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Baths

No doubt: the bathroom occupies an ambiguous position among the rooms of our houses at present. A position that oscillates between the most private and the almost public ('social'). This oscillation can be taken as one of the measurements of our cultural position, both horizontally (from the point of view of history) and vertically (from the point of view of social structure). Historically, we can distinguish periods in which the baths were the most public of places (like the Imperial Roman period, or the Moslem period of Spain), and in which, therefore, they left the house to become palace-like buildings. And there were periods in which the baths became so private, (and shameful, e.g., during Romanticism), that they were given no room at all in the houses, and were either hidden away or periodically installed in kitchen corners. During their public periods the baths were places of dialogical communication and therefore of political decisions. During their private periods the baths were repressed into the subliminary regions of the consciousness of culture. Sociologically, we can distinguish classes which live, from the point of view of baths, more or less on levels that correspond to private historical periods (for instance the urban proletariat) from classes that live on levels that approach the public historical periods (for instance the very rich as they are shown in Hollywood pictures). But the correspondence between a historical and sociological analysis of baths' positions is not that easy. Urban sub-proletarians seem to stay with the public historical periods most closely, in that they use public baths, and the introduction of saunas and similar institutions renders the correspondence even more complex. This suggests that the famous hypothesis, which states that 'ontogenesis repeats philogenesis' (so fruitful in biology and psychology), might also be applied to this problem. Possibly, the present social structure is a repetition of the history of society, in the sense of being a synchronization of diachronically evolved elements, and the position occupied therein by the cultureme 'baths' may be revealing both of our history and of our present situation.

In order to render such a sort of investigation meaningful, it is necessary to ask what the essence of bathrooms is. Obviously, they are places for cleaning. Places, therefore, in which impurities accumulated from the outside are removed (for instance through washing with water) and also places in which impurities that erupted from within are removed (for instance through shaving). The moment we state this, however, the bathroom gains very curious connotations. We know, for instance, that the removal of impurities is called, in Greek, 'catharsis', and in Hebrew, 'kashruth', and we are reminded immediately of the metaphysical, moral and religious dimensions

which adhere to the concept of cleaning. And we are also reminded of the two extreme positions toward cleaning assumed by our tradition: on the one hand public baptism, public Jewish ritual baths, Pilates washing his hands in public, and the public confessions and cleanings ('tchistky') in Russia; on the other hand the secret ritual washings in the Greek mysteries, the secret anointing (washing in oil) of the Messiah, the secret confessions in churches and the well-known saying (used most within bourgeois morality and totalitarian regimes) that 'the washing of dirty linen is best done in private'. (By the way, the word 'Watergate' may in this context be considered to have rather ominous connotations.) So that, if we consider the essential aspect of bathrooms, we might well ask what position we are in (from the point of view of tradition) the moment we step into a bathtub the waters of which we have anointed with oily extracts.

If we set the problem of bath rooms in such coordinates (and there seem to be no other), the question immediately arises: what is the meaning of the word 'cleaning'? It implies, of course, two opposites; 'dirty' and 'clean', 'impure' and 'pure', 'polluted' and 'safe', 'practical' and 'theoretical', 'accidental' and 'essential', 'committed' and 'integer', 'sinful' and 'holy'. There is not much sense in wanting to restrict this opposition to its merely physical aspects, by saying, for instance, that bathrooms are places where material particles are removed through various more or less sophisticated methods from the human body. That they are places of physical hygiene, after all 'Hygieia' is a goddess. (Thus the attempt to demythologize for instance Jewish washing rituals by saying that they are 'merely' hygienical is slightly silly.) There is not much sense in this, because to wash material particles off one's body means that one is nauseated by them and that they are not healthy. And the concept of 'nausea' is a moral concept, and the concept of 'health' cannot be separated from the concept of 'salvation'. We must accept the given fact that every human condition exceeds the merely physical (or even the biological, psychological, and social) level, and always implies philosophical, moral and religious considerations also. Bathrooms are human conditions. Therefore they must be considered in the fullness of their human dimensions if we are to understand them and free ourselves from their conditioning effect.

Now, the opposition 'dirty-clean' (and all the numerous connotations that emanate from it) is a case of negative dialectics in the sense that there can be no synthesis between the opposing factors. It is quite unlike the opposition 'right-left', or the opposition 'energy-matter' which allow for synthesis or intermediate positions. This difference is important. I cannot use the bathroom in order to achieve a synthesis between dirty and clean, in order to 'overcome' that opposition. If I use the bathroom I am committed against dirt, and I want to remove it. I want to restore cleanliness, which is felt to be a primitive, original situation. Therefore, my attitude in the bathroom is clearly 'unprogressive'. I am committed against the progress of dirt accumulation. Sartre is right in saying that to have dirty hands is a symptom of commitment for progress. His is

a stand against bathrooms. He wants to eliminate bathrooms, or at least hide them somewhere outside the houses, and in this he is typically romantic. (Or, if you prefer, in favor of the spittle on Jesus' face and against the clean hands of Pilates.)

The opposition 'dirty-clean', to which bathrooms are dedicated, is a reminder of the fact that our civilization is based on two entirely different traditions. In one of them (the Greek tradition), 'justice=dyke' is conceived of as a principle that seeks a 'just' middle position between opposites, or seeks to overcome them by a new, embracing, position. In the other one (the Jewish tradition) 'justice=tzedakah' is conceived of as a principle that seeks the victor of the 'good=clean' over the 'bad=unclean'. From the Greek point of view Jewish justice is fanaticism, and from the Jewish point of view Greek justice is compromise, therefore a mockery of justice. We cannot escape either one of these traditions. This is why we have parliaments on the one hand and bathrooms on the other. In one place laws are elaborated through compromise, in the other 'given' laws are being obeyed in practice. It seems that parliaments are necessarily public (in the Greek sense of 'polis') and bathrooms necessarily private (in the Jewish, and in the existential, sense of the term). But this is not really the truth of the matter. There are private parliaments (for instance: my moral conscience) and public baths (for instance: public flagellations). This is so because the Greek tradition, though political, has a private dimension, and Jewish tradition, though personal and existential, has a public dimension. The privacy or publicity of bathrooms is therefore a problem.

The reason why the opposition 'dirty-clean' admits no synthesis is the fact that the opposites are not 'objective phenomena,' but human experiences. There is no sense in an objective statement of the type: 'mud is dirty'. It must be said, of course, that 'objectively' too much mud on a human body can prevent its perfect working. But it can also be said that, 'objectively,' too many human bodies in mud can prevent perfect humus formation. The term 'dirty' can thus be revealed to be relative to a given constant. Mud is dirt for human bodies, and human bodies are dirt for mud, and this is all that can be objectively stated. Therefore, there is something comical about so-called 'ecological' discussions of pollution like the 1972 Stockholm discussion. What is dirt for Americans is health for Brazilians, and no translation into a scientifically objective terminology, called 'ecology,' can change this. Atomic explosions in the Pacific are healthy for France and dirty for Japan, and no scientific argument can change this. If I want to transform the world into a universal bathroom (like the 'eco-freaks' and the greeners of America want to, and like the various Ministries for Environment profess to want to) I must first confess that bathrooms are places of commitment against dirt, therefore of personal, subjective commitment. Of course, this seems to be a bizarre exaggeration. It can be said that when I walk into the bathroom I assume the point of view of man, not the point of view of a bacillus of tooth decay, and that therefore I am right, (maybe not 'objectively' but humanly), to want to kill it. And that

when I am talking about pollution I am talking about dirt in the sense of ‘danger to the survival of mankind,’ and that therefore I am right to want to fight it. In other words, it can be said that where dirt is concerned I find myself always in the atmosphere of the bathroom (of Jewish justice), not of the laboratory (of Greek justice). Therefore, it is a bizarre exaggeration to want to introduce objective criteria in it. But, in fact, there is nothing bizarre and nothing exaggerated about the argument as stated. On the contrary, if I extend my bathroom attitude to the whole world, I find the limits of commitment against dirt (of Jewish justice). This is what ecology is all about: it shows that there is either some kind of compromise in a given situation (some equilibrium between clean and dirty), or that the situation collapses. If I eliminate dirty mosquitoes from the situation I might find that I am disturbing that equilibrium to a point where I shall have eliminated myself from the situation. In other words: if I extend my bathroom attitude I shall find a point where Jewish and Greek justice clash, and this clash will tend to eliminate me. Of course, I can hope that a universal bathroom will become totally Greek (containing no dirt, but only ecological problems). But if this were so, there would be no place for commitment left (commitment being always against dirt) and, therefore, no reason for living. It seems that it is better for the world to be divided into contending bathrooms (an American, a Brazilian, a French, a Japanese one and so forth) than that it becomes a sterile laboratory of ecological experimentation.

For the time being, however, there seems to be no danger for a serious clash between laboratory and bathroom. Although some modern bathrooms may superficially look like laboratories (following in this a trend toward superficial scientism), they continue to be basically unscientific places of anti-dirt commitment. But such a commitment is, in itself, dubious, and an inspection of bathrooms reveals this. One aspect of this dubiousity is the difference between washing and shaving already mentioned. Another is the difference between taking a bath or a shower. Other aspects of anti-dirt dubiousity may also be discovered, but the aspects mentioned must suffice to illustrate the problem.

In washing I remove dirt that has been accumulating on my body due to its contact with the outside world. Therefore, it can be interpreted as follows: the contact with the world pollutes me in the sense that it blurs the dividing line between myself and the world. ‘Dirt’ is that doubtful zone which is neither me nor the world. By washing, I re-establish the clean distinction between what I am and what surrounds me. The act of washing is the method by which I re-discover myself and re-affirm myself in the face of the world. In this sense, I am reborn each time I wash, and this is very close to the meaning of ‘catharsis’, ‘kashruth’ and salvation. It is also very close to the idea that ‘purity’ is what is essential, and ‘impurity’ is what is accidental. Washing is, therefore, the prototype of many religious, moral and philosophical concepts. But in shaving, an entirely

different aspect of cleaning appears, an aspect that contradicts the first one. What I shave off is something that was hidden within me, and is felt to be dirty now that it appears in the open. This suggests that a part of myself is essentially unclean and that I must actively cleanse myself of it. This idea, too, is at the bottom of many myths that inform our tradition, for instance in the Orphic myth that says that we have unclean ('titanic') components, and that we must free ourselves of them with the help of a savior ('soter'). It is easy to find parallels of this myth in the idea of 'original sin' and in Christology, but also in many Marxist and other psychoanalytical concepts. The razor as a prototype of the Savior (and of other more immanent concepts of salvation from ourselves and in spite of ourselves) is not a far-fetched idea, especially if we realize how dangerous it can be. But the difference between washing and shaving becomes all the clearer if we consider the role of the mirror in shaving. If we wash we do not need mirrors, because washing is a method of distinguishing between myself and the world. I must look at the frontier between myself and the world while washing. But if we shave we need mirrors, because shaving is a method of distinguishing between what is clean and dirty within myself, and I must look at myself while shaving. Shaving is introspection turned external through mirror reflexion. This, too, is 'catharsis' (but possibly not 'kashruth' since shaving is almost forbidden in Jewish orthodoxy, a very revealing example of the difference between Jewish and Greek concepts of 'salvation').

But this is not the end of this problem of the dubiousity of cleaning. Mirrors in bathrooms are not only used for shaving, but also for 'making up' oneself for others to see us. Is putting on make-up still cleaning? It is in the sense of hiding dirt, not of removing it, if 'cleaning' means anti-dirt commitment. But, certainly, this is not 'catharsis' but prostitution? And if so, what of it? Is prostitution not, at its roots, a sacrificial ritual and typical of bathroom commitment? Is not the bathroom a place somewhere midway between temple and brothel? Was it not St. Mary Magdalene who washed the feet of Jesus? It is better to leave the matter as is at this point, because the deeper we probe into bathroom dubiousity, the deeper we advance into very dangerous regions. Even if we do not speak theologically, but philosophically. Because here the bathroom poses the problem of appearing and being, of phenomenon and what it hides (and makes appear), and it is best not to go into this too deeply. Not, at least, in the bathroom atmosphere, which is, by definition, cloudy and misty.

Even more perturbing is the difference revealed by our choice between taking a bath in the tub and taking a shower. The shower is a washing away of dirt, and can be taken as a prototype of Puritanism. Taking a bath in the tub is an immersion into what will become polluted by our dirt, and can be taken as a prototype of hedonism. And still, both taking a shower and a bath serves the purpose of cleaning. The luxurious comfort of a bath, the immersion into an

amorphous liquid, and the ascetic auto-flagellation of a shower, the exposition of oneself to a purifying whipping, are two methods to achieve the same aim: purification. If we add to this that we have at our disposal hot and cold water (in fact so hot that we can make all dirt evaporate, and so cold that we can close our pores to the outside world, but that we can also mix both to achieve a warm embrace), and that we have at our disposal soap (which may either decompose all luxurious fats or form a protective, luxurious foam around us), we can feel the dangerous ambiguity of anti-dirt commitment. We need no psychoanalyst to tell us this: any inspection of any bathroom reveals it. The bathroom is that place in which asceticism turns into masochism, commitment against dirt turns into luxury, and 'hygienic' practice turns into quasi-pathological abandon. Therefore, we need not turn to Lady Macbeth and her constant hand washing to know that the present predominance of bathrooms is an ambiguous symptom. It is a surprising irruption of the moral and religious (not to say philosophical) sphere into the realm of profane every-day living.

Indeed, the bathroom does occupy an ambiguous position among the rooms of our houses. It may well be that some future archaeology will rely more on the examination of our bathroom, its antiseptic tiles and lush carpets, its complex gadgets and its vivid colors, than on the examination of any other archaeological remains we shall leave, in order to understand our living and thinking, our suffering and acting. And should we ourselves be able to take a distanced and ironical view of our bathrooms, we might not only be able to change them but to understand ourselves and change ourselves to become a little bit better. But such an attitude might in itself be a bathroom attitude (in the sense of being a commitment against dirt) and, thus, closes the circle of the present considerations.