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Mourning

The burial of the dead is a prime opportunity for poetry, the heightened speech used to mark occasions as important. The following elegy is a translation of a poem by one poet (Callimachus) mourning the death of another (Heraclitus). Callimachus worked at the great library in Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE. As a poet, he was famous for his epigrams and epitaphs. His friend Heraclitus was a poet from Asia Minor.¹

The translation from the Greek is by William Johnson Cory (1823-92), a master of classics at Eton.² His book of poems *Ionica* contains translations from Greek and Latin and some original poems, many in classical style. Most are strained and sentimental. Only this poem is remembered:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead;
They bought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.
And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake,
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.³

The translation differs from the original in its use of repetition.⁴ This has been disparaged by some critics and other translators, who feel that it betrays the brevity for which Callimachus was famous. Walter Headlam considered the

¹ The poet Heraclitus is not the famous philosopher from several centuries earlier, who had written about time and change: how we cannot step twice into the same river.

² Gathorne-Hardy, J. (1977). *The public school phenomenon, 597-1977*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. (pp 186-188).

³ Cory, W. J. (1891). *Ionica*. London George Allen. (p. 7)

⁴ Paton, W. R. (1919). *The Greek Anthology. Volume II. (Book VII The Sepulchral Epigrams and Book VIII The Epigrams of Saint Gregory the Theologian)*. London: William Heinemann; Paton VII 80 is the Callimachus epitaph by Heraclitus.

translation "a *vin sec* turned into a sweet."⁵ For me, however, the repetition works to accentuate the feeling of loss. The poem sounds like someone speaking at a memorial service. Overcome by grief, the eulogist pauses, calms himself, and then starts over.

The “nightingales” are the poems of Callimachus. Only one of these remains. It describes a recent grave and its epitaph:

The earth is still fresh,
the wreaths only half-faded.
The epitaph tells the sad story
of the bones interred below:
Stranger, I am Aretemias of Cnidos,
wife of Euphron; I died
giving birth to twins.
I left one behind to care for
his father as he grows old.
I took the other with me
to remind me of my husband.⁶

Many Greek gravestones deal with death during childbirth. Some contain statues of both the dead and the bereaved. Figure V.4 shows the stele of Baco, Socrates and Aristonike.⁷ The mother Baco on the left has just died in childbirth. She briefly lifts the veil separating her from the real world to say farewell to her mother Aristonike, who remains seated and appears not to see her daughter. The young boy Socrates in the lower left tries but fails to get his mother’s attention. One servant succumbs to grief at Baco’s death, and another carries away the newborn infant in swaddling clothes.

⁵ quoted in Higham, T. F., & Bowra, C. M. (1938). *The Oxford book of Greek verse in translation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p lxix.

⁶ Paton (1919). *The Greek Anthology* VII:465. My translation is loosely based on the more accurate translation given in the anthology.

⁷ Lepetoukha, C. (accessed 2013). Attic funerary stele of Baco, Socrates and Aristonike. (<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/attic-funerary-stele-baco-socrates-and-aristonike>).

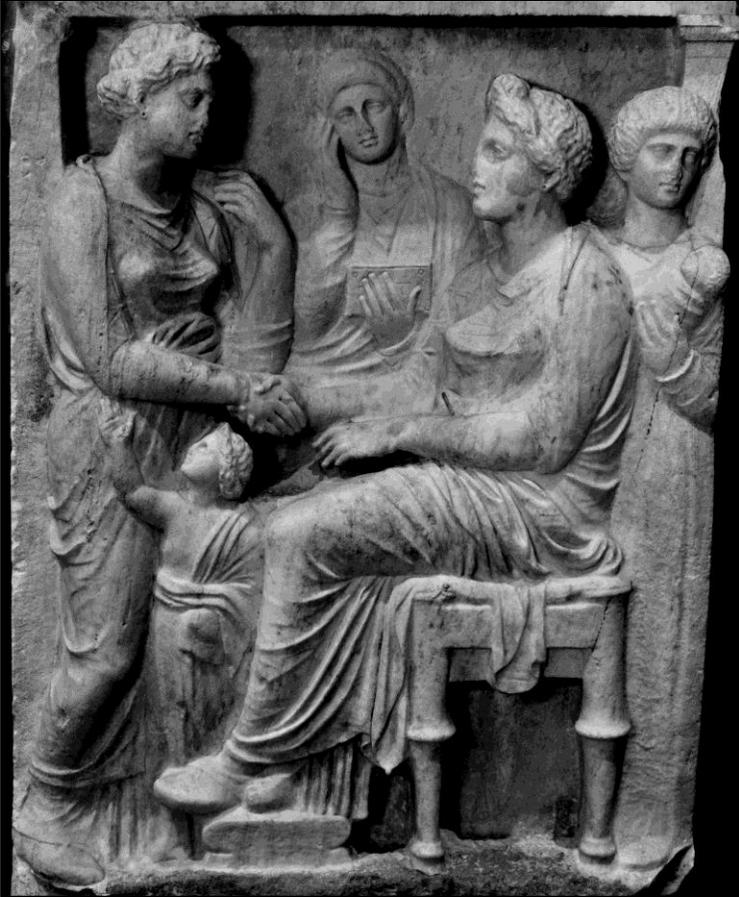


Figure V.4 Stele of Baco, Socrates and Aristonike. Fourth century BCE. Louvre. (Photograph courtesy of Santiago Abella)

The Greek view of death was one of acceptance. However, such fatalism was somehow adapted to the sense of personal control that is the essence of Greek thought. In the poem the tragedy is transmuted into an act of personal choice by the dying mother. Underlying the poem, however, is the realization that this choice is illusory. Aretemias could no more control what happened to her two boys than she could prevent her own death.

"Carian" refers to a region in southwest Turkey. Its capital was Halicarnassus (now Bodrum). The original Greek poem of Callimachus referred to Heraclitus as "my Helicarnassian friend." In the 4th century BCE, the ruler of Caria was

Mausolus. When he died, his wife Artemisia erected in his memory a huge tomb of white marble that was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The "Mausoleum at Halicarnassus" exists no longer, although pieces of its statuary are in the British Museum.⁸

The main idea of Cory's translation of Callimachus' poem is that the achievements of an individual do not die when the individual dies. This is certainly the thrust of the last words, which assume a defiant tone quite different from the preceding solemnity. Nevertheless, although clearly insisting on the permanence of art, the poem is imbued with the idea of transience. Like the mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the library at Alexandria, the nightingales of Heraclitus now exist only in fragments.

Dances of Death

In the late Middle Ages, Europe was full of death. The Hundred Years' War was raging, and the Black Death moved inexorably from city to city. Artists represented this theme in the Dance of Death (*Dance Macabre* or *Totentanz*). The most important of these representations was in Lübeck's Marienkirche (1463). The skeletons leading the bishops, kings, merchants and mayors off to their graves are agile and graceful: they are enjoying themselves immensely. The dying are clumsy and tentative: they have not yet learned the dance. After the invention of the printing press, the theme became enormously popular. In 1538, Holbein created a series of woodcuts with 41 images of Death meeting his clients, two of which are shown in Figure V.5.⁹

World War I brought back many of the horrors of the late Middle Ages. In 1932, Kurt Jooss choreographed *The Green Table*, one of the most striking ballets of the 20th century.¹⁰ The music by Fritz A. Cohen is an amazing

⁸ Jenkins, I. (2006). *Greek architecture and its sculpture*. London: British Museum Press. (Chapter 9 the Mausoleum at Helikarnassos, pp 203-236)

⁹ Holbein, H. (1538, edited by Gundersheimer, W. L., 1971). *Dance of Death: A complete facsimile of the original 1538 Ed. of Les simulachres et historiees faces de la mort*. New York: Dover Publications

¹⁰ Guest, A. H., Jooss, K., Cohen, F. A., & Markard, A. (2003). *The Green Table: A dance of death in eight scenes*. New York: Routledge; Holder, C. (1993) Dancing for Joos: Recreating the role of Death in *The Green Table*. *Choreography and Dance*, 3:79-81; Walther, S. K. (1993). The Dance of Death: Description and analysis of *The Green Table*. *Choreography and Dance*, 3:53-77.



Figure V.5 The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein the Younger. In the print on the left, Death points out to the Empress that even she will come to the grave (Plate 10). On the right a triumphant Death drags away the Abbot without regard for the promise of salvation in his book (Plate 14).

mixture of classical and popular, varying from the *Dies Irae* rhythms of the Middle Ages to the tangos of modern Argentina.

The ballet opens with ten formally dressed diplomats, wearing white gloves and garish masks. They posture, argue and gesticulate around a conference table covered with green felt. Tempers are lost, guns are drawn and shots are fired. War is declared. The stage grows dark. At the back of the stage the figure of Death becomes visible as a tall warrior with skeletal features. He dances slowly and inexorably to an insistent rhythm. This is one of the most riveting scenes in theatre.

As the ballet proceeds, troops are recruited and led into battle. Death's solo dance then becomes a set of duets with each of the dying. Death comes to everyone from soldier to profiteer, from executioner to partisan, from lover to prostitute. After they all succumb, Death repeats his initial solo. This time it is directed clearly to the audience. The diplomats return to their table and repeat their opening scene. Nothing has changed. War will break out again. We never learn.

Judgment

The dance of death is but prelude to judgment. The idea of judgment has always fascinated humanity. Christian culture has the Last Judgment, with Christ selecting the good and faithful for heaven and damning the evil to the fires and demons of hell. Representations of this division of the blessed from the damned became widespread in the medieval churches of Western Europe, either on the tympanum above the entrance or on the wall behind the altar. The believer could not go to church without being reminded of judgment.

The idea of judgment was also deeply ingrained in Egyptian thought. In the books of the dead, falcon-headed Horus presents the newly deceased to Osiris, the God of the Dead, while jackal-headed Anubis weighs the supplicant's heart against a feather. Depending on the tilting of the balance, the deceased is allowed to live on or is given to Ammut, the swallower of the damned. Death thus leads either to immortality or to annihilation.¹¹

In Hindu and Buddhist thought the God of Death, Yama (known as Emma or Enma in Chinese Buddhism), sits in judgment. In the *Devadutta Sutta*,¹² Yama examines a man who has just died. Because he had not followed the way of *dharma*, Yama consigns him to a terrible hell. If he had recognized the warnings he had been given and had renounced his clinging to the world of desire, he could have been released from the cycle of life and death and hell. Figure V.6 shows a Japanese wood carving of Emma sitting in judgment. In temples such as Hoshakuji (near Kyoto), Enma is accompanied by assistant judges, a scribe to record the evidence, and a reader to pronounce the judgment.¹³

We have within us some deep sense of what is right and a conviction that justice will ultimately prevail. Knowing that we have not done what we ought to have done or that we have done what we ought not to have done leads to a terrible fear of punishment.

¹¹ Faulkner, R. O., Goelet, O., Von Dassow, E., & Wasserman, J. (1998). *The Egyptian Book of the dead: The Book of going forth by day: being the Papyrus of Ani (royal scribe of the divine offerings), written and illustrated circa 1250 BCE*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

¹² *Devaduta Sutta* (The Deva Messengers) from *Majjhima Nikaya* (Middle length discourses) 130, translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Available at <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.130.than.html>.

¹³ Ito, S. (accessed 2013). King Enma and his attendants. (<http://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/dictio/data/choukoku/enma.htm>)



Figure V.6 Judge Emma. Japanese, late 16th or early 17th century CE. Photograph courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

A parable of Jesus tells the story of a rich man (Dives, simply the Latin word for a rich man) and a poor man (Lazarus, a name derived from the Hebrew *Eleazar* or “God is my help”).¹⁴

¹⁴ Luke 16: 19-31. The Lazarus of this parable is not the Lazarus that Jesus later raised from the dead. Their common name is just coincidence.

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:
 And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,
 And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

During his life Dives enjoyed his luxury and took no notice of Lazarus. The parable has become significant to the Christian Church because of what happened after both men died. Lazarus was taken to Abraham's bosom whereas Dives went to hell. Justice was served. The parable has always been popular. The poor are more numerous than the rich.

The story is told in the stone carvings on the west side of the south portal of the Abbaye Saint Pierre in Moissac, France (Figure V.7).¹⁵ The right side of the tableau shows Dives eating a sumptuous meal. He pays no heed to Lazarus, who lies on the ground in the lower center part of the panel, beset by dogs. At his death Lazarus is taken by the angel to the bosom of Abraham. The fate of Dives is played out in a separate carving lower down on the wall (not illustrated). Devils take both his soul and his accumulated riches. Like Dives, this carving has not survived well.

At the end of the parable, Dives calls out to Abraham:

And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

This is the beginning of the Christian idea of an afterlife where we can be compensated for our suffering or punished for our sins. We go to the bosom of Abraham or the flames of hell. Between these eternal homes is an impassible abyss.

An English ballad retells the story, with the recurring verse

¹⁵ Schapiro, M., & Finn, D. (1985). *The sculpture of Moissac*. London: Thames & Hudson.



Figure V.7 Dives and Lazarus. West side of the south portal, Abbaye St. Pierre de Moissac, 12th Century CE. (photograph courtesy of Nick Thompson, University of Auckland).

Then Lazarus laid him down and down
 And down at Dives' door
 "Some meat, some drink, brother Dives,
 Bestow upon the poor"¹⁶

There are many variants of the words. In the version collected by Vaughan Williams, one verse of the ballad describes the rueful words of Dives:

Oh, hell is dark, oh, hell is deep;
 Oh, hell is full of mice.
 It is a pity that any poor sinful soul
 Should depart from our Saviour Christ.

The "mice" probably originally come from "mist" which would have rhymed with Christ in Middle English.¹⁷

Ralph Vaughan-Williams composed *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus* for Harp and String Orchestra.¹⁸ This work is not a set of formal variations on a theme but "rather reminiscences of various versions." The music winds up being a meditation on both the tune of the ballad and the meanings of the

¹⁶ This is 56 in the collection of Child of the late 19th century. (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/ch056.htm>)

¹⁷ Palmer, R. (1983). *Folk songs collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams*. London: J. M. Dent. (pp 65-68).

¹⁸ Vaughan Williams, R. (1940). *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*. London: Oxford University Press.

story, moving from feelings of compassion for Lazarus to awe at the justice of God. The ending of his piece portrays an anxious wonder. Should not God take pity on Dives?

However, pity is not the usual response to those condemned to hell. Aquinas proposed that the blessed in heaven should enjoy the suffering of the damned.

Nothing should be denied the blessed that belongs to the perfection of their beatitude. Now everything is known the more for being compared with its contrary, because when contraries are placed beside one another they become more conspicuous. Wherefore in order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned.¹⁹

To the question about why it would not be right to have pity, Aquinas argued that

Whoever pities another shares somewhat in his unhappiness. But the blessed cannot share in any unhappiness. Therefore they do not pity the afflictions of the damned.²⁰

Nowadays, the idea of hell is no longer a mainstay of religious thought. The great religions have become more oriented to achieving heaven than escaping hell. Although 75% of Americans believe in heaven, only 61% believe in hell.²¹ Perhaps we may never be called to account for our lives. Without a God there is no judgment; with a merciful God all is forgiven, and we run no risk of hell:

Religion, opium of the people. To those suffering pain, humiliation, illness and serfdom. it promised a reward in the afterlife. And now we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium for the people is a belief in nothingness – a huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders we are not going to be judged.²²

¹⁹ Aquinas, T. (1272) *Summa Theologica Part III* 94:1. Available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/5094.htm>

²⁰ *ibid*, 94:2. To be fair, these quotations come from the unfinished third section of the *Summa Theologica*, and may have originated with Rainaldo da Piperno, St Thomas' secretary,

²¹ Harris Poll (2009). What people do and do not believe in. Summarized at http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/Harris_Poll_2009_12_15.pdf

²² Milosz, C. (1998, November). Discreet charm of nihilism. *New York Review of Books*. p 17.

Two ideas run deeply through the course of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. One is that without God "everything is permitted." The other is that "if there were no God, he would have to be invented."²³ Justice requires that we be held to account for what we do. We have long presumed that God should be the judge. Though civilization requires that we be judged, there is no reason, however, that the judgment should not be human rather than divine.

²³ Dostoevsky, F. (1880, translated, Pevear, R., & Volokhonsky, L., 1991). *The brothers Karamazov: A novel in four parts with epilogue*. New York: Vintage Books. The first quotation occurs on pp. 69, 82, 263, 589, 593, 604 625, 635, 649 and 696. The second derives from Voltaire and occurs on pp. 134, 234, 553, and 557. Variants of the latter are that man also had to invent the devil and hell (pp. 24, 239).