

INTELLECTUAL AFFAIRS



Mortal Grace

September 16, 2009

By [Scott McLemee](#)

Over the weekend came word that the poet and memoirist Jim Carroll died in New York at the age of 59. In the late 1970s, he went from reading his work aloud to performing with a punk band -- a transition later followed, with less memorable results, by his friend Allen Ginsberg. And while by no means the best cut on his debut album *Catholic Boy* (1980), his song "[The People Who Died](#)" has become a lasting part of American popular culture -- a catalog of friends lost to suicide, overdose, disease, and misadventure.

A whole generation got its first glimpse of the figure of the *poète maudit* from *The Basketball Diaries*, a [film](#) based on Carroll's memoir of being a teenage junkie and prostitute. But Carroll himself lived much closer to the source -- that is, to literature, since a wild life itself is not sufficient to make anyone into a writer. T.S. Eliot once said that anyone who intends to continue to develop as a poet beyond the age of 25 must have a firm sense of literary tradition. And this Carroll definitely possessed. A friend who met him says they ended up discussing William Blake and Frank O'Hara; and I suspect "The People Who Died" owes something to [Francois Villon](#), who was a punk rocker five hundred years before the fact.

The legend Carroll left behind is somewhat misleading. He once sniffed glue and loitered at the gates of abjection, but that isn't what made him a poet. A better clue is to be found in the note put up on the [author's Web site](#) a few days ago: "He was at his desk working when he passed away."

As it happens, the news about Carroll arrived while I was in the midst of taking notes on Paul Ricoeur's book *Living Up to Death*, published in April by the [University of Chicago Press](#). This is one of those coincidences in which fate seems to be laying things on a bit thick.

It is not clear that calling this a "book" by the philosopher makes a lot of sense -- at least beyond the most pedestrian acknowledgment that it exists between covers. Rather, it is a folder of notes left when Ricoeur died in 2005. (See this [obituary](#), in two [parts](#).) The folder consists of a very rough preliminary sketch for an essay, along with several pages of brief and occasionally oblique notes. The editors have accompanied these texts with commentary and memoirs that situate the writings with respect to Ricoeur's final period of work on history, memory, and ethics.

But how this slender posthumous volume on death fits within the larger structure of Ricoeur's work is only just so interesting to the nonspecialist reader. Its power comes precisely from the circumstances making it so disjointed and unfinished. He began writing it as his wife of more than 60 years was succumbing to a degenerative disease. He added pages to it some years following her death, in the final months of his own life, as his health was rapidly worsening. These are pages written, not while gazing into an abyss, but while being swallowed up by it.

"He decided to continue to write," one of the editors says, "but now what he called 'fragments.' These did not make many material demands -- some sheets of paper on a clipboard and a pencil accompanied him everywhere; the suppleness and brevity of short texts where he could present his reactions to the reader, add to his reflections on the themes dear to him and to those commitments that had marked his life: 'to become capable of dying' was his present concern."

To philosophize means learning how to die, as [Montaigne](#) put it, borrowing in turn from Cicero. But in Ricoeur's case, it was not just a matter of trying to accept the inevitable. In ordinary circumstances, the thought of death tends "to disturb, confront, insult the insolence of our appetite for an invulnerable life," writes Ricoeur. But reality -- the death of his spouse, and his own end approaching fast, with no mistake about it -- had shaken him too much for that appetite to dominate his thoughts. The notes are not for the most part introspective, and Ricoeur was averse to the idea that the greatest wisdom available comes from insisting on the ~~uniqueness, solitude, and essential incommunicability of the experience~~

have their own time." These registers are superimposed, but ultimately they are "disjoined" by mortality. And so the dying thinker, growing weaker each day, is conscious of that gap and finds himself falling into it. It is "the time of disappearance"-- and necessarily one of saying farewell to people who will, in turn, themselves one day pass.

"This is the time I'm in," he writes in a stunning passage. "I still participate in the torments and joys of creation, like a twilight end of season; but I feel in my flesh and mind the scission between the time of the work and the time of life; I am moving away from the immortal time of the work, and I withdraw into the mortal time of life: this moving away is a kind of dispossession, a laying bare of mortal time in the sadness of having-to-die...."

Ricoeur was a Christian, albeit one who exhibits doubt about any literal afterlife or resurrection. His notion of immortality seems to turn on a belief in service to others -- sharing in a community that survives each of its members. "I am wary," he writes, "of the immediate, the fusional, the intuitive, the mystical. There is one exception, the grace of a certain dying."

What would that "grace" look like? I think Ricoeur manifests it in terms that may be understood even by those of us who do not believe. It can be found in a short note he sent to a friend who was also in her final days.

"From the depths of life," he writes, "a power suddenly appears which says that being is being against death. Believe this with me."