

Religion and Death

Such a keen and incorruptible observer of the religious scene as Gore Vidal, in his famous ‘historical novel’, *Julian*, has the fourth-century pagan rhetorician, Libanius of Antioch, say about the Christians: ‘What most disturbs me is their curious hopelessness about *this* life, and the undue emphasis they put on the next. Of course eternity is larger than the brief span of man’s life, but to live entirely within the idea of eternity is limiting to the spirit and makes man wretched in his day-to-day existence, since his eye must always be fixed not on this lovely world but on that dark door through which he must one day pass.’¹ Libanius’ views reflect an enduring perception of Christianity as other-worldly and consequently life-denying, in short, as being more concerned with death than with life.

It is surely not without irony that a religion which began by declaring that death had lost its sting, should eventually come to be perceived as having put the sting back into death, poisoning all of life’s pleasures. Yet such a perception oversimplifies the subtle dialectic between the attachment to life and the knowledge of death that characterises human existence. This permanent dialectic can breed both resentment towards an existence which must end, and also, by contrast, a desire for immortality, for a permanent connection with the eternal spring of life. Poised ironically between these two extremes is Proust’s idea that death ‘cures us of the desire for immortality’.² Even more curious, however, is the seeming collusion between death and what it destroys. For death’s ever-present threat appears also to be the condition of life’s peculiar beauty. ‘Life’s greatest charm is borrowed from death; it is only beautiful because it is transitory’, wrote Friedrich Hebbel (1812–1863),³ a sentiment often echoed in modern times, most memorably perhaps by Wallace Stevens (‘Death is the mother of beauty’). Rather than being perceived as the narrow gate leading to eternity, death, or rather the thought of death, is felt – particularly by moderns – as the spice giving life its unique savour.

¹ G. Vidal, *Julian* (London: Abacus, 1993), 403.

² Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York, 2000), 186.

³ ‘Das Leben borgt seinen höchsten Reiz vom Tode; es ist nur schön, weil es vergänglich ist’, quoted from Hebbel’s *Tagebücher*, in F. Spicker, *Aphorismen der Weltliteratur* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 98.

Where, one could well ask, does that leave the relationship between death and religion now? Certainly, the dominant, modern sensibility or *Lebensgefühl* is a far cry from the centuries-old 'Platonic sense of life' that viewed the beautiful on earth as simply a reflection of eternal beauty, not its exhaustive incarnation. The weakening of the Platonist legacy, that was in the past eagerly exploited as a vehicle for Christian eschatology, may mark then the death-knell of Christianity's grip on the Western imagination. Or it may simply be that one way in which Christianity conceived the link between time and eternity has come to an end. But death, religion's most faithful ally, still continues poker-faced to point towards eternity and, paradoxically, to enhance and undermine the securities of time.