

PREAMBLE TO AN EMPTY TOMB

A narrow path climbs up into the hills from the town of Kardamyli in southern Greece. At its side is a tomb cut into a large rock. It has two large windowlike openings through which may be seen two rectangular hollows in the ground. Long, long ago, it is said, these rather small spaces held the bodies of Castor and Polydeuces, or Pollux, the Dioscuri, twin sons of Zeus and brothers of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra.

Castor was a great horseman, Pollux a great boxer. For this reason there are those who wonder at the smallness of his tomb. They accept that a horseman may be small, but forget that some of the greatest pugilists have been little men, from George Dixon and Jimmy Wilde to the present day.

Standing here, though, one is not only intrigued by the antiquity of two sports, but conscious of being in some sort at the very beginning of western culture generally, for the Twin Brethren are mentioned in the *Iliad*, its first testament, and a poem which would not have been composed but for their sister's escapades. Helen lived in Sparta, just over the Taygetos mountains, before she left her husband Menelaos and went to Troy with Paris. Then Menelaos and his brother Agamemnon convoked an army from all over Greece and laid siege to Troy; after ten years it fell, and out of the event arose the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and in another land the *Aeneid*; and much later, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Racine and Goethe would testify to the power of this ancient inspiration.

There is a moment in the *Iliad* when Helen appears upon the walls of Troy. In 'the ringing plain' below the armies are assembled for combat. There are some old men on the ramparts and as she walks past they remark how like she is to a goddess, not only beautiful but awesome. She pays no heed to them: she is wondering what has become of her brothers, whom she has not seen in ten years and more. She does not know that they are already dead, and will not find out until the war is over and the topless towers fall in flame and she is restored to Menelaos and to Sparta, where in due course she will be worshipped as a goddess.

Helen's sister, Clytemnestra, murdered Agamemnon her husband upon his return from the war: he had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to secure a favourable wind for the fleet. Aeschylus tells the story in a trilogy of great dramas, the *Oresteia*. It takes its name from Orestes, the son of the tragic couple, who in turn slew his mother, but, in complying with the imperative of requital, committed an outrage against the divine order and was duly punished. One thinks of that here, too, on the path above Kardamyli: the

drama and its great early writers, its ongoing history and its origins in the festival of the god Dionysus.

Castor and Pollux were such loving brothers that when they died Zeus, their divine father, made them into the constellation we call Gemini, the Twins. They were worshipped, among other divine functions, as helpers of seafarers and patrons of hospitality. The Greeks were great voyagers and are noted to this day for their generosity to strangers: *philoxenia* they call it. So, on this rough path above a Peloponnesian town we stand at a place where adventure and welcome are to be borne livingly in mind. Other western countries, following the example of the Greeks, have sent adventurers to every part of the world and latterly into space, but not all have been so generous to the stranger.

It is good to be able to come to such a place as this empty, myth-honored tomb. People go up and down the stony path and hardly give it a glance. But the name is on the maps of Messenia: *Taphoi Dioskourôn*, the Graves of the Sons of Zeus. It is in its plain way an affirmation of continuity between not only the present and the past, but the future and the past, between adventuring science and abiding mythology: continuity in Greece, in Europe, in the West generally.

A short step down there are wayside chapels and a church; also a fortress which gave shelter to some heroes of the War of Independence. The fortress has been restored, the church has its services, the chapels attract the occasional visitor. So, in one small corner of Greece, we have a microcosm of much that has made the West what it is: mythology, religion and the aspiration to freedom; political freedom here, not quite the same as what is meant by freedom in Buddhism, but an achievement which can lead to conditions in which something more meaningful may be sought.

When Helen walks on the ramparts of Troy, the old men say the Trojans are right in retaining her at all costs. They can have been under no illusions as to her character, nor as to that of Paris, who had not exactly distinguished himself in the battles to keep his prize. But Helen has a divine beauty, and this seems to justify the years of strife and the deaths of many men, even their own deaths should the city fall. This too is part of the Greek heritage, the worship of beauty, the belief that through it we may touch a higher sphere, where ordinary standards of good and bad may not apply and prosaic morality may not have the last word. Whether this is a sound way of thinking is certainly open to question, but it was the Greek way, and they left us many beautiful things which have enriched the life of man more than a lot of what passes for morality.

As already said, divine honors were later paid to Helen, as to her brothers. Which reminds us that ancient Greece was a prolifically polytheistic

land, as was the Buddha's India. The religion of both lands was based on blood-sacrifice. Greece however does not seem to have produced figures comparable to the Buddha or Mahavira the Jain to criticize the practice. The coming of Christianity reduced rather than eliminated the sacred slaughter; for even today the paschal lamb is slain in towns and villages and there are other festivals which also culminate in the shedding of animal blood. The gods and goddesses, however, were eliminated, not only in Greece but all over the Christian world. They were equated with demons in an unsympathetic theology extending from St. Augustine to John Milton; which meant that all the art devoted to them might be considered as of demonic inspiration. Renaissance Catholic humanism made a difference to this attitude, but the Orthodox Church remained conservative, as its artistic productions witness, and the rising Protestant sects were suspicious of all representational art, taking their tone from the Old Testament and its rejection of graven images.

The early Buddhists seem to have been reluctant to portray the Master, preferring to suggest his presence by one of his few possessions, such as bowl or parasol. With the coming of the Greeks to India this changed. From the workshops of their craftsmen an Indian Apollo emerged, and the great history of Buddhist art began. Until the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan its productions were almost universally admired and prized. The destruction of the colossal statues at Bamiyan was a cause of sadness to believers, but it did serve as a reminder that in its earliest and purest days Buddhism was an aniconic system and that the sculpture, however great, is not an essential part of it, but rather an additional, Greek component. To the Greeks ethics and aesthetics were inseparable aspects of reality. Not so with Buddhism, in which the ethical predominates, the temples, statues and paintings being ancillary. This keeps the artefact from becoming an idol: it is a means to an end, not an end in itself; not at any rate unless another and different set of values is brought to bear upon it. Then, like the sacred artefacts of Europe or Egypt or the Americas it becomes just another museum piece or collector's trophy.

The Greek pantheon had its counterpart in the Buddha's India. There was one major difference however which is not always noticed. The Indians of that time do not seem to have had goddesses of the stature of Hera, Aphrodite, or Athena. Theirs was very much a masculine pantheon, though not as differentiated or as developed, in the Buddhist texts at least, to anything approaching the vividness of the Olympian gods. Even so, it reflected a society where masculine values reigned supreme and unchallenged. In the caste system, the warriors, *khattiyas*, were on top; which is paralleled in Greek society, where the cities rested on a foundation of military virtue, not on the activities of merchants or farmers. But there was not in Greece an ambitious religious caste, such as the brahmans constituted in India, vying with the warriors for supremacy in society. The Buddha, born a *khattiya*, was profoundly inimical to these pretensions, and expressed himself more strongly on the subject than any Greek thinker needed to do. Important as religion was

in Greece, it had its own sphere and kept to it, and its officiants knew their place.

So: a masculine society and a masculine pantheon. All the more impressive then that the Buddha and Mahavira should each have founded an Order for the benefit of women. In their upbringing there were no Diotimas such as Socrates claimed as his instructress. There may have been female ascetics on the banks of the Ganges when the Bodhisattva was seeking Enlightenment; if so, there is no record of his having met any of them. It was his cousin and fellow-khattiya Ananda who helped him towards the decision to admit women to his discipline. It cannot have been easy, given his background and the social environment. But a great religious figure transcends the limitations of his age, as his message, if it be true, transcends the limitations of later ages.