

## Religion & Philosophy

### *THE ETERNAL PITY: Reflections on Dying.*

Edited by Richard John Neuhaus.  
Univ. of Notre Dame Press. 181 pp.  
\$25 cloth, \$15 paper

Too often in the expanding literature of mortality, the title tends to overwhelm the text. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Civilization* (1998), for example, or *The American Way of Death* (1963)—either one could bear the subtitle *Answers to the Questions of the Ages*. The first volume, by the British scholar Jonathan Dollimore, surveys literary and cultural studies related to deathly metaphors and deadly images; the second, by the lately lamented and remarkable gadfly Jessica Mitford, surveys the math of caskets.

But *The Eternal Pity*, with its assemblage of voices, dead and living, crossing cultural, religious, and temporal borders, delivers on the title's promise. This quietly compelling anthology contains reflections—meditations, incantations, benedictions—long on wonder, short on polemics. Neuhaus, a Catholic priest who edits *First Things*, takes his title from Peter DeVries's fictional telling of his daughter's death, *The Blood of the Lamb* (1961), which manages to consider the notion of redemptive suffering without minimizing the horrible pain and the righteous outrage when a child gets leukemia and dies, or the salvation that might be claimed within it. DeVries wrote of "the recognition of how long, how very long, is the mourners' bench upon which we sit, arms linked in undeluded friendship—all of us, brief links ourselves, in the eternal pity."

What is best about this collection is that each voice is raised to the existential properties of death and dying, rather than the more typical (and more marketable) emotional or social or retail contexts. There is a welcome refusal to traffic in warm fuzzies or psychobabble, and an abundance of meaning and mystery and experience held up for consideration, not spectacle. From Charles Dickens to Dylan Thomas to Carol Zaleski, from the Upanishads to the Quran to the Book of Common Prayer, each piece calls

the reader to keep the difficult vigil that the living owe the dying and the dead. Ralph Abernathy's account of the burial, disinterment, and entombment of Martin Luther King, Jr., Milton Himmelfarb's "Going to Shul," A. Alvarez's homage to and horror at the suicide of Sylvia Plath ("Even now I find it hard to believe")—one senses in the 26 selections a search for that sacred space where we are hushed enough to listen for the din of creation in the rattle of death.

"A measure of reticence and silence is in order," Neuhaus writes. "There is a time simply to be present to death—whether one's own or that of others—without any felt urgencies about doing something about it or getting over it. The Preacher had it right: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time



The Death of the Strong Wicked Man, by William Blake

to mourn, and a time to dance.' One may be permitted to wonder about the wisdom of contemporary funeral rites that hurry to the dancing, displacing sorrow with the determined affirmation of resurrection hope, supplying a ready answer to a question that has not been given time to understand itself." The assembled voices—each of them worthy of inclusion—and the editor's guidance, in the powerful introduction and the notes that introduce the contributions, make *The Eternal Pity* the kind of whole-being exercise the subject requires. Neuhaus, ever generous with his gifts, gives yet another here.

—Thomas Lynch