

DEATH, BEAUTY AND EXISTENCE

Ingo Porada

(Department of Languages and Arts, Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education)

“The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*, 1846

This poignant observation is one that, in many variants, has over time imbued two human modes of responding to the experience of death with an ‘interest’ which neither of them acknowledges in its declared *raison d’être*. At least since the Battle of Jena, however, which (long before a civil servant in Washington harnessed the same idea to the ‘interests’ of his government) signified to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel the *End of History*, but perhaps already since the Reformation, which had inspired a similar perspective in Martin Luther, these two human modes of responding to the experience of death have begun to inhabit different conceptual edifices.

On the one hand, there is art.

No longer now is art associated, in the general perception, with the most fundamental need of men, with the need, that is, to *exist*. In Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire Philosophique* of 1764 we read: “L’espèce humaine est la seule qui sache qu’elle doit mourir, et elle ne le sait que par l’expérience.”

Voltaire was not wrong, certainly. But is it indeed a matter of *knowledge* - and thus, in other words, one also of *consciousness* - which sets the human species apart from all others in this regard? Or is the litmus test of knowledge itself already a reduction of a more fundamental difference between man and beast to a quasi-computational criterion? Is not the knowledge of death contingent upon the instinct for *self-preservation*, which all species share, and as such mere evidence of the quest for survival, whose pursuit is inherent in the condition of life itself, rather than in the behavioural pattern or the capacity for intellection of a particular species?

“History,” in the words which Boris Pasternak assigned to his protagonist *Dr Zhivago* some forty years ago, is “another universe, [i.e. one that is] made by man with the help of time and memory in answer to the challenge of death... [it] is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death, with a view to overcoming death...[,]” and so on, and so on. Athol Fugard’s *Dimetos*, in the thus named play of 1975, says it more briefly: “Time stinks!”

Implicit in the words of both *Doctor Zhivago* and *Dimetos* is the idea that history is the method of staying alive *by narrative*. Alas, the interval of almost a generation between the publications of *Doctor Zhivago* and *Dimetos*, and a profound geo-political distance between their settings, as well as between the diasporas which nourished the inspiration for these works, accounts for an important difference in their perspectives on history; it is a difference, which - in the chronology of *European culture*, and in the genesis of national mentalities - separates them by more than two millennia.

Dimetos, a play which - by its cryptic imagery - alludes to an archaic past (and also, besides, to a "locale without location"), and which therefore breathes the aura of a great culture whose universal impact has been acknowledged by history, is for all that nonetheless borne of the Promethean, but yet archetypally *modern* aspiration to the overcoming of space and time. And therefore the stench of transitoriness in that play stems from the putrefaction of History itself, which thus contests its ideologically enforced redundancy. But *Doctor Zhivago*, by comparison, remains piously rooted in the spiritual order of decay and regeneration which has been bequeathed to us, most recently by Christianity; the novel remains rooted in that order *not in spite of the temporal and geographical specificities of its plot(s)*, but *on their very account*, namely for affirming the sensation of *existence* as one which is conditional upon the capacity for death, in the sense, somewhat, as that which is alluded to by the protagonist of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* of 1727, Lemuel Gulliver, when he contemplates the presumed pleasure of a Struldbruggs such a one "diverts himself with the annual Succession of Pinks and Tulips in his Garden, without regretting the Loss of those which withered the preceding Year." And thus, perhaps, Voltaire's axiom may be qualified by the observation that it is neither, *in itself* - the knowledge of death (*par l'expérience*), which distinguishes man from beast, nor even *the want to exist*, in as much as it might be stimulated by that knowledge, but *the experience of beauty*, which arises from the artefactualisation of Nature, including Death.

Beauty is that which "serenely disdains to annihilate us" wrote Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Dumb Elegies* of (circa) 1919. And in these words he recalled the primeval function of art as a magic tool, the function, that is, of dissipating the spell which the knowledge of biological necessity, i.e. of death, had cast upon the morbid imagination of men; art dissipated that spell by *making alike*, and it thus heightened men's sense of their existence. But where art has been made to surrender this function, what else may it still do but, on the contrary, to raise the spectre of Death, in virtue of manifesting to *men themselves*, since "the End of History", its transcendence of the metabolism of life.

History was allied to art. "The only tool[,]" so *Dimetos* is told by a voice, which "a man can make that will help him to hold time, is a story." If the story comes too late, however, if it comes after it has already been subsumed into the general decomposition by a "regime of narratives", what else can men still do but *to kill time*? And is it not this perversion which

menaces us in the story of Dimetos,¹ as it was rendered by Albert Camus in (circa) 1940, but which he had in turn distilled from an ancient rendering of the story by Parthenius? Again, is it not this perversion which was brooding already in the guts of Sophocles, when he invented the manner of *Antigone's*² condemnation by Creon to a mode of *having* to transcend space and time?

"I die because I do not die" are the words which Miguel de Unamuno Y Jugo attributed, in 1925, to St Teresa of Jesus. And our generation's rejoinder to her lament might be that "time heals all wounds, except in Postmodernity."

On the other hand, there is anthropology.

Appendix One

(A)

Dimoetes is said to have married his brother Troezen's daughter, Euopis. But when he discovered that she was passionately in love with her brother[,] and was sleeping with him, he informed Troezen. The girl, in fear and shame, hanged herself; but before she did so, [she] called down all sorts of terrible curses on the man who was responsible for her fate.

Then, not long afterwards, Dimoetes chanced upon the body of a very lovely woman [which was] thrown up by the waves of the sea. A powerful desire for her took hold of him, and he began to sleep with her. But when the body started to decay because of the long interval since death, he raised a great burial mound for her. And as his desire did not slacken he killed himself on her tomb.

Parthenius, *Unhappy Love Stories*, (first century BC)

¹ Appendix one.

² Appendix two.

(B)

Dimetos had a guilty love for his niece, who hanged herself. One day the little waves carried on to the fine sand of the beach . . . the body of a marvellously beautiful young woman. Seeing her, Dimetos fell on his knees, stricken with love. But he was forced to watch the decay of this magnificent body, and went mad. This was his niece's vengeance, and the symbol of a condition [which] we must try to define.

Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1935 to*

1942 (1962).

Appendix Two

CREON: I will take her down some wild, desolate path
never trod by men, and wall her up alive
in a rocky vault, and set out short rations,
just the measure piety demands
to keep the entire city free of defilement.
There let her pray to the one god she worships:
Death - who knows? - may just relieve her from
death.

Sophocles, *Antigone*, (circa 442 BC.)