

# DEATH AND LIFE

by HELMUT THIELICKE

*translated by* EDWARD H. SCHROEDER

*"The thing that more than anything  
else profoundly determines the way  
we feel about life is the way life  
is related to death."*

*Wilhelm Dilthey*

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by side. And after death, what then? Death is only the blissful sleep in which everything dissolves, in order then to come to life rejuvenated, to fear, to hope, to desire anew.

His Diwan poem, "Selige Sehnsucht" celebrates this proximity of death to the mystery of love and life in the symbol of the butterfly burning in the flame. It is that alien feeling that overtakes us and gives us a premonition that behind the act of reproduction, as an act of mystical unfolding of life, there is a yet higher secret of life which is simultaneously the secret of death. This is the mystery of dying and becoming, the mystery of transformation through flaming death. Here the perishing of which the "Prometheus fragment" speaks is raised to a higher level. To "die and become" transforms man from being merely a dismal guest upon an equally dreary earth.

However, in conversation—above all with Eckermann—it is always the notion of entelechy which appears as the grounds for the indestructibility of life and the conquest of death. Several concluding examples can document this more fully. "The thought of death leaves me in complete peace. For I have the solid conviction that our spirit is a reality of a completely indestructible nature. It is constantly operative from eternity to eternity. It resembles the sun which only seems to set according to our earthly eyes, although actually it never does, but shines forth unceasingly."<sup>25</sup> "But not all of us are immortal in the same way; in order to manifest oneself as something in the future, one also has to be something now."<sup>26</sup> "Those who hope for no other life are also dead to this present one. Yet such incomprehensible things as this lie too far away to become the object of daily observation and thought-destroying speculation. . . . A worthy man, one who sets out to be something decent and therefore has to strive and fight and achieve every day, lets the future world take care of itself while he is active and useful in this present one."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> From the conversation of 2 May 1824. *Goethes Gespräche*, 3:104-5.

<sup>26</sup> 1 September 1829. *Ibid.*, 4:163.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation of 25 February 1824. *Ibid.*, 3:76-77. See the discussion above of Goethe's concept of action.

## *Death Repressed and Privatized in Contemporary Secular Religion*

We cannot conclude our treatment of the various types of non-Christian conceptions of death without evaluating secularized man and seeking to understand the way he comprehends the horizon of his existence. Our interest is conditioned less by the contemporary nature of the situation we are here treating than by the posture that secularized man assumes within the various types we have found.

Secularized man is characterized by two circumstances which we must clearly explicate. One is that here man's autonomous self-understanding has arrived at its ultimate possibility, namely, at the boundary of nihilism. And the other is that the movement toward this boundary is shaped by constant interplay with the message of Christ: either by an unconscious historical web that binds it to Christianity or by a conscious polemic whereby man seeks to secure his own indigenous life by rejecting what is presumed to be alien. Nihilism is the most extreme consequence of secularization, and precisely because of its tie with secularization it is nihilism *post Christum*. By virtue of his contact with Christianity the autonomous man of the Western world has in hand a most ultimate standard by means of which he can measure the interior truth about himself to a terrifying degree. Perhaps it is a curse imposed by Christ on those who desert him, that they have come to knowledge because of him without yet having the com-

fort that sustains them in this knowledge. No one can finally endure such knowledge without comfort. The law, as the genetic source of such knowledge, kills. Knowledge that cannot be endured leads to repression which expresses itself either in glorifying an illusion while ignoring ostrichlike the dangerous facts, or else in heroic defiance or frenzied attempts to forget. We shall have to keep this unconscious tendency in mind as we try to specify the secular interpretation of death. For death is the most dangerous of those dangerous facts; thus in secular man we see death variously glorified, ignored, or held in contempt.

#### HOW SECULAR RELIGION RANKS DEATH AND LIFE

The relationship between death and life as drawn by secular religion shows its antithesis to the Christian relationship between the two powers all the way down the line. But from the very outset we must once more keep in mind that this antithesis dare not be understood as a goal for its own sake, as though secular religion were only rooted in negativism. Even though this does apply to certain forms of Nazism's "Germanic faith," whose negative attitude has condemned it to sterility, it cannot be applied to secular religion *per se*. The anti-Christian aspect of secular religion signifies rather its desire to remove all alien religious veneer in order to present its own real essence in authentically pure form.<sup>1</sup>

Secular religion's designated goal is self-liberation of life, whereby life is understood on the basis of its own resources, as represented in the sustaining biological energies of existence (folk, race, etc.). This life receives its structural norms not from the outside but from its own interior resources, thus making the norms, as it were, an ideological superstructure originating from physical life itself.<sup>2</sup> Hence the pragmatic character of these norms, since

<sup>1</sup> See the penetrating exposition by Theodor Litt on the impossibility of eliminating historical encounter with Christianity in his *Der deutsche Geist und das Christentum. Vom Wesen geschichtlicher Begegnung* (Leipzig, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> See at this point Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1930), with his thesis that race, so to speak, is the soul viewed from the outside and the soul is race viewed from the inside. The same applies to Hans Heyse, *Idea and Existenz* (Hamburg, 1935) who correlates *logos* and *bios* in similar fashion. See my debate with the notion in *Theologische Blaetter* 16, no.

life is not responsible to them as a subordinate is to a superior authority, but on the contrary the norms are subordinate to life, inasmuch as they must benefit, promote, and sustain it.<sup>3</sup> Such an inversion of authorities is expressed explicitly in the Nazi thesis, "Good is what benefits the *Volk*."

The process whereby life is liberated to become an autonomous authority cannot, of course, occur apart from constant reference to the "bondage" imposed upon life by Christianity. For it is from this bondage that life is liberated. What this means can be clarified by examining the way that life and death are related in both camps. Here we are once more back at our central theme.

If we were to attempt a crass contrast between the two it might be stated like this: From the perspective of the Christian faith, life is conditioned both forwards and backwards by a totality that encompasses it entirely. This is the horizon line of human existence which is visible in the events of birth and death. These terms themselves are but ciphers for much more complex events. Birth is a cipher for God's bestowing my life to me: "I believe that God made me." Death is a cipher for God's extermination of a life that is at odds with him and has not remained faithful in its creatureliness. (We will treat this in more detail below.) Death so understood casts a retroactive shadow upon birth—or, expressed without ciphers, the fatal end characterizes also the created beginning of the course of human existence so that one can no longer speak of creation without at the same time speaking of the fall and man's vulnerability to nothingness and to the end. Equally certain is the fact that death puts its distinctive stamp upon the horizon of

5/6 (May/June 1937). See also Kaethe Nadler, "Theologische und politische Existenz (Thielicke und Heyse)" in *Der Idea*, 1936, pp. 344 ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Nietzsche's remarks about truth as a force that either promotes or strangles life. He ranks truth not by the degree of its truthfulness, but according to the degree that it does such promoting or strangling. Truth is not something that "exists and is to be found or to be uncovered. Instead it is something that must be created. It is the name for a process which *per se* is without end, a process of grappling with truth and, in the fray, actively determining it. It is not a process of becoming conscious of something already established and determined" (*Friedrich Nietzsches Werke* [Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1917 —], 16:56). "Unconditional knowledge is a madness of the period of virtue; with it life would be demolished. We must sanctify the lie, the insanity of faith, the act of unrighteousness" (*ibid.*, 13:124).



human existence. The adage *memento mori* is a legitimate reminder of the precipice that death injects into human life, how completely life stands in death's shadow and is conditioned by it. From this basis the New Testament even goes further to view death triumphing masterfully over life as the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), maintaining its dominion to the very end (Rom. 1:17, 21; 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:55).

While the biblical proclamation sees life as qualified by death and conditioned by death's horizon, secular religion reverses this and views death as receiving its distinctive trademark from life. It cannot be otherwise when life is elevated to the judge's bench as authority, when it becomes the supreme power of being, not only producing all values from itself (instead of receiving them from above) but also having to incorporate within itself as its own most basic content the process of becoming and perishing. Although in the Christian message birth and death constitute the horizon line which encompasses life, in secular religion life encompasses even the powers of being represented by birth and death, or in secular religion's more appropriate labels, the powers of being represented by becoming and perishing. Becoming and perishing are but variations of this life that is constantly in process and constantly self-renewing.<sup>4</sup>

To contrast these two positions very emphatically and one-sidedly we might say: Christian thought interprets life from death, and secular thought interprets death from life.

#### THE VALUE-FILLED LIFE<sup>5</sup>

What does such an interpretation of death from life look like?

<sup>4</sup> Compare the notion of death as metamorphosis, especially in the more popular secular literature on death. Typical of the group, particularly in its bald and boisterous expression, is Wulf Sörensen, *Freund Hein. Eine Dichtung* (Magdeburg: Norland-Verlag, n.d.). This thought permeates the entire breadth of the secular religion, including its genre of funeral orations.

<sup>5</sup> Since secular thought has not yet produced a classic spokesman who is universally acknowledged as such, I am forced to pinpoint the crucial theses on my own. Even if we build our argument on the rather narrow foundation of the newspaper article cited below, our interpretation does not represent an exaggeration inasmuch as we have constantly in view the whole intellectual milieu out of which these statements about death arise.

It unfolds in rather schizoid form from a basic notion of value. We shall take the liberty of citing a series of newspaper articles symptomatic of this thinking. They can serve in a special way as a seismograph for specific secular ideological eruptions and thus their views on death carry a definite symptomatic weight.<sup>6</sup>

The basic thesis is as follows: "The value of human life, yes, the very measure of achieved human perfection, is expressed in the individual's relation to death." This takes place when he is face to face with eternity (this word remains very ambiguous), when the value of that existence now terminating is decided. A person who has filled his life with value, whose life has been decent and hence perfect, is able at the time of its conclusion to enter "the peace of eternal sleep virtuously . . . worthily, and serenely," while one who has not lived his life to the full, hence imperfectly, has to die "with the cry of the beast."

The conquest of death envisioned here is not so much focused on some durable immortal quality of man from which only his individual shell is taken away. On the contrary, what is durable and immortal is the timeless value in a perfected form (actually in the sense of the Greek concept of *morphe* as a concretization of the reality in the world of ideas), a form that has made itself authentic. Death in consequence is rendered impotent not by being the transition to another form of existence, but by being simply the period placed at the end of a timelessly valid and thereby perfect sentence.

Although this view also understands that a man is unique, granted only once the chance to fill his life with value or fail to do so, still at the moment of death it allows time hardly any role at all. Certainly time has nothing to do with overtaking and extinguishing this unique phenomenon that has arisen within it. No, time can only carry on the work of perfection; at the moment of death time can only "promote the developmental success of the form." Whatever else is there dies with the cry of the beast.

Of course that immediately raises the question: Where is the

<sup>6</sup> See the article already cited above on p. 13 in *Das Schwarze Korps*, 22 June 1939.

judge who can measure and determine the worthiness of a given life, who can decide nothing less than whether death is condemnation or perfection?

In view of the ideology that underlies these thoughts one thing here is clear. This way of thinking must measure the value of a particular being exclusively on the basis of a predetermined idea of "life." Either it fulfills this idea or does not fulfill it, either it becomes the *morphe* of life or else it fails to do so. Such a life, however, is placed within the plenitude and processes of historical life, of which it constitutes one individual representation. Value-fulfillment, then, is not conceived in the sense of Goethe's *entelechy*, which realizes itself in an individual phenomenon as that individual portrays life. On the contrary, the underlying idea here is an organic totality as it exists, for example, in the supraindividual entity of race. Perfection of life consequently can only mean a pure expression of the race. However, since this race does not exist in the abstract, but drives toward historical expression and historical realization, perfection necessarily also entails meaningful involvement in this process of realization. But being meaningful signifies nothing else than being a serviceable means to the end which the supraindividual reality has itself.

It is obvious that these underlying factors for determining the value of a man's life, that is, its rooting in the transsubjective realities already mentioned, do not always have to be explicit in his consciousness. His existential experience of value generally can and will more likely occur in apparent existential isolation. Either a man looks at his life and rejoices to see the evidence of his value, for example, his accomplishments, or in the face of the evidence of his valuelessness he despairs with the cry of the beast. It is not impossible, however, but necessary, that when these values are brought into consciousness, for example, when he gives account for his performance or when he reflects on his life, he also sees the supraindividual framework within which the values are sketched.

At this point we see that the microcosmic existence of the individual is closely aligned to the macrocosm of the encompassing power, race. And thus the victory over death receives yet another

accent. It is not only the perfection of a value-filled existence, but also incorporation into the historical process whereby the encompassing power comes to realization. Thereby perfection is no longer merely the end of a life that has fulfilled its meaning and destiny, not merely a falling away into dreamless sleep. For how could something be labeled perfection if it were at the same time annihilation? Instead perfection means being caught up and supplanted by the value that fills life. This value, however, is not to be understood in analogy to a timelessly valid Platonic idea; after all, it is only an expression of, and a higher moment of elevation for, life itself. Victory over death does not occur in some abstract timelessness as though existence were caught up into some timelessly sound values (e.g., a universal idea of the good) and were translated from temporal annihilation into another world beyond time. If this were true, one could and would have to envision an eternal eye before whose timeless view would stand every being that ever existed and was yet to exist, who had ever exhibited the eternal value in himself. On the contrary, death in this view is conquered when a being realizes those values which express and enhance life and thereby enters into the realm of this very life process. Time, which sets the punctuating period behind a completed existence and thus asserts its dominion, is the time of the race or, in other words, the time of the *Volk*. In any case it is a macrocosmic temporal reality in the framework of which an individual being arises and then again declines. Hence time is not the hostile executioner of perishability, but time is a friend. It does not destroy, but it perfects by accepting the gift of a value-filled life.

For this reason whatever else is present in the I can drift into oblivion without qualms if only the real task has been fulfilled. It is clear enough that when we follow the fragmentary basic thoughts of this extraordinarily contemporary proposition to the very end, we encounter the division of the I. It is not the sleep of death which constitutes perfection, but death itself as culmination of a value-filled life. This culmination simultaneously means a translation of the value-filled life into that stream of history which

never ceases to flow. Whatever is translated into the "sleep" is merely what was nonintrinsic. This is the immortality offered by secular religion when orientated toward the idea of life.

#### SUPPRESSING THE ANXIETY ABOUT DEATH

In rather strange contrast to this ideological program stands the concrete fact of anxiety in the face of death; anxiety is undeniably there, even though it is given short shrift by the author of the article. In fact his basic thoughts are intended to be nothing but a fortifying answer to irrational anxiety about the specters of death's night. It is no wonder that the author is unable to explain this anxiety on the basis of his value ideas, and therefore must try to explain it historically. The specters of anxiety, in his view, have gained entrance into that dreamless sleep via Christian ideas of hell and similar alien apparitions. Thus they owe their existence to what Nietzsche called the nonsense Christianity has promoted about the hour of death. This factually present anxiety cannot be explained by any sinking into dreamless sleep, into nothingness, as it were, and still less by the idea that one's value-filled life is translated into history's realm of value. For with this idea that what is essential in one's life does not fall prey to annihilation but is translated (in the Hegelian sense), death could really come only as "*Freund Hein*"<sup>7</sup> and not as the power of destruction that drives me to despair.<sup>8</sup> In the face of this one cannot deny the irritating fact that de facto anxiety about death is present not only in spite of that experience of value but is in fact based on the experience of value, albeit value of another kind.

In his study of French secularism and its concept of death,

<sup>7</sup> "*Freund Hein*" is a designation for death in the poetry of Matthias Claudius.

<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that Paul Krannhals is logically consistent when he measures the value of an individual according to his achievements for the supra-individual entities (state, Volk, cultural community, "soul" of the species, idea of god). Thereby he deduces that in view of a man's placement within the supra-individual realities his individual death is meaningless. See especially his *Das organische Weltbild. Grundlage einer neu entstehenden Kultur*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1928). In addition *Religion als Sinnerfüllung des Lebens* (Leipzig, 1933); *Revolution des Geistes* (Leipzig, 1935). See also the extensive appropriation and approbation of Krannhals in Otto Dietrich, *Die philosophischen Grundlagen des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1935).

Bernhard Groethuysen arrives at the entirely correct conclusion that in every instance where "the last moment" is accorded special significance it receives this significance not by being a farewell from a basically valueless life. On the contrary, death receives its significance from "the value that is ascribed to life."<sup>9</sup> On such grounds one could say that anxiety about death is actually rooted in a man's consciousness of value, in that his life as person (the I) ceases to exist; the unique fades away. In the face of death's darkness the "cry of the beast" grows silent since an animal possesses no such value-filled life; a much more terrifying, though perhaps suppressed and sublimated, cry comes from man who sees his own self, his distinctive I, exterminated. Speaking of this cry, then, who is really doing the crying: man or beast? Is it a life that is value-filled or a life where value is not involved?

But precisely when we realize that such supra-individual value which is to be translated into history provides no explanation for such a cry, we are directed to that other stratum of value from which the anxiety does arise, namely, the value of the self as a person, an irreplaceable entity now coming to an end and in mortal isolation actually moving toward this end. Speaking in another context, Heidegger very forcefully portrays how human "talk" about death as "its reality is publicly interpreted" follows the line not that "I" die, but that "one" dies<sup>10</sup> and that it is anxiety that represses the thought of "I" dying and transposes it upon "one" as something exterior to me.<sup>11</sup> On this level, anxiety about death and consciousness of value are interrelated. By pushing the element of value onto a suprapersonal level, the level of that which

<sup>9</sup> *Die Entstehung der bürgerlichen Weltanschauung in Frankreich*, vol. 1, *Das Bürgertum und die katholische Weltanschauung* (Halle, 1927), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 297.

<sup>11</sup> See the words of Peter Ivanovich in Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 102, as he views the dead Ivan: "Three days of frightful suffering and then death! Why, that might suddenly happen to me," he thought and for a moment felt terrified. But—he did not himself know how—the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him. . . . After which reflection Peter Ivanovich felt reassured . . . as though death was an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself."

endures, therefore pulling it away from any anxiety about perishing, man only represses that more profound anxiety about the personal value of his uniqueness, his I, sinking into oblivion.

It is expressive of such anxiety repression that the paradigm for death is a far-off sacrificial death for a cause, especially a hero's death, in comparison with which normal dying in a deathbed seems strangely unreal. Such emphasis on sacrificial death, considering the ideological backdrop already presented, is entirely logical and consistent. For sacrificial death is the most explicit mode of filling life with value, inasmuch as a supra-individual value, for example, the nation that I am dying for, is certainly incorporated into my life as I die. Inversely, my life is also delivered up to the higher power where it is translated in a twofold sense. On the one hand this suprapersonal power is granted continued life by virtue of my sacrifice and thereby, so to speak, assumes the role of representing my departed life and maintaining its value; secondly, the memory of my sacrifice is kept alive. The cult of the dead hero is the primeval expression for this.<sup>12</sup>

#### REPRESSION AND STYLE OF LIFE

One cannot speak of these episodes of repressing anxiety about death and projecting the death-event to another level without calling to mind the style of life which secular man assumes and in which such reinterpretation of dying comes to expression.

In public secular life death plays practically no role at all except perhaps in terms of dying for a cause. Death is banned from secular life in such a remarkable way that one might ask whether its banishment from public view is the cause or the result of that conspicuous conspiracy of avoiding everything connected with death.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger rightly calls attention to the fact that when one dies for another, despite the vicarious sense, the conclusion dare never be drawn that the other is relieved of dying. "No one can take the Other's dying away from him. Of course someone can 'go to his death for another'. But that always means to sacrifice oneself for the Other 'in some definite affair'. Such 'dying for' can never signify that the Other has thus had his death taken away in even the slightest degree. . . . By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all. . . . In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death." *Op. cit.*, p. 284.

The following are some aspects of this banishment:<sup>13</sup>

1) All events which hint of the boundaries of human life are purged—whether consciously or unconsciously, whether arising from the will or the confusion of human beings—from public life.

Sickness as the symptom of perishability is largely banished to the hospitals. This applies especially to the gruesome borderline cases of mental illness. They are isolated and removed from public view. Movies and the theater of prewar Germany simply mirror the healthy life to such an exclusive extent that they thereby not only engrave the ideal image of a healthy person upon the spectator's heart, but at the same time nurture the illusion that this picture of health is life *in toto*. As a consequence of this illusory repression it then becomes possible to play off something like the idealized figure of a Kolbe<sup>14</sup> sculpture as the one symbol of life against the unnerving sculpture in the Bamberg cathedral of Bishop Friedrich von Hohenlohe (d. 1351), whose emaciated figure not only testifies to physical pain but also to the torment brought on by an overpowering knowledge of truth that has grown via suffering.

Related to this is the cult of youth, which is not part of the conscious intention of the public either, but results more as a consequence from the cult of good health.

The same repression is apparent in the events of birth and death. Only in rural areas might one still hear the cry of a mother giving birth. In the city the sound most often dies away behind the walls of the maternity ward. In any case the general consciousness is much more deprived of the glorious dreadfulness of this event than it was in earlier times. It is all the more so since the birth-event usually comes to public attention only in terms of population explosion, biological energy, and life's own joyous self-renewal. Birth is hardly ever considered in terms of the one's own personal perilous hour, an hour whose peril resides not merely in the physi-

<sup>13</sup> This section is closely related to several lines of thought in my work on cultural criticism, *Fragen des Christentums an die moderne Welt* (Tübingen, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> [Georg Kolbe, 1877-1947, a German sculptor whose statues and national memorials reflected the Greek ideal of physical beauty, was for a time highly favored by the Nazi regime.—Trans.]



cal suffering, but in risking one's life and in the thrilling horror of exposing one's own life as well as that of the newly born to the grand and ominous mysteries of human existence. Birth as a boundary situation of life is privatized and removed from the public eye.

The same applies to death, with which birth and illness are essentially related. Symbolic of this is the fact that in our cities, our genuinely public places, no longer do funeral processions pass ominously through the streets, at least not the major streets, the expressways. Instead these are reserved only for the ghetto of the cemeteries. This banishment is not intentional but results from considerations of transportation, hygiene, and economics. Still it is a remarkably crafty product of the dominant idea: indirectly and yet explicitly showing that death is ignored, and simultaneously helping create the conditions which allow for its being ignored.<sup>15</sup>

How are these facts to be understood? Are they the expression of life's genuine triumph that no longer knows death? Or are they the expression of a catatonic attitude that no longer wants to accept death as true because it cannot come to terms with it, because it can no longer generate the "courage to confront the anxiety about death"<sup>16</sup> and therefore in despair grasps at such systematic repression?

2) To this must be added that secular man intentionally avoids the existential situation into which death places a man, namely, the situation of solitude. For solitude throws him back onto the primeval roots of his personhood and strips him of the illusion that he is simply a piece of something called the crowd. The more a man becomes conscious of the vacuity and lostness in his personhood, the more he flees from it into the anonymity of being part of the crowd, into the frenzied activity of overwork and orgies, into the constant companionship of amplified noise that drowns out all the voices of emptiness. "The man caught up in the tempo of the times can find a vacation with relaxation and recreation only

<sup>15</sup> For a brilliant description of this depletion of content in public life see Paul Schütz, *Warum ich noch ein Christ bin* (Berlin, 1933).

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

if he does not feel the stress of solitude."<sup>17</sup> In his *horror vacui* he is comforted by the voice of the portable record player even out in his canoe, while normally the cafe, the movies, and the lights of the city are able to take possession of his empty I-region. "All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."<sup>18</sup>

In terms of the attitude toward death this style of life is significant because it eliminates any situation of personal solitude—Heidegger would say that quality of my life and death which makes it "mine and mine alone"—in which one would have to reckon with death. Thus it deceives man about the factual presence of his own indelible character as a person, even an inevitably mortal person. This style of life is also significant for the attitude toward death simply by brutally and physically disallowing the least space for the thought of *memento mori* to arise. Death does not exist; it is not supposed to exist for the man of secular religion.

The most significant illustration of this can perhaps be found in the mass dying of the Bolsheviks in the great offensives of the Second World War. Some ultimate aversion restrains Western man, who has at least a Christian tradition behind him, to speak here simply of "sacrifice" (i.e., of individual self-oblation) and of "heroism" (i.e., of a position consciously assumed in the face of personal death), since for him something decisive is missing for both terms. Such collective death of collective man renders it almost impossible to surrender one's spirit or to breathe out one's soul since both are dissipated into the collective nonexistence of the self. There no longer exists any self who encounters death as "his and his alone." All that is involved anymore is the elimination of a number. Death has taken a somewhat biological, animal cast. It has here become an extreme, but nevertheless especially clear, paradigm of secularized death per se, namely, death within the realm of anonymous man, a "crowd" death, whereby death has ceased to be "my" death because I have ceased to be "my self."

Rilke succeeded in expressing anonymous man's elimination

<sup>17</sup> From an advertisement for radios.

<sup>18</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 48 (#139).



of authentic human death in terms that pierce beneath the surface. He calls such collective death "little death" in contrast to grand, "mature," "authentic" death, giving the following eerie picture: "Now they are dying there in 559 beds. Factory-like, of course. Where production is so enormous an individual death is not so nicely carried out; but then that doesn't matter. It is quantity that counts. Who cares anything today for a finely-finished death? . . . the wish to have a death of one's own is growing ever rarer. A while yet, and it will be just as rare as a life of one's own. Heavens, it's all there. One arrives, one finds a life, ready made, one has only to put it on. . . . One dies just as it comes; one dies the death that belongs to the disease one has (for since one has come to know all diseases, one knows, too, that the different lethal terminations belong to the diseases and not to the people; and the sick person has so to speak nothing to do)."<sup>19</sup>

Within the collective, therefore, man is forced into a kind of death that is alien and impersonal to him and only characterized by the sickness that leads to it. Thus Rilke can say in his *Stundenbuch*, "For this is what makes death alien and hard, that it is not *our* death; it is one that finally takes us simply because we do not mature our own; therefore the storm proceeds to wipe us all out."<sup>20</sup> For this reason he pleads for a death that is personally his own, which makes a man solely a man and protects him from an animal's demise. "Oh Lord, give each one his own death. The dying that proceeds from such life, wherein he had his own love, meaning and troubles."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1964), pp. 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stundenbuch* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1931), p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86. Rilke is here propounding the thought that each one should bring his own death to maturity. Death has the significance of a fruit, which a man should let grow in his own life and which then belongs to him as his very own, grown to his own specifications. Bullnow's article "Existenzphilosophie" in *Systematische Philosophie*, ed. N. Hartmann (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1942), p. 391, calls attention to the fact that "in the final analysis the notion of death as a fruit to be nourished is still an evasion of the full force and sinister character of death." It approaches "once more certain conceptions already occasionally expressed in Romanticism." In Rilke's later works, especially in the "Sonetten an Orpheus," this changes completely and he understands death as failure and fragility, yet simultaneously something that enables "other men to perceive the meaning of being human at all" precisely in its own qualities of transformation and destruction.

But now back to our description of the secular style of life with its depersonalization via artificial maneuvers to avoid every encounter with one's own solitude. To express the secular style of life in a strict formula that would do justice theologically to the idea of flight from oneself and thus flight from death, one might say: the directional movement in the life of man when he is bonded to God is one of centripetal gathering, whereby he reflects on the basics and unifies them for restoration and growth. Thus he "girds up his mind" (1 Pet. 1:13; see Eph. 6:14; 1 Thess. 5:8) and is protected against losing himself centrifugally to the outside.

In complete contrast to this gathering movement secular man finds his recovery in dissipation,<sup>22</sup> that is, in losing himself. It is basically man's inability any longer to confront himself and his own emptiness face to face. A synonym for this dissipation is "diversion," which is not so much a sidestepping of some discomforting, worrisome thing as it is a sidestepping of one's own I, entangled as the I is in this worry, vulnerable to it with no counterforce of its own, and thrashing aimlessly as it confronts its own emptiness.<sup>23</sup> Secular man as a rule does not seek to confront the reality of suffering by standing fast (that would be a movement of centripetal gathering), by placing it within some larger meaning or by conquering it with a frontal attack. But by diversion and by looking the other way, he nourishes the fascinating dream that such tactics might make the fear and the reality that caused it disappear. A monstrous, even if unconscious, self-irony resides thus in the illusion that he might thereby successfully disdain the reality that generates the fear, as for example, death. The contempt which perhaps does arise is the contempt of concern, of refusing to acknowledge the reality. It is contempt assisted by an act of repression. But is that really contempt or is it not rather a terrifying, even if unconsciously attentive, fascination with death? Is this not precisely to be spellbound by it?

The dissipation which avoids death is thereby unconsciously an

<sup>22</sup> It goes without saying that we are here contrasting types which in praxis are not present in pure form, although on the whole they can clearly be recognized as types.

<sup>23</sup> Pascal, *op. cit.*, the section on diversion, pp. 48 ff.

important existential interpretation of death. In consideration of what we have already said about it we can specify its characteristics in several respects.

1) On the one hand dissipation shows that the one doing it is unable to withstand the objects of his anxiety, but turns away from them and to that extent represses them.

2) The frightening thing in this situation is not the object to be avoided, but the frightened man himself who is threatened with exposure in his lostness, his inability to master the problem.

3) The existential cause of dissipation is thus one's own emptiness. In other words, no counterforce is present to achieve mastery of the problem, neither the counterforce of intellect which might take the spellbinding object of terror and draw it into the light of some meaningful totality, nor the counterforce of power which could defy the specters.<sup>24</sup>

4) The existential cause of dissipation therefore is one's own vacuity which drives one to flee in the face of nothingness. When such cases arise we are accustomed to say that a man is bored, or when several are together, that they are bored with each other.

5) Dissipation is therefore simultaneously an expression of, a consequence of, and an actual occurrence of this vacuity. It is an expression of vacuity inasmuch as it proclaims anxiety vis-à-vis a nothingness that is becoming all the more obvious.

It is a consequence of vacuity inasmuch as the dissipating man can no longer be alone and no longer has any singularity, any self; this situation of having nothing anymore reminds him in terror that he ought to have it, that he has lost himself and that it is his own fault. Finally, dissipation is the occurrence of vacuity inasmuch as it drives a man to surrender ever more completely and to lose himself ever more totally. Man can still endure the vacuity only by ever more frantic attempts to have something external occupy his empty I-region, the vacated temple of God, for

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80. There exist individual clear-eyed spirits such as Ernst Jünger who do not look away, but look the specters in the eye. Actually the situation of adventure into which they plunge is a higher way of avoiding the view. The chief characteristic of their fundamental stance is not standing ground in the face of the terror, but rejoicing in one's own fortitude and daring—a remarkable sort of therapy by inverting the view!

this zone is never unoccupied long. The more he reels, the more furiously he plunges into the frenzy. He seeks release from the impressions madly storming in upon him and taking possession of him, but he seeks it only through even stronger impressions, through the centrifugal tendency of an even more frenzied dissipation for which modern technology willingly supplies all sorts of auxiliary media. Of dissipation it is quite true: He who has nothing (and thus in dissipating seeks to forget and be secure), even what he has is taken from him by this very dissipation. Though dissipation may appear to be the pursuit of happiness, it is born of unhappiness. "If man were happy, he would be the more so, the less he was diverted, like the saints and god."<sup>25</sup>

6) Dissipation—always understood as the expression of an existentially conditioned style of life—must in the first place be understood as a direct diversion from death. Secondly, it is also an indirect one, that is, a diversion from the solitary I of human personhood, which in dying has no vicarious substitute and which hopes somehow via diversion and via "self-extinction by losing itself in" something to save itself from death. (A characteristic symptom for both forms of diversion can be found in the fact that secular man craves intoxication precisely at those stations of life which most clearly reflect his transitoriness: on the eve of battle and on New Year's Eve.)

7) Dissipation therefore is flight from nothingness and from the annihilation which man still sees approaching. Both of these—flight from nothingness and from annihilation—are inextricably interwoven. This becomes apparent if one considers that nothingness—as Heidegger labels it, "Being-toward-death"—is the looming shadow of annihilation coming to exterminate an existence that already knows itself to be null and void. Heidegger is right in connecting anxiety about death with anxiety about "Being-in-the-world" itself,<sup>26</sup> since death conditions such Being-in-the-world and belongs to it. Anxiety, or as we said, flight from death, is characterized by the knowledge that we are at the end of our rope

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

just as surely as we will be someday when our actual death takes place; for it will be only confirmation of the public secret that we were already at the end of our rope. "Every man is a mere breath" no matter how securely he lives, or how much repression he practices (Ps. 39:11). Biblically interpreted, security might be labeled repressed anxiety. Conquered anxiety, however, when one is pulled free by the saving hand of God, is called "peace."<sup>27</sup> If Christ be not raised, that is, if there exists no real conquest of the power of death, liberating our self from subjection to death, then we are of all men most miserable (1 Cor. 15:14-19). This misery signifies that both the internal and external security of our life was no realistic peace, but repression of the paramount reality. It signifies that our self in its attempts at security by dissipation is exposed as one lost in nothingness. And our self in a dreadful involution of its nothingness—by means of dissipation and repression—has even lost that which it did possess. Is it not obvious to everyone, legible right from the faces of people today,<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> "Peace" according to the biblical use of language is not a psychological phenomenon. If one were to isolate peace psychologically, the psychologist's perception of it would probably be similar to the psychically isolated phenomenon of "security." Nevertheless the phenomena are objectively different. For peace initially takes place outside of man, in the objective peace with God by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ. This reconciliation, however, entails man's appropriating it from the posture of repentance. And repentance in turn means willingly turning away from the spellbinding powers of existence, from sin and its causes and consequences, in such a way as to face these powers realistically, consciously letting oneself be placed under judgment. Peace therefore is granted to man standing under the law; it comes even while man realistically shoulders his burden of slavery to sin and death, a slavery exposed by the law in all its realism. If one were crassly to juxtapose the two phenomena, peace and security, one might say: Security lives on the resources of untruth inasmuch as the true realities are repressed and an "as if not" illusion is the source of the self-securing existence. Peace, on the contrary, lives from the truth. Peace is bestowed in face-to-face confrontation with death's hideous strength and its yawning abyss.

<sup>28</sup> See Ernst Jünger, *Das abenteuerliche Herz*, 1st ed. (Hamburg, 1929), pp. 91 ff. "One can see that the face of the modern urbanite carries a twofold trademark: that of anxiety and that of the dream, the one more obvious in his movement, the other in his repose. . . . It is for this reason that street corners and bridges in the metropolis are so infinitely sad and depressing. Whoever has looked into the faces of fishermen in a southern harbor, who surely haven't a penny in their ragged pockets, knows for certain that it cannot be money which is able to bring out these half-sullen, half-harried beings. In a crisis such as this, in the midst of highest insecurity, no peaceful satisfaction is possible. There is but one thing that can be set against it: Bravery. . . ."

"It is just as remarkable to observe the completely ossified, automated, and almost narcotic behavior of modern man in circumstances of repose, for example,

that by repressing the ultimate concerns, especially that horizon which threatens our life, we do not by any means confine nothingness and emptiness to the position they have won but render them ever more vacuous and accelerate the loss of substance as though by some law of arithmetical progression? Does not man's flight into a state of lost personhood where death can no longer find a vulnerable spot (because death finds no prey extant and its victim has evaporated into the collective) simultaneously induce and promote that loss of personhood? Is it not true that man really cannot eradicate himself, that he always retains just enough personhood to despair over his loss of self and be compelled to repress the loss and seek escape from himself?

It is precisely this latter perspective that makes one thing clear: Neither the ideological repression of death by transferring value to supra-individual powers nor the ignoring of death by means of one's style of life can occur without some remnant of the sub-conscious knowledge that one must die,<sup>29</sup> even if funeral processions no longer pass through the main thoroughfares proclaiming their *memento mori*. As men hasten through these emptied streets with glances that manage to ignore everything eternal, they are of course expressing their alleged security in the face of threatening nothingness and annihilation. But do not these glances and this haste along such death-free streets simultaneously express a kind of spatial phobia about these emptied streets? Does not man still have a presentiment of some grim disaster and therefore flee from whatever nocturnal visions might confront him? Here, too, dying is still the gruesome mask, and despite attempts to aestheticize, repress, or avoid it, behind it all the grim token of death's anxiety remains:

while traveling on public transportation. One would hardly find such a degree of inversion and lostness present on these masks even in a Chinese opium den. The uncommonly similar and typical character of this expression betrays the decisive fact that the occurrences are inescapable and universal. . . . Wake up and be brave—that's what ought to be on our banner."

<sup>29</sup> One might only recall that according to Rom. 1:18 ff. despite man's idolatry and despite his repression of the true Creator he still retains some knowledge of him, a knowledge strong enough to make man responsible. For an age that knows so much about the unconscious, these thoughts ought not to be all too alien.



. . . unresolved the riddle of eternal night,  
the earnest token of an alien might.<sup>30</sup>

The only ethos that man can still produce in this crisis of his own lost personhood is the aristocratic ethos of bravely holding out in the face of nothingness. In the words of Saint Paul this is the power with which the "miserable man" of 1 Cor. 15 looks nothingness and annihilation in the eye. "In a crisis such as this, in the midst of highest insecurity, no peaceful satisfaction is possible. There is but one thing that can be set against it: Bravery."<sup>31</sup>

#### DEATH REINTERPRETED AT THE LAST MOMENT

It might be helpful in this connection to consider the interpretation of death presented by the French physician Barbarin in the guise of psychological statistics.<sup>32</sup> Up to this point we have always examined secular religion's attitude toward death in two ways: first under the rubric of reinterpreting death by an ideological repression (cf. our line of thought on value-experience in the face of death), and then under the rubric of removing death from the public domain (cf. the thoughts on flight into personlessness and into dissipation). In both instances, however, death as a brute biological act—beyond all the problems about personhood that it causes—remains unavoidable. At least it remains unavoidable in the sense that every man in answer to the question whether he must die says yes, and even the man who has lost his personhood still has at least his *biological* end before his eyes (even though as a future reality it is not *constantly* before his eyes).

Barbarin now addresses himself to the task of clearing away even this remnant of death on the soil of secular existence. He does this with the aid of a wealth of material obtained from people condemned to death, from survivors of plane crashes, from people rescued from drowning at the last moment, etc. He shows statistically that the last moments before death are actually exhilarating

<sup>30</sup> Novalis, the fifth of his *Hymnen an die Nacht* in *Novalis' Werke*, ed. J. Dohmke (Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, n.d.), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 92. Note the overtones of, yet opposition to, the peace described above.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Barbarin, *Der Tod als Freund* (Stuttgart, 1938).

and liberating. It is only the pathway up to death's border that is characterized by suffering and shock, by anxiety and terror, whereas death itself comes as a friend and liberator, always accompanied by a state of euphoria.

For our consideration the factual content of these observations is immaterial. If we wish to focus consideration on man's understanding of himself, it is immaterial whether the process of dying is subjectively painful or not. What is important, however, is the viewpoint about the essence of dying which invisibly stands behind this statistical investigation with all its intended precision. This viewpoint, which is very instructive for the self-understanding of human existence at its base, is characterized by the fact that in its own way it too isolates, banishes, and represses the event of death. It isolates death both from life, over which death thus as yet casts no shadow and for which death is no companion, and also from eternity, to which it leads. Death is a point built into the life process at random which very casually, almost accidentally, constitutes the terminal point without in any way being characteristic of the life process itself. Life expires in a fade-out that is only of psychological, but not of ontological, interest. Death is considered the last moment, but no longer the last enemy. It is a last moment which still belongs to the sum of life's moments as the euphoric termination of them all, but death is no longer viewed as one of life's own constitutive features.<sup>33</sup> What an impoverished banishment of death this is, with nothingness itself as its trademark, and yet a banishment which often enough constitutes the only means for a physician to practice "Seelsorge" at the deathbed!

<sup>33</sup> In contrast to Barbarin see the profound statement by Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., n.d.), p. 68: "Our death is the mould into which our life flows: it is death that has shaped our features."