

Necromancy

By Lacy Collison-Morley

The belief that it was possible to call up the souls of the dead by-means of spells was almost universal in antiquity. We know that even Saul, who had himself cut off those that had familiar spirits and the wizards out of the land, disguised himself and went with two others to consult the witch of En-dor; that she called up the spirit of Samuel at his request; that Samuel asked Saul, "Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?" and then prophesied his ruin and death at the hands of the Philistines at Mount Gilboa. We find frequent references to the practice in classical literature. The elder Pliny gives us the interesting information that spirits refuse to obey people afflicted with freckles.

There were always certain spots hallowed by tradition as particularly favourable to intercourse with the dead, or even as being actual entrances to the lower world. For instance, at Heraclea in Pontus there was a famous *ψυχομαντειου*, or place where the souls of the dead could be conjured up and consulted, as Hercules was believed to have dragged Cerberus up to earth here. Other places supposed to be connected with this myth had a similar legend attached to them, as also did all places where Pluto was thought to have carried off Persephone. Thus we hear of entrances to Hades at Eleusis, at Colonus, at Enna in Sicily, and finally at the lovely pool of Cyane, up the Anapus River, near Syracuse, one of the few streams in which the papyrus still flourishes. Lakes and seas also were frequently believed to be entrances to Hades.

The existence of sulphurous fumes easily gave rise to a belief that certain places were in direct communication with the lower world. This was the case at Cumæ where Æneas consulted the Sybil, and at Colonus; while at Hierapolis in Phrygia there was a famous "Plutonium," which could only be safely approached by the priests of Cybele. It was situated under a temple of Apollo, a real entrance to Hades; and it is doubtless to this that Cicero refers when he speaks of the deadly "Plutonia" he had seen in Asia. These "Plutonia" or "Charonia" are, in fact, places where mephitic vapours exist, like the Grotto del Cane and other spots in the neighbourhood of Naples and Pozzuoli. The priests must either have become used to the fumes, or have learnt some means of counteracting them; otherwise their lives can hardly have been more pleasant than that of the unfortunate dog which used to be exhibited in the Naples grotto, though the control of these very realistic entrances to the kingdom of Pluto must have been a very profitable business, well worth a little personal inconvenience. Others are mentioned by Strabo at Magnesia and Myus, and there was one at Cyllene, in Arcadia.

In addition to these there were numerous special temples or places where the souls of the dead, which were universally-thought to possess a knowledge of the future, could be called up and consulted—*e.g.*, the temple at Phigalia, in Arcadia, used by Pausanias, the Spartan commander; or the *νεκρομαντειου*, the oracle of the dead, by the River Acheron, in Threspotia, to which Periander, the famous tyrant of Corinth, had recourse; and it was here, according to Pausanias, that Orpheus went down to the lower world in search of Eurydice.

Lucian tells us that it was only with Pluto's permission that the dead could return to life, and they were invariably accompanied by Mercury. Consequently, both these gods

were regularly invoked in the prayers and spells used on such occasions. Only the souls of those recently dead were, as a rule, called up, for it was naturally held that they would feel greater interest in the world they had just left, and in the friends and relations still alive, to whom they were really attached. Not that it was impossible to evoke the ghosts of those long dead, if it was desired. Even Orpheus and Cecrops were not beyond reach of call, and Apollonius of Tyana claimed to have raised the shade of Achilles.

All oracles were originally sacred to Persephone and Pluto, and relied largely on necromancy, a snake being the emblem of prophetic power. Hence, when Apollo, the god of light, claimed possession of the oracles as the conqueror of darkness, the snake was twined round his tripod as an emblem, and his priestess was called Pythia. When Alexander set up his famous oracle, as described by Lucian, the first step taken in establishing its reputation was the finding of a live snake in an egg in a lake. The find had, of course, been previously arranged by Alexander and his confederates.

We still possess accounts of the working of these oracles of the dead, especially of the one connected with the Lake of Avernus, near Naples. Cicero describes how, from this lake, "shades, the spirits of the dead, are summoned in the dense gloom of the mouth of Acheron with salt blood"; and Strabo quotes the early Greek historian Ephorus as relating how, even in his day, "the priests that raise the dead from Avernus live in underground dwellings, communicating with each other by subterranean passages, through which they led those who wished to consult the oracle hidden in the bowels of the earth." "Not far from the lake of Avernus," says Maximus of Tyre, "was an oracular cave, which took its name from the calling up of the dead. Those who came to consult the oracle, after repeating the sacred formula and offering libations and slaying victims, called upon the spirit of the friend or relation they wished to consult. Then it appeared, an unsubstantial shade, difficult both to see and to recognize, yet endowed with a human voice and skilled in prophecy. When it had answered the questions put to it, it vanished." One is at once struck with the similarity of this account to those of the spiritualistic seances of the famous Eusapia in the same part of the world, not so very long ago. In most cases those consulting the oracle would probably be satisfied with hearing the voice of the dead man, or with a vision of him in sleep, so that some knowledge of ventriloquism or power of hypnotism or suggestion would often be ample stock-in-trade for those in charge.

This consulting of the dead must have been very common in antiquity. Both Plato and Euripides mention it; and the belief that the dead have a knowledge of the future, which seems to be ingrained in human nature, gave these oracles great power. Thus, Cicero tells us that Appius often consulted "soul-oracles" (psychomantia), and also mentions a man having recourse to one when his son was seriously ill. The poets have, of course, made free use of this supposed prophetic power of the dead. The shade of Polydorus, for instance, speaks the prologue of the Hecuba, while the appearance of the dead Creusa in the *Aeneid* is known to everyone. In the *Persæ*, Æschylus makes the shade of Darius ignorant of all that has happened since his death, and is thus able to introduce his famous description of the battle of Salamis; but Darius, nevertheless, possesses a knowledge of the future, and can therefore give us an equally vivid account of the battle of Platiaæ, which had not yet taken place. The shade of Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*, however, does not prophesy.

Pliny mentions the belief that the dead had prophetic powers, but declares that they could not always be relied on, as the following instance proves. During the Sicilian war,

Gabienus, the bravest man in Cæsar's fleet, was captured by Sextus Pompeius, and beheaded by his orders. For a whole day the corpse lay upon the shore, the head almost severed from the body. Then, towards evening, a large crowd assembled, attracted by his groans and prayers; and he begged Sextus Pompeius either to come to him himself or to send some of his friends; for he had returned from the dead, and had something to tell him. Pompeius sent friends, and Gabienus informed them that Pompeius's cause found favour with the gods below, and was the right cause, and that he was bidden to announce that all would end as he wished. To prove the truth of what he said, he announced that he would die immediately, as he actually did.

This knowledge of the future by the dead is to be found in more than one well-authenticated modern ghost story, where the apparition would seem to have manifested itself for the express purpose of warning those whom it has loved on earth of approaching danger. We may take, for instance, the story where a wife, who is lying in bed with her husband, suddenly sees a gentleman dressed in full naval uniform sitting on the bed. She was too astonished for fear, and waked her husband, who "for a second or two lay looking in intense astonishment at the intruder; then, lifting himself a little, he shouted 'What on earth are you doing here, sir?' Meanwhile the form, slowly drawing himself into an upright position, now said in a commanding, yet reproachful voice, 'Willie! Willie!' and then vanished." Her husband got up, unlocked the door, and searched the house, but found nothing. On his return he informed his wife that the form was that of his father, whom she had never seen. He had left the navy before this son was born, and the son had, therefore, only seen his father in uniform a very few times. It afterwards came out that her husband was about to engage in some speculations which, had he done so, would have proved his ruin; but, fortunately, this vision of his father made such an impression on him that he abandoned the idea altogether.

Lucan describes how Sextus Pompeius went to consult Erichtho, one of the famous Thessalian witches, as to the prospects of his father's success against Cæsar, during the campaign that ended in the disastrous defeat at Pharsalia. It is decided that a dead man must be called back to life, and Erichtho goes out to where a recent skirmish has taken place, and chooses the body of a man whose throat had been cut, which was lying there unburied. She drags it back to her cave, and fills its breast with warm blood. She has chosen a man recently dead, because his words are more likely to be clear and distinct, which might not be the case with one long accustomed to the world below. She then washes it, uses various magic herbs and potions, and prays to the gods of the lower world. At last she sees the shade of the man, whose lifeless body lies stretched before her, standing close by and gazing upon the limbs it had left and the hated bonds of its former prison. Furious at the delay and the slow working of her spells, she seizes a live serpent and lashes the corpse with it. Even the last boon of death, the power of dying, is denied the poor wretch. Slowly the life returns to the body, and Erichtho promises that if the man speaks the truth she will bury him so effectually that no spells will ever be able to call him back to life again. He is weak and faint, like a dying man, but finally tells her all she wishes to know, and dies once again. She fulfills her promise and burns the body, using every kind of magic spell to make it impossible for anyone to trouble the shade again. Indeed, it seems to have been unusual to summon a shade from the lower world more than once, except in the case of very famous persons. This kind of magic was nearly

always carried on at night. Statius has also given us a long and characteristically elaborate account of the calling up of the shade of Laius by Eteocles and Tiresias.

Apuleius, in his truly astounding account of Thessaly in his day, gives a detailed description of the process of calling back a corpse to life. "The prophet then took a certain herb and laid it thrice upon the mouth of the dead man, placing another upon the breast. Then, turning himself to the east with a silent prayer for the help of the holy sun, he drew the attention of the audience to the great miracle he was performing. Gradually the breast of the corpse began to swell in the act of breathing, the arteries to pulsate, and the body to be filled with life. Finally the dead man sat up and asked why he had been brought back to life and not left in peace."

One is reminded of the dead man being carried out to burial who meets Dionysus in Hades, in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and expresses the wish that he may be struck alive again if he does what is requested of him. If ghosts are often represented as "all loath to leave the body that they love," they are generally quite as loath to return to it, when once they have left it, though whether it is the process of returning or the continuance of a life which they have left that is distasteful to them is not very clear. The painfulness of the process of restoration to life after drowning seems to favour the former explanation.

These cases of resurrection are, of course, quite different from ordinary necromancy—the summoning of the shade of a dead man from the world below, in order to ask its advice with the help of a professional diviner. As religious faith decayed and the superstitions of the East and the belief in magic gained ground, necromancy became more and more common. Even Cicero charges Vatinius with evoking the souls of the dead, and with being in the habit of sacrificing the entrails of boys to the Manes. Tacitus mentions a young man trying to raise the dead by means of incantations, while Pliny speaks of necromancy as a recognized branch of magic, and Origen classes it among the crimes of the magicians in his own day.

After murdering his mother, Nero often declared that he was troubled by her spirit and by the lashes and blazing torches of the Furies. One would imagine that the similarity of his crime and his punishment to those of Orestes would have been singularly gratifying to a man of Nero's theatrical temperament; yet we are informed that he often tried to call up her ghost and lay it with the help of magic rites. Nero, however, took particular pleasure in raising the spirits of the dead, according to the Elder Pliny, II who adds that not even the charms of his own singing and acting had greater attractions for him.

Caracalla, besides his bodily illnesses, was obviously insane and often troubled with delusions, imagining that he was being driven out by his father and also by his brother Geta, whom he had murdered in his mother's arms, and that they pursued him with drawn swords in their hands. At last, as a desperate resource, he endeavoured to find a cure by means of necromancy, and called up, among others, the shade of his father, Septimius Severus, as well as that of Commodus. But they all refused to speak to him, with the exception of Commodus; and it was even rumoured that the shade of Severus was accompanied by that of the murdered Geta, though it had not been evoked by Caracalla. Nor had Commodus any comfort for him. He only terrified the suffering Emperor the more by his ominous words.

Philostratus has described for us a famous interview which Apollonius of Tyana maintained that he had had with the shade of Achilles. The philosopher related that it was not by digging a trench nor by shedding the blood of rams, like Odysseus, that he raised

the ghost of Achilles; but by prayers such as the Indians are said to make to their heroes. In his prayer to Achilles he said that, unlike most men, he did not believe that the great warrior was dead, any more than his master Pythagoras had done; and he begged him to show himself. Then there was a slight earthquake shock, and a beautiful youth stood before him, nine feet in height, wearing a Thessalian cloak. He did not look like a boaster, as some men had thought him, and his expression, if grim, was not unpleasant. No words could describe his beauty, which surpassed anything imaginable. Meanwhile he had grown to be twenty feet high, and his beauty increased in proportion. His hair he had never cut. Apollonius was allowed to ask him five questions, and accordingly asked for information on five of the most knotty points in the history of the Trojan War—whether Helen was really in Troy, why Homer never mentions Palamedes, etc. Achilles answered him fully and correctly in each instance. Then suddenly the cock crew, and, like Hamlet's father, he vanished from Apollonius's sight.