Boccaccio in Florence
Also by W.D. Jackson

*Then and Now:*

*Then and Now — Words in the Dark (Menard Press)*
*From Now to Then (Menard Press)*
W.D. Jackson

Boccaccio in Florence
and other poems

From Then and Now — Opus 3

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CONTENTS

The Dance of Death 9

*From* Boccaccio in Florence
   i  The Dream 29
   ii  The Convent Garden 36
   iii Nastagio degli Onesti and the Necromancer 42

The Chest 51

The Gift 67

Rainer Maria Rilke: A Post-Romantic Portrait
(On Poetry and Death) 71

after jandl 99

*From* Self-Portrait as a White-Collar Worker (4)
   i  Working for the Enemy 118
   ii  North of the Future
       —The Curse 120
       —An Ordinary Day 120
       —The Blessing 122

Acknowledgements & Notes 124
THE DANCE OF DEATH
(after Todtentanz der Stadt Basel)

“Dance, dance, dance till you drop”
W.H. Auden, Death’s Echo

i

The Pope

Come, Holy Father, show them how
You do the dance and make your bow.
Though triple-crowned and double-crossed,
Your powers to bind and loose are lost.

*

Alive, they called me ‘Your Holiness’.
Selling indulgences made me wealthy.
I was God’s mouth on earth, no less—
But now my breath couldn’t smell less healthy.

ii

The Emperor

Imperial Highness, grim and grey,
It’s too late now for looking sorry:
I’ll pipe you down death’s dusty way.
So off you dance—I’m in a hurry.

*
Able not only to defend
My empire but to make it bigger,
Here I cut a sorry figure:
Death’s dominion has no end.

iii

The Empress

Empress, for you I’ll demonstrate
The dance—just trip along behind.
The court has left you to your fate.
Dance, dance while I rob you blind.

*

A lusty life I thought I led
As a rich kaiser’s fubsy Frau.
I’ve danced my last dance, anyhow,
And lack all pride and joy, being dead—

iv

The King

O King, relax. Don’t waste your breath
On giving orders. My thin hand
Makes all men weak and powerless, and
Crows their bowed heads with a dry wreath.

*
Living, I loved to wield my power,
Raised to the highest ranks of honour.
And now? I'm nothing but a goner:
Shackled and gagged, I await my hour.

\[v\]

The Queen

Queenie, your fun and games are over,
So down you flop into your grave.
Your beauty, health and wealth can't save
Your face—from pushing up the clover.

* 

Oh help, where are my maids to cheer
And grace my chamber? Someone please
Come here and set my mind at ease!
Or is my end so near? . . .

\[vi\]

The Cardinal

Off you waltz in your crimson hat,
Monseigneur, mind you don't fall flat!
You’ve blessed or cursed the dead with a text,
But I'm afraid it’s your turn next.

*
I was a well-known Cardinal,
An apple of the papal eye:
The whole world honoured me—must I
Keep dancing till I fall?

vii

The Bishop

Learned defender of the Faith,
Bishop, you’ve often turned aside
Into the primrose way of pride.
But you can’t run away from death.

*

Flattered by sacristan and flunkey
As long as I lived as a Reverend Sir,
Breathing death’s deconstructed air
I dance and chatter like a monkey.

viii

The Duke

With ladies you have danced, proud Duke,
And had them come and had them go.
The dead may make you want to puke,
But take their hands and say hello.

*
Dammit, must I be off so quickly
And leave land, friends, wife, children, fame
Behind, until I look the same
As these—as thin and sickly?

ix

The Duchess

My gracious lady, be of good cheer!
Although you come of a noble line,
Loved and respected by all up here,
Down there, my love, you’re mine all mine.

*

My lute is cracked. And no dissembling
Affects this bony dancing horror.
Duchess today but not tomorrow,
I dance in fear and trembling.

x

The Earl

Although my news has brought no joy,
My lord, feed me in your French cuisine,
Before you hop it . . . Or are you itching
To join the hoi polloi?

*
A noble earl I was. My name
Was known and feared in all the world,
But death has danced me off and hurled
Me down, and felled my fame.

_xi_

_The Abbot_

_Abbot, come here and let me knock_
_Your mitre off and break your staff._
_Good shepherds always put their flock_
_First. You’re good for a laugh._

_*_

I rose to be abbot, biggest of brothers,
And lived empowered and honoured, until
Nobody dared oppose my will.
But death has culled me like the others.

_xii_

_The Knight_

_Sir Knight, your name is on my list._
_Your sword-hand had the power to kill,_
_But the thrust of my armour-piercing fist_
_Cannot be parried by strength or skill._

_*_
A conscientious, valiant knight,  
I served the world with derring-do.  
Breaking my order’s rules, I now  
Must dance a last good-night.

_xiii_

_The Lawyer_

_No dodge or obsequious flattery_  
_Can get you off; there’s no appeal._  
_My prison cells set no one free,_  
_Cleric or lay. I over-rule._  

_*_

Man’s law derives from God on high,  
As all may read in learned books.  
Lawyers should not behave like crooks,  
But love the truth and hate to lie.

_xiv_

_The Alderman_

_Although a gent of this great city,_  
_One who’s done business here, and sat_  
_On board and council and committee,_  
_Please bow your head while I eat your hat._  

_*_
I worked my fingers to the bone
To see the common good protected.
Both rich and poor should be respected,
Not live or die as if on their own.

\[xv\]

**The Canon**

*O Canon, chanting loud and clear,*
*Leading your nice cathedral choir,*
*Listen: my scrannel pipe shrieks higher.*
—*Life’s old sweet song croaks here.*

* 

I loved to swank in cope and frock,
And warble sacred melodies:
Death’s clashing discords cut through these
And gave me a nasty shock.

\[xvi\]

**The Doctor**

*Doctor, please check my anatomy,*
*That all is as it ought to be.*
*You used to treat, for a fat fee,*
*Patients who shortly looked like me!*

*
An expert in urology,
I hoped to help both man and wife.
Who'll check my water, now that my life
Is pissing away so rapidly?

xvii

The Nobleman

Come, noble warrior, sheathe your sword,
And screw, if you want to save your face,
Your courage to the sticking place.
Death is the hero’s last reward.

*

I terrified my enemies,
Though armed and in harness cap-à-pie—
As death has seized and rattled me,
Grimly forcing me to my knees.

xviii

The Lady

Milady, all this beauty-care
Is nothing but a purblind error.
Your body—skin—face—hair—
Are grey as ashes. Look in your mirror.

*
My eyes were blue, my hair was gold,
But all I can see in my mirror’s a skull.
What a horrible shock! What a drag! How dull
To feel my blood run cold.

xix

The Merchant

Business as usual, sir? Well, not
Much longer. Though a proper toff,
Nothing you’ve got can buy me off.
Come dance till you rot.

*

My time was money, and I learned
To get rich quick by ruthless thrift.
But death, devaluing my gift,
Robs me of everything I earned.

xx

The Abbess

My lady Abbess, full of grace,
How flat your little tummy’s grown.
But I’ve no need to cast a stone!
Or cut off my nose to spite my face.

*