THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH

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is a notion cultivated by man that disappears in the overall plan of nature. Death is pure "imagination." Sade also says that "there is no death . . . Death exists only figuratively; it has no reality. Matter, once deprived of the sublime portion of itself that gave it movement, is not thereby destroyed; it merely changes its form, it is corrupted." Therefore, movement is never completely eliminated in the cadaver, thanks to corruption. Sade was never tempted to work backward, from corruption to humanity, to play Prometheus; he was not sufficiently interested in the human, and preferred, as we know from his will, the transformation of the human into other forms of life: "She [death] provides nourishment for the earth, she fertilizes it and serves the regeneration of other kingdoms [i.e., animal and vegetable]."[56]

Many eighteenth-century thinkers would refuse to go as far as Sade and to recognize "the singular correspondences between physical excitement and moral deviation." On the contrary, they were to develop other aspects, which they found more tranquilizing, of the continuity of nature and the infinite work of destruction and re-creation. They would see the possibility for man of dominating this destructive force and making it beneficent by studying its laws and adapting himself to them. This is the "nature" of the philanthropists as opposed to the nature of the Sadeians. However, both have the same foundation, and the transition from one to the other is easily made.

The Sadeian tendency has certainly been more widespread than has long been believed, but in forms more socially acceptable and less aggressive. We find it in the new forms of satanism. The new Satan is the man who has espoused nature, like the monstrous creature of Frankenstein. The modern temptation tends rather toward the superman, the successor of Satan. For certain types of strong men who have understood the Sadean system of nature, there is no more "legal order"; everything is permitted. As Potocki puts it, "The satisfaction of his own desires must be his natural goal." They know that the virtues of the philanthropists are pure hypocrisy. "Religious piety, filial devotion, passionate and tender love, the clemency of kings, are so many affectations of egoism." Here man's encounter with nature takes place not on the level of virtue but on the level of blind and immoral omnipotence.

Love and Death

The omnipotence of nature asserts itself in two areas: sex and death. In our Western cultures, these two realms were alien to one another until the end of the Middle Ages. This incompatability is not a Christian phenomenon; sexual allusions are very rare in Greek and Roman funerary art, with the

exception of the Etruscans. But after the sixteenth century love and death came closer together, until by the end of the eighteenth century they formed a veritable corpus of macabre eroticism. Almost everything else connected with death remained unchanged. The solemnity or simplicity of funeral services continued, amplifying traditions that were born in the heart of the Middle Ages. The change in the art of dying well through meditation on the melancholy of life, though real, was discreet and unobtrusive. The relocation of the cemeteries where the excommunicate and criminals were now accepted took place silently, without scandal or sensation.

It was in the depths of the unconscious, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the disturbing changes occurred. It was in the world of the imagination that love and death came together until their appearances merged. This union took place, as we have seen, in two stages. At the end of the sixteenth century and in the first half of the seventeenth, the baroque era, a whole undiscovered world of emotions and fantasies began to stir. But the undercurrents that were created barely reached the surface of things; contemporaries did not even notice them. However, the distance between love and death had already diminished, and artists unconsciously tended to suggest resemblances between the two that had previously been unknown.

In the middle of the eighteenth century it was a whole dangerous and savage continent that emerged, bringing to the collective consciousness things that until then had been carefully repressed and that found expression in violent and destructive conceptions of nature. The breadth of this movement has been clearly perceived and analyzed by Georges Bataille, in a climate of surrealism favorable to its understanding.[57] Let us try, by way of conclusion, to interpret this great phenomenon of the imagination.

For thousands of years, *homo sapiens* owed his progress to the defense system he erected against nature. Nature is not some well-regulated and beneficent Providence, but a world of annihilation and violence that, although it may be judged more or less good or evil according to the tendencies of philosophers, always remains external, if not hostile, to man. Man has therefore set the society that he has constructed against the nature that he has controlled. The violence of nature had to be maintained outside the domain reserved by man for society. The defense system was achieved and maintained by the creation of a morality and a religion, the establishment of government and law, and the founding of an economy by means of the organization of work, collective discipline, and even technology.

This bulwark erected against nature had two weak spots, love and death, through which a little of the savage violence always leaked. Human society took great pains to reinforce these weak spots. It did everything it

It confined sexuality by means of taboos, which varied from one society to the next but which have always tried to curb its expression, reduce its power, and prevent deviation. It even divested death of its brutality, incongruity, and contagious effects by weakening its personal quality in favor of the permanence of society, by ritualizing it and making it only one more transition in every life, only slightly more dramatic than the others. Death had been tamed, and it was in this primitive form that we found it at the beginning of this book.

There was now a certain symmetry between the two worlds of human society and nature. Both worlds were continuous; the continuity of society was ensured by the traditional institutions and codes of morality. They followed the same rhythm, and although they communicated with each other, their exchanges were limited by custom, and the traditional boundaries were seldom violated.

It was the role of holidays to open the floodgates periodically and allow the violence to enter for a while. Sexuality was another domain where, with great discretion, space was allowed for instinct, desire, and pleasure. In certain civilizations—among the Malagasy, for example—death was the occasion for a temporary suspension of the taboos. In our Western and Christian civilizations the supervision was more rigorous, the ritualization more constraining; death was better guarded.

Against this ceremonial background the first change appeared in the Christian West, or at least among its elites, in the middle of the medieval period. A new model appeared, the model of the death of the self. The traditional continuity was broken. Tradition had taken the edge off of death, so that there would be no break in this continuity. But in the Middle Ages, death was redefined as the end and curtailment of an individual life. The old continuity was replaced by a sum of discontinuities. It was then that the duality of the body and the soul began to replace the idea of the *homo totus.* The survival of the soul, beginning at the moment of death, eliminated the intermediary phase of sleep, to which popular opinion had long been attached. Once deprived of the soul, the body was nothing but a handful of dust, which was returned to nature. This idea had no great impact as long as nature was not attributed with a demiurgic personality rivaling God.

However, the substitution of a series of biographical discontinuities for the primitive continuity was not yet universal, and the ancient model of the tame death persisted. Consequently, the relationship between the order of society and the disorder of nature was not really disturbed until the seventeenth century. The defense system was still intact. It began to crack at the time of the great Catholic and Protestant religious reforms, the great purifications of feeling, reason, and morality.

The order of reason, work, and discipline gave way before the assault of love and death, agony and orgasm, corruption and fertility. The first breaches were made in the realm of the imaginary, which in turn opened the passage to the real. Through these two gates, in the nineteenth century, the savagery of nature invaded the city of man just as the latter was preparing to colonize nature by expanding the frontiers of technological advancement and rational organization. It is almost as if society, in its effort to conquer nature and the environment, abandoned the old defense system that had surrounded sex and death, and nature, which had apparently been conquered, surged back *inside* man, crept in through the abandoned fortifications and made him savage again.

All this was far from being actually accomplished by the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the distress signals were flashing. The fantasies of the marquis de Sade appear as portents of apocalypse. Very unobtrusively, but very effectively, an irreparable change had taken place in the ancient relationship between man and death.