The Return of the Tragic in Postmodern Societies*

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The tragic is unthinkable, and yet it is incumbent on us to think it. Let us also remember that the spirit, like the wind, blows where it will. Perhaps in this way we can understand the astonishing return of archaic values to the forefront of the social scene. Tribalism and nomadism, in particular, undermine our mental convictions and ways of being. Like the wind, they swirl up around us; this renders them disturbing, as well as the values they bring with them.

But there is little talk of all this in the organs of established thought. Denial is mandatory; we dare not speak of what frightens us. The tragic belongs to this category. It is a deafening unsaid, for if there is anything that is lived empirically on a day-to-day basis, it is indeed “the tragic sense of life.” There is a tendency to think of everyday life, which was terra incognita until recently, only in anecdotal and superficial terms. Commenting on the saying from the gospel, “Give us this day our daily bread,” Jung observed that it was difficult to translate because the term “daily” occurs only in this passage, and he notes that St. Jerome proposed the Gnostic expression “suprasubstantial bread.” This linkage is enlightening, for it emphasizes that the daily is the true principle of reality—indeed, of “superreality” (*surréalité*).1

Without being put into so many words, everyday facts and experience are there, inescapable. There is something fated about them and it is with this fatum that we must wrestle. This means integrating, on an individual as well as a collective level, the role of the unpredictable or the incalculable in causing decisive events. This is something like the “objective chance” (*hasard objectif*) of the surrealists, not limited to the happy few but widely lived by the whole of society.

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1 This essay is adapted from *L’instant éternel. Le retour du tragique dans les sociétés postmodernes* by Michel Maffesoli, © 2000 Éditions Denoël. Used by permission of Éditions Denoël.
Unquestionably, if we know how to recognize all the features of the tragic, we will be able to understand a number of social practices, particularly among the young, that otherwise appear meaningless. Let me be direct: in the tragic sensibility, time comes to a halt, or at least it slows down. Speed in its diverse forms characterized the drama of modernity. Scientific, technological, or economic development is the most visible result. By contrast, we are seeing an emerging panegyric to slowness, indeed to idleness. Life is now no more than a concatenation of motionless moments, eternal moments, from which one must be able to draw the greatest amount of pleasure.

It is this inversion of the polarity of time that gives presence to life and accords value even to what is stifling in the present, that promotes the sense of tribal belonging, and that allows us to view ordinary life under the sign of destiny. Ordinary life, banal life: this is the mulch from which communal renewal comes.

The great paradigm shift that is taking place, thanks to this presentism, is indeed the slippage from an “ego-centered” to a “place-centered” (lococentré) worldview. In the former instance of a modernity that is now ending, primacy is given to the rational individual living in a contractual society. In the latter instance, of an emerging postmodernity, it is groups that come into play, “neotribes” that lay siege to specific spaces and harmonize with them.

In the drama of modernity one finds an optimistic claim to totality: totality of the self, the world, the state. In the tragedy of postmodernity there is an interest for entirety leading to the loss of the individual ego in a greater self of natural or social otherness. The narcissism of the individual is dramatic; the primacy of the tribal is tragic. . . .

The importance of Greek tragedy for Western culture is in fact deeply rooted, frequently emphasizing everything that humanity owes to Tyche (Fortune) and Moira (Fate). There are many Greek poets, such as Archilochus, who show how the gods bring low and then in turn raise up human beings, countries, parties, and institutions. However conscientious, logical, or rational it may be, all human effort is precarious, even more so when it is moved by passion and affect. There is something irrational about the trajectory of fortune. Or rather, its rationality lies precisely in its precariousness, in its not discriminating among those upon whom it acts. No one, mighty or lowly, rich or poor, escapes its blows. Everyone can await its blessings.

The vanity of human actions, the sense of their precariousness and of the brevity of life, are more or less consciously expressed in the latent tragic mood or the fervent hedonism that characterizes this fin de siècle. For there is a strong link—it will be necessary to show how it is articulated—between the tragic and hedonism. Both concern themselves with living intensely what offers itself to be experienced. Life is
avidly lived. It is no longer a question of mere consumption, but of intense consummation. This “society of consummation” can be seen especially clearly in the practices of the young, who no longer recognize themselves in the postponed pleasures of political action or professional achievement but who want everything and want it now, even if this “everything” does not amount to much, even if it is—whether religious, cultural, technical, or economic—quickly rendered obsolete. It is this avid desire that allows us to understand the predominance of the “fashionable” mode of everything, or even the surprising instability that characterizes the political, ideological, and indeed the emotional relationships that make up the social bond. The sense of fate underlying all this expresses a way of life, an *ars vivendi* that accords with the world such as it is because it is the only one that we have, the only one that is given to live. An art of living that is no longer based on a search for absolute freedom, but rather for small freedoms that are interstitial, relative, empirical, and lived from day to day.

It is a matter, to be sure, of a general analytical framework. This framework serves to emphasize that the tragic, a secret or unobtrusive structural presence during the last two or three centuries which were largely dominated by a dramatic notion of the world, is now tending to assert itself ever more vigorously. Film, music, clothing, and above all music, forcefully evoke the return of necessity. This *Ananke*, which, according to the sages, did not have a face, nowadays, by contrast, wears a multitude of faces.

That things are felt to be inescapable, that we see the recurrence of the same phenomena, that everything mysteriously takes its course without there really being the possibility of intervention, the turn to fortune-telling or other forms of prediction, just like the religiosity that surrounds us—all this is indeed the sign of a kind of acceptance of fatality, the indication of the replacement of history, whose rational path we can influence, by a destiny which we must take on. There are moments, as Virgil says, when destiny finds the way: “Fata viam invenient.”3 Something of this sort is now under way. . . .

We need to reflect at length on this theme of the cyclical return of things. For the moment, let us note that it clearly underscores the predominance of fate, a fate with which one must reckon both in terms of individual life and of social life as a whole. The importance that the pursuit of pleasure is taking on—or taking on again—is illuminating in this regard. It is indeed true that, traditionally, the culture of pleasure goes hand in hand with the tragic sense of destiny. We can say, moreover, that the theatricality of everyday life, the pursuit of the superfluous, even the frivolous, and of course the importance given to *carpe diem*, not to mention the cult of the body in its diverse forms, are all expressions of such a tragic consciousness.
We often see social commentators puzzling over the violent character of some news item, taking note of the suicide of an adolescent seeking to emulate the rock singer who was his model. But this is not at all surprising. Such an excessive action simply reveals a latent state of mind that sees in paroxysmal revolt, in a death that is really enacted, the only alternative to a sanitized existence where the certainty of not dying is countered by the certainty of dying of boredom. Hard rock in its various forms, decadent styles in painting and dress, in short the nomadism that is around us, all reveal the return of the barbarians inside our gates, that is to say, the bursting apart of the civilized universe that modernity, over the course of three centuries, has patiently established.

There is a kind of wisdom at the disposal of the young who know, to paraphrase Aeschylus, how to yield to fate. This new tragic wisdom, which can go so far as suicide, and which in any case favors excess, is a form of heroism. A heroism that, while recognizing the irrevocability of love affairs, ideological commitments, and sudden acts of revolt, does not think of instituting them in the form of “family, faith, party,” all forms that are sclerotic and potentially deadly.

In short, what once was—passions, ideals, enthusiasms—cannot be abolished, but one does not want to turn them into a constraining yoke. The culture of pleasure, the sense of the tragic, the confrontation with destiny, are both the cause and the effect of an ethics of the moment, of an emphasis on experiences lived for their own sake, that exhaust themselves in the very act and that no longer point forward into a future that is predictable and controllable at will. This is the outcome of “necessity” in its philosophical sense: it creates heroes, the new knights of postmodernity, capable of risking their lives for a cause that can be both idealistic and perfectly frivolous. Such a risk may be imaginary, belonging to the order of simulation, or, with brutal consequences, completely real. But in every instance we can understand it as an affirmation of life that is sufficiently polymorphous to include death.

In the confrontation with fate there is thus a passion for life that can only shock staid minds and other administrators of knowledge who are only capable of locating and analyzing thoughts and lifestyles that approximate the average. Fate reminds us that being is event, indeed advent. To return to the modernity/postmodernity opposition, one can say that in the framework of the former, history unfolds, whereas in the latter, the event arrives. It intrudes, it compels, it wreaks violence. Hence its brutal, unexpected, always startling quality. Here again we find the difference of tonality between the drama or the dialectic, which postulates a solution or a possible synthesis, and the tragic, which is aporetic in structure.

The advent is singular, but its singularity is rooted in an archaic atemporal substratum. Of course, it is a matter of “archaisms” that are
rethought in relation to the present, that are lived in a specific manner, but that retain nevertheless the memory of their origins. The event-advent, as I have said. Certainly, whatever is experienced qualitatively and with intensity works to bring about the resurgence of what is already at the very heart of individual or collective being. Here we can refer to Heidegger and his concern for postmetaphysical thought, in that he strives to bring out the more “simple” that underlies human existence, but we can also refer to Leibniz, who through his “principle of indiscernibles” seeks a middle way between absolute difference and the return of the same. Between these two, romanticism or Lebensphilosophie accentuates the tragic side of the present, as well as its demands, its passion for life, and the sense of urgency it exudes.

Does not all of this typify the surprising contemporary attitudes of young people and others who show little or no concern for the consequences of their acts? Plural families or serial and ephemeral love affairs exemplify this phenomenon in the affective domain, as do political fickleness or ideological changes in public life. The acceptance of the anarchic laws of production and at the same time the extraordinary suspicion of them attest to what we might call economic disorder. In all of this there is an air of nonchalance that encourages not concern for tomorrow but, on the contrary, a desire to live in the present, in reference to a mode of being that has progressively constituted itself over the course of centuries.

If we try to define this mood, we can link it with an eternal paganism, a paganism striving to seize hold of life, to seize what life offers and what presents itself. This pagan exuberance is determined to make use of the pleasures of the present, leading a bold, audacious life, a life permeated by the freshness of the moment—insofar as the latter is provisional, precarious, and therefore intense. Fichte refers to the “general impiety” to be found in Machiavelli’s opposition to Christianity. It seems to me that we can extrapolate from what Fichte says about this paganism. For it is indeed the essence of Christianity that we find in the political project, in the economic conception of existence, or in the search for security that is advocated by various social institutions.

It is against this form of Christianity that the impiety of the present is in revolt. The youthful quality of its effervescences, the freshness of its acts of revolt, the heightened search for polymorphous pleasure in the present, all lead it to see the “ancient world” as its country of origin. Of course, we have to understand “ancient world” metaphorically, that is, as meaning everything that contravenes the various categorical imperatives formulated by modern moralism, whether sexual, economic, or ideological. What distinguishes postmodernity is indeed this return to antiquity, to the archaic. It is as if, beyond the parenthetical episode of
modernity, for better or for worse, in ordinary life or in paroxysmal frenzy, in subdued fashion or in destructive excess, the sublime aspect of the beauty of the world were being rediscovered. Only this would be important, to take pleasure in it for what it is, even if this means submitting to terrible and dangerous laws that must indeed be accepted. This is of course to evoke the theme of amor fati, whose major social consequences one can evaluate in a Nietzschean spirit.

Marx observes that men make history without knowing what history they are making. More generally, the whole of modernity sets up an equivalence between self-realization and mastery over one’s self and the world. There is a kind of pleasure in activity, whether work in the strict sense or the activity of politics. People are very often outraged by the slogan that was inscribed on the gate of the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau: “Arbeit macht frei” (work makes you free). But this is not at all a gloomy antiphrasis; the concentration camps were only the paroxysmal form of the “camp” that is contemporary society, where the injunction to do one thing or another (work, political or conjugal duty, educating one’s children, vacations, and so forth) offers an illusory freedom in exchange for a real slavery, that of “modern times.” To give Marx his due, modern people have indeed made their own history, but what a strange history! In any case, if they had known what history they were making, perhaps they would have refrained!

Waking up with a hangover from this bacchanal of promethean activity, more and more people are adopting a stoic attitude. It is a generalized stoicism, whereby those things that people can do nothing about become unimportant to them. This is the amor fati which ensures that fate is not simply meted out but is accepted, even loved, for what it is. This leads to a form of serenity that can seem paradoxical, but that is the basis of the numerous expressions of generosity, mutual aid, volunteering, and various humanitarian activities that are not uncommon in society and that are tending to proliferate. For the acceptance of what is can go hand in hand with a wish to become involved—not to master a given situation, but to go along with it in order to induce it, should the occasion arise, to give the best of itself. Thus the realization of the self or the world no longer takes the form of straightforward economic action but opens out into an ecological interaction. Perhaps this is how we move from the Hegelian-Marxist “mastery” that typifies modernity to what Bataille calls “sovereignty,” which operates in terms of structural reversibility and would be the trademark of premodern and postmodern societies.

This stoic sovereignty, to be sure, reminds us of the thought, sensibility, and attitudes of the Far East (for example, those of Japan or China) which tend—if I may refer here to François Jullien—to privilege the
“propensity of things.” Which is to say that things, the world—we might add social situations and why not even individual or tribal situations—develop according to their own dispositions. Hence there are no grounds for projecting desires, values, and convictions of whatever kind upon them; rather one must “harmonize” with their development and the necessity that is theirs. Here again, the initiative no longer belongs to the isolated individual or a collectivity formed on the basis of a social contract; rather it is conjoined, shared between the world and humanity, between things and the words that are spoken about them.

Indeed, being attentive to necessity, to the propensity of things, to fate requires us to view individuals in their globality, in their context. That is to say, they are not ruled only by reason, as was the case in modernity, but are equally moved by emotions, feelings, moods, all the nonrational dimensions of what is given in the world.

To take up again a well-known theme revived by Eric Dodds, we can recall the role of the daimon in Greek tradition. Socrates, of course, openly displayed his own daimon, and we can assume that this was a widespread belief from which no one was exempt. But in the context of the present argument, it is interesting to underscore the close link between the daimon and Tyche—that necessity which played such an important role in the framework of ancient culture. In short, we can say that much more depended on necessity than on the particular character of the individual. It is precisely this which is expressed in various ways in the tragedies; one is acted upon more than one truly acts. Fate is there, all-powerful and pitiless, and in spite of the will of the subject it guides the action in the direction of what is written. Here again we are dealing with a form of predestination. To cite just one example among many, the entire myth of Oedipus is constructed on such a necessity, with its well-known paroxysmal outcome.

In fact, the force of destiny only serves to accentuate the growing power of the impersonal. What is at stake in this return of fate is the very negation of the philosophical foundation of the modern West: free will, the decisions of individuals or social groups acting together to make history. The great fantasy of universality was the result. By way of contrast, the affirmation or reaffirmation of cyclical systems makes such free will null and void. The diverse mythic visions of the East that intrude into postmodernity renew their bond with impersonal forces and with the ineluctability of their actions. Whether we are talking about the various philosophies, or more simply the techniques, of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, of an African clairvoyance in direct contact with the forces of the earth, of African-Brazilian possession cults, not to mention the many New Age practices, or simply the fascination exercised by astrology—all this essentially underscores that individuals are at worst
mere toys and at best the partners of forces that exceed them and to which they must adjust.

As expressions of contemporary mythology, science fiction films, many video-clips, and sometimes even advertisements, show very clearly this relativizing of free will by a supraindividual “force.” To be sure, great minds make mockery of such things but their meaningfulness cannot be denied. It bores into the social imaginary, assures the success of folkloric displays and historical reenactments, sends crowds off to pilgrimage sites and turns novels of initiation into bestsellers. In all these cases, and the list is far from complete, it is indeed a matter of a collective mind, a mass subjectivity—what the initiatory tradition calls the “egregore,” that is to say, a social bond that no longer relies on pure reason but on a global interaction saturated with pathos. We could call this an “ethics of the aesthetic,” which is another way of asking the same question as those medieval alchemists puzzling over the glutinum mundi, the glue of the world which brings it about that, whatever else is the case, there is something rather than nothing, and that this something is coherent. This “glue of the world” would thus be an impersonal force, a vital flux in which everyone and everything participates in a mysterious attracting correspondence.

Numerous poets, artists, and utopian thinkers have celebrated this attraction, which it is possible to read in a socio-anthropological sense. This is what I have tried to do through my use of the term “orgy,” by which I mean communal passion, social empathy. Or, to slightly modify a phrase used by Durkheim, we could speak in this regard of an organic solidarity that causes everyone, willing or not, to be essentially part of a whole that at the same time makes each person what he or she is. In short, I exist only because the other who is my neighbor, or the Other who is the social world, grants me my existence. I am such and such a person because the other recognizes me as such. Such a claim may well appear shocking, but is this not, empirically, how societies function, from the smallest entity to the largest wholes? In her book *How Institutions Think*, Mary Douglas ably describes such a “structural effect.” This same phenomenon allows us to understand that whoever does not submit to such a recognition will be rejected, stigmatized, or marginalized. This exclusion stems from the fact that he or she does not have the “clan scent” or did not want to acquire it.

Thus, beyond individualism, whether theoretical or methodological, empirical social life simply is the expression of successive feelings of belonging. One is a member, one belongs, one joins with others, one participates, or to put it more trivially, one is “in.” Even if this could be so in the best moments of modernity, nowadays autonomy, distinctiveness, and the affirmation of individual or class identity are all no longer
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anything more than a lure, an illusion, a simulacrum. The “sociology of the orgy,” I have called it—that is to say, an order of fusion, indeed of confusion, whereby every person exists according to a principle of heteronomy.9

Keeping this in mind, we can understand the wholesale return and resonance of emblematic figures and other archetypes of everyday life. The phenomenon of fan groups among the younger generation is simply the paroxysmal form of these multiple attachments that are lived without even being consciously noticed. In this way one magically “connects” with such and such a rock singer, sports idol, religious or intellectual guru, or political leader, a participation that produces a quasi-mystical communion, a shared feeling of belonging. In a subtle observation, Gilbert Durand, alluding to such great tragic figures as Don Giovanni, emphasizes that they become “pure objects.” They are objects more than subjects since they only exist in the minds of others; they become “ideal types.”10

We can pursue this line of analysis by noting that these “grand abstractions” or archetypes are tending to multiply, indeed to become more democratic. More and more, we see small grand figures. In the final instance, every postmodern tribe will have its emblematic figure just as each tribe, in the strict sense, possessed and was possessed by its totem. In every case, identity, free will, decision-making, and individual choice can, to be sure, be affirmed or claimed, but these are in fact dependent on the identities, decisions, and choices of the group to which one belongs. Let us note, moreover, that these archetypes are regaining force and vigor at the same time that the tragic mood of the present asserts itself. This correlation merits our attention.

Indeed, within the context of the mechanism of the saturation of cultural values so well described by Pitirim Sorokin, it is because belief in the individual’s absolute mastery over himself and nature is waning that we are seeing the resurgence of grand emblematic figures who exercise a powerful attraction. In short, whether it is acknowledged or not, we need to reckon with powers that go beyond us. We might recall—and this complicates our analysis somewhat—that the Judeo-Christian tradition, or even Western culture, rationalized such powers to some degree. The notion of a unique, omnipresent, all-surveying God, and the rational theodicy or theology which served to justify it, are among these rationalizations. It is the same with the unified State, guarantor of the social contract, and the political models that serve as its theoretical foundation. Let us recall in this regard the formula that Marx uses in The Jewish Question to define politics: “the profane form of religion.” God and the State have thus been “economic” ways of thinking and organizing the forces that transcend the individual. These forces were inscribed into a dramatic, rational, and potentially controllable process.
At other moments these forces are again diffracted—they become plural, wild, and hence tragic once more. We master them less than they rule us. We must, for better or worse, deal with them. With regard to Goethe’s exemplary work *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, it was possible to speak of an “intertwining of destinies and characters,” a judicious comment that alerts us to the interaction between the “vital force” belonging to a given individual and “external circumstances,” that is to say, what is determined by fate.11 This is the eternal problem that defines the formation of human beings, but also their existence in society—the problem of the relationship between individual subjectivity and the importance of environment, whatever it may be.

In the final analysis, the long initiation that is human existence consists of finding an equilibrium between character (let us remember the etymology of character: imprint) and the necessities with which this character is confronted. In tragic epochs the archetype can offer a useful way of reaching this equilibrium. As an all-embracing model, as an informing type, it can serve as a matrix—it brings into being and is the condition of possibility for modes of individual and social life. We can illustrate this statement with an observation by Thomas Mann taken from that other great bildungsroman, *Joseph and His Brothers*: “[T]he transparency of personality, the fact that it was the repetition and return of an established type: this basic idea was part of Joseph’s flesh and blood.”

Instead of being irreducibly opposed to each other, instead of being sublated into a reassuring synthesis through a dialectical and dramatic mechanism, at certain moments freedom and necessity are lived in contradictory tension (*tension contradictorielle*), what I have called conflictual harmony. This is of course reminiscent of the mystical tradition or of Hindu philosophy, but also of the process of individuation, well described by C. G. Jung, where the I acts and considers itself as the object of a subject that encompasses it. This is an experience of the Self that does not destroy the empirical individual, the I, but that, on the contrary, elevates it—that is to say, raises it up into a greater unity. This is indeed the intensity and exultation of the tragic condition, the condition, let us remember, of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*: being free in a necessity filled with love.12 In short, it is a form of dependence full of serenity, in that individuals fulfill themselves in a “surplus being” (*plus être*) that reveals them to themselves.

We can easily see how this condition of “surplus being” manifests itself nowadays. Huge rallies, crowds of all kinds, collective trances, fusion through sport, ecstasy through music, religious or cultural effervescences, all raise the individual up to a form of plenitude that is not provided by the greyness of economic or political functionality. In each of these
Phenomena there is a kind of magical participation in what is foreign, in what is strange, in a globality that transcends the singularity of the individual. This globality, whereby everyone is in communion, is of the order of the sacred. Is this the irony of the tragic or the “cunning” of the collective imaginary, putting back into the social circuit that numinous dimension that modernity thought it had evacuated from social life? A reenchantment of the world? Certainly this is the case insofar as we are undeniably witnessing a transcending of mere utility, indeed of instrumentality, whether it be individual or social.

From such a viewpoint, the world and the individual do not progressively become what they ought to be in the light of a predetermined telos, but rather, one might say, they arrive at what they are. The archetype is, in some way, simply an aid to this unveiling, a revelatory mechanism that highlights what is already there. In this sense there is a close link between the tragic dimension of the archetype and the emphasis on a cyclical view of time.

The structural proximity between the archetypal procedure, the collective unconscious, and cyclical time stems from the fact that, as Jung puts it, “every vital process follows its own internal laws.” Take, for example, the unconscious: we cannot force what will come to light in its own good time. Like a spring that spurts forth, wells up again, or dries up according to its own rhythm, one can never predict with certainty the emergence of unconscious flux.

One can likewise compare this to what is circular—or better, spiral—in the creation of images in alchemistic thought or in the dynamic of the unconscious. This creation is not governed by the mechanical linearity of pure reason, but is highly convoluted, rendering its interpretation especially complicated. There is indeed a labyrinthine structure both in the unconscious and in the world of images. And if intellectual interpretation has made extensive inroads into the unconscious, the same cannot be said of the world of images, which continues to be ignored, belittled, or marginalized by thinkers, at least by those who defend a strictly rationalist point of view.

It is certain that convolutions, or even, if we refer to Jungian theory, “circumambulations,” describe the slow circular work that everyone must undergo in order to accede, little by little, to the realization of what I previously called “surplus being.” This is the work of a lifetime. The Tibetan mandala illustrates this idea well in the Eastern tradition, just as the quest for the holy grail expresses it in the tradition of the West. In both cases there is repetition, cyclical movement, and a tragic conception of life. Archetypal figures always employ redundancy, they always refer to a mythical time, the undatable time of our myths and legends: the “once upon a time” of illud tempus.
This is noteworthy with mythic examples in the strict sense, of which there are many in literature, film, theater, and song. But this phenomenon of atemporality, of cyclical or tragic emphasis, can likewise be located in the everyday, or often spectacular, mise-en-scène of contemporary stars. The eternal boy (puer aeternus) represented by Michael Jackson, the repentant fallen woman embodied by Madonna, or, more prosaically, the holy rascal represented by Bernard Tapie, not to mention the warlike heroes exemplified in so many sports figures—all this stems from a reenchantment of the world that reverberates powerfully in the collective unconscious. These figures do not create anything specific, they only repeat, rearticulate, characters and ways of being that are anthropologically rooted. It is this cyclical aspect, moreover, that carries them to the pinnacle. And it is by communing with these redundant mise-en-scène, by identifying with them, that after a long and largely unconscious initiation, one goes beyond oneself, one “explodes” into something that transcends the confinement or the constriction of the small individual ego.

Precisely this is the question in the cyclical notion of time: the possibility of living a plural self or of getting beyond the self and becoming part of a much greater entity. This could be the Self, as suggested by various Eastern philosophies, or the conjunction of yin and yang in the same tradition. With regard to Western culture, we can note the two columns of Solomon’s temple: Jachin and Boaz, metaphors of a kind of coincidentia oppositorum, namely, the conjunction of such opposites as passivity and activity, freedom and necessity, and, of course, self and nonself. In short, it is a matter of the globality, the organic character of all things.

It is important to highlight a fundamental redundancy, whether in the actual expressions of contemporary art, or—in an area not necessarily very far removed—in the contradictions of myth. Both Lévi-Strauss and Gilbert Durand have insisted that repetition, and the “bricolage” that goes along with it, are at work in the great spiritual works of humanity. This repetitive quality, whether it be the Nietzschean return of the same, the idea that obsesses the writer, the characteristic phrase of the musician, the “hand” of the painter, the eternal theoretical digression of the thinker, even the recognizable refrain of the singer, all underscore, in a certain sense, the presence of the nontemporal in history, of a kind of immobility in the midst of movement.

It is by keeping in mind the redundancy of myth and the repetitiveness of daily creation, without, to be sure, forgetting the repetition at work in contemporary life, that we will come to understand the part played by the intimate emotions occasioned by familiar phenomena, situations, ideas, and so forth that regularly return. As Thomas Aquinas
has shown, *habitus* emphasizes the structuring character of established custom. The metaphor of the "fold" proposed by Deleuze is a way of actualizing the resonance of habit. Contrary to what modern theories of education have claimed, everything shows that individual or collective improvement is not necessarily part of a progress without end. Rather, it can realize itself at certain moments in accordance with that which recurs: uses and customs, myths and rituals, the habitual practices of a given society. Such was the claim of premodern society; it is possible that it is regaining importance in postmodernity.

To put it another way, education gives way to initiation, with improvement drawing on internal resources and not as a function of what is imported or imposed from outside. All this is highlighted by the prevalence of the cyclical instead of the linear, the confrontation with fate rather than a history that one fashions as one wills. The relation to politics is certainly the clearest expression of such a paradigm shift. Thus it is no longer a matter of taking the place of the master via a struggle unto death, as the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave has it, but rather of recognizing, when one is ready, a master who presents himself. This might be a master in the strict sense, or it might take the form of inescapable events, of the tribe to which one belongs, or even the adversity that is accepted for what it is.

This is what initiation means: to use an external constraint in order to achieve an inner perfection. We could link such an initiation to Jung’s commentary on an epitaph that appears in the cloister of Basel cathedral: "eadem mutata resurgo": to reappear transformed and yet the same. This is, of course, the process of the unconscious turning in spirals around a center. But there are many social examples of this movement, resting less on a historical and progressivist notion than on a cyclical and more progressive one. It is a matter here of the return of a traditional attitude that is especially evident in the many syncretic practices that characterize postmodernity. We can easily locate this traditional attitude in Eastern philosophies, but it is also expressed in the Etruscan doctrine of “the Ages of the World.” Henri de Lubac’s analysis of Vico’s claim that there is a regular rotation of the ages of the world is relevant here. Under the watching eye of Providence, peoples replay, always and anew, the eternal problem of life and death.

It would be interesting to clarify, in the light of such a doctrine, the astonishing circular succession of social phenomena, as well as the no less surprising attitude of the ever greater number of individuals eager to perfect themselves through religion, fusion with nature, or merging with the group. In all these cases it is not the fact of being master (of oneself, of the world, of society) that is important, but, on the contrary, of acceding to the status of a disciple and adhering to the demanding servitude implied by such a status.
There is a form of fatalism that we could stigmatize and consider regressive, but which at the same time underlines a possible renaissance, the necessary renewal of all things. The spirit of the times, to be sure, inclines toward melancholy, toward a nostalgia for an indistinct elsewhere that is hard to locate in time and space. But this “thirst for the infinite,” to take up Durkheim’s expression, by virtue of the anomie that it causes, will encourage sudden acts of revolt and inspire multiple social effervescences that do not follow the established schema of historical reason, but that take the chaotic path of those utterly unpredictable corsi e recorsi, just like the surging pulse of life reacting against the multiple constraints of the forms of death. Like the fabulous phoenix that is reborn from its ashes, social life depends on surprising “regressions” (regrédiences) in order to surge up anew where one no longer expected it. What is indeed striking is the circularity of this movement, even while, thanks to the development of technology, it has affinities with a spiral process.

What is underlined by the doctrine of “the ages of the world,” what is emphasized by the cyclical conception of time and highlighted by all the repetitive acts of everyday life, is a vital need for regeneration, an anthropological need grounded in the belief that life always begins anew. Here one finds the theme of the affirmative attitude that is characteristic, for example, of Nietzschean philosophy but that is also expressed in the Zen sensibility as it appears in this koan: “What is the ultimate word for expressing truth? Joshu replies: yes.” To affirm existence is difficult for theories grounded in the meaning of history, whether divine or profane, that look for the significance of life in a finality that is to come and that is never attained. The Judeo-Christian and Hegelian-Marxist vulgates have based their waiting for the future coming on the negation of life “here” in relation to a life “over there” that would be better and free of all vicissitudes. The dramatic tension toward another life is their driving force.

The tragic sensibility, that of the cycle, is completely different, wisely accepting what is and applying a form of intensity to living it. We can allude here to a phrase from St. Augustine taken somewhat out of context: “[T]he measure of love is without measure.” Precisely this is underscored by the intensity of the tragic: the measure of life is to live without measure. The confrontation with destiny that can be found in many youth practices, in the search for a life of quality, in the concern for the present, in an ecological sensibility, is, quite simply, a way of living with intensity what offers itself, what arrives—in short, what is rather than what should be or could be. As I have said, it is an ethics of the moment in that it means, obstinately and in spite of everything, to live this existence that is shot through by vicissitudes but that remains attractive in spite of this or because of it.
The tragic sense of life, whether acknowledged or not, whether conscious or unconscious, reminds us that the grayness of the everyday could not exist without moments of rupture that periodically illuminate it. These underscore the fact that a life that does not project itself into the future is obliged to take seriously the orgiastic pleasures of the unbridled senses, whether the pleasures of taste, smell, hearing, touch, or sexuality. Rooted in this chthonian foundation, that of the emblematic figure of Dionysus, the emphasis placed on the cycle makes it possible, when faced with apologists for the future and those nostalgic for the past, to relive the serenity of the Greek *kairos*, that is, to seize hold of the many opportunities of contemporary life.

We are talking here about a true revolution, one which, like the revolutions in the heavens, consists of a return to the forefront of the social scene of what we had thought we had left behind. This is what Pierre-Simon Ballanche calls “palingenetic cycles,” which is to say that human affairs proceed less by evolution than by revolution. Palingenesis as “the law of repair” ensures that humanity grows on the ruins of what collapsed. Cataclysms are no more avoidable in the social order than they are in the natural order. Empires are born, flourish, then disappear. Other empires are born in their turn. But suffering and sorrow are educators of humanity in giving value to what is lived. “There can be no resurrection without the cross.” This saying belongs to a specific culture, but its meaning is general in establishing an equivalence between the precariousness of all things and the exalting of the world in its successive moments.

Confrontation with destiny and cyclical return—these are indeed the essential elements marking the fundamental change now taking place in the notion of social time. Let us recall that this is not an abstractly philosophical problem but rather the basis of a new relationship to others and to the world. Is it the turn of a millennium that reactivates the hopes and fears belonging to the arrival of a world to which we have not been accustomed? Historians have often made the point that millenarianism brings with it ideas of catastrophe, but also the hope for a “New Age.” Let us keep in mind that the “New Age” of our own time is only a version of an older structure that sees in cyclical temporality an opportunity to change everything and every one of us. The idea of a millennium that changes everything has existed since the dawn of modernity, and as with Joachim of Fiore and Savonarola, it will not fail to find new forms of expression at this end of modern times.

These could be the celebration of the image of the hero, or indeed the big-hearted bandit, or quite simply the delinquent whose exploits are discussed in detail on television and in the news. Serial dramas, documentaries, and human-interest stories on the television news—all
these only awaken in everyone the desire for an intensely lived fate. In communing with these anomic destinies one magically participates in the very idea of Destiny. The fascination that such destinies exert on the “man without qualities” forces us to recognize that the tragic is again the order of the day and that the antiseptic society that has gradually imposed itself may not be as solid as it appears. In each of us slumbers a bandit who does not fear death and who is willing to put his life on the line. This may well occur only by proxy, but even as fantasy it expresses a need for the Shadow, a desire for the “accursed share” that modernity thought it had well and truly eliminated.

Indeed, we must insist that there are moments when History writ large gives way to the small histories that are lived from day to day. At such moments, History exhausts itself in myths. At such moments, the tragic rises up again. It is the moment when death is no longer denied, but is deliberately confronted and publicly embraced.

NOTES

This is a translation of part of the introduction and first chapter of Michel Maffesoli’s *L’instant éternel: Le retour du tragique dans les sociétés postmodernes* (Paris: Denoël, 2000). Translated by permission of the author.

3  Virgil *Aeneid* 3.395.


