

The Masque of Self Death

Gilles Lazare

The mark of death stains the living – residue of an order of consumption that flattens difference and jettisons humanity into unforgiving continuity. Death functions as a horizon and its pursuit is a reckless desire to reach beyond the shuddering discontinuity of being and enter into an undifferentiated Nothingness.

Death is not negation but the exchange of one state for another through the membrane of existence called life. Since it is generally reckoned that this transmutation cannot reverse itself, to describe death as 'not-life' is insufficient: it is 'other-than-life' in the plurality of connotation. However, in a civilization predicated on materiality, this exchange has been seen to be a poor bargain – giving up the certainty of life for the unknown. Down the centuries Death has been figured as an insatiable collector of souls, one whose dues are to be cheated if, and whenever, possible, though this itself carries its own penalties. Eager to appease the gods to whom each civilization is beholden, those, like Faustus, who are given the power over life and death are shown to be trapped by their own greed for life. Snared by their impure lust to retain their grip on the fragile threads guaranteeing existence in the face of annihilation, they lose not only their life but their soul, too; damned for despair. As in Ancient Greek tragedy, that failure to embrace and honour the release of death signals an immaturity, an unwillingness to pass from this human world into the beyond.

In the general economy of life in Western culture, suicide has been allotted an excremental role, as an expression of waste or as the denial of the fundamental tenets of Christian and scientific-rational order. The self death, or self murder, has heaped upon it the contempt and opprobrium of religion. It features as a far greater crime than homicide, since (in Christian terms) the suicide removes him or herself beyond the authority and jurisdiction of the priests through whose benediction salvation may be attained from God for one's sins. That, in Western jurisprudence, suicide remained a statutory offence until relatively recently (and frequently with the harshest of prison terms), exposes that passionate opposition it has inspired as a form of hysteria. Thus the agents of Law wreak a futile vengeance upon those who have slipped from them. As suicides are denied burial in hallowed ground, so too, unshriven, are they denied access to Heaven by the intermissaries of God on Earth. A caste of unsexed 'others' denying the gift of Eros as if this were able to bestow upon them a sanctity of objectivity.

Death erupts in us, jars us from our mundane consciousness in a fashion analogous to the mode in which travellers in the modern world are displaced from one site to another, from deep within the borders of countries and nations. The aeroplane and the airport act as zones of transition materialising 'foreign' bodies like an efflorescence of cancer bursting in waves from its epicentre. The metaphor of the journey is stayed – thousands of years of spiritual representation of humanity's place within the greater order(s) of the cosmos vanishes as those simple means by which we come to understand the transition from one state to another ebb away from our everyday experience. In this way the crossing of borders, too, ceases to resonate as powerfully in a modern psyche now freed from the surface; and the concept of exile is radically altered as the exponential flooding of day-to-day existence with mass telecommunications ushers in an immersive representation of the world to which we are all 'foreign'.

Self Death remains a radical act of removing the self from the convention of socially reasonable behaviour, the order of legitimacy enabled by a willing deference to the concept of social order and hierarchies. Against the flow of all the propaganda of education and conditioning, it is a channel cutting through the fabric of civilization towards a zone of chaos, a plunge into the nebulous place of the Unnameable. That process of naming (and even more extensively of anthropomorphising) is crucial to the inscription of the self into the binary stasis of subjectivity which governs the human perspective reached in the West. It draws up at an impasse at the point where the difference between the subject and the object, as traditionally observed, breaks down and there occurs an oscillation: the exclusivity of identity is clouded by new relations forged in the flux between the self and its environment. This state opens up a new dialogue for the individual, not yet on the cusp of death, whereby discontinuity may be tempered by an expanded sense of the self in continuous relation to the world. Sensing the way in which the forces forming and formed by one's existence interpenetrate within the binary, linear mode of human thought. But even here, such moments are fleeting and of necessity fragmentary.

It is the denial of the role of the self in maintaining a concept of one's own existence that makes Self Death an insurrection against the banality of social mores imposed by the logic of government and democracy in all its forms.

A Pornography of Logic

Against the Weapons of Mass Entertainment brought to bear upon us by the insidious forces of Reason and Capital there are precious few defences to deflect the onslaught of banality that threatens to overwhelm us. However, it is the knowledge of a certain, if final and ultimate, sally port which yet remains open to us that rescues us from the horror of total incorporation into a body politic that despises difference. To take this route, to choose this option is to make a gamble against the odds that, beyond the horizon of predetermined existence with which we are familiar, lies a region of which we cannot be informed. A region where, as ancient maps used to say, "Here Be Dragons" – fabulous beings whose mantle, once there, we might assume. The only certainty on this journey is that one may not turn back. But turn back to what?

Spewed across the wreckage of History are the corpses of people who have taken the route of Self Death rather than submit to an oppressor. Caught on a precipice between one form of danger – radical action to preserve the dignity and state of the individual – and safety, or the regression to a position within an order representing physical integrity at the expense of intellectual and moral autonomy. Their Self Deaths seem to me now as necessary actions taken by the individual to preserve their honour and should themselves be honoured as an affirmation of life up to the point of annihilation. Even though that act thrust the individual across the threshold of death, the fundamental refusal to submit to oppression is surely a signal voice shouting for the right to live. Self death could never be an act taken lightly, in that it pierces the membrane of the knowledge of its own condition that humanity believes incontrovertible. It is to take a step outside of what can be represented.

But logic determines that life is sacred, not to be given up at any cost. In just such a way as pornography is commonly portrayed as an obscenity, an excessive and over-indulgent obsession with the erotic, so too does this logic of preservation appear obscene: what horrors must we suffer at the hands of tormentors in order to win the approval of the guardians of morality? Who, after a century's harrowing witness to industrialised violence against both the individual and whole communities, could honestly proclaim the moral superiority of martyrdom? It can only be with a lament that friends are gone from us now, that any Self Death can also be honoured and a human life celebrated at its point of departure for loving life well-enough to let go before the taste of it turns stale.

A Modern Antigone: Punctum and the Sigh

The proximity with which Marina Abramovic has approached the space of death causes me to see her two-fold: in one light as a latter-day St Teresa of Avila, whose pursuit of ritual self-sacrifice led her into a dialogue with psychic damage, obsessively seeking after a mental purity through privation of the body; and secondly, as a modern Antigone, maniacally cleansing the bones of the victims of the twentieth century, engaging in a process of sublimating violence to honour the Dead. Both of these roles are ones which have been removed from their traditional contexts in the twentieth century. Under the influence of psychiatry and psychoanalysis they have been pathologised, made subject to the scrutiny of experts whose objective overview of the wider social order becomes one of a tendency to normalise, to homogenise. In the desire to fix a partisan concept of the nature of 'truth' and 'reality', such aberrant behaviour is no longer seen as part of complex pattern of social exchanges made by self-organising and regulating communities, but as illness, as potentially unstable and dangerous.

Sacrifice and damage play a pas de deux of ritual significance. Art and artists, literature and writers, theatre and performers, music and composers, all are deeply involved (though not necessarily along parallel levels and intensities) with these fundamental economies of human existence. Their low status as economic activities, combined with a paradoxically high status as commodity, have perpetuated a grievous situation whereby those who are driven to act as cultural producers suffer the indignities of poverty and lack of appreciation. Denied the recognition of their considerable contribution to culture, they are all the while surrounded by the highly visible signs of success. That they provide so much of the colour of life consumed via the media means that they are often challenging; morally, ethically and politically.

It would not be sufficient to sketch out a list of those for whom Self Death offered the option of an exit from one state of existence to another, too many would fill these pages. Among them are those whose actions may appear futile, desperate and unforgivable – a waste of the precious gift of life – but for whom it remains a possibility that their action was taken from a position of inner strength rather than weakness.

Viewed in this light, sacrifice takes on the relevance of a wound through which we communicate with the unknown. It is a rupture in the fabric of existence through which we may pass on a journey into uncertainty. A journey for which, over thousands of years, religions and cults sought to equip the individual with knowledge of to ensure a smooth transition, but which the latter-day materialism of our age has abandoned in favour of the certainty of fleshy, rude health. Sacrifice need not entail death, but occasionally the 'choice' so dear to democracy has such narrow parameters as to make it a necessity. Self Death is not a heroic act, but a position of resignation. To have lived well, with passion or honour or dignity; to have made one's life one's own or have swum against the current, this is a fuller criteria to judge a human existence. That some decide to honour life with their own death is not a heresy, but serves to remind us that life is but a parenthesis, a punctuation of infinity.

We must remind ourselves that against all the depredations of materialism, against all the forces of Reason and Normality, we yet have the power of politesse and the nobility of the soul.

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