

## The Worst, or the Lesser of Two Evils<sup>1</sup>

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In her report on the so-called banality of evil, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt at one point refers to a “sinister potentiality.” “It is in the very nature of things human, she writes, that every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past.”<sup>2</sup> Arendt explains the sinister character of a potentiality dependent on an actuality by giving the following example: “Once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been.” The argument is then summarised in the form of a statement. It is no longer a question of acts in general but of crimes that seem to exceed what lies in the “very nature of things human”: “The unprecedented, once it has appeared, may become a precedent for the future.” It is as if Arendt’s “sinister potentiality” could not have preceded the actualization of an act that lacks a precedent in the past, or as if the act in question were unprecedented because it had not required an actualization for it to occur. In the text, Arendt marks the occurrence of this act by an adverb she uses repeatedly, the adverb “once.” She allows it to hover between the temporality of the “for-once” and the temporality of the “once-more.” Thus, the “sinister potentiality” to which Arendt refers stretches between two temporalities. The actualization of the “sinister potential” appears to be so unexpected and sudden that the act overtakes its own possibility, its own probability, only to then lag behind and finally vanish, leaving nothing except for a potentiality, the possibility of its own repetition. The relationship between possibility and act is turned on its head, as it were, pointing to an absolute and previously unimaginable beginning, to a beginning that falls outside the causality of nature, outside the automatism of habit, but still “stays with mankind.” Is it such a reversal that is “in the very nature of things human”? Is it the ability to bring about “the unprecedented” that defines this “nature,” a radical and anarchic freedom that can hardly be accommodated by the idea of a human “nature” or an order of “things”? Perhaps Arendt’s remarks, aimed at what had appeared as something unprecedented in the 1940s, continued to appear in this manner when she was writing her report, and continues to appear as something unprecedented today, namely the organised mass murder that German Nazis carried out in extermination camps—perhaps these few remarks contain what could be called a certain logic of the worst.

Arendt’s remarks suggest that once the worst, or that for which, by definition, there is no precedent and cannot be any precedent, has “appeared” for the first and only time, once it has been “recorded in the history of mankind” and identified as such, it immediately becomes itself a precedent. The time of its first appearance ceases to be the only time. Otherwise the worst could never appear, never belong to the “history of mankind” by allowing itself to be identified and recorded. The worst creates its own potentiality rather than depending on it to make an appearance, and in doing so it submits itself to probability, it enters into a comparative relationship. What once verged on the impossible, what was once almost impossible to imagine, what would have been dismissed once as sheer madness and irresponsible exaggeration, is now an event likely, or more or less likely, to happen again. One could even push the argument further by saying that the reason an event, the event of the worst, has the force to develop the “sinister potentiality” on which probability draws, is the extreme improbability and unlikelihood of its happening. It is precisely because the interruption it causes is so unlikely that it can be repeated once it has interrupted the normal course of things. Not situating itself in the realm of the probable and the improbable, surpassing calculation, the event of the worst depends only on itself, on the potentiality it inaugurates, on a calculation it brings about. The force of that which can happen only once, be it the worst or also the best, the force of that which, happening only

once, should not allow for a recording and indicate either an unfathomable rupture or an end without a beginning, a beginning without a continuation, manifests itself in a new series of events that can only be measured against itself. One then says that something “like this” may happen again.

The worst cannot be part of history; when, however, it becomes an event that will eventually turn into a “thing of the past,” it must both insert itself in an existing historical narrative and alter its sense significantly, as if history had to begin anew. From this paradoxical “logic of the worst,” from the worst’s resistance and invitation to repetition, it follows that the happening of a terrible and unprecedented event that transforms the “for-the-first-and-only-time” into a “for-the-first-but-not-for-the-last-time” is as much a sign of force as a sign of a lack of force. For it is because the worst can happen only once that it is potent, that it has the force to manifest itself, to allow itself to be “recorded in the history of mankind,” to engender a “sinister potentiality” and to surrender to probability, in short, to create the possibility of happening one more time at least. As paradoxical as it may seem, repetition denotes the force of the worst. Yet it is also because the worst can happen only once that it lacks the force to manifest itself. When it does so, it is no longer the worst but something that will happen again and is only comparatively bad: worse things can happen in the future. The instant the event of the worst occurs and generates a “sinister potentiality,” iterability opens it up to comparison. It is in this sense as well, as a messenger of worse things to come, that the worst is a “precedent for the future.” The worst cannot appropriate the repetition that depends on it. This is why, despite the traumatic shock of undergoing the experience of the worst, one may feel relieved and at the same time threatened by its occurrence.

The logic of the worst is the logic of a force that is never merely forceful, that enters into a relationship with itself, into a comparison, and that is forceful only inasmuch as it lacks force. When, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno refers to the events in the extermination camps as “samples”<sup>3</sup> and still persists in holding fast to their uniqueness, to their “incommensurability,” it could be argued that rather than falling prey to a fallacy of thought, he displays a contradiction that inheres in the events themselves. The worst immediately inscribes itself in a potentiality of its own making, in a comparative relationship, in a probability calculus that exposes it to a past and a future over which it has no control. It is always the lesser of two evils and there is always worse than the worst. The worst is always less bad, it is better than the worst, not because it is not bad enough but on the contrary, because it appears and manifests itself as the worst. This is what accounts for the paradoxical aspect of its logic. Where something deserves to be called the worst, there are already two evils competing. One evil is lesser than the other and announces it so that the worst remains still to come. Both evils can be identified, yet their comparison also thwarts the identifiability of the other evil. The otherness of the other evil does not only indicate that this evil is the second term in a comparison. It denotes a quality as well, a quality not to be compared. However, as has become evident, it is by virtue of its qualitative otherness that the other evil splits into a quantity and a quality. To put it differently, the worst announced is the worst that has already appeared. Hence the worst keeps haunting itself forever and is, perhaps, the origin of all possible haunting. As the logic of the lesser of two evils, the logic of the worst is the logic of haunting, of a fundamental ambiguity of precedence and novelty.

This logic underlies perhaps the literary exploitation of language, at least to the extent that what has been said about it must also apply to a logic of the best. If, according to Maurice Blanchot, literature’s task consists in exploring an ambiguity that proves essential to language, then it must either adhere to language’s idealising effects, to a certain force of negativity, and seek to produce an ideal work, a work of meaning, or else it must turn to the materiality of language, which is divested of meaning and thwarts ideality: it must turn to the fact that words are things, to an

“impersonal power”<sup>4</sup> that permeates beings before a world arises. Creation and decreation constitute the two “slopes” or “inclinations”<sup>5</sup> of literature. The creation of a world testifies to the sovereignty and freedom of literary activity. In a bold move inspired by Hegel’s thoughts on the French Revolution, Blanchot demonstrates that the pure ideality brought about by literature, the ideality that corresponds to a world and a work in which things are invested with meaning, corresponds to the pure ideality that the Reign of Terror sought so as to protect the Revolution from falling back into a state of corruption. He shows that establishing a pure ideality of language corresponds historically to the effort to preserve the pure positing that characterises the revolutionary action and that is not yet a particular position exposed to other positions, to the risk of forfeiting an ideality distinguished from reality. In both cases, in the case of a naming that aims at meaning and in the case of a freedom that aims at virtue, the real existence of things and persons are put to death, are annihilated, negated or discarded in favour of an ideal existence that finds its place in a totality and that remains indifferent towards the particular, the singular, the private, the different. Just as the essence of the rights belonging to each citizen of the revolution is death, just as each such citizen has essentially a “right to death,” or to a liberating suicide, the essence of words lies not in the materiality of language but in meaningfulness, in a negation that elevates words above their materiality and reduces materiality to a means of communication. It lies in a negation that detaches things from themselves and performs a “delayed murder” of the person whose naming announces her death: “The writer recognises himself in the Revolution,”<sup>6</sup> Blanchot states succinctly. He also asserts that “literature mirrors itself in revolution,” in the ideal of a historical moment that aspires to a life which bears death within itself and maintains itself untouched in the very experience of dying. Hence, it could be concluded from Blanchot’s argument that literature as an exploitation of language and its ideality is always revolutionary, always creating the world anew in its works and thereby turning the world as it is into an ideal world. It is revolutionary because it wishes to attain not the worst, mere death, but the best, the purity of ideality. One could claim that literature allows itself to be guided by the idea of a pure seeing that the Russian formalist Viktor Sklovskij detects in the literary procedure. In Sklovskij’s view, such seeing wrests itself from automatism, making the world a more hospitable place and rendering the modern way of life more intelligible. Inasmuch as it is revolutionary, literature thus proceeds in the sense of a positing that resists the automatism of the posited. Unhinging the mechanism that obfuscates the clarity of meaning, it amounts to an immaterial seeing in which everything that is seen is constantly dissolved, or in which ideality signifies the point at which seeing and what is seen merge into each other and shine in pure daylight.

Now to the extent that the logic of the best, of ideality or pure seeing, is a logic that includes the best in a comparative relationship, just as the logic of the worst reveals the worst to be the lesser of two evils, attaining a world of ideal meaning is invariably attaining one of two good things. Perhaps revolutionary terror is an attempt to extract the best from what is only better, from what is already impure and corrupted, but an attempt that ends up with death. When considered from the perspective of the best, such death appears as the “worst” since it no longer functions as an operator of ideality: it undermines the revolution. Yet it does not appear as the “worst” when the Reign of Terror in France is compared to other forms of revolutionary terror, the assassination of citizens to, say, the assassination of Jews in Nazi extermination camps, even though the latter death, too, points to something worse than death. It should be added that to the extent that the death with which revolutionary terror keeps ending also confirms the success of the revolution and does not simply undermine it, the worst, when viewed from the perspective of the best, of an ideally virtuous world, is once again the lesser of two evils. This implies that, if revolutionary terror is an ambiguous attempt to safeguard the purity of life in an ideally virtuous world, it is just as much an ambiguous attempt to safeguard the purity of death, to play off death as an operator of ideality against death as a threat to ideality, or to wager on the lesser of two evils so as to safeguard the best from being only something better or indeed something worse.

Is it surprising, given how Blanchot justifies the revolutionary import of literature and how the logic of the worst and the best imbues life and death with a certain ambiguity, that the best can have two faces, the face of life in a purely meaningful world created by death and the face of death as the ultimate manifestation of ideal life? That life can have these two faces can be gauged by turning to Blanchot's essay "The Apocalypse Disappoints," published in 1964 as a response to the thoughts that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers had put forward in relation to the impending danger of an atomic war. As Blanchot himself stresses in a footnote to his text, Jaspers had alerted the informed public to the fact that the menace of such a war had altered the very structure of political consciousness. Can the worst ever appear other than in the guise of a menace, if its appearance must transform it into the lesser of two evils? Blanchot discusses the shift provoked by the menace of an atomic war in terms of a shift in humanity's relation to death: with the possibility of starting atomic wars, it is not simply the individual who is capable of putting an end to his life but humanity itself. However, Blanchot asks himself whether the invention of atomic weapons does indeed signal the possibility of humanity putting an end to itself, or whether it does not signal a more "sinister potentiality," to quote Hannah Arendt once again, a potentiality that can be called "sinister," or "disproportionate," or "ambiguous,"<sup>7</sup> precisely because, for the "radical destruction of humanity" to be "possible,"<sup>8</sup> humanity must first come into existence as a whole. If humanity is to engage in self-destruction, certain conditions without which the possibility of self-destruction is not a possibility must be met. Blanchot lists three such conditions: real freedom, the accomplishment of a human community, and reason as a principle that confers unity. A humanity that would have demonstrated its freedom by reason creating a unified community, would have obtained the possibility, or even acquired the right, to decide unequivocally on the handling of nuclear weapons and to destroy itself unambiguously. Such a humanity Blanchot qualifies as the humanity of a "communist" whole. It is almost as if the French Revolution had been too local and hence too ambiguous an event. Only in the middle of the twentieth century does the "idea of totality" arise "visibly and for the first time on the horizon,"<sup>9</sup> as Blanchot writes, only at this time can life and death collapse into each other in ideality. Does Blanchot adhere to the ideals of Enlightenment and carry a progress meant to bring about an ideal humanity to its logical or conceptual conclusion, to the point where the ideal humanity must establish itself as a communism simultaneously dead and alive, and hence beyond life and death? Does he adhere to these ideals so as to uncover the hypocrisy of the condemnation of technology as a demonic force, in a gesture that radicalises Enlightenment because the most abject danger lurks in Enlightenment not having the courage to face itself, to take itself seriously and see itself to the end?

From the vantage point of a technologically fostered communism, the goal of the idealising and purifying "procedure" of literature and revolutionary law, of a literature that serves revolutionary law, appears as the formation of a subject of totality, of a subject in which humanity would recognise itself fully, "see" itself once and for all at the instant when it would commit collective suicide, when its death would be so much an operator of ideality that it would touch on a meaningful life and become indistinguishable from it. Yet the fact that this event, too, must entail the possibility of a repetition jeopardises its ideality before it can take place, the ideality of accomplished communism. The germ of corruption, of a blinding automatism, contaminates the conditions that must be met for the possibility of a pure language of literature and a pure positing of law to be given. Thus, the collective suicide of humanity can never be collective enough because the best keeps splitting into two good things, one less good than the other. In collective suicide, we die impurely, as it were, from a catastrophe that is the lesser of two evils since it has become perfectly imaginable, or since it can be anticipated. No wonder that the song of apocalypse is "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when," the lyrics we hear at the end of Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove*, as the loved bombs burst and the world disintegrates.

Does radical Enlightenment then amount to a deconstruction of its own ending, its own aim or goal? As a thought of the best that is radical enough to touch upon the worst, upon death, Enlightenment never stops splitting up; this is why there is such a thing as radical Enlightenment in the first place, why one form of Enlightenment can always claim to be more radical than the other.

In “Literature and the Right to Death,” the essay on the two “slopes” or “inclinations” of literature, Blanchot is clearly aware of the dialectic in which the double exploitation of literary language entangles itself. The ideality of words investing things with meaning stumbles against language’s materiality, against the obtuse fact that words are also things. When it names things, literature cannot avoid the named thing and simply find refuge in the word itself, in its being; but when it refuses naming things and seeks to acknowledge their meaninglessness, a “primordial obscurity,”<sup>10</sup> as Blanchot puts it, the meaning of the word is substituted with the “possibility of conveying meaning” in general, or with an “empty power.” Rather than presenting the day of light and sight, rather than being the best, literature, when it exploits the ideality of language, is a “trace.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than presenting the night that precedes the world, rather than being the worst, the worst from the viewpoint of ideality, literature, when it exploits the materiality of language, is the “haunting”<sup>12</sup> of the night. Unable to be merely life or death, literature is “death as the impossibility of dying,” a good but not the best thing, the lesser of two evils. It is in this sense that literature, if we follow Blanchot, explores an ambiguity essential to language, and that there is a “right of literature,”<sup>13</sup> a “right” that proves inseparable from a “right to death.”

But how, exactly, does literature explore the ambiguity of language? By allowing it to express itself with ease, as it were: “In literature it is as if ambiguity were delivered to its own excess because of the many opportunities it encounters. But it is also as if ambiguity were drained of its strength because it can commit so many abuses. One might think that a hidden trap is set here so that ambiguity can reveal its own traps, and that, surrendering to ambiguity without reservation, literature tries to restrain ambiguity, keep it from the world’s sight and the thinking of the world, in a domain where it can fulfill itself without putting anything at risk. Ambiguity here is at odds with itself.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is clear that there can only be an ambiguous answer to the question of ambiguity, at least inasmuch as language remains fundamentally ambiguous or inasmuch as ordinary language’s delimitation of understanding and misunderstanding, of which Blanchot speaks, must keep avoiding and missing literature and language, must keep exposing itself to the surprising effects of ambiguity. In the end, literature is everywhere, whether it constitutes a more or less autonomous domain and enjoys certain rights or not. The “right of literature” is a “non-right,” as it were. Still, since there undoubtedly exists an institution called literature and since literature has a history, this is not the only answer to the question of ambiguity. What does literature do, specifically? While politics may orient itself toward what it considers to be the best of a number of options, universally or in a particular situation, and falls prey to a logic that offers the better but not the best thing, or the lesser of two evils, literature frees itself to some degree from haunting, from being haunted by the best and the worst, because from the start it is a *production* of such haunting, of ambiguity, beyond any possible appeal to a precarious autonomy.

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(Konstanç: Konstanç University Press 2011), and *Naive Art (with an afterword by Christoph Menke; Berlin: August Verlag 2012)*.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on notes I used for a presentation at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the autumn of 2010 (InC research seminar).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 273.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1975), 355.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” in *La part du feu* (Gallimard: Paris, 1949), 335.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “L’apocalypse déçoit,” in *L’amitié* (Gallimard: Paris, 1971), 122.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Blanchot, “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” 331.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 343.