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Anxiety and the Death Imagery of Desire

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Introduction - The mockery that death seeks to wield over life is no better exemplified than in the *risus sardonicus* that seems to betray its own irrationality at the thought of being able to taunt us from beyond the grave. Such a grinning gripping looking awry seems to say to us, 'here too is your fate, you'll see, and the thought of your realization of it makes me mirthful!' The immediate reaction of the living is to pretend that we have not seen such a face, to ignore its remorseless stare, as one looks away from the portrait that follows us too closely-especially if the ancestor had a notorious reputation-perhaps the looking awry threatens us with the same historical fate through a contagious magic or action at a distance-or perhaps the woman in the painting is not as pretty as we might desire, or the man not as handsome, etc. But the face of death appears in many guises, and we must constantly attempt to think of something other than its presence, the elephant in the room that is as inconvenient as it is immovable: "We don't know how to deal with death, and so we ignore it as much and for us as long as possible. We concentrate on life.

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I. Introduction

The mockery that death seeks to wield over life is no better exemplified than in the *risus sardonicus* that seems to betray its own irrationality at the thought of being able to taunt us from beyond the grave. Such a grinning gripping looking awry seems to say to us, 'here too is your fate, you'll see, and the thought of your realization of it makes me mirthful!' The immediate reaction of the living is to pretend that we have not seen such a face, to ignore its remorseless stare, as one looks away from the portrait that follows us too closely-especially if the ancestor had a notorious reputation-perhaps the looking awry threatens us with the same historical fate through a contagious magic or action at a distance-or perhaps the woman in the painting is not as pretty as we might desire, or the man not as handsome, etc. But the face of death appears in many guises, and we must constantly attempt to think of something other than its presence, the elephant in the room that is as inconvenient as it is immovable: "We don't know how to deal with death, and so we ignore it as much and for us as long as possible. We concentrate on life. The dying don't want to impose their plight on the people they love, even though they may be eager, even aching to talk about what it means now that they face it." (Taylor 2007:723). Yet this inability to 'deal with' is surely of recent origin, as all ethnographic work suggests that communities face death with an intimate solidarity. It is perhaps because we have lost this ability, at least culture-wide, in large-scale mass societies that the inability to confront head on the death's head shows up as an epiphenomenon. The rationalization of modern life has found its way even into the process of dying and beyond. Whether it is contrived and evil, as in the rationality of the gas-chambers, or individuated and existential-and once again, the figures of the Doctor and the Clinic are present at both extremes-there is a sense that the social fabric of modern organizations can aid us, can provide cover for us as we advance, haltingly, upon the horizons of our demise. Even our collective demise, which has the same kind of banal rationality about it as did the systematic genocides of our era, carries the logic of annihilation to its final step; a species-wide genocide that leaves no survivors of any kind. But this is too abstract, too much a part of the day to day in which we live, at least since the mid-1950s, to be of immanent concern. Rather, we stare back at the *risus sardonicus* mainly because we feel its stare to be a personal one-it is looking at us and no other. We begin to understand the authenticity of modernity when we notice this same gaze emanating from sources of rationality. When we return it, we enter into cultural critique. This desire to speak about death, even to death itself, can aid us in speaking to the forces of suasion and centers of power that delimit our freedom whilst we are still alive. Indeed, this is the more important outcome of the desire to become intimate with death through dying: "Doctors and others fail to pick up on this desire, because they project their own reluctance to deal with death onto the patient." (ibid). There is also surely the banality of the profession that has its object human death, though not usually its goal. The Nazi Doctors were perhaps medically available to confuse the statuses of these two kinds of objects, and failed, miserably, to object to the second meaning of death as a result of a human process. In their collusion and their belief, they radically excerpted themselves from the empathy which the death of the other must awaken in us. But this distanciation is, in many lesser degrees, still a characteristic of all professionals who maintain their 'professionalism'. On the one hand, one could not survive oneself without doing some of this. The health worker would not last long if she became entwined with each patient. Too little empathy, on the other hand, and one also could not perform one's duty to the sick and dying. And this duty means not merely what is included in contractual obligations as a social role, health professional or otherwise. Duty here means, more importantly, the wider human and humane responsibility that each of us has to the other, because it is a self-responsibility that needs to occur as part of the process of self-understanding. The other, ideally, provides this self-same act and function for us, and not always directly in return.

Both because of such a duty, and in spite of it, the desire for death springs out of an ultimate desire for solitude and for a final adjudication of self-consciousness. For too long, we might imagine nearing the end of our mortality, have we been beholden to others. For too long have we put our existential needs in the background as we have looked to solve the problems of others, and indeed, somewhat more illusorily, the problem of otherness as a whole. Yet there is a final rite of passage that must be undertaken if we are to make authentic this desire for self-reliance in the in the face of death, and indeed, our impending demise aids us in doing so: "This dependence on other people, this fear of being forced to be alone, puts Self-

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Conscious man at the mercy of other people, so that he is forced to laugh when they say laugh and weep when they say weep [ ]. But 'other people' cannot save us from death, and death forces us to face our solitude." (Mendel 1974:217). The introspective desire for both the time and the being of a life lived, well or otherwise in our own valuation, is part of the character of this force. So the suasion of death is not at all about its dark mystery, but has everything to do with how one has lived, how one has run along toward it, which is why we have such idioms as 'running a good race', 'riding a good ride', and such-like in casual language.

That there are highly rationalized ways of meeting the death's head speak not only to our desire-'let's just get it over with, after all'-but as well rehearse the problem of being other-directed and reliant at the very moment when self-responsibility as the way to self-understanding is of the utmost. Of course, rehearsals can easily turn real, and indeed, specific rationalities plan to make them more authentic at the drop of a proverbial hat. *These* kinds of stages, set as they are not only by others but by abstract otherness such as the state, contrive to push us along into the face of death both prematurely and unethically. There is hardly time and space needed for reflection on the battlefield, or within the other extremes of wage-slavery. Speaking of the history of Tibet, Bataille notes something that can easily be generalized to any thinking people: "The creation of an army may have been rationally called for, but it was nonetheless at odds with the feeling upon which life was founded [but] To go back on so absolute a decision would have been to renounce oneself: it would have been like drowning to escape the rain." (op. cit. 106). The call to arms taken in a social context devoted to the preservation of life has a cunning about it that is not easily outlasted. 'We must defend ourselves', our *way* of life, we might say to ourselves, or at least, make a big show of it so the other thinks twice before attacking us. In doing so, however, the way of life itself has been transformed into the way of death, and this eventuality merely shows that the two of them do not ever really part ways in the first place. What we produce, the life of our culture is certainly merely one variant of the theme of humanity. At the same time, our production does not occur in a void. When we make ourselves, we tend to unmake others, or at least, suggest that they make themselves differently than they had done so before the wild-fire spread of capital and its attendant practices around the globe. Blackburn shows agreement with Bataille on this point, for "The true contrary to the concept of production, as of creation, however, is not that of consumption, but that of destruction. Consumption is merely a peculiarly creative form of destruction..." (Blackburn op. cit. 15). Indeed, it may not be as creative as all that, when we consider what we routinely consume and how we consume-vast hoards of persons gorging themselves with foodstuffs lacking in basic nutrients, vast hoards of the same and of others passively staring at images on screens small and large, and so on-these compulsions of the desire for death, since they attempt to enact an early death of both body and mind, organism and intellect, are also badly managed dress rehearsals for our ultimate, and sometimes collective, demise.

Such activities are the vulgar prosthetics of a promethean godhead that, in its mortal form, misunderstands the nature of the logos and of our relationship with historical Being in general. For some, the godhead that is also human, and thus imparts, at least analogically, the semi-divine abilities to destroy oneself piece by piece, is monstrous both in form and in principle: "It is strange and, at least to me, somewhat frightening to see with what enthusiasm many intellectuals embrace this monster, regarding it as a first step towards a 'more sublime' interpretation of divinity. On the other hand, the attitude is also very understandable for the remaining human features are features many intellectuals would love to possess...". (Feyerabend op. cit. 95). Why have the perverse patience for the gradual self-destruction of what is merely human, when one can imagine oneself as the relative omniscient to all other forms of known life, and thus give oneself the powers of ultimate and sudden destruction. We have given ourselves these powers, and their denouement is simply the wretched agony of the half-human animals who survive the first god-like strike. Along with this is the grim-faced dogmatism that all should respect our power, or our godhead. All will perish by the fire that is both vengeance and purification. Indeed, since there is a next world, and that a better one, all should welcome their sudden deaths and thus be converted, in the end, by the end.

The apocalypse as imagined by specific Western agrarian religions is of this kind, but it is ultimately only an hypostasization, an expression of human power writ into the world at large, an extension of the promethean power which was once the domain of authentic gods. Its dissemination to humanity was the most risky thing a higher being could do, because mortality knows best its own self, and thus its imagination is limited to the horizontal visions of the life-cycle, rather than the vantage point of the divine aerie. And so it takes revenge against itself whilst claiming liberation: "We would like to be able to concentrate all chemical action into a handful of gunpowder, all hatred into one swift poison, an immense and unutterable love into a humble gift. In the unconscious of a prescientific mind, fire does perform actions of this kind; an atom of fire in certain cosmological dreams is sufficient to set a whole world ablaze." (Bachelard, op. cit. 72). On the one hand there is such a desire that allays itself within the acts needed for day to day subsistence; the lighting and maintain of a fire, the cooking of animal flesh, the heating hearth of the domus, the sexual acts, the

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expressions of temper and argument, the social control of children, and what have you. But these are miniscule and routine activities, expressing as they do only what is necessary, and not what is profound. We may embellish them in rituals, we may imagine that all humans must perform them regularly, but these luxuriant aspects of the simple life in fact make life worth living for, and not so much dying for, even if they do also make life not as simple as we might have expected. It remained to couple the desire for death with the unremitting love of life. These same apocalyptic religious ideas had within them the sense that through the end of the 'this-world', the other world would be brought about, or, at least brought into focus so that those who were once humans could now participate in such a realm. There was irony, but also, when forced upon others of all stripes, a sheer hypocrisy to any such movement that claimed salvation was at hand, but only through the allegory of destruction which, in retaining its metaphorical force-in conversion one is 'twice born', as it were-actually tells us that death is to be desired not for itself, but as a rite of ascension to eternal life: "...Christian doctrine and 'peace movements' may have had some deterrent effect on resort to violence, although it must be accepted against this view that the reality of the afterlife was evident and important to the true believer that it made death a less intimidating threat, even for its perpetrator, so long as penance and absolution were made." (Blackburn, op. cit. 130). One could, therefore, commit any violence in the name of both creation and destruction, because these two cosmic events had the same source, a godhead to which we are now trying to move toward. In doing so, we must repeat the acts of any God whose Being is the order of the universe as well as its moral suasion. In joining hands with such a force, we become as such a God is imagined to be, and it is perhaps this aspect of human desire that most equivocally translates our participation in the life-cycle of birth and death. That we can imagine such a cycle as eternal-witness the historically recent big bang theory of creation and destruction which differs little from Eastern cosmogonies thousands of years old-is testament to the human desire to partake in the life-giving and life-ending events over and over again without end. It is a way of not only accepting our personal deaths, but death in general as the manner in which new life comes into the world and the cycle is continued. Indeed, the continuation of the cycle is what makes life worth dying for, for "...death distributes the passage of the generations over time. It constantly leaves the necessary room for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse *the one without whom we would not exist*. In reality, when we curse death we only fear ourselves. The severity of *our will* is what makes us tremble." (Bataille, op. cit. 34, italics the text's). If we are dishonest about our condition when we attempt to escape the 'luxuriance of life' in human form, as Bataille continues, it may be due to the sense that we experience the most intense form of the will to death, which will inevitably appear no matter how dishonest we may become in its face.

Indeed, we may be said to take ultimate pleasure only through the pain of leaving the human behind us, the path prepared before us by those we both love and hate-and even each of these we may have detracted or exonerated as the case may be, pending smaller contexts and interaction we may have experienced with them-and the privilege of seeing these people die before us. In the paroxysm of violence, lust and love become as one, and we drown our hatred of our own mortality in the desire to see the *will* of humanity come to a momentary end: "It is this paradox that defines surplus-enjoyment: it is not a surplus which simply attaches itself to some 'normal', fundamental enjoyment, because *enjoyment as such emerges only in this surplus*. If we subtract the surplus we lose enjoyment itself..." (Zizek, op. cit. 54, italics the text's). This *jouissance*, the focus of which is the extermination of desire through its final, fatal expression, codetermines the paradox of the human will to life, for it is what acts as the *Aufheben* of birth and death. Like the popular song 'Death by Sex', we must, upon entering into both the schematic and the experience of this surplus, be sure that we are both 'coming and going at the same time'. That the orgasm is referred to as the 'smaller death' in the stereotypically romantic language of the French only makes us laugh a little more, increasing our ability to enjoy this surplus of meaning by being a little sardonic about the allegory of union and the desired loss of oneself in and through the other, two exorbitantly flaming candles into one. Yes, the smirk of all 'well-laid' plans is the living expression of the smile of rigor mortis, a smug complacency that one has died and yet lived to die another day.

Yet it is hardly only through pleasureful desire that we chase our own demise. There is an entirely different class of such experience that has been expressed as the dour abstinence from enjoyment, let alone joy: "Consider melancholy: black bile is not the cause of melancholy, it embodies it, it *is* melancholy. The emotional life is porous here again; it doesn't simply exist in an inner, mental space. Our vulnerability to the evil, the inwardly destructive, extends to more than just spirits which are malevolent. It goes beyond them to things which have now wills, but are nevertheless redolent with the evil meanings." (Taylor 2007:37). Whether or not one feels 'blue' or 'black' and so on has here to do with the presence or absence of an aspect of the wider world which is intrusively palpitating in its character. Even if such things are extant only in certain combinations of contexts-the body and the personality, the spirit and the place etc.-their force is one inherent to their character and this character is brought about by circumstances that have their own volition, but also within which we can participate. Taylor is correct to

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contrast the modern, clinical version of sadness or anomie, 'depression' or even ideational suicide as it is now referred to, but it is not merely the Cartesian division of ontological labor that is the source of this recent difference. (cf. ibid). Rather, how one 'feels' about one's situation is also a thing in itself. Emotions have been shown to affect neural chemistry. It is an open debate as to which is the chicken and which the egg in these kinds of cases, and this ambiguity-indeed, the aleatory nature of these conditions is likely also near the root of their 'causality'; we cannot decide what is happening to us and how much we are responsible for our situation-itself ambiguates the distinction between mind and body. The clinician tells us we can control our own feelings; mind over matter. But the previous metaphysics gives similar advice: "If adversity hath killed his thousand, prosperity killed his ten thousand: therefore adversity is to be preferred; the one deceives, the other instructs: the one miserably happy, the other happily miserable: and therefore many Philosophers have voluntarily sought adversity, and so much commend it in their precepts." (Burton 1938:529 [1651]). This counsel suggests that the dictum *aspera ad astra* be taken as a directive; that is, only by going through adversity does one attain the heights (the stars) or immortality or eternity, etc. The interpretation, or at least the emphasis, changes by the time Beethoven takes over this phrase and makes it his motto. By the Romantic period, the dictum turns into a descriptive; that is, if you encounter adversity, keep going through it and you will attain the stars. This is the literary source of Churchill's optimistic and yet sardonic comments about 'going through hell'. But the major pivot upon which melancholy suffered its shift of meaning came through the attribution of *depth* to sorrow. This was also a Romantic leitmotif: "Sadness made one 'interesting'. It was the mark of refinement, of sensibility, to be sad. That is, to be powerless." (Sontag 1978:31). The one who seemingly voluntaristically turned away from the pursuit of power, and was also seen to give it up in one's personal affairs to the point of not being able to laugh, take a joke, or get out of bed in the morning, became a kind of fetish for the introspective intellect of the Romantics. The old quip about the famous novelist who ultimately ruined his career because he gave up alcoholism, nocturnal wanderings and depression is well taken here. By the time we react to this framework along the way to the encounter the psychoanalytic archaeology of the matter of sorrow's continuity and its mythological self-referencing to the fallen state of humanity, the abilities we have to work in the world have been cast as being attracted to the light, as it were, while the dangers of navel-gazing are attributed to self-interested thinking and the desire for death. At first, it is Hegel "...who argues that vision and hearing are the proper senses of art because all of the other senses are stimulated by the effects of a destruction of the world. Freud seems to agree with this argument..." (Horowitz 2001:228). Though Freud attributes the ascendance of such worldly sense to evolutionary biology, organismic adaptation alone could not have produced the self-concept. Indeed, one would think altruism to be the more refined sensibility of an animal that had both volition and reflection, with or without the sensus communis of the social contract. Given this, "One is often tempted to wonder whether, if Freud had recognized the internal economy of melancholia *before* he formulated his theory of narcissism, he and Abraham would not themselves have carried further their exploration of intra-psychic animism." (Brierley 1951:81 italics the text's). The sense that the self can feed back into itself only self-directedness has a touch of the narcotic about it. Indeed, Brierley herself suggests the 'magical' quality of such a conception which surely is fitting given the problem a new and rational discourse of the irrational suggesting that such thinking only occurs *outside* the model of consciousness it proposes; that is, only as unreflected reactive thinking and doing which is sourced in the unconscious life: "Its exploration is of great importance, since the more irrational aspects of human life and behaviour, e.g. the sphere of beliefs and values, not to mention politics, are largely dominated by animistic thinking, and rational thinking is far more influenced by it than is generally recognized. The proportion of rationalization in reasoning is frequently high." (ibid). It is striking, and heartening, to note that a mid-twentieth century female critic was unafraid to state clearly the truth of the male-dominated public life as being ironically, and paradoxically, shot through with either irrational actions and non-rational value systems. The latter might even be seen to have become the former through the very process of rationalization in modern institutional life. Perhaps in the wake of Nuremberg it was more obvious that politics was so dominated, but it is a critique that we cannot afford to leave behind us.

Given that the 'interesting' quality of the person who has given himself over to sadness might well merge with the magical quality of the person who attempts to be charismatic in a rational/legal system of authority, the social role of such a person[perhaps an odd inversion of the village idiot in the realm of the intellectual or the political, a figure of projected pity turned into a figure of unholy fascination-introduces a convolution into the path of desire on its way to the place of death. We are distracted from the course through lingering with the potential malingerer. Yet in the meanwhile, the other end of the thread continues its motion. Death itself does not tarry awhile with the living dead. Soon enough our more authenticating desire tears us away from the way-stations of theater, the half-way houses of the morose or the charming, the smaller than life and the larger than life, their *gravis* unable to finish their own graves. And so we continue: "He approached death, which approached

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him, more and more quickly; he approached it in preceding it, and anticipated it with these images and glosses, for which the grammar of the future anterior no doubt does not suffice to convey their force and time, their sense." (Derrida 2001:157). The temporality of self-mourning, Derrida continues, does not give itself over to the language of prediction or predication. We might well add that working through mourning is the manner in which we allow ourselves to accept that we are not only moving along in the direction of our demise, but that death as an empirical event, and as no mere harbinger, is moving along that self-same path. We confront this situation as one that takes us outside of the closed loop of originary psycho-analytic melancholy, as its act appears to us as a 'sacrifice', "...a pure loss without any narcissistic benefit." (Zizek op. cit. 127). It is one that we hesitate to make in its entirety, at least at first, because the desire for death also wishes to keep on reproducing its desire. Hence its alteration and inverse perambulations in the wake of tragedy, the waking of sorrows, and the wakes held as social spaces of the reaffirmation of community. Such a desire has only itself to consume, but this is not ultimately a paradox: "This contradiction, at the very root of the intuition of being, favors endless transformations of value." (Bachelard, op. cit. 79). It is these translations, such as sorrow or contrived political charm, apocalyptic thinking at once waiting to be saved by the one who overcomes the apocalypse, madness ascending through madness, melancholia rescued by charisma-and how often do we imagine that the 'mentally ill' simply need someone to *love* them selflessly?-that give us the sense that "Since we must disappear, since the instinct for death will impose itself one day on the most exuberant life, let us disappear and die completely. Let us destroy the fire of our life by a superfire, by a superhuman superfire without flame or ashes, which will bring extinction to the very heart of the being." (ibid). This kind of destruction is not everything the heart alone desires, but rather is all mortality can do to itself to prove its own existence as a guise of Being. In immolating itself in a manner that no mortality could withstand, the desires of the heart are finally overcome.

It is not only the imagined subject that is the object of its own demise. The mortality of the object too cannot be objected to in too abject a way. What is destroyed by an 'inflammation' of Being, by the inflammatory language of the other, or yet further through the conflagration of transmigrating spirit, its ascent arrested in mid-air by a voice of flame speaking in the unknowable tongue of the dead, is more akin to an object in the object realm. In any case, it no longer 'lives' in the usual manner of living things. It has wasted itself upon living, as it were, and now must record how such a consumption of life was, after all, also a consummation of it. This has a special effect upon the human being as both an organism in a chain but also as the source of all authentic wastefulness in a nature from which he is partially exempt: "The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit. His sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption." (Bataille, op. cit. 23). We may well criticize this kind of activity as being egoistic in the extreme. What right do we have, ask the few, to make the earth our garbage-scow, traversing the ellipse like a pariah barge, never nearing close enough to the ultimate fire to be consumed in an ultimate event? Yet we are also carrion-eaters, we consume our own garbage, so that the earth only slowly reveals its human transformation-greenhouse gases, irradiated lakes and the like-and in its inorganic non-conscious justice, becomes unlivable at the very point when humanity must be destroyed. In other words, the earth as a world of humans conceals its own *risus sardonicus* until it can flash the grin at us when it will mean the most. This time may well be fast approaching, but like our individual deaths, the point of no return is difficult to precisely predict. One will know it when it occurs, we are told, somewhat perversely, as if some Pauline environmentalist had come back from the Levantine birthplace of world-denying soteriology to announce the final denial of the world, though this time, with his own death-mask smirk, to then reveal no paradise to which we as a species might exeunt. So egotism revels at all corners of this predicament. It wastes exuberantly, while it warns smugly. It desires to be both the deed and the doer, the criminal and the detective. It wants to possess for itself alone both the success of the crime and the accolade for its solution, except in this case the crime cannot be absolved by our collective perpetration being caught up in the folding nets of an imploding ecosphere. And rather than admitting to such deeds and thus then attempting to pay a remittance for them, committing to rehabilitate the damage we have done with a view to the future, we blame the ego in our subjectitude for seeking revenge against a world we imagine has tried to imprison it in the object. Thus the ego becomes a freedom-fighter who circumnavigates the child-self by claiming that it is 'too mature' to be distracted by the visions of the child, this latter wishing to conjure again the pristine garden of its birth. The ego, rather, imagines itself, and is imagined by an entire discourse, to be the source of a problem that only it can solve. It has given itself, quite egotistically, a sacred task, and yet the problem is that of the 'dirty job' which 'someone has to do': "It's the latest fetish introduced into the holy of holies of a practice that is legitimated by the superiority of the superiors. It does the job as well as any other, everyone realizing that it is always the most outmoded, dirty, and repulsive object that best fulfills this function-this function being entirely real." (Lacan 2004:124 [1966]). Once taken up, however,

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such a job quickly reveals itself as a drudge. No singularity of prideful or resourceful egotism could ever clean up its own act. This is where the excavation skills of psychoanalysis appear on the scene, bearing with them their heavy equipment, discursive apparatuses that can dig the deepest hole. If this kind of operation fails, the gaping gap-toothed hole can at least be used to dump more garbage into, out of sight, quite literally out of mind! Mouths agape, these forays into the structure of the self perhaps reveal more about our uncanny ability to distract ourselves from the pragmatic task of curbing our exuberance regarding consumption of resources and production of waste, in which we North Americans provide the Olympian epitomes. No surprise here, given that we live in the most highly individuated society in history, our egos striving for, more than anything else, an inequality of egotism. At the same time, there is also, as we have seen, a strong desire to be the savior, even to sacrifice our own life through the proclamation that our ego was the herald of continued life, that our vision was more realistic and forward-thinking than all others. In doing so, we allow ourselves to participate in yet another version of the smug smirk of death, this time combining melancholia and desire. In this, the human being "...*realizes* his discouragement and impotency; he makes a phantom of his own fatigue. Thus the mark of changeable man is placed upon things. That which diminishes or increases within ourselves becomes a sign of a life that is either stifled or fully awakened within reality." (Bachelard, op. cit. 45). Perhaps this is the most salient of all the errors which appeals to the half-objectified half-objected to subjectivity of humanity. We desire most of all to make sure that our way of life is projected onto an objective landscape where it can remain unchanged. The pyramids of Giza may be the most obvious of examples, monuments to a mortality which, as we shall shortly see below, are transfigured into an immortality that seeks to deny the history of beings. Even their presence in a desert, deserted of the usual foliage and organisms that enliven the stolid earth is of more than metaphoric interest. Or perhaps the landscape of the pyramids has become a desert over time, the energy and resources drawn up into the limestone edifices, like trees sucking water from their immediate hinterlands. Such an energy, we may imagine, performs some occult function in the process begun by the original practitioners of the greatest occult science, the priestly preservation of life through death.

Such monuments represent the will to have both an increase of being and an expression of desireful longing to become larger than life. Such a duet of options is, however, rarely in tune with itself: "If we have the choice between that which appeals to us and that which increases our resources, it is always hard to give up our desire in exchange for future benefits. It may be easy if we are in good condition: Rational interest operates without hindrance. But if we are exhausted, only terror and exaltation keep us from going slack." (Bataille, op. cit. 164-5). If the desire for nothingness merges the two, ultimate fear and joy now both operating them without limits, this must be the vivisection that produces the exhaust of auto-combustion. Yet we do not wish to die at the hands of just any worldly force. The sensibility that we must be the authors of our own demise also appears to be just as rational. This is so because only within our own hearths do we find that we no longer die alone, especially in the non-rational worldviews of pre-industrial social organizations, for it is within the hearth that we are recalled to our true community, the circle that gave us birth and nurtured us, both in the reality of place and in social reality. Of course, the sense that one cannot die a stranger to one's own land produced long-lasting biases against any form of otherness which in most regions of the world have lasted in a variety of sometimes little-altered forms to our own day. Nevertheless, "Fear of the alien, in particular the alien soldier, had a quite rational basis which helps explain the frequent manifestations of xenophobia and particularism that were characteristic of the pre-modern world." (Blackburn, op. cit. 62). If dying amongst one's community, within the interiority of the hypostasized self which itself gave life to our selves is the ideal, and remains so-one only need think of the hospital death and the home death to bring this sentiment to the forefront of our anxieties, the former too rationalized, the latter with just enough of the non-rational 'homey' quality to make it part of the magic circle of life-there are still instances where we are called upon to pass away the quietude of 'going in one's sleep' for the still romanticized heroism of 'dying with one's boots on'. If this is to be the case, there is another response that our community makes on our behalves. This is especially or ultimately so "...when the actions involved also imply, for the participants, the facing of an incalculably weighty risk-their own death-then ritualisation, by freeing the mind from the need to ponder, is probably effective." (Gellner 1985:80). Ironically, the lack of forethought regarding the desire for self-immolation helps the process along to its sought after conclusion. The feelings that hold us back have to do not with the loss of life, but of the anticipated lost, or at least, radically transformed, quality of love and community without which we would have never lived in the first place.

The hypostasization of death therefore involves us in its own circle, articulated through a rite of passage that has no identifiable terminus, at least from this side of the 'river'. Just as the boundary flows along with no apparent or visible stoppage, no place of rest, one must traverse this symbolic obstacle in order to do just that. 'Eternal rest;' it may not be, but exhaustion means that one *must* rest, for however lengthy a period, liminal, purgatorial, heavenly, and one of the great fears

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regarding the hellishness of all imagined underworlds where there is to be not an evaluatory sojourn but an indefinite or even an everlasting sentence is that there exists and can exist no rest nor hope of rest in these horrifying places. When we perish, exhausted by the flames of life, driven to death by the desire to live in the fullest possible manner, we also may well feel we have done such a job of it that rest is deserved. Certainly, archaic soteriologies of self-knowledge weigh this part of their other-worldly evaluation quite heavily. Was one's life well-lived, did one manufacture a *good* life, rather than merely *the* good life? Did one live on as a good human being rather than merely as a human being who lived well, high on the hog of neo-colonialism. When Aristotle reminds us that the 'best revenge is living well', he means both of these things to be intimately related, that the ethical life generates the 'good life' for itself. Otherwise, we become obsessed by a history that rematerializes in front of us at the slightest insult. We never overcome the thingness that we have let it become. We are becalmed in its waters, drifting ever closer to the ghostly derelict that we know, once close to, or yet more terrifyingly, once aboard, we are no longer our own masters and must succumb to *ressentiment* and further, neurosis. Therefore, the overcoming of the resented meanings through the forgetting of history which Nietzsche recommends, avoids the problem of pouring human meaningfulness into a void-or perverting it by producing the waste that fills in the holes in our consciousness, as above-and ameliorates the drive to "...attempt to domesticate the Thing by reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with a meaning. We usually say that the fascinating presence of a Thing obscures its meaning; here, we say the opposite is true: the meaning obscures the terrifying impact of its presence." (Zizek, op. cit. 77). The thingness of an object gone wild, broken out beyond our control-Zizek uses RMS Titanic, the most famous, though hardly the most horrifying, shipwreck of modernity to illustrate his point-produces its new Lovecraftian status of the Thing which should *not* have been. We should, we reiterate to ourselves and whoever else might *listen* to us, have been able to control things better: steer the ship, slow her down, post more lookouts, provide searchlights, take a different course, not listen to passenger's advice or hubris-it is amazing, looking at the history of modern shipwrecks, how often senior crewmen and deck officers give in to their passenger's desires (witness the very recent and ridiculous wreck of the Italian cruise ship)-but in the end we did not. This 'end' indeed must produce the effect of losing control over things, of making them thus the Thing which overcomes our uncapitalized beings. We did not capitalize upon our existence when we needed to, or perhaps we knew this and deliberately desired to remain small in the face of a world rewriting itself as immanent before our very eyes. This is the fascination of which Zizek speaks, and to pretend its non-existence is the very thing that allows it an uncanny humanity, the very thingness that produces the Thing and thus all of its overcoming of being through the forgetting of time. For the Thing renders itself to us as timeless, we will never get rid of it, like Poe's famous Raven inside our houses, it's nevermore sounds against the passage of time, and thus ends the passage upon which we have booked our destinies.

Like the sorcerer's apprentice, we are the students of being. Its power is not yet our own, but through our trial and error we produce the monsters which Goya and others have famously remarked are but the 'dreams the reason': "In fact, *to think of a power means not only to use it, but above all to abuse it.* Were it not for this desire to misuse it, the consciousness of power would not be clearly felt." (Bachelard, op. cit. 78, italics the text's). The usual moralizing chides us for being 'all too human' in our approach to the infinite, but perhaps this is what is necessary for us as humans, and we can only attain the horizon of Being by suddenly being thrust by our own incautious devices into its arms. Like the realization that we are in love, or even the needful but criminal comprehension that we must 'make love' where it might not actually exist, whether or not the other is willing, this thrusting home of ourselves over the threshold of normative social being both exalts and shames being in the world. The very criminality of unbridled lust helps this process along, though in the moment of its realization we are at pains to understand what it may mean to us later on. Remorse, if it comes at all, is always a reaction: "Anguish arises when the anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance. This is precisely what evinces the isolated, individual character of anguish. There can be anguish only from a personal, *particular* point of view that is radically opposed to the *general*." (Bataille, op. cit. 38-9, italics the text's). If life is inherently overflowing, as Bataille continues, the one who is 'full of it' cannot himself suffer anguish. Thus the exuberance which overflows itself into a conquest of the other is never at risk for an ethical review. It is too full to know itself to still be empty of such things. The absence of reflection within a humanity that partakes of life as such should give us pause, because it is the same feeling of superabundance that allows us the leisurely and unexamined consumption of resources to the 'nth' degree, and thus the ultimate destruction of the world.

There *is* such reflection, but it tends towards a meditation on the *results* of these excesses, which for so long before the advent of modern industrial systems had very little effect on the overall picture. The earth was never in real danger from humanity until quite recently. Such ruminations take the form of warnings more than policy. As with other forms of discourse, it is always easier to mount a criticism than to do something differently, and this itself is also a reflection on the

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convenience of enjoyment of surplus rather than the sometimes inconvenient storing of surplus for future and needful use. As well, within the caveat discourses of critical modernity, the humanism that is shown there also turns away from itself by relying, sometimes quite heavily, on the previous world-systems of other-worldly soteriology and occluded kerygma: "Strangely, many things reminiscent of the religious tradition emerge in these and other writings, while it is also in some cases clear that they mean to reject religion, at least as it has been understood." (Taylor 2007:321). But such a rejection-e.g. it is the religious construction of the ego in the image of a god that is the true problem of consumption and waste (the world is yours for your uses and the like) as well as the religious notion of the apocalypse that is responsible for our veering towards self-destructive tendencies-is based on the idea that the present can thoroughly extinguish the past, as if the past was no longer a part of itself, like ridding oneself of an ague or complaint that had threatened to become both chronic and thence terminal. It is unlikely that this is the case, first of all, because these agrarian notions are still part of us and will be until the species itself evolves into what could not be called entirely human, and secondly, that for every shady idea that we have inherited from the previous metaphysics there is present to a brighter one that guides our secular salvation. The stewardship of the earth, for instance, or the idea that we are a singular and important part of the cosmos, are such ideas. They too betray the same egotism as the destructive sensibility, and they too will not be overcome -indeed, they are less likely to be so, given their general valuation as goods in themselves-unless and until a new species arises through our co-constructed auto-evolution. To make the world as it is a meaningful place, the social world is constructed as a symbolic architecture, rich and complex, but with the overarching thematic of attempting to objectivity social relations and personal desires: "Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire." (Lacan 2004:101 [1966]). In terms of cultural evolution, the reconstruction of death in meaningful and symbolic ritual is archaeologically often taken to be the first *symbol* of humanity itself, of our most recent and 'modern' speciation, the doubly wise sub-species of Homo within which we at length have remained. Lacan continues, "The first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestiges is the burial, and death as a means can be recognized in every relation in which man is born into the life of his history." (ibid). When we do so, we also over-reach the simple but singular event of death and make it into a symbol of existential freedom. If the funeral is the *first* symbol, it takes the form of symbolization itself. That is, every other act of meaning will have some necessary relation to the new concept of mortality, new because we are unaware ethnographically or archaeologically of another sensibility that we imagine to be more akin to the remaining animal kingdom, where death surely goes unrecognized in the manner in which humanity has attached itself to it: "...the funeral rite presents an act of symbolization par excellence; by means of a forced choice, the subject assumes, repeats his own act, what happened anyway. In the funeral rite, the subject confers the form of a *free* act on an 'irrational' contingent natural process." (Zizek, op. cit. 249). Hence meaningfulness in general will begin to appear to have the power of confronting and combating the lack of sense in the world, or, if the world has its own sensibility, a structure of symbols which is quite apart from human doings, then the world will be considered a creation of another order, in which humans must live, and thus must also make choices rationally to survive within. Whether or not one adheres to creation or evolution as an explanatory schema for the whys and wherefores of human existence, one must come face to face with the character of distanciation inherent in all meaning-making. The desire for death is not to be taken at *face* value. The smugly smirking *rigor mortis* of the moment of death is, on the face of it, a mockery of life, yes, but it is also to be taken as its own warning: Those who only laugh or smile at life whilst alive will suffer the grim fate of not being able to recognize death for what it is. It remains only a symbol and not an authentic terminus. This is so whether or not, once again, one has within one's worldview an afterlife where humanity continues even though consciousness itself is transformed, or where humanity is discontinued by the transformation of matter itself. Rather, we must interpret the desire for death to be in fact a desire for a *meaningful* death, and melancholia or depression to the rumination on how; in fact, one can make such a radical event meaningful before it occurs. This is why the melancholic often seems to be rehearsing his own demise, living a living death, as it were. This must be accomplished in advance and cannot be left to those who continue, who succeed our presence in the world. They have their own task-all funerals are for the living-and thus we ourselves take on the task of burying what we are in the meanings of what we had been, our legacies, our 'contributions', our experiences which are uniquely, we imagine, our own. In doing so, we do make a contribution to the general picture of the human condition, to be succeeded and built upon over the passing of generations and to make way for the next question of beings in the world; to get out of the way of the process of Being as the world at large, and to get on with one's own death as a mean to exhort our successors to attend to their own autochthonous business: "The difference for human beings lies in the group character of the selection in question and in their concomitant scope for conscious rational choice of means to advance and secure survival, to reject failures and bequeath knowledge and ideas to their offspring, a

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faculty characteristic of human evolution." (Blackburn, op. cit. 158). If we are tempted to use our own deaths to utter a final and lasting self-portrait as the grinning ironist, telling the same old joke of the 'lie of life' again and again, we are also just as capable of interpreting and thus exhibiting life in death as a puzzle to be figured out, an aporia to be bridged by the meaningfulness of being able to possess desire at all.

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