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THE APOCALYPSE IS (STILL) DISAPPOINTING

The bigger a man is the fuller he is.
(Pause. Gloomily.)
And the emptier.

Beckett, Endgame

In 1964, Maurice Blanchot wrote a remarkable text, with a most ingenious title—"The Apocalypse is Disappointing."[1] This title is what one would rightfully call a "perspective shifter": amidst all the talk about a possibly imminent apocalypse and doom (mostly, but not exclusively, related to "the Bomb"), to suggest that apocalypse may be "disappointing" effectually opens a whole new way of thinking about it. It has a quality of an excellent, spirited joke. Apocalypse evokes something so final and colossal that describing it as disappointing sounds utterly nonsensical. And yet, as with all good jokes, this nonsense somehow makes perfect sense.

Blanchot is not discussing the notion of the lost cause, at least not in these terms. But it is plausible to argue that he is very much discussing it in other, different terms. Indeed, if one were to sum up the most compelling elements of Blanchot's argument, it would be hard to find a formulation more fitting and concise than the following, used by Žižek in his take on "lost causes":

> The goal is to leave behind, with all the violence necessary, what Lacan mockingly referred to as the "narcissism of the lost Cause," and to courageously accept the full actualization of a cause, including the inevitable risk of a catastrophic disaster. (Žižek 2008, 7)

Indeed, and as it will hopefully become palpable in what follows, this formulation could be seen as the blueprint of Blanchot's argument, which he develops in his own—often unexpected—terms, and in a specific philosophical and geopolitical context. We will stick to this argument, its terms and its context, and also take it as as a starting point for a reflection on what looks like a repetition of the apocalypse, or at least of the "apocalyptic mood," in recent times.

But let us turn back, first, and begin in times which—somewhat paradoxically—now tend to appear to us as the good old times....

The Bomb

"The Bomb" was a genuine master signifier, capturing in one word a whole speculative universe surrounding the historical sequence of the cold war. The war was "cold," yet this "coldness" relied upon the threat of an absolute heat that could melt down the entire world. The Bomb functioned not only as a master signifier, but also as a perfect figuration of the *functioning* of the master signifier as such. That is, it functioned as a figuration of the correlation, or rather the *non-correlation*, between a simple, stupid button that "any imbecile" can press, and the all-encompassing chain of consequences, possibly leading to the disappearance of an entire world. A stupid, minimal gesture (sign) on the one side, and a *whole* (of the world) on the other side—this is indeed a perfect emblem of a master signifier.[2]

And as every master signifier (or "phallic" emblem) worthy of the name, the Bomb also received the appropriate comic treatment, with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). One of the interesting things about this film is that, while remaining a perfect comedy, it ends with the button actually *getting pressed*, and atomic weapons exploding all over the place, in a kind of sublime spectacle of total destruction, filmed from above... The suspense ends in a full realization of the threat that the movie's plot aimed at preventing, and this results in a kind of final comic relief. Despite the spectacle of destruction (the popping up of a field of atomic "mushrooms") there is an impression of *impotence* efficiently conveyed: Ok, so, that's it? This is very similar to the case of authority which, as Mladen Dolar has argued, relies on its constitutive threat never being realized or carried out.[3] The moment this threat constitutive of power is acted out, it necessarily results—in spite of its possible violence—in a display of impotence. And impotence—the loss of (or the display of *lost*) power—can indeed cause a lot of violence.

So we could say that here, too, we have a case of the apocalypse being "disappointing," in the sense that its actually taking place can never match up to the power it wields in being withheld—that is, with its remaining a *threat*. Paradoxically, even if the realization of this threat would kill us, we would not be exactly overwhelmed by its power, but rather swept away by its raging impotence. We could of course say that this doesn't really matter, if it kills us, and that this is rather a poor consolation. Provoking the "coming out" of a power is a very dangerous and dubious game. But we can nevertheless grasp in what sense this coming out may be "disappointing"...

Blanchot's point, however, about the apocalypse being disappointing goes in a somewhat different direction. In its minimal form his argument runs like this: the threat of the Bomb and its destructive potential made appear, for the first time, the idea of a whole (of the world)—a whole, precisely, that can be lost, or disap-

pear forever. We can lose it all; but the idea of the whole (of an all that can be lost) only appears through a negation; it only constitutes a whole in the perspective of being potentially lost. In other words, there is no (existing) totality, no "whole of the world," which could be eventually (actually) lost in an atomic apocalypse; it is, paradoxically, only the perspective of this very (potential) loss which constitutes it, or makes it *appear*, as such a totality or whole.

Blanchot adopts a very Hegelian stance: not at all receding from the idea of a totality or whole as many contemporary philosophers would, he argues that although the appearance of this idea is very important, it remains abstract, that is to say related to the abstract power of negation (as the power of the Understanding). In other words, the Bomb (or imminent apocalypse) gives rise to the idea of the whole, but remains "disappointing" in the sense that this whole is in fact empty of any concrete content and form. People are bound together, united, only by their common disappearance, and not by any real form of global community. The totality that is about to disappear (if the Bomb does go off) doesn't really exist yet as a meaningful totality or whole. Indeed, Blanchot cites Hegel in making this very point:

> What does the problematic event teach us? That: insofar as it puts into question the human species in its totality, it is also because of this event that the idea of totality arises visibly and for the first time on our horizon—a sun, though we know not whether it is rising or setting; also this totality is in our possession, but as a negative power. This singularity confirms the preface to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*: the power of understanding is an absolute power of negation. (…) Thus man is held to the whole first by the force of understanding, and understanding is held to the whole by negation. Whence the insecurity of all knowledge [*toute connaissance*]—of a knowledge that bears on the whole [*la connaissance qui porte sur le tout*].

> But let's reflect a little further. The problematic event about which we should rejoice because it confirms us in our relations to totality—it is true, only in a negative way—and also in our power over the whole—a power, it is true, only of destruction—why does it disappoint us? It is indeed a power, but one in relation to which we remain at a loss [*en défaut*]. A power that is not in our power, that only points to a possibility without mastery, a probability (…). But for the moment we are just as incapable of mastering it as we are of wanting it, and for an obvious reason: we are not in control of ourselves because this humanity, capable of being totally destroyed, does not yet exist as a whole. On the one hand, a power that cannot be, and on the other, an existence—the human community—that can be wiped out but not affirmed, or that could be affirmed, in some sense, only after its disappearance and by the void, impossible to grasp, of this disappearance; consequently something that cannot even be destroyed, because it does not exist. (Blanchot, 105-6)

To avoid any misunderstanding, we should perhaps first stress the following: Blanchot isn't saying that the destruction of the world would be insignificant because there is no real (communal) world yet; he is not, that is, cynically saying, "Let it all go to hell, the world such as it is is not worth the trouble anyway!" On the contrary, Blanchot is suggesting that, now that we have at least an abstract idea of the world (humanity) as a whole, it is worth the trouble more than ever. It is here that the political edge of Blanchot's text is situated, for he turns this into no less than a surprising and powerful argument for communism (that which remains to be invented), which is also extremely pertinent for our present times and circumstances.

But let's take this step by step.

Blanchot wrote his text as a polemical response to Karl Jaspers. In 1956, Jaspers gave a talk on the atomic peril, which was then broadcast over the radio, creating a considerable stir. So Jaspers thought it necessary to take up the question again, and even to reexamine all of the problems that arose in relation to this reaction. The result was a book published in German in 1958, and translated into French roughly at the time of Blanchot's "response" of 1964. Jaspers' book was called *The Atomic Bomb And The Future Of Man: Political Conscience Of Our Time.* Blanchot points to the incredibly ambitious scope of Jaspers' project, as is clear from the following quote from Jaspers' book: "The matter of this book is, properly speaking, the political conscience of our time. That the threat of the atomic bomb should necessarily give another structure to political conscience for all time: this act is what brought about the main title." (Jaspers 1958, 3)

The core of Jaspers' argument as outlined by Blanchot is the following: science has made us masters of annihilation. There is the atomic bomb; humanity can destroy itself; this destruction would be radical; the possibility of a radical destruction of humanity by humanity inaugurates a beginning in history; and whatever happens, whatever precautionary measures there may be, we cannot go backward. The result is: either man will disappear or he will transform himself. This transformation will not only be of an institutional or social order; rather, what is required is a change in the totality of existence, a profound—and entirely individual—conversion.

The first *coup de force* of Blanchot's response is to point out a striking discrepancy between what Jaspers's text declares, and the text itself. The theme is that we must change, writes Blanchot. But right away we are surprised by something: in regard to Jaspers, nothing has changed—neither in the language, nor in the thinking, nor in political formulations that are maintained. How could he have the authority to alert us to a threat so great that, as he says, it must shatter our existence utterly and, what is more, our thinking, while persisting, without contestation or modification, in the same speculative conception to which he was led well before becoming conscious of this unique event, this immanent possibility of universal catastrophe?

> Why does a question so serious, a question such that to answer it would suppose a radically new thinking, why does it not renew the language that conveys it, and why does it only give rise to remarks that are either biased

> ... when they are of political order, or moving and urgent, when they are of spiritual order, but identical to those that we have heard in vain for two thousand years? (Blanchot, 103)

Blanchot asks where this difficulty comes from. Is the question too grave, so that thinking immediately turns away from it to call for help? Or else is it because, as significant as it is, it *nonetheless contributes nothing new*? Or else because it is far from being as important as it seems to be? Or, finally, is it because the question only serves as an alibi or a means of pressure for bringing us to spiritual or political conclusions that have already been formulated long ago and independently of it?

Blanchot starts with the affirmative answer to the last question: what preoccupies Jaspers is the end of humanity, but more particularly the advent of communism. Thus he comes to this practical question: Should we say "no" to the Bomb if this "no" runs the risk of weakening the defense of the "free world"? For Jaspers, the dilemma ultimately comes down to this: either to save oneself from total extermination, or to save oneself from total domination; either the Bomb and its threat of total destruction, or an "explosive totalitarianism" (communism). And Blanchot is right to point out how the logic of choice suggested by Jaspers is actually the oldest of thoughts: life should not be preferred to the reasons for leaving ("I'd rather die than have my freedom taken away..."): we should prefer death to oppression...

Blanchot is also right to insist that something is obviously lost here, if all the talk of a most radical change and conversion comes down to this oldest of thoughts. The radical novelty allegedly introduced by the perspective of the Bomb is nowhere to be seen, nor seriously taken into account in Jaspers' argument. Jaspers simply takes one side in the cold war conflict:

> However, where the liberal philosopher—and with him a good number of men—speaks of totalitarianism without examination or critique, others— and with them a large number of men—speak of liberation and the achievement of the community as a whole. (Blanchot, 104)

Yet Blanchot does not simply take the other side in this conflict—his point is much more insightful. He continues:

> Once again the dialogue has stopped. The event, the pivot of history, does not change the options or the fundamental oppositions in the least. Reflection on the atomic terror is but a pretense; what one is looking for is not a new way of thinking but a way to consolidate old predicaments. And with this "choice" it becomes clear that humanity will continue to turn around old values, be it for all eternity. (104)

Instead of novelty we have repetition, even the enthronement of a possibly eternal repetition. The problem is not that Jaspers chooses the "wrong" political side; the problem is that he immediately disavows the novelty of the perspective introduced by the Bomb, and uses its threat simply to consolidate the old parameters and oppositions. What is fundamentally problematic in Jaspers' argument is not the political

choice he makes, the side he picks, but rather the very terms, and the manner, in which he *formulates the choice itself.*

> If thinking falls back into its traditional affirmations, it is because it wants to risk nothing of itself in the presence of an ambiguous event about which it is not able to decide what it means, with its horrible face, with its appearance as absolute—an event of enormous size but enormously empty, about which it can say nothing save this banality: that it would be better to prevent it. (Blanchot, 107)

Blanchot argues that in the face of this ambiguous event we could perhaps actually take the risk of thinking differently, that is, to properly *think*, instead of immediately falling back into the old formulas and oppositions. It is here that Blanchot, inspired by Hegel, makes his ingenious turn, which eventually leads to a very different kind of choice and opposition. Here is the crucial passage, which relies strongly on the Hegelian distinction between the notions of understanding and reason:

> Understanding lets us choose. Either to accept, henceforth this end for what it will be when it will have taken place: a simple fact about which there is nothing to say, except that it is insignificance itself—something that deserves neither exaltation nor despair nor even attention. Or else to work to elevate the fact to concept and empty negation to negativity. It is in this sense that understanding addresses—it is true, in an indirect manner, for the choice does not belong to it and understanding is in fact indifferent to it—"a call to reason." Reason is totality itself at work, but because it is achieved not through the effect of some quiet goodwill but through antagonism, struggle, and violence, it risks provoking, as it realizes itself, the unreasonable event against which and also, in some ways with the help of which it raises itself [*s'édifie*]. Hence the turmoil that this perspective introduces into old ways of thinking: one still does not know what to say about it. If, for example, Jaspers gives himself the task of reflecting on the atomic peril and at the same time never stops reflecting on the communist "peril," it is because he senses that, with the approach of this destructive totality, humanity risks being awakened to the idea of the whole and pressed, as it were, to become conscious of it by giving the whole form, that is by organizing and uniting itself. (107)

Blanchot thus skillfully shifts the parameters of the choice and invites us to (re-)discover *another* choice. The true choice is not between tolerating the Bomb (and hence running the risk of losing everything) on the one hand, and preventing the looming destruction of the world (but thereby running the risk of losing our liberal freedoms) on the other hand; the true choice is between "losing it all" and *creating what we are about to lose* (even if we lose it all in the process): only this could eventually save us, in a profound sense. The problem with the choice as formulated by Jaspers is that it presents the given situation as utterly homogenous, unambiguous, fully accomplished. Blanchot, on the other hand, points to a *crack* in this situation,

a time-loop inscribed in it. When caught in the threat and fear of "losing it all" we are in fact held hostages of something that does not exist—yet. And is this kind of blackmail not in fact the very means of making sure that it *never will* exist? It makes us focus on preserving what is there, and what we have, but excludes any real alternative, any means of really thinking differently.

The crack in this looming fate does not mean that there is a chance, a possibility or hope that it won't happen; it means that what is *bound* to happen (and will *necessarily* happen) is not fully there yet: this, and nothing else. To use a suggestive image from another, Hollywood universe, this is somewhat like in that deservedly famous scene from the movie *Back to the Future*, in which the hero is desperately trying to connect his parents, induce them to fall in love, and hence conceive him. In the past, where he has been sent by mistake, he has with him a photograph from which he is slowly disappearing, because he is failing to connect his parents... The past of the future we inhabit is being decided in a somewhat similar way.

The call to awakening that can be potentially heard with the appearance of the Bomb is not simply "let's do everything in our power to prevent it before it's too late," but rather "let's first built this totality (unity, community, freedom) that we are about to lose through the Bomb."⁴ If through the Bomb "the idea of totality arises visibly and for the first time on our horizon" (as the idea that we could "lose it all"), than perhaps we have to take it from here, and build on this.

Blanchot is not advocating that we take the side of the "existing communism" (or of the Eastern bloc) against the West, but is rather arguing for a much more uncertain form of uniting and organizing as a first true form of the world. The choice is to fight not simply to preserve the world such as it is, but to unite in *creating*, in forming a world, for the first time.... This is not so much about "changing the world," but about *making it*. The totality or whole that Blanchot defends and argues for here is clearly not some kind of organic, harmonious totality, but simply a totality which does not disavow its own antagonism(s). The crucial passage in the quote above is this: "Reason is totality itself at work, but because it is achieved not through the effect of some quiet goodwill but through antagonism, struggle, and violence, it risks provoking, as it realizes itself, the unreasonable event against which and also, in some ways with the help of which it rises itself." The Bomb is part of this totality, as are the struggle and violence. But such is the nature of a true totality.

Yet things are far from moving in this direction, so what is the problem? The configuration of "the Bomb" also tells us something about what is usually perceived as an encouraging (liberating) dimension of some fatal threat. The acute consciousness that we may actually die at any moment is supposed to liberate us from our everyday petty little fears, and give us courage to pursue things that we would otherwise fear pursuing....

What happens in reality is something very different: the possibility of universal catastrophe does not produce an opening to the new dimensions of the possible, but usually incites either apathy and depression, or an anxiety-ridden inclination

to "realize" the existing possibilities (and as many of them as possible, so as not to miss out on anything). Yet these are clearly possibilities that are determined by the parameters of the already existing configuration (take a mistress, yell at your boss, steal something from the store....). In other words, and to link this back to Blanchot's argument, when confronted with an impending doom, we usually don't say to ourselves: "We will all die very soon anyway, so we may as well engage in the struggle for communism!"

The fact that this kind of suggestion is most likely to incite laughter tells us a lot about the ideological consolidation of the "possible" as based on the existent. We hear a lot about the necessity of creative thinking, and "thinking outside the box" has become a fashionable *bon mot* of entrepreneurship. But why does nobody even remotely consider taking the above example as an illustrious example of a *true* "thinking outside the box"? If everything is going to hell anyway, why not introduce communism first? Why is it that an impending doom usually encourages only a commonplace nihilism: all is meaningless, nothing is worth fighting for; or a pathetic, that is, pathos-ridden "courage" of claiming a few last indulgences for oneself in the face of the inevitable...?

This, I think, has a lot to do with the ideology of death, and of the end. The problem is not that—at least from our secular perspective—death looks so final and irreversible; the problem is that it looks so *full* (of itself), so dense and substantial. Ours is a society of death, yet one that does not accept death for what it is: an enormous event (for us), but also enormously empty, "insignificance itself." Yes, like the apocalypse, death is disappointing: nothing really happens there.

And now for something completely different?

After some decades of optimistic belief in growing prosperity and general well-being, the apocalyptic mood has returned to haunt us. Looming ecological disaster, economical crashes, wars, "terror," millions of refugees, and now even the reemergence of the Bomb. Not that atomic bombs have not been there during all this time, quite the opposite. But their presence did not function like "the Bomb" of the cold war, until we have recently received a properly farcical (in the Marxian/Hegelian sense) repetition of the configuration of the Bomb in the form of two spoiled grown up babies, threatening to use their bombs because, *Hey, nobody will f*** with us!* Yet the farce should not blind us to the seriousness of the matter, nor to the fact that the threat is quite real.

These similarities notwithstanding, there are also important differences with respect to the configuration of the '60s, and particularly with respect to the figure of the Bomb. These differences are largely obfuscated by the very predominant apocalyptic thinking, namely by *expectation* of the apocalypse.

The configuration of the Bomb suggested a more or less instantaneous destruction of the world and extinction of humanity, which could have occurred if somebody

pressed the wrong button. Today, the most lucid analysts do not warn against what will happen if we press the wrong buttons; they rather insist that the wrong button *has already been pressed*. The apocalypse has already started and is becoming an active part of our life and our world, such as it is. It is not waiting for us somewhere in the future, but is dictating our social, economic, environmental conditions as we speak. The lesson of negative utopias (with the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* as a prominent recent example) is also not simply that we are approaching the apocalypse; moreover they direct our attention to its duration: apocalypse can take time, even a lot of time; it is not necessarily an instantaneous event, but can last and last... long enough for another world and history to take place before "it all ends." We could also say: the final result of the apocalypse (total extinction) is insignificance itself. The problem is that apocalypse is not so much the end of the world as it is itself first and foremost the revelation of *a new world*.

What does this mean? At different levels of analysis we can encounter a convincing argument according to which perhaps the biggest problem today is the rapid normalization and hence admission of things that were only a moment ago still considered inadmissible, totally unacceptable, "impossible" (normalization of "torture"—in certain circumstances—of racism, discrimination, of the precariat, of the "crisis," of the state of emergency...). And this is not about a progressive moving forward toward new horizons; these things are not "unheard-of" because of their novelty, but precisely because they constitute a step *backwards* to a point we had considered "beyond the pale," a *reversion* of "progress" we had considered "irreversible." It is "unheard-of," for example, that somebody in an exposed public office indirectly gives his support to a white supremacist rally that features openly Nazi symbols and slogans, as well as open violence—but there is nothing new in this. Indeed, this is a possible definition of the apocalypse: a suspension or reversal of the irreversible itself.

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In brief, all this suggests that we are not facing an approaching apocalypse, but rather already standing *within* it. Apocalypse is already here, we cannot "prevent" it. Or, put in a slightly different way:

> Giorgio Agamben said in an interview that "thought is the courage of hopelessness"—an insight which is especially pertinent for our historical moment, when even the most pessimistic diagnosis as a rule finishes with an uplifting hint at some version of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, functioning as a fetish that prevents us from thinking through to the end of the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end

of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction. (Žižek 2017, xi-xii)

In other words, before we fully grasp that there is no way out, nothing can really change. To say that today we are situated *within* the apocalypse introduces a different perspective from the one that constitutes Blanchot's point of departure. The perspective of totality, of a "whole" that we can lose, presupposes an external point from which this whole appears as a whole. In the case of the configuration analyzed by Blanchot, this external point is temporal: we *will* lose everything in the apocalypse. The perspective of totality depends on the time gap separating us from the catastrophe: the point where we stand anticipating it is external to the apocalypse. Hence the mode in which Blanchot formulates his call to awakening: instead of waiting to lose it all, we can unite and organize as a whole, build the world/humanity as a whole—and then decide whether or not we want it to disappear. For Blanchot is far from stating that the making of humanity (as a whole) excludes its destruction.[5]

The perspective opened by *our* apocalypse is no longer the perspective according to which we can lose it "all" in a single unfathomable event. The fantasy of this possibility is still alive, of course: the predictions and expectations of, for example, this or that planet crashing to the earth and totally destroying it continue to excite the imagination. But in spite of their catastrophic character there is something perhaps too optimistic about them. Because we know all too well that we won't get off so lightly, and that dying will most likely be gradual, long and painful...

Our immanence to the apocalypse is at the same time precisely that which enables the functioning of this normalization. What does this mean? Just think about that advice we usually get when something terrible happens to us, say that we lose a loved person. If we start thinking about *all* that we lost with this person, this perspective can break us totally (we will never again do this, and that, and...—the whole picture is unbearable). This is why we are advised not to think in this way, but rather to try to survive through one day first, and then take it one day at a time, focus on the tasks at hand... What else is this but an invitation to start with the work of mourning, to step inside our mourning, to inhabit it, precisely *without* trying to comprehend its totality? Every day something happens that just a day ago we would have considered impossible or unbearable, but slowly we adjust to the new situation. But if, in our example, we first lose the beloved person and this (concrete) loss opens the perspective of *all* that we have lost with her, the perspective of a whole into which we then step and start our work of mourning, the contemporary apocalypse functions differently. We start with the survival strategies, we take the losses one at a time, and only at "the end" will we find out what exactly it was that we lost, in total. Today we get used to this, tomorrow to something else; we'll manage somehow, as long as we don't see the whole picture, which is actually being created in this way.

The fact that normalization works so smoothly is precisely the *proof* that we are already *inside the apocalypse*. This is to say that the automatism of normalization is not the way to, or the means of, structural change, but is already a sign, an indicator, a symptom of a serious structural change—that is, of the fact that the button has already been pressed. Were it not for this change having *already* occurred, the normalization would not work as smoothly as it does. "With time, one gets used even to the worst of things," we say. This is not simply and necessarily bad, if we knew what exactly we had lost and were mourning. But this is precisely what, for structural reasons, we cannot know, because this "something" is being created as we go along, with our daily adjustments. Our apocalypse is a loss without the lost, a mourning that precedes the loss and actually creates it with its work (that of mourning). It is a mourning without object.

Does this structural change mean that Blanchot's "solution," his call to first create the whole that we are about to lose, loses its pertinence here? On the contrary. The standpoint of reason (Hegelian *Vernunft*) to which Blanchot calls us is in fact precisely a standpoint which is *interior*, and not exterior, to the whole. The fact that apocalypse is already here, that it has already started, does not mean that everything is over. The problem is that, for the most part, we haven't yet accepted that this change is already operative—we still think of the world as pre-apocalyptic, we are expecting the catastrophe, are afraid of it, and hope that perhaps it won't happen…. Or, to return to Blanchot's own terms:

> Reason, in anticipation of itself and immobilized by this anticipation, seems only to want to win time, and, in order to win time, passes off to the understanding the ask that it is not yet able to master. (In such a way that the caption that would best illustrate the blackboard of our time might be this one: The anticipation of reason humbling itself before understanding.) (108)

Understanding, Blanchot continues, is cold and without fear. It analyses the danger, subjects it to its measures, looks for the solutions, strategies, adjustments. This work is useful: it demystifies the apocalypse, and shows that it is possible to live with it (and the normalization we talked about is precisely this: we have learned how to make do with the apocalypse.) "It shows that the alternative of all or nothing, which turns the atomic weapon in a quasi-mystical force, is far from being the only truth of our situation. (…) Yes, this lesson of understanding is sound. Only, it is almost too sound, because it exposes us to a loss of fear." (108)

The loss of fear that Blanchot talks about does not mean that we have become so brave that we are no longer afraid of anything; it does not speak about our courage, but rather about our perspective on the world in which, with necessary adjustments, everything can be solved… It does not speak about the presence of courage, but rather of its absence, in the sense given to it by Agamben and Žižek: "the courage of the hopeless," the courage to admit that we don't have a solution and that there is none visible on the horizon. Instead, we would quite literally "rather die" than admit this.

Where does this paralyzing effect of reason anticipating itself come from? Reason does not feel up to its task, to the work which is already its own. The question is perhaps whether reason could, at any point, *feel* that it is up to this task; or whether it is rather that taking the risk and making the first step would be the only possible proof of its being up to its task? This risk is properly speaking "existential," because it is not covered by any guarantee, by any symbolic mandate. And this risk, this step into the unknown, is not necessarily a matter of (premeditated) decision—we can also be pushed to make it.

Many years ago, I saw on TV a beginning of a horror movie[6] in which a depressed woman decides to commit suicide. She is about to swallow a whole bottle of sleeping pills when a werewolf climbs up the wall of the house, entering through the bathroom window. And the woman who was about to die anyway starts screaming for help and does everything in her power to escape the werewolf. At the time I thought this was ridiculously funny, she obviously shouldn't have cared one way or another, she should have looked the beast straight in the eye and said: come on, be my guest! But on second thought, my reaction was perhaps wrong. The scene is funny, of course, but that is because the truth is funny. It's not that upon seeing the werewolf, the woman suddenly realized that her meaningless life had a meaning after all. And it is also not simply that the sheer instinct of survival prevailed over depression and metaphysical considerations of the meaninglessness of it all. No, at that moment she was simply *frightened to death*, as we say. And it woke her up.

In all its brutal immediacy the encounter with the negative can have a deeply symbolic effect. The "logic of sheer survival" has gained a pretty bad reputation in contemporary emancipatory philosophy (for example in the work of Alain Badiou): it basically means that we merely cling on to our lives, in the absence of any idea or truth, and hence sustain the *status quo*. But perhaps we should return to Hegel on this point, and stress the difference between the moment of the life and death struggle that *inaugurates* the master/slave dialectic, and this dialectic itself.[7] In mortal fear the slave chooses life, yet this does not mean that he thereby forever condemns himself to vegetating (survival), without any idea or truth. The master is prepared to go all the way and die, yet this also doesn't entail that he is henceforth immune to the logic—and the straitjacket—of survival. Hegel's point is rather that actual freedom (in respect to the demands of survival, for example) cannot be chosen directly, and in this sense the master's choice is no more "correct" than the slave's. They are both forced choices. And of course this is also not simply about the fact that we first have to choose life, if we want to make something with it; it is about the fact that we need first to experience the trembling of pure negativity, the mortal fear. If the choice of life is not a forced choice (forced because of mortal fear), but appears natural and immediate, then we have no means of accessing it and repeating the choice; since there is nothing to repeat here, we can only cling on to our lives. The problem is not a slave who, in mortal terror, has bent before a master—for him there is still a possible escape, a future, even freedom. The problem is with the idea of a "neutral man," who is neither a master nor a slave, but "freely" creates his life,

changes roles etc. Paradoxically, what condemns us to the logic of survival without any idea or truth is not the experience of mortal fear, but rather the absence of this experience, of the (also symbolic) cut it represents, and of the *subjectivation*—in one way or another—of this cut. I emphasize subjectivation, because as psychoanalysis teaches us, this kind of cut can also result in its foreclosure, that is to say in psychosis, which is precisely a way to avoid its subjectivation. Differently from *both* "master" and "slave," the psychotic "chooses" freedom directly; but the price of this direct choice is that he lives as the helpless prisoner of his freedom, enslaved to it, so to speak. Both Hegel and Lacan emphasize that the choice of *actual* freedom can only be a second, *repeated* choice.

Returning for a moment to our example of the suicide interrupted by a werewolf, we can relate this situation to the logical and temporal dialectics emphasized by Blanchot. The woman who decided to commit suicide made this decision following an understanding-based insight according to which *everything* was meaningless. The surprise in the form of the "invasion of the negative" (the werewolf) makes her start fighting for her life—the life that she never really had, and was hence ready to give up. But perhaps she will now get it, precisely through this fight. Perhaps—for there are no guarantees here. In our apocalyptic world, in the smooth running of normalization and adaptation to one problematic thing after another, when our attitude toward the world is so "sound" that it is actually *all too sound*, there are of course also werewolves that appear from time to time. After all, Donald Trump is such a werewolf. But can they scare us to death? Can they scare us so much that we start fighting for our lives and switch from the survival mode of coping with things one day at a time (and as comfortably as possible), to a passionate struggle for our lives? For the struggle for life is not the same as clinging on to life and to the *status quo*; it is much more than this, and it derives its force from the encounter with the negative, from the utmost distress which can also be a birthplace of ideas, and even truths.

What does all this imply in relation to the difference pointed out earlier—the difference between the perspective of the whole, appearing as such from an external point of view, and our being situated within this whole, which for this reason we cannot see as a whole? Moreover: since we have related this difference to the difference between the perspective of understanding and that of reason (in the Hegelian senses of these terms), does this mean that in the perspective of reason the Idea of totality is simply lost? This would certainly contrast with Hegel's position. In truth, we are dealing with two different types of totality or "whole," the difference conceptualized by Lacan as that between the "all" and the "not-all." Crucial in understanding this difference is precisely to avoid the idea that "not-all" is the *opposite* of all, and thus of totality. Rather, the "not-all" is "all" to which something more gets added, it is "all" *plus* the point of view from which this all *appears* as "all." This point is now situated within the "whole"/"all," which for this very reason becomes not-whole/not-all; that is to say, it includes its own negativity. The Lacanian not-all is a different kind of totality, and not simply its opposite. This also implies that

there are certain points *within* this totality, from which, and only from which, this totality can appear as totality.

So if, on the one hand, we can be awakened to the idea of a whole by the possibility of losing it, that is, by the possibility of losing this *whole* (even if it doesn't yet exist), we can, on the other hand, also be woken up to it by the appearance of the *loss as such*, that is, by the cut that redoubles—and functions as a symbolic marker of—the insecurity and incompleteness of the whole (of life).

The recently renewed threat of nuclear war could be an example of such a cut. The apocalypse has already started, and to "press the button" would now be inherent to the apocalypse: it functions as a cut that could open the perspective of a "whole" from within, and make us fight for our lives—and perhaps build a world in the process. Or would we still rather die than let this thing "scare the shit out of us," as the saying goes? If so, then we are clearly still in the process of the work of *mourning* without object (the smooth running of normalization, of gradually accepting what we even yesterday deemed unimaginable), instead of "jumping over" and starting the work on the object (of mourning), in the process of which we wouldn't be building the loss, but the lost. In order to make this jump, we need *courage*. Yet this courage is not the courage in the usual sense, the courage of the understanding, which is not that scarce today (as we already pointed out: we would "rather die," or—worse?—simply keep suffering, than acknowledge some rather obvious things). No, what is lacking is precisely the "courage of the hopeless"—the courage to see the hopelessness of our predicament. What is lacking is—in one word, and to follow Agamben on this—*thought*.

This thought is not the opposite of action, but rather the inherent condition of a properly *courageous* action that eventually makes a difference.

This would also imply rediscovering the "lost cause" in a new way: there are no lost causes, in the sense of causes that were originally lost. There are only *refound* causes, causes *found again*, causes that emerge at the site of something that never was—that never existed—but which we are nevertheless able to recognize.

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Notes

1. Blanchot, Maurice. "Apocalypse is disappointing." *Friendship.* Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, 1997, 101-108.

2. "In the master's discourse, for instance, it is effectively impossible that there be a master who makes the entire world function. Getting people to work is even more tiring, if one really has to do it, than working oneself. The master never does it. He gives a sign, the master signifier, and everybody jumps." (Lacan 2007, 174)

3. See Dolar 2004.

4. An additional footnote as regards the (political) efforts of the preservation: There is of course nothing wrong in itself with trying to *preserve* certain values and accomplishments, say the welfare state. The problem with the leftist politics being reduced to fighting to conserve the fast-disappearing remains of the welfare state is that with the ongoing devastating economic politics this is a lost fight.—Lost not simply because of the financial elite who profits from its loss, but because this same financial elite can rely on the growing army of those who *never even had* access to any of these "benefits" and instead denounce them as privileges (young, precarious workers). The present dynamic is disastrous because far from endangering it, the growing poverty and insecurity play right into the hands of the infamous "1%." The extremely poor do the fighting for the extremely rich, as was made all too clear in the election of Donald Trump as president.

5. "It is very probable that humanity would have no fear of this power of the end if it could recognize in it a decision that belonged exclusively to it, on condition thus too of being truly the subject and not simply the object of it, and without having to trust to the hazardous initiative of some head of State who is just as foreign to humanity today as formerly the turtle that fell from the sky and crushed him dead was to the unfortunate Aeschylus. One is constantly speaking to us about suicide; we are told, You have finally become the masters and rulers of yourself, you possess not only your own death but, in you, the death of everyone. A strange discourse that childishly represents thousands of human beings divided according to the model of single individual, the supreme hero of the negative, deliberating, as the final Hamlet, on the reasons for giving himself death, and dying at his own hand in order to preserve the power of dying until the end. Supposing this image of common suicide made any sense whatsoever, it would do so only if men could be shown all that they are lacking in order to reach the decision of a death said to be voluntary, whose subject would be the world.« (Blanchot, 106)

6. I don't remember the title, but I've been told that the description fits the movie *Silver Bullet.*

7. See Hegel 1977, 111-119.