

The Power of the Dead to Return to Earth

By Lacy Collison-Morley

Though there is no period at which the ancients do not seem to have believed in a future life, continual confusion prevails when they come to picture the existence led by man in the other world, as we see from the sixth book of the *Æneid*. Combined with the elaborate mythology of Greece, we are confronted with the primitive belief of Italy, and doubtless of Greece too—a belief supported by all the religious rites in connection with the dead—that the spirits of the departed lived on in the tomb with the body. As cremation gradually superseded burial, the idea took shape that the soul might have an existence of its own, altogether independent of the body, and a place of abode was assigned to it in a hole in the centre of the earth, where it lived on in eternity with other souls.

This latter view seems to have become the official theory, at least in Italy, in classical days. In the gloomy, horrible Etruscan religion, the shades were supposed to be in charge of the Conductor of the Dead—a repulsive figure, always represented with wings and long, matted hair and a hammer, whose appearance was afterwards imitated in the dress of the man who removed the dead from the arena. Surely something may be said for Gaston Boissier's suggestion that Dante's Tuscan blood may account to some extent for the gruesome imagery of the *Inferno*.

Cicero tells us that it was generally believed that the dead lived on beneath the earth, and special provision was made for them in every Latin town in the "mundus," a deep trench which was dug before the "pomerium" was traced, and regarded as the particular entrance to the lower world for the dead of the town in question. The trench was vaulted over, so that it might correspond more or less with the sky, a gap being left in the vault which was closed with the stone of the departed—the "lapis manalis." Corn was thrown into the trench, which was filled up with earth, and an altar erected over it. On three solemn days in the year—August 25, October 5, and November 8—the trench was opened and the stone removed, the dead thus once more having free access to the world above, where the usual offerings were made to them.

These provisions clearly show an official belief that death did not create an impassable barrier between the dead and the living. The spirits of the departed still belonged to the city of their birth, and took an interest in their old home. They could even return to it on the days when "the trench of the gods of gloom lies open and the very jaws of hell yawn wide." Their rights must be respected, if evil was to be averted from the State. In fact, the dead were gods with altars of their own, and Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, could write to her sons, "You will make offerings to me and invoke your parent as a god." Their cult was closely connected with that of the Lares—the gods of the hearth, which symbolized a fixed abode in contrast with the early nomad life. Indeed, there is practically no distinction between the Lares and the Manes, the souls of the good dead. But the dead had their own festival, the "Dies Parentales," held from the 13th to the 21st of February, in Rome; and in Greece the "Genesia," celebrated on the 5th of Boëdromion, towards the end of September, about which we know very little.

There is nothing more characteristic of paganism than the passionate longing of the average man to perpetuate his memory after death in the world round which all his hopes

and aspirations clung. Cicero uses it as an argument for immortality. Many men left large sums to found colleges to celebrate their memories and feast at their tombs on stated occasions. Lucian laughs at this custom when he represents the soul of the ordinary man in the next world as a mere bodiless shade that vanishes at a touch like smoke. It subsists on the libations and offerings it receives from the living, and those who have no friends or relatives on earth are starving and famished. Violators of tombs were threatened with the curse of dying the last of their race—a curse which Macaulay, with his intense family affection, considered the most awful that could be devised by man; and the fact that the tombs were built by the high road, so that the dead might be cheered by the greeting of the passer-by, lends an additional touch of sadness to a walk among the crumbling ruins that line the Latin or the Appian Way outside Rome to-day.

No one of the moderns has caught the pagan feeling towards death better than Giosuè Carducci, a true spiritual descendant of the great Romans of old, if ever there was one. He tells how, one glorious June day, he was sitting in school, listening to the priest outraging the verb “*amo*,” when his eyes wandered to the window and lighted on a cherry-tree, red with fruit, and then strayed away to the hills and the sky and the distant curve of the seashore. All Nature was teeming with life, and he felt an answering thrill, when suddenly, as if from the very fountains of being within him, there welled up a consciousness of death, and with it the formless nothing, and a vision of himself lying cold, motionless, dumb in the black earth, while above him the birds sang, the trees rustled in the wind, the rivers ran on in their course, and the living revelled in the warm sun, bathed in its divine light. This first vision of death often haunted him in later years; and one realizes that such must often have been the feelings of the Romans, and still more often of the Greeks, for the joy of the Greek in life was far greater than that of the Roman. Peace was the only boon that death could bring to a pagan, and “*Pax tecum æterna*” is among the commonest of the inscriptions. The life beyond the grave was at best an unreal and joyless copy of an earthly existence, and Achilles told Odysseus that he would rather be the serf of a poor man upon earth than Achilles among the shades.

When we come to inquire into the appearance of ghosts revisiting the glimpses of the moon, we find, as we should expect, that they are a vague, unsubstantial copy of their former selves on earth. In Homer the shade of Patroclus, which visited Achilles in a vision as he slept by the sea-shore, looks exactly as Patroclus had looked on earth, even down to the clothes. Hadrian’s famous “*animula vagula blandula*” gives the same idea, and it would be difficult to imagine a disembodied spirit which retains its personality and returns to earth again except as a kind of immaterial likeness of its earthly self. We often hear of the extreme pallor of ghosts, which was doubtless due to their being bloodless and to the pallor of death itself. Propertius conceived of them as skeletons; but the unsubstantial, shadowy aspect is by far the commonest, and best harmonizes with the life they were supposed to lead.

Hitherto we have been dealing with the spirits of the dead who have been duly buried and are at rest, making their appearance among men only at stated intervals, regulated by the religion of the State. The lot of the dead who have not been vouchsafed the trifling boon of a handful of earth cast upon their bones was very different. They had not yet been admitted to the world below, and were forced to wander for a hundred years before they might enter Charon’s boat. Æneas beheld them on the banks of the Styx, stretching out their hands “*riple ulterioris amore*.” The shade of Patroclus describes its hapless state

to Achilles, as does that of Elpenor to Odysseus, when they meet in the lower world. It is not surprising that the ancients attached the highest importance to the duty of burying the dead, and that Pausanias blames Lysander for not burying the bodies of Philocles and the four thousand slain at Ægospotami, seeing that the Athenians even buried the Persian dead after Marathon.

The spirits of the unburied were usually held to be bound, more or less, to the spot where their bodies lay, and to be able to enter into communication with the living with comparative ease, even if they did not actually haunt them. They were, in fact, evil spirits which had to be propitiated and honoured in special rites. Their appearances among the living were not regulated by religion. They wandered at will over the earth, belonging neither to this world nor to the next, restless and malignant, unable to escape from the trammels of mortal life, in the joys of which they had no part. Thus, in the *Phædo* we read of souls “prowling about tombs and sepulchres, near which, as they tell us, are seen certain ghostly apparitions of souls which have not departed pure. . . . These must be the souls, not of the good, but of the evil, which are compelled to wander about such places in payment of the penalty of their former evil way of life.”

Apuleius classifies the spirits of the departed for us. The Manes are the good people, not to be feared so long as their rites are duly performed, as we have already seen; Lemures are disembodied spirits; while Larvæ are the ghosts that haunt houses. Apuleius, however, is wholly uncritical, and the distinction between Larvæ and Lemures is certainly not borne out by facts.

The Larvæ had distinct attributes, and were thought to cause epilepsy or madness. They were generally treated more or less as a joke, and are spoken of much as we speak of a bogey. They appear to have been entrusted with the torturing of the dead, as we see from the saying, “Only the Larvae war with the dead.” In Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*, when the question of the deification of the late Emperor Claudius is laid before a meeting of the gods, Father Janus gives it as his opinion that no more mortals should be treated in this way, and that “anyone who, contrary to this decree, shall hereafter be made, addressed, or painted as a god, should be delivered over to the Larvæ” and flogged at the next games.

Larva also means a skeleton, and Trimalchio, following the Egyptian custom, has one brought in and placed on the table during his famous feast. It is, as one would expect, of silver, and the millionaire freedman points the usual moral—“Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die.”

The Larvæ were regular characters in the Atellane farces at Rome, where they performed various “dances macabres.” Can these possibly be the prototypes of the Dances of Death so popular in the Middle Ages? We find something very similar on the well-known silver cups discovered at Bosco Reale, though Death itself does not seem to have been represented in this way. Some of the designs in the medieval series would certainly have appealed to the average bourgeois Roman of the Trimalchio type—*e.g.*, “Les Trois Vifs et les Trois Morts,” the three men riding gaily out hunting and meeting their own skeletons. Such crude contrasts are just what one would expect to find at Pompeii.

Lemures and Larvæ are often confused, but Lemures is the regular word for the dead not at rest—the “Lemuri,” or spirits of the churchyard, of some parts of modern Italy. They were evil spirits, propitiated in early days with blood. Hence the first gladiatorial games were given in connection with funerals. Both in Greece and in Rome there were

special festivals for appeasing these restless spirits. Originally they were of a public character, for murder was common in primitive times, and such spirits would be numerous, as is proved by the festival lasting three days.

In Athens the Nemesia were held during Anthesterion (February-March). As in Rome, the days were unlucky. Temples were closed and business was suspended, for the dead were abroad. In the morning the doors were smeared with pitch, and those in the house chewed whitethorn to keep off the evil spirits. On the last day of the festival offerings were made to Hermes, and the dead were formally bidden to depart.

Ovid describes the Lemuria or Lemuralia. They took place in May, which was consequently regarded as an unlucky month for marriages, and is still so regarded almost as universally in England today as it was in Rome during the principate of Augustus. The name of the festival Ovid derives from Remus, as the ghost of his murdered brother was said to have appeared to Romulus in his sleep and to have demanded burial. Hence the institution of the Lemuria.

The head of the family walked through the house with bare feet at dead of night, making the mystic sign with his first and fourth fingers extended, the other fingers being turned inwards and the thumb crossed over them, in case he might run against an unsubstantial spirit as he moved noiselessly along. This is the sign of "le corna," held to be infallible against the Evil Eye in modern Italy. After solemnly washing his hands, he places black beans in his mouth, and throws others over his shoulders, saying, "With these beans do I redeem me and mine." He repeats this ceremony nine times without looking round, and the spirits are thought to follow unseen and pick up the beans. Then he purifies himself once more and clashes brass, and bids the demons leave his house. When he has repeated nine times "Manes exite paterni," he looks round, and the ceremony is over, and the restless ghosts have been duly laid for a year.

Lamiaë haunted rooms, which had to be fumigated with sulphur, while some mystic rites were performed with eggs before they could be expelled.

The dead not yet at rest were divided into three classes—those who had died before their time, the *áùñië*, who had to wander till the span of their natural life was completed; those who had met with violent deaths, the *âéáéièÛõáóïé*; and the unburied, the *áóáóïé*. In the Hymn to Hecate, to whom they were especially attached, they are represented as following in her train and taking part in her nightly revels in human shape. The lot of the murdered is no better, and executed criminals belong to the same class.

Spirits of this kind were supposed to haunt the place where their bodies lay. Hence they were regarded as demons, and were frequently entrusted with the carrying out of the strange curses, which have been found in their tombs, or in wells where a man had been drowned, or even in the sea, written on leaden tablets, often from right to left, or in queer characters, so as to be illegible, with another tablet fastened over them by means of a nail, symbolizing the binding effect it was hoped they would have—the "Defixiones," to give them their Latin name, which are very numerous among the inscriptions. So real was the belief in these curses that the elder Pliny says that everyone is afraid of being placed under evil spells; and they are frequently referred to in antiquity.