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To see oneself die.

It has been said of us Occidentals that we have lost the capacity to mourn. It might be said, with equal justification, that we have lost the capacity to rejoice. Because both these capacities are intimately connected with each other. They have, both, a festive character, and it is through them that men participate in what is sacred. If it were true that we no longer know how to mourn, this would imply that we have become blind to the splendor, and deaf to the voice of the sacred. Such blindness and deafness, if they were indeed facts, would condemn us to live in the insipid profanity of displeasures and pleasures, in the grey dullness of work and play, in the meaningless chain of weeks, no longer gloriously interrupted by the Seventh Day, but containing ever longer and ever more tedious week-ends. And who will dare to deny that such is a more or less fair description of the way we are living? Of course: the insipid profanity, the grey dullness, the meaningless chain of weeks, is only a sort of middle layer of the climate we live in. On the surface there are the ever more numerous "sensational events" we participate in. And deep down there is the gnawing fear of imminent and merited disaster. Still: the profanity, the dullness, the meaninglessness do characterize our climate. And it is not difficult to make a diagnosis of such a climate. It is the symptom of decadence, of the process of dying, (of senility, not of disease or in battle)

Now the moment one writes this down, one is challenged by a curious feeling. Not by the feeling that what one had written was somehow untrue or exaggerated. No: there is no doubt in the writer's mind that the above description is faithful to the situation. But by the feeling that there is something metaphorical, oblique, indirect to that description, that it is more like a "façon de parler" than like a true description. One has the feeling that to say of a society that it is dying is a figurative, and therefore loose, way of speaking. Societies are quite unlike living organisms. To apply biological categories to them is an abuse which we are tempted to commit, because we are still victims to the Romantic, (and mostly German), tendency to see everything through biological, ("vital"), terms. We should be able to resist, by now, such misguided demagoguery as are "young and old nations", "Lebensraum", or "healthy societies", especially after the "decline of the West" had been so often romantically proclaimed, and so often disproved. It seems to be the "old" and the "sick" societies which produce the most interesting works of art and of science, and to say of a society that it is dying is to say strictly nothing: there is no such thing as a "dead body of a society", because society is not a body, but an abstract term which means some aspects of the behavior of concrete human bodies. Therefore the above description of the present state of Western society is metaphorical, romantic, biologizing, and thus inadequate to the situation. It may be what the writer feels about the situation, but as a diagnosis it has very little value. This doubt must be confessed, before one goes on writing.

Yes, it is true: societies do not die like people. They are abstract concepts, they may be defined more or less deliberately, and one has to agree to a specific definition, before one can talk about them. What, for instance, do we mean by "Western civilisation"? And if we must ask this sort of question before even discussing that specific society, it is obvious that it is nonsense to say of it that it is dying. Still: even if we do not agree upon a definition of "Western society", we know more or less what we mean, when we use the term. We mean, more or less, the way we are in the world, as opposed to other ways of human existence. For instance: to sit on chairs, as opposed to sitting on one's heels, seems to be an Occidental way to be in the world. In fact: the moment one begins to try and define "the West", it becomes dubious and elusive, and loses the solidity of meaning it has when used colloquially. And the same is true of the word "to die". If we apply it colloquially to "the West", we know, more or less, what we mean: that we shall no longer be in the world the way we are now in it. And the moment we begin to try and define what we mean by saying that the West is dying, we are in trouble. So it is true: societies do not die like people, and to say of the West that it is dying is to say, strictly speaking, a metaphorical nonsense. Still: we need not speak always strictly. You know what I mean when I say that the West is dying, don't you? It is on this level of more or less intuitive communication that I can go on writing, in spite of the previously confessed feeling. I am aware of the dangers inherent to such a level. If I am unable of defining what I mean, my meaning is highly suspicious. But in this case I see no other way of speaking. Shall I stop writing? Not communicate what is on my mind, and on the minds of so many of us? No: if we keep always in mind that we are speaking metaphorically, I think we can go on speaking of the terrible fact that our society is, in fact, dying, and that we may last longer than it does.

Metaphorically speaking, then, ours is a generation which is present to the slow and gliding process of dying of the society it is part of. How does one live in such a situation? I mean: can one truly survive the culture which is one's way of living? Can one plan for a future "after"? Can one even imagine a life in a different existential project from the one which informs one's imagination? How is one to educate one's children in such a situation? Can one prepare them for a new shape of things to come, (for "communism", or "the yellow menace", or "the rebellion of the colonial slaves" or whatever the inadequate name one has given, in the recent past, to this unimaginable future)? Or must one accept the "decline of the West" as a sort of destiny, in the sense of "I shall visit the transgressions until the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me"? Does the agony of one's civilisation condemn one to a passive, ("consumer's"), acceptance of the historical process? Is one already an object, and no longer a subject, of history, even before the actual death of one's society had been consummated?

Such questions, (and other similar ones), have a meaning only if there is a method to verify the process of dying, even if that word be used as a metaphore only. Are we not, when asking such questions, victims to the Romantic ideology mentioned earlier, which repeatedly prophetized the death of our society, partly because it could not face the industrial civilisation, and partly because it could not face the decline of German political power? Or are we indeed forced to ask such questions because the imminent end of our society can no longer be doubted? So that the Romantic prophecies became true inspite of their ideological deformation? And if we are indeed approaching an end stage, are there parallels in history from which we might learn? Are we like the members of the Ancien régime during the early stages of the French revolution? Or are we like the clergy during the rise of bourgeois power in 15th century Tuscany and Flandres? Or like the Roman latifundarian during the German invasions? Or like the Plain Indian warrior facing the English Pilgrims? Or like the Paleolithic hunter being displaced by early neolithic agriculture? History, (such as we "read" it), is full of examples of societies dying in a metaphorical sense, and they seem to be incomparable among themselves and with our situation. It is, in consequence, more than doubtful that we can learn from history whether what we are passing through is indeed the agony of our civilisation. As it is being said so often: history can teach us only that it can teach us nothing.

There must be a different, and more direct, method to verify the meaning of our questions. We must be able to look at ourselves critically while we go through the process. We must have a mirror through which we may watch ourselves dying. But such a demand is both absurd and banal. It is absurd in the sense that one cannot die while watching oneself in the process. To die is to give oneself up, to surrender, whilst to watch oneself is to assume oneself both as a subject and as an object. And the demand is banal in the sense that we not only have such a mirror, but several mirrors, and constantly use them. We look at ourselves from the point of view of those who are around us, they are our mirror. We can see that we are dying, because those around us are preparing to bury us. We look at ourselves from the point of view of "objectivity", for instance of science. We can see that we are dying, because many of our manifestations are objectively symptoms of decadence and exhaustion. We look at ourselves from the point of view of "reflexion", for instance of philosophy. We can see that we are dying, because this specific mirror is getting cloudy: proof that the reflexion itself, (philosophy), is dying. And there are several other methods of self-observation. So that the demand for a mirror to be introduced between ourselves and our death is both an impossibility and redundant. And such a contradiction suggests that we will have to specify better what we mean by "a mirror". Because, as a matter of course, we have a specific mirror in mind when we ask for it.

do need to beat about the bush: the mirror we have in mind as a method to observe the agony of our society is what a generation ago was called "art", and what some still call by that name, because they dispose of no other. Why should one be ashamed of admitting that "art" is a more direct and immediate, and in that sense a "truer" method of observation and self-observation than many others, including the presently sanctified methods of science? It should be admitted that "art", (however one might want to define the term), has to do with showing something. And that there is only one basic criterium to judge "art": namely the "newness" of what it shows us. This may be stated more nobly by saying that the business of art is to make visible what had been invisible, or that it articulates the unspeakable. Or it may be stated more coolly by saying that the aesthetic criterium is the amount of information a specific communication transmits to its consumer. But however we want to state it, there can be little doubt that "art" is a method of observation, (whatever else it may be, may want to be, or may be understood to be by those who make it, those who use it, and those who think about it).

But what we have in mind by proposing "art" as a mirror of our metaphorical agony is not a critique of the arts of our time, in order to show that the arts are "decadent", and therefore a symptom of a general process of degeneration. Not to do what the Nazis did when speaking about "entartete Kunst", in order to prove that the "white Arian man" was dying. Nor what some orthodox Stalinists are doing now when speaking about "alienated art", in order to prove that capitalism is dying. What we have in mind is to look into present "art", not at it. Use it like a mirror. Because it is, epistemologically and ontologically, exactly that: a mirror. It shows what is "new" in the world, and it does so dialectically: what it shows is "new" because "art" shows it. In early Renaissance "art" showed Nature, (with a capital N), because this was then "news". During the decline and fall of the Roman empire it showed Transcendence, because that was new at that time. In pre-classic Greece it showed Man, because that was the novelty then being discovered. And Nature, Transcendence and Man were "new" at their times, because "art" showed them. Now if our feeling is correct that our society is dying, present "art" will have to show it, because that is what is new about our situation. And, if indeed our agony is a fact, then it is new, because our art will show it. Thus to "die" is to discover death through the mirror of "art", and it is in this sense that we have "art" in mind as a mirror for our process of dying. This is therefore our question: does "art" show us at present that we are dying as a society, and that our way to be in the world is ending? If it does, that will convince us immediately, and much better than sociological, economical, philosophical or political considerations. It will convince us better, because "art" is that mirror which stands between ourselves and our death: "vincit mortem".

The present essay is not an unprejudiced investigation. It is not informed by a value-free scientific spirit. It is on the contrary being written in the climate of a rather desperate commitment to what is very vaguely known as the "Occidental values". And it presupposes as a fact that if one looks into present "art" one will discover the agony of our society within a very characteristic tendency, (not in every art form). Therefore the present essay cannot pretend to ignore its outcome: the writer believes, from the start, that his investigation will show that our feeling is correct, and that we are indeed about to experience the catastrophic, (or anti-climactic), disappearance of our present way of living. In fact: the writer has chosen his example of present "art", (which will form the body of this essay), in function of this belief, and as an effort to prove it. Thus the following question, which ought to be formulated normally only after an investigation, must be in this case honestly put at its beginning: how can we survive the death of the society which is the foundation of our living? This question must be put now, before the investigation proper begins, because, as will be seen immediately, its answer will bear on the investigation.

The answer is: we cannot survive our society, if by "survive" we mean go on living. "Society" is not some concrete entity which exists somehow besides us, so that we might survive it as we survive the death of a neighbor. Nor is "society" some abstract name of a class, of which we are concrete members, so that we might survive it by being re-defined under a different class name. "Society" is the way we live, it is the "how" of our existence. To live, we must live somehow. And that does not mean that we can live one way or another. We cannot choose the way we want to live, because before we can choose, we must be living somehow. Every choice will be a result of the way we live at the moment of our choosing. There is no sense, therefore, in saying that we are part of a society, or that society is part of ourselves: it is not a question of "participation". It is a question of living. We cannot survive our society, because we cannot survive our way of living.

But if we mean by "survive" to go on breathing, and eating, and copulating, and to go on thinking, and feeling, and wishing, then of course we can survive our society, and this is the reason why to speak about the death of a society is a metaphorical way of talking. But is not "breathing", and "thinking" and so forth synonymous with "living", so that what was said in the previous paragraph is nonsense? No: "living" is composed of elements like "breathing", but the sum of those elements does not equal "living". "Living" is a project, a "Gestalt" which imposes a sort of very imperfect unity upon the elements it is composed of. And this project is the "society" felt, in our case, to be dying. Therefore to speak about the death of our society is not, after all, a mere figure of speaking. All the elements of our living will still be there after the disintegration of our society,

we shall no longer be living in the strict, (existential), sense of the term. It is in this sense that we can survive our society: as a disintegrated, groundless, formless, bottomless, "bodenloses" being-in-the-world.

Now we feel that this is exactly what is happening to us at present: a disintegration of our living. This disintegration is mirrored by "art" as the process of dying of Western civilisation. But it is not the whole picture we see when looking into that mirror. I said that to die is to discover death through the mirror of "art", and I have to add now that to discover death implies the discovery of what stands behind it. Disintegration is a kind of opening up, of dissolution into. Now as long as disintegration is a sort of horizon in the direction of which we move, we may very elegantly speak about the "what" we shall dissolve into. We may call it "God", or "the All", or "Nothingness", or whatever other name for it may be at our disposal. But the moment disintegration has set in, and the moment that opening up is experienced existentially, this elegant name-giving begins to work the other way round: it becomes a method by which we try not to admit that we are in fact dying. Because by making a "what" out of disintegration and giving it a name, we try to deny it. What stands behind death, and what we are dissolving into when dying is, when experienced concretely, death and dissolution. Death stands behind death, and this is not the same as saying that behind death there is nothing. The experience does not mean that death leads to nothing, or that it leads nowhere. It means that death is what it is: dying, disintegrating, dissolving into.

All this has the ring of mystical nonsense. (And here the term "nonsense" does not imply, necessarily, a pejorative flavor.) But in fact there is nothing mystical about it. On the contrary: there is something very profane about it. Our feeling of disintegration, of experiencing concretely the process of dying, is de-mystifying death for us. We no longer hold it sacred. And this is the reason why I began the present essay by saying that we are losing the capacity for participation in the sacred. What stands behind death is the profanation of death, and this is therefore the answer to the question: how can we survive the death of the society which is the foundation of our living? By going on "living" without foundation, which means by profanation.

It was important to give this answer before beginning to investigate "art" as a mirror which stands between ourselves and death. The point this essay will try to drive by taking one specific example of present "art" is this: we can see ourselves dying when looking into present art, and we can also see what it means to die, namely simply to die. This is the "new thing" which our art is showing us now: death and what stands behind it. It shows us that our society is dying, and that we cannot survive it, but that we can still survive it somehow, because we now know that to die does not matter.