



Marc Lerner

## The Apocryphal Deaths

Before entering into an exposition of the events that took place during and after the recent war, it must be mentioned that all soldiers, in the kind of conditions that we experienced towards the end of that savage fight, are touched in some small part or other with a measure of insanity. Those that were actually allowed to leave the front and were taken back across the ocean to sanitariums or tribunals were extreme cases, but the difference is, as the expression goes, one of degree and not of kind.

To recall an example from my own experience: in the last weeks, my platoon was holed up in what had been a forest of blue gums on the eastern edge of the trenchline. In our miserable dugouts we had lain the night while it rained sporadically and shells landed in the mud around us with a screeching violence like expulsions from the nether world. In the morning everything was wet and the remaining stumps stood amputated and ghostly in a thick mist. Bullets slammed at random into the trench wall just above our heads - the bullets which we had at first feared, then became indifferent towards, and finally now even saw with some quantity of longing. With the frenetic disorganization of an army on its last legs, my section alone was suddenly sent a few kilometres to the west to the edge of the action, where it was quieter. Everyone was demoralised; as the corporal I went on sentry duty first. Through the hole in the parapet I could not see more than a few metres in the mist, my feet sunk in the slimy mud. Directly overhead the visibility was just as poor. The week before Private T---, a close friend of mine from before the war, had been killed by a direct mortar hit on our lines. He was there one moment and in

the next his boots were lying all but empty. I looked up into the grayness above me. His smile and unique humours wafted through my mind less like a memory than a receding dream.

One instant everything was silent, and in the next the catatonic haze above me was torn apart by an air battle. The ancients reckoned the use of bow and arrow to be a cowardly withdrawal from hand-to-hand combat; I feel resentment of a similar sort towards these new machines. I couldn't see the planes, just hear the roar of their engines and the intermittent crash of machine guns. Occasionally splinters of light from the guns would come through the fog. From exhaustion I closed my eyes momentarily. When I opened them again the mist had twisted into long ductile cylinders. These quickly extended into a writhing and nebulous mass, like a pit of infinite and ravenous worms in the sky. Shadowed, slippery, manic. The gunshots seemed to be coming from the interstices between their bodies like lightning issuing from between clouds. For a dreadful instant it expanded to fill the whole sky. I use the word 'dreadful' only in an aesthetic sense, for I felt no fear or even wonder. I could tell it wasn't real, yet at the same time it seemed just as natural a thing as any other. The hallucination lasted only a minute and then I saw nothing again but the fog. We had had no new ration packs for four days. I told no one, but others told me of similar experiences.

No doubt the fatigue, demoralisation and near-starvation that we suffered through towards the end of our losing conflict contributed to the sharp rise in such incidents. Nonetheless, it must also be noted that the land which we pre-emptively attacked itself has some characteristics which, if not exactly psychosis-inducing, are certainly disorienting to the unacclimated foreigner and were so from the very start. Once we got through the northern port cities - which their government abandoned to us - and ventured into the open country, difficulties of a natural sort beset us. The climate was as vertiginous as the landscape; within a few days we went from being scorched by the sun in the desert to drenched in the torrential rains of a rainforest, and back again. Perhaps the worst were the animals. We had to be given lessons prior to deployment on the varieties of poisonous snakes and the ways of dealing with them. In the north, every river hides crocodiles that weigh over five hundred kilograms just below the murky and frothing surface. In the absence of a defending army, one gets the impression that the land itself is putting up a vicious fight. The cries of the birds are excruciatingly memorable:

in the country's vast open spaces the hysterical shrieks of the cockatoo and the wedge-tailed eagle echo like those of a maniac tightly confined in a straitjacket.

Soon enough, of course, the enemy did appear, and these early transcontinental adventures were replaced by four years of methodical and senseless trench warfare. It was during the last six months of this period that the apocryphal deaths, as they are now called, began. I happened to witness what is believed to be the very first incident. We were in a quiet sector on a peaceful day. The landscape, too, was relatively untouched: mynah birds flickered in the sparse eucalypts overhead like wraiths from a child's tale. There was a rocky red soil underfoot and the sun warmed our weary backs. I leaned against the trench wall and smoked my last cigarette, looking up at the visible patch of pale blue wallpaper sky. Tranquil and alluring and dissociative. There was a spring freshness in the air. Sergeant W-----, newly added to our platoon, stepped carefully up a ladder that was propped against the wall a few metres away with a pair of binoculars. As soon as his helmeted head poked above the sandbags his body was thrown violently backwards into the trench as though he had been shot. I hadn't heard anything, however; everything was as quiet as it had been. I rushed over to him and called for help. We could find no wound, but his heart had stopped. Next week a corporal on sentry duty close by to us collapsed in exactly the same way.

At first, these incidents were put down to sudden heart attacks and other medical maladies. The pattern, however, soon became too common not to notice. Men were dying inexplicably, and always in positions where they were vulnerable to enemy fire - but without actually being hit. Rumours circulated that military doctors had looked over the bodies and confirmed that no medical defects had been found. Officially, nothing was said, although trust in our government at this time was extremely low, and it may have only made the situation worse if an explanation had been attempted. We found out later that news of the apocryphal deaths had spread domestically coupled with all kinds of fanciful speculations. At the front, the already disastrous morale plummeted even further and cases of soldiers openly refusing orders, although thankfully they never became general, did increase.

A month before our final withdrawal, over the holiday period, we were stationed in what had been an idyllic countryside. The remains of a farming fence still stood just behind our frontline trench and relatively infrequent shelling had left the grazing land in a condition of less than total destruction. One morning we were awakened at dawn by loud singing from the enemy trenches, which were not a hundred metres away. It was one of their traditional holiday songs. We had heard nothing like this for the preceding four years; perhaps they had relaxed in the knowledge they were almost completely victorious. We responded in kind with one of ours and were greeted with loud cheers that were not at all derisive. I cautiously looked over the trench wall. In the foreground wandered a vicious-looking dingo, its fur mangy and ribs standing out starkly on its body like bars on a cell. Beyond, however, I was surprised to see a white handkerchief being waved from the other side in the gray morning sun. Two men stepped out smiling and waving. They were not holding rifles. After a quick conference, Corporal H---- and I went out to speak to them.

It was the sole holiday truce. Within minutes suspicious yet joyful men were streaming out of the trenches on both sides and talking to each other; for a brief period we were released from the very maw of hell. On our side our commanders would have liked to have stopped us, but their endless blunders had by this stage put them in a position where they were unable to. I spoke for most of the time with a man name 'Freddie'. He was taller than me, thin, with sympathetic eyes. He showed me photos of his family and I did the same; I gave him my lighter as a souvenir and he gave me a package of biscuits. With my halting command of his language I asked him - after making sure no one on our side was within earshot - whether they had experienced anything like the phenomenon of the apocryphal deaths. He knew nothing of it. In half an hour it was over, we went back to our trenches and were at war once again.

This was not long before the end; soon our dictatorial form of government collapsed and a new era was ushered in after our surrender. At home there were many changes to our way of life, freedoms increased greatly and many latent possibilities were realised. For a time everyone forgot the apocryphal deaths as one wartime nightmare among many. I have never been very interested in politics: it seems to me a pursuit that is an abrogation of one's duty towards one's immediate surroundings, to one's friends and family. An acquaintance

brought me to a talk being given by a certain provincial leader to discuss particular local and national economic problems. It was in an old party hall now open for common use.

The atmosphere was hushed, expectant, revenant; as though it was the appearance of a medieval preacher. When he came out he was small and fat, the loose folds of skin on his face and neck rubbery like a chicken's. The audience leaned forward in anticipation. He spoke quickly out of his ponderous bulk, mashing together poorly pronounced words as though he might get something past the listener. It was not five minutes into the talk that he keeled backwards in silence as though shot by a sniper. For a moment everyone was still, and then the crowd surged forward in a mass of anxiety. He was dead; no cause of death was identified.

Our press is free now, and we know this is not happening in any other country but here. Not a week goes by without rumours of a new apocryphal death. Typically it is a prominent public figure, and always in the act of talking to a group, perhaps giving a speech. Sometimes, however, it will be no one more significant than a manager in a factory or an office, talking to their workmates. Last week a police officer was struck while chasing robbery suspects down an alleyway. Our kind-hearted criminals were so stunned to witness the bruited circumstance that they waited by her body until more officers arrived. The people always seem to keel over backwards, as though a bullet has hit them square in the forehead. Naturally, there is no such wound.

Confusion in our society has now become general, much more so even than in the immediate aftermath of the defeat. Medical professionals and scientists posit explanations of varying sophistication for the phenomenon of the apocryphal deaths, none of which seem quite convincing. Naturally, various religious groups have their own eschatological interpretations of these events. Foreign agents and assassination plots are speculated about in the press. Some segments of the population are suspected of deliberately sabotaging others through various kinds of voodoo or witchcraft; these explanations are very popular and exist in infinitely complex variations. Some people have withdrawn out of fear from social life altogether, preferring the mere prolonging of life to its living. All interactions have become suffused with anger and suspicion and the apportioning of blame.

The streets of our fine and ancient cities are alternately emptied by terror and filled with protests that frequently turn into violent riots. Another group affirms - perhaps correctly - that the deaths are not happening at all, that they are all in fact explainable by already understood causes and that any perceived mystery is the result of a kind of group hysteria. The tenuous threads of reasoning people have always used to parse reality have become completely lost in a foggy and bilious skein of chaos. In our new and freer political system various leaders and parties are now able to present their own solutions to these interconnected issues, and some of these seem promising.