

THE VIOLENCE OF DEATH

THE Greek kindred has been shown to be governed by the principles of death and renewal, and it has been argued that these principles carry with them a certain deep consolation. The living know that a personal immortality awaits them, for a period, in their children, their name, their house and fields, in the memorial services, and in the regenerating power of memory and the continuity of the customs and beliefs which they inherited and passed on. Conversely, because it is not by their lives only, but by their deaths also, that past generations contribute to the continual re-birth of the kindred, and because it is, in a sense, in the very act of forgetting that new generations find new life, there is a type of solace here for all those who long for immortality. In this understanding the individual plays a supporting role, as the bearer and guardian—for a time—of the blood that, renewing itself in him, pours ceaselessly into future generations; and in accepting his role as the servant, through the gift of himself, of a principle far greater than he is, he gains the dignity of serving the cause of life itself.

In these two senses then, the society is permeated with a healing understanding of the interweaving of individual life and death in the renewal of the life of the community as a whole, and it is in part this understanding that gives to the society its immense stability, and to the people within it their capacity for acceptance of the passage of time and the approach of death: 'Up to the age of forty you build your life. After forty you fold your hands, look after your children, have the company of your spouse, and go down hill towards death.'

The uncompromising acceptance of death which is so characteristic of this culture is assisted by the fact that the people are no strangers to it, and from their earliest years they see the older generations one by one succumbing to the onset of infirmity which, it is accepted without fuss, will lead to the stones of the burial ground. Children are allowed freely into rooms where people are sitting with the dead, they see the open coffins of the Orthodox funeral, and

with the rest of the congregation they go up to kiss the dead person at the end of the funeral service in the ritual of 'the last farewell'. And the community's physical care for the body does not end with the funeral service, for after the required number of years in the ground the bones are dug up by the relatives to be washed with water and wine, put in the church over Saturday night and Sunday morning, and then set aside in the ossuary. The exhumation is an encounter with the nature of physical existence so sharp that invariably someone is moved to remark involuntarily, 'Look at what we are!' or, 'That's what man is—a handful of little bones', and someone else to reply, 'We are only temporary here'. So the dissolution of the flesh is in its own terms the final reality, and this is faced with a certain robust realism which defies any easy comfort referring to the life of the soul in paradise: 'A fat lot I'll see when I'm under the earth!' and 'No-one's come back to tell us!' It is an acceptance of death firmly based on a repeated confrontation with the limits of physical existence—a continual following through of the cycle of life from the birth of a child onto the earth from which it came, to the return of the body to the earth when that life is finished.

But although the people accept death, because they must, they do not thereby weaken in their love of life. It is this life in which people eat, drink, and feel the light of the sun, in which they dance, laugh, and love, which is celebrated with such passion, this life in which even the simplest things occasion the most profound delight—the planting of chickpeas in the vineyard so that the worker among the vines can 'go eating', a drink of cold water from a mountain spring, a special find of mushrooms in the autumn which are borne back pierced through one after the other on a long withy, the use of the round leaves of the arbutus as spoons to scoop off the froth from buckets of new milk, or the rosy translucent vein of pine wood which smells wonderfully of resin and burns with a brilliant flare. It is this world of precise and personal experiences that represents life, and this world which man, because he cannot bear to leave it, leaves behind to his children who inherit it in his stead and in their turn re-people it and hold the past in their memories.

This view of immortality in which life is recreated again through new generations springs from one perspective, but there are others. Elements in the tradition which speak of the sacredness of the dead,

the purgation of the soul, and the journey to paradise, emerge early in the rituals of death, and become increasingly clear as time passes and the response to death develops. Nevertheless, dominating the foreground of daily life, and treated in ordinary contexts as the overwhelming reality, is the extraordinary joy of living, and ever present in the background is the idea of death the destroyer as its ultimate enemy. It is a picture of life as both triumph and tragedy, and of a world so full of richness that in it man longs to defeat the odds, but so constructed that in the last resort this defeat is impossible. So, in the word often used in the context of mortality, this world is a 'deluding world' (*ψευδοντουνια*), which beguiles us with a sensation of permanence even while it prepares remorselessly to give us over, together with all living things, to the grave. The love of life and the awareness of death are bound together in a powerful irony as dual aspects of a single understanding.

This love of the world, however, is given a further dimension by the symbolic values discussed earlier which are attributed to the cosmos in general—sun and moon, fire and water, village and wilderness. It is matter infused by spirit, not matter alone, which is the indivisible stuff of this world and is ravaged by death, and in the same way as the blood of life is both a material and a spiritual substance, so death, which spills this blood, is not only the physical but also the spiritual enemy. And its great power lies primarily not in the fact that it destroys the body, but that in destroying the body it destroys also the possibility of the union of soul and body which is the precondition for life. Even at its darkest, this way of thought does not deny a future life in some form, but it is easily clouded by the image of a future life in which the soul is fundamentally flawed by the lack of the body. So while there is no doubt of the tragedy of death for the community and for the bereaved, the tragedy is principally for the one who has died, who now lies under the earth's 'black mantle', who 'no longer sees', and who in the half-life of the 'other world' laments his absence from the celebration of the life he once knew.

The blackness of death, then, comes down like a shutter on the light and colour of physical life, and against this picture of contrasts the subtler theology of the life of the spirit after death is at first more elusive, drawn in half-tones, forming a subtext only readable as it were between the lines. The view of death as the final and total

enemy, which takes up the foreground during life and is overwhelming at a death, is a view which derives from a particular perspective; this is the perspective of the natural man, strong in the fulness of the body and the passion for living, for flesh and blood, hillside and water, sun and earth. Within this perspective death cannot come otherwise than as a sundering from all that is good, and the life of the soul in the other world cannot appear other than as a thin and etiolated existence, and within this perspective, while on the one hand death is accepted without equivocation and often with some humour as a grim reality which awaits us all, on the other hand it is feared by the dying and is greeted by the bereaved with the most passionate resistance and rebellion.

The degree of communal resistance to a death varies with the circumstances, and although it is great for children, it is greatest of all in the case of a young unmarried man or girl, at the peak of their youth and promise. In these cases the capriciousness and cruelty of death is seen at its most acute as it seizes a person at the very moment that they step into life, robbing them of their inheritance and snatching from them the priceless gift of marriage and children at the very moment at which it has been offered. So it is typical that the death of an exceptionally lovely sixteen-year-old girl should be remembered years afterwards for the pity of such beauty 'being lost'. This is not a generalized pity at beauty being lost to death, but specifically that such beauty should be claimed by the grave before it has been claimed by a man, before it has left its imprint on a new generation. Those who die at the peak of their perfection before they have stepped into the transfiguring cycle of marriage and procreation are those who are lost to posterity, lost to the very cause of life itself, and leave a permanent void in the family of their birth. A married woman, buried in the customary best clothes and with her marriage crown, is witness in her death to her human fulfilment which has thus been ended; but the bridal dress, the crown of flowers, and the sugared almonds which accompany a young girl to the grave image instead the grim fact that her consummation is in the bridal chamber of death.

The focus on death therefore, as the focus on life, is child-centered. For your children to die before you is a grotesque violation, and because of this the terror of a woman at the possible onset of civil war—'It's not for myself, I've eaten my bread. It's for my chil-

dren, my nephews and nieces...’—is the authentic voice of the culture, as is the comment of some old women at the exhumation of the bones of a young man killed just as he reached maturity: ‘It should have been us.’ And for the dead also the perspective is child-centered—a mother dying young is thought to have been cheated of the joy of seeing her children growing up, and of an older woman who dies before seeing her grandchildren it is said that she ‘ought to have lived to see her sons married’. It is not until the age of seventy and over, the allotted span of human life, that death ceases to be an outrage and becomes accepted—albeit reluctantly—as a necessity. By this time people have ‘eaten their bread’, they have lived their life and reached the point at which it is inappropriate to insist on making further demands on it, so that the following explanation, on the death of a very old woman, is characteristic: ‘For a young person, people wail. You should see what they do for a very young man. But for such an old woman, why weep? She has passed through so many trials and griefs, she has had so many years of life. Why weep that she is gone?’ Nevertheless, the point has to be returned to, that whatever the differentiation made in general between different deaths, it is life in this world not the next which is the prime value, and a characteristic prayer is always for a bit more time: ‘Give me five days [more], and my son and my grandchildren.’ And even the old, living in great poverty and increasing decrepitude, can express the glory of this life in the voice of purest poetry: ‘We eat, we drink, we celebrate our joys. Life is sweet, it is hard to surrender one’s soul.’

While, then, individual responses to any death vary along a certain continuum, these individual responses take place within a common cultural awareness, and the particular pageantry of rural Greek life is derived in great measure from the heroic nature of a communal life lived with colour and panache in the awareness and defiance of death and its encircling darkness. It is an awareness best expressed in song, and it is encapsulated in the following song from one of the Greek islands which accompanies the dance:

Dance, dance, take pleasure in your youth
Since in this world you’ll come by it no more.
Give the dance wings, this earth will eat us!
This earth will eat us, give the dance wings!