

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE DEAD

In the epilogue of Piero and Vittorio Taviani's incomparably beautiful film "Kaos", the Italian author Luigi Pirandello returns to his home town on Sicily and there meets his long deceased mother. He confides to her that he has written a few stories about his native Sicily, but has not succeeded in giving them the authentic flavour he wanted them to have. The reason is, his mother tells him, that he, although already a famous writer, still must learn to look 'through the eyes of the dead'. And she takes her son back to her own past, and we see her as a young girl, swimming with her brother and sisters in a cristal clear sea of azure, in their long white underwear, at the foot of a glaringly white pumice-hill.

Pirandello has obviously learnt to see through the eyes of the dead, for what this means the Taviani's show us in four episodes based on Pirandello stories. The scenes are laid in the arid and mountainous interior of Sicily. Although there are a few references to 19th-century events - Garibaldi appears on horse back as in a dream, poor peasants are emigrating to America, the Pirandello family is fleeing after the revolt against the Bourbons in 1848 -, history is always very far. In fact history is rejected or denied as unimportant or disturbing. One of the episodes called "Requiem" is about peasants and shepherds squatting on an piece of land belonging to a rich baron. Although they have even built a small village there, they are tolerated. But when the old patriarch of the group is dying and the villagers ask the baron to cede a burial place, he sternly refuses, for where their dead are buried the living are settled by right. The carabinieri march in to prevent the laying out of the cemetery. But when the mourning villagers carry the dead man (who is not jet really dead, it is a ruse of them) solemnly to his last resting place, the men of the law flee. Death has not only triumphed over them, but also over history.

For in this film nature and myth are much nearer than history, than public events. The people are primitive and emotional, but at the same time tender and solemn. Their way of living seems to stem from very long ago and to have

been fixed for ever. A man is made ill by the full moon (the theme returns in a quite urban and modern setting in Eric Rohmer's recent film "Les nuits de la pleine lune"), - a curious old man can repair all broken things with a magic gum, - the peasants till their land with the same implements the old Sikeliotes used. If history is change, as we always are averring, it has passed along them. In this film as in so many others, as in literature and art, there is a refusal of history, an attempt to create a timeless or rather an eventless world. This was the real reason why Khrushchey became so furious about Boris Pasternak's "Dr. Zhivago" (1956). For in this great novel the whole communist revolution of 1917 is treated as a side effect, with no other significance than that of disturbing the lives of the main persons. "It would be so much nicer if there was no cause and effect in life, no one thing leading inevitably to another, but just everything being sufficient in itself", says a woman in a short story by Angus Wilson, "More friend than lodger". And there you have the main source from which history wells forth: that things are not sufficient in themselves. Sufficient they were for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but our own human condition is more akin to that of King Lear on the heath.

In matters of time Fernand Braudel has gone with me a long way. In his famous book "La Méditerranée" (1949) he uses a threefold conception of time, as everyone knows. First we have "la courte durée", the quickly moving and changing events of every day and every year; then "la moyenne durée", the far more slowly moving longer periods of history, like the Classical Age of Greece, or the Later Middle Ages; and finally "la longue durée", very long stretches of time in which the changes that occur are only perceptible to the trained eye of the historian, changes in the climate for instance or in our mental attitude to a phenomenon like death. It is a fact that generally spoken our history text books pay far too little attention to the effects of long term changes, for instance to changes in the population build up or in the age pyramid. But what I really want to do is to outdistance even Braudel. And by doing that we may reach a level where nothing at all happens, where there has never been any change.

Perhaps the professional historian will deny this ferociously, because he feels himself cheated of part of his business in this way, and his reaction will probably be that people just do not want that things change (which they do nevertheless, whether people like it or not), so that the apparent immobility exists only in their eyes and not in reality. But all the same, there is a widespread denial of time, of history, of change, and not only by the most simple minds. In a lecture delivered to an audience at Princeton University in 1939 Thomas Mann said that his famous novel "Der Zauberberg" (1924) was a novel about time in a twofold sense: first historically because the novel depicts "the inner image" of the pre-war (1914) period, but secondly because it handles time as a subject in itself. "It pictures, he told his sophisticated audience, the hermetic witching away of his hero into the timeless... It tries to eliminate time by positing a magic "nunc stans". So the real meaning of the "magic mountain" (the renowned health resort at Davos in Switzerland) is not that people are healed there of their tuberculosis (for Hans Castorp, the young hero, leaves Davos uncured), but of the far worse disease of time.

Let us now look at some facts. In his beautiful and penetrating description of life in a Southern Italian village, when he lived there as an antifascist exile from the North in 1936, 'Cristo s'è fermato a Eboli', Carlo Levi tells us how he is invited to dinner by a gentleman in a neighbouring town. This gentleman still had 'the old Lucanian habits: his wife did not eat with us at the table and left us alone'. The old Lucanian habits are in reality the old Greek habits, for Lucania is part of Magna Graecia, where the Greek language persists till in our own days. Athenian gentlemen did admit their wives at their dish, when they entertained guests; there are no women present at Plato's "Symposion" (except for the flute-girl in the background, who is sent away when the real discussion begins). Very probably this has been the customs of still older times and still older peoples. When Abraham asked the "strangers" to dine with him in front of his tent at Mamre, he ordered his wife to make cakes, but she did not eat them with the male company. Instead, she stood eavesdropping behind the tent door (Gen 18:1-11). So Carlo Levi met with a habit that had undergone no change in four thousand years or more.

But what I am aiming at I can make still clearer by a somewhat longer citation from Levi's book. "I talked with the peasants and saw their faces and their shapes: black, with round heads, big eyes and thin lips; in their aspects they had nothing of Romans or Greeks or Etruscans or Normans, neither of all the other conquering peoples that had passed over their fields; they called to my mind the very oldest Italiote figures. I thought that their lives, in the identical forms of today, had gone on in the same way in the most remote times, and that the whole of history had passed over them without touching them. Two Italies live together in this same country, one of them being that of the peasants, certainly the oldest, and nobody knows where it did come from; perhaps it has always been there... And I thought that one could write a history of this other Italy, if it were possible to write a history of that which is eternal and immutable, a mythology."

The last word is one that historians abhor. Rational scientists as they are they want to have nothing to do with myth, the embodiment for them of everything that is irrational, uncontrollable, unverifiable. And myth falls outside their scope, because it pretends to be eternal. For to quote Thomas Mann again, in a lecture on Lessing (1929): "... the essence of myth is the return of the same, the timeless, the ever present". Perhaps the professional historian, and no less his counterpart the history teacher, would enrich himself and his work, if he took this essential element, the immutable, more into account. And certainly it would bring him into closer contact with the minds of the pupils. For we, as the professionals of time and change, tend to forget that there is a timeless domain in man. I for one think that the main tenet of historicism, that everything is historical, that everything can be explained historically, is fundamentally wrong, and that non-historians, including our pupils, are much more keenly aware thereof than we are. In my opinion it would be a very valuable task for history didactics to stake out the different domains of myth and history, and myth then taken in its original meaning, not as a kind of refuse of the human mind. For I think that the reception of our history teaching is being hindered considerably, not so much because children and adults often explain the world according to a mythical model, but because

we prefer to overlook this. Perhaps I shall return in a later essay to the relations and contrasts between myth and history, but for the present I have to content myself with the fundamental mythical notion of immutability.

In my last essay I wrote about "cyclical time", which has been the prevalent time concept for countless civilizations, including the Greek one, and for most of the historians. This is very important, for cyclical time is very much akin to timelessness - Wendorff (in "Zeit und Kultur") even says that it is "an image of the timeless" -, which seems to be evident, because in steady rhythm the same things are always returning in the same way. To quote a remarkable instance from classical Greek historiography: Xenophon's book "Hellenica" is often considered as a sequel to Thucydides' "Historiai" and as such inferior to it. But I do not think it is, it is not a direct sequel and it is not inferior. It exists as a historical work in its own right. A very remarkable fact is that Xenophon nowhere mentions Thucydides and his work, not with one word, which would be certainly queer if he saw himself as the heir of his predecessor. It is true, indeed, that Xenophon carries on where Thucydides stopped when he died, leaving his work unfinished, after having brought it up till 411 B.C. Xenophon's first words are "meta de tauta", thereafter, but if you take a sharp look at the joint between both books you shall see that they do not fit together quite exactly. Describing the vicissitudes of his country Xenophon proceeds till the battle of Mantinea in 362 B.C., and then leaves off abruptly, again with the words "meta tauta": "what happened after that may be somebody else's concern". This does not sound as if he had succeeded in achieving what Lessing saw as the historian's main task: giving sense to the senseless. On the contrary, he ends on a note of the deepest despondency: "And now, after the battle, there reigned in Greece still more confusion and disorder than ever before".

He may have had very good reasons to stop exactly there, in 362 b.c., although he himself lived till 354 B.C. First of all, though Mantinea was a resounding Theban victory over the redoubtable Spartan fighting machine, nevertheless Greek hegemony slipped from Thebe's hands, because her great leader

Epaminondas fell in the pursuit, killed by a spear. His eminent gifts had been of no avail to him, for Luck, destiny, "tuchê", was against him. No, there is apparently no sense in history!, Xenophon seems to be saying. And this forced itself the more strongly upon him, because his son Gryllos fell in the battle, on the Spartan side. Xenophon, the perfect gentleman, the connoisseur of the arts of hunting, horse breeding and politics, who even knew how to educate a prince, a fine general himself who had seen many soldiers die, but who had always written history at his desk in the calm of his country house, saw death now entering at his own door. And the pen dropped from his hands.

His sudden decision must have prepared itself subconsciously, so that he could make Mantinea the absolute end of what he had to communicate. His book is like everything he wrote elegantly and well written, much more "human" than Thucydides' stern "Histories". But a mist of gloom lies over it, a doom. Reading on the reader gets the impression that things turn about and about, in a circle, that the events, always of perfectly the same order, repeat themselves in the same way. The wheel of fortune lifts the poleis to the top till they have won the hegemony, everyone in its turn, and then dashes them down again, and everything starts anew. Or perhaps history is a spiral with every circuit lying lower than the last. And no polis ever contrives to win the hegemony definitely, and with always new poleis entering the lists no city ever succeeds in unifying Greece and giving it at last the general peace. And seen in this perspective with Mantinea the lowest and last grade has been reached. The admired Spartans have been beaten, which seemed impossible, and the one man who could have done something for the good of Hellas died all of a sudden by a trick of fortune.

Now we, modern historians, do not see things in this way. To cite Dwight D. Hoover ("Black History", in 'New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History', Ed. M. Ballard, London, 1970), we 'serve as secular theologians, explaining the ways of society to man'. And in this role we are 'success oriented... Few historians document tragedy and failure'. 'The ways of society'

follow the time line obediently, which is linear and progressive, going on to some new brave world or utopia, a warless or classless society perhaps.

But I suspect that our own "pupils", pupils included, see this, viscerally, as artificial optimism. Very probably history represents for them only 'an unsuccessful attempt to be free', as Karl Jaspers put it (in his 'Die geistige Situation der Zeit', 1931). I think they see events coming over them in waves and going about in circles, the one tyrant goes and another comes, a war ends and a new one is about to begin, things get new names but remain essentially the same. It is of no use to know much about it, it does not help matters. Better find some comfort in your own personal sphere. "Perhaps it is just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome", this what Joseph Conrad thinks ("Lord Jim", 1900). Of course I do not say that we historians and history teachers must give in to this despondency and this dullness, to this subconscious idea of the circularity of history. But I wonder whether we always are aware how ill our own historical conceptions (which are those of a minority) fit with the unconscious or subconscious notions, ageold as they are, of pupils and adults.

Piet F.M. Fontaine  
Amsterdam