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Intertwinings of Death and Desire in Michele Soavi's *Dellamorte Dellamore*

ABSTRACT *This article engages in an in-depth discussion of Michele Soavi's* Dellamorte Dellamore/Cemetery Man, *a 1993 film based on a bestselling novel and on Italy's most popular comic-book series (Dylan Dog). Close analysis reveals that, rather than being just another forgettable splatter movie or ridiculous horror comedy, this zombie thriller is a film of great psychosexual complexity, along the lines of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ligeia' (1838) and Alfred Hitchcock's* Vertigo *(1958). In* Dellamorte Dellamore, *horror becomes the vehicle for the female character's struggle with guilt over infidelity to her deceased husband, with fear of phallic sexuality and with masochistic desires linked to the death drive. For the male character, zombies represent his fear of the* femme fatale, *his haunting by feelings of impotence in relation to older men and his gradual contamination by cynicism and indifference to life as he loses his faith in love and immortality. This article explores the psychological, sexual and religious aspects of love and death in the minds of the film's male and female protagonists.*

In terms of psychosexual complexity, there are few films as worthy of close analysis as Michele Soavi's *Dellamorte Dellamore/Cemetery Man* (1993) — a film that deserves to be much better known. In his magisterial survey of cult movies, *DVD Delirium,* Nathaniel Thompson identified this film as 'easily the most significant Italian horror title of the past decade', deeming it 'as philosophically rich and sensually aware as it is filled with zombie-blasting mayhem' (2006: 203). In their book *Spaghetti Nightmares,* Luca M. Palmerini and Gaetano Mistretta praised this movie as 'innovative, elegant, intelligent and highly personal', calling it 'the best full-length horror/fantasy film in the last ten years of Italy's fantasy films' (1996: 165). Distinguished scholar of Italian cinema Peter Bondanella endorsed this movie as 'one of the very best Italian horror films of recent date' (2001: 423), and no less a director than Martin Scorsese called it quite simply 'the Best Film of 1993', as Tim Lucas (1997: 53) and Andy Black (1998: 75) have both noted. The director of *Dellamorte Dellamore,* Michele Soavi, worked as assistant director under horror maestro Dario Argento, and Argent() scholar Maitland McDonagh championed Soavi's film in a feature article for *Film Comment* (1996). *Dellamorte Dellamore* marked the triumphant conclusion of the Italian zombie cycle, which had first been inspired by the Argento cut of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

Not only does Soavi's film have an important place in the history of Italian horror cinema, it is also significant in subsuming the genres of Italian horror comics and fiction. The lead character in the film, Francesco, owes some of his traits to Dylan Dog, the hero of Italy's most popular comic-book series, which was created by Tiziano Sclavi and debuted in 1986. (In an interesting turn of events, Sclavi had originally modelled the look

of Dylan Dog on that of actor Rupert Everett, who was later chosen to play the film's Francesco — the very character on whom Dylan Dog was based.) In 1991, Sclavi published a novel, *Dellamorte Dellamore,* which he had written some years before as a kind of blueprint for the comic. The novel became a bestseller in Italy and served as the most direct source for the film.

One sign that this is a film with some ambition is the title itself, *Dellamorte Dellamore,* which was unfortunately changed to the blandly generic *Cemetery Man* for the Anglophone market.[1] Our lead character Francesco's patronymic is Dellamorte, while his mother's maiden name was Dellamore, making him a product of the intertwining of love and death. Just as *Dellamorte Dellamore* joins two antonyms together as near-homonyms, so the film is a study in the subtle relations between death and desire, the carnal and the charnel. This article explores the psychological, sexual and religious aspects of love and death in the minds of the film's male and female protagonists.

Francesco, a cemetery caretaker, falls in love with a woman veiled in mourning. Based on a photo of the dead man on the tombstone — that of a dour, elderly gentleman — Francesco assumes the deceased to have been the woman's father. Instead, the Widow informs him, he was her husband and 'a wonderful lover — incredible, tireless. He was fantastic'. Francesco's belittlement in this Oedipal situation is made even worse when he sees the dead man now smiling triumphantly at him from the gravestone photo. Eerily

[1] The tagline chosen to sell the film `Zombies, guns, and sex - oh my!' - is also unfortunate, making the film's potent mixture of humour and horror seem merely silly.

vital, the dead man has come between them in the form of Francesco's feelings of inferiority and the Widow's idealization of her late husband's prowess.

In a later scene, Francesco fails again to get the Widow interested in him until he invites her to visit the cemetery's ossuary. Exclaiming that she has 'never seen anything so exciting', the Widow gazes at skulls, sniffs cerements and then kisses Francesco, insisting that the kiss occur only through the black veil she is wearing and through the red veil she has him don. It could be that the nearness of death (the bones, the 'masque of the red death') excites in the Widow a healthy desire for new love and life, but it also seems that she is still fixated on the deceased husband, unable to face her new love directly, cathected in mourning to a love of death. Whom is she kissing through the black veil, Francesco or her dead husband? And who is embracing her through the red veil, new life or death? After the camera has circled the kissing couple, revealing all the skulls watching from the walls of the ossuary, the Widow breaks away, saying, 'No, I must be faithful to the memory of my husband. I can't. I can't. It's not my fault; it's this place. f...1 This place wants me to — It's forcing me to —'As the Widow backs into a corner, skeletal hands reach out for her and tear her dress, while she says, 'I don't want to — I don't *want* to — I can't. I can't'. Personified by the watching skulls, guilt over infidelity to her dead husband prevents the Widow from enjoying new love with Francesco. The skeleton's groping hands indicate that her morbid attachment to her dead husband may allow him to drag her into the grave with him. Most importantly, the scene shows that the prospect of sex with Francesco is tainted in her mind by guilt and morbidity. Love with him is haunted by death; their embrace is replaced in her fearful imagination by a skeletal assault.

In a following scene, the Widow and Francesco try again. On a moonlit night, the black veil slides from her face, her flowers of mourning drop to the ground and the couple lie down to make love. That the Widow chooses her husband's grave as the place for their lovemaking raises doubts about her continuing morbid fixation, but she seems to see this site as part of the work of mourning, a way of remaining faithful to him in spirit — 'I've never kept anything from him. We trusted each other implicitly. He would have liked to know' — while moving on in body. However, when the glowing fairy lights of *ignis fatuus,* so much a part of the romantic setting, are imagined by the Widow as voyeurs invading the couple's privacy, and when her late husband's tombstone photo appears to glower, guilt over infidelity is clearly getting the better of her. This guilt grows monstrous when her deceased husband, in his tomb below the couple, opens his eyes, rises from his grave and assaults her. Her attempts to defend her need for new life —'Let me explain. Listen to me. You've always been so understanding' — do not appease his vengeful wrath, which is to say that they do not assuage her own guilt. The Doctor's later verdict on her death is telling: 'Her heart stopped from fear. [...1 She died while making — well, you know, doing it'. In the Widow's fearful imagination, Francesco's kisses and caresses became gropes and bites from her dead husband. The Inspector on the case scoffs at the idea that a dead man did it, and instead would suspect Francesco as the one who 'raped her and then bit her to death', which lends further support to the theory that, in the Widow's mind, guilt made having sex with Francesco seem like violence done to her by her dead husband.

I said that the Inspector *would* suspect Francesco; the only reason he does not is that Francesco is generally believed to be impotent. While seeming to free Francesco of guilt over the Widow's death, the belief that he is impotent belittles him again in relation to a virile and violent male like the husband. Just as the fear of being unfaithful to her late husband prevents the Widow's attempts at new love — her husband rises from the grave at the moment she is telling Francesco, 'It's never been like this before, with anybody, only with you. No one will ever make us part' — so the memory of the dead husband incapacitates Francesco for love, increasing his own sense of inferiority, reminding him that he comes after, is a second and lesser man, will never be her first and presumably one true love. As Francesco sits beside the Widow's shrouded body, she appears to revive, but he fears that she is a revenant from the dead, a zombie:

Francesco: 'No'.

Widow: 'Yes, my love'.

Francesco: 'Don't let me do it'.

Widow: 'Ah, but you do it so well, so well'.

Francesco: 'Not you'.

Widow: be better with me than with the others'.

As the Widow sits up, her shroud slides off, unveiling her face, but Francesco will not look at her; instead, he puts his hand over his eyes, her shroud falls from her onto his face and he shoots her in the head.

In this scene, Francesco believes that the Widow is not a woman wanting love, but a *femme fatale* threatening death.[2] The Widow's seductive statement, 'you do it so well, so well', could be about Francesco's sexual prowess, but he reacts to her flirtation as if it were a mortal threat, perhaps because her morbid fixation on her late husband frightens him, or because it exacerbates his insecurity over his own primacy and potency. Her line of reassurance, 'It'll be better with me than with the others', may inadvertently feed his fear about the belatedness of their love, the sense that neither she nor he is the other's first or final love. Francesco's anxiety tips desire over into dread, and his ambivalence over whether to have sex with her or to shoot her — 'Don't let me do it' — finds its fatal resolution in the latter.

Significantly, Francesco shoots her without looking at her. Here he is no more able than she was earlier to face new love unmediated by the veil of death, untainted by its fear. As director Michele Soavi has said, Francesco is'not scared of zombies because killing them is a normal job to him. What is more scary, is living. Instead of being a horror film about being scared of death, it's more a film about being scared of life' (quoted in Black 1998: 75). Elsewhere, Soavi elaborated that his film 'doesn't focus on scares, shocks, a killer or the murders'; instead/tension is built more towards the arrival at a caress, perhaps even a kiss, than bloody slaughter'; Francesco is 'scared of love, commitment, disappointment, the impossible dream' (quoted in Jones 1994: 55). It is easier just to kill a black-veiled nightmare than to risk kissing a face that may disappoint your dreams, a face whose fears may redouble your own. If Francesco had lifted the veil from the Widow's visage, allowing the dropped shroud to bring them face to face, he might have found mutual desire and

[2] 2 In this article, I use the term *'femme fatale'* in both a general and a more specific sense. Generally, the term is common parlance for a seductive but potentially lethal woman as figured in the patriarchal imagination: `The *fatale* myth is common to all cultures... Woman = sex death is an equation inscribed into mass consciousness around the world' (Stables 1998: 167). More specifically, given that Soavi's film is partly based on the noir/horror crossover comic 'Dylan Dog'
(the 'Investigator of Nightmares'), it abounds with references to the iconography of the film noir *femme fatale:* veils, cigarettes, taking away a man's gun, etc. (see Sclavi (2009).

renewed life. Indeed, in an important revelation, Francesco discovers later on that the Widow he shot while thinking she was a zombie coming to feed on his flesh was, in fact, a woman still very much alive and needing his love. She was not dead until *he* killed her: 'The first time when her husband bit her, she wasn't really dead. When she woke up and I shot her, she was alive. I killed her. I killed the only woman I ever loved'. In warding off what he mistakenly took to be a *femme fatale,* Francesco himself has become a force for death. It is only when the Widow does come back as a zombie and attempts to bite Francesco that he realizes the kiss she had offered him earlier had been a loving one. Thus, it is Francesco's own murderous actions and guilt over them that cause him to feel haunted by a woman whose love for him he turned lethal.

Francesco is given another choice between love and death when he meets the Secretary of the new Mayor. In Francesco's haunted and hopeful eyes, this woman bears a striking resemblance to the Widow (she is played by the same actress, Anna Falchi): will he see in her the possibility of renewed desire, or will he be haunted by past failure? At first, history threatens to repeat itself when, after the Secretary shows up unexpectedly at his door, Francesco throws it open and almost shoots her in the head before really looking at her to tell if she is another zombie.

After reviving her from a faint, Francesco falls rather warily in love, countering her vow of eternal devotion — 'it's as if I've known you forever, as if I've loved you forever' — with a question — 'You love me too?' — which gives doubt an opening: 'Why', she wonders, 'who else is there?' While Francesco probably meant, 'Do you love me as I love you?', his words may be taken in a way that betrays his worst fear — that she has loved someone else

before more than she can ever love him. As if to confirm his fear — or perhaps incited by it — the Secretary goes on to confess her own phobia:

> Is it true that you don't — you can't — Because I can only love an impotent man. 1.. .1 I like men, but their manhood terrifies me. I can't stand the thought of them having a — I mean — you understand. [...] It's a sort of phobia I have.

To understand the Secretary's phallophobia, we can turn to the fuller version of her speech as given in the novel:

> I have a horror of sex with men. I tried two or three times to make love, but I always cried out from disgust and fled from those filthy things, loathsome pieces of flesh swollen with blood like leeches that fed on my eyes, my mouth, my breasts, my vagina, on me.

(Sclavi 1991: 114)[3]

The Secretary's fear of the male sex as consuming her flesh mirrors Francesco's dread of a zombie *femme fatale* desiring to devour him.

Another prominently phallic man (her father?) was with the Secretary before Francesco, traumatizing her into a fear of the male sex, ruining Francesco's chance at consummation. Earlier, Francesco had reacted by turning himself into a destructive phallic force and shooting a gun, but this way only destroyed the Widow he loved. Now, rather than identifying with the omnipotent father figure, Francesco chooses another way out of the Oedipal dilemma —

[3] 3 It is also possible that the Secretary is a figment of Francesco's imagination, in which case her disgust at the male organ may be a sign of Francesco's loathing of his own fleshly desires, which he may see as opposed to a more spiritual love. In *The Anatomy of Disgust,* William Ian Miller argues that there is a sense in which 'male sexuality, embodied in an organ reminiscent of a slug that emits viscous ooze, makes every man, in men's view, unimaginable to women except as a source of horror, a monster' (1997: 28).

impotence. Yielding to the patriarch's power, Francesco goes to the Doctor who, after almost cutting off Francesco's sex with garden shears, instead decides to inject his organ with a giant hypodermic needle to render it impotent. In a plot development whose parallelism is marked by the dialogue — Secretary: 'If you only knew what *happened* to me'. Francesco: 'If you only knew what happened to *me'* — Francesco later finds out that, while he was being given the needle by the Doctor, the Secretary was being raped by the Mayor. It would seem that their shared suffering might be conducive to the mutual understanding and the joint overcoming of trauma that can lead to love.

However, the assault on the Secretary has had an unexpected effect:

> The Mayor raped me. [...] I liked it. Well, not the violence, no, but after that, we did it again, nicely, so that I'd forgive him, and it was wonderful. Understand? This means I'm cured. I don't have a phobia anymore. I can't marry you now. I'm going to marry *him*.

This politically incorrect monologue can be read in several ways — all of them more or less offensive. In one reading, force, though not something she'liked', did succeed in bringing the Secretary out of her fearful virginity and into a love of (the male) sex. In another interpretation, the Secretary, though she would deny it, has developed a masochistic desire as a result of her boss's sadism; she has learned to love submission to patriarchal power; for her, sex is now linked to the death drive. No matter how we understand this passage, Francesco has again lost the woman to another man, and in a way that leaves him feeling impotent in love and ineffectual as a counter against violence

and death. Upon hearing the news that he has lost the Secretary to the omnipotent Father Death, Francesco falls to the ground as if slain.

One way of understanding Francesco's dilemma is to see it precisely as a conflict between *amore* and *morte,* between a faith in love (perhaps instilled in him by a religious mother whose name was Dellamore) and a countervailing fear of death (perhaps inherited from a cynical father with the name of Dellamorte). Horror film critic Alan Jones has speculated on 'the reason why ultra-religious Italy took over the undead issue' from George Romero after *Dawn of the Dead* in order to make a series of specifically *Italian* zombie films:

> the very idea of death unable to contain the dead is a very strong Catholic notion .... To Catholics, the body is the waste product of the departed soul. The flesh case literally lies around for some diseased evil to infest it and make it rise again in a corrupt version of Christ's resurrection. Italians adore such reverse affirmation of their faith and that's why continental film-makers embraced the zombie genre to become the foremost practitioners of the staple art.

(1999: 14)

But does a film like *Dellamorte Dellamore* show a reverse affirmation of faith or is it more about creeping doubt? 'Francesco fantasizes perfect love with an ethereal being', says Soavi. 'Unfortunately, the exquisite creature of his dreams turns out to be a gorgeous ghoul' (quoted in Jones 1994: 53). 'Resyrrectvris'/'You will be resurrected' is the word of

faith over the cemetery gate, but rather than be reunited with his beautiful beloved in an afterlife, Francesco fears her grossly physical return as a corpse and flesh-eater.

Edgar Allan Poe scholar J. Gerald Kennedy has written about the Beautiful Death, a sentimental tradition of pious mourning at the graveside of loved ones in the hope of eventual resurrection and reunion with them on the other side. This tradition, first popularized in the nineteenth century, stressed the beauty of the dead beloved as a sign of the eternal soul. Thus, it 'sponsored an ethereal image of mortality, purged of gross physical detail ; this 'impression of death's beauty involved an act of communal self-delusion, a tacit refusal to see dying as a physical process' (Kennedy 1987: 5, 10). However, this very etherealization of the beloved was driven by doubts about the body's decay, as a sceptical materialism ate away at the consolations of religious faith: 'the continuing erosion of Christian belief, together with the development of scientific interest in the physiology of dying ... further intensified the sense of a horrible discontinuity between bodily dissolution and spiritual transcendence' (Kennedy 1987: 11).

As Francesco notes, he shares a name with Francesco d'Assisi (Saint Francis of Assisi), a man of good deeds and joyous faith, but he increasingly doubts that there is any 'resurrection' other than that of flesh-eating zombies, and his only 'good deed' is to try to kill them so that they stay dead. As Francesco says, he has become 'Saint Francis of Death', with Dellamorte winning out over Dellamore. Francesco wants to believe in eternal love; he wants to see the beauty of his beloved as a sign of her angelic nature — and of his when he is with her. As Francesco and the Widow make love in the cemetery, the statue of an angel is visible behind them in such a way that each in turn appears to be wearing white angel wings. However, when the Widow moves, her zombie husband is

revealed behind her in the form of an *avenging* angel as the widow's guilt over adultery makes her love with Francesco seem like something sinful and corrupt. Later, the Widow herself will be resurrected in all her angelic beauty and love for Francesco, but his faith will be undermined by his fear of death and decay, leading him to imagine her as a mere corpse out to prey on his flesh: his 'angel' takes a bit out of his neck.

According to William Ian Miller in *The Anatomy of Disgust,* 'Part of death's horror is that it too is a severance of body and soul and then, via putrefaction, of the body's integrity' (1997: 27). Expanding on Julia Kristeva's notion of 'the abject',[4] Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine* has said:

> Within a biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution — the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic. In relation to the horror film, it is relevant to note that several of the most popular horrific figures are 'bodies without souls' (the vampire), the 'living corpse' (the zombie), corpse-eater (the ghoul) .... (1993: 10)

In the scene where the Widow's kiss becomes a bite, she is covered in dirt and decaying plant matter, embracing and contaminating Francesco with the taint of the grave from which she has just arisen. No longer an angelic figure of eternal love, the Widow with her putrefying corpse now embodies the very threat of mortality as Francesco is eaten away

[4] 4. See Kristeva in *Powers of Horror:* The corpse, seen without God ..., is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. ... Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us' (1982: 4).

by religious doubt. Earlier, Francesco had hopped out of a grave he was digging when he caught sight of the widow, viewing her as a resurrection of his hopes, but now her zombified form threatens to cover him in dirt, which he can not wash off no matter how many showers he takes because it represents his own fear of being overcome by death. There is no Beautiful Death because there is no spiritual afterlife. There is only a gorgeous ghoul's hungry maw — a symbol of the gaping grave out to devour him. In another scene where Francesco shoots to kill a zombie, his bullet accidentally clips a wing from the statue of an angel; later, he will deliberately shoot off another wing. Bit by bit, Francesco's gynephobia and thanatophobia are replacing whatever faith he once had in love and life.

Having twice lost his love (first the Widow and then the Secretary), Francesco is himself tempted to succumb to masochistic desire and the death drive. He lies on a grave, then goes cruising for prostitutes, musing that 'You look for death in the clear night. You tell her you still love her, that you are her slave, that she's still your queen. Death, death, death the whore'. In Francesco's mind, the Widow and the Secretary have shown themselves to be fickle, betraying him with other men, destroying the uniqueness of love. Now he is tempted to submit to women who are bound to betray him, prostitutes who will kill his hope of happiness once and for all. Yet, rather than hire a whore, Francesco goes to a bar, where some female college students — one of whom, Laura (again played by Anna Falchi), reminds him of his beloved ask him for a ride home. Back at their place, Francesco seems to allow himself to feel desire again, igniting Laura's passion by lighting her cigarette with his, telling her his wish that she would fall for him and discovering himself miraculously capable of making love despite his chemically induced impotence.

But thanatophobia prevents Francesco from giving his all for love. When Laura remarks that he has 'come three times already', Francesco says, 'Twice the third one was faked'. The implication is that he has been holding back, afraid that if he gives his heart completely to this third woman, she will destroy it as the first two have done. He has already discovered that Laura is one of three women who share that apartment, a fact that seems to trigger his fear that hers will be the third betrayal. Then, as if conjured up by this nightmarish thought, one of the other female college students tells Francesco that all three are moonlighting as prostitutes, and that he is expected to pay dearly for having loved Laura. With cynical hindsight, Francesco now revises the earlier cigarette-lighting scene between him and Laura as one in which he was lured into sex by a *femme fatale*. Despite the fact that Laura has encouraged him to stay the night and invites him back into bed to 'Come warm me up' — which suggests that she has, or could develop, a more than financial interest in him Francesco will not take a risk, does not look at her face and only pretends to get close to her. In place of his body, he puts a space-heater in bed with her, perverting the language of love towards death: 'Coming, love. Now you'll be warm forever'. However, Francesco's plot to burn her before he gets burned proves self-destructive. As he sits cynically in his car listening to the screams of the three women burning inside the apartment, the flames from the fire as reflected in his car window seem to combine with the flame he uses to light his own cigarette, spreading to consume him along with them.

Certainly, Francesco's belief that he had found true love again in the Secretary and then in Laura was rooted in the hope that the Widow had come back through them, that she had never really died, that he and his beloved had never been parted. But the irony of Francesco's seeing

each subsequent woman as the return of his beloved is that her resurrection reminds him as much of the grave as it does of new life. Unable to see her as herself, Francesco views each woman through a veil of immortal hopes and mortal dread. As Elisabeth Bronfen argues in a study of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ligeia' (1838) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958),

> The beloved's body induces an intellectual hesitation about whether she is a sign for life's triumph over death or death's inhabitation of life; whether her presence signifies that a corpse has been resurrected or a living body turned to a corpse; whether the first beloved is alive or the living woman dead through repetition. (Bronfen 1993: 116)

As Bronfen points out, 'Even as the return of the dead at the body of the second jor third] woman apotropaically enacts that death is not irrevocable because the lost returns, what also returns is death itself. This gesture of repressing death betrays death everywhere' (1993: 115).

As Francesco's belief in eternal love is gradually hollowed out by grave anxiety, his desire for a restored beloved gives way to paranoid fear of her as a *femme fatale.* As Rupert Everett has said about the character he plays, Francesco 'goes from being a killer of the dead to a killer of the living because he becomes so emotionally zapped by the same woman in different disguises' (quoted in Jones 1994: 55). Rather than offering a new occasion for love and life, each woman appears to the fearful Francesco as a harbinger of inevitable parting and passing away. Each female revenant 'brings him face to face with his own death, which he has resorted to this romance to repress' (Bronfen 1993: 121). Every potential romance must be killed before she fatally disappoints Francesco. Every female body must be destroyed before entanglement with her drags him down to death.

But Francesco's gynephobic killings do not work as a defence against death. Instead, all he has succeeded in doing is to hasten the collapse of love into loss, the living into the dead. Francesco's mortal dread results in a cynical indifference to life. In the novel, Francesco's double Franco muses, 'Have you noticed that all the things in life that give you pleasure are a bit disgusting? Like to eat, to shit and to piss, and to shoot your sperm into a clammy and dark cave' (Sclavi 1991: 159). The film's Francesco calls his helper Gnaghi a 'disgusting' eater, then adds that 'it all does get mixed up in the stomach in the end'. Thus does Francesco telescope eating and elimination, ejaculation and the little death, as if there were no point in sowing or nourishing a new life if it only ends in dying. However, no matter how armoured he pretends to be against loss, Francesco betrays his anxiety by using the word 'disgusting' to describe the way in which food and sex are haunted by dissolution. As William Ian Miller notes,

> whatever *tedium vitae* and melancholia are, they hardly fear disgust at all, but indulge it whenever they can. ... Melancholic persons experience a perverse satisfaction when the universe obliges their disposition by showing them all existence to be infected as they believe it to be. For them, existence itself is contaminating.
>
> (1997: 29)

For Francesco, the prospect of death contaminates life; the end empties the beginning of all meaning. Explaining his job as a cemetery caretaker, Francesco says, 'It's the only job I

could get, even with a degree in biology [the study of life]. Anyway, we all end up here sooner or later, don't we?' Why not bury ourselves now since we are going to die anyway? 'The living dead and the dying living are all the same'; 'hell', Francesco says — and that word suggests his state of mind — 'at a certain point in life, you realize you know more dead people than living'. Loss has come to loom so large it blocks hope from sight. Later, imagining that Death is alive and talking, Francesco hears him say, 'If you don't want the dead coming back to life, why don't you just kill the living? Shoot them in the head'. Indeed, since renewed life only reminds him of past loss, why not forestall the pain of disillusionment by killing the other before she departs, by shooting her in the head to allay his death anxiety? In his fatal cynicism, Francesco has not distanced himself from death, but become one with him. As he tells Death, 'You and I are both the same. We kill out of indifference, out of love sometimes, never out of hate. Now I don't know who's dead or alive'. Francesco's murders are mercy killings, designed to spare everyone, including himself, the pain of living. He kills not as a misogynist, but as a disillusioned lover — though that may well be a distinction without a difference to his victims.

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