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Drowning

Wolfi Landstreicher

Drowning...

A death in which one is completely overcome by a natural force too great for one to fight...

But what deaths do not involve such a force?

I think drowning has its special significance because the force surrounds the victim, encompasses her, ingests and plays with him. Particularly in the sea, it is as if infinity has swallowed the one who has drowned, has taken him in and turned her into a part of itself. While there are similarities to death by fire, which also consumes its victims, fire lacks the apparent infinity of the sea, and the victim has freedom of motion limited only by her own fear, at least until asphyxiation causes him to lose consciousness. But one who drowns finds himself to be the plaything of the sea, forced to partake in its fluidity of motion. Certainly the drowning one will struggle against the power of the sea. But to what avail? Her motions are conformed to the desires of the sea; his struggles merely lead to exhaustion and limpid acceptance. The motions, the currents, the fluid tidal dance possess one's body and take it where they will. I imagine one's mind is

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also slowly possessed by the aqueous dream and slowly drifts along toward inevitable oblivion. Who does not imagine the drowning victim dreamy-eyed and languid? Do not forget that we are mostly water. Doesn't it make sense then that such a death would seem, in our imaginations, to simply be a return to our source? Maybe this is why we attribute calm and peace to the last moments of one who drowns. I have heard people speak of this as if it were a known established truth, even a scientific fact. But of course, no one knows. The drowned do not return to tell the tale of their last moments. So such a "truth" must be understood poetically, as a reflection of our view of the sea and of our own unperceived fluidity.

We are strange creatures. We desire...we need...to separate ourselves from the infinity, to find our own uniqueness and color all the infinite worlds with it, in this way making them our own. But such a task is daunting. And more so as social constructs developed by those in power in their attempts to dominate this process channel our endeavors into mere reproduction of this social system which drains the infinity of color and of its infinitude, leaving us with lifeless matter and lifeless lives.

Then the appeal of losing ourselves once more in the infinite, of drowning ourselves, comes to the fore — the appeal of religion. Surely by this time, the absurdity of religion has been exposed a million times over, both practically and through intellectual argument. Yet in these desolate and dreamless times, its appeal is on the rise. The anguish of living as a unique individual without the possibility of creating the universe in one's own image, of coloring the infinite marvelous from which one has extracted oneself, with a beauty that enhances the world and one's own life, makes oblivion attractive. And the oblivion offered by religion, drowning in the waters of baptism, is far less frightening to most people than the absolute and final oblivion of suicide. But those who choose the oblivion of religion are not merely cowards, but traitors to themselves and

to all who strive for self-realization, because religion — however soft and malleable its form (even in the guise of spirituality, that insidious thief which steals the marvelous from the physical world and encrusts it with belief, destroying its fluid and convulsive beauty) — is part of the social system that stole our creativity from us to construct the monstrous, gray nightmare that surrounds, this mad civilization that replaces creativity with production, free activity with work, vibrant living interactions with technological and bureaucratic mediation. This explains how religion is an opiate: it makes us oblivious to the anguish of our suppressed uniqueness and creativity, allowing us to forget the damage without curing it. It numbs us to the point where we accept the damage and its cause, civilization in its totality. One can see how certain forms of atheism — its stalinist and maoist forms as well as the 19th century rationalist forms touted by the American Atheist followers of Madelyn Murray O'Hare — can be religions. Atheism only avoids religiosity by having an existential as opposed to a dogmatic basis — that is as a willful decision to refuse god rather than a belief in no god. And the willful refusal of god has its basis precisely in the decision to extract ourselves from the infinite — that is the mass — and to live to the full the singularity of our being, drawing the universe into ourselves as our own and, thus, creating the marvelous in all its poetic beauty...the decision to pull ourselves from the sea so that we may come to know and love it with the fullness of our own unique being as only those who refuse to drown can.