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The ancient Greeks on why mankind does not live forever

By Malcolm Davies, Oxford

“Ich habe als Knabe daran in meinem Innern durchaus nicht glauben wollen und viele Jahre, so lange ich das Wesen des Todes noch nicht genauer kennen gelernt hatte, eigensinnig an der Hoffnung festgehalten, dass doch *ich* vielleicht eine Ausnahme machen und nicht sterben würde, wie es sonst in der Weltgeschichte üblich ist.”

These moving words, all the more poignant because the phenomenon they relate is so universal, were penned by the anthropologist Carl von den Steinen¹ in the context of his observation that the Bakairí of Central Brazil encounter great difficulty in translating the phrase “everyone must die” into their own language. They were quoted by Karl Meuli² as a sensitive illustration of the widely-spread and deeply-rooted feeling that death is basically unnatural, an unintelligible event to be blamed on outside interference³. In the words of a professional psychiatrist⁴:

“Although even the child can soon understand in theory that life on earth must eventually end in death, the actual coming of death to a known person is not so easy to accept. Killing often seems to be better understood than death ... This also applies to some primitive tribes, notably the Trobrianders and Bushmen; although well acquainted with death in the world about them and among their own community, they may yet deny the existence of natural death. Information from many studies of different primitive societies has been brought together⁵ ... to show the patterns and trends of their beliefs about death ... Of forty-seven tribes, seventeen did not regard death as natural ... It is usual for the tribesman explicitly to blame a malign agency for the death, but civilised

1 *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens*² (Berlin 1897) 302. There are, of course, numerous analogies one could cite, as, for instance, the way in which the Nilotic tribe known as the Nuer “avoid using the word ‘die’” (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford 1956, 159), preferring to talk of people who ‘disappear’.

2 In *Herkunft und Wesen der Fabel*, W. F. Otto ... zum 80. Geburtstag, Schweiz. Arch. f. Volkskunde 50 (1954) 84f. = Ges. Schr. 2, 750f.

3 See Meuli, *Der Ursprung der olympischen Spiele*, Die Antike 17 (1941) 195f. = Ges. Schr. 2, 889f. On the popular view of death as unnatural see also Meuli’s remarks in Ges. Schr. 1, 439ff.

4 J. Hinton, *Dying* (London 1967) 42f.

5 The reference is to a book by L. W. Simmons, *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society* (New Haven 1945).

people are also apt to blame others following bereavement⁶. An example of this sort of attitude⁷ has been described in the New Guinea tribe of the Arapesh, a friendly people living in the mountains. The death of one of their number would be attributed to the machinations of the distant plainsmen. Placing the blame on outsiders also prevents ill-feeling within the tribe. The Yoruba of Nigeria have been inclined to attribute the visitation of death either to particular gods, who therefore need propitiation and sacrifice, or to witches.”⁸

Meuli cited the words of Carl von den Steinen which stand at the start of this essay in connection with an ancient Greek aetiological tale that explains why it is that man does not live for ever. Given the ubiquity of the view of death as unnatural, it is not surprising to encounter the closely related view that this unnatural state of affairs has not always prevailed, but was preceded by a much more natural condition in which man did *not* die: “Many cultures have myths that ... contain beliefs that once upon a time man did not die, that there was a Golden Age, or an innocent eternal life in a Garden of Eden. The present loss of immortality is thought to have come about by chance or by misdeed. There are numerous tales that ancestors could renew their life by changing their skins or taking a secret medicine.”⁹ The mention of the Garden of Eden here is significant; what is still one of the most useful collections of tales of the type in question was assembled by J. G. Frazer à propos of Genesis’ account of Eden¹⁰. Even the version that now stands in the Old Testament presents us with a story whereby man loses immortality because of the machinations of the subtle

6 See, for instance, a remark quoted by *The Sunday Times*, September 7, 1986, p. 3, from a woman whose baby had inexplicably died in its cot: “at least if a baby dies of an illness you have something to fight against or to hate”.

7 The source here is Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (London 1935) 12f. 155, etc. For a report from British Columbia of a natural death ‘avenged’ by the slaughter of enemies see Meuli, *sup. cit.* n. 3, 195 = 889 n. 1. A recent work records two similar events from New Guinea (J. W. and E. Leach, *The Kula: new perspectives on Massim Exchange*, Cambridge 1982, 497) with no apparent awareness of this wider context.

8 See P. Morton-Williams, *Yoruba responses to the fear of death*, *Africa* 30 (1960) 34. Further analogous reactions to cases of natural death are catalogued by Meuli, *sup. cit.* n. 3, 195ff. = 890f. One might add to these e.g. the classic description of the link between witchcraft and death in the thinking of the Azande by Evans-Pritchard (*Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford 1937, 26ff. and 540ff.) and the entries in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (ed. Mary Douglas, London 1970) Subject Index s.v. “death ... witchcraft and sorcery, explanation of”, and “children, death of ... witchcraft as explanation of”.

9 Hinton, *sup. cit.* n. 4, 35.

10 *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (London 1919) 1, 49ff. Most of the material gathered here by Frazer is conveniently reproduced with some additional matter in T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* (London 1969) 36ff. (in the references below I give both sets of page numbers). Frazer’s chapter is also reprinted in *Sacred Narrative: readings in the theory of myth*, ed. A. Dundes (London 1984) 74ff. Frazer had already published most of his material in *The Belief in Immortality* 1 (London 1913) 59ff. These collections, invaluable though they are, can now be supplemented quite considerably. Without aiming at completeness one may cite, for the all-important African material, H. Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythos der afrikanischen Völker* (Berlin 1936, ²1964); E. E. Evans-Pritchard

serpent. Frazer's ingenious suggestion was that originally the story "may have belonged to a type which we find in many parts of the world and which tells how a benevolent God sent an envoy to man to inform him how he might obtain immortality but how that envoy cunningly falsified the message to his own advantage"¹¹.

There are many folk tales which bear the imprint of this motif of the falsified or frustrated message. A personal favourite is from Togoland in West Africa¹²: 'Once upon a time men sent a dog to God to say that when they died they would like to come to life again. So off the dog trotted to deliver the message. But on the way he felt hungry and turned into a house, where a man was boiling magic herbs. So the dog sat down and thought to himself, "He is cooking food".' Meantime an officious frog had set off to tell God that when men died they would prefer not to come to life again. 'The dog ... saw him hurrying past the door, but he thought to himself, "When I have had something to eat, I will soon catch froggy up". However, froggy came in first, and said to the deity, "When men die, they would prefer not to come to life again".' God is naturally puzzled when the dog arrives with a contradictory request, but decides "As I heard the frog's request first, I will comply with it". So man dies but frogs come to life again with the rainy season after lying dead through the drought.

The closing detail about the frog's immortality is a nice reminder of the story's geographical location. The explanations of how mankind came to forfeit immortality often include some such foil figure from the animal world who gains at man's expense. More often it is a creature whose claims to immortality

and A. C. Beaton, *Folk Stories of the Sudan*, Sudan Notes and Records 23, 1 (1940); H. Abrahamsson, *The Origin of Death: Studies in African Mythology*, Studia ethnographica Upsalien-sia 3 (1951) 1ff.; B. Anell, *The Origin of Death according to the traditions of Oceania*, ib. 20 (1964) 1ff.; Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris 1964) 148ff. \cong *The Raw and the Cooked* (London 1970) 154ff.; id., *L'Homme Nu* (Paris 1971) 163ff. \cong *The Naked Man* (London 1981) 186ff. has interesting material on South American Indians' tales. For further bibliography see Sacred Narrative (ed. Dundes as cited above) 73f.

11 Gaster 39; cf. Frazer 51f. The Greek tale was compared with *Genesis*' account as early as Buttmann, *Neue Berliner Monatsschrift* (März 1804) 268 = *Mythologus* 1 (1828) 147. For a bibliography of reactions to Frazer's interpretation of *Genesis* see Sacred Narrative (ed. Dundes) as cited above (n. 10) 74. On the general question of the various interpretations that have been advanced to explain *Genesis*' account of the Garden of Eden see now Claus Westermann's commentary (1974; English translation 1984, 237ff.). Westermann himself concludes (p. 238): "One should not compare the function of a trickster of this sort (the mendacious animal messenger of God) with that of the serpent" (in *Genesis*). For this sort of link see e.g. R. D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: a study of mythic irony and sacred delight* (London 1980) Index s.v. 'trickster and death'. On the folkloristic aspects of the story see L. Röhrich in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. "Adam und Eva" (1, 89ff.). "Origin of death from falsified message" is item A 1335, 1 in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*².

12 Frazer 62 = Gaster 45: cited from Müller, *Die Religionen Togos in Einzeldarstellungen*, *Anthropos* 2 (1907) 203. Cf. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* A 1335, 1, 1 ("origin of death: wrong messenger goes to God").

are explicable in terms of its shedding of its skin – shrimps, lizards, crabs, beetles; and, particularly, the snake. The snake sometimes receives eternal life as a result of mischance rather than its own misdeed. Thus ‘the Wafipa and Wabende of East Africa say that one day God ... came down to earth, and addressing all living creatures said, “Who wishes not to die?” Unfortunately man and the other animals were asleep; only the serpent was awake and he promptly answered, “I do”’, with predictable consequences¹³. Likewise ‘the Dunsuns of British North Borneo say that when the Creator had finished making all things, he asked, “Who is able to cast off his skin? If any one can do so he shall not die”. The snake alone heard and answered, “I can”.’¹⁴ Similarly in the Epic of Gilgamesh it is a serpent that carries off the magical plant of immortality which the hero has left unguarded¹⁵.

Stories involving the motif of the falsified message usually have as framework an animal envoy sent by God to mankind (or “two messengers are despatched, and the cause of death is said to have been the dilatoriness or misconduct of the one who bore the glad tidings of immortality”). The tale from Togoland cited above interestingly reverses the roles, as does an analogous story from Calabar¹⁶. However, it is when the motifs of the cast skin and the falsified message are combined that we approach more closely to the ancient Greek story of the origin of death alluded to above. Most closely, perhaps, in a tale told by the Gallas of East Africa¹⁷ whereby God once sent a bird ‘to tell men that they should not die, but that when they grew old and weak they should slip off their skins and so renew their youth. In order to authenticate the message God gave the bird a crest to serve as the badge of his high office.’ The bird sets off and soon encounters ‘a snake devouring carrion in the path. The bird looked longingly at the carrion and said to the snake, “Give me some of the meat and blood, and I will tell you God’s message”. “I don’t want to hear it”, said the snake tartly, and continued his meal. But the bird pressed him so to hear the message that the

13 Frazer 66 = Gaster 37: cited from Lechaptois, *Aux Rives du Tanganika* (Algiers 1913) 195.

14 Frazer and Gaster as in previous note: cited from I. H. N. Evans, *Folk Stories of the Tempasuk and Tuaran Districts, British North Borneo*, Journ. of the Royal Anthropol. Institute 43 (1913) 478.

15 Cf. Meuli, *Hermes* 70 (1935) 168 = *Ges. Schr.* 2, 870f. n. 3; Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der gr. Relig. und Lit.*, Sitzb. der Heidelberger Akad. d. Wiss., phil.-hist. Kl. 1 (1984) 113. Burkert himself talks in terms of oriental influence (via “mündliche Erzähltradition”). That the Greek tale “ein sichtbares orientalisches Gepräge trägt” was already inferred (on different grounds) by Buttman, *sup. cit.* n. 11, 141. Meuli, *sup. cit.* n. 2, 85 = 751 cautiously remarked: “Mit diesem Hinweis auf die Allgemeinheit einer solchen Vorstellung von der Naturwidrigkeit des Todes ist freilich über Ursprung und Abhängigkeitsverhältnisse unseres Mythos gar nichts ausgesagt.” Westermann wisely comments, *sup. cit.* n. 11, 5: “The ways in which people of all places and at all times are going to present the origin of humanity and the universe or of the present state of the world are not without limit; they are relatively few. And so there will be many similarities even though direct influence is excluded.”

16 Frazer 63 = Gaster 45f.

17 Frazer 74f. = Gaster 47.

snake rather reluctantly consented. “The message”, then said the bird, “is this. When men grow old they will die, but when you grow old you will cast your skin and renew your youth” ... For this gross perversion of the message God punished the heedless or wicked bird with a painful internal malady, from which he suffers to this day; that is why he sits wailing on the tops of trees.’

Let us now turn to the Greek story referred to above. The fullest version to survive is that of Aelian the second to third century A.D. author in his work *On the Characteristics of Animals* (NA 6, 51). I quote the relevant passage in an English translation¹⁸: “It is said that Prometheus stole fire, and the story goes that Zeus was angered and bestowed upon those who laid information of the theft a drug to ward off old age. So they took it, as I am informed, and placed it upon an ass. The ass proceeded with the load on its back; and it was summer time, and the ass came thirsting to a spring in its need for a drink. Now the snake which was guarding the spring tried to prevent it and force it back, and the ass in torment gave it as the price of the loving-cup the drug that it happened to be carrying. And so there was an exchange of gifts: the ass got his drink and the snake sloughed his old age, receiving in addition, so the story goes, the ass’s thirst.”

The similarities between this and the above stories are patent; but the differences will also repay investigation. In the first place, though we still have to do with “an animal messenger sent by God to mankind”, there is no longer any question of a verbal message to be delivered. Instead, the beast carries “a drug to ward off old age”, a frequent motif in Greek folk-tales and legends and in stories the world over (compare the Epic of Gilgamesh mentioned above). One of the earliest instances of this in Greek literature came in the now lost epic *Thebais* where Athena was about to save the life of her protégé Tydeus by giving him a drug of immortality, until his repulsive gnawing of his dead enemy Melanippus’ head caused her in disgust to pour the valuable drug on the ground¹⁹. Likewise the serpent who guards a spring, tree, treasure or the like is a familiar feature of folk-literature²⁰, as is the notion of the snake’s immortality²¹.

The priceless cargo that would guarantee human immortality is short-sightedly sacrificed by the ass for selfish gratification of a passing physical need. This is a regular feature of such stories; several parallels can be found in the specimens cited above. A propos of a version I have not mentioned, J. G. Frazer observed “from this Louyi legend it would appear that human mortality resulted from a domestic jar in heaven, the deity falling out with his wife over his dead dog and mother-in-law. From such seemingly trivial causes may flow

18 By A. F. Scholfield in his Loeb translation (1959): 2, 73.

19 *Thebais* fr. 5 in my *Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. My forthcoming commentary on the Theban epics will deal thoroughly with all the issues raised by the story and the motif it exploits. Cf., for the moment, Stith Thompson, *sup. cit.* n. 12, D 1346, 3 and 5 (“food” and “plant of immortality”) and Frazer 50 = Gaster 29f.

20 Cf. Gaster 35 and cf. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles* 2, 32.

21 Cf. Frazer 49ff. = Gaster 36f.

such momentous consequences”²². A variant of the falsified message motif from the Nuer of Africa “makes”, in the words of Evans-Pritchard, “death follow from a mere blunder or a trifling act of malice”²³. Because a child squalls and bawls when confronted by her grandmother, unrecognisably clad in a brand new skin, granny puts back on her old skin and mankind will henceforth die²⁴. A perverse pleasure seems to be taken in the contrast contrived between the enormous issues at stake and the trivial causation.

The snake in the Greek story gains immortality with the power to shed its skin, but is punished by having the ass’s thirst transferred to it. Aelian quotes the story in connection with the snake known as the *dipsas* (“thirst-provoker”) whose bite causes a burning thirst. Stories of the loss of immortality often close with some such aetiological appendix²⁵. If Frazer’s interpretation of Genesis’ account of Eden is correct, then the story of Adam and Eve provides the most famous example: God’s punishment of the serpent offers an aetiological explanation of why snakes, alone of all animals, crawl on their bellies and eat dust. The loss of immortality as explained by the Gallas of East Africa and cited above contains two such aetiologies, one regarding the messenger bird’s conspicuous crest, the other concerning the loud wailing note which the bird emits from tree-top. When the lost immortality theme involves two animals, the actual messenger from God and the unintended beneficiary, both may be punished in an aetiological manner. In a tale told in similar forms by several Bantu tribes²⁶, the chamaeleon’s dawdling approach to mankind with the message “Let not men die” causes him to be overtaken by the swifter lizard with the news “Let men die”. As a result, the Zulus hate the lizard and kill it whenever possible; but the chamaeleon fares no better and is teased and killed for his crime to mankind. One may therefore wonder whether the Greek story in the form preserved by Aelian and the other relevant writers is not truncated at the end. For it would be easy to imagine a version which balanced the punishment of the snake by that of the ass: the reason why men to this day treat the ass as a beast of burden to be weighed down and beaten with sticks is because of his original crime against mankind, which resulted in the loss of immortality²⁷. The universal tendency (noted at the start of this article) to blame a third party for a seemingly natural death is, in such stories as these, generalised and carried back in time to a mythical past: psychologically speaking, the more creatures that can be blamed for the origin of death, the better.

One final question remains to be asked. We have seen how primitive and

22 Frazer 58 = Gaster 42.

23 Evans-Pritchard, *sup. cit.* n. 1, 20f.

24 Frazer 69 = Gaster 38.

25 On aetiological tales in general cf. H. Lixfeld in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. *Ätiologie* (1, 949ff.). On the instance in *Genesis* cf. Westermann, *sup. cit.* n. 11, 259.

26 See the examples gathered by Frazer 63ff. = Gaster 46f.

27 Cf. Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* A 2239, 3 (“ass betrays deity’s secret: hence his ugly bray”).

wide-spread are the various versions of mankind's loss of immortality. Why does it play so small a role within Greek literature? The degree of smallness can be suggestively illustrated. Sir James Frazer, in spite of his massive knowledge of Greek and Latin literature²⁸, overlooked their few remaining traces of the tale, as Karl Meuli pointed out²⁹. Had Frazer remembered them it is inconceivable that he would have omitted them from his assemblage of instances of the themes "lost immortality" and "the falsified message". The contrast with the crucial significance of the Garden of Eden for so many cultures³⁰ is immense. In Greek literature, on the contrary, the only direct treatment to have survived occurs in the Hellenistic poet Nicander's work on poisonous animals (*Theriaca* 343ff.). Here is an English translation³¹:

"Now there is a tale of ancient days current among men how, when the first-born seed of Cronus became lord of heaven, he apportioned to his brothers severally their illustrious realms, and in his wisdom bestowed upon mortals Youth, honouring them because they had denounced the Fire-Stealer. The fools, they got no good of their imprudence: for being sluggards and growing weary, they entrusted the gift to an ass for carriage, and the beast, his throat burning with thirst, ran off skittishly, and seeing in its hole the deadly, trailing brute, implored it with fawning speech to aid him in his sore plight. Whereat the snake asked of the foolish creature as a gift the load which he had taken on his back; and the ass refused not its request. Ever since then do trailing reptiles slough their skin in old age, but grievous end attends mortals. The affliction of thirst did the deadly brute receive from the braying ass, and imparts it with its feeble blows."

The sophisticated interest in and preservation of a naïve old³² folk-tale of this sort is highly characteristic of Alexandrian and Hellenistic literature in general³³. Equally characteristic is its absence from Homer: his playing-down of stories and forms redolent of folk-tale or the fable is notorious³⁴, and the idea

28 Frazer "read Greek as other men read their native language" (R. Angus Downie, *Frazer and the Golden Bough*, London 1970, 109; pp. 93ff. attempt an assessment of Frazer's *Classical Studies*).

29 Sup. cit. n. 2, 84 = 751.

30 See Westermann sup. cit. n. 11.

31 From *Nicander: the poems and poetical fragments*, edited with a translation and notes by A. S. F. Gow and A. F. Scholfield (Cambridge 1953) 51. By the simple change of *κακοφραδῖς* to *-ίητος* in line 348, Beazley (CR 4, 1954, 98) produces the better sense "The fools, they got no good of the boon granted them by the god, owing to their folly".

32 Nicander calls it an *ὠγύγιος μῦθος* (343) which phrase is meant to remind us of such story-telling formulae as *παλαιφάτος ... γέρον λόγος* (Aesch. *Ag.* 750), *λόγος ... ἀρχαῖος* (Soph. *Tr.* 1), etc. Cf. Bond on Eur. *Her.* 26.

33 For instance, for Callimachus' exploitation of fables, from the point of view both of content and style or tone, see T. Karadagli, *Fabel und Ainos: Studien zur gr. Fabel*, Beitr. zur kl. Phil. 135 (1981), Index of authors s.v. Kallimachos (p. 194) and pp. 100, 103, 113, etc.

34 For the avoidance of motifs smacking of folk tale see, e.g., Griffin, *JHS* 97 (1977) 39ff. Even in the *Odyssey*, which allows them more prominence, a process of normalisation and humanisa-

that the gods could ever intend (however unsuccessfully) immortality for mankind is quite at odds with his whole attitude to life³⁵. But it is still surprising that the story should have left so slight a mark on ancient Greek literature³⁶. Aelian as quoted above concludes his account with a list of earlier poets who mentioned the tale: Sophocles, Aristias³⁷, Apollophanes³⁸, and Dinolochus³⁹; and Ibycus of Rhegium. We can do little with this list: from a different source we know that the Sophoclean play in question was his *Κωφοί*⁴⁰, but as Scholfield notes ad loc. in his text of and commentary on Aelian “of the following poets no fragment relating to this story survives”⁴¹. Ibycus, the oldest of all the poets listed, is the most interesting, as providing the earliest known reference to the story, and perhaps we can infer a little more about this than Scholfield

tion can be detected (cf. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey*, 1973, passim with e.g. Hainsworth, CR 26, 1976, 165: “The epic is concerned, while readily using folktale, to minimise its supernatural content and heroise it”). For the absence of the fable (as strictly conceived) from Homer see Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* (1921) 9f. = Ges. Schr. 2, 599f. with the modification expressed, sup. cit. n. 2, 73f. = Ges. Schr. 2, 739f.

- 35 See e.g. Griffin, as cited above n. 34, and in *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980). (On the seeming counter-examples of Menelaus in *Od.* 4, 561ff. and Odysseus himself ib. 5, 137f. [the former prospective, the latter involving a promise that is not fulfilled] see Griffin, sup. cit. n. 34, 42.) The story's absence from the fable-collections of Phaedrus and Babrius is very striking.
- 36 Note, however, the existence of a motif whereby death originates because the world is overpopulated (Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index A* 1335, 8; H. Schwarzbaum, *The Overcrowded Earth*, 1957). A toned-down version of this featured near the start of the *Cypria* (fr. 1; cf. Burkert, sup. cit. n. 15, 96ff.).
- 37 TrGF 1, 9 F 8 Snell. O. Crusius, Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Sprachgeschichte vornehmlich des Orients, Ernst Kuhn zum 70. Geburtstag am 7. Februar 1916 gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern (Munich/Breslau 1916) 394 n. 2 wonders if the poet in question may not be Aristias the author of the epic *Arimaspea* (Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta fr. 1ff.). Schneidewin, *Ibyci Rhegini Carminum Reliquiae* (Göttingen 1833) 197f. scented corruption of an original Ἀριστοφάνης καὶ Ἀπολλοφάνης, attributing the tale to the former's Γῆρας (fr. 128–155 Kassel-Austin [PCG III 2, 89ff.]) and the latter's Ἰοιγέρον (fr. 3–4 Kock). Neither scholar's suggestion has met with approval. Against the first note the tale's apparent absence from the serious genres of epic and tragedy. See further Dover, JHS 86 (1966) 47 n. 35: “That a comic poet made the story the *plot* of a comedy is hardly conceivable; we should think rather of something like Ar. *Lys.* 781ff.”
- 38 Fr. 9 (1, 799 Kock). Schneidewin, sup. cit. n. 37, 197 observed that Dinolochus' *Medea* (fr. 4–5 Kaibel) might have provided a suitable resting-place for the story, if that play touched upon its titular heroine's rejuvenation of Aeson (cf. the epic *Nostoi*, fr. 6 in my *Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*; Arist. *Eq.* 1321, etc.).
- 39 Fr. 8 Kaibel.
- 40 TrGF 4 F 362 Radt. The other source is Σ Nic. *Ther.* 343ff. (p. 150 Crugnola) which otherwise tells us nothing new about the Greek tale in question. On Sophocles' *Κωφοί* see Crusius, sup. cit. (n. 37) 394ff. It was (significantly enough: see n. 37 above) a satyr play.
- 41 Sup. cit. n. 18. According to F. Lasserre (ap. *La Fable, Entretiens Hardt* 30, 1984, 88) “rien ne prouve, à partir de ce témoignage, que chacun des auteurs mentionnés ait vraiment raconté la fable”. That might seem excessively sceptical, but (for instance) Ibycus' exploitation of the motif might not have extended beyond the single line that constitutes fr. 313 P (see below).

allows. For in addition to Aelian's mention of him⁴² we have, preserved by a different author, a direct quotation of a line of his⁴³:

οὐκ ἔστιν ἀποφθιμένοις ζωᾶς ἔτι φάρμακον εὐρεῖν.

Speculation about single lines ripped from their original context is seldom fruitful, but that tell-tale ἔτι is surely significant: it is *no longer* possible for the dead to get a drug that will restore them to life (but once Zeus gave them the opportunity, which, thanks to the ass, was squandered). We also know from a third source that Ibycus somewhere described how Athena made Diomedes immortal⁴⁴: this idea is obviously connected with the same goddess' frustration over Diomedes' father Tydeus, whose failure to receive the drug of immortality we mentioned above, though the question of priority between the two instances of the motif has been the subject of some dispute⁴⁵.

But to return to the question posed above: why do the Greeks seem to have shown such relatively little interest in the tale? This cannot be answered independently of the question as to why their literature is so disappointingly inexplicit concerning a closely-related motif in folk-literature, the creation of mankind⁴⁶. "The Greeks", as G. S. Kirk has observed, "evidently did not wish to include in their myths any detailed account of the creation of men, even though the various Mesopotamian motifs must have been available, and even though allied themes, in particular the periodical destruction of men, were themselves alluded to"⁴⁷. In the case of the story of how death entered the world, the relative silence seems all the more paradoxical, given the large space occupied by death within Greek religion, thought and literature, the crucial distinction

42 Fr. 342 P.

43 Fr. 313 P. Translated "you cannot find a medicine for life" by J. M. Edmonds, *Lyra Graeca* 2, 99; but this is probably one of those passages (cf. R. M. Fraser, *Mnemosyne* 29, 1976, 182f.) where εὐρίσκω is better translated "get" rather than "find". The distinction between ζωᾶς ... φάρμακον in Ibycus' ipsissima verba and the φάρμακον γήρωσ in Aelian's account is unlikely to be at all significant.

44 Fr. 294 P. The details recur in Pind. *Nem.* 10, 7, an Attic scholion (*Carm. conv.* 894 P), etc.

45 Wilamowitz, *Hermes* 26 (1891) 239 = *Kl. Schr.* 5, 1, 74 thought it inconceivable that the poet who described Tydeus' death before Thebes could have known of a tradition whereby the death was avenged by a son who sacked the city that defeated his father. Friedländer, *Rh. Mus.* 69 (1914) 328 = *Studien zur antiken Lit. und ihrer Nachwirk.* 42 thought the successful immortalisation must be primary, the unsuccessful secondary and derivative. Both approaches raise issues that are too momentous to go into now. Suffice it for the present to say that I agree with Ø. Andersen, *Die Diomedesgestalt in der Ilias*, *Symb. Osl. Suppl.* 25 (1978) 30 n. 6 (cf. J. Fontenrose, *Calif. Stud. Class. Ant.* 2, 1969, 126) in seeing the transference of the immortality motif from father to son.

46 For an introduction to this motif see L. Röhrich in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, s.v. *Anthropogonie*, 1, 579ff.

47 *The Nature of Greek Myths* (London 1974) 274 (I am not sure whether I would agree with Kirk's own explanation of this negative phenomenon). For the Babylonian material see e.g. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḥasīs: the Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford 1969). On the more general issue of stories of the destruction of humanity by flood see now G. A. Caduff, *Antike Sintflutsagen*, *Hypomnemata* 82 (1986).

between θνητοί and ἀθάνατοι which runs through Greek attitudes from Homer on. But a deep concern with death can go hand in hand with a surprising indifference to apparently crucial aspects of it. One recalls Evans-Pritchard's comment on the Nuer, that Nilotic tribe: "[they] avoid as far as possible speaking of death and when they have to do so they speak about it in such a way as to leave no doubt that they regard it as the most dreadful of all dreadful things. This horror of death fits in with their almost total lack of eschatology. Theirs is a this-worldly religion, a religion of abundant life and the fullness of days, and they neither pretend to know, nor, I think, do they care, what happens to them after death"⁴⁸. The Greeks did have their more positive ideas about life after death, of course, as well as their heroes, like the Dioscuri and Heracles, who partly or completely escape mortality⁴⁹. Nevertheless, these remarks on the Nuer fit many aspects of Greek, especially early Greek, attitudes. It was precisely because they took death so seriously that the Greeks could not be satisfied with simplistic stories as to how it came into the world. One might, indeed, see in this refusal to be easily satisfied something of the very core of 'the Greek miracle'. To quote Lloyd-Jones⁵⁰: "Human kind, says the bird in Eliot, cannot bear very much reality. The early Greeks were capable of their unique achievements largely because they could bear, as their religion shows, very much more reality than most human beings." In their overwhelming indifference to the sort of tale we have been examining one surely sees a particularly striking example of this capacity. They felt, more than most other portions of humanity, that they could get by without a tale on the origin of death that would explain the tragedy of existence in a simple and satisfying manner⁵¹. Nevertheless, thanks to one or two writers, the tale was preserved and survives: μῦθος ἐσώθη καὶ οὐκ ἀπώλετο.

Appendix: the link with Prometheus

As we have seen above, both Nicander and Aelian associate the story of mankind's lost immortality with that of Prometheus' theft of fire: some unnamed and unspecified individuals informed Zeus of this theft and were re-

48 Sup. cit. n. 1, 154. On the Homeric attitude see e.g. Griffin's *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980).

49 See Burkert, *Griechische Religion* 303ff. \cong *Greek Religion* 197ff. for an antidote to oversimplified views of Greek attitudes to the afterlife, arguments against the idea that the negative Homeric presentation of life after death is necessarily and solely a glorious instance of the triumph of human progress, and a more detailed treatment of the complications and inconsistencies in Greek attitudes to death than is possible here.

50 *The Justice of Zeus* 164.

51 We might compare G. S. Kirk's observations on the relative absence of the fantastic from Greek myths (JHS 92, 1972, 85): "For how long had the Greeks managed to live without this kind of fantasy, or with so little of it? And how was their peculiar creativity affected by what looks, from a certain point of view, like a kind of emotional and even intellectual deprivation?"

warded with the drug to ward off old age. This link between the two stories is, on the fact of it, rather puzzling. W. Kraus⁵² sought to explain it by citing the Melanesian tale of two brothers who fished the Earth out of the Ocean and made themselves wives from it to become the ancestors of mankind. One brother was clever, the other stupid, and mankind forfeited immortality when the clever brother received a message of immortality for men which his brother (predictably enough) conveyed to the snakes. The tale is interesting, and the two brothers are irresistibly reminiscent of Prometheus and Epimetheus; but the comparison is not very illuminating because no detail corresponding to the theft of fire is to be found in the Melanesian story.

The link between the two stories of Prometheus' theft and mankind's loss of immortality might be late and superficial, an unconvincing attempt to associate two independent tales which can both be placed early on in the evolution of man. One is given pause, however, by several of the accounts of how men lost immortality which Lévi-Strauss⁵³ cites from South American Indian tribes. One such begins appealingly: "After the fire he refused to give to men had been stolen from him by a toad, the demiurge married a young Indian." The demiurge proceeds to instruct mankind in the arts of civilisation by means of a vulture; as this bird finally flies off the demiurge's mother-in-law asks "the vulture how old men could be rejuvenated. The reply came from very high up and very far away. The trees and certain animals could hear it, but not men". There are several other stories quoted by Lévi-Strauss wherein man's loss of immortality is related to the origin of fire. As he states in a summary of the Ge tribes' accounts of "the transition from nature to culture. In one series, culture begins with the theft of fire from the jaguar; in the other, with the introduction of cultivated plants. But in all contexts the origin of man's loss of immortality is linked with the advent of civilised life, which is thought of as culture whenever the question at issue is the origin of fire". The issues raised by this generalisation are too complex to be dealt with in a mere appendix; but they may at least deter us from any too automatic assumption as to a secondary origin for the link between Prometheus and the aetiology of human mortality⁵⁴.

52 RE s.v. *Prometheus*, 23, 1 (1957) 665f. citing A. H. Krappe, *Rev. d'hist. des religions* 119 (1939) 179f. who depends on R. Briffault, *The Mothers* (London 1917) 2, 679.

53 Sup. cit. n. 10.

54 The rarity of any chronological indication at the start of Greek fables is remarked upon by, for instance, M. Nøjgaard, *La fable antique* (Copenhagen 1964) 1, 225. One cannot but help finding significance in the fact that most of the few exceptions involve Prometheus (see, e.g. The Index of Fables in B. E. Perry's Loeb text of Babrius and Phaedrus (1965) s.v. "Prometheus, after creating Men and Animals, changes many Animals into Men", "Prometheus and Guile", and "Prometheus, how his Creation of Men and Women led to Sexual Perversion"). The other main category of exceptions involves what one may broadly class as Zeus' relations with newly-created man (see Perry's Index s.v. "Zeus endows Men and Animals with various Powers ...", "Zeus orders Hermes to infuse Brains into Men", and "Zeus orders Hermes to write down the Misdeeds of Men severally on Shards").