

## *The Apotheosis of J. F. K.*

Z. JOHN LEVAY

***Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy***, edited by Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber. *New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1964. xiv + 155 pp. \$5.95.*

FEW EVENTS in recent history have elicited as profound and universal a reaction as the assassination of President Kennedy more than a year ago. The national tragedy has shaken benevolent and complacent souls. A commonplace phenomenon on our television screens—shooting in the streets at high noon—was suddenly catapulted into the focus of national and global attention by its result: the incredibly quick and unexpected death of the American President in the prime of his life. Our reawakening consciousness realized that the assassination did not happen in a recently established jungle-republic or in a faraway country ruled by an operetta-style absolute monarch: it happened right here in our own house. It did not occur in the Dark Ages, which the liberal mind finds so horrid and detestable, but in our own brave new Universe of Reason, right in the native land of Pragmatism; yes, and in the age of computers and budding world government.

We Americans are almost contemptuously familiar with firearms. We tend to have the quick-on-the-draw, fearless and carefree attitude toward others as long as the guns are in our hands. Yet the rifle that took the President's life suddenly became an awesome instrument of death rather than an admirable toy. We realized how it felt to be ambushed at noon, with the Light of Reason shining right on the zenith. In November, 1963, the complacent smile was wiped from our faces. In November, 1963, we suddenly found it hard to believe what Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his spiritual progeny, the liberals, have taught us about the basic goodness of man.

On witnessing a tragedy, either directly or vicariously, and on encountering a loss, the human mind usually reacts with denial: "Oh no, it cannot be!" This feeble and primitive but nevertheless widespread mental mechanism is defensive in purpose: it cushions the raw shock of sudden pain. It is short-lived, however. We may deny the existence of positive evil, but we cannot eliminate it. After the shock, what? Reason begins to absorb reality at its own speed, no matter how terrible or irrational it is and man reacts to confrontation with reality. This reaction involves the total personality, that is to say, both rational and irrational faculties. Mourning sets in. It takes many forms, reflecting cultural and individual varieties of expression; and it is interest-

ing to observe the individual variations in our own age and culture.

In antiquity, and indeed in the quite recent past, irrational elements of behavior could find "legalized" expression in *rituals* that were taken seriously and held sacred by the community or by the entire society. Rituals are individual means of acting out a feeling or impulse by way of the universal symbolic behavior. The ritual gives structure and *meaning* to individual variations of feelings as well as to behavior that otherwise would be overwhelming and dangerous for the lonely individual and would be completely incomprehensible to others.<sup>1</sup> Thus ritual is to be judged on the basis of its symbolic meaning and not according to its outward (concrete) manifestation.

Modern man does not appreciate common denominators such as rituals any more. This is not to say that we have no rituals; we have too many.<sup>2</sup> But these are empty shells, devoid of meaning, of symbol, and are not representative of our inner, or psychic, life. In our sophisticated, pragmatic, well oiled world the national tragedy of 1963 struck with elemental force and we reacted with the elemental force of our latent souls because we have forgotten the centuries-old lesson that life is basically tragic. Because the individual stands alone in his grief, having no communal channel for his irrational feelings, he will act irrationally, and he will not be understood by outsiders. On the other hand, the community, lacking communal channels for the expression and communication of irrational but universal feelings, will seize upon any individual variety of expression and will transform it into an *ad hoc* ritual. The masses will then follow unconsciously, automatically (in the predictable fashion of the *vulgus profanum*), and a veritable psychic epidemic is in the making, with its attendant bewilderment and confusion for the individual, while a semblance of sanity and propriety is preserved.

Over the tolling of the bells and the mournful rolling of the drums, our lamentations were heard. Behind the subdued liturgical dirges of the funeral the disorganization of our inner selves was perceptible: the weeping on street corners where even confirmed atheists exclaimed, "My God!"; the paralysis of industrious citizens who were too disturbed to work after hearing the news; the sorry spectacle of the assassin's assassination—but no gross disorganization, no political upheaval.

When scores of security men, the cheering crowds and the otherwise powerful masses proved powerless to prevent a national tragedy we unexpectedly got a martyr, and we did not quite know what to do with him. Having long discarded the time-honored

formulae for expressing his deepest feelings, the individual person stood unprepared, naked, exposed in his shame, very lonely and very vulnerable. The student of human personality has found a rich lode of facts in observing the behavior of the masses and of individuals following the tragedy. One was able to witness a whole array of defense mechanisms in operation, serving the very useful purpose of allaying the pangs of individual guilt. I shall mention only a few. After a brief period of "shocked disbelief" (denial), a flurry of generalized accusations, directed toward "rightist" and conservative groups followed (projection). Then a fearful silence with inner confusion, also with a more or less honest, penetrating self-examination and evaluation (introversion and introspection). National mourning, burial ceremonies, the lighting of an "eternal flame" and the time-honored liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church (sublimation) have given some Americans the relative comfort of communal ritual. Individual persons who did not appreciate or accept these rituals presented a wide spectrum of attitudes and behavior.

Some of these attitudes became institutionalized, almost legislated. The well-known renaming epidemic may serve as an example of this kind of reaction. Here and there one was able to witness the beginnings of apotheosis and the process of manufacturing the "hero." For observers of human behavior endowed with a predilection for the historical perspective, the latter phenomenon proved only an old truth, namely that we humans are constantly in need of a hero. If we had no hero, we should be obliged to create one. The popular imagination is not satisfied with having a martyr; it must have a hero. Since many of us are prone to confound these two concepts, it is important to understand why a hero is necessary. The image of a martyr is passive while the hero—according to the *consensus gentium*—is a *doer*, an active one, and not necessarily a dead one, although we usually prefer dead heroes. A society of incurably activist individuals cannot be satisfied with a martyr. Paradoxically, the more secularized is the society, the more the individual feels the need for a mystical hero who is second only to the Godhead. Hence the desire for apotheosis, for endless pilgrimages to the grave; hence the secular litany of the qualities of the dead hero without the possibility of rational evaluation of the great leader who was an outstanding human; hence the endless recital of the deeds of the hero without waiting for history's scrutiny to separate truth from fiction; hence the retroactive infallibility of the hero who could do no wrong and the duty, dictated by our guilt-ridden conscience, to

mind his unfinished business and to enact into law in an emotional hurry whatever policies or ideas he had vaguely conceived and projected into the misty future. A pair of bullets suddenly transformed the ephemeral into the eternal, the drab into the mystical, and the profane into the sacred.

Abundant evidence and rich documentation of the process of hero-making is to be found in the anthology called *Of Poetry and Power*, published on the first anniversary of President Kennedy's death. What are or purport to be tributes to his memory by more than seventy poets, mostly American, are sandwiched between a Foreword by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the appendix and annotations. The best of the contributions, not unexpectedly, is one by the late Robert Frost—a work of structured, articulate symbolism and verbal music. Though most of the poems reflect the reaction of the poet to the assassination, one searches in vain for anything remotely resembling the classical elegy. One notes instead in many instances a total absence of structure and rhythm and a degree of ambiguity that places the poem utterly beyond normal comprehension. I quote in its entirety "Finally a Valentine" by Louis Zukofsky:

There is  
a heart  
has no  
complaint  
better a-  
part  
than  
faint  
so the  
faintest  
part of  
it  
has no  
complaint—  
a  
part.

Harvey Shapiro's "National Cold Storage Company" exhibits a similar incoherence and irrelevance; so does "A Kind of Libation for JFK" by James L. Weil:

Sorry I  
can't pour with  
my manners  
manhood my  
unsteady  
ness spilling.

So much for poets who, under the pressure of their grief, try to write down their "innermost feelings" which, true to the nature of such feelings, are elemental and unorganized. Since these psychic forces are universal, they are objective, and as we know from experience, formidable. But the objective psychic is not communicable in the raw. What these poets seem to ignore is that the contents of the unconscious must be transformed and rendered communicable through a valid, manifest symbol—but this calls for a good deal of skill and conscious articulation.

It is among the more articulate poems that we discover the incipient signs of apotheosis, veiled and vague references to the crucifixion, archetypal utterances about sacrifice and resurrection, comparing (timidly) JFK with Jesus Christ. Though none of the poems spells this out, some of them come quite close to doing so (H. L. Mountzoures' "Three Nights of Mourning: John F. Kennedy" and X. J. Kennedy's "Down in Dallas"). It is interesting to note that these poets who found the symbol in the hero-figure and in the apotheosis of JFK have the clearest voice in the anthology, while those of the former group, who impulsively put unconscious contents on paper, are not only obscure and protean but their poems have an ominous ring to the ears of the student of psyche who is all too familiar with unconscious utterances. The most notable among the better poems is Raymond Roseliep's "For John Kennedy, Jr."—short, elegant, dignified, touchingly human. Oscar Mandel's "We Who Do Not Grieve in Silence," which adroitly employs the art of refrain, is tartly cynical but valid: "Their right hand mourned, their left rang up the cash. . ."

In summing up, we can say that the poets in their reaction to the national tragedy have honestly endeavored to register their feelings. Each work represents a search for the self of the poet, occasioned by a tragic event. This, to say the least, is a noble reaction of the individual personality to a collective loss.

<sup>1</sup>*The Integration of the Personality*, C. G. Jung, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952.

<sup>2</sup>*The Undiscovered Self*, C. G. Jung, New York: New American Library (Mentor), 1963.