MOURNING AND DISASTER
Mourning and Disaster: Finding Meaning in the Mourning for Hillsborough and Diana,
by Michael Brennan

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IN MEMORY OF JACK DARWIN
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INTRODUCTION

This book is the product of several years of thinking and research on the topic of mourning and loss. A major focus is provided by the public mourning following the Hillsborough disaster of 15 April 1989, in which ninety-six supporters of Liverpool FC were crushed to death by overcrowding at an FA Cup Semi-Final fixture held at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield. Another is provided by the public mourning following the death of Princess Diana on 31 August 1997, when she, Dodi Al-Fayed and Henri Paul were all killed when the car in which they were travelling was involved in a high-speed collision in a Paris underpass.

The rationale underlying my choice of these two events as the dual focus for this study lies in several key sources. In the first, it can be found in the particular circumstances surrounding these events: the violent, tragic and untimely deaths of people, whom, because they were young and were engaging in routine activities with a reasonable expectation of safety, we did not expect to die (Haney and Davis 1999, 236). Each event in this way can be seen to fit the category of the archetypal “bad death” as it is conceived within contemporary Western society.

Another explanation can be found in the shared structural properties or similarities underpinning the grief generated by these deaths: as public mourning events of a particular species or type. A leitmotif linking both events was thus the extraordinary displays of expressivism: the floral tributes, make-shift shrines and messages of condolence that were used to decorate the various sites that became a focus for people’s grief. This, in the case of Diana, was concentrated mainly in London, and on Diana’s home, Kensington Palace. In the case of Hillsborough, the focus for people’s grief fell both upon the Hillsborough stadium, as site and scene of the disaster, as well as upon the Anfield stadium in Liverpool, the home of Liverpool FC. It was this expressivism characteristic of both events, moreover, that generated significant tensions amongst large sections of the public who refused to participate in the rituals of grief and were appalled by the duration, drama and degree of public mourning. If there is a common thread linking Liverpool and Diana, it is to be found in public reactions, by which people are attracted or repelled by the expressivism associated with each. If Liverpool is a “sentimental, self-dramatizing”
place (Bennett, cited in Belchem 2006, 62) that routinely “wears its heart on its sleeve” and is renowned for expressivist displays of emotion relatively unknown within other parts of the UK (Davie 1993a, 201), then the local reaction on Merseyside following the Hillsborough disaster was but a dress-rehearsal for the national scenes of public mourning witnessed following the death of Princess Diana (Berridge 2002).

A third explanation for my choice of these two events as the focus of my analysis can be found in my own personal experience of them. Like so much other social scientific research, however infrequently it might be declared, this study emerged out of “some contingency in the personal biography of the researcher” (Taylor, Evans and Fraser 1996, 3). As someone who was not only perplexed but felt deeply troubled and profoundly alienated by the large-scale public mourning for a woman whom the vast majority of mourners had never met and knew only through television and the tabloids, my academic curiosity was awakened by an attempt to understand what had motivated the millions of people who mourned Diana. What to me only three months earlier in the election of a New Labour government—promising constitutional reform and coming after eighteen years of Conservative rule—had seemed like a new political dawn, was thus seemingly being undone in the mass public mourning for an aristocratic woman, who, as former wife of Charles (the future king), and mother to William (an heir to the British throne) was not only connected to royalty but was also in possession of vast resources of privilege and wealth. Only later, as I read the scholarly literature which emerged to explain and put into context the public mourning for Diana, did it dawn on me that I too, several years earlier, had been profoundly moved to mourn the deaths of people killed in the Hillsborough disaster whom I did not know and had never met.

**Language and Meaning in Mourning and Memory**

Mourning, as Geoffrey Gorer (1965, 110) has reminded us, is the inevitable and universal human reaction to the loss of someone whom we have loved. It is also the attempt to recover the meaning suddenly and unexpectedly shattered by loss in general and death in particular; for death signals not only the loss of relationships with those whom we have loved, but it threatens the very meaning upon which life itself depends. Grieving reactions, moreover, as Peter Marris (1974) has argued, are elicited not just by death but by any profound loss, disruption or change; by anything, in short, in which our adaptive capabilities are threatened and the predictable pattern of life has been disrupted. If, as Marris suggests, “loss
disrupts our ability to find meaning in experience”, then mourning and memory can be seen to represent “the struggle to retrieve [a] sense of meaning when circumstances have bewildered or betrayed it” (Marris 1974, 147).

Death in particular and loss in general are therefore unwelcome intruders upon the routines of everyday life, providing a “crisis of discontinuity” by disrupting our relationships, expectations and ability to predict the future. Faced by the disappearance of the people or “things” whom we have loved, the very identity of the bereaved is itself called into question in ways that lead us in our attempts to restore meaning where there is apparently none; in material activities and practices for understanding loss, by which a place for the beloved can be found and reintegrated within the flow of everyday life (Hallam and Hockey 2001).

If death threatens to disrupt the taken-for-granted expectations and routines upon which daily life is premised, one such way in which modern society manages this threat is by the “bracketing out” of troubling existential questions posed by death (Giddens 1991). It does so precisely because the existential confrontation with death, whether our own or that of others, has the potential to threaten the individual’s own sense of psychological well-being, casting doubt upon the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which they participate (Mellor 1993). Accordingly, Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that meaning is both derived and continually reinforced by the practical routines of everyday life in which we participate, contributing to our on-going sense of “ontological security”. As the “great extrinsic factor of human existence”, death in modern society, for Giddens (1991, 162), remains largely unintelligible precisely because it confounds and cannot, as such, be incorporated within its internally referential systems of meaning-making.

The rituals of public mourning surrounding the two events that provide a central foci of this book, can therefore, I want to suggest, be understood as collective attempts at restoring a sense of meaning threatened by loss. Language in particular provides a key vehicle for navigating the tumultuous process of bereavement and loss, helping us not only to come to terms with a sense of what, exactly, has been lost and is being mourned, but serving also to displace the acute sense of loss by transforming an event experienced as meaningless into something meaningful. As a shared system of meaning and communication—through which the universe and our place within it are socially constructed by us, its community of users—language can be understood as a collective enterprise in “world-building” (Berger and Luckmann 1967). It is thus language—as a vehicle of meaning-making—that provides us with a
durable framework for constructing the social reality we inhabit by allowing us to go on living after the disappearance of something or someone whom we have loved and lost, whilst contributing to our own sense of what is meaningful and real, as well as to our sense of identity, purpose and place.

If language provides the cultural means for managing loss (Elliott 1999), public books of condolence offer a viable site for the ritualized expression of grief, allowing us to put our innermost feelings and thoughts into words. Putting our words into a narrative or a wider chain of events is a practical sense-making activity in which our feelings can be comprehended and made meaningful. For if disaster is to be borne it must be meaningful. “The story”, in this way, as Hannah Arendt (1968, 104) has argued, thus “reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings”.

Because a recurrent theme running throughout this book is the relationship between language and meaning, two sites of analysis provide its main focus: the public books of condolence signed following the Hillsborough disaster and death of Princess Diana, alongside my own autobiographical memories of events gathered using the method of “memory-work” (Haug 1987). Both can be seen to represent a hermeneutic domain in and through which loss is “melancholically materialized” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 5), providing an opportunity to fathom what has been lost and is being mourned. For it is not always abundantly clear to us, as Judith Butler (2004) explains, following Freud (1917/1957), what or for whom we are mourning. It is in similar vein that Anthony Elliott (1999, 11) is led to ask: “For whom, exactly, is the [public] mourner mourning? Are we mourning some aspect of ourselves? How might [a] mourning of the self relate to [a] cultural mourning? How does contemporary culture mourn?” It is to these questions, amongst others, that this book seeks to provide answers.

**About this Book**

This book is comprised of six main chapters and adopts a largely interdisciplinary approach. It does so chiefly because mourning is a complex and multi-faceted process, composed of several interrelated elements that cannot and should not be reduced to any one of its constituent parts. In one key respect mourning is the outer expression of the inner emotions generated by loss related specifically to death. The funerary and post-mortem practices surrounding death are, in this way, group-specific,
socially-learned and normatively-governed, variable according to social group and across historical time.

In another, mourning can be conceived much more broadly, as the inevitable human response to the loss of a love-object and the ensuing feelings of sadness and sorrow, amongst others, that routinely accompany the associated disruption and sense of chaos caused by loss to relationships and the predictable pattern of life. Such feelings, and the necessity to adapt to a set of changed social circumstances, need not necessarily be precipitated by death as such, but may result from various kinds of loss more generally. These feelings of loss do not exist independently within an internally constituted psychic economy, but are themselves the outcome of our interactions with external reality: the (un)conscious identifications and attachments we forge with objects and people in the “outer” social world.

In a third and further respect, mourning can also be seen to operate and exist at a cultural level, manifested in a variety of ritual and material practices and activities that serve at once to reflect and disguise the pain created by loss. Language and narrative in particular provide a vehicle through which mourning and loss are not only sublimated but made meaningful. The linguistic strategies deployed in the aftermath of mourning and disaster, I want to argue, reveal a great deal about the identificatory dynamics of mourning and the processes by which some objects are, for some people, constructed as worthy of grief, whilst others are not.

For these reasons and on this basis, a number of disciplinary approaches and theoretical frameworks are drawn upon and discussed in an attempt to capture the multifarious nature of mourning and loss: sociological, psychoanalytic and cultural studies, as well as many others in between. Drawing chiefly upon historical, sociological and philosophical perspectives, chapter 1 begins by providing a discussion of the age-old problem presented by death. It does so in the main by locating attitudes and practices surrounding death and dying within shifting social contexts and historical conditions. Charting debates between and amongst sociologists and historians, it argues that whilst public sensibilities and practices surrounding death have, over the centuries, waxed and waned, the existential and hermeneutic challenges provided by death have remained relatively constant. What has changed, however, it suggests, are the strategies and subterfuges by which the idea of death is not only socially managed or “tamed” but rendered meaningful.

Chapter 2 continues with the theme of death, using it to introduce and explore the theoretical school of psychoanalysis. Not only, it suggests, did
the birth of Freudian psychoanalysis provide an early and serious scholarly foray into the relatively uncharted and heavily embargoed terrain of death (especially its relationship to the unconscious), but it has provided for an understanding of loss and the emotional states that inevitably follow in its train. Freud’s (1917/1957) seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” here provides a point of focus with which to trace out not only the applications of psychoanalysis as the basis for “clinical lore”, but also for subsequent criticisms and new paradigms of grief that have emerged in opposition to it. In addition, this chapter argues that Freud’s early theoretical formulations have provided the basis for the recent emergence of cultural applications of psychoanalysis that have re-visioned the rigid distinctions envisioned in Freud’s original distinction between mourning and melancholia.

The chapters which follow—chapters 3, 4 and 5—provide an empirical rather than purely theoretical focus, using the public books of condolence signed following the Hillsborough disaster and death of Princess Diana in order to explore the way in which contemporary society mourns. Taking the condolence books signed following each event together, chapter 3 examines the linguistic strategies by which death is simultaneously apprehended and held at arms length. Drawing upon work from both the field of psychologically oriented bereavement studies and Bakhtinian speech based theories of dialogue, it seeks to locate condolence books within historical antecedents, asking not only what the function of condolence messages is, but whom, exactly, they are intended for? In so doing, it suggests that the cultural “scripts” which are routinely drawn upon by the speech community in mourning can be seen to oscillate between conservative structures of meaning whilst simultaneously assimilated within contemporary structures of feeling.

This idea of a structure of feeling is taken up in chapter 4 in order to explore the condolence books signed in Liverpool following the Hillsborough disaster. The nature and inflexion of messages contained within these condolence books, it suggests, can be best understood by reference to the local practices and linguistic traits characteristic of a particular “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977; Elias 1994/1939) or “structure of feeling” (Williams, R. 1971). By providing a brief historical sketch of the city of Liverpool, this chapter argues that feelings of loss were widespread on Merseyside during the 1980s. As a second-order of signification, it suggests that, in addition to victims of the Hillsborough disaster, it was Liverpool itself that was being both celebrated and mourned.

Where chapter 4 locates the condolence books signed following the Hillsborough disaster in the largely local structures of feeling on
Merseyside, so chapter 5 locates the condolence books signed for Princess Diana within the largely feminine feeling-structures which the “Diana figure”—as an iconic cultural representation or media “text”—helped mobilize and make available as a source of subjective identification. If Diana, using a theoretical framework drawn from semiotics and cultural studies, can be understood as a “text” providing a particular message(s), then the condolence books signed following her death can be seen as the audiences’ response. In this light, condolence books provide us with access not only to the public reaction following Diana’s death, but crucially, to the ways in which she was used during life as a cultural resource, providing the basis for identification and meaning-making.

If chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on the linguistic strategies and meaning-making of others, chapter 6 explores the emotional and identificatory dynamics of loss underpinning my own mourning and not mourning following the Hillsborough disaster and death of Princess Diana. It does so, using the self as a source of sociological knowledge, by focusing upon my own narrativized autobiographical memories produced using the method of “memory-work” (Haug 1987). It is these memories, related to and triggered by the Hillsborough disaster and death of Princess Diana, that provide the basis for exploring the wider processes of meaning-making as they became accrued in these two events. My own and others “vicarious grieving” (Rando 1997), following the Hillsborough disaster, for people that we do not personally know can, in part, be understood as a mourning for the people, places or “things” that we do. At the same time, the steadfast refusal of mourning for Princess Diana by some people, including myself, can be seen to reveal much not only about their identities but also about the psychic processes of repudiation that give rise to those identities in the first place. Both instances, namely, my mourning for Hillsborough but refusal of the public mourning for Diana, can, I want to suggest, be understood as powerfully governed by the overarching gender identifications that are made available for us in language and culture.
CHAPTER ONE

SITUATING DEATH

Death provides a focus and starting-point in this chapter for exploring the ways in which contemporary society mourns. It was death, after all, that precipitated the seemingly unprecedented outpouring of public grief in the two public mourning events that are the focus of this study. The public expression of grief for people personally unknown to the vast majority of mourners was what most perplexed bystanders to these events. Only by locating these events within a wider social, historical and cultural context can we begin to explain and make sense of them. What may thus appear strange to one community at a particular historical moment in time, may, to another, appear perfectly normal. For whilst death is a universal biological certainty, all other events, attitudes and practices surrounding it are variable, differing not only according to the society and culture in which they occur, but also across historical time. That the response to death is both contingent and group-specific thus suggests that it contains elements of learned social behaviour that are themselves worthy of sociological inquiry (Elias 1985).1

This chapter is largely theoretical and conceptual. It is concerned primarily with tracing out the wider historical shifts in attitudes and practices surrounding death, against which the contemporary public mourning following the Hillsborough disaster and death of Princess Diana might usefully be understood. In so doing, therefore, this chapter draws upon and engages in a critical dialogue with social theories and frameworks that provide a resource for understanding society’s relationship to death, dying and mourning.

Death as a Problem of Meaning: Meditations on Finitude

The idea that death, especially one’s own, is an insoluble and intractable issue that defies attempts to confront it directly, has a long and distinguished pedigree. French seventeenth century writer François de La Rochefoucauld (1959, 40) has famously observed that death, like the sun,
cannot be looked at directly. In the philosophical tradition, death occupies a complex, contested and ambivalent position, signaling, on the one hand, the negation of meaning, whilst, on the other, providing the potential for meaning-making and the realization of consciousness. As the negation of meaning, death is an absolute nothing, and “absolute nothing”, as Zygmunt Bauman (1992) explains, “makes no sense”, for “we know that ‘there is nothing’ only when we can perceive the absence of perception...But death is the cessation of the very ‘acting subject’, and with it, the end of all perception” (Bauman 1992, 2, 3). Similarly, for Jean-Paul Sartre, the knowledge of one’s own non-being negates rather than precipitates meaning-making, for it removes the possibility of realizing one’s presence in the world: “Thus, death is never that which gives life its meaning; it is, on the contrary, that which as a matter of principle removes all meaning from life” (Sartre 1962, 244n, cited in Dastur 1996, 62). Death, in this view, is therefore the ultimate non-meaning (Kristeva 1989, 101).

In contrast, Heidegger ostensibly asserts that meaning, especially meaning-in-being, is born in knowledge of the certitude of one’s own impending death, that is, in one’s “being-for-death” (Heidegger 1985, cited in Dastur 1996, 49). Elsewhere, in Hegelian philosophy, it is only through direct confrontation with death that we as individuals may first achieve consciousness and a sense of what Hegel calls “pure-being-for-self” (Hegel 1977). It is thus in Hegel’s metaphorical discussion of the life-and-death struggle between master and slave, that the dialectical moment of consciousness finally reveals itself. By seeking to kill the other with whom the individual is in combat, the individual comes to recognize his or her own existence independent of the life and death of the other; whilst by risking one’s own life, the individual demonstrates that he or she possesses a consciousness independent of one’s own body. As Françoise Dastur (1996, 27) explains, “what Hegel brings out here with great force is that the dread of death is the very principle of individuation”.

It is the inescapable inevitability of death, especially one’s own, that precipitates the quest for meaning in our own mortal being. It is this knowledge and anticipation of our own finitude that separates us from other species; for it is we alone of all living beings that know we shall die (Elias 1985, 3). Death is therefore clearly a problem of meaning. Yet as sociologist Norbert Elias (1985) has reminded us, death is only a problem for the living; for the dead, unburdened by the anticipation of what will happen to them and their beloved after they die, have no such quandaries. The pursuit of knowledge in search of answers to existentially troubling questions is that which has fuelled various branches of knowledge:
metaphysics, theology, science. It is that, moreover, which, according to anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1962), provides the origin and impetus for religious belief, with its promise of a personal afterlife. Indeed, as I argued in the introduction to this book, it is precisely because humans are dependent upon meaning for their continued existence that death, albeit to varying degrees, is "always a problem for all societies" (Mellor 1993, 13).

Philosophy is a scholarly pursuit which arguably provides one of the most candid and sustained engagements with the topic of death. To engage in philosophical questions—of being and non-being—is, as Michel de Montaigne (1993) has famously argued, "to learn how to die". Dastur identifies an elective affinity between philosophy and death, since both involve the disconnection of the soul from the body. Dastur helps wrap conceptual flesh around the skeleton provided by Montaigne’s maxim, pointing to the way in which it is anticipated in Plato’s earlier observation: that “Those who pursue philosophy rightly are practicing how to die, and there is no one in the world who is less afraid of death” (Plato 1991, cited in Dastur 1996, 21). Dastur explains this by pointing to Plato’s the Phaedo, especially the way in which

one encounters the idea that thinking and philosophizing are a metaphorical death because they assume a separation from the corruptible nature of the body and an exit from time into the intemporality of the idea. (Dastur 1996, 21)

In a complex and theoretical fashion, philosophy, Dastur appears to be arguing, is bound by the seemingly universal human impulse to push death aside. Such evasion stems in part from the fear which death generates. Here Dastur points to the "strategies" by which philosophy has attempted to apprehend this fear. One such way is through a general avoidance of the topic. Thus, Dastur cites the statement from Spinoza—that “a free man thinks nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life”—as a means by which philosophy has been relieved of the task of thinking about death (Spinoza 1930, cited in Dastur 1996, 1). Rather than focus on the incommunicable nature of death and non-being—the “absolute” and “unimaginable Other” of human existence (Bauman 1992, 2)—philosophy has therefore concentrated instead on human consciousness as the foundation upon which “being” and the meaningful life are predicated.

Platonic philosophy, moreover, according to Jan Patočka (1981), triumphs over death by staring it in the face and from a refusal to flee from it (see Dastur 1996, 21). Yet even here, such attempts to conquer, control
and tame the fear which death generates are less direct than one might assume. These attempts at mastery are themselves a further indicator of the terror which the thought of death inspires. Thus, another way in which philosophy has wrestled with the problem of death is by attempting to relativise it as something which exerts a hold over only part of our being. Again, Dastur points to Spinoza to support his argument and his assertion that: “The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body”, for “something remains of it which is eternal” (Spinoza 1930 cited in Dastur 1996, 2).

This emphasis on the eternal, immortal and transcendental underpins much, if not all, philosophical thinking. It is evident in Platonic philosophy, with its assertion of the immortality of the soul. It is arguably evident in Hegelian philosophy too, where confrontation with death is a means by which it is both tamed and overcome. Dastur points also to Montaigne, who, on the personal occasion of a close brush with death, was led to observe that “to tame death…one only needs come close to it” (Montaigne, cited in Dastur 1996, 90n). The ultimate reality of death, of nothingness and non-being, is thus displaced within philosophical meditations on eternity, immortality, and elevated philosophical “being”, where both the fear and “inevitable arrival of death” are “thwarted in advance by attempts to surpass and transcend it (Dastur 1996, 2).

The Denial of Death

The idea that modern Western societies are death-denying societies has become something of conventional wisdom since the 1980s, if not amongst the so-called “knowledge class” more generally, then certainly within particular academic and professional circles (Andrews 2001, 361). This is especially the case, according to Ian Andrews (2001), following the string of academic articles on the topic which Geoffrey Gorer’s 1955 essay, The Pornography of Death, helped initiate. Here Gorer (1955) claimed that death had become an “unmentionable” topic of conversation and had come to represent a kind of pornography analogous to masturbation. Less well appreciated, however, is the contrasting picture of attitudes and practices towards death in earlier historical periods of society against which the putative trend towards death-denial must be placed. What most commentators actually mean, however, when they refer to death-denial is not, as Ralph Houlbrooke (1989, 15) suggests, outright denial as such, but rather the evasion, avoidance or concealment of death. Here, then, is a good place to start, with a discussion of the ways in which death has, over the centuries, not only disappeared from public view, but
also how attitudes towards it have undergone a commensurate transformation.

In pre-modern European societies, where plagues, warfare and natural calamities were a routine feature of everyday life, not only was death more prevalent, but it was much more likely to occur in settings that were very public in nature. In the ancient world, as well as in medieval and early modern Europe, death was frequently a public spectacle and source of popular entertainment. The “sports” of ancient Greece and Rome, especially the gladiatorial combats and mock battles, have been noted for the high levels of cruelty and violence—as well as the blood-lust of the crowds—which routinely culminated in the death of one or more of their competitors. Judged by today’s standards, these “sports” would almost certainly be characterized as barbaric. Sociologically, as Eric Dunning (1999, 47) notes, these “sports” “are indicative of an attitude to life, death and the sufferings of others which was very different from that which dominates in the contemporary West” (see also August 1972). Elsewhere in pre-modern Europe, Michel Foucault (1977) has demonstrated to great effect how, as public spectacle, public executions were exceedingly painful and tortuously prolonged.

Where life was not claimed as punishment or entertainment, it was often claimed as the result of famine, pestilence and disease. In societies such as these, where chronic illness and the sight of dying people were ubiquitous, close personal contact with death, as Anthony Giddens (1991, 161) suggests, “was a more or less commonplace feature of everyone’s experience”. The Middle Ages in particular, as Elias reminds us, were an exceedingly turbulent period. Thus, Elias writes that:

In comparison with the present, death at that time was, for young and old, less concealed, more pervasive, more familiar….Violence was more commonplace, conflict more impassioned, war was often the rule and peace the exception. Epidemics swept across the Eurasian landmass, thousands died in torment and squalor without help or comfort. Bad harvests made bread scarce for the poor every few years. Crowds of beggars and cripples were a normal feature of the medieval landscape. People were capable of great kindness as they were of naked cruelty, unconceptual joy in the torment of others and total indifference to their distress. (Elias 1985, 14, 15).

Popular literature of the time, Elias (1985, 14) claims, attests to the way in which death and dying were not only more pervasive than today but were also “spoken of more openly and frequently”. This is reflected in a wide array of cultural representations that informed the popular imagination of the time. The knowledge that death was both inevitable and impartial gave
rise to a seemingly boundless variety of *memento mori* images, which, as Clare Gittings (2001, 301) explains, were, until the eighteenth century, routinely “incorporated into a wide range of decorative, fine art and practical items”, each intended to confront and remind people of their own inescapable mortality. (The Latin term *memento mori*, as Gittings reminds us, means literally “remember death”). In paintings, as well as poetry, music, murals, engravings and woodcuttings, the dance of death (the *danses macabres*) was a ubiquitous feature of the fourteenth century cultural landscape (Gallery 2001). The *danses macabres*, as Steven Gallery (2001, 134) explains, was “painted on cemetery walls, in charnel houses, mortuary chapels and sometimes in churches, but its most famous depiction is in the engravings attributed to Hans Holbein the younger”. This intimacy with death was, until quite recently, reflected in wider material practices and culture more generally, where everyday social artifacts functioned to mediate the individual’s relationship with death, preserving the memory of those they had loved and lost, whilst serving as a reminder of their own finitude. Here for example, as Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey (2001, 4) suggest, it was thus not uncommon, until fairly recently within Western society, to wear jewellery made from enduring parts of the human corpse, including the deceased’s hair.

As public event, death was far less private than it was an experience that was shared with others. Here Elias (1985) points to contrasting experiences of intimacy associated with death: from the loving embrace and kiss on the mouth that Thomas More, Chancellor to Henry VIII, is reported to have given his dying father; to other less celebrated incidents where the dying were taunted and mocked by their heirs. French social historian Philippe Ariès (1975, 137) has noted how even death at home in bed was a public event, as, upon hearing that death was immanent, the room would quickly fill with people: parents, children, neighbours and friends. Not only, Ariès suggests, did everyone die in public, but “the death of each person was a public event that moved, literally and figuratively, society as a whole”. It was therefore “not only an individual who was disappearing, but society as a whole that had been wounded and that [needed] to be healed” (Ariès 1981, in Dickinson and Johnson 1993, 11).

Gradually, however, beginning in the Middle Ages, this permissiveness in attitudes and practices began to shift, giving way to a situation in which the experiences associated with death were to undergo a wholesale transformation. In ways that were barely perceptible at the time, the dead and dying were slowly, yet comprehensively, expedited from the public sphere. It was a process of transformation that was accompanied, if not determined, by the commensurate emergence of feelings and attitudes
by which the dead and dying were increasingly viewed with repugnance, embarrassment and shame. For Elias (1985) this transformation is explained as part of a wider European civilizing process, comprising the growth of individualization and the privatization of emotions, in which death and other organic and bodily functions come to be gradually concealed from public view, where they are “pushed more and more behind the scenes of social life” (Elias 1985, 12). Ariès (1974) has similarly discerned a “brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings” towards death, in which it has been “furtively pushed out of the world of familiar things” (Ariès 1974, 85, 105).

Until this point in my discussion, we have seen that there has been general agreement amongst historians and sociologists regarding the overall direction that attitudes and practices towards death within Western societies have seemingly taken. Ariès and Elias, for example, ostensibly occupy the same terrain when they point to the ways in which death has been effaced from public life. Yet there are significant differences in emphasis, orientation and approach amongst sociologists and historians. Here is not the place to engage in complex and lengthy theoretical discussion of disagreements regarding the precise dating, whereabouts and socio-genesis of such changes. It is nevertheless worthwhile spelling out in a little more detail what some of the major differences are.

Historian Allan Mitchell (1978), for example, has challenged the foundations upon which Ariès’ assertions of death-denial have been built. In particular, Mitchell points to discrepancies in Ariès’ thesis, not least in terms of the geography and chronology underpinning Ariès’ claims of purported shifts in attitudes towards death. In the first instance, Mitchell (1978, 687) claims that Ariès’ early work referred “explicitly and exclusively” to French attitudes towards death, attributing shifts in the collective mentalité to reasons that were indigenously French. Mitchell claims, however, that in his later work Ariès broadens his scope of inquiry—in ways that cannot necessarily be “analytically justified” or “factually sustained”—to include the entire industrialized West, locating the origins of the repression of death in the USA, which then spread to mainland Europe (Mitchell 1978, 689–690).

Thus, what was at first identified by Ariès as an exclusively French phenomenon becomes, in Mitchell’s view (1978, 689), a generalized Anglo-Saxon phenomenon using a method of historical analysis that is not “rigorously comparative”. In the second instance, Mitchell points to the way in which, in Ariès’ early work, the great transition in attitudes towards death was seen to begin sometime after the French revolution; that these attitudes of death-denial were accelerated during the nineteenth century,
and were an “accomplished fact” by the time of the First World War (Mitchell 1978, 688). In Ariès’ later work, however, Mitchell argues that the metamorphosis in attitudes is located in the twentieth- rather than the nineteenth century, whereby “the great transition in ideas and feelings toward death has apparently been advanced a full century” (Mitchell 1978, 690).

Elias (1985, 12–13) has himself challenged the apparent “golden age” in Western attitudes towards death first identified by Ariès. Elias’s criticism relates principally to the distinction Ariès makes between the “ancient” and contemporary attitude towards death, concentrating upon a particular passage within Ariès’ work that has since become a focal point for discussion and interpretation. In it Ariès writes:

The old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name. This is why I have called this household sort of death “tamed death”. I do not mean that death had once been wild and that it had ceased to be so. I mean, on the contrary, that today it has become wild. (Ariès 1974, 13–14)

The “tame” death, in Ariès’ view, thus refers to a situation in which death in earlier periods of history was met largely by feelings of resignation and equanimity. Such indifference, Ariès suggests, comes not only from the omnipresence of death, but also from the cultural frameworks and religious rituals of the time in which death was experienced and understood reassuringly as a rite of passage from this world to the next. For Ariès (1991), the “tame” death is best expressed in the requies or “repose of the dead”, in which the deceased were perceived as neither dead nor alive but, rather, as occupying a state of dormancy or rest akin to sleep. Widely represented in the popular imagery and funerary monuments of the ancient world, Ariès claims that literary and artistic depictions of the recumbent figure provide us with an indication of how death was experienced and understood at the time.

For Elias, however, Ariès fails to fully appreciate that these representations are themselves wish-fulfilling idealizations that help betray the brutal reality of medieval death. Elias thus claims that Ariès’ selection of historical facts is based on a preconceived assumption in which people in earlier times died calmly and serenely (Elias 1985, 12). Elias, then, contends what he regards as Ariès’ romantic view of history, whereby he is accused of looking “mistrustfully on the bad present in the name of a better past” (Elias 1985, 12). Instead, Elias prefers a realist view of history in which not only was life “passionate, violent, and therefore uncertain, brief
and wild”, but where death was routinely experienced in “dreadful agony” (Elias 1985, 12, 13). Elias locates his own analysis within a sociological framework that explains shifts in the relationship to death and dying as related to a wider long-term historical process of European civilization (Elias 1994/1939). He is scornful, however, of the perceived absence in Ariès’ work of a framework for explaining social change, claiming that Ariès “understands history [only] as pure description” (Elias 1985, 12).

Bauman (1992) has elsewhere attempted to clarify the confusion surrounding the meaning of the “tame” death as intended by Ariès. Such an interpretation relies less upon the actual circumstances in which people died, violent or otherwise, than it does upon how death was emotionally and existentially experienced and perceived. Thus as Bauman explains:

“Tame” does not mean benign, “close” does not mean willingly embraced, “familiar” does not mean accepted without grudge…. (Instead), what Ariès’ “tameness” of pre-modern death may be seen as referring to is merely a common assumption, unchallenged until the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, that there was nothing one could do against cruel human fate…One could repine the fate, give voice to one’s abhorrence and fury—but that was about all, and that “all” was dazzlingly, despairingly ineffective” (1992, 95, 96).

Instead, for Bauman, death was frightening for all societies and all periods in time. What is, however, different, in Bauman’s view, are the strategies and subterfuges by which various societies at various stages of development have wrestled with death as a means of “taming” the terror which accompanies it. This, then, returns us to what, in Bauman’s view, appears as a universal and “incessant struggle to transcend what in principle cannot be transcended” (Bauman 1992, 15n). Here we will recall from my earlier discussion of philosophy with which I began this chapter, that even here, in what is one of the most explicit and sustained engagements with the topic of death, that such meditations are in the end attempts at transcending mortality. In this vein, Ernest Becker (1973, 33) has suggested that “all culture, all man’s creative life-ways, are in some basic part…a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth [about the] human condition”.

**Death and Mourning in Modern Society**

If the denial of death has been a gradually evolving phenomenon since the Middle Ages, it has reached an unparalleled zenith in contemporary modern society. Such death-denial has been manifested in a variety of
practices that have unfolded in a somewhat uneven and contradictory course of development. In Victorian England, for example, the dead were rapidly expedited from the world of the living for fear of contagion. Following a wave of deadly cholera epidemics, cremation rather than burial of the dead was favoured as a public health measure (see Leaman 2001c; also Jupp 1990). At the same time, however, not only was the Victorian period infamous for body-snatchers in search of a fresh corpse to be sold and used for dissection in the burgeoning field of medical research, but it was also the high-point in elaborate and deeply prescriptive mourning practices surrounding death. Funerals, especially for those who could afford them, were elaborate affairs that often comprised a cortege of carriages led by black horses with black plumes. The mourning surrounding and following it was similarly flamboyant, influenced and shaped by the Romantic movement in literature and art and often involving the use of black-edged stationary, black clothes and special jewellery using newly developed material such as black enamel, jet and onyx (Leaman 2001c).

Mourning for the bereaved, especially widows, was both extensive and long-lasting, in which one’s outward appearance was both heavily circumscribed and seen as an expression and reflection of one’s inner emotional state. Typically expected to last three years, the first year was marked by a period of “deep mourning” in which widows wore black clothes comprising a black cape and veil but with little or no ornamentation. In the second and third years of mourning dress codes were relaxed, with the second year involving less crêpe and no cape or veil, while the third year of “half mourning”, as Oliver Leaman (2001c, 467) notes, “made it possible to move from entirely black clothes to those of a less dark colour”. Leaman notes too how some widows, most famously Queen Victoria, remained in mourning for the rest of their lives. Here Geoffrey Gorer (1965, 79) has pointed to the way in which, for years following the death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria continued the daily ritual of having his clothes laid out and his shaving water brought. Children, moreover, as journalist Kate Berridge (2002) notes, were also routinely involved in all aspects of funerary ritual, where they were exposed to death in all its nakedness.

In Cornwall, children would kiss the hand of the corpse in the belief that it would grant them longevity. In close-knit communities in the North children would knock on the door of a bereaved household and ask to see the laid-out body. Children attended deathbeds, funerals and even carried the coffins of their peers with white carrying straps and white coffins for innocence. A visual symbolism which was carried through to the horses,
white plumes replacing black and tack similarly modified. Death was [thus] a normal part of everyday life. (Berridge 2002, 12)

Children’s exposure to death in Victorian England was also, Berridge suggests, manifested in children’s literature of the time, where it provides a benchmark against which to evaluate contemporary sensibilities. Children’s magazines, Berridge explains, were packed full with a miscellany of death-related material, from woodcuts of catacombs, tips on taxidermy and poems about graveyards and human remains, to tales of funerary rites in far-flung places. These, Berridge suggests, appear between the pages of stories whose main juvenile heroes and heroines, instead of living happily-ever-after, die happily believing in the eternal hereafter. They reflect the emergence of anthropocentric afterlife beliefs which, fuelled by the rise of Romanticism and the Evangelical idealization of the bourgeois family unit (Jones 1999, 206), are premised on romantic family reunion (see also Jalland 1996; Morley 1971; Wheeler 1990). At the same time, however, these stories, Berridge argues, carried with them a strong moral and didactic message, serving as cautionary tales of what fate might befall children if they failed to behave as they should.

By the twentieth century, the movement towards death-denial had reached unprecedented heights. What began centuries earlier with the birth of the cemetery and the gradual spatial separation of the living from the dead was intensified under medical science, in which people now routinely died behind closed institutional doors, wired to elaborate machines designed to artificially preserve life. In the first instance, as French historian Michel Vovelle (1974) has shown, cemeteries gradually replaced church graveyards as the main locus for the internment of the dead. From the late eighteenth century onwards, Vovelle argues that the main authorities in France—civilian, scientific and ecclesiastic—conspired to locate cemeteries at farthest possible distance from the heart of major cities. Reflecting on this, Bauman (1992) notes how the siting and design of cemeteries have both mirrored and help to shape modern sensibilities, whereby the dead are ensconced within walls so as not to offend innocent passers-by. Bauman thus writes of the way in which the dead themselves, once accommodated in the churchyards as if to remind...churchgoers every Sunday of the vanity of their earthly pursuits, had [now] been removed to a secure distance from the living quarters [where they were] confined to...graveyard ghettos meant to separate and banish not just the corpses but also the bereaved who visited them. (Bauman 1992, 136)
This demarcation, between metropolis and necropolis, served therefore an important psychological and existential function in relation to death, where out of sight meant largely out of mind. It has been augmented in the twentieth century by the rise of institutional medicine and palliative care, where today the majority of people die either in hospitals, hospices or residential care homes. This movement, from public to private, contributes towards what Ariès calls the “invisible death”, whereby the last moments of a person’s life escape public visibility and are instead experienced with an unprecedented degree of solitude and isolation. It stands in sharp contrast to the “beautiful” death associated by Ariès with the late Middle Ages (1991).

By the middle of the twentieth century, especially in the major cities of the industrialized West, the majority of people stopped dying at home. Ariès points to figures to illustrate this which show that by 1967, 75 per cent of all deaths within New York City occurred in hospitals or similar institutions, compared to 69 per cent in 1955 (Ariès 1991, 584). Similarly, within the UK by the new millennium, only 18 per cent of people died at home, compared to 78.5 per cent of people who died in hospitals, hospices or residential nursing homes (Field 2003, 156). The medicalization of society, according to modern medicine’s most vociferous critics, has thus “expropriated” the experience of death from the dying patient. It is modern medicine, as libertarian philosopher Ivan Illich has famously argued, that today “decides when and after what indignities and mutilations a person shall die” (Illich 1976, 207). In Illich’s view, the medicalization of society has thus “brought the epoch of natural death to an end” (Illich 1976, 207). “Western man”, Illich writes, “has lost the right to preside at his own act of dying” (Illich 1976, 207). Indeed, where death in the past was largely explained in religious or spiritual terms, in modern society it has become a technical matter whose assessment has been transferred into the hands of the medical profession. What death is, and has therefore become, in Anthony Giddens’ view, is simply “a matter of deciding at what point [exactly] a person should be treated as having died in respect of the cessation of various types of bodily function” (Giddens 1991, 161).

Over the last forty years or so since the 1960s, there has been a gradual accumulation of evidence from sociologists and psychologists to support claims that the sick and elderly die in relative isolation. Research in the 1960s by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in six San Francisco hospitals found that doctors and medical staff would, through a
variety of subterfuges, routinely collude in order to conceal from terminally-ill patients the knowledge that they were dying (Glaser and Strauss 1965). In the same decade, research by medical psychologist Elisabeth Kübler Ross found that hospitals would routinely isolate dying patients from other hospitalized patients in order to avoid upsetting them (Kübler-Ross 1969). This physical isolation was further compounded by the social isolation borne of a sense of awkwardness and embarrassment that the living routinely experience when in the presence of dying people. Here Elias has written of a profound process of social withdrawal that often leaves the sick and elderly feeling abandoned and alone.

Closely bound up, in our day, with the greatest possible exclusion of death and dying from social life, and with the screening-off of dying people from others, from children in particular, is a peculiar embarrassment felt by the living in the presence of dying people. They often do not know what to say. The range of words is relatively narrow. Feelings of embarrassment hold words back. For the dying this can be a bitter experience. (Elias 1985, 23)

As a mode of sensibility rather than an attempt at precise historical dating (Bauman 1991, 1992), modernity, in Zygmunt Bauman’s view, has, and in ways that are characteristically modern, sought not only to conquer but to eliminate and extinguish death altogether (Bauman 1989, 1992). This contrasts with pre-modern societies, where notable individuals within them sought to cheat death by private bids for immortality in which their eternal presence would rest secure in their surviving literary and artistic creations. Instead, founded on Enlightenment principles of reason and rationality, modernity has deconstructed mortality, as a phenomenon about which we can do nothing about, into a series of manageable problems about which we can do something about. Here the modern emphasis on “lifestyle strategies”—on “fitness regimes” and “healthy diets”—are, in Bauman’s view (1992), but exorcistic rites and displacement activities designed at delaying the inevitable. Much more insidious, however, in Bauman’s view, is the logical culmination of modern attempts to overcome, through the deployment of reason and science, what, in modern eyes, emerged as a persistent problem that proved stubbornly resistant to human efforts towards its eradication. For here, and “of all [the] adversities of human existence”,

dead soon emerged as the most persistent and indifferent to human effort. It was, indeed, the major scandal. The hard, irreducible core of human impotence in a world increasingly subject to human will and acumen. The
last, yet seemingly irremovable, relic of fate in a world increasingly 
designed and controlled by reason. (Bauman 1992, 134)

Incapable of death’s outright elimination, the “audacious attempt at killing 
death” therefore “turns into the practice of killing people” (Bauman 1992, 
160). Here Bauman has demonstrated to great effect how, instead of killing 
death, modernity focused its attention on potential carriers of degeneration 
and disease. In the racial and eugenic discourses of the 1930s—the logical, 
if accelerated outcrop of medical science—attention shifted to the 
segregation of “inferior”, death-carrying “races” who might, through 
contagion, infect the “superior”, “healthy” population. Such discourses, for 
Bauman, are premised upon the modern obsession with hygiene. The 
obsession with cleanliness that was, for the Victorians, a virtue (Ariès 
1991), was thus transformed, in the modern era, into an absolute necessity; 
an injunction to kill death in to order ensure the survival not only of the so-
called “superior race” but of humanity in general (Bauman 1992). The end 
result, for Bauman, of the modern “war on death”, culminates in the 
twisted, and ultra-rationalist, road to Auschwitz (Bauman 1989).

Much of my discussion has, hitherto, focused on death and the way in 
which, in modern society, it has become a sordid and salacious topic of 
both avoidance and titillation. Geoffrey Gorer has thus famously argued 
that death in the twentieth century had become an object of prudery in the 
same way that sex was for the Victorians in the nineteenth century. The 
avoidance of all things “morbid”, Gorer argued, extended from the physical 
and discursive aspects of death, to the social processes surrounding it; 
namely, mourning and the period of bereavement following death. Social 
research conducted by Gorer (1965) during the 1960s found that, unlike the 
Victorians, with their highly prescriptive, outwardly demonstrative, and 
lengthy period of mourning, contemporary Britons were without the rituals 
and social wherewithal as to know how to adequately respond to their own 
grief, as well as to that of others. Instead of the necessary period of 
readjustment and “leave-of-absence” following bereavement, characteristic 
of other cultures and earlier times, most Britons, Gorer claimed (1965), 
were expected to quickly resume their daily duties in ways that had 
potentially deleterious consequences, including the risk of psychological 
maladjustment.

The rituals of grief were not, in Gorer’s view, a mere adjunct or 
artifact of grief, they were instead a necessary means by which the 
bereaved might begin to come to terms with the personal loss which they 
had encountered. Bereavement, as Ariès (1974, 1991) has usefully 
indicated, is a relatively recent and modern phenomenon that reflects a shift 
in emphasis from a concern with one’s own death, especially the fate of
one’s own soul (“my death”), to a concern with the death of another and how we will cope following the loss of a beloved (“thy death”). Bereavement, as Tony Walter (1994, 15) thus notes, came therefore to be feared as much, if not more, as one’s own death; so much so that the rituals of mourning and bereavement were themselves banished as a means of avoiding emotional distress. It is these rituals, and the general revival of interest in death more generally, that were seemingly being resuscitated in the widespread displays of public mourning that appeared in the wake of the Hillsborough disaster and following the death of Princess Diana.

**The Revival of Death**

In the last two decades since the 1990s—and against the backdrop of purported death-denial in which death was identified as a taboo rivaled only by nineteenth century interdictions surrounding the topic of sex—death, dying and the practices surrounding it have undergone something of a revival. Such a renaissance in attitudes and practices contains a number of interrelated strands. One such strand is the revival of interest in death as both a topic of scholarly pursuit and source of popular curiosity and appeal. Another is the encouragement and growth in the expression of feelings and emotions generated by death, dying and bereavement.9 A third strand is the emergence of greater individual involvement, improvisation and control of funerary practices and customs surrounding one’s own as well as the death of those closest to us. A fourth and final strand is the wider public revival of mourning rituals that, under pressure of modernizing tendencies and trajectories, had hitherto disappeared or waned in significance within modern Western societies. Whilst all of these strands are intertwined and have significant bearing on the public mourning practices that are the focus of this book, it is the first, and, to a lesser extent the fourth, which are of principal concern to me in the remainder of this chapter.

As a particular manifestation of the fourth strand, the public mourning following the death of Princess Diana, and to a lesser degree the Hillsborough disaster, has been identified as marking a watershed in the revival of practices and traditions which have long since become attenuated within modern Western societies. It is these societies, especially Anglo-Saxon ones, that have, for some observers, for most of the twentieth century, been regarded as largely “death-denying” (Ariès 1981; Becker 1973; Mitford 1963). In this light, Berridge (2002) has argued that the public mourning for Princess Diana in 1997 marked something of a watershed, jolting us out of a century-long process of death-denial and back into the communal social practices by which death is fully acknowledged.10