

MORS AND VITA

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When crossing the Atlantic in order to explore the unknown shores of death with you, I thought of the beautiful, unforeseeable adventure of Christopher Columbus, who set off to discover a new world. I recalled the play "Christopher Columbus", by Paul Claudel, in which the two themes of the explorer seeking the new world and the earth-bound pilgrim searching for another world are combined. The hope of finding permanence at the end of the voyage has been put into words by Saint Theresa of Lisieux, a young Carmelite nun : "I have told you, Mother, that the conviction I would one day go far from my somber country had been granted to me as early on as childhood. I not only believed, through what I heard spoken, but I also felt in my heart, through its inner and deep-seated yearnings, that another land a more beautiful region, would one day be my permanent abode, just as the guardian spirit of Christopher Columbus made him divine a new world". In this way, the image of a voyage appears, from the very first, to be indispensable when describing the passage through earthly life, which is a voyage in time but also an inner voyage made up of interweaving events which embroider the motifs of a personal destiny upon the stuff of a being or, to employ a musical image, an inner voyage, the notes of which form an ever-unfinished symphony.

All meditation on death is a meditation on life, on time, on man, on society, on history, on civilization, on suffering, on failure, on hope, on the end and on ends. It is a quest for meaning which, by revealing to us the anguish of the perishable, leads us to seek the permanent. Beneath the somber illumination of death everything becomes relative, and the resounding cry from Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity", makes evident the futility of the debates,, the conflicts, the fights, the victories, the defeats, the emotions, the uprisings, and the passions comprising our poor temporal history, which in the heat of immediate events, we have, through lack of distance and perspective, magnified beyond all bounds.

Is death the supreme reality? "Decay foments the beauty of the trees, the curve of the hills, the bodies of young girls. What we call life is but a brief glimmer of death amid the great slanting lights propelled by time", wrote André Malraux. In a sad vein, Ionesco follows his example: "Beauty is an ephemeral sign that eternity makes apparent to us and then withdraws. A manifestation of eternity and also a sign of death, beauty often seems to me to be a maleficent flower of the void, or the cry of a dying world, or a rich and despairing prayer – and then ashes."

Death forces us to ponder upon our real importance. It situates the span of our brief life – "a flash of lightning between two eternities of death", according to Poincaré – in relation to temporal infinity and eternity, or rather it makes us divine an incomprehensible domain of extra temporal duration. It

integrates our perishable body into the universal change of matter and into the incessant exchange of our component atoms, and integrates our consciousness – a brief spark of inexplicable brightness – into a universe without light. “The most incomprehensible thing in the world is that the world is comprehensible to us” said Einstein. Death relates our suffering to the indifference of the universe. Listen to the words of Jacques Monod, the Nobel Prize winner: “Man knows from now onwards that he is alone in an indifferent universe into which he has emerged by chance”. Death integrates our derisory memory into the seas of oblivion. It makes us see our civilization as a human structure with which we challenge time, and which is engulfed in the shipwreck of the centuries. Paul Valéry has written: “We, civilizations, now know that we are mortal. We have heard of worlds disappearing completely, of empires with all their men and inventions sinking with a vertical trajectory, descending, with their gods and their laws, to the unexplored sea-bed of the centuries. We know that the whole of the visible world is made of ashes, and that these ashes mean something. Through the veils of history we glimpse at the specters of vast ships laden with wealth and knowledge. We cannot count them, but, after all, these shipwrecks were not our doing. Elam, Ninive and Babylon were vague, fine-sounding names, and the total destruction of these worlds had as little meaning as their very existence. But France, England and Russia will be fine-sounding names too...”

In our calamitous existence in which all comes to nothing, death is the essence of the tragic consciousness. Only fear, despair and revolt, or, by a compensatory reversal, a confident abandon, remain for man.

Let us firstly with fear : “Human knowledge, making a leap equal to that which marked the discovery of fire and the invention of electricity, forges ahead, arriving in one go at the year 3000,” wrote René Grousset. He entrusts this knowledge of the fourth millennium of our era to the terrible hands of the pithecanthropus. So much genius, in fact all of human genius, devoted to the original murder! How the somber Aztec and Civaïte mythologies are surpassed by reality! After the intercontinental wars and the annihilation, over vast areas, of all the attainments of civilization, we can no longer be allowed to keep our eyes shut. The warning, as in the biblical scene, is written on the wall. Let us decipher it while there is still time, for the life of the human species is at stake.”

Albert Camus, Sartre and, more recently, J.M. Domenach in his work “The return of tragedy”, have voiced the despair of contemporary times is the face of death. Listen to Claude Levi-Strauss who, in one of the final sentences of the last volume in his vast anthropological work, announces “the twilight of mankind.” Listen to Jacques Monod: “Man’s destiny is not laid down anywhere, no more than in his duty.” Listen to André Malraux and his assessment of human history: “History is an abominable adventure. All these captains, these Parthenons and these megalopolises do not dull the polished splendor of the void. On the darkness of its mirrors the generations follow one after the other, groping their way forward, stumbling like the blind men of Jerome Bosch. (...) The epic of the Earth is not so much that of Brasilia and Tintoretto as the suffering of the flagellants, the haggard crowds of Suse and Assur, the slaves and the bunker-hands, the massacres and the crusades, the galley-slaves and the negroes, the wars of the poor and the snows of Russia, Dachau, history has no other power than that of organizing death.”

If it is only death which wins in the end, the history itself is but a tissue of grief, mourning and death. Such is the nihilistic conception of human history. But not only of human history, of the history of the cosmos in which the life and death of the stars reveal to us the transitoriness of all things and make

even more piercing the cry into the darkness which was uttered by Jean Rostand : “The human species will disappear, just as the dinosaurs and stegocephalites disappeared. All life will cease upon the earth which, as a dead star, will go on spinning endlessly in the boundless heavens. Out of all the discoveries, philosophies, ideals, and religions which make up human and superhuman civilization, nothing will survive. In this minute corner of the universe the insignificant life of protoplasm will perhaps rear in yet other worlds and everywhere it is sustained by the same illusions which create the same torments, everywhere it is just as absurd, just as vain, just as inevitably destined from the beginning to the final defeat and the infinite darkness.”

Despair it is an escapist attitude which helps one to forget, it is the Pascalian “divertissement” which takes on the paroxysmal appearance of frenzy, it is James Dean being crushed, it’s drugs, eroticism, and violence. Suicide lies one step ahead: weariness of life, difficulties in living, the annihilation of the individual which reduces the world to nothingness. Nietzsche has written the following apology of suicide: “I recommend death to you, a voluntary death which comes to you because you have willed it.”

At the extreme limit of despair, there exists the cry of the Spanish anarchists “Long Live Death”, the proclamation of nihilism as a philosophical doctrine, the sinister utilization of death as a political instrument and the fascination at its triumph. This fascination grips hold of the leaders of the masses who want to be the masters of history : “quos vult perdere”... “Powerlessness drives them insane and transforms them into gods of darkness : Neron and the burning of Rome, Hitler in the world of concentration camps, committing suicide in the bunker in Berlin.

In the regions beyond despair the tragic has been made into an absolute. “The idea of the unknowable, manifested as a bloodthirsty god of terror, haunts all primitive religions” wrote René Grousset. The menace, depicted in such a way from the dawn of human consciousness, will one day, when it attains its most developed form, take on the appearance of the Hindou god Civa, the cosmic god whose dance reduces the generations to dust – Civa ,the child of the metaphysical genius of India. Several million Vichnous will perish and several million Brahmins also will meet their death, when the sea, the earth, the air, the fire and the wind are annihilated. Civa will then collect the heads of these gods together and make a necklace out of them, and dance his inimitable one-footed dance, the necklace dangling upon his eight shoulders. He will sing mysterious melodies that no-one knows how to sing, and enjoy pleasures no-one has experienced.”

Now for revolt: God is dead.

Fear, despair, tragedy, revolt – or abandonment to the arms of “death, our sister”, in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi - “At the coming of death, we must possess that intense faith in life which makes us surrender to death as if to a descent into higher life”, wrote Teilhard de Chardin. We should love life so much and believe in it so strongly that we embrace and turn towards it even through death... The only great prayer that can be made in those hours when the path grows dim in front of us is that of Jesus on the cross: “Into thy hands, God, I comment my spirit...” May death and the horror of the return to cosmic Energy be blessed above all things. At death, an attraction stronger than any material tension draws our souls towards the Centre where they belong without any resistance. Death makes us lose our footing completely and hands us over to the Powers of Heaven and Earth. This is where lies death’s greatest source of dread, but also the summit of beatitude for the mystic - the definitive exaltation at last, amidst a Medium which masters, carries off and burns.

O triumph". Can one love one's death? "Happiness is mine because I am determined to love everything, even death", A. Rubinstein exclaims. "O death so sweet, the only morning!" (Bernanos)

"Christianity has poked death at length trying to find God's presence in it", wrote André Malraux. He continued thus: "In death I look for the intelligible". Such is the search for meaning.

Like each one of you, I am only a human lost in the ocean of the living and the dead, a drop in an immense ocean. A feeling of humility prevents me from wanting to give my life-story as an example. But, because of my constant meditation on life and death, on my life and my death, I feel close to each one of you, so true is it that a common destiny creates fraternity.

So, let me leave behind the artifices of the spotlights, the tribune and the dais and be no more than a man speaking to other men.

I would like, now, to present to you a biologist's tentative answer to the search for the meaning of death.

The earth, lost in the middle of the tens of thousands of planetary systems which make up a galaxy, and the hundreds of thousands of galaxies in movement in the universe, was borne five thousand million years ago.

It was no doubt about four thousand million years ago that life appeared on this earth, which is of the same nature as the whole of the immense cosmos. The materials of which it is made up are of the same nature as those of the rest of the universe. Spectroscopic examination of the stars allows us to identify in them the same elements as those seen on the earth. The basic material is formed by the constituents of the atom, that is, protons, neutrons and electrons. The only difference with the rest of the universe lies in the degree of organization. Life is a higher form of the organization of matter.

Life has a policy or perseverance, conquest, self-expression and evolution.

Perseverance:

From a physico-chemical point of view, life is a battle against the rise of entropy, that is against a growth of the disorder of the infra-structure, a disorder which leads onto the final thermodynamic balance, death.

Perseverance: Life seems to attach great value to its keeping off. In order that a single human may be conceived, the male sexual organ produces between two hundred and three hundred million spermatozoa for a single emission of seminal fluid, and the number of spermatozoa equals that of the population of Western Europe. Sixteen emissions represent the whole of the earth's population. The ovaries of one woman contain seven hundred thousand ovules, four hundred of which are emitted at the rate of one every twenty-eight days over the thirty years span of the woman's reproductive life. Billions of spermatozoa and hundreds of thousands of ovules are produced in order that a couple may have some chance of conceiving two or three children.

Life then spends lavishly in order to survive.

Let us finally consider the moving obstinacy life shows in persevering in being. Certain species are the obscure witnesses of the first ages. They have traversed the centuries by reproducing themselves

identically right up until our days. Towards what meeting-place did they move? And now, today, man can rise up against the eternal march, spoken of by Bataillon.

Conquest

The second policy of life is conquest.

Life, which has such a prodigious past, and which stubbornly goes on persevering, is animated by an enormous power of expansion. A single bacterium, dividing in favorable environmental conditions could produce, by a geometric progression, a mass of living matter greater than the mass of the earth within eight days.

Conquest: when life left its cradle, the ocean, it made the conquest of land ; today, the conquest of the cosmos is taking place.

Self-expression

The nucleic acids which make up our chromosomes use an alphabet of twenty letters, the twenty vital amino-acids. Imagine the number of poems that nature could compose with such means! With this alphabet life creates, destroys and recreates ad infinitum this world of forms of an inexhaustible variety.

Evolution

There was, at the origin of life, a remarkable event. After this unparalleled event life evolved for thirty-five million centuries. Three and a half billion years ago, the presence of organic carbon combined with pyrites appears as the first manifestation of life. Thalli of blue algae and of mushrooms, dating from one billion eight hundred million years ago, have been discovered in the silex of southern Canada. The oldest layer of the primary era, the Cambrian layer, already contains highly evolved fossils; thus all the branches of the animal kingdom, with the exception of the vertebrates, had completed their evolution at the beginning of primary era. Then comes the well-known sequence of fishes, batrachians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Man, the last-born of life, appeared scarcely six hundred thousand years ago or maybe two million years.

Coming from the depths of the ages, life has been shaped by the efforts of many millennia.

Such is the powerful policy of life.

But life has seen some dramas: the frailty of the higher orders and the penury of materials and space. There is a striking divorce between the superabundance of potentialities and the penury of means.

“What does a cell dream of? O becoming two” wrote François Jacob, neatly defining the movement of life. This movement does not always reach its issue.

A single bacterium, as I already mentioned, dividing in favorable environmental conditions, could synthesize by a geometric progression, a mass of living matter greater than the mass of the earth within eight days. Now it is indeed true that a bacterium does not create an earth every eight days; it has to impose upon itself a sort of birth control, and it has to deal with scarcity, and to come up against its own limits.

Penury

Our life span is too short to accomplish and bring to maturity all the potentialities that we contain.

Penury: the earth's land is becoming too small for our number and living matter is becoming insufficient for the building-up and the maintenance of our protoplasm. Paradoxically, life is becoming a threat to life. A biology of limits will have to be established at the furthest margins of the possible. Limits to environmental conditions, and limits to liberty are needed in the cause of life. In both cases, the punishment for transgressing these limits is death.

Penury: life recuperates everything. Each of the atoms and molecules which make up our organism has been involved with billions of living beings before us, and our remains will serve to construct other organisms through the agency of the well-known cycle of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and so on...

From this point of view, death has a place in the economy of life: it becomes the servant of life, in giving the later new possibilities for fresh trials, for fresh forms of protoplasm. Life starts a new with each new birth.

New is life for each being that has been born and so is its impetus. Each new being is the morning of the world.

Death counterbalances life at every moment, and we know well that each of our heart beats measures out the rhythm of our march towards death. Life is, according to Heraclitus' image, "a river of ever changing waves but of an eternal course". The unceasing exchange between the inanimate and the animate takes place in both directions.

It is extraordinary to see how life, encountering the drama of penury, makes death, the absolute defeat, serve its own ends. The defeat is in itself defeated. The species transcends the individual; it continues "its eternal march upon a roadway strewn with the corpses of individuals" to use Bataillon's bold image.

For the individual the defeat is irreversible; his death is without remedy. Destruction of the individual for the greater glory of the species and of life!

Let us remember as the most important lesson that the individual is subordinated to the species : One individual dies and the species survives. But let us note as well that the species themselves are subordinated to a higher, more mysterious plan of life since the species themselves are mortal. The blind alleys of evolution exist in the dinosaurs, the stegocephales, which disappeared for ever. But life has gone on towards further progress.

Evolution pursues its road from the simple to the complex. Billions of individuals and millions of species suffer death for a greater good of life, a good which is greater than them. At the moment of death our remains return to the Whole. Life reverently salvages our ashes in order to make a new structure from them, a structure which is itself destined to the same fate. A new fountain of youth appears in the obscurity and the anonymity of the atoms. New living creatures are formed and destined to the disintegration and the dissolution of death. But the cards are dealt again and again; the atoms and the molecules of our particular remains will be integrated into new lives.

Let me conclude on the mingled themes of limits, penury and death; defeat is transcended by the subordination to a higher plan, the individual is subordinated to the species and the species to life's great and mysterious design.

The heroic adventure of life has been developing four billion years.

The life with its legendary past, its obstinate will to persist, has a great future ahead of it.

A great future for life, yes, but with or without man?

Now, at the top of the evolutionary tree, man has the means to cut loose from destiny.

LIFE IS OUR FATHERLAND

Life invites us to build. We are not thrown to the future like a cannonball out of control. We are not a rudderless boat wandering, in the words of one contemporary historian, "between the double gaps of what has been and what will be."

We are but a moment in a continuing saga. "It is this continuity", writes the historian, "that I would like to bind to our present so that, nourished by accumulated experience and convince that life is worth living, we will finally reach a future where there is hope for prospects".

This future is unfathomable and fabulous. We will never finish building it. It will last the 5,5 billion years that the Earth will remain habitable for man. We have scarcely covered one meter out of eight kilometers; we are still in the early stages of childhood, infancy.

If living beings "build the future", if the future is the only sphere in which liberty can intervene if the ways of life are also those of liberty, if one of the characteristics of man is to create history, not just bear it, then liberty with man becomes incarnate in creation and will prevail throughout the world. A grandiose destiny, but one which will be tragic if man cannot live up to himself. "Humanity obliges", proclaimed Jean Rostand, but everything indicates that we are still primitives not yet in full possession of our humanity.

Thus, the thoughts of the biologist ever turn toward the celebration of life. Time is an indispensable assistant. The past is present. Life with the past makes the future. The future is a fertile field for the growth of liberty, liberty which lives inside all of us and endows man with his tragedy or greatness.

Who is man? André Malraux answered this question with, "a pitiful pile of secrets". For me, man is a monument of mystery

My testimony as a biologist comes to a close here. It has in many places taken on the tone of a hymn to life. It has outlined the policy of life.

To fight for life implies the rejection of all philosophies of despair as dangerous since ideas rule the world and will continue to rule the world. From now onwards, due to the power that man has given himself through science, the frenzy of nihilism can annihilate our species. The brazier we have kindled will destroy us. The end of human history will not however be the end of the history of the universe. It will not even be the end of human life but simply the extinction of one particular species and of a few others that man will have involved in his ruin.

To proclaim life as the prime value is to coincide with the fundamental assertions of the major monotheistic religions and the other religions of the world. This proclamation rejects manicheism as a dangerous heresy, since it puts on an equal level life and death, Eros and Thanatos. It is false to

state, as Freud seemed to do, that the death instinct is equal to the life instinct. Death is negative like evil, which can only be defined in relation to being.

“Life is the sum of the forces that resist death”. This formula by Bichat is too pessimistic, as if life were only a resistance instead of being a conquest! A healthy attitude in front of death is to proclaim life, whose servant is death. In opposition to the limitations of Bichat and the false equilibrium of Freud, this is the new attitude that we suggest.

To give life priority is to recognize the positive contribution our civilization has made. Our century is a great century.

Our generation should be overwhelmed with shame at the folly of the crematoria and the lack of measure in the creation of exterminatory weapons, both of which are signs of death triumphant. But it can also be proud of its scientific conquests, of its technical achievements, of its victory over scourges, of certain advances of the conscience attained in spite of vicissitudes. These victories of life have, through their witchery been able to hide death from view for a moment. This eclipse is not necessarily a harmful symptom. It shows a healthy reaction of the life instinct, which is stronger than death.

You are familiar with the case brought against our society; it is described as productivist, technological and commercial; it is accused of wastage, of destroying nature; man is considered as a producer, a consumer, an object and no longer a subject, “the super-object of a society of exchange” said Marcuse.

Such a society holds life in contempt; it is the carrier of death, it kills and it allows death. Death, a collective matter, was in France during the seventeenth century the object of a social ceremony; today, it still retains a collective dimension in African societies but elsewhere it has lost this dimension and has withdrawn into the family circle. Now, with the segregation of old people, it has become a solitary matter. Joyous familiarity with death has disappeared. The widespread dispossession of death results from the dispossession of the sick person. 78% of French people die in the anonymity of the hospital and the clinic, after physicians and nurses have officiated in the technical activism of the last fight. Physicians in their relentless pursuit of healing, are suspected of yielding to the sporting taste for good performance and prowess, and more seriously still, of wanting to fight their own anguish, then, in front of the unavoidable defeat, they are suspected of changing into sacrificers who inflict death by euthanasia, which is the sigh of supreme helplessness.

In this secularized society, the emotional charge of death has been transferred onto illness: death is no more than an accident, an ailment which is “at the present moment” irreversible. Death is no longer characterized by the grief of near relations, by the self examination of the dying, but by the battle against the challenge, by the use of narcotics to make the journey an unconscious one, and finally by the avoiding of mourning. Religious liturgy henceforth aims more to comfort the living than to attend to the dead.

In the domain of death, the human and the fraternal are supplanted by a glacial technology, technical mirages make us dream of the perenniality of the body being achieved by cryogeny, and diminish our belief in the immortality of the soul. Man is in this way dispossessed of his death and loses sight of the meaning of his destiny. Such is the pessimistic analysis of our time.

I do not want to join the procession of those who mourn for the past : the necessary denunciation of a particular logic of our society does not imply the return to a past which was in fact tragic, in which the average life span was less than twenty years, in which social inequality was over helming, in which man was powerless in front of nature's scourge, in which the awful law of the jungle and of dynamic equilibrium between the species set up its reign of terror, in which culture was non-existent, in which the light of knowledge had not shown forth to enrich our vision of man and the universe, in which no one could attempt to shoulder his destiny in order to dominate nature and eliminate its scourges, in which freedom in the fullest sense of the word was so restricted that man was the branded slave of fatality.

I do not however reject contestation. Contestation can be fruitful if its underlying value and its intended demands are revealed from the outset. Sometimes it appears it is right. To spoil the earthly garden, to destroy forever, as we are doing in one generation, twenty per cent of all living species, as much as what has disappeared in sixty million years, it is a crime against life and future, to refuse to question the meaning of life and the ultimate ends (last things) is a voluntary mutilation of man and an abdication of the spirit, to caricature medicine is to ignore its greatness.

But, to look straight the prospect of the end and the black sun of death is a humanizing attitude.

It is a question of assuming one's death in an old fashion. "I will die like I make love, with my eyes open", the poet Aragon wrote. "We should die our own natural death, not that of physicians. Lord, give to each of us our own death born from our own life" wrote Rilke.

"My death belongs to me", E. Mounier said, "it transforms my life into a destiny. It is an act". When death is accepted an assumed it gives life relief and meaning. "Death is constantly there, like the small red pepper which in Mexico they call a chili, and which I eat raw without flinching." Death is the spice of life", wrote Max-Pol Fouchet.

"Even if I never were to die, said Garaudy, there would be nothing I could prefer to my personal life. There would be no love, no love great enough to make me prefer another life to my own. There is one supreme gift that I could never make, the gift of my life". According to Jankelivitch, "Death inaugurates liberty", a liberty which has responsibility, the awareness of good and evil, and the autonomy of the will as corollaries. Now the free adult human is drawn up to his full height. He has been restored to himself, he has transcended the dialectic of being and having: one only needs to have to a very small degree in order to be, but to have too much stifles being. He integrates his own history into the history of matter, of life and of mankind. His gaze plunges into the past but also moves full of expectation, towards the future. Eschatology is not only sacred, it can be terrestrial: Montherlant has written 'It is the words which they have not spoken which make the presence of the buried dead so great', and Ernest Bloch in like vein "No life ever ends completely, for the dead bequeath their surplus of life and their unaccomplished deeds to the living who survive them."

Even if human history were to come to an end, the meditation of the last human being at the supreme hour would challenge the despair that futility brings. Listen to the incantatory magic of Thomas Mann's where he praises the ephemeral: "In the depths of my soul, I believe – and I consider this belief to be native to every human soul – that, in the great universe, our earth should be considered as a centre. In the depths of my soul I nurture a hypothesis – that the creative act which made the universe surge up out of the void has, like the birth of life from organic matter, man as its

only goal; and that with man a great enterprise began which, if it fails through the fault of man, will be a failure of creation itself.”

Whether this is so or not, it would be fitting for man to act as if it were.

Finally, the assertion of the being must be the necessity of the link for man is not autonomous. He belongs to the universe, of which he is a thinking and suffering piece, he proceeds from life of which he is, in the multimillenary history of evolution, the present supreme form. He belongs to the human species to which he is bound. “Hell is the others” said Jean-Paul Sartre. “No, Garaudy replies, it is the others’ absence and absence to the others”. Man cannot fully be himself if he is not linked to the cosmos, to life, to human beings, and last to the invisible.

For there exists a kingdom of the invisible: that of the secret history of life, written in the nucleic acids of our chromosomes, and which we carry without being aware of it ; that of the total history of the life which preceded us, with its sufferings and struggles, and of which we are a fleeting instant, a link in the immense chain between the past and the future, that of the unconscious, the subconscious, the “nescient”, the unexpressed, the inexpressible, the ineffable.

Beyond scientific and technical rapture, the acceleration of history proposes a grandiose task to our generation. To go beyond suffering and anguish in order to reach certainties : not the “cal homeland” where death is “blissful silence” according to Albert Camus phrase, not the lazy and limited enchantments of the Hellenes’Olympus – Nor the philosophy of the pain which enhances human distress and substitutes to Phidias’ Zeus, Mathias Grünwald’s suffering man, but a more serene vision that integrates respect for life and acceptance of death, joy and sorrow, success and failure, past and present, knowledge and love, the enterprising mind and the spirit of perfection, contemplation and action, the ephemeral and the eternal, the part and the whole, the atom and the universe, the zero and the infinite.

A famous sentence is written under Gauguin’s triptych: “Where do we come from, who are we, where are we going to?”

We come from the mists of time. We are as old as the atom, I mean, as old as the billions of centuries of the universe; we are as old as the billions of centuries of life. Who are we? A flash of awareness filled with an irrepressible love and an irrepressible hope.

I estimate to conclude. We have to make possible the advance of the conscience, in spite of vicissitudes.

I happen to have created, more than thirty years ago, a world organization, the Institut de la Vie which celebrates life, and urges us to respect it. It has gathered more than three thousand scientists from sixty countries and amongst them fifty Nobel Prize winners. I was invited to chair the society of Thanatology for twenty three years and I have been elected International President.

It is under the auspices of the Society of Thanatology that I would like to situate the last words of this lecture :

- If man is probably the only member of the living world to know he is mortal, nothing is more humanizing than to dare think of death. The philosophy of the Society of Thanatology (Paris) regarding death is not morbid at all. It is not a morose delectation, it is mature, lucid and serene. It aims at giving man his full dimension. Man must be at peace with his destiny which is not only tragic, with himself, with the living, with the universe and with happiness. Because we are aware of the ephemeral feature of our life on earth, we try to enjoy even more each minute of it.

Here are two quotations to explicit our statements: “to know how to die is stronger than to know how to kill”, philosopher André Glucksmann said. “The greatest civilizations are those where life is at peace with death”, “The idea of death must lead to the heart of life”, the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz explained.

- The benefit of the lucidity is not only personal; it can apply to the whole society because it is unhealthy to occult death. Let’s consider the social dimension of the phenomenon.

The social challenges are to make society aware of conditions before and at the moment of death, to try to lighten the burden of suffering, to analyze the circumstances of suicide, to tackle the problem of the family and death, to alleviate the loneliness of the old man ; to try to humanize the hospital by creating a fraternal atmosphere, to help the physician in his dialogue with his patient, and to explore the resources of spirituality at the ultimate moment, to broad the analysis to all the events of social life which are signs or carriers of death.

If this action could develop fully, society as a whole could be changed.

- Let’s go even further. It is necessarily the whole human race we aim at.

Death is inherent to all living beings, including man whatever his time, his cultural, geographical and sociological belonging. It is unifying factor since the same destiny is shared by the whole mankind. And it is the whole past, present and future human family that we encompass in our action.

Mankind is composed of more dead than living Auguste Comte said. And Sartre, as an echo, described himself as : “a man make of all men, who is worth all of them and worth any of them”. We will not die since mankind encompasses all men and since we encompass all mankind, the living and the dead.

And Sartre added : “Let me like forget me after my burial, I do not care : as long as they live, I, ungraspable and nameless, will haunt theme and present in each of them just like millions of dead I do not know and whom I keep away from destruction are in me.”

Such is Jean-Paul Sartre’s global conscience towards the end of his life. Beyond those endeavors to answer the mystery of our life and of our death, another answer is given by the major faiths in the world.

If we dare go further in the dream till the end of its movement, we will consider the complex relationship between life and death and we will be able to place death in the economy of life, because death is the servant of life. That is true in our terrestrial condition. About our mysterious human condition, death is for god believers, the way to reach the ultimate ends.

I have in mind an international conference which deals will all the dimensions of the phenomenon of death. Its formulation as destiny, its somatic, medical, biological, ecological,

economic, social, cultural, ethical, historic, legal, moral, psychological, metaphysical implications make of it an eternal matter for thought. Although the sphinx remains mute, we have to ask questions. The scope is immense. Our aim is philosophical, cultural and social. Any meditation on death leads us beyond its and help us glorify life. Thus death could appear as it is: the counter-melody of an hymn to the glory of life, life in its whole biological, social, metaphysical and cosmic meaning.