with her mother in a cellar apartment, never spoke to any adult, and only whispered to some girls in her group. Asked about who she wanted to be, she said barely audibly, "A Krampus." She looked like an angelic Krampus, in her black leotards with red tail and cap and with her sweet smile. She also wanted apples and nuts to give to the others. From that day on she talked. We had neither the time nor the skill to look into her background or to work with her elderly, very unfriendly mother; but at least this acting out—her being the devil rather than the one caught by him and taken to hell—had freed her.

Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1943) relate how children who lost their fathers in air raids did not mention their experience for many months. Speech did not serve as an outlet until the feelings about the father's death had been dealt with in some other way. "The outlet into conscious thought and speech with consequent relief in their behaviour is unluckily denied to some of our children who would be most in need of it" (p. 139). In Vienna we did not have the opportunity to find the roots of the child's worries, as they are told so well in *War and Children* in Bertie's story (pp. 124–128), but at least Ann could safely begin public school a few months later.

When death has to be rejected by a child to be tolerated, the painting *The Dead Mother and Her Child* (1899) by Edvard Munch the Norwegian may serve as a moving example of how to protect the ego (fig. 3). The girl not only turns away from

Figure 3. Edvard Munch: *The Dead Mother and the Child*

Oil on cardboard. Bremen, Kunsthalle

the mother but also has to hold her ears—she does not want to see or hear of the tragedy. Munch was 5 years old when he lost his mother, and subsequently a number of his siblings, who all died from tuberculosis. Illness, isolation, pain, and death became his frequent subjects in painting. He once said: "Death is pitch dark, but colors are light. . . . To die is as if one's eyes had been put out and one cannot see anything any more. . . . One is abandoned by all. They have slammed the door and are gone" (Hodin, 1972, p. 93). Another of his paintings, *Life and Death* (1897), conveys a message of biologi-

cal immortality. Buried in the earth is a woman from whom plants and flowerlike shapes arise.

A 3-year-old as quoted by the Russian writer Chukovsky (1963) expresses a similar idea of restitution: "They bury old people, that is, they plant them in the ground and from them grow little children like flowers" (p. 48).

Another child, 3½ years old, quoted by Anthony (1971) from his mother's diary, asked how plants come up in spring, not having shown above ground in winter. After an explanation he said: "When shall we all be dead and gone and then come back again?" (p. 26).

A possible connection with castration anxiety is indicated by the interrelated questions of a 6-year-old and Piaget's (1959) comment on them:

> "Caterpillars turn into butterflies, then shall I turn into a little girl?"—No—"Why?"—"Why has it [a dead caterpillar] grown quite small? When I die shall I also grow quite small?"
>
> [Piaget adds in a footnote:] These last two questions correspond to two spontaneous ideas of childhood which are well known to psycho-analysts: that it is possible to change one's sex, and that after death one becomes a child again [p. 177; italics omitted].

He does not specify which psychoanalysts he has in mind, but he could have referred, e.g., to Hug-Hellmuth (1912).

Denial of Death

Denial of the finality of death in poetry, familiar from such poems as Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," is also used by writers who cannot bear the loss of a child. The German poet Friedrich Rückert (1872) wrote a whole series (420 poems), *Kindertotenlieder,* to manage his grief when two of his daughters died of scarlet fever. Some became widely known since Gustav Mahler set them to music. Poem 36 shows that not only the siblings, but Rückert himself needed to deny the finality of death to bear his loss:

The servant comes to tell the children
Their sister has died. They hear it said,
And yet with one voice say the brothers:
  It is not true, she is not dead.
They see her white, they see her lying,
Her lip so pale that was so red,
And whisper softly as replying:
  It is not true, she is not dead.
They see the mother weeping, waning,
The father's tears his heart has bled,
And yet their chorus is remaining:
  It is not true, she is not dead.
And when the day came and the hours
To lay her in her final bed,
To lower her beneath the flowers:
  It is not true, she is not dead.
May she remain your sister longer,
May every year her beauty spread
And may your love grow ever stronger—
  It is not true, she is not dead.

Hermann Hesse (1960) ends his poem "Kleiner Knabe" ("Little Boy") thus:

Grownup people die:
Uncle, grandpapa.
But I, I shall remain
Ever, ever here.

A similar feeling of omnipotence was expressed by a 4½-year-old boy who "looked out of the bus window at a funeral procession and said, with serenity: 'Everyone will die, but I'll remain' " (Chukovsky, 1963, p. 46f.).

Three great writers of our century present themselves as adult witnesses to a child's death. The agony of a boy dying from plague is the more passionate because of Camus's (1947) clinical tone. Aldous Huxley (1928) and Thomas Mann (1948) each have a haunting chapter in their novels describing the death of a young boy from meningitis. We heard it said that Mann alarmed his family by depicting little Nepomuk, the extraordinarily charming child who dies, as looking and acting

like one of his grandsons. Did Mann try to deny the possibility of losing this child by describing (thus magically averting) this most terrible death?

In children the denial can be observed more directly. Few 5-year-olds will be as certain as a boy Chukovsky quotes: "To die—that's very bad. That's for ever." And another child: "She tried to persuade us and her grandmother not to die until she was grown up and would find medicine against old age and death. 'Because there must not be any death' " (p. 58). The same feeling of omnipotence is still operating here.

The finality of death is clearly doubted by children in the Hampstead Nursery reports (A. Freud and Burlingham, 1944).

> Susan, four and one-half, who lost her father in the raids [said]: "My father is deaded, he has gone far away to Scotland; he will come back, much later when I am quite big." . . .
>
> [Same child:] "My daddy is coming next Sunday. Yes, yes, he is coming Sunday. You will see, he will bring me the biggest piece of chocolate you have ever seen."
>
> Bertie, five and one-half, whose father was killed in the raids: . . . "Why can't all killed daddies come back and be little babies and come to the mummies again?"
>
> Peter, four, whose father was killed in the raids: . . . "My Daddy is taking me to the Zoo to-day. He told me last night; he comes every night and sits on my bed and talks to me" [p. 107f.].

The irreversibility of death is questioned constantly by these children. For these boys in the oedipal period the magnification of the father's virtues and powers may aid the process of identification, but it may also camouflage their hidden death wishes.

We also find fantasies about death wishes, this time against siblings, in spontaneously written stories of children. The reversibility of death, a final denial or use of magic power, mitigates the guilt feelings of the writer. Nancy, a child I (E.N.P.) taught many years ago, wrote the following story at age 7:

> There was once a little girl who did not have any father and mother. And she had a little brother who was very good. Once sister said to brother: "Go and get breakfast" and brother says: "if nothing will happen to me I'll go." Brother went and a car passed and ran him over. And little sister cried and cried. A fairy came and said: "Why do you cry so hard?" "Oh my!" said sister, "my little brother died." "Don't worry, I'll make him come to life again," said the fairy.

When Nancy was 8, no good fairy came to the rescue any longer. She had to carry the guilt of her death wishes all by herself.

> *How a Mother Lost 4 Children*
>
> A 6-year-old girl wanted to cross the street with a 3-year-old. The little child wanted to break loose from her sister's hand, the 6-year-old saw her friend and let go of the little one and ran over to her friend. Just then the little girl sat down right in the middle of the streetcar tracks and started to play with sand. All of a sudden a streetcar came along, the big girl did not look at all and the little one was run over and was dead immediately. Now the older child finally wanted to go home, and called the little one, but she did not come. Then she saw many people stand around and as she could not find the little one she started to cry. A policeman came and asked her why she cried. And she says: "My sister got lost, she had a blue coat on." "Yes, said the policeman, she got run over; she is dead." First she did not want to believe it, but when she saw it she sure did. She cried loud with fear and fainted and after she came to she took the little sister but did not dare to go home. Since she wandered around she got lost and did not find the way home anymore.

As the oldest of three children, Nancy had often felt resentful and burdened by having to watch the little ones. The fourth child in the story's title referred to a stillbirth the mother had suffered at that time. When I saw Nancy 40 years later as a well-established adult, she had many memories of her school days, but none of these stories.

A recurrence of the oedipal feelings is strongly expressed in a poem by an 11-year-old French boy who was living alone

with his mother who suffered from heart disease. The mother's denial to the boy of the father's death played into this:

> I'd like to know, Mummy,
> Why you always cry
> When I talk of dear Daddy.
> Yet you have told me
> That he is getting better.
> Come, Mummy,
> Stop these lies.
> They don't become you.
> I know quite well
> That Daddy has left us for ever.
> So why isolate us
> In our great pain?
> Lean on
> Your little boy
> Who will love you for two [Heuyer et al., 1955, p. 228].

REACTIONS TO CATASTROPHES

In *War and Children* Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1943) describe that many months elapsed after bombings before the children began to draw pictures of, or to dictate letters about, what had happened. One child dictated: "my pussy-cat was hurt by a bomb and was hanging on the guard" (p. 66); another said, "my pussy-cat was thrown away" (p. 67).

> The children who lost their fathers in air raids never mentioned anything of their experience for many months. . . . Then after a year, two of them at least told the complete story with no details left out. In all these instances speech does not serve as an outlet for the emotion which is attached to the happening. It is rather the other way round. The child begins to talk about the incident when the feelings which were aroused by it have been dealt with in some other manner [p. 67].

It is interesting to compare these young children who had loving care after the catastrophe with the 9-year-old girl in

Boyer's *Jeux interdits* ("Forbidden Games"), both a book and a film. We witness her tragedy in a crowd of refugees machine-gunned by a German plane. When the parents are killed, she leaves them behind but takes her dead dog with her on the flight South. She finds refuge in a peasants' home where she and the young son become close friends. They secretly bury the dog and then take to collecting dead animals, also killing small ones, and establish a hidden cemetery for which they steal crosses. This morbid game becomes their whole life, as if having and tending the graveyard were soothing the guilt and terror of having left the dead parents and being left by them. Since there was nobody who helped this child to talk about her loss and helped establish her mourning, she reacted in this macabre way.

Wolfgang Borchert, in a short and gripping story (1949), describes a 9-year-old boy who sits day and night in the shambles of his bombed home to protect the body of his 4-year-old brother buried under the debris from rats that he fears would eat the corpse.

What makes it so chilling to read these reports on children coping with death in wartime, be they scientific observations as in the case of the Hampstead Nurseries, be they fiction as with Boyer and Borchert, is the children's familiarity with catastrophic death, so inappropriate for their age. It is difficult to decide whether children under conditions of modern war come to understand death earlier, or whether on the contrary they become so familiar with death because they are not yet able to understand its awesomeness and finality and yet are pushed into it and have to come to terms with it.

Some Theoretical Questions

It would be easier to understand the apparent precocity of children in war if we knew at which age or developmental stage a realistic notion of death emerges under normal conditions; but this we do not exactly know. Nagera (1970) rather understates the case when he says that "there is some disagreement" on this point, for he goes on to cite one psychoanalytic study that ascribes the formation of a reasonably realistic con-

cept of death to children of 3½ to 4, and another to children of 10 to 11 (p. 361).

Much empirical research will be needed to narrow this gap. Bluebond-Langner (1977) reviewed a variety of studies in this area and reported on some new work. Our material furnishes but a modest contribution. It suggests that the truth, as so often, may lie somewhere in the middle. It is reasonable to hypothesize that comprehension of death may depend on the solution of the oedipus complex. As the need to grapple with his death wishes is lessened, the child can use the cooler climate of the latency years to look at death more objectively.

"Neo-Freudians" have reproached psychoanalysis with neglecting social and historical factors. Freud, however, has actually pointed out how war affects attitudes toward death (1915, especially p. 291f.). He knew this decades before his apprehensions materialized in the atrocities of our more recent wars.

Freud (1917) brought out how fate and chance determine a child's acquaintance with death, and so may set the course of his development when he stressed the importance which the deaths of his younger siblings had for the boy Goethe. In those days, more than 200 years ago, it was not war that did it, but infant mortality (Mitchell, 1966, p. 35). It almost seems as though a malignant power saw to it that there was always one or the other scourge to keep children acquainted with death. Pestilence handed the reins to War. Now the silhouette of the third apocalyptic horseman, Famine, presently raging in distant parts of the world, begins to loom on our horizon.

The question at which stage a clear concept of death develops leads to the more generally significant question whether fear of death evolves out of life experience or is inborn; for it is difficult to imagine how a fear could exist before its object can be grasped. Of course, as the history of concept development in the physical sciences has abundantly shown, our inability to imagine a phenomenon does not keep it from occurring. That many generations ago people could not visualize the surface of the earth as anything but flat does not prevent it from being curved.

The view that the fear of death is inborn in man and beast

and that it acts as a most powerful force in the mental development of the human individual has been propounded by philosophers (Schopenhauer, 1818, especially Book IV). It has again been placed much more in the foreground of public consciousness through Becker's influential book (1973). The question is part of the larger one whether—and if so, by what mechanism—mental contents or dispositions can be inherited. While Jung based his system on an unequivocal answer, Freud refrained from rushing in where angels fear to tread; though in some more or less *obiter dicta* (see 1919, p. 241f.) he seems to lean toward inheritance.

On the whole, though, it seems more natural to psychoanalytic thinking to believe that interest in how life ends would emerge as a corollary to the interest in how it begins. Piaget (1923, pp. 178, 206ff.) takes the opposite view: "the idea of death sets the child's curiosity in action, precisely because, if every cause is coupled with a motive, then death calls for a special explanation. The child will therefore look for the distinguishing criteria of life and of death, and this will lead him in a certain measure to replace precausal explanation" (p. 206).

While these theoretical considerations focus on the individual's attitude toward death as a general phenomenon which the child may hear about or observe but which does not necessarily have a direct personal impact, this study is more concerned with that impact when it strikes. How do children handle their grief?

The first personal encounter with death is often the loss of a loved pet. While young children seem heartbroken at the death of a pet (fig. 4), such clearly visible reactions are rarely reported at the death of a family member; their absence is often misinterpreted as "not caring." Children have to be encouraged and helped to grieve and should not be excluded from the family's mourning. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1943) explain the difficulties that arise when the surviving parent's wish precludes the staff from letting a child know of the death of the other parent. As we found out in our hospital experience, one has to allow thoughts or reactions to

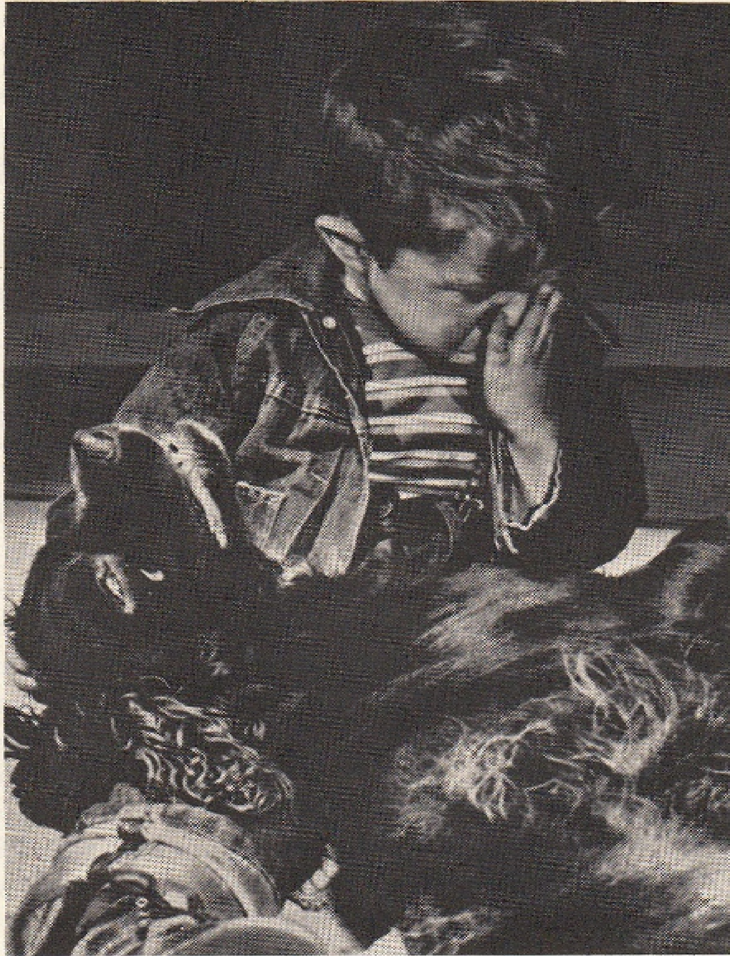

Figure 4. Roger Wrenn: Child and Dead Dog
Photo "Hit and Run." From Hanns Reich, *Children of Many Lands.* Hill & Wang, 1958

death to come into the open and be talked about to retain the children's trust and to support them in showing their grief, and to clarify their threatening fantasies about their own danger.

Ritual is very important in the child's working through the experience of death. It can help or hamper the child's building of his defenses. We have seen rituals in two different roles, though both are essentially obsessive-compulsive defenses. Rituals developed by adults, and sometimes rigidified by long tradition, may be valuable. They may serve as vessels for the

child to pour his anxiety into so that it may be contained. They can also be frightening and damaging. For O'Casey, as his story shows, the ritual was traumatic. Reports of similar reactions were collected by Mitchell (1966, pp. 51–54). Rituals on the other hand that a child invents (Sartre, 1964; Boyer, 1968) may limit and structuralize his neurotic needs.

Historic change intrudes in all these matters, as it did in the matter of infant mortality and war forcing death on the child's attention. We are referring to a phenomenon that is by now well known. In fact, the very attention that has been paid to it may have helped to reverse it. The trend has been particularly well formulated by Ariès (1974):

> Geoffrey Gorer . . . has shown clearly how death has become a taboo and how in the twentieth century it has replaced sex as the principal forbidden subject. Formerly children were told that they were brought by the stork, but they were admitted to the great farewell scene about the bed of the dying person. Today they are initiated in their early years to the physiology of love; but when they no longer see their grandfather and express astonishment, they are told that he is resting in a beautiful garden among the flowers. Such is "The Pornography of Death" . . . and the more society was liberated from the Victorian constraints concerning sex, the more it rejected things having to do with death [p. 92f.].

Thus, what Freud (1930) predicted has come to pass: "And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers', eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary" (p. 145). A year later, he added a last sentence to this paragraph: "But who can foresee with what success and with what results?"

One may wonder indeed whether the reemergence of Eros from the dark closet where societal forces of Freud's day confined it, followed by a similar banishment of Thanatos from which he is now again emerging, has taken quite the forms that Freud anticipated. Be this as it may, we have to maintain our effort to humanize both heavenly powers: as scientists and scholars, we must keep trying to penetrate into the thoughts and feelings of children; as practitioners, to help them carry

the burdens that press on them. This remains our professional calling.

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