The Games of Life and the Dances of Death

Benjamin Nelson
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A premier Poet of our time once sang:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.¹

The Poet would almost certainly have been mistaken had he meant his remarks to apply to civilizations. Civilizations do not end with a bang or a whimper. Civilizations generally die laughing!

The more closely great societies approach the point of checkmate, the deeper the indulgence of great numbers in their favorite games. In fact, the worse the situation, the more hectic the abandonment. It is when all is fun and joy, on the go-go, when the dancers in the charades are at the edge of ecstasy and frenzy, that the hoped-for oblivion prevails. At this juncture, treasured elements of the legacy of civilizations slip unnoticed out of focus.²

Abundant evidence for these statements is available to those students of history and sociology who attend strongly to the ways in which the classes and the masses alike have related to certain of the very critical transitions in their histories. The more closely we study the episodes, the more we discover that relatively few can sense or understand the changes which occur in peak structures of value or in all of those sensibilities which might have had to be maintained if civilizations are somehow to be preserved.

The depictions by Samuel Dill and others of Roman society of the late fourth and fifth centuries A.D.³ tell the story eloquently. The available evidence on political and economic developments makes it clear that the Imperial Establishment was sagging. In losing to the Visigoths at
Adrianople (A.D. 378), the Romans had suffered a crucial break in their frontiers. Very decisive structures at every level appeared to be crumbling. Yet, when we read their letters and other literary efforts, we discover that only a handful of men cared to relate to the circumstances of their undoing.

Christian thinkers were, in the main, more prone to respond to the crisis than were the pagans. The reasons are easy enough to see. For St. Augustine, the sack of Rome in 410 offered the needed proof that the only true grounds for hope lay in the promise of a city uncontaminated by Rome's persisting corruptions, a city of God (civitas Dei).

But if we read the pagan letters of the time, we get a much more serene picture. We discover that long before the time of the worst onslaughts, the well-to-do had left the cities for country villas where they would regularly meet and engage one another in sports, charades of sociability, and polite banter about their literary traditions. How effete their favorite rhetoric was may be judged from stilted missives they wrote to one another from time to time. The situation continued to get worse, but the classes and for that matter the masses, neither truly understood nor cared to analyze their predicaments.

Masses do not usually have the alternatives that the classes do. They cannot, for the most part, put things out of mind by devising genteel distractions. Masses are likely to be stirred into states of effervescence, to coalesce into collectivities and to move toward ways—whether political, prepolitical, or postpolitical—of achieving some new sense of vitality and existence. Masses often get to be completely involved in efforts to discover a collective oneness.

Patterns of this sort have occurred again and again. Sometimes a religion is formed in the midst of the effervescence; always there are powerful components goading men into mindlessness and into "trances of action." The reasons are not hard to find: the old ways have become tedious, everything that comes to mind in these times proves frightening. Rather than "minding," great numbers resort to drink, drugs, Dionysiac abandonment, disaster politics. No prejudice is intended in these words. A great deal of dying and being reborn is in process. This is one form of the equation of our essay.

There is another form of our equation which links the games of life men play in their hours of despair to their dances of death. I begin with some paragraphs from Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. Maugham is describing a Paris dance hall around 1900:

The hall was lit by great white lights low down which emphasized the shadows on the faces, although the light seemed to harden under it and the colors were most curious. Philip leaned over the rails staring down. He ceased to hear the music. They danced
furiously. They danced around the room, slowly talking, but very little, with all their attention given to the dance. It seemed to Philip that they had thrown off the guard which people wear on their expression, and he saw them now as they really were. In that moment of abandon they were strangely animals. Some were foxy; some were wolf-life. Others had the long foolish faces of sheep. Their skins were sallow from the unhealthy life they led. Their features were blunted by mean interests and their little eyes were shifty and cunning. They were seeking escape from a world of horror.

Fate seemed to tower above them, and they danced as though everlasting darkness were about their feet. It was as if life terrified them, and the shriek that was in their hearts died within their throats. Notwithstanding the beastly lust which disfigured them and the meanness of their faces, and the cruelty. Notwithstanding the stupidity which was the worst of all, the anguish of these fixed eyes made all that crowd terrible and pathetic.

Maugham's grim description locates the main elements of our scenario: the haste to stave off horror; the growing fascination with and the anguished flight from a sense of impending death; the experience of vertigo. It is against this background that men come to play their games of life.

A not so surprising effect occurs as the games grow more abandoned; the takeoff into oblivion accelerates. Played with enough frenzy, the games promise escape from the horrors of existence; precisely, then, the masks of the actors fall: the games of life turn out to be dances of death.

The equation I have just stated is one which has been very well understood by all those attuned to divining the signs of the times. Depictions of the agonies of interims recur throughout literature and art. My subsequent examples will be drawn mainly but not exclusively from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the arts, there are those who run ahead and who are especially sensitive to the quakes and tremors of their times. One such spiritual seismographer was Rimbaud, whose Season in Hell is a supreme illustration of the sorts of games that life suggests to those in the extremities of despair. Anyone wishing to have a more than superficial understanding of the twentieth century must come to know that Rimbaud's logbook offers us more insights into the profiles of our future sense of reality than myriad "futurological" publications which are now concerned with the Year 2000. Rimbaud was truly a visionary, one who saw far ahead in respect to the spiritual itineraries we would all encounter in our efforts to find our ways out of the maze.

None of us ever really learns to live life. The living of death comes to us more or less naturally. We do not need to receive special lessons on how
to live death. We move toward death with faultless ease and skill. Is this not exactly what many of our foremost playwrights, poets, and painters have been telling us? Among the playwrights I would mention only a few whose works make no sense unless they are read and experienced in the spirit of the equations I have been suggesting here.

Samuel Beckett's whole work is devoted to the notion that the boring charades which comprise our games of life are in their own little way dances on the way to a death—if, indeed, there is any reality to either life or death. Beckett never settles the question; we read him or listen to him in Waiting for Godot, in Malone Dies, and other plays and novels; we sense that he doesn't ever decide whether he is alive or dead or has yet been born. The whole of life has the quality of being a silly turn on the way to death, itself an illusory end to meaninglessness.8

The resistances men exhibit to facing the realities of their lives and deaths have provoked one playwright after another in our time. Audiences have worked wonders in fending off these messages. I recall the perplexities of more than one elegant and cultivated group when The Iceman Cometh of Eugene O'Neill first appeared on Broadway. In my naivete, I originally supposed that everyone who saw or read the play would instantly recognize that The Iceman Cometh was a passion play. I found it the single most searing contemporary statement of this theme I had until then seen, relentlessly depicting the ways by which people seek to assure themselves that life eternal is theirs for the asking, exposing the "moonshine" and "pipedreams," everything—including the arts and sciences—which was fashioned in the attempt to make reality more bearable.

Those who remember the play cannot forget how stark were the alternatives with which O'Neill confronts us. As I was to learn only recently, O'Neill's stage directions directly recall the eve of the sacrifice of the paschal lamb. On Hickey's return to the saloon for the purpose of having a reunion with his old cronies, they throw themselves into having a wonderful time, living just as they always wanted to live and avoiding all the mess of the actual world. O'Neill's stage directions call upon Hickey and his cronies to be grouped in a manner which recalls Leonardo's painting of the Last Supper.9 It turns out the "Last Supper" is not only with Christ but also with Freud. What O'Neill wants to argue is the proposition that neither Christ nor Freud will get us out of the "bum rap" of this living death.10

We must not be astonished that the disciples turn on Hickey-Christ-Freud. They wish to destroy him. In fact, they put him out of the way as hopelessly mad; what else could they do? Was he not telling them that the illusions they insisted upon living and reliving in this womb, that they had recreated for themselves, could not in the end suffice?
It is startling that I have not yet found the author or critic who has noticed that Hickey's old cronies set upon him exactly when he comes to deliver a message meant to bring them into close touch with reality. Are not those who come to deliver some message too hard for our ears, too strong for our hearts and minds, regularly set aside as being beside themselves? Who among us can look straight into the eyes of life and death?

Countless illustrations of the relationship between the games of life and the dances of death are found in major living playwrights, Sartre, Genet, Ionesco, Peter Weiss, and others less removed.

Most recently, the works of art which have spelled out our equation most profoundly are films, but for some reason, not easy to state in a formula, many critics of films seem to miss critical dimensions of what is happening. Too often in our day, we get psychoanalytic pathographies of the directors rather than interpretations of the film. A case in point is an essay which offers proof that Fellini's Satyricon illustrated Fellini's inability to shake his way free of the perversions and psychopathologies which consumed him. Was it not obvious that he had voyeuristic tendencies, that he was dedicated to sadistic perversion, that he had addictions to necrophilia, and so forth?

Are we prepared to overlook the fact that Fellini's most interesting and most recent pictures are located in Rome, the historic city of Rome? La Dolce Vita, which is certainly about Rome, has the nobility wandering through catacombs and old villas engaging in orgiastic, frenetic efforts to shake themselves free of agonizing obsessions of one kind or another. As many will recall, La Dolce Vita begins with a helicopter carrying aloft the image of Jesus.

When I first saw La Dolce Vita, I felt certain that Fellini's future work would have to include The Satyricon. Fellini had to film Satyricon because Satyricon was our story, spoke to our condition. Fellini's reputed perversions—his sadism, his scatology, and his necrophilia—proved to be in the service of other purposes. What did Fellini really want to say? All the evidence, in my view, points to the fact that Fellini wanted to re-present us to ourselves by helping us, compelling us to re-live critical phases in the experiences of Western men during the anguished hours of Rome's age-old history.

La Dolce Vita is the prelude to The Satyricon. Both are the working out of deeply committed experiments in Fellini's spiritual efforts to read our times. Knowing that Rome had been—and continues to be—one of the navels of the world, an irradiating nucleus of civilizational development, Fellini sought to depict a dilemma revealed by Rome's history. Fellini was sensitive to the fact that when Rome sought to be starkly pagan, it had a way of going berserk, out of its mind; when it sought to be altogether—
totally and totalistically—Christian, it became absurd. How does one get beyond this impasse? Fellini undertook an experiment: he tried to establish whether those who escaped being thrown off course by the distortions of the Christian sense of guilt, who hoped to be able to enjoy “pagan” innocence in their indulgences, are in fact able to manage to have joy without shame or whether the games they play destroy them.

I am now able to cite Fellini himself as a witness that my conjectures tally with the key facts. A recently published guide to Fellini’s Satyricon permits us to read his own words. Interestingly, the setting of the interviews might almost be one from a Fellini film. A party is going on, starlets and international reporters are everywhere, and the renowned Moravia is one among them; he is the chief interviewer. Everyone explains Fellini to himself, but Fellini tells his own story clearly in his Preface. He explains he first read The Satyricon “many years ago at school,” and that the reading remained a “vivid memory” and exerted “a constant and mysterious challenge.” He continues:

After the lapse of many years I reread the Satyricon recently . . . This time [there was] more than just a temptation to make a film out of it, there was a need, an enthusiastic certainty.

The encounter with that world and that society turned out to be a joyful affair, a stimulation of fantasy, an encounter rich in themes of remarkable relevance to modern society.11

Clearly, Fellini expects us to know that La Dolce Vita was for him a first step along this way. His remarks go forward to describe the “disconcerting analogies” between society today and Roman society “before the final arrival of Christianity.”12

Fellini is quick to explain that his intentions went far beyond transcribing Petronius on film. His work was to be as much an experiment as a satire.

. . . If the work of Petronius is the realistic, bloody and amusing description of the customs, characters and general feel of those times, the film we want to freely adapt from it could be a fresco in fantasy key, a powerful and evocative allegory—a satire of the world we live in today. Man never changes, and today we can recognise all the principal characters of the drama: Encolpius and Ascyltos, two hippy students, like any of those hanging around today in Piazza di Spagna, or in Paris, Amsterdam or London, moving on from adventure to adventure, even the most gruesome, without the least remorse, with all the natural innocence and splendid vitality of two young animals. Their revolt, though having

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol10/iss10/12
nothing in common with traditional revolts—neither the faith, nor the desperation, nor the drive to change or destroy—is nevertheless a revolt and is expressed in terms of utter ignorance of an estrangement from the society surrounding them. They live from day to day, taking problems as they come, their life interests alarmingly confined to the elementaries: they eat, make love, stick together, bed down anywhere. They make a living by the most haphazard expedients, often downright illegal ones. They are dropouts from every system, and recognize no obligations, duties or restrictions. . . .

They are totally insensible to conventional ties like the family (usually built less on affection than on blackmail): they don’t even practice the cult of friendship, which they consider a precarious and contradictory sentiment, and so are willing to betray or disown each other any time. They have no illusions precisely because they believe in nothing but, in a completely new and original way, their cynicism stays this side of a peaceful self-fulfillment, of a solid, healthy and unique good sense. 18

That last remark offers Fellini’s most compelling statement of the new credo. The new faith is expressed in the conviction that if previous structures of commitment, including commitment to one’s dearest friends, are held in total abeyance, if there is a total rejection of any image of reciprocity, this may well be the very remedy which this dementing society apparently requires. Self-fulfillment then seems to be “solid, healthy and unique good sense.”

Is this situation conceivable or possible? Has the new credo the makings of some new faith which will recover us from our alienation? The story fills out as we follow the details of the interview. On more than one occasion evidence develops that Moravia was not able to understand what Fellini was saying. Despite Moravia’s vaunted moralism, he seems to enjoy the spectacle of ongoing decays. Fellini runs very much deeper. He reminds us here of Nietzsche! He explains:

When I think that at the time of Hadrian the cultivated, sensitive, cosmopolitan emperor who traveled constantly throughout the empire, in the Coliseums at Rome, one could witness the massacre of seventy-five pairs of gladiators in a single afternoon. . . . What escapes us in the mentality of the world in which you went to the box office or the theater and bought a ticket which entitled you to entertain yourself with the agony of a fellow human being killed by the sword or devoured by a wild beast. Death probably constituted the most entertaining part of these spectacles. People watched men die as today Spaniards watch bulls die: joking, laughing, having a drink. 14
Moravia, ever the cultured critic, remarks, "Agony as a spectacle comes to an end in history with the coming of Christianity."

This seems to be as questionable an assertion as has been uttered in our century. Agony as a spectacle does not come to an end in history with the coming of Christianity; it takes myriad new forms. We, in our own time, are witnessing many of those forms. We, you and I, are able to look at our TV and see agonies far beyond the imagination of Roman proletarians and emperors alike, the agonies now occurring across the world which regularly appear on our TV screens—Vietnam, Biafra, East Pakistan, the agonies displayed in gladiatorial sport spectacles, football, and so on. Our films more than match the fantasies of de Sade.

It was the era of the late Middle Ages—in many ways a prototype of our times—which best understood that the games of life are the sources of the dances of death. The men of those days were fascinated by the image of the confrontation of the living and dead. Introducing a medieval dance of death, Florence Warren reminds us that the theme of the encounter of the three living and three dead occurs again and again. Actual dancing was frequently held at the times and places of death, and during the plague it was even encouraged as a means of raising people's spirits. There was a dance in which the dancers circled others who played dead. Death has an ironic and humorous tone, though there is the usual grim message underneath, for death takes liberties in addressing his subjects. He tells the abbot, for example, to dance "even though you're nothing light." The dance was jolly, and when it came time for each of the dancers to kiss their "dead" fellow goodbye, each would do an exaggerated parody of the act, which caused mirth. In the poem, "the grim confrontation of death with the living becomes a game of the living," Florence Warren explains.15

(This last metaphor, introducing a moving variation of the image I had already selected for my own title, surprised me on running across it in Florence Warren's pages.)

Perhaps the most powerful explicit rendering of a medieval dance of death by a modern master will be found in Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal. Indeed, the entire action of that great work occurs in an interlude or a reprieve between the sittings of a great game of chess, whose outcome the Knight-Crusader knows in advance: he will be checkmated by his opponent, Death. At the end, he learns that Death has "no secrets," "nothing to tell him." The central project under consideration among the people of the everyday world in interaction in the play is the planning of a re-presentation of the dance of death. Here again we have the links between the games of life and the dances of death.

As in the case of Fellini, we have Bergman's own word that the grim equations I have touched upon on these pages depict pangs and blights of
modern existence. We dare not close our comparison of these two men, however, without remarking that a chasm seems to separate their images of world and future. Bergman sums up his own creed in the following stark lines:

... In former days the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; 'eternal values,' 'immortality' and 'masterpiece' were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.

Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy... The individualists stare into each other's eyes and yet deny the existence of each other. We walk in circles, so limited by our own anxieties that we can no longer distinguish between true and false, between the gangster's whim and the purest ideal.

Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil—or perhaps a saint—out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.16

I allow myself some summary theses on the dramas of life and death which constitute the fabrics of our several and joint histories. I do this by way of conclusion and reprise.

The present essay argues that societies do undergo changes in their images of their states of being; their senses of their past, present, and future; their experience of the balances of hoped-for fruitions and dreaded failures.17 At times in the histories of societies, the tensions verge upon the unendurable. Deep confusion and perplexities begin to manifest themselves at every turn—in some as agony, in some as apathy, in some as effervescence, in some as immense urgency to engage in mindless acts of ecstasy, terror, fusion with others.

The most compelling instances or signs of the crisis state of civilization may be described as anomie and vertigo.18 When this occurs, societies seem to be caught up in maelstrom. In the omnipresence of the grotesque,19 all of the rules have been suspended and no longer appear to apply. A precedent seems to be absurd. Among the critical developments
are new religious statements and truths allegedly derived from the sciences and the pseudosciences, that death has no power over man, that it is possible to eliminate it by the expansion of consciousness or by some particular device of a new science or an old science, whether it be reincarnation or cryonic suspension.20 Whenever societies are close to the state of vertigo, we discover the increase of frenzied efforts to fight off the sense of impending doom. Vast numbers of people are propelled into violent motions, whether in dance, marathon,21 nomadism, or in brutal sports of an agonistic character.

The most interesting of all of the responses of individuals and groups to the sense of impending doom is the increase in pressure to create games and dances which distract one's mind from brooding over one's fate. I have called these games "the games of life," and when they are looked at very carefully, it is observed that these games of life, whose purpose one would suppose would be to stave off the dances of death are after their own fashion, dances of death; for, in the playing of the games of life, we actually lose our lives or cast them away in one or another fashion.

The connections between the games of life and the dances of death were very well understood by men of another time, especially the men of the Middle Ages. It is, therefore, no wonder whatever that they gave so much stress to the idea of the dances of death. Indeed, these were always projected as the games of life which were being played by hectic and frenzied dancers.22

The stuff which we produce as "plays" in our theaters is the dramas of our lives and deaths. Who does not relive these histories will not be able to reappropriate these re-presentations. We are the authors, the audience, the actors, and the acts. The stories we are telling and are being told are about ourselves.23

_De nobis fabulae narratur._

**NOTES**


Clues to the wider perspectives adopted in this essay will be found in the writings of Durkheim, Jane Harrison, Johan Huizinga, and others who place strong stress on the structures of experience in the shaping of men's expressions. See esp., Emile Durkheim, _The
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5. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages.


8. This scheme is given insistent stress in the script written for—and acted by—Beckett's friend, Jack McGowran.


10. Karl Schifigriesser concludes an interview with O'Neill saying, "But as it (the play) proceeds, the 'Iceman' who started as a ribald joke, takes on a different, deeper and even terrifying meaning and before the end becomes Death itself," in Raleigh, ed., p. 28.


12. Fellini, Satyricon, p. 43. As this essay goes to press, word comes from Italy that Fellini has now completed a new film entitled Roma: The Decline of the Roman Empire, 1931–1972.

13. Fellini, Satyricon, p. 44.


Nelson, "Actors, Directors, Roles, Cues, Meanings."


The dance marathon was truly a danse macabre, and the violent contrasts inherent in the scene: the band (always, as the author notes, playing, overly loud), the gaudy festoons and ribbons of bunting strung all over the hall, the bars and hot dog counters along the walls, the intermittently booming loud speakers, all centering on the weaving array of close-to-collapsing contestants, almost literally walking in their sleep—these contrasts only served to heighten the resemblance to a kind of Surrealist, latter-day Inferno. (All this too was punctuated—and this the author brings out skillfully indeed—by the fiendish jocularity of the promoter, who was always at his most expansive when he was ordering an extra sprint to thin out some of the contestants.)

