

Encountering the Macabre: The Three Living and the Three Dead

The legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead is essentially that of three young men who went down to the woods yesterday and got a big surprise: while out in their finery, hunting and hawking, either mounted or on foot, these three lads, gaily displaying by their splendour the signs of their social station, meet three cadavers in various stages of decomposition. A dialogue ensues in which the living express mortification, while the mortified admonish them to improve their ways, and to ponder the transience and essential baseness of the human condition. This tableau encapsulates for us some of the most important structural features of the macabre image: such images are 'split', employing dialogic interchanges between two partners or two social or moral types, and representing such dialogue by means of the doubled self as 'Other'. They are thus encounters. They also entail reversals or ambiguities of time – the dead illustrate death as a state beyond human experience by exhibiting the by-products of death, namely the human embodiment of decay, the effect illustrating the cause of the moral predicament. And they also entail decisive reversals of initiative – the hunting motif is important, because it is the living hunters who are now brought to bay by death, the hunter of all men, a theme apparent in many renditions of death as an equestrian cadaver after its mortal prey. This theme of the hunt is made explicit in a border accompanying a deathbed scene in the Grimani Breviary.

The legend also presents us with the Christian dilemma of choice and future contingency: in pondering the collapse of our mortal station, we are invited to mend our ways by means of a penitential injunction familiar from Christ's repeated admonition to sin no more. What is interesting here is partly the ambivalence of these figures, these revenants (who are they?), but also the ambivalence of the subject. At first it looks simply like a macabre tableau which plays on the themes of shock, fascination, self-realization and so on. But, more deeply, the subject, through its liminal and uncanny nature, concerns a moment of intellectual hesitation: the quick are provoked to think both about the consequence of death for the vanity of the self – which is in a sense the 'false' outcome of death, since it concerns the end of that which does not matter anyway – but also of the true end of the contemplation of death, namely the amending of life. Though uncanny, the image has a certain canniness.

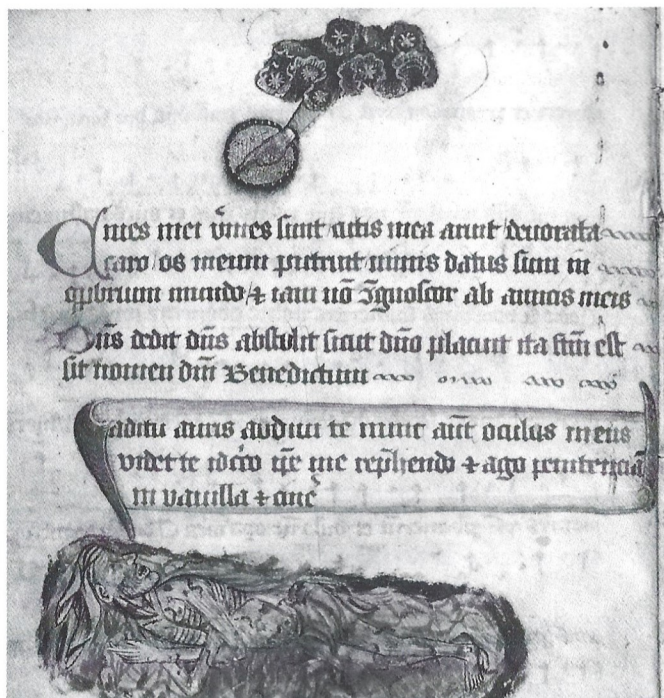
In visual form the subject is a demotic one, traceable in many parish church wall paintings, and popular as a high-class representation in the characteristic genres of illuminated book of the late-medieval period, the Psalter, Book of Hours and so on: the image is one aimed at and conceived for laypeople whose initiative in sponsoring devotional and moralizing images in the period was burgeoning. But as with many such themes the initial occurrences were (as far as we know) literary. The roots of the legend may lie in the tale of Barlaam and Josephat, a Greco-Christian novel distantly related to the story of Buddha, translated into Provençal in the thirteenth century and installed thereafter in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. A hermit, Barlaam, told the young man Josephat a parable about the emptiness of the world: a man fleeing from a unicorn (signifying death) fell down a precipice (the world) and tried to rescue himself by clinging onto a tree (life); but when he looked down he saw two mice gnawing away at the tree. However, he was distracted by honey (the illusory pleasure of the world) dripping from the tree's branches, and forgot the threat. Josephat's predicament is illustrated on the retrospective sculpted tomb of Adelais de Champagne, of c.1260, at Saint-Jean at Joigny. This shows that legends cognate with the Three Living and the Three Dead were associated with French funerary art by the later thirteenth century.

Geographically the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead was fairly widespread in the thirteenth century, known in the Mediterranean and especially in Italy, where it appears to have been the only significant theme of the macabre, and where it often includes a representation of a hermit. Of the sixty-odd versions of the tale, the best known were produced in France and England, with French poems such as that by Baudouin de Condé appearing first; and by about 1300 the subject seems to have attained popularity as a pictorial conceit. In 1302–3, Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, purchased two panels, some kind of diptych, of the scene of the Three Living and the Three Dead in London for 40s. 6d., and it is in exactly this form, as a kind of diptych, that the subject appears amongst the remarkable display of Gospel narrative pictures, theologically inspired didactic diagrams and quasi-autonomous genre images in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (PL. VIII), died 1344.

The devotional context of Robert's Psalter reminds us of the eremitical slant of the story itself. Robert had strong Franciscan leanings, and many of the subjects in those parts of his Psalter executed c.1310 exemplify a specifically Mendicant spirituality. The de Lisle Psalter illustration marks one of those evocative moments when a fashionably French-looking Gothic image breaks out into the English vernacular: the Three Living exclaim 'I am afraid', 'Lo, what I see' and 'Methinks these be devils three', while the Dead reply 'I was well fair', 'Such shall you be' and 'For God's love beware by me'. The dialogue then continues in French, in an abridged version of the poem *Le dit des trois morts et trois vifs*.

- The First Living King: Friends, look what I see:
Unless I have gone quite mad
My heart shakes with great fear:
See there three shades together,
How ugly and strange they are
Rotten and worm-eaten.
- The First Dead King: The first shade said: Lord,
Do not forget because of this bird
Nor for your bejewelled robes,
That you are not obeying well the laws
That Jesus Christ has commanded
By his holy will.
- The Second Living King: The second said: I desire,
Friend, to amend my life:
I have over-indulged my whims
And my heart is eager
To do, as much as my soul submits
To God the King of Pity.
- The Second Dead King: Gentlemen, said the second shade,
The truth is that death
Had made us such as we are
And you will rot as we are now;
Until now you were so pure and perfect
However you will rot before the end.
- The Third Living King: The third living, who wrings his hands,
Said, why was man made so lowly
That he must receive such an end;
This was too evident a folly.
God would never perpetrate this madness
So brief a joy and such great pleasures.
- The Third Dead King: The third shade says: know
That I was head of my line;
Princes, kings and nobles
Royal and rich, rejoicing in my wealth;
But now I am so hideous and bare
That even the worms disdain me.

What of course is so telling in the language and construction of image is the way it charts response. Here we have three fay and resourceless products of youth culture – prototypes of Dorian Gray – exposed to the naked truth of time. In this sense the representation is the outcome of numerous strands of development which characterize late-medieval religious art as a whole, namely that it itself depicts and so validates the character of reactions to it; the legend becomes a drama of reaction increasingly typical of the Christian image. We can chart this rhetorical language in thirteenth-century representations of the Crucifixion, where the onlookers faint (like the Virgin Mary) and wring their hands (like St John), or in such moments of high drama as Giotto's tremendous representation of the Raising of Lazarus in the Arena Chapel at Padua, where the stench of Lazarus's three-day old remains is made manifest to the nose, by means of the eyes contemplating the gestures of disgust of the witnesses. And it is exactly this rhetoric of response that marks out the most impressive of all representations of the legend, that of the mid-fourteenth century in the Camposanto at Pisa, where the horses upon which the living are mounted shy and recoil at the sight and stink of the bloated purulent flesh of the dead.



A corpse possessed of its senses hears and sees the approach of God, and responds with a sentiment from the

This reflexivity, born of the divided character of macabre representations, reminds us of the way such images engage the human sensorium: death, as patristic literature argued, here enters in through the eyes, and spreads a kind of visual contamination or contagion. The dead are shunned, according to the de Lisle text, even by the worms. The dead, who mimic or parody the living but do not extend out to them except as images, are a new class of marginalized untouchables, like lepers, a class forced in life to go through special rites of separation and to relinquish their property much as the dead in the poem have lost their signs of earthly station. Here the dead act to mirror the living by the signs of sense-possession, for they too look back and respond, like the sinister little shrouded corpse in a fifteenth-century German Office of the Dead which emits a speech scroll saying: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eyes seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:5-6.) The macabre thus lends the dead a voice.

The reason this type of image of death is so powerful – in the same way as the related genres of the Dance of Death and of Death personified – is that it is intimately linked to the psychology of anxiety. In the legend we have a classic instance of a moment of instability between two temporal realms, a sudden breach of existential boundaries between two worlds, which confuses the animate and the inanimate. The confusion brought about by the use of the *doppelgänger*, or 'double', motif is related to the notion of the uncanny, simultaneously denying and affirming mortality in an experience which, because of its inner contradictions, can never be quite assimilated, and which through its repression repeatedly throws out the same circular oppositions of dead and living. By means of doubling or repetition, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar in a daemonic experience of estrangement. In psychoanalytical terms death, like love, is linked to repetition and to the uncanniness of the doubled image that repeats, but does not reflect, its model. The image represents a future state – what the subject will become – and so contributes to the construction of the subject's sense of self. In this case the thing that is constructed (recalling the earlier discussion of late-medieval penitential culture on p. 37) is the notion of the sinner. But the image too is a thing returned to the spectator; the corpse, as image, stands for the absence that is death, returning to rebuke both the imaged living, and also ourselves as onlookers. The macabre implicates us in a *mise-en-abyme*, a hall of mirrors. And by means of its use of defamiliarization, it offers the capacity for self-examination. The organization of the macabre image is thus not just binary (playing on antitheses), but ternary (implicating the third-party viewer). We will be considering the emergence of ternary models of this type when we turn to the construction of Purgatory later on.