

H₂O and the Waters of Forget- fulness

IVAN ILLICH

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purpose He used a shard. All sources agree that He sealed this "firmament" with his own ineffable name and appointed a special angel to watch over the integrity of the sky. This angel, appointed eons before the other one who stands at the door of Paradise, holds the great seal, and each time a Jew's curse rends the mantle, the angel is there to repair it. Only when He had finally succeeded in splitting the waters could He set out to create the earth.

To keep one's bearing when exploring water, one must not lose sight of its dual nature. In many African languages the word for the "waters of the beginning" is the same as that used to designate twins. Dream-water there is two-faced. The flood, the blood, the rain, milk, semen, and dew, each of the waters has an identical twin. Water is deep and shallow, life-giving and murderous. Twinned, water arises from chaos, and waters cannot be but dual.

Water's Dual Nature: Purity and Cleanliness

One very special way in which the dual nature of water shows is water's ability to purify as well as to clean. Water communicates its purity by touching or waking the substance of a thing and it cleans by washing dirt from its surface.

The substantive purity that water radiates is not my theme; it is, rather, the other side of the subject I am pursuing. I wish to focus on the ability of water to wash and must be careful not to be misled and distracted by its purity. My theme is the power of water to clean, to detach what sticks to people, to their clothes or their streets. The power water has to penetrate body and soul and communicate to them its own freshness, clarity, and purity is another theme with an altogether different history.

The distinction between purification and cleansing is obvious yet difficult to clarify. The late archaic transformation of *miasma* in Greece, followed by the gnostic tradition and

baptismal theology, has jumbled purifying blessing and detergent scrubbing under the emblem of "water" that determines modern sensibilities.¹⁸ In our century psychology and the religious sciences have continued this jumbled tradition and, consequently, the discussion of the power of water to detach and purge filth has been left to hygiene and engineering. As a result, the symbolic functions of ablution and laundry, insofar as these are distinct from purification, have been little explored.

Purification is by no means a process for which water is always needed. Water is often used in this process even though purification is also performed by other means: blood is used, but also incantations, noisy processions, ecstatic dances, the imposition of hands, induced trances or dreams, the wearing of amulets, fumigations, or contact with fire. However the purity that water restores or confers has a special connotation of freshness and transparency that transforms the innermost being and so it is often associated with re-birth.

A reflection on vocabulary is helpful to clarify the difference between purification and cleaning. Purity refers to a quality of being. Even when this quality appears on a being's surface, it is perceived as the manifestation of something deep inside. Its beauty can be lost only through a corruption at the being's core. There is no one word to say what is then lost. The loss can be expressed only with a negative compound: we cannot help but say "impure."

In contrast with this negative reference to the condition that calls for purification, Indo-Germanic languages possess a rich register for referring to the conditions that require

18. "Miasma", see Pokorny (*Indogermanisches Woerterbuch*): +mai- (= moi-?) beflecken, beschmutzen; Anglo-saxon *mal*, n. "Fleck, Makel"—Old High German. The same meaning for *meil*- and possibly its equivalent in Lithuanian (*Sumpfwiese* or marsh-meadow), Kluge in *Mhd. mal*, sbstv Onians, 585; discolored spot in Old English; spot or blemish on the human skin after the fourteenth century.

cleansing. "Miasma" that can be washed away is given in bold and direct terms as something that sticks to the skin, such as soil (soiled), shit (a word that comes from the same root as "dirt" and "dirty"), foul things (filthy), dung (from Old Germanic *quat*, *Kot*), glue or sap (*sucio*, *sudicio*) or mud (Irish *loth*, from the same root as Latin *lutum*). These are all earthy things that water washes away. It acts as a solvent (it ab-solves), detaches these leftovers of past activities and disengages the person from an encumbrance. Nor is it only the condition requiring such cleansing that is directly expressed in our languages; what water itself does is described by means of several different verbs: fingers, face, and mouth are rinsed; clothes are laundered; the body and also the feet are bathed when they are washed.

In one and the same ceremony water can sometimes both purify and clean. This action is most evident in the washing of the dead. The custom is attested as far back as Homer, and it has remained, well into the twentieth century, a common feature of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim funeral ritual from Morocco to the Urals. The task has been elevated by the church to the dignity of an act of mercy. Ignatius Loyola imposed it on his novices before he would accept their vows as Jesuits. But apart from such masculine heroism, it has remained an act performed primarily by old women, widows, and semi-witches—not infrequently by the same women who also wash the newborn. Washing the newborn or the dead is fraught with dangers that women face better than men. Before starting her cleansing, the Jewish woman places a kerchief on the face of the corpse; the Russian woman bows deeply and asks the dead to forgive her for stripping his remains. The ceremony is performed mainly to divest the corpse of an aura that attaches to it, one that should not go along with the dead into the grave.

Great care is taken to dispose of the water used on such occasions in such a way that the corpse will not pick up this

aura again. Only bodies so washed will not stay glued to their environment, will not remain prisoners of this world and haunt those who are still alive. What for the dead man or woman is "ablution," "absolution," delivery from burdensome soil and dirt is, for the living, a purification of their dwelling space corrupted by death.

The Waters of Lethe Wash

Once the dead man has been washed, he can set out on a journey. All Indo-Germanic pilgrims—Greek, Indic, Nordic, and Celtic—cross the same funeral landscape on their way to the beyond, and the mythical hydrology on that route is the same: at the end of their journey they reach a body of water. This water separates two worlds: it divides the present from the past into which the dead move. This other world does not have one common fixed location on the mental map of Indo-Germanic myths; it may be located below the earth, on a mountain top, on an island, in the sky, or in a cave. However, this other world is always a realm lying beyond a body of water—beyond ocean, river, or bay. In some regions one crosses this water on a ferry; in others one must wade or swim. The slow, flowing waters the traveler crosses are everywhere emblematic of the stream of forgetfulness; the water has the power to strip those who cross it of memories that attach them to life. The sleepy beating of the head in the *threnos* with which the mourning women lull the heroes of Thebes into their last sleep reminds Aeschylus of the monotonous beat of the oars across the river Acheron.¹⁹

This river, which sums up recollections, detaches memories, detaches from the dead those deeds that survive them,

19. Ninck, 122, note 2: "This picture offers us a profound glimpse into the character of sorrow. . . . The lullaby for the other side must be heavier and duller, as though it were putting one to sleep." Marringer surveys what we know about the meaning given to water in prehistoric times; water was both "fertile" and the "shore" for the other world.

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IVAN ILLICH

Philosopher and social analyst Ivan Illich, one of the most influential thinkers of the second half of this century, directs his attention to water, the "stuff" of purity and the creative force of the imagination without which life is unthinkable. He deals with the dual nature of water, as life-giving material substance and as the wellspring of form, on which are founded the most basic myths and cultural manifestations: water as cleanser, water as domestic necessity and water as a religious and spiritual force.

Tracing the history of the use and abuse of H₂O as a scarce commodity in twentieth century life with its quest for odorless hygiene, he contrasts these matters with an examination of the history of ideas, mythologies and visions associated with water.

"Water throughout history has been perceived as the stuff which radiates purity: H₂O is the new stuff, on whose purification human survival now depends. H₂O and water have become opposites: H₂O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management. It is an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams."

Ever since the first publication in 1971 of *Celebration of Awareness*, Ivan Illich has, with unnerving brilliance and erudition, questioned the assumptions and ideologies underlying many contemporary institutions and perceptions. His other books include: *Deschooling Society*, *Limits to Medicine – Medical Nemesis*, *The Expropriation of Health*, *Tools for Conviviality*, *Energy and Equity*, *Disabling Professions*, *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, *Shadow Work* and *Gender*.

Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd
24 Lacy Road
London SW15 1NL
£5.95

Cover Design Susi Borrmann
Ideas in Progress
Original Paperback
ISBN 0-7145-2854-4