

Michel Maffesoli

EVERYDAY TRAGEDY AND CREATION

Translated from the French by

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In this essay, Michel Maffesoli exalts the poetry of the everyday, and a way of being that, paradoxically, opens one up to life through rituals that smack of a quest for divine nothingness. 'Everyday Tragedy and Creation' traces a series of connections: between Benjamin's particular form of empirical mysticism and the notion of messianic time, the vitalism of Nietzsche (and tangentially his rediscovery of the Greek notion of tragedy and destiny), that of Bergson with his concept of duration, as well as the sociological hermeneutics of Dilthey. In the course of his discussion, Maffesoli invokes Verlaine, Rimbaud, street theatre and Eliot, and proposes a Zen-like approach to everyday happiness. More generally, Maffesoli rejects the temporality of modernism and drama and celebrates instead the 'non-time' of the tragedy of living in the present within a medium of communal images and practices.

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I

It is always interesting to lend an ear to what mystics, dreamers and storytellers have to say, as they are often in tune with the natural forces secretly tapping into a given era. Their messages are naturally ahead of established facts yet largely in accord with everyday social life. They are also *paroxysmal* with respect to prevailing social conformity, hence marginal.¹ And yet, from the moment one wishes to be attentive to things in their nascent stages, it is important to know how to appreciate their true value. This is a good 'method' since these *creations* illuminate the paths taken by all practices, ways of being and thinking that, in a non-conscious manner, reject established values and other dogmatic representations in an era that has become alien for most people.

In this sense, the prophetic message is a highly pertinent one. Contrary to what is generally said in order to invalidate it, prophecy is not given to foretelling the future. In terms closest to its etymological roots as *pro phemi*, a prophet

speaks 'before' rather than 'ahead of' the people. He is content to voice the experiences that others keep to themselves. To select just a few examples among many, one may recall that for the mystics of the Kabbalah, the progressive temporality of modernism makes little sense. All that matters is the *moment* when eternity can be gathered in its plenitude. This insight has often been highlighted. Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* reflect on the claim that for Jews 'every second of time constituted the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter' (1968, p. 264). In *messianic time*, this moment only matters, inasmuch as it offers self-fulfilment through a ritual of communion transcending the limits of the small self, hemmed in by time and all of its constraints and contingencies.²

It would be easy to conceive of this moment as nothing but a succession of moments: good or bad moments, as the case may be, but moments that one strives to live with qualitative intensity and that are, for want of anything better, accepted for what they are. Such a popular concern may, further, be compared to that of another mystic, Eckhart, for whom fulfilment consists in passing from the realm of *pure possibility* to that of *eternal actuality*. Such is the natural force of the eternal moment!

To connect with the subject at hand, I would say that the *drama* of history – be it individual or social – consists in being a perpetual possibility. It is characterized by an ideological tension, and its essential trademark is the 'project', or *pro jectum* tending towards the future. *Tragedy*, on the other hand, is of the present, and is nothing but a series of actualizations: passions, thoughts and creations that exhaust themselves in action, in acts of instantaneous expenditure, without reserve. There is a mythical vision – of which there are many contemporary illustrations – whereby each moment possesses, in some sense, the potential to express the manifold possibilities at the disposal of each person, individually, or of every social group, collectively. Time stands still, becomes intensified, to allow each individual and every situation to give the best of itself.

Let the world turn, events unfold, catastrophes strike, politics make a spectacle of itself; all that matters is a still point where what exists can be fully enjoyed. As T. S. Eliot put it: *at the still point of the world*. An aristocratic attitude, you might say. Yes, but a popular one, befitting the man without qualities, whose existence (conscious or not), is but a succession of fixed moments, whose concatenation constitutes the vital flow. In Bergsonian terms, one remembers the *duration* of such moments more than their *historical* connection.

II

This is the issue with respect to the moment and the present, since both lead back to life and experience, more than to representation or a theory of life with some kind of all-encompassing and rigid system. Life in its banality, in its

cruelty too, and its mixture of light and shadow: this is what terrifies those who give voice to life or who have taken it upon themselves to make life speak. Vitalism and the diverse strands of a philosophy of life (Nietzsche, Simmel and Bergson) have received rather poor press, having always been under suspicion of corruption, by association with dubious influences. What cannot be controlled or rationalized is always disquieting, especially in the Western tradition, where the primacy of the cognitive functions and of reason has always been maintained.

It would be simple to establish a parallel between reason and the future on the one hand, and image and the present on the other. By image – as indicated earlier – is meant an image insofar as it presents or *actualizes* things immediately and directly. In any case, it is striking to note the coincidence of two phenomena: the forceful return of the image, and the multifaceted reinvestment of the present. Add to this, the renewed interest for the vitalist authors cited above.

What is most important though is the relation between life and the present, and both of these issues are generally left unspoken, or relegated to the category of things that are so self-evident, it is pointless to commit them to theory. To illustrate this nexus of ideas, there is a passage from the work of poet and novelist Julien Gracq, which reads: ‘Nine tenths of our lived life – of the time when, after all, nothing is uninteresting for literature – takes place in a world without past or future. This is the world that Paul Eluard called *immediate life*, a world which is largely off limits to history, and where the drive for action and accomplishment has no purchase’ (Gracq 1969, p. 878).³

This insightful analysis aptly underscores the atemporality of immediate life and the eternity of the lived moment as well as its intensity. It would appear that these *nine tenths* of life are what so interest literature, and theory even more so. Indeed, it is all of existence, all of those mundane elements that make up the ground of culture and the social tie. This plenitude is the conservatory, in the long run, of our being together – a surprisingly resilient togetherness, if you consider the many estrangements and impositions affecting it. Strength of the everyday!

I have said that one could give pride of place to poets. Verlaine comes to mind here: ‘The humble life with its simple and repetitive tasks is a choice labour, deserving much love’ (1964, pp. 146–147).⁴ This is it, exactly: ‘immediate life’, non-theorized, non-rationalized, with no finality nor aim, but entirely invested in the present. It is this that calls for love; in other words, intensity. In this way, I repeat, giving these terms their strictest sense: no longer *tending towards* something (*ex-tendere*), but *tending inwards*, to what founds and constitutes being together (*in-tendere*). Investment in the present, *intensity*, is what ties me to others in order to live this mutual investment. A *choice labour* allows me to understand, at certain moments, the importance of the qualitative, the suspension of time, rituals of all kinds, and the uses and customs that in fact ensure the framework of the body social. Life without qualities is just what ensures, in a

mysterious manner, the preservation of society. This leads us to the heart of everyday sociality, of banality, but also *survival* in the long run.

In a mysterious manner: meaning in the manner that is closest to the sort of mystery found in traditional initiation rites, allowing individuals to congregate and commune in something that surpasses them. Indeed, over and above any strictly religious form, perhaps what is truly sacred resides in this: an unfathomable connection ensuring a no less solid bond. And is it not in this sense that one can comprehend, on the level of the day-to-day, what ethnologists have called the *aura*, what historians of certain secret societies have named the *egregore*, and what theologians and philosophers refer to as the *habitus*? In brief, a way of being, based on a close relationship to the natural and social environment, lived before it is thought or theorized.

On the whole, everyday situations are thus a kind of naturally occurring founding ritual. The places and games of childhood, the circumstances of early enthusiasms, the apprenticeship of ways of thinking, the internalization of bodily postures, the assimilation of linguistic forms, and foremost, all sorts of non-verbal communication – all of these rituals – through successive layerings, create the framework of an organic solidarity without which society would fall apart.

There are times when these fundamental uses and customs are rejected, or at least relativized, through historical movements. Modernity belongs to this class of events, tending to erase or minimize all of the effects and contingencies of rootedness. At times, however, rootedness returns with a vengeance. Things such as territory, space, and symbolic values again make sense. The local and its nostalgic associations, its fragrances and flavours ‘structure’ individuals and groups. All of this is what gives the present its power of assemblage. One could say that a philosophy of becoming makes way for an anthropology of being, or, to repeat a statement of Durand’s, the abstraction of history is replaced by the *density of the present* (1980, p. 157), or what may also be called the *labyrinth of the lived* (Moles & Rohmer 1972, cf. also Maffesoli 1979).

In this context, it is interesting to recall the etymology of the term *concrete*: meaning what stimulates growth or ‘increase’ with (*cum crescere*); that is, a time lending itself to being that is shared with others. It is an increase that, mirroring the surrounding flora, raises itself by taking root and nourishment from all of those trifling things making up common life. Consider this an ethic (*ethos*): the place that unites me with the other, the other that is at hand, the other that is the distant tamed.

That is what I am calling the sacred. However, this sense of sacred is not overarching, nor does it imply an abstract God or a rational state. Instead, this sense of sacred relates to an *immanent transcendence* that is constituted by the feeling of belonging, by shared passion or by a quasi-mystical sense of correspondence to one’s surroundings. Consequently, it is no longer the universal that matters, but the particular in all of its carnality, affectiveness and essentially

symbolic properties. Indeed, if one sees the *presentist* ambience in this light, it is what enables self-knowledge as well as the knowledge of others. Is this not what constitutes a symbol *stricto sensu*? It implies knowing oneself and acknowledging the other, but not as a purely rational, autonomous abstract entity. That is, not as a modern individual who separates himself from nature and distinguishes himself from his neighbours, and makes of this separation and distinction the basis of a well-known logic of domination and mastery. Rather, it implies a knowledge and acknowledgement lived by someone in a community framework: that of a group, a tribe, of *elective affinities*, all things of which tradition speaks, and which seem to be coming back before our very eyes. It is this very *feeling* that lends the present moment all of its tragic intensity.

At the same time, it is all of this that makes the present so alien to our modes of analysis, based as they are on and upon the universal. In fact, as modernist theories would have it, everyday life, insofar as it is concrete and rooted, is essentially alienated. As modernists, we are urged to overcome ordinary life and to liberate it from all of the constraints in which it is steeped, in order to attain a surplus of being. We are told that it is in history and the dialectics that drives it, that the modern individual will find fulfilment. All that links us to space and habits is more or less potentially damaging. We must, through rational and consciously assumed struggles and conflicts, dramatically break loose from everything that binds us.

III

One may recall, at this point, the work of Henri Lefebvre, who in his unique critical way of thinking, with all of the nuances bestowed upon it by his erudition, could nevertheless not desist from being critical of ordinary life. He must be praised for taking it into consideration, but he regards daily life only as something that should be overcome, that must, in a sense, be freed from itself. The title of his work is instructive in this regard: *The Critique of Everyday Life*. In this case, the critique consists in considering everyday life as the ‘non-tragic’ par excellence. For Lefebvre (1991, p. 169), kitsch objects and interior design in general serve to create an armature against the feeling of tragedy, which is to say against our consciousness of death and the inevitable finitude of life. The work of Moles (1971), on the contrary, shows how a ‘psychology of kitsch’ is entirely an *art of happiness*.

Lefebvre’s stance is characteristic of an intellectual attitude incapable of grasping what imbues the everyday with its poetry. This *poetry* is clearly not present as such, but is nonetheless at work in such things as the ironic stance toward any grandiloquent moral certainties, the humour suffusing run-of-the-mill conversations, and most of all in the body language expressing our passion for all things social.

Evidently, each of these instances bears the stamp of the stereotypical; this is the reason, moreover, why they are so often overlooked, and yet it is important to realize that the stereotypes in question are rooted in founding archetypes. I would even say that it is precisely this dialectic between the everyday and the archetypal that constitutes the poetry of the everyday, and again it is this everyday poetry that becomes the wellspring from which, soon after, works of culture will emerge. In effect, this everyday poetry is where the richness of cultural experience can be found, the source of its longevity.

IV

As opposed to the dramatic, which tends to overlook it, the conditions of everyday life are ideally suited to the tragic; our task is to provide a theoretical account of this situation. If we take Dilthey's hermeneutics, for example, we see that it places its emphasis squarely on lived experience. On Dilthey's account, 'taking life as the starting point and maintaining a permanent connection with it forms the primary feature of the structure of the cultural sciences, based as they are on experience, understanding and acquaintance with life' (Habermas 1978, p. 178). What Dilthey proposes is an entire programme. This includes learned comprehension, but also a theory of empathy or *Einfühlungstheorie*, a theory that sees in 'poiesis' the basis of creation par excellence. *Poiesis* is not to be confused with a goal to be attained, nor with an end to be reached, but should be understood as the rooted sense, the lived sense, the sense that is exhausted *in actu* – in the act itself.⁵ This is what founds the triadic relation of 'tragic/lived/experience'. It is also the key to understanding what Moles (1995) refers to as the *science of the imprecise*.

If hermeneutics takes such a connection seriously, it provides a way to understand the many contemporary expressions of being open to the world and the tranquil raging of the present. That is, it can shed light on the need to live here and now, and the desire to enjoy whatever presents itself. It can explain, as well, the current disillusionment with all of the ideological and political agendas, and the extreme scepticism with which many abstract beliefs and representations are viewed. In a word, an amazing empiricism is afoot, placing its trust only in the presentation of the world, and appreciating only the world such as it is, not worrying about how the world should be or might be. Everyday experience is geared to living life as it is, to accommodating what exists, to making sense 'anyway' of an experience awash with vicissitudes and imperfections, seeing as it is the only life we are given to live. While it is clearly not the case in every epoch, it appears that in certain eras the collective unconscious is constituted by and for such an *immanentism*.

I would like to insist on this point; there is a poetics of banality, a poetics harbouring a high degree of intensity. I would tend to view it as a wellspring of

societal energy, a watertable (so to speak), hidden from view but crucially important to collective survival. In a different context, Callois comments on what he calls the ‘adventure of greyness’ (Cioran 1986, p. 140). The expression fittingly describes this repository that is everyday life. A treasure is buried there, although it must be revealed to itself *within the framework of an organic knowledge and solidarity*. It should therefore not be disdained *a priori*. In keeping with the mysterious cycle of human history, the fascination of the future or the search for lost origins is sometimes superseded by the adventure of the present. And, one may well wonder whether the postmodern knights of the Holy Grail are not actually the adventurers of the everyday, who no longer speculate about faraway hypothetical ideals, but expend their energies living in the here and now, day by day, with a kind of existential intensity.

Simmel considered a key trait of this adventure to be precisely this focus on the ‘here and now’, life in its immediacy, ‘the upsurge – he said – of the vital process in a point that has neither past nor future’ (1989, pp. 319–320). The expression is paradoxical, yet it captures the intensity of the moment, that of Zen archers focusing more on their inner balance than on their aim, with the end result being given as a bonus. It is interesting to note that adventure as a concentration of the vital process is presented by Simmel as a form of experience. One could say as the ‘ethics of aesthetics’, inasmuch as it creates sociality.

When one is aware of the importance of ‘form’ as per Simmel (form being that which reveals and brings about the advent of being), one cannot but be attentive to the reversibility, the intimate connection, in a word to the cross-fertilization between adventure and experience. By keeping this in mind, one can understand how, more and more, an adventurous life goes hand in hand with a spiritual experience lived as a relationship with destiny – a relationship that must be counted on, but of which one is not entirely in control.

In this sense, the contemporary attitude connects with that of the tragic hero, especially as incarnated in the Greek tradition. The Greek tragic hero does not question; instead, he is proud to accept the dictates of fate. Cioran distinguishes between this type of heroism and that embodied by Job. The latter harasses the Almighty, demands explanations, and absolutely rejects what is and what happens, although his fate is out of his hands. Job’s is a good example of the dramatic spirit, hounded by an obsession with the future, the project, the action – in a word – mastery of life. This sums up all of Judaeo-Christian culture. Tragedy, on the contrary, accepts destiny and acknowledges existence for what it is: precarious, finite, always submitted to the inexorable law of mortality, the finitude of every thing and every one.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the accentuation of the present is simply another way of affirming one’s acceptance of death. To live in the present is to live one’s death in the everyday, to confront it, and to assume it. The terms intensity and tragedy convey exactly this: the only things that matter are those

that one knows will cease. Certain eras fight against this certitude and, therefore, will, action and projections for the future predominate. Other ages adapt, accommodate and adjust to finitude and give preference to the contemplation and enjoyment of the world, and to the present serving as their vector. Yet, such contemplation and pleasure are fleeting, shot through as they are with feelings of finitude, consuming with intensity everything that gives them life.

We may recall, for example, the difference between civilizations that bury their dead, and those that cremate them (Spengler 1973). The former express a desire for duration over time. Burial is a kind of negation or denial of death. It is a simulacrum of lasting life, the tomb being in a sense a second abode which, depending on the culture, may be decorated or where one may leave nourishment and other manifestations of the kind in the hope of a return to life. Cremation, on the contrary, enacts the fact that what is over is definitely over. The lapsing of life is affirmed and even constitutes through appropriate ceremonies an exaltation of the end. The force of destiny goes hand in hand with the force of oblivion. This ritual does not mimic rebirth, but rather recognizes that death is an integral part of life. This amounts to a paroxysmal display of immanentism, of a present that suffices unto itself and wants no truck with the illusions and comforts furnished by long-term aims.

Death and the present are at the heart of any number of contemporary phenomena. The music scene surely offers numerous examples, but painting does so as well, highlighting through various forms the 'minimalism' and the everyday banality of art that in the best of cases resembles the quest of mystics for divine nothingness. Street theatre is no less important, offering the moving spectacle of the vibrant new tribes living innocently in excess and chaos, in a surprising alliance where the closeness of death is coupled with a voracious zeal for life. Such an alliance brings to mind Rimbaud's invocation to a 'mysterious death', his 'sister of charity'. Actually, from the moment one makes one's life into a work of art, that is, makes one's existence into something all-encompassing, life contains its opposite and will strive to accommodate it.

Presentism and its incarnation in everyday life tends to give rise to a kind of intensity that, conscious or quasi-conscious of the ephemeral nature of all things, chooses to enjoy them to the fullest, at full speed, here and now. Consequently, the linear time of modern calculation, the mechanical time of industrial production and the time clock, the empty and homogeneous time of drama, make way for the discontinuities of lived time – the time of duration. The powerful moments or the banal events of the everyday are all that matter. One might say that only the banal is eventful. Thus the *kairos* of ancient philosophy meets up with a sense of opportunity, a generalized *savoir vivre*, a 'situationism' for all of those events that occur along the path of one's existence.⁶ Contemporary research on cinema and advertising stresses the fact that the success of a given movie or advertising campaign hinges, precisely, on whether or not they express the eventfulness or the *adventitiousness* of life without qualities (Moles 1981).⁷ In

this sense, the image is definitely a medium for symbolic communication. It creates culture.

We are speaking here of *popular* culture in the strongest terms, by which I mean to say something that founds or creates society. That is, culture expressing a collective experience that, in the final analysis, thumbs its nose at any and all moral, political or economic imperatives issued by power in the abstract and overarching sense. The phrase 'in the final analysis' has to be uttered because there must exist, beyond a doubt, an apparent submission to the established order. What choice is there? But, above and beyond this apparent submission, there exists a substantial force of resistance, that of aloofness or that of dropping out, not causing a stir but expressing itself in a thousand little ironies, versatilities and revolts that come to light regularly in societies called democratic.

It may be possible to compare this ruse or anthropological duplicity with the fundamental immanentism or 'instinctive phenomenism' with which the cultures of the Far East, as well as the diverse religious philosophies that have constituted them, have been credited (Pons 1988, p. 43). This immanentism succeeds in expressing a relationship with nature and with others that compose what is finite, derelict and mortal in everyday life. Transcendent power, whether religious or political, may be exercised, but is considered no more than an illusion that is not to be trusted, or as a force that can be tempered by the much more precious demands of the everyday, of concrete existence expressing itself in the infinity of rites and customs – exacting, minutious, constraining – that make up a culture. A strange reversal of fortune, whereby the hegemony of Western thought, underscored by a linear conception of time, is now ceding to the 'mythical Orient' whose revenge it is to impose, through an accentuation of the present, an openness to the world, to its pleasures and its joys, as well as its cruelties and sorrows.

Is ordinary life becoming oriental? Perhaps not consciously, but certainly unconsciously, precisely to the extent that only the present lived moment exists, with others, in a given place. This is immanentism. Living that is transmitted through the medium of communal images, the bodies that one intensifies, the environment that one reinvests in, all things found under the aegis of the 'instinctive phenomenism' of empirical life. Life without qualities, the everyday life that in the strongest terms is 're-orienting' the world – giving it its profound sense.

Notes

- 1 Trans. Note: Maffesoli uses this term throughout his work to mean 'extreme' or 'acute'.
- 2 Cf. the analysis of Löwy (1992, pp. 95–126); also Eckhart (1942, p. 158).
- 3 Trans. by Karen Isabel Ocaña.

- 4 Modified trans. by Karen Isabel Ocaña.
 5 For those with etymological knowledge of ancient Greek, the sense of *poiesis* would be very close to that of the creative act.
 6 Trans. Note: *Kairos* in Maffesoli's usages means right or proper time; that is, the propitious moment for performing an action.
 7 Cf. Durand (1982, p. 254); also Maffesoli (1993, 1996).

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