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Without Optimism: Sex, Žižek, and Apocalyptic Queerness

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Trouble in Paradise

In *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, Slavoj Žižek writes a response to the feeling of many people, especially on the Left, who feel that although capitalism and democracy appear to be in a state of crisis, it seems impossible to envision more than modest changes in the capitalist social and political order. The “paradise” in the title refers to “the paradise of the End of History (as elaborated by Francis Fukuyama: liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found best possible social order)” and Žižek’s claim is not only that there is “trouble” with this vision of history, but that “the ‘eternal’ marriage between

democracy and capitalism is nearing a divorce.” (Žižek 2014: 7, 123) In *Trouble in Paradise* Žižek offers more than a diagnosis of the conditions that have given rise to the current economic and political crises of the last decade; he attempts to explain why we feel paralyzed in the face of such crises, resigned to more of the same, as if the future as already been written. He is interested in how deep feelings of dissatisfaction, even rage, are typically accompanied these days with feelings of impotence.ⁱ It is this paradox that has led Žižek to conclude that what we now need to do is “separate apocalyptic experience from eschatology.” (Žižek 2014: 146)

“Eschatology” is a term that typically refers to “the end.” It implies the reaching of some goal, some *telos*. It is this teleology inherent in eschatology that Žižek is rejecting. He invokes T. J. Clark’s argument that we need to reject the sort of eschatological thinking that Marxism seems to have inherited from Christianity. (Clark 2012, Žižek 2014: 145) Like Christian eschatology, the eschatology of the Left also has a vision of paradise, a teleological closure of human struggle that will reconcile humans to each other and align their practices with human desire. Žižek claims that clinging to this eschatological vision of the future is precisely what prevents our acting in ways that might adequately respond to these crises. Recent economic and political eruptions point to the fact that global capitalism is fraught with irreconcilable contradictions that the current liberal-democratic political organization is seemingly powerless to confront. In fact, he says we are fast approaching a “zero-point” in which the ecological, economic, and social tensions of the early twenty-first century will inevitably lead to change.ⁱⁱ (Žižek 2014: 146) But, Žižek argues, there is no reason to think this change will be emancipatory or lead to the long hoped-for global revolution that has often characterized the aspirations of the Left.ⁱⁱⁱ

But, as Žižek points out, this is not a new, uniquely twenty-first-century experience, but the extension of a century-long process. As global capitalism has worked like the sorcerer’s apprentice in restructuring not only markets and human cultures, but the very ecosystem of the planet, resistance has often seemed futile. Thus, Žižek suggests that “perhaps” the “terrifying experience of

the Left in the twentieth century” should prompt a “return from Marx back to Hegel, i.e., from Marxist revolutionary eschatology back to Hegel’s tragic vision of a history which forever remains radically open, since the historical process always redirects our activity in an unexpected direction.” (Žižek 2014: 146) This is the point at which Žižek wants to unhook us from eschatology. We can only act on the event(s) in front of us with no way to know the ultimate effect of those acts. In his return from Marx to Hegel Žižek’s Hegel is not a teleological thinker, but a tragic one.^{iv} The human situation is always haunted by a negativity for which we can never offer a complete or ultimately corresponding account. For Žižek the historical process contains just such a “basic alienation.” This alienation is the result of the fact that we cannot control the consequences of our acts, but not because we are mere puppets in the hands of powerful agents and agencies who are ultimately in control, but, on the contrary, because “there is no big Other, no agent of total accountability.” (Žižek 2014: 146) But this realization does not, for Žižek, imply a cynical distance; it implies a stance towards our actions that is always aware of the risks, always aware that “there is no higher historical Necessity whose instruments we are and who guarantees the final outcome of our interventions.” (Žižek 2014: 146) He goes so far as to say “there will never be a Left that magically transforms confused revolts and protests into one big consistent Project of Salvation; all we have is our activity, open to all the risks of contingent history.” (Žižek 2014: 123)

Thus, we can read Žižek’s intervention, his return from Marx to Hegel (informed by Lacan), as an embracing of the tragic, without cynicism. It is a rejection of eschatology without rejecting apocalyptic experience. No doubt, our understanding of “apocalypse,” like our understanding of “eschatology” will carry with it certain Christian associations, associations that have given the word its popular meaning of something like “total destruction.” But this does not seem to be what Žižek has in mind (at least not what he should have in mind) when he thinks of recovering the apocalyptic without the eschatological. We must remember that even in the Christian use of the term, apocalypse primarily meant “revelation.” (The last book of the Christian *New Testament* has been commonly

known in English as *The Revelation*, but its Greek title is “Apocalypse.”) In ancient Greek (both “classical” and “*koine*”/biblical) ἀποκάλυψις means “an uncovering” (literally), hence, “a revelation.” This is the experience we need to have—a sense of uncovering the negativity at the heart of human consciousness that would allow us to see with fresh eyes the conditions in which we live. Specifically, this would mean relinquishing our eschatological hopes (and fears). The “sorcerer’s apprentice” quality of global capitalism, generating within us such a feeling of impotence, must be replaced by an awareness of this negativity not as something to be overcome or rejected, but as the experience of experience itself.

Sex without optimism

Žižek’s idea of “apocalypse without eschatology” has its parallels in Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s concept of “sex without optimism.” In their book, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant and Edelman engage in a series of dialogues that approach sex as “a site” that “holds out the prospect of discovering new ways of being and being in the world” where we also find “the possibility of confronting our limit in ourselves or in another . . .” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: vii) Though they both approach this site from different theoretical perspectives, their willingness to engage sex as this sort of site opens up the possibilities not only for thinking subjectivity, but also for rethinking the nature and role of desire. Their project illuminates the relationship between sex and politics, both of which operate out of the rupture between fantasy and corporeality and always take place within the horizons of the symbolic and imaginary at the limits of the Real. This connection between sex and the political is explicit in Berlant and Edelman who frame their own exploration of sex as a way to examine “our attempts to remain rooted in the social by both holding fast to and moving beyond our accustomed ways of experiencing ourselves and our connectedness to others.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: vii)

Especially relevant to what I am framing as “apocalyptic experience without eschatology” is their first chapter, “Sex without Optimism.” They argue

that optimism “hooks us into fantasies of the good life, however the good life may be defined. Often such optimism enacts the hope of successful integration into dominant orders—social, psychic, and political—by anticipating ways of resolving the various contradictions amid which we live. Sex, as a locus for optimism, is a site at which the promise of overcoming division and antagonism is frequently played out.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: xiv) Their analysis of the “normative logic of optimism” points to the ways in which the future, as phantasmic staging of optimism, typically serves as a mode of social integration. Thus, to live optimistically is to live with the hope of constituting a self free from the contradictions that characterize the limits of the symbolic. To live without this kind of optimism is to live with the “tragic sense of history” Žižek derives from Hegel; to live without this optimism is to live with the full knowledge that there is no “big Other.”^v

Sex is a site for the exploration of this situation because of the way it draws our attention to what Berlant and Edelman call “non-sovereignty.” This non-sovereignty is not a function of some existential impotence, but is at the very heart of subjectivity itself. This non-sovereignty is a feature of the negativity that is at the heart of being. It is in this sense that Berlant and Edelman see “negativity” as “inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: xii) In their approach, negativity is not opposed to politics, it is not an impotence, but a “challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: xvi) This negativity is especially important for understanding Edelman’s view of “sex without optimism.” For his part, Edelman argues that sex “denotes an encounter with otherness that attains the stability of knowable relation only by way of an optimism that erases its negativity.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 1-2) Like Žižek, Edelman is theorizing from Lacan’s *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*. (Lacan 207:116) For Edelman, there is no coherent, stable subject and thus there cannot be a sexual relation. For him, *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*, suggests to us that sex has “something to do with experiencing corporeally and in the orbit of the libidinal, the shock of discontinuity and the

encounter with non-knowledge.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 4) The “without” in “without optimism” would, for Edelman, it seems, refer to this non-knowledge. By contrast, for Berlant, negativity, the “without” in “without optimism,” refers “at once to the self-clearing work of the drives, being socially oppressed, and being non-sovereign, affectively undone by being in relation.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 2) Thus, for Edelman, the “without” points to something structural in subjectivity itself, but for Berlant it points to an historical, contextual encounter, an expression of power directed at or imposed on the subject.

These are key distinctions between their approaches. As Berlant points out, we could configure their approaches this way: Berlant (utopian), Edelman (non-utopian). But of course things are not so simple. A utopia is a “no-place” a fantastic space where our imagined ideals take shape. To be utopian is, in a sense, to willingly engage in a sort of fantasy. Berlant understands the phantasmic nature of this configuration, but pursues it anyway, seeing optimism as a “mode of attachment to life.” Thus, her political project is a matter of “imagining how to detach from lives that don’t work and from worlds that negate the subjects that produce them.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 5) Her project is historically specific, focused as it is on “lives” and “worlds” rather than on some inevitable condition. In this sense, she groups herself with “antinormative activists” in attempting to “expand the field of affective potentialities, latent and explicit fantasies, and infrastructures for how to live beyond survival, toward flourishing not later but in the ongoing now.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 5)

This emphasis on the “ongoing now” derives from Berlant’s claim that the “affective experience of the sexual,” like any “non-knowledge,” is “not blockage or limit but is actually the experience of the multiplication of knowledges that have an awkward relation to each other” that “create intensities that require management.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 5) In this context she says we can view “normativity” as “an attempt to drown out the subject’s constitution by an attachment to varieties of being undone and our strong interest in a pedagogy that does not purchase space for negativity by advocating for a simplifying optimism.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 6) Thus, for Berlant, the historical

conditions (of repression) that constitute the subject are what must be overcome. For her, it seems that while optimism has the power to engage us with life, its “cruel” downside is that it can shackle us to specific historical forms of repression. In this sense, Berlant’s orientation is very much the typical mode of Leftist activism. Affective connections with others, worked out in specific historical moments as gestures of resistance that allow optimisms to guide our actions.

If we can think of Berlant’s theorization as beginning with the “affective experience of the sexual,” we can see that for Edelman, “incoherence” is the critical experience. Our experiences of shock, which can become part of our quotidian experience, are signs of this incoherence, which though it may be familiar, so familiar as to go unnoticed in our day-to-day lives, may, by its very familiarity, “testify to the will to domesticate the encounter with what can *never* be made familiar.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 8) The subject that normalizes itself has, Edelman claims, grown accustomed to this incoherence and “has usually succeeded, if painfully, in the labor of normalizing a self, even when it conceives that self as inadequate to the norm.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 9) In this way, he says, “the structuring incoherences that queer the self as the center of consciousness, and so of a pseudo-sovereignty, remain unavailable to the subject except in rare moments of traumatic encounter, moments when the potential for shock gets activated by the nearness of the unbearable, which is to say, of our own enjoyment: the enjoyment ‘we’ never own.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 9) For Edelman, the “unbearable,” the *jouissance* of Lacan’s theorization, points to the incompleteness of the subject’s condition and this incoherence is the space in which optimisms can play out their normalizing roles. We can read his theory as encompassing all of the dreams of normal/proper enjoyments that must, inevitably be deferred. To return to Žižek’s rejection of eschatology, the problem with any vision of a kind of paradise is that it presupposes some inevitable, ‘natural,’ mode of desiring emanating from a coherent subject that could then find its fulfillment—its telos—in some eschatological vision. This is

where Edelman can help us find the end of The End—the end of eschatology in favor of the apocalyptic.

Edelman's version of "sex without optimism" gives us the very structure of Žižek's "apocalypse without eschatology." The structure is the same because for both of them (working as they do from a Lacanian point of view) the signified—the Subject—is empty. An analysis of any relation must begin with this understanding of this negativity. All identities are an answer to this negativity. In thinking through the social implications of these "structuring incoherences" Edelman argues that "inherent in the proliferation of social forms lies what structures the social as form: the void of the non-relation that in-forms, which is to say, forms from within, the imperative to formalize relation even while deforming it as well." (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 10-11) We can argue that capitalism is one (particularly prolific) manifestation of this ongoing process, but it is not unique. Social forms, in all of their manifestations, are, as Edelman points out, an expression of this negativity. I am arguing that while eschatology typically works within the logic of "social as form," as a "structuring incoherence" that attempts to conceal this negativity, apocalyptic typically works by uncovering "the void."

This negativity, the void, Edelman argues, points to the fact that "life, in some sense, 'doesn't work' . . . is structurally inimical to happiness, stability, or regulated functioning." Thus, for Edelman, flourishing can only occur through "the repetitive working through of what still doesn't work in the end, or works only until the radically non-relational erupts from within it once more." (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 11) For him, "flourishing" is not "happiness" or detachment from what doesn't work (Berlant), but "rather the effort to push beyond limits (internal and external both) imposed by the fantasy of the sovereign self (the self detached from negativity) or the optimism invested in happiness (as an end to the labor of trying to achieve it). (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 11) In working out the implications of this theory for our visions of the future, Edelman cites Badiou who claimed every definition of humanity based on happiness was ultimately nihilistic. (Badiou 1998: 37) Thus, for Edelman, "the political program of happiness as a regulatory norm is less a recipe for liberation than an inducement

to entomb oneself in the stillness of an image.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 18) The logic of this reading of happiness is found in its eschatological character. In the formula, “the pursuit of happiness,” “happiness” is the ultimate telos of all pursuits. But the negativity Edelman (also, Žižek and Lacan) locates at the heart of subjectivity suggests there is no there, there. Reading Žižek’s argument from this point of view we can claim that the rejection of eschatology is based on the fact that all teleologies, including those of both Capitalism and the Left, are grounded in just such a vision of happiness. What is needed is not some new path to achieve the same visions offered from within capitalism, but neither is what is needed some new eschatology to replace the old one. What is needed is an apocalyptic experience of the incoherence and negativity that have given rise to all form(s) and thus to all visions of happiness.

Thus, Edelman argues for “queerness” as the best option for addressing this negativity. “In the misrecognitions that sex entails and their recurrent neutralization by optimism’s stabilizing impulse” he seeks a “queerness that works as that optimism’s self-resistance: the queerness that is less an identity than an ongoing effort of divestiture, a practice of undoing.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 19) This sort of queerness can:

“make no claim—no claim to the good or the proper, and so to no ground from which identitarian claims for redress of wrongs might be launched. In its paradoxical self-definition as what blocks definition’s closure, it resists the regime of the smiley face whose rictus carries the promise of consistency, stability, and normalization. Panoptimism precludes the very life it purportedly enables while denying the negativity of its own death-driven investment in ‘life’—where ‘life’ names the fantasy of escape from loss, contradiction, confusion, or defeat in pursuit of an armored happiness that aggresses the enemies of its hope.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 19)

What Edelman is characterizing as “queerness,” I am characterizing as “apocalyptic.”

This apocalyptic queerness can form the basis for change, but such change can be unpredictable. Here we come to the heart of what motivates Berlant to characterize Edelman’s position as non-utopian. He asks,

“what happens when hope *turns against itself* in order to affirm the rupture that defines its enabling negativity, its structuring noncoincidence with the universe as it ‘is’? Things that *may* happen include disaffection, depression, immobility, resignation, or the suicidal fantasmatics of ontological repair. But among the others is a political resistance to the norms by which political possibility is defined—and defined precisely to exclude negativity and, with it, the radical undoing that animates hope as a rupture from itself and thus sets it apart from the happiness that Panoptimism promises.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 19)

Edelman points out that the “violence (psychic, physical, emotional) of sexual normativity, its targeting of what it sees as ‘unbecoming’ with regard to sex, performs this optimism by trying to separate sex from negativity, from what’s “unbearable in enjoyment.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 32) Queerness is apocalyptic not because it destroys, but because it reveals. It points to the negativity and incoherence of all social forms and norms. Such normativities depend on optimism to attach us to specific visions of wholeness, happiness, etc. The “queer” position, by pointing to the rupture with such visions creates an opening for something else.

Edelman’s conception of sex without optimism is, thus, a rejection of the reality offered to us as an incomplete and incoherent attempt to cover over the rupture of experience with the Real (in Lacan’s sense). For Edelman, “the persistence of reality may be a necessary fiction, even for those who resist a given social or political reality, but the intrusions of the Real make the fictionality of its status almost palpable, reminding us therefore, that reality is imaginary in

form.” He goes on to point out that we can never offer an argument for the Real that would not also take place within the imaginary, but still, we can try to give an account for “the disturbance of imaginary reality by a Real with which we can never have a relation only the recurrence of encounter.” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 28) It is this “disturbance” that best characterizes the experience of the apocalyptic which Žižek so provocatively called for. The shocks and incoherences of global capitalism have become commonplace, but their disturbing quality nevertheless persists and occasionally erupts in collective outbursts—Tahrir Square, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, The Women’s March, etc.—and persist in uncommon places as stains on the global order that serve as moments of apocalyptic queerness.

Epic apocalyptic experience

Rather than return to the (too?) familiar eschatological and apocalyptic positions associated with Christianity, it might be useful to consider a more ancient set of texts that starkly show the difference between the eschatological and apocalyptic perspectives while also demonstrating the real possibility of having apocalypse without eschatology: the epics of Homer (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and Virgil (*Aeneid*). While both Homer and Virgil’s texts occupied similar cultural functions—something like Heidegger’s “work of art”—for their respective cultures, and while they have many superficial similarities, their orientations are radically different. The Homeric epics are apocalyptic, revealing the incoherence and negativity that structures the self, culture, and relationship; Virgil’s epic is eschatological, concealing incoherence and negativity with a teleological optimism.^{vi}

Superficially, Virgil’s work is very similar to the Homeric epics. The very structure of *The Aeneid* mimics Homer’s. The first words of the epic, *arma virumque*, outline the themes of his work: “arms and a man.” The “man” part of *The Aeneid*, books 1-6, parallels Homer’s *Odyssey*, tracing Aeneas’ journey from Troy to Italy, by way of Carthage. Along the way Aeneas visits many of the same

sites Odysseus had visited on his epic voyage, even descending into the underworld. The “arms” portion of *The Aeneid*, book 7-12, parallels *The Iliad*, recounting the armed conflict that engulfed Aeneas as he established a foothold for the future Roman Empire in Italy. Virgil even mimics the invocations characteristic of the Homeric epics, “speak muse,” in beginning his story.

However, there are important differences in their orientation towards what Edelman called “structuring” negativity and incoherence. We can see this even in considering the origins of both works. That the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both the products of a long history of oral poetry is obvious and well documented. The inscription of these epics, probably around 800 BCE, came only after centuries of oral performances by countless unknown “singers” who crafted their poems, to some degree, on the spot, shaping their tales like a modern jazz musician in response to the “inspiration” of the moment. The muse was still an essential feature of the telling. By contrast, as is also well known, Virgil’s epic was “commissioned” as part the larger imperial agenda of Augustus in legitimating his rule. It was composed by a single individual, Virgil, in the last decade of his life (ca. 29-19 BCE). The *Aeneid* conceals the “stain” of Augustus’ dissolution of the Republic by depicting the rise of Augustus as the fulfillment of Rome’s destiny. For example, during Aeneas’ visit to the underworld, Anchises, Aeneas’ father, shows the hero the destiny of Rome, which culminates in “the man promised to you, Augustus Caesar, born of the gods, who will establish again a Golden Age.” (*Aeneid* 6.939-941) The end of the Roman Republic, enacted by Augustus’ unprecedented consolidation of power into his own hands, an act he concealed with a host of political fictions, is cast here as a “golden age” by a teleological interpretation of a set of actions that were made to seem inevitable and positive when a similar move had led to the assassination of Augustus’ uncle, Julius Caesar, in 44 BCE. This eschatological vision appears in the form of a “prophecy” delivered to Aeneas over a millennium before its fulfillment.

This use of *ex eventu* prophecy is the most striking form of the *Aeneid*’s eschatological stance. These “prophecies” have the effect of seeing all human action as governed by some sense of fate, or destiny that leads towards the

ultimate goal of Roman civilization with all of its social and political forms seen as both good and inevitable. In the very first book of the *Aeneid*, Jupiter provides just such a prophecy for Venus (the mother of Aeneas) promising her that her “people’s destiny remains unmoved” and describing Aeneas’ specific tasks in Italy in ways that mimic the perennial *modus operandi* of Rome: to “crush barbarous nations, and set up laws and city walls.” The prophecy then gives a brief synopsis of several hundred years of early Roman history before Jupiter finally says that for the Romans he has “set no limits in time or space, and [has] given to them eternal empire, world without end.” (*Aeneid* 1.314-345) Thus, that Rome would become an imperial power, and that it would be ruled by Augustus, is framed in strictly eschatological terms.

The implications of such eschatological gestures for legitimating specific social and political forms is obvious. But we should also note how this eschatology is engaged in concealing the negativity and incoherence of being itself. The prophecies of both Anchises and Jupiter are delivered in moments of radical openness and uncertainty when Aeneas and Venus seek reassurance that their actions will lead to desired ends. The openness of human action, the non-sovereignty that governs all our engagements, the negativity that characterizes subjectivity belies all such reassurances. We might ask would not the Roman reader of Virgil’s day see through these *ex eventu* prophecies, recognizing them as hindsight, thus undermining the eschatological force of such “predictions?” One would think so, but that would be to fail to understand how eschatology works. Eschatology sees the course of human history as oriented towards some telos. These *ex eventu* prophecies lay out that telos thus allowing the Roman social and political order to seem inevitable and eternal. For the Augustan-era Roman reader, facing disruption, uncertainty, and a new political order, this eschatology, even in the form of *ex eventu* prophecy, conceals the negativity and incoherence that gave rise to form and structure in the first place. Eschatology, while normally thought of as “predicting the future” is really about shaping human action in the present with a teleological narrative that conceals incoherence and negativity. Eschatology does not simply appropriate the future;

it appropriates all of human history—past, present, and future—in order to reify an inherently fantasmic set of values, norms, and ideals.

On almost every page of the *Aeneid* Roman cultural values, i.e., the Roman “form” or the Roman “normal” is idealized. For example, when Aeneas first encounters Carthage he sees a city running according to Roman ideals: “. . . once a few hovels . . . [now] city gates, Tyrians . . . hard at work, building walls, fortifying the citadel, rolling boulders by hand . . . As Aeneas watched, they made laws, chose officials, installed a senate . . .” (*Aeneid* 1.515-526) This text idealizes building, hard work, and making laws—quintessential Roman activities that are consistent themes throughout the work—in order to imply that the Roman form of life simply “just was” the correct form of life, the goal toward which every culture, including those conquered by the Romans, ought to aim. The eschatology of the *Aeneid* reinforces the form, the “normal” of the Roman order, and its teleology implies that the path to meaning and fulfillment lies in conforming oneself to that order, an order complete in its teleological form. Tellingly, this idealized civilization of Carthage is undone when Venus has Cupid enflame the queen, Dido, with a passionate desire for Aeneas. Thus enflamed, the building of the city ceases, and, when Aeneas leaves her, Dido commits suicide, undone by the erotic impulse that cannot be “normalized” within the Roman set of values. Dido’s “fall” from her role as pious, productive leader to passionate woman confirms, from the point of view of the *Aeneid*, the dangers of following one’s private projects and bodily impulses; Dido is queer. By contrast, Aeneas, dutiful and pious, “submits” to his fate and follows his destiny in laying the groundwork for the Roman Empire.

Still, there are moments when the text deconstructs itself pointing to the incoherence that gave rise to its teleological structure in the first place. In Book Six, Anchises is explaining the structure of the universe in terms that reflect Virgil’s version of Stoicism. He suggests that the universe is “sustained by a spirit within. Every part is infused with Mind (*mens*) which moves the Whole.” But the “wholeness,” the completeness of this order is undermined by the fact that the “divine fire” that is in all things is “slowed and dulled by mortal frames, earthly

bodies doomed to die. And so men fear and desire, sorrow and exult, and, shut in the shade of their prison-houses, cannot see the sky.” (*Aeneid* 6.859-884) In this way of thinking there is a divine completeness (Mind), but this completeness is disturbed by corporeality. This disturbance gives rise to “many corporeal taints” that must be purged in the afterlife. Though the text wants to conceal this negativity completely, to find some ultimate wholeness, it acknowledges that human existence, in its corporeality, is a site of rupture with that wholeness.

This rupture is also registered in the historical realm in ways that undermine the *Aeneid*'s eschatological project. At the conclusion of Book Six, after Anchises finishes his breathtaking “prophetic” summary of Roman history, he tells us “there are two Gates of Sleep. One, they say is horn, and offers easy exit for true shades. The other is finished with glimmering ivory, but through it the Spirits send false dreams to the world above.” In other words, there are two “gates” through which a dream can pass: the true dreams go through the horn gate; the false go through the ivory gate. Then, in a stunning reversal of expectation, we are told that Aeneas exits “through the Ivory Gate.” In other words, the amazing *ex eventu* prophecy of Book Six that foretells of the glorious destiny of Rome is a false dream. But how can this prophecy be false when it is *ex eventu*—that is based on the events themselves? It is a false dream because all of our readings of history are eschatological, reading them in light of the present, seeing them as inevitable, forgetting all the contingencies, negativities, and incoherences that have been effaced to provide the semblance of order in such narratives.

By contrast, the Homeric epics reflect an apocalyptic experience with no eschatology. The characters in the Homeric epics still live within a world of form and structure, i.e., they have a culture, they persist in a “reality,” but their experience of the world is non-eschatological in the sense of having no ultimate goal or end. This is not to say that they live without value(s), but rather that they live with an openness to, and awareness of, the rupture of negativity at the heart of human existence. They live in a world in which the gods act, appear, and even speak, but not in ways that conform to an ultimate plan or goal, or that are even

aimed at some kind of “good.” Destiny for the Homeric Greeks is open and mysterious.

The paradigmatic example of this would be Achilles himself. In the *Iliad* he is depicted as having been presented with two options for his life. He can live a peaceful, quiet, life at home in his own country, or he can live a short glorious life. (*Iliad* 1.332-415, 9.330-412) After his falling out with Agamemnon he seems to be seriously considering a return to his home, Phthia, to lead a quiet, long, life as a farmer/raider. It is only after his friend Patroclus is killed by Hector that he chooses to return to the battle in search of revenge. In one sense “we” know that he will die young and famous, but for the character, for Achilles, the option feels open to him. This openness is complicated by the fact that “we” also know that given the kind of man he is, and given his relationship to Patroclus, Patroclus’ death will inevitably lead him back into the battle, thus keeping him at Troy, where he will find both fame and death. But the *Iliad* gives us both the feeling of openness and negativity that characterize human choice, and the subsequent feeling of destiny that always comes after the event. Achilles feels free to choose his fate, but we are reading about him as if he had always already chosen it.

But it is even more complicated than this. The *Iliad* ends with Hector’s death, but Achilles still alive. We know that Achilles dies at Troy, and in the *Odyssey* he is one of the figures that Odysseus visits in Hades. There, Odysseus says to Achilles, “no man in earlier times or in those that came later is more fortunate than you. When you were alive we honored you like the gods, and now that you are here [in Hades], you rule among the dead. Therefore do not be sad that you are dead, O Achilles.” Achilles’ response is surprising. Rather than confirm Odysseus’ appraisal—i.e., that Achilles’ end, his telos, justifies his short glorious life, that it was worth it—Achilles responds by saying, “don’t sing praise to me about death . . . If I could live on the earth, I would be happy to serve as a hired hand to some other, even to some man without a plot of land, one who has little to live on, than to be king among all the dead who have perished.” (*Odyssey*, 11.451-460) The power of death to undo all of our projects haunts the story of Achilles, confounding attempts to understand which kind of life is better

than another. The vision of happiness offered by the Homeric big Other, is undermined by Achilles own self-appraisal. Unlike Aeneas, whose life is about some larger, eschatological project, Achilles life is self-contained. His death (and his life?) has no ultimate meaning. There is an uncovering, a revealing of the negativity and incoherence of subjectivity at the heart of the Homeric experience. The Homeric epics value certain kinds of people, things, acts, and experiences more than others, but they do so without optimism, which is to say, without eschatology. This lack of optimism does not lead to inaction because it is not nihilistic, renouncing value and “meaning.” On the contrary, the Homeric characters, acting without optimism, base their decisions to act on the meaning or value that emerges from the situation, that is from what is revealed in moments, things, people, and acts often with the intimation of something divine manifesting and revealing itself as significant. But this revealing is not teleological, pointing toward some “good” end. At times the gods act in ways that are outright deceptive. Such is the case with Hector, who was lured from the safety of the walls of Troy into his fatal confrontation with Achilles by Athena, who disguised herself as his brother, Deiphobos. (*Iliad*, 22.214-222) In this case, the “revelation” Hector receives is deliberately designed to lead him to his death. There is no assurance, as there is in the *Aeneid* (at least for Aeneas) that following the lead of the gods will lead to one’s best end. There are no guarantees at all. No reason for optimism. No eschatological vision. Even the gods in the Homeric epics disagree, are divided, and are constantly subject to negotiation. In other words, even when the narrative shows us what is occurring with the gods, we see gods fighting and in turmoil, and even if we see Zeus as somehow acting as the final arbiter of these conflicts, there is no teleology that retroactively justifies history.

We can see this dynamic in the *Iliad* in a discussion between two allies of the Trojans, Sarpedon and Glaucón. Confronting the powerful Achaean army they naturally feel fear and wonder if they should press ahead or not. Sarpedon urges Glaucón to action by reminding him of the privileged status they enjoy in their home, Lycia, and that they must fight heroically to legitimize that standing.

He concludes his speech by saying, “if escaped from battle it were possible for the two of us never to grow old and never to die, I would not myself fight among the foremost, nor would I send you into the fight where men win glory. But as it is, the fates of death stand over us, ten thousand of them—no man can flee or escape from them—so let us go forward and give glory to another, or to ourselves.” (*Iliad*, 12.276-293). No guarantees. No optimism. No larger historical project to give meaning to their deaths. In fact, it is the very lack of optimism that motivates their action. Sarpedon says that *if* it were possible to remain eternally young and avoid death, then they would avoid the risks of battle. But since one cannot avoid death, the very limited nature of human existence opens up the possibility for action. The action is motivated by the very negativity that emerges from the uncertainty of life. Sarpedon acknowledges that they will either gain glory for themselves, or for others, and so they must act. “Glory” here is a positive value that can shape one’s decision-making, but in and of itself, it is not a telos that can, in a positive way, legitimize any action other than to refer directly to the culture’s own values.

We can see a similarly non-eschatological perspective in an important conversation between Hector and Helen. Helen has followed the leading of Aphrodite in deserting her husband and child and running off to Troy with Paris, thus leading to the Trojan War. Reflecting on these events Helen says she wishes that on the day she was born “an evil wind had come along and carried [her] away to the mountains or beneath the wave of the loud-resounding sea.” But we can see that this is not really guilt in the personal way we conceive it today because she goes on to say that “the gods have made such horrible things come to pass.” (*Iliad*, 6.344-354). She sees that she has had a role to play in this calamity, but she understands it all to be the “work of the gods,” rather than the result of her personal, free choices. She then speculates as to why all of this might have happened. Within an eschatological framework her conclusion would try to “make sense” out of the tragic events as either a just punishment for some human transgression, or as part of some ultimate plan to accomplish some positive end. But her conclusion is different. She says, “Zeus has placed a dark

fate on us so we might be the subject of song for men who come later.” (*Iliad*, 6.358-360) When we read the *Iliad* we are reading that exact song, but this is not a telos in the eschatological sense. If anything, it is an attempt to focus on the value of individual action in the face of the dark and mysterious purposes of the gods. There is no illusion that human action can lead to a specific outcome, nor is there even an eschatological hope that this will lead to some better tomorrow (like Virgil’s “Golden Age” or Fukuyama’s “end of history”). The best Helen can do is to suggest that perhaps the tragic events described in the *Iliad* will make a good story. Since the Homeric culture values fame—it is almost a kind of currency—the idea that one’s actions might be the subject of an epic might be appealing, but it is not as though either the Trojans or the Achaeans are engaged in some larger historical drama with a clear telos. Helen’s view reveals the negativity and incoherence that find a kind of structure in a narrative without the optimistic stance that this is all “leading to something.” Rather than a narrative that provides a coherent view of history, we get only a narrative as a narrative.

This is not optimism, but neither is it nihilism. It is an awareness of the incompleteness, the incoherence, at the heart of human subjectivity. Both the Homeric song/epic and the Virgilian *ex eventu* prophecy assemble a coherent image out of this incoherence, but the *ex eventu* prophecy does so in an eschatological manner, attempting to provide coherence with a telos that attempts to erase the negativity at the heart of existence while the “song” of the Homeric epic creates an explicitly contingent coherence without a telos. Virgil gives us an eschatological reading of the past that tries to frame human action within an optimistic teleology. Homer, without ever using the word “apocalyptic,” gives us an apocalyptic experience revealing the negativity at the heart of being without eschatological optimism.

Sex/apocalypse without optimism/eschatology

Reading Žižek’s argument with Berlant and Edelman’s “sex without optimism” has suggested that “apocalyptic experience without eschatology” is roughly equivalent to “sex without optimism.” Berlant’s project is more typical of Leftist

strategies, seeking “better scenarios” for human flourishing while Edelman’s strategy, aligned with “queerness” as a form of resistance based on a fundamental “incoherence” looks more like an affirmation of transgression with no larger ideals to give it shape. Yet both approaches share a common interest in detaching ourselves from normativity and this detachment is based, for each of them, in negativity. Berlant speaks of “non-knowledge” and “fantasmatic futures,” while Edelman speaks of “incoherence,” but both point to the divided self, the Real, the limits of the symbolic order, and the ways in which non-sovereignty impinges on all relationality.

The apocalyptic experience is one of undoing. To reveal, to uncover, is to show the non-knowledge within knowledge (and not the other way around!). This undoing means, in our context today, seeing the phantasmic nature of all our relations—sexual, social, psychic, political, and economic—and allowing, shock, trauma, and crisis to become, for us, not “signs of the end” or merely “more of the same,” but revelatory moments of profound undoing. This negative revelation, this revealing that there is nothing to be revealed, is the apocalyptic experience *par excellence*. Thus, even our experiences of rage, impotence, and impotent rage are apocalyptic. Sex is apocalyptic. What is revealed is *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*, but this does not mean that we, as actors, give up on sex. When what is revealed is that form, optimism, even happiness is nothing more than an attempt to cover over negativity and incoherence we will not necessarily give up on acting, but will, perhaps, act in a “queer” way that recognizes normativity for what it is.

Thus, to have sex without optimism would be to fully engage relationality with an awareness of negativity, non-knowledge, and non-sovereignty. To have apocalyptic experience without eschatology would be to open ourselves to action while fully facing the fact that we are all alone, not only without the traditional gods to master the universe and control our destiny, but without the modern gods of “history” and capitalism (*cum* democracy) to save us. There is no big Other. No set of norms to which we must hobble ourselves. We can change our situation only by “queering” our future. We can queer our future by relinquishing

our optimism and embracing a more tragic vision of history. Paradoxically, this tragic vision of history is the very one that would allow us to embrace new fantasies. We have arrived at a moment in which economic disruption, perpetual violence, and impending ecological catastrophe have become revelatory. In this light, Žižek’s call for an end to the “End of History,” an experience of apocalypse without eschatology, is a way to “change our dreams.”^{vii}

Notes

ⁱ The Green Revolution in Iran, Tahrir Square, the London Riots, Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, The Women’s March (*et al*) movements all appear to be signs of a growing realization that “something must change,” and, for some, they might even give rise to a new optimism that such crises might (finally) lead to the emancipatory changes—the “Revolution”—envisioned by the Left. But at the same time a general sense of impotence seems to lurk behind the rage and dissatisfaction stimulated by these crises.

ⁱⁱ Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise*, 146,

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, the election and inauguration of Donald Trump suggests there is no reason to think that the changes that await us will be welcomed by the Left.

^{iv} For a more complete development of Žižek’s interpretation of Hegel on this point see: Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

^v For a more complete development of Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan see: Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

^{vi} Homer never uses the term “apocalypse” or “apocalyptic.” This term comes much later in the Greek tradition, but my argument is not about the use of a specific term. Virgil does not use the term “eschatology,” either. My point is that these two epic traditions are oriented towards history and subjectivity in radically different ways.

^{vii} Slavoj Žižek in Sophie Fiennes (Dir.), *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, 2012. In the film Žižek provides a reading of the John Frankenheimer film, *Seconds* (1966). His reading suggests that the problem faced by the central character, Antiochus Wilson, played by Rock Hudson, was not with his circumstances, but with his dreams. He had the “wrong dreams,” according to Žižek. I am suggesting this apocalyptic experience is a path towards different dreams.

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