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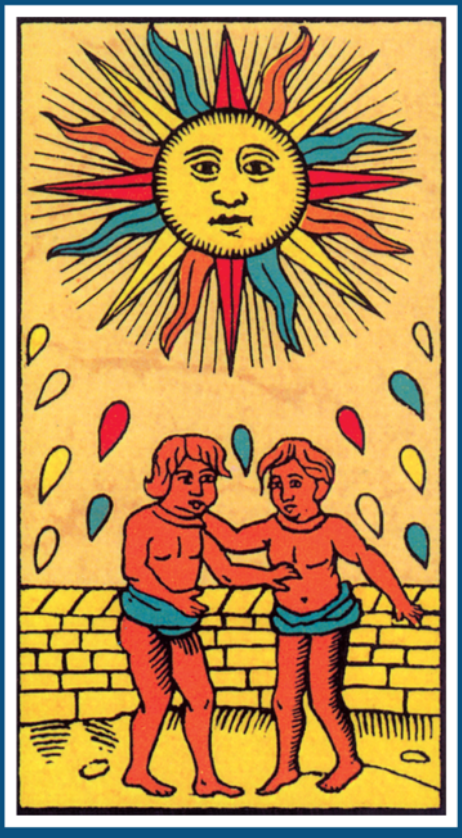
ROSEMARY GORDON

DYING AND CREATING

A Search for Meaning



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DYING AND CREATING

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Dying and Creating

A Search for Meaning

by

Rosemary Gordon

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot: Little Gidding

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Editorial introduction

The Library of Analytical Psychology aims to give an account of current developments in that science. In this, the fourth volume of the series, we are adding a new dimension to the topics covered so far. Volume 1 described the evolution of analytic theory, Volume 2 demonstrated some of the changes that have taken place in technique and practice; both contained contributions by a number of writers. The third volume, the first one to be written by a single author, Michael Fordham, made an original contribution to the theory of early development in childhood, to the practice of child analysis and to the study of autism, one of the most obscure areas of childhood disturbance. Fordham's work is based primarily on Jung, though Jung himself had not dealt systematically with either child development or its psychopathology.

The present volume by Rosemary Gordon builds upon, but also transcends, the existing body of theory and practice in another area of analytical psychology. It re-opens one of those topics of universal human concern that so greatly exercised Jung during his lifetime—and indeed Freud also, as well as innumerable other analysts of this century. Gordon brings the themes of death and creativity into meaningful relationship with each other, and in doing so she acknowledges her debt to Jung's creative spirit and his penetrating understanding of death, rebirth and transformation.

This book gives the result of research, devoted to the subject over a number of years, combined with, stimulated by and nourished through the author's analytic work with patients deeply troubled in these areas. The clinical descriptions will assist the reader to share in some degree her experiences and reflections.

As a part of her concern with both normal and pathological reactions to death and creation, she also re-examines those theories of Freud, Klein and Jung that she considers both relevant to her subject and of particular importance in view of recent developments in those schools.

In the field of death, Rosemary Gordon draws, in the first

part of the book, upon a wide area of knowledge, including anthropology, principally in respect of the myths and theories about the origin of death and its symbolic meaning, and of the customs and formal rites that embody attitudes towards the actual dead in various cultures. In addition she also describes the results of Rorschach tests (the standard ink-blot test) carried out by her on four dying patients.

In Part II she examines the development of the symbolic process at length and in a way that, as well as deepening our understanding of creativity, can also help to bridge the split between Freud and Jung over the nature of symbolism.

When dealing with creativity, in the third part of the book, the author analyses the creative process in terms of both its conscious and its deeply unconscious roots, and also draws upon the philosophy and the psychology of art. This is done in a way that can be illuminating to all concerned with art and creativity, including, of course, the psychotherapist, for she describes many of the factors that hinder the creative process and constitute its psychopathology.

Who can die well and create well? Rosemary Gordon gives some answers that are impressively clear and yet open-ended. Certainly they cannot be neglected or denied without the danger of a real diminishment of that ambiguous, ambivalent and bipolar existence that constitutes the human condition.

All the patients discussed in this book completed their analysis several years ago. In any case a great many details of their personal history have been altered in order to safeguard their anonymity.

References to Jung's writings in the volume are taken from the *Collected works*, abbreviated as '*Coll. wks.*', followed by the volume number. Dates refer to the first publication in whatever language and not to the English translation.

The author wishes to express deep gratitude to Corinne Peterson for her work in constructing the index and to James Seddon for his invaluable help with the bibliography. Special warm thanks go to Diana Riviere for her perceptive and speedy editing of this book and the friendship that has grown out of it. The editorial committee is most grateful to both Diana Riviere and John Lucas, who have given invaluable professional help in preparing this volume for publication in addition to its predecessors.

Introduction

One of the most outstanding features in Jung's work is the importance he has attributed to man's drive to create, and to the pervasiveness of man's concern with death. Indeed, one of the factors that first attracted me to Jung's work was the seriousness with which he treated the need to make, that is to create, to invent and to transform; as early as 1929 Jung had classified creativity as one of the five main instincts characteristic of man. As regards death, he believed that there is a natural and innate disposition in man to concern himself with death, and to prepare himself for it as his life moves towards it.

While I responded quickly and easily to Jung's ideas about creativity, my grappling with his thoughts about death and man's concern with it arose from my own analytic experience. For I had discovered, almost to my surprise, that, whatever the age and whatever the symptom picture, sooner or later concern with death becomes a feature in nearly every analysis. Such concern may make its appearance either directly and overtly, or else in a more or less disguised and symbolic form.

It will be the thesis of this book that there is much similarity between the psychological constellation that favours good and peaceful dying and that which favours creative work. In the first part I shall give you my reflections about death as it is experienced in the human psyche. I shall then move on to discuss some thoughts and speculations concerning the creative process. In the final part of the book I shall try to explore the possible parallels and similarities between these two vital human preoccupations and activities.

* * *

In this first part, but before I begin to discuss my own thoughts about our concern with death, it might be useful and relevant to start by quoting some of the remarks that Jung himself has

made about it, for it is these passages that helped me make sense of my own analytic work and experience.

As early as 1930 and 1931 Jung had written of death as an essential constituent of life. In his paper 'The stages of life' (1930), he remarked:

> As a doctor I am convinced that it is hygienic to discover in death a goal towards which one can strive,

and in 1931 in *The secret of the golden flower*, he wrote:

> Death is psychologically as important as birth and, like it, is an integral part of life.

His most salient points about the psychology of death are, however, to be found in his *Symbols of transformation* (1912) published in 1952. The following is a rather long passage, but it summarises well his general thinking:

> In the morning of life the son tears himself loose from the mother, from the domestic hearth, to rise through battles to his destined heights. Always he imagines his worst enemy in front of him, yet he carries the enemy within himself—a deadly longing for the abyss, a longing to drown in his own source, to be sucked down to the realm of the Mothers. His life is a constant struggle against extinction, a violent yet fleeting deliverance from ever-lurking night. This death is no external enemy, it is his own inner longing for the stillness and profound peace of all-knowing non-existence, for all-seeing sleep in the ocean of coming-to-be and passing away. Even in his highest strivings for harmony and balance, for the profundities of philosophy and the raptures of the artist, he seeks death, immobility, satiety, rest . . .
>
> If he is to live, he must fight and sacrifice his longing for the past in order to rise to his own heights. And having reached the noonday heights, he must sacrifice his love for his own achievement, for he may not loiter. The sun, too, sacrifices its greatest strength in order to hasten onwards to the fruits of autumn, which are the seeds of rebirth . . .

This passage has strangely close affinities with Melanie Klein's hypothesis that—and I quote from Segal:

> The immature ego of the infant is exposed from birth to the anxiety stirred up by the in-born polarity of instincts—that is the immediate conflict between the life instinct and the death instinct.

As I re-read Jung's passages I was amazed how much my own thinking and experience had in fact run parallel to this

thought, and, indeed, with how much sensitive intuition Jung has pointed to psychological processes and conflicts that are the object of much contemporary observation, interpretation, debate, denial or acknowledgment.

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PART I

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CHAPTER 1

Social attitudes to death: a brief survey

'Whoever rightly understands and celebrates death at the same time magnifies life.' *R. M. Rilke*

All my personal experience lends weight to the assumption that death is intimately relevant to all psychological growth. A person's relationship to death, the intensity of his attraction to it, his fear of it, the type of defence built up against conscious awareness of it, the symbolic meaning given to it, all these greatly affect and shape the personality both of an individual and of a culture.

Thus man's greatest achievements, as well as his worst crimes, seem to be, at least in part, an expression of the way he handles his knowledge of the existence of death and it is plausible to believe that only those who can look death squarely in the face can really live a meaningful life.

Several years ago, Arthur Koestler gave voice to this very realisation in a broadcast when he said:

> Take the word 'death' out of your vocabulary and the great works of literature become meaningless; take that awareness away and the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent.

Even a relatively simple people like the Kasai of East Africa were expressing such awareness when they used to say:

> Without magic, illness, knives, arrows, wars and death, life would be just a matter of eating, drinking, sleeping and defecating. Life would be no good without death.

It is, of course, quite true that without death, the death of individuals or even of whole species, there could be no biological change and therefore no evolution of species. Nor is

there really any logic in the assumption that man should have been supplied with an innate readiness to live, and with an innate readiness to procreate, and yet be left adrift in his confrontation with that third basic biological process which is to cease to live—that is, to die. Psychological growth, development and the general self-fulfilment of a person seems inconceivable without conscious acknowledgment of the fact of death. In particular the capacity to symbolise—without which all experience is doomed to be without meaning and significance—is likely to remain fallow and undeveloped unless a man live his life consciously aware of death. I hope to give weight to these thoughts in the course of this book.

My interest in this whole problem was aroused first of all not by any personal bereavement, or through contact with people who were actually dying, but as a result of listening to the men and women with whom I sat and to whom I listened in my consulting room. I have tried to listen to them with what I hope is a more or less 'free-floating attention'. Freud has enjoined such free-floating attention on all analysts, believing that they should offer to their patients that same capacity to listen without conscious prejudgment, criticisms and direction that they themselves demand of their patients' 'free association'.

My surprise at this general concern with death is perhaps itself worthy of comment. After all, death is the most certain event in all our lives. It is surely quite unlikely that a person can ever shirk awareness of it for any length of time unless, as I have already hinted, he can relinquish and surrender that gift that marks him as distinctly human: the gift of consciousness of self.

My surprise at the ubiquity in analyses of a concern with death probably reveals how much I had shared in the cultural assumptions and attitudes of my time. For until quite recently modern man had come to regard death as, at best, a regrettable inconvenience, or the result of human inefficiency; at the worst as an obscenity and an outrage. The men of science of our time have had every intention of breaking its pervasive power sooner or later. Thus many of them devote themselves to the task of exploring the possibility of extending life beyond its present span; if possible, indefinitely.

Admittedly, others are engaged in devising ever more efficient means of damaging and destroying life. Such people

are perhaps trying to contain their anxiety by putting upon themselves the magic mantle of death, a defensive manœuvre that I shall describe in greater depth when I discuss some aspects of individual psychopathology.

Nevertheless, for at least half a century death has been the most tabooed subject in the Western world—much more so than sex. Geoffrey Gorer, the English anthropologist, has drawn attention to it in an article, 'The pornography of death', which he had published in *Encounter* in 1955. He described there the sense of being isolated and ignored that a person experiences who has suffered the death of a near relative. For the absence of all mourning ritual, and of culturally accepted forms of relationship between the mourner and the rest of the community, had created such general unease and embarrassment that avoidance had become for many the only way out of the dilemma. A particularly interesting study of the psychological literature—or rather the scarcity of the psychological literature—on death was published in 1966 in the journal *Human Relations*, by Mary Williams, an analytical psychologist in London. Having made a thorough survey of 'psychological abstracts' between the years 1931 and 1961, she discovered that the total number of contributions on the theme of death, suicide and murder in 1961 was only a little higher than it had been in 1931, and this in spite of the fact that by 1961 there was a far greater number of workers in the field and a greatly increased volume of psychological literature. This led her to conclude that

> . . . the universal fact of death remained a relatively tabooed subject in Western culture and had, therefore, all the power of a repressed content, seeking a channel of expression.

We may indeed have to examine with greater diligence Kenneth Clark's suggestion that concern with eternity is an important part of every viable civilisation, a suggestion that I have found re-echoed recently in John Dunne's extremely interesting book, *The city of the gods*, in which he writes that:

> It might well be that the stability of Egyptian culture, its persistence for better than two millenia, its ability to recover twice from the kind of downfall that destroyed other civilisations, is not unrelated to the fact that the Egyptian could face death squarely and face it with good hope and had no need to repress the thought of death in order to be happy.

From time to time Western man has dared to turn his face from the fact of death in order to contemplate a life without it. The stories of Dr Faustus or of the Wandering Jew spring to mind; and so does Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's travels*. In one of his travels Gulliver meets the Struldbrugs, the Immortals, and is told that:

> whenever they see a funeral, they lament and repine that others are gone to a harbour of rest to which they themselves never can hope to arrive.

And that 'because of the dreadful prospect of never dying' they are described as

> not only opinionate, peevish, covetous, morose, vain and talkative, but also incapable of friendship and dead to all natural affection.

Indeed, the King of the Luggnaggians teasingly suggests to Gulliver that he should send a couple of Struldbrugs to his own country to arm his people 'against the fear of death'.

In our own time the French writer, Simone de Beauvoir, has in her novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels* once more attempted to explore this theme. The twentieth-century writer can no longer rely on the devil and his pact in order to explain the pain and the hurt of him who cannot die. Rather this pain, this despair, is now recognised as the intrinsic and inevitable component of the fate of a person doomed to live for ever. The hero in de Beauvoir's book is a man who loses, as the centuries pass by, all capacity to see, to taste, to laugh, to cry, to search, to be surprised—all experiences that, as I shall try to show later on, are essential to the process of creation. Instead, everything becomes for him flat, dull, monotonous; and he becomes a 'no-person', neither mean nor generous, neither brave nor cowardly, neither good nor bad. For if time stretches indefinitely then there can be no measure and no meaning. For then there is only:

> always the same past, the same experience, the same reasonable thought, the same boredom. A thousand years, ten thousand years. I can never take leave of myself (p. 229).

And so he is alone. Envious of mortals upon whose lives he tries from time to time to graft his own, he becomes himself envied by those he envies. There can be no pity between him and them; all bonds, all mutuality, all possibility of communication is irrevocably broken once they have discovered