

6. *The Significance of the Breakdown*

THE better to see our situation, let us look at America—that other Europe which has been released from both the routine practices and traditional restraints of the old. No other known civilization, in the 7,000 years that one civilization has been succeeding another, has bestowed on the love known as *romance* anything like the same amount of daily publicity by means of the screen, the hoarding, the letterpress and advertisements in magazines, by means of songs and pictures, and of current morals and of whatever defies them. No other civilization has embarked with anything like the same ingenuous assurance upon the perilous enterprise of making marriage coincide with love thus understood, and of making the first depend upon the second.

During a telephone strike in 1947, the women operators in the county town of White Plains, near New York, received the following call: 'My girl and I want to get married. We're trying to locate a justice of the peace. Is it an emergency?' The women telephone operators decided forthwith that it was. And the newspaper which reported the item headed it: 'Love is Classified as an Emergency.' This commonplace newspaper cutting provides an example of the perfectly natural beliefs of Americans, and that is how it is of interest. It shows that in America the terms 'love' and 'marriage' are practically equivalent; that when one 'loves' one must get married instantly; and, further, that 'love' should normally overcome all obstacles, as is shown every day in films, novels, and comic-strips. In reality, however, let romantic love overcome no matter how many obstacles, and it almost always fails at one. That is the obstacle constituted by time. Now, either marriage is an institution set up to be lasting—or it is meaningless. That is the first secret of the present breakdown, a breakdown of which the

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extent can be measured simply by reference to divorce statistics, where the United States heads the list of countries. To try to base marriage on a form of love which is unstable by definition is really to benefit the State of Nevada. To insist that no matter what film, even one about the atomic bomb, shall contain a certain amount of the romantic drug—and romantic more than erotic—known as 'love interest', is to give publicity to the germs that are making marriage ill, not to a cure.

Romance feeds on obstacles, short excitations, and partings; marriage, on the contrary, is made up of wont, daily propinquity, growing accustomed to one another. Romance calls for 'the faraway love' of the troubadours; marriage, for love of 'one's neighbour'. Where, then, a couple have married in obedience to a romance, it is natural that the first time a conflict of temperament or of taste becomes manifest the parties should each ask themselves: 'Why did I marry?' And it is no less natural that, obsessed by the universal propaganda in favour of romance, each should seize the first occasion to fall in love with somebody else. And thereupon it is perfectly logical to decide to divorce, so as to obtain from the new love, which demands a fresh marriage, a new promise of happiness—all three words, 'marriage', 'love', 'happiness', being synonyms. Thus, remedying boredom with a passing fever, 'he for the second time, she for the fourth', American men and women go in quest of 'adjustment'. They do not seek it, however, in the old situation, the one guaranteed—'for better, for worse'—by a vow. They seek it, on the contrary, in a fresh 'experience' regarded as such, and affected from the start by the same potentialities of failure as those which preceded it. That is how divorce assumes in the United States a less 'disastrous' character, and is even more 'normal', than in Europe. There where a European regards the rupture of a marriage as producing social disorder and the loss of a capital of joint recollections and experiences, an American has rather the impression that 'he is putting his life straight', and opening up for himself a fresh future. The economy of saving is

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once again opposed to that of squandering, as the concern to preserve the past is opposed to the concern to make a clean sweep in order to build something tidy, without compromise. But any man opposed to compromise is inconsistent in marrying. And he who would draw a draft on his future is very unwise to mention beforehand that he wishes to be allowed not to honour it; as did the young millionairess who told the newspaper men on the eve of her marriage: 'It's marvellous to be getting married *for the first time!*' A year later, she got divorced.

Whereupon a number of people propose to forbid divorce, or at least to render it very difficult. But it is marriage which, in my opinion, has been made too easy, through the supposition that let there be 'love' and marriage should follow, regardless of outmoded conventions of social and religious station, of upbringing and substance. It is certainly possible to imagine new conditions which candidates for marriage—that true 'co-existence' which should be enduring, peaceable, and mutually educative—should fulfil. It is possible to exact tests or ordeals bearing on whatever gives any human union its best chances of lasting: aims in life, rhythms of life, comparative vocations, characters, and temperaments. If marriage—that is to say, lastingness—is what is wanted, it is natural to ensure its conditions. But such reforms would have little effect in a world which retained, if not true passion, at least the nostalgia of passion that has grown congenital in western man.

When marriage was established on social conventions, and hence, from the individual standpoint, on chance, it had at least as much likelihood of success as marriage based on 'love' alone. But the whole of western evolution goes from tribal wisdom to individual risk; it is irreversible, and it must be approved to the extent it tends to make collective and native destiny depend on personal decision.

It is also clear that the present breakdown of marriage, in Europe as in America, results from a plurality of profound or proximate causes, of which the cult of romance is but an instance. (But it was my due to myself to insist on it

here.) For the quest for individual happiness to have precedence on social stability, and for respect of psychological evolution to have precedence on the meaning of a vow, is something which can be connected with the romantic complex. But there is more to it, and in other domains, or at other levels of reality, at times social and at other times psychical.

Woman's emancipation—her entrance into the professions and her claim to equality of treatment—is a perceptible factor in the breakdown. The popularization of psychological knowledge is another. Men and women of the twentieth century, even with only a smattering of the existence of Freudian complexes, of the play of repressions and inhibitions, and of the origin of neuroses, are inclined to require more than their ancestors did from marriage and from conjugal life. Those demands will go on growing with the diffusion of the 'human sciences', the early stammerings of which have already in perceptible measure modified the self-awareness of western man. Finally, there are signs of a more profound event—one possibly comparable to that which invaded the collective psyche in the twelfth century, and which I called in Book II the 'Reascent of the Shakti'. The strong revival of Mariology in the Roman Catholic Church with its popular millions; the most recent work of C. G. Jung and his school,¹³ on the eternal Sophia, Wisdom, and Mother-Virgin; and also (and really otherwise) the revival of interest in Catharism shown by the *avant-garde* of European literature, and in the elevation of the 'Child-Woman', saviour of rational man, or the repeated announcement that the feminine principle is about to get even with patriarchal pretensions¹⁴—all that allows the premoni-

¹³ Cf. C. G. Jung, *Antwort auf Hiob* (1952), where the author does not hesitate to write that the proclamation in 1950 of the Dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin marks the most important religious event since the Reformation. See also Henry Corbin's study of the Eternal Sophia in *Revue de Culture européenne*, No. 5, 1953.

¹⁴ Cf. notably, and in addition to the works cited above on Catharism and Courtly Love, such books as *Arcane 17* by André

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tion of a vast evolution of the modern psyche in prospect, and even though the first principle and the implications of such an evolution are withheld from us, nevertheless an evolution that will possibly provide the future historians of our western society with the key to a breakdown of which we so far see but the superficial, sporadic, and incoherent symptoms.

We can feel how vain any attempt would be at present 'to resolve' the contradictions which so many men and women put up with in marriage. Harmonization or a new equipoise is being worked out, perhaps—invisibly. Its nature keeps it for the present out of range of individual awareness. Any solution that I might be tempted to offer, even if deemed 'it' in the next century, would be stamped today as ineffectual, or, if it could effect anything, would do more harm than good. If I had hit upon it, and had the power to make my contemporaries adopt it, I should carefully refrain from doing so. For a breakdown of this sort is no accident. To try to arrest it as a fever is stopped would be not so much to cure it as to deprive ourselves of any prospect of one day understanding its secret. And it would be at the same time a kind of cheating, either because a solution would mean really no more than an attempt to get back to the former equipoise, and how precarious that was the breakdown itself shows, or else because any solution must cast over the future of the community a theory or precepts reasonable enough in themselves, but the remote effects of which cannot be estimated so long as the general *significance* of the breakdown escapes us.

We shall be better employed in deciphering the message and in patiently decoding the ambiguous tidings which the breakdown brings us concerning ourselves—concerning our secret wishes, the genuine tendency—possibly creative—sometimes betrayed in our rebellions, our ingenuous illusions, and our sins. To seek to repair the breakdown of

Breton, the lyrical novels of Julien Gracq, the studies by Robert Graves concerning the Great Goddess, and by Adrian Turel on matriarchates.

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marriage by means of moral, social, or scientific measures inspired by the sole desire to stop further damage, might very well be to deny arbitrarily to this breakdown what seems to be its actual character—namely, that of a quest, as yet carried on blindfold, for a *fresh equipoise* of the married couple—a harmony that will reconcile the invariably simultaneous, contrary, and legitimate demands of the stability and evolution of both the species and the individual, and indeed the needs both of the fulfilment of the person and of the Absolute that alone judges and raises up that person.