

# Heaven And Hell On Earth

What Visionary Art  
Makes Visible  
Ira Livingston



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## What Visionary Art Makes Visible

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

—Satan, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Ira Livingston

*Heaven and Hell on Earth: What Visionary Art Makes Visible*  
Ira Livingston

ISBN 979-8-9896199-0-0

*Cover Art:* Samuel Palmer, "The Lonely Tower" (etching), 1879  
*Cover Design:* Jamison Lung, I.L., Duncan Hamilton & Gloriana Russell

*Book Design:* J.L., D.H., & I.L.

*Layout and Typesetting:* J.L., D.H., & I.L.

*Copyediting:* Haseena Milea

*Printing:* Linco Printing, Brooklyn, NY

*Published by Poetics Lab Books, 2023*

Poetics Lab; Humanities and Media Studies Dept.  
Pratt Institute  
200 Willoughby Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11205

poeticslab.com

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Poetics Lab Books is an imprint of Poetics Lab, an initiative of Pratt Institute of Art and Design in Brooklyn, New York. PLAB sponsors faculty, student, and guest projects on an ad hoc basis. Poetics (from the Greek word for making) is used in the broad sense to refer to the study and practice of the principles by which things are made. We explore how the traffic among kinds of making deepen and open them via the ongoing experiment of transdisciplinary work.

The means are the end.



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# I Introduction

This book—more like two small books—is a series of linked essays. As you read, you’ll notice that horizontal threads connect the essays, which is to say, they are woven together by a series of resonances and repetitions: *they rhyme*. Ultimately this is because the linear organization of books—and of language itself—is overlaid on a shifty set of nonlinear resonances. So it’s the typical way books cohere, but here the resonances prevail a bit more than usual over the linearity, which means that the surface is choppier, glintier and gleamier and more heterogeneous, the depths darker but more crystalline. This may be why an old critic once described my writing as flashy *and* incomprehensible. I have worked to merit that distinction.

The two books are about Hell and Heaven on Earth. The first is more about how we make hell on Earth; it’s a historical meditation on living through the reign of a Mad King, a Plague, and the End of Modernity. (Why should right-wingers have a monopoly on mythic and apocalyptic thinking?) The second concerns poetics as a ritual practice of heaven-making, but the two are intimately connected. The book could have been called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but I googled it and it turned out it had already been used.



The horizontal threads include the poetry of William Blake, the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the resonant intersection of deconstructionist and Kabbalist non-dualism. Each of these have their own essays devoted to them, but they weave through each other and through most of the other essays as well. Given my training and background, these happen to be the twigs of which the book is woven. As in bird nests, the loose weaving produces a fuzzy set that coheres by family resemblances—but how it is thatched does not entirely constrain what can, in it, be hatched.

The essays also overlap with my previous writing: for example, “Joyful Asymmetry” is a condensed version of Chapters 5 and 6 from my book *Ecopoetics: Groundwork* but focused on a different poem by Blake (another one of his rewrites of the book of Job). How could 50 pages be condensed into four? I got better at saying it more economically. Recycled

snippets of prose and examples from my previous work also float through (sometimes called *self-plagiarism*): some things I haven't found a better way of saying. Again, though all of this is typical of how writers write books, the parameters are pushed here. Careful readers might wonder how much the author is building on previous work versus rewriting the same *ur-book*. As Freud understood, working through your ingrained patterns (on the way to breaking through them) looks an awful lot like repeating them. Whichever it is, the *ur-book* is always lurking in the shadows: I still haven't written it, but (I like to think) I get closer.

### Where to Find Your Unwritten Books:

Relatively early in his career, Blake said he and a particular angel “often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense which the world shall have if they behave well.” The world didn't behave well (nor gave Blake much indication that it was interested), so Blake never worked up such a text for publication.

Presumably, it would have comprised commentary that turns inside out the way the Bible is typically (mis)understood: the inversion is the diabolical part. It remained what I've called an *ur-book*, which you can find lurking behind what I understand as Blake's rewrites of Job (one of the most misunderstood books of all).

Blake went on to claim that “I have also The Bible of Hell: which the world shall have whether they will or no.” Presumably, “Bible of Hell” refers to the DIY bible that would comprise his mythic and epic poetical works in illuminated printing. The remarkable thing here is his use of “I have” rather than “I will write” to refer to the mythic works he would write in the remaining 33 years of his life. He understood them (however he understood “them” at the time) as already having been completed in Eternity, beyond time—where, as he suggested, with more or less of a wink, they were being read and studied by angels. It only remained for him to work them up into actual earthly books. (I call these *ur-books* since what I am going to be writing exists for me only in much more nebulous form. I'm *near-sighted*. Even when the magical but hazy mountainous horizon beckons, I often can see clearly only a sentence or two away.)

Y o u  
 could understand Blake's  
 assertion that he "had" the books before  
 he "wrote" them as some version of what you'd mean  
 if you say "I have in mind a book on x." How fully you have  
 it in mind might go toward how easy or difficult it would be to  
 "actually" write it. You might have rough chapter outlines and so on—  
 though Blake didn't (as is clear from the way his cast of characters evolved  
 as he went along). Alternately, you might imagine that what he "had" were  
 an underlying set of principles and ideas that could function as a kind of  
 algorithm: turn the crank and the books start to roll out—or to organize the  
 metaphor, you could say that an ur-book is a kind of pluripotent stem cell whose  
 DNA could be expressed in various forms depending on context. In any case,  
 though, to understand what needs to be written (since, if you live in heaven all  
 the time, there is no need to write books at all), you have to have understood by those  
 who live in the fallen world—differ from the superimposed-heaven-and-hell  
 world where Blake lived. But this is also the world where we all live—  
 or rather than characterizing it as a place, better to say that  
 this is the differential that we also live at every moment.  
 (I'm thinking of how, through dark and troubled eyes,  
 the radiance pierces through, how cosmic  
 ironies lift the corner of a mouth.)

H o w  
 intimately can you  
 engage your experiences beyond  
 words? What credence and value do you  
 give them? Which are experiences of abuse  
 and subordination, and which of love and rapture  
 and sublimity—and how are these interwoven? I  
 imagine you saying that every day of my life, most of  
 my experience—not to mention all that is beyond the  
 confines of "my" and "experience"—is beyond words.  
 So if you were to write books, your work would be cut out  
 for you, wouldn't it? All that is beyond words that needs  
 saying. Blake's future works were cut out for him. If you  
 have stammeringly tried to tell your complex truth to  
 someone you love, then you know what it means  
 for your work to be cut out for you in this way—  
 but at least for us Word People (all of us,  
 more or less), this is the path to love,  
 the path of love.

T h e  
 intersection of heaven,  
 hell, and the world is exactly like the  
 intersection of words with what is beyond words  
 —and between the visible—the visualizeable  
 —and the invisible. Again, rather than characterizing  
 it as a place, it is better to think of it as a differential,  
 a motor, a dynamic, an energy potential. How to find this  
 intersection in yourself, and how better and more fully to  
 live this differential, is what we stand to learn from  
 Blake, but—as I hope you are at least sometimes  
 aware—angels are always already and  
 lovingly studying you too.

**T**hroughout, this book is engaged in what in academia is often called “the production of knowledge,” but because this is not what organizes it, the knowledges may seem to be scattered on the surface (or across debris-fields such as those known as *The Rings of Saturn*, as per W.G. Sebald). They are not organized by discipline so you might find a definition of *meaning* (which, in my version, belongs to systems theory) next to an account of how to practice “method” criticism (which belongs to literary theory), a demonstration of how to reverse-engineer the poems of Blake (which should be a creative-writing prompt), little taxonomies such as “two kinds of modern suicide” (sociology?) and even research agendas such as the search for optimal complexity. I hope these will be engaging in themselves but also that people in various fields will stumble onto bits that are particularly relevant to them.

What organizes the book—the trail of which I am always on, zigzagging through some of the topics I mentioned above, with my nose to the ground—the sublimest of the horizontal threads—is just beyond the reach of language and knowledge. It is a set of contemplative objects, where contemplation is understood as moving “beyond the last thought” into other realms. For example, several are kinds of darkness: one that is intermittently lit, one that is green and one that’s red; another is a universal nodule or module of complexity. As you float down the meandering river that I have described above as the surface of this book, look up and, if it’s dark enough, you might be able to see the constellation of these objects moving slowly through the sky.

“Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.”

So sung a little Clod of Clay  
Trodden with the cattle’s feet,  
But a Pebble of the brook  
Warbled out these metres meet:

“Love seeketh only self to please,  
To bind another to its delight,  
Joys in another’s loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.”

This book might also be understood  
as an elaboration of Blake’s schematic  
little poem, “The Clod and the Pebble.”  
It’s a simple enough version of the  
“complexity generator”  
mentioned above.

The first verse is sung (in the first person) by the clod of clay, who lays out a program of love as feminine self-sacrifice and as a way of making heaven on Earth. The second verse is spoken by a narrator, who describes how the clod and pebble are situated: clay, a mixture of earth *and* water, is further mixed by being trodden underfoot, while the pebble crisply and dualistically distinguishes itself from the brook in which it resides, earth *from* water. In the third verse, the pebble lays out its masculinist vision of selfish love as a zero-sum-game of possession and domination in a fallen world made more hellish as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

If you understand the dualism that the pebble is devoted to enforcing as *the problem*—not just as a subject dominating an object but as that which is opaque and boundaried defended against that which is fluid and sparkling—doesn't the poem entrench the problem by distinguishing the clod and the pebble so dualistically? Isn't the narrator of the pebble's party, like someone who asserts that "there are two kinds of people, those who divide people into two kinds and those who don't"? And isn't pietistic feminine self-sacrifice part of the problem too?

The short answer is yes. Blake's "Songs of Experience" feature disillusioned narrators who haven't yet found their way through the disillusionment but give us the terms and tools to do so, such as by asking "what's wrong with this picture?" This is what Wittgenstein meant when he said, "One cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes, they contain so much truth." Blake later confirmed to me, in a text message, that he had, in fact, written the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to illustrate Wittgenstein's principle.

As you begin to get through the dualism, you realize that the clod's philosophy is the more capacious and *contains* the pebble's purified dualism, just as clay typically also includes water and dry pebbles—or to spell it out further: heterogeneous mixtures are all the more mixed and heterogeneous for including (without privileging) the pure and unmixed. Beyond this, when you deconstruct the dualities of clod and pebble, earth and water, the opaque and boundaried versus the fluid and sparkling, what you get is *opalescence*.



There,  
did you get it,  
just for a moment—  
the opalescence, I mean?  
—I didn't think so—  
I rushed through the example too quickly;  
it was too condensed, too pebblish, too formulaic.

—Let's try again—



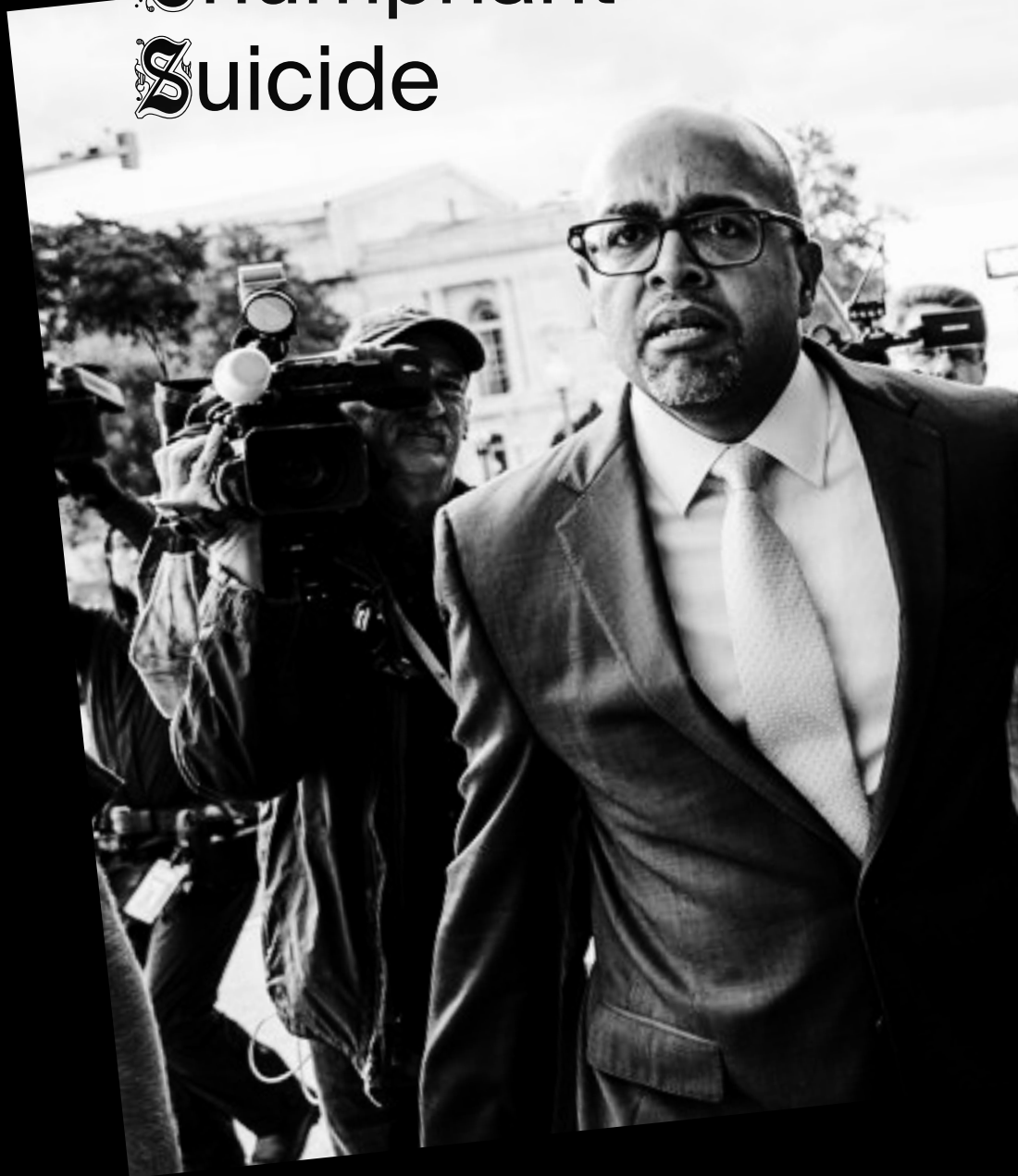




Part

I

# 1. Modernity's Triumphant Suicide





1.1

**A**n October 2019 *New York Times* photo shows hotel executive and Trump-appointed U.S. ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland being led by one of his lawyers to his deposition before the preliminary House impeachment hearings.

As the accompanying article by Michelle Goldberg explains, lifelong Republican Sondland withdrew support from Trump in 2016, citing clashes in “personal beliefs and values on so many levels,” but when Trump was elected, he “donated \$1 million to his inauguration to buy himself an ambassadorship, and then worked slavishly for the President’s approval,” conspiring to pressure Ukraine into announcing that they were investigating Trump’s rivals.

The article turns on a rhetorical question: “Sure, people sell their souls all the time—but why for something as small as a chance to serve a man whose depravity Sondland himself once recognized?” The question sets up Goldberg’s conclusion: “That’s the thing about deals with the devil. You get what you want, and then it ruins you.” This is the dynamic that interests me.

The photo seems to *show* why Sondland did it. He looks like he’s loving being the center of attention, the eye of a bustling storm of lawyers and journalists. The look of anxious attention on his lawyer’s face sets off Sondland’s basking-in-the-attention, riding-the-wave look as he allows himself to be steered along.

*This* is what Sondland bought with his million-dollar donation: his moment on the historical stage. This is recognition that, no matter how much power and money you wield, you can’t quite get as a hotel executive. The fact that it’s more of a perp walk than a tickertape parade does not detract: that’s just the dynamical structure of the moment he’s riding.

This is why the photo has an apocalyptic feel, along with the lowering clouds and the chaos of lawyers, journalists and camera crews that help give it a giddy, fiddling-while-Rome-burns, last-helicopter-out-of-the-war-zone vibe.

An apocalypse reveals the contradictions at the heart of a historical formation that is shaped around them but cannot withstand their revelation. As Hegel quipped, “the owl of Minerva flies at twilight.” The moment a formation comes fully into its own is also its annihilation. The moment could be a transformative rather than a purely destructive one if the system in which it occurs is capable of transformation, but such a transformation would be radical enough that the system in question might not be said to *survive* it.

This is where we are.

The devil, in Goldberg's deal-with-the-devil scenario, is of course Donald Trump, and many of his associates have become subject to its "you get what you want, and then it ruins you" logic. But the devil is also subject to the same logic. As much as he is an arch-villainous master, he also is the most abject loser. As Milton's Satan puts it:

**“Wherever I am, there is hell  
Me miserable! which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.”**

Philosopher Judith Butler explores this logic by considering speculations that “Trump is either carrying out a very public suicide or exhibiting some weird genius for survival” and by showing how it must be *both*. If you crave power that can only be generated by flouting laws and ethics, then you must keep putting yourself into the same predicament, acting out what Freud called the *repetition compulsion* or *Death Drive*: “The shameful ‘end’ is what he fends off and solicits at the same time: getting shamed is not what he wants, yet he moves compulsively in that direction.” Trump “will try to destroy in the course of being destroyed. But for him it will be the scene of a lifetime, a raging battle to determine who delivers the final judgment against whom.” Every situation is a fight for existential survival.



While the precise logic and mechanisms of the repetition compulsion are debatable, its operation is most evident in behaviors characterized by repetitive scriptedness. For Trump, these behaviors include the flouting of laws and ethics, the doubling down when called out, bullying while casting oneself as the victim, and accusing one's opponents of what one is blatantly guilty. These don't differ much from run-of-the-mill ways in which people act out defensive defiance, but the scripted repetition—daily, hourly—of what seems to be a small repertoire of defenses, and the stark elegance of these ploys, make them special markers of pathology.

The fact that Trump engaged in corruption with Ukraine in the attempt to realize the fantasy that his opponent engaged in corruption with Ukraine is telling. The mechanistic elegance of these reversals and otherings marks the grip of psychopathology.

The strategy of “doubling down,” called a *martingale* in 18th-century France, is based on the idea that, if a gambler betting on a coin toss doubles his bet after each loss, his first win will recoup all previous losses. This makes winning seem like a sure thing, but in practice, the exponential growth in the stakes will bankrupt you the first time the bet gets too large to cover. Finding someone to bail you out—as capitalists do—only prolongs the inevitable reckoning and makes it more dramatic. *This is also where we are in modernity.* The scenario captures some of the mechanicity, escalation, and survival/suicide dynamic of the repetition compulsion as a behavior-driving algorithm.

It is easy to speculate about ways in which Trump must have been shamed and rejected as a child—and that these must be as extreme and thoroughgoing as the ways in which he was entitled and empowered. It is almost too easy to see how the deficit of validation from a cruel father would render him so regressed, so admiring of, and so easily used by authoritarian strongmen like Putin and Erdogan. But this is not about personal psychology. Butler applies her observations not to Trump *per se* but to what she calls “the psychic field we call ‘Trump.’”

The term *psychic field* (calling it a *psychological field* might be less open to misreading) could be described as shorthand for the ways in which personal psychology resonates with larger social and historical formations; it's what starts coming into focus when you ask *who identifies with Trump, and how does this resonance happen?* It's related to what cultural theorist Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling": an emotional and cognitive orientation to the world specific to a particular group, time, and place. For Williams, structures of feeling are especially definitive during the decline of social and economic formations and the emergence of others: for those who feel their power slipping away or in the ascendancy. Psychic fields and structures of feeling connect individual psyches and family dynamics with historical formations such as class, race, gender, nation. At any moment there are particular ways in which these resonate or line up. These might be points of particular stability (where an upholstery button anchors the fabric to the structure underneath) or of particular instability (fractures along which the system is coming apart and new structures may be emerging) *or both*: stuck points along the fault line that build tension for the big reckoning to come.

White masculinity is built on this fault line. As Bob Dylan put it, "If the Bible is right, the whole world will explode; I've been trying to get as far away from myself as I can."

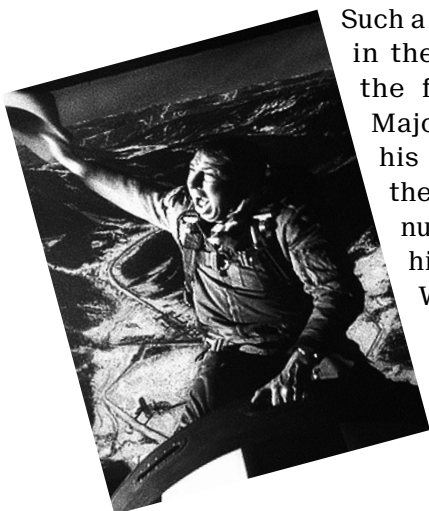
To be at once entitled and empowered *and* silenced, shamed, or rendered invisible is the recipe for toxic whiteness and masculinity.

If you are one of those who feels that compassion for the entitled and empowered will blunt the force of your own judgment and anger and will compromise holding them responsible, then consider how your own judgment and anger are being *manufactured* to fuel "the psychic field we call 'Trump.'"

## 1.2

An iconic *primal scene* of shaming in individual psychology is the child being caught masturbating. A primal scene of psychological conflict, contradiction and trauma formative for the psyche is not, however, its origin. It is an *epicenter*: the place onto which a dynamic of shaming thoroughly structured into a family system is displaced and condensed. The scene itself—as stark as it may be—both makes visible *and conceals* conflict and existential negation too stark and too thoroughgoing to be admitted into consciousness. The same seems to apply to the future apotheosis/apocalypse in which the system is imagined both to come into its own and destroy itself. This ultimate scene—Butler’s “scene of a lifetime”—might be added to our psychopathological lexicon.

An obvious place to start would be the *ultimate scene* of the Cold War era—the scene of modernity’s death drive to *mutually assured destruction*.



Such a scene is nicely portrayed in the apocalyptic climax of the film *Dr. Strangelove*: Major Kong whoops & waves his cowboy hat as he rides the Armageddon-triggering nuclear warhead down from his B-52, while, back in the War Room, General Turgidson & Dr. Strangelove indulge their own kinds of apocalyptic glee.



But the scene of *triumphant suicide* is coextensive with modernity. In 1818, a teenager named Mary Shelley wrote the book on toxic masculinity: the futile attempts by the nameless monster to be validated by the maker/father who has rejected him turn to murderous rage for mutual destruction. Having completed his flailing-at-first but then increasingly methodical murderous mission and driven Frankenstein to his death, the monster looks forward only to the moment in which “I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames.”

The white, French protagonist in Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger*, returning to a dissociated state as he awaits execution for his senseless hate-crime murder of an Arab, realizes only “that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still” but hopes “that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.”

Here in the latter days of modernity, the logic of triumphant suicide is often enacted by mass shooters and other terrorists (though here we can also recognize those who act out their fantasy of the coronavirus as a conspiracy and a personal affront).

It gets worse. According to Walter Benjamin, human-kind's “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which fascism is rendering aesthetic.” Mark Fisher attributes to cultural theorists Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek the further observation that, as the popularity of apocalyptic fantasies shows, “It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” This way of putting it is itself a bit jaded. After all, “kissing everything goodbye” in fantasy might turn out to be good emotional preparation for the revolutionary task ahead. To put this in a less depressive and more activist way: we have gotten to the point where failing to work for the end of capitalism—even if one cannot fully imagine it—means bringing on apocalypse.

Will climate change in its catastrophic repercussions (and, we can add, waves of pandemics) jeopardize capitalism, or will capitalism manage to “stay ahead of the curve” via what Naomi Klein called the *shock doctrine*, exploiting proliferating crises as opportunities for profit and power

consolidation? Genius or suicide? This is no simple fork in the road. Capitalism and sustained human life will be up for grabs in hundreds of different ways at every juncture, every day. It is as true now as it was when Benjamin, with the Nazis starting to close in around him, wrote that “the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” Above all, you will be challenged to find practices to sustain your own well-being that serve rather than oppose those that will sustain the well-being of the heterogeneous ecosystems to which you belong.

Greta Thunberg has called out “hope” in the face of climate change as a form of denial or dissociation—a way of feeling good enough to go about business as usual. People differ as to how much stoic fatalism and even how much simple realism is conducive to action. Tests have shown that depressives are more realistic when confronted with situations and asked to assess possible outcomes, but—almost by definition—these tests are skewed to situations in which the test subjects themselves cannot alter the range of outcomes.

As an old person, I can testify that recognizing that it’s much worse—and much later—than you think does not leave you only the options of defiantly rejecting your fate (the do-not-go-gentle path), or accepting it with resignation, philosophically. What gets in the way of coming to grips with where we are—emotionally, intellectually, and politically—is the opposition of defiance and acceptance in the first place—and of fate and choice, at least in the Western paradigm. Embracing fate is the first step to finding what the real options and freedoms are.

Capitalism will end. Life on Earth will end. But when, and how? And which one first?

Coming to terms with climate change means understanding modernity’s vision of capitalist individuality, rationality and prosperity as a deal with the devil in which “you get what you want, and then it ruins you.” It is not that capitalist modernity fails, but that its *success* is failure. Because climate change is a systemic phenomenon stretching out across the planet and across the span of decades and centuries, it is hard to find a supremely representative ultimate scene—but for the same reasons, such scenes are everywhere.

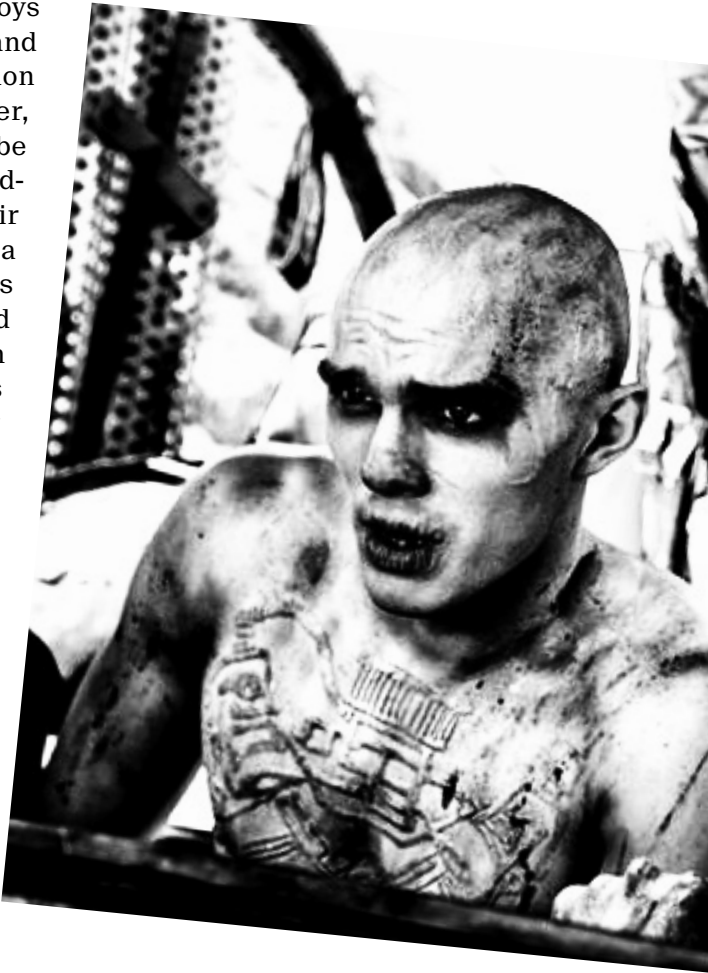






In one viral photo, golfers golf in the foreground while a forested mountainside is on fire behind them.

In George Miller's 2015 film *Fury Road*, a desertified, post-apocalyptic Australia is ruled by the fascist warlord Immortan Joe via his control of water. Joe is ensconced in his Citadel, surrounded by his War Boys with their fleet of monster trucks and other gothically modified vehicles. The War Boys live to serve Immortan Joe and worship the internal combustion engine as a symbol of power, ensuring that their lives will be dedicated to finding and raiding sources of gasoline, their perpetual thirst. When Furiosa is sent to find gas, she goes rogue, rescuing the enslaved young brides of Immortan Joe and driving them across the wasteland, pursued by Immortan Joe and his fleet. When she finds in ruins the community of wise warrior women with whom she had hoped to seek refuge, she and the remaining wise women have no choice but to bring the fight back to the Citadel. On the way, they manage to kill Immortan Joe. They return and release the water to the people; Furiosa is poised to be the new leader.



The film is a generic tour-de-force: one long chase scene into the desert for the first half of the film and, for the second half, back to the Citadel. On the way back, Nux, the most gung-ho of the War Boys, is captured by Furiosa and the brides. Despondent in his failure to serve Immortan Joe, he is comforted by the brides and, in the process, seems to realize that the feminine/feminist harem and “holding environment” he has fallen into is a hell of a lot better than the toxic masculinist and violent Darwinian nightmare he has fallen out with.



Is it possible to have progressive apocalyptic  
and postapocalyptic myths and fantasies?  
And can they contain seeds of political possibility?  
I think so.

“Miyu Kojima creates miniature scenes based on Tokyo apartments her company has cleaned after solitary deaths.”



### 1.3

If the blaze of glory is the ultimate scene for the narcissist and paranoiac, then for the depressive, the ultimate scene is *dying alone*—or in Japanese, *kodokushi*, the lonely death. Like public shame, dying alone has always, for us social animals, been among the greatest fears, often deeper even than the fear of death itself.

The public shame—but, at the same time, spectacular recognition—that the narcissist paradoxically defies and *invites*—has a kind of opposite in the nonrecognition that the depressive (“too proud to seek help”) escapes *and embraces*, unto death.

Capitalist modernity, especially now in its “late” phase, is conducive to both.

We have even found a scientific way of writing these scenarios into the fates that physicists imagine for the universe: a hot and violent implosion driven by gravity (a *Big Crunch*) or a drifting apart into nothingness, driven by dark energy (sometimes called the *Big Chill*)—triumphant suicide or *kodokushi*, bang or whimper.

How is it that the repetition compulsion or Death Drive, which Freud understood as applying to individual psyches, might even apply at the level of the history of humans on the planetary or even cosmic scale, where complex sets of mostly very different mechanisms are at work? Is it something more than pure projection or mere metaphor?



The long answer starts by recognizing that systems (like psychic fields and structures of feeling) work by partially synching radically different realms and scales—and that realms and scales are understood better as products of systems rather than vice versa. Only meticulous study of the chains of influence in multiple directions (say, among psyches, societies, and ecosystems) can enable intelligent local interventions.

A shorter and more schematic answer is that, for Freud, the individual psyche is a special case of what we now understand as the necessarily precarious state of complex systems generally—and especially of living things and their tendency—like spinning tops, to come inevitably to rest, or steaming cups of coffee that, after a finite interval of swirlings, come to sit quietly—and forever—at room temperature. The spinning and swirling—all the melodrama and convulsive choreographies of living things and their ecosystems—are elaborations of the arc all systems trace: the leap of a fish from the water, let's say—its moment in the sun—if not prolonged then at least is embellished by its wriggings and flappings—just as, for the psyche, the pleasure principle and reality principle create new detours in the death drive—detours that shape our path.

For me, the question is not whether Freud discovered a real family resemblance among complex systems or merely found a compelling metaphor between otherwise unrelated realms. It is clear to me, anyway, that systems logic is a good way for complex systems to think about fellow complex systems, and that “mere metaphor” is at least the trailhead of a path that converges with the path of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, what's wrong is Freud's reductive understanding of thermodynamics as the inevitable tendency to revert back to a condition of inorganic stasis. It's the same thing that's wrong with the arc of arousal and relief by which Freud mapped the dynamics of pleasure, where arousal is unpleasure and relief is a kind of stasis. The argument may be complex, but you can get the idea of how the paradigm begins to come apart if you'd agree that arousal isn't exactly unpleasure and relief isn't exactly stasis.

To be fair, Freud tuned the resonances between psychoanalysis and physics before the discovery that the universe is expanding, before the postulations of dark energy and dark matter, and before the still-nascent development of quantum thermodynamics, to name a few game-changers.

Psychoanalysis got it wrong?

*Blame physics.*

The resting state of things is *not* stasis—

or you might say, it's exactly

*not* exactly stasis.

At the same time, there is no escaping the logic of the death drive because no complex system is eternal; our ongoing task is to stave off collapse—or to put it in a less reactionary way, we surf on our own dissipation. The idea is to surf in the curl of the wave and to extend the ride as long as possible. Capitalism as a system is unsustainable, not only because it's riven with internal contradictions, but because growth-based economy is a martingale.

## 1.4

Today (Dec. 12, 2019), the *New York Times* informs me that antisemite Donald Trump has issued an executive order against antisemitism in a way that, by pitting Jews against each other, has virulent antisemitic force. It is disturbing that yesterday's disturbing stories have already disappeared from the news cycle: two members of the Black Hebrew Israelite sect murdered Jews in a kosher market in Jersey City. The Department of Justice's investigation of the FBI's investigation of Donald Trump shows that the FBI did not act vindictively but nonetheless mishandled the case, thus achieving the political motives of the vindictive meta-investigation, which itself goes uninvestigated.

These are not even the worst stories, only a few with the kind of meta-ironies that twist language to its breaking point.

I think of Yeats, who saw storm clouds spiraling in 1920: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." And Auden, in 1939, "Uncertain and afraid / As the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade" and "Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth."

This is where we are, again.

Last night I dreamed my best friend died. I was eating, and crying uncontrollably. Food was falling out of my mouth, and I was trying in vain to cover my face so that her young son would not see me. Later—in waking life—my friend called me as she was walking through the park. I told her the dream, and she said, *whatever the dream was about, it was a real grief event for you.* I thought *yes, she's right, and she has such clarity and sweetness today.* She said her watchword for 2020 was going to be power, which I found heartening. Throughout the conversation I could hear her steady footsteps, crunching through fallen leaves, and I thought of Blake's proverb, "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead."

In three days I would be leaving Brooklyn for two weeks in Beijing. I'm not a list-maker, but this is the point where low-level anxiety about leaving something important undone—enhanced by how often something else occurs to me that I must do—drives me to make a list. It is the first day I don't have to be on campus—fortuitously, because I have to be at home to sign for a package. Lunchtime arrives, still no package, and I find that I have only a ragtag assortment of half-eaten leftovers. Because I can't leave the apartment, I will have to make a meal of what I have on hand, but fortuitously, this serves the mandate to use up all perishable items before I leave. Fortuitously, again, the items seem to combine to make a perfect little meal—three small tortillas, a few bits of roast pork, the very end of a wedge of cheese, half an apple, and two cookies. The meal strikes me as an answer to the question posed by Robert Frost's oven bird: "what to make of a diminished thing." And finally, fortuitously, this all comes as a kind of punchline to my meditation on sustainability. All the fortuitousnesses seem to converge. It is the most mundane of miracles, which I take as a sign that I'm on the right path. Half an apple, two cookies, three days, four fortuitousnesses.

"Leave nothing on the table": the phrase had occurred to me a few days before when talking on the phone with an old friend who had just lost his longtime partner to cancer. Even in sorrow, he said, he felt lightened and lifted by having left no part of their love undone, unsaid.

As an old person, I sometimes think, I am a gleaner, finding pleasures and surprises in new and even more mundane places, often smaller and subtler, sometimes sweeter. "Summer's gone, but a lot goes on forever."

This is also where we are.

There is a singer everyone has heard,  
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,  
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.  
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers  
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.  
He says the early petal-fall is past  
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers  
On sunny days a moment overcast;  
And comes that other fall we name the fall.  
He says the highway dust is over all.  
The bird would cease and be as other birds  
But that he knows in singing not to sing.  
The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.