

Time and Mortality in *Dead Man's Token*

Robin Hardy can be counted on to include a Christian worldview in a novel. In *Dead Man's Token* Ares, Surchatain of Lystra and the hero of the Latter Annals of Lystra, reads Scriptures, meditates, confesses to the priest, and relies on God when, as is often the case, problems seem beyond remedy. God is at work in the characters as even spoiled, self-centered Renée, granddaughter of the usurper who scarred Ares' face in seizing the throne, begins to consider others' needs as she asks Ares, in response to a marriage proposal from a lord of neighboring Scylla, "What would you have me do? . . . What is best for Lystra?" (193). My favorite line in Hardy's latest novel is a comment on Henry, Renée's brother, whom in *Road of Vanishing*, the novel preceding *Dead Man's Token*, Ares rescues from slavery; and now "He threw himself into serving Ares, and Lystra, with a pride that bordered on ferocity. He had found his worth in offering himself completely to Ares' service, however he would be used, or not" (184). These passages describe the life of the person committed to Christ. It is for such moments of insight that I have appreciated Hardy's work from the first novel I read, *Striker's Bride*, but I believe her work is maturing as with symbol and fantasy she tackles basic issues of life.

Beginning *Road of Vanishing* with a poem by the hymnist Isaac Watts that compares time to "an ever-rolling stream," Hardy alerts the reader to the theme. In its sequel, *Dead Man's Token*, Hardy follows the lead of William Shakespeare, who in his sonnets links time and mortality: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold" as the speaker says his friend will love him more strongly realizing he will lose him before long (Sonnet 73). As Nathaniel Hawthorne makes clear in *The Scarlet Letter*, *token* is another word for symbol. In her title Hardy alerts her reader to her themes. On one level the stream of time moves swiftly to its end—death, but on another, a person living for self alone is dead though still breathing. Jesus said, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt. 16.25). To grasp the overall structure of *Dead Man's Token*, the reader must understand its themes as the bustle, busyness, and hurry of our lives make time pass swiftly and death awaits

us, but life is to be lived in service to our high Lord.

The novel opens with Ares' weariness from carrying the never-ending weight of his responsibilities and demands upon his time. In the novel's first episode, after several references to dying, he must face a challenger, who claims Ares has weakened due to age. His foe has been pushed into the fight by Lady Auer, whose name surely is pronounced *hour*. Throughout the novel Ares attempts to find time with his wife, but each time they are alone in their bedroom beginning to make love, someone knocks insistently on their door demanding Ares' attention. The novel jumps quickly from one episode to the next with council meetings and dinners and disappearances to be managed. Still, Ares, our hero, learns to delegate some of his responsibility before the novel's end as he prays and listens for God's guidance. Though the setting seems medieval, the frenzied activity and business and constant interruption appear to be a picture of twenty-first-century life in America.

Even stronger than time is the presence of death in the novel. Unless taken in the Rapture that Christians have been longing for for two thousand years, we all must face death. Conspirators plan Ares' death, but he outmaneuvers them in the novel's first episode. Due to the excitement of that duel, Ares' daughter Sophie is separated from her guardian and seems lost. She has disappeared into a secret tunnel that had long been sealed but has been reopened. This tunnel turns out to be a living tomb such as the one where Antigone is buried in Sophocles' play. Chiacos had been accidentally trapped there eight years before. He had been rescued, but at the end of the novel, he has been sealed there again, this time with concrete. There are at least two other episodes in the novel where living people are encuffed as though they were dead. Ares, not wanting to kill Athian, his challenger, declares him dead to honor the loyal father, Lord Backvold. Though Athian's throat has been crushed in the duel with Ares, he is still breathing. Lord Backvold makes a show of carrying the wounded son out of the palace in a coffin. Later, her abductor uses some type of chloroform to deaden the senses of Ares' wife Nicole, who is then carried out of the palace in an old banner, as if she is wrapped in a winding sheet. She awakes in a coffin-like space under the false bottom of a wagon. Though in revenge the man responsible

for her abduction intended to rape her and then dismember her body, Ares' men manage to rescue her from her coffin. T. S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* finds modern materialistic culture a living death. In symbolic terms death is ever-present in the novel.

The secret tunnel that had been sealed eight years before but reopened and through which Nicole's abductor enters her bedroom leads not only out of the palace but also to an underground stream. Chiacos escapes from his prison cell into this stream, but as the exits have been sealed with concrete there is no way out. Unable to break through the thick concrete where Chiacos is heard weeping, Ares reopens the trap door into the stream where the concrete has not yet dried to attempt Chiacos' rescue, even though the man is the one who had abducted Nicole. Ares struggles against the current, finally reaching Chiacos, only to be attacked with a knife by the seemingly mad man. Wounded, Ares is forced to retreat leaving the Polonti in his living tomb. Almost dead, Ares is pulled from the water through the trap door. The rushing stream leading to death reminds of time. Henry David Thoreau says in *Walden* that "Time is but a stream I go a fishin' in." Humans are trapped in time, and death is timelessness.

The novel's apt title comes from a coin presumably dropped by Chiacos (or his companion) as he retreats over the garden wall of the palace. Sophie finds it near the wall where the "ghost" she saw has disappeared. Chiacos has been rumored dead and has not been seen for many years. He is married to Druella, who married Magnus, Surchatain of Scylla, while still married to Chiacos. Loving and supporting her still, Chiacos keeps her secret because if her previous marriage were known she would be removed as Surchataine of Scylla, the marriage to Magnus being void, and her son would be illegitimate instead of the heir to the kingdom. In fact, it is to protect her that he kidnaps Nicole and attempts to kill Ares, weeping all the while about what he has been commanded to do. When Sophie enters the tunnel he has opened, she does not see him because he wears black. When he (or his companion) flees through another door, she follows only to see him "fly" over the wall. She thinks him a ghost as she has heard stories of ghosts from her tutor. Ares discovers that the intruder had come over the wall with a rope depending from an oak tree thirty feet away, whose branch reaches over the wall, which

would confirm that the intruder is not a ghost. But in some senses surely he is a ghost. When first captured and questioned by Ares after he has kidnapped Nicole twice, he responds, “I am a dead man” (192). He has given up his identity in guarding the secret that his wife has married someone else, he has kept out of sight and allowed the rumor to circulate that he is dead, and he has given up his moral sense to please Druella. Hence, he weeps, moans, and mutters, refusing to speak, as ghosts are said to do. In the secret tunnel, apparently he uses a mechanical contraption to walk on the ceiling so that he does not leave his tracks in the dust. His not leaving footprints would also suggest that he is a ghost. Drawing only a fine line between life and death, the novel leaves Chiacos imprisoned in the tunnel with no exit, presumably to die, but the reader wonders if he isn’t already dead.

Sophie explains what a dead man’s token is: “It’s a token that a ghost leaves behind to show something about who it was when it was alive or to show something about how it died” (106). In this case it is an old Scyllan gold coin called a *crux*. These coins were taken out of circulation nine years before by Magnus after he replaced his father as Surchatain of Scylla. Apparently Druella sent two bags of the coins to Chiacos as a promise that one day the two of them would be together again. Because they are gold, they are still accepted by merchants, but they represent the dead past. Chiacos also took himself out of circulation and was reported dead. By naming the story as she did, Hardy suggests that this coin is the novel’s major symbol. Sophie realizes that Chiacos came back to the tunnel where he had been trapped years before, like a ghost, because in a way his spirit was still trapped there. Ares tells Sophie that Chiacos was required to choose. He could divorce Druella, whom he still loved and with whom he hoped some day to be reunited, or he could tell the truth and have Druella ousted from her high position as Surchataine of Lystra. He refused to make either choice, and from that point on he was essentially a dead man: “But Chiacos chose what he would become—whether he would be a real man or a ghost—by *not* making a choice. The only choice that means anything is when we choose to do the right thing, no matter how hard it is” (182). The situation demands an allegorical reading. Paul said that when we enter into a relationship with Christ we are made

alive though we were dead before: “And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2.1). According to Galatians 5, the fruits that spring from the flesh include adultery and murder, with which Chiacos is involved. The fruit of the Spirit can be seen in Nicole, who struggles with a chance to get rid of Renée, who often troubles her: “This terrible inner struggle ensued for a fraction of a second, which seemed days to Nicole. At last, she rejected the action without any conscious reason other than that it was foreign to her nature” (171). Later, Nicole realizes that she will never send Renée away: “Despite all of Renée’s insecurities and game-playing, Nicole loved her. How could she not? It was Nicole’s nature to love” (231). Whether he still breathes or not, Chiacos is a dead man, and when he appears, it is as a ghost. Nicole, by contrast, is alive. The tokens of their states are the fruits they produce.

My first thought when I finished *Dead Man’s Token* was that I wished I had not yet read it so that I would still have it to read. A few days later I did read it again, and it well bears rereading. Now I have *Games of God and Men*, the next book in the Latter Annals of Lystra, to look forward to as *Dead Man’s Token* leaves many strands untied. Was the second man in the tunnel simply someone Chiacos hired? Will Lady Auer and Athian return claiming that Ares did not kill his challenger? What will be heard from Melva and Fancsali in the next novel? And what about all those gold coins that Sophie saw at the potter’s booth?

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