Comment:

Death and some philosophers

Death defeats philosophers. Poets cope, finding words that, in retrospect, after bereavement, express the pain, grief and anger. Novels, even memoirs, are often too diffuse, with wonderful exceptions: *The Perfect Stranger*, P.J. Kavanagh's account of his young wife's sudden death comes to mind, but then he is a poet. In any case, in Western thought from the earliest times until now, the interest is principally in one's own death, rather than in mourning.

Recently, we have been given two remarkable accounts by people who knew that they would soon die. Allon White, Lecturer in English at the University of Sussex, died of leukemia in 1988 at the age of thirty seven. Wide-ranging in scope, his work had made him one of the most important literary and cultural critics of his generation. In *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing : Collected Essays and Autobiography* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1993), we have, in the chapter entitled 'Too Close to the Bone', thirty pages of memories he set down as he was dying. He had had two bone-marrow transplants and an almost unendurable amount of chemotherapy: 'But it seems that I am losing the battle now. Flaccid, diseased cells are swarming and swelling inside my bones and I have little time left. Of course I've waited too long before writing this and now it is late, probably too late. Like beginning to write at twilight with no lamp as the darkness falls'. He tells us first about the novel he wrote during the break-up of his first marriage; then about the Bedfordshire village where he grew up; the death by drowning of his sister Carol (he was five and she was three), by far the most significant event in his life, though it was only in writing it that he sensed the significance of the marshes and swamps, the network of ponds, in his abortive novel — 'how clearly now they seem displacements of my childhood mourning and terror'. The chances of a sibling having suitable marrow are about four to one, but his sister Debbie (Carol's twin) had a perfect match. His failure to mourn Carol, it began to seem, had brought about the disease that Debbie's marrow would cure: 'Carol had made me ill, Debbie would make me well again'. He replaced the juniper tree that his father had cut down when Carol was drowned, putting a small box beneath the roots 'with a rose

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01604.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

in it and a short prayer to Carol asking her to help me'. The newly planted tree grew, for six months the transplant seemed to have succeeded, but inexorably the leukemia returned.

Gillian Rose, Professor of Social and Political Thought at the University of Warwick, died of cancer in 1995 at the age of forty eight. (Her sister Jacqueline, also an academic and the author of a fine book about the poet Sylvia Plath, writes the Afterword in Allon White's book.) Baffled by philosophy at Oxford, where her tutor Jean Austin (widow of J.L. Austin, star of Oxford linguistic analysis until his early death) greeted her pupils with the words: 'Remember, girls, all the philosophers you will read are much more intelligent than you are', Rose turned to sociology but, with major studies of T.W. Adorno, Hegel, and a galaxy of modern Jewish thinkers, she attracted many students who were as disillusioned as herself by certain aspects of analytic philosophy. In 1993 she discovered that she had ovarian cancer. Her book *Love's Work* (Chatto & Windus: London 1995), distilling her thoughts about sickness and mortality, friendship and betrayal, is already recognized as a classic: 'If I am to stay alive, I am bound to continue to get love wrong, all the time, but not to cease wooing, for that is my life affair, *love's work*'. Hours before her death she was baptised by the Bishop of Coventry. In her last months she completed a publishable manuscript of a sequel to *Love's Work*.

In *Lament for a Son* (SPCK 1997, £7.99) Nicholas Wolterstorff mourns the death of his 25-year-old son Eric in a mountaineering accident in 1983 (the book came out in America in 1987). Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University and author of many important books, and a lifelong Christian, Wolterstorff interweaves fragments of Scripture and poetry with the terrible details of his son's death, the beauty of the funeral (a liturgy he 'adapt[ed] from the funeral liturgy of the Catholic church'); and the never-ending grief — 'There's no forgetting'. Prefacing this welcome new edition, Nicholas Wolterstorff quotes a friend who told him that he had given copies of *Lament* to all his children. 'Why?' he asked; 'Because it is a love-song' his friend replied — 'That took me aback. But, yes, it is a love-song. Every lament is a love-song'.

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