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CONTAMINATIONS
IRRUPTIONS OF THE VOID

CARLO GALLI

Here we present, in broad terms, not a history of the Void, which Sergio Givone has covered with great authority, nor a history of nihilism, whose most important coordinates have already been mapped,1 but instead an essay on the irruptions of the void within the intellectual experience of the West.

Our basic hypothesis is, first of all, that these irruptions presuppose that the void exerts a ceaseless labor—which is not, however, a “productivity”—that is capable of dismantling the forms and norms that are established from time to time to curb it or at least to hide it. And secondly, that whenever we frantically try to neutralize the void, the void seizes us from its abyss with even greater violence, twisting our forms and violating our boundaries (which are so much more fragile than they claim to be in the face of its impervious power). As such, he who fears and exorcises the void and its devastation is most exposed to them, and he who believes he gets the farthest away from them, is actually the nearest. Irruption is not, therefore, simply an “experience,” a deliberate attempt to transgress the limits of the human, toward Good and toward Evil.2 It is rather an unforeseen and unwanted experience, a catastrophe we suffer.

The sphere with which we are concerned is not theoretical but practical. Therefore the void is experienced as death, the absolute disorder, the annihilation of life—the very thing from which we wish to protect ourselves by creating the norm, law, and order to begin with. In this practical sphere, the categorical imperative absolutely must be security, which is to say, the deferral, or humanization, of death. There are many strategies that, in various guises, have the objective of securing life by means of a “productive” relation with death, of creating orders that incorporate disorder, strategies that make coexistence with death the origin of social cohesion, of coexistence among men. So many human laws find their own innermost force by incorporating the law of death. And if, as Emanuele Severino asserts, all Western thought that believes in the reality of death is nihilistic, and if this thought strives to defend itself from death with metaphysics and ontology, then there exist sophisticated forms of nihilism that define themselves by their proximity to death, to the annihilation of living beings.

We learn this from Rene Girard and his theory of the sacrifice of the scapegoat; from Hegel, who in Phenomenology of Spirit demonstrates the power of death, that absolute

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1 See Löwith, Goudsblom, Verra, Gavoli, Vercellone, Volpi, and D’Agostini.
2 Already in Dante, we see a breakdown of the boundary between life and death, less as a catastrophic outcome of their absolute separation than as a result of the conscious pursuit of the experience of absolute evil. When Dante the poet reaches Lucifer, he dramatically experiences the horror of the contamination of life and death: “I did not die, nor did I stay alive” [io non mori e non rimasi vivo] [Inferno 34.25]. Analogously, the trasumanar in Paradiso 1.70 implicitly indicates the transcendence of death, of the human condition—only now because of the poet’s proximity to God. We find a diametrically opposed intent, meanwhile, in the surrealistic and expressionistic strategies of Georges Bataille (in such texts as Eroticism and The Accursed Share as well as in his writings on sovereignty). On this point, see Besnier; and Esposito, Categorie dell’impolitico.
mistress, at work in history—and more precisely in the history of the slave who introjects death as anguish, as an agonized relation of labor with the Thing, the necessary passage toward the freedom of the Spirit; from the lesson of existentialism, which—from early Martin Heidegger to Karl Jaspers, from Luigi Pareyson to Jean-Paul Sartre—in the experience of death as the possibility exclusive to man that provides the occasion for the discovery of concrete contingency as the liberty and authority of the individual; from the negative thought (from Friedrich Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt to Ernst Jünger) that draws its own nihilistic disenchantment from the power of the void; from every form of “weak” thought, that from resignation—from Verwindung, the remission of the power of nihilism already outlined in late Heidegger—arrives at pietas toward the world, to let be whatever is (and, with this, the productivity of death extinguishes itself in non-productivity).³

These historical-political figures, so different from one another, interpret death less as a danger than as a destiny—one that can be transformed from the merely natural into the human, though never contained by the rhetoric of humanist discourse. And therefore, as we have said, even these historical-political figures believe they can render death productive for man: they believe they can turn death into a contradiction that is dialectically surmountable, into something manageable or governable.⁴ They believe in the existence of words and orders capable of incorporating or subduing death. This is a problematic faith, but it is much more sophisticated than the error committed by those figures and forms that pursue the immediate triumph of life over death, the “simple” security that, because of established norms, longs to win out over death by virtue of its own capacity to exclude it rationally. It is clear that, of all these latest thanatophobic forms of Western metaphysics, our own culture of humanistic-rationalistic security is the extreme—and supremely contradictory—version.

One of Michel Foucault’s great lessons is that the power that imposes a norm also produces, together with normality, a pathology to be excluded. We, however, want to suggest something more and different, namely, that those political-juridical strategies that seek absolute security become ineffective when they turn death into the supreme pathology from which, as from an absolute danger, we ought to pursue absolute exclusion. The catastrophic outcome of these strategies is a death that irrupts within law’s defenses, a death that is worse than death: it is, precisely, a ghostly contamination of life, a life infected and rendered unrecognizable by death. In short, that form (or norm) which is too rigid is not only destined, to that same degree, to suffer its own deformation, but its catastrophe will render both life and death unrecognizable as well: the specter of death.

³ This is not the place for a critical list of the various strategies the twentieth century has specified to deal with nihilism—from its radical and active acceptance by Heidegger, Schmitt, and Jünger (though each in his own very different way), to the “lateral” evasion of Alfred Weber, Karl Jaspers, and Karl Löwith; from the head-on metaphysical opposition to the void we find in Augusto Del Noce, Eric Voegelin, and Leo Strauss, to the use of dialogue as a form of non-metaphysical opposition to the void by both Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (despite the distances that divide them); and finally to the “weak thought” of Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty. For more detailed discussion of these strategies, see the texts cited in note 1, as well as Galli, Genealogia della politica. We cite here only the epitome of the twentieth-century discussion—the correspondence between Jünger and Heidegger “on the line” [Jünger, “Über die Linie” and Heidegger, “The Question of Being”] and, as an example of a radical, impolitical assumption of the void that approaches the pietas of the “singular sense” [senso singolare], Roberto Esposito’s essay “Nihilismo e comunità.”

⁴ That I defined Schmitt’s thought as “tragic” in Genealogia della politica does not subtract from the fact that the tragicity [tragicità] of Schmittian thought is inscribed within the horizon of the necessity of order: the tragedy lies in the fact that order reveals itself as impossible at exactly the moment it appears to be necessary. From another point of view, Günther Anders critiques the pathos of authenticity that implies ab origine a technico-governing limitation on a presumed human nature. See “The Pathology of Freedom.”

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will, as such, circulate, uncontrolled, within order itself. It is hardly then an accident that, within our society that strives to be hyper-protective, horror is multiplying in all its manifestations, virtual and real. Nor is it by accident that the most devastating insecurity indeed dominates our society.

To demonstrate how attempts at total immunization against this catastrophe are thwarted, I will offer a few cases of spectral and disfiguring irruption of death, of the void, within the “normal” security that wishes to exclude it. These cases are arranged according to a logic of growing proximity of the norm to the void. In classical tragedy, the irruption happens from without, through the power of the divine. In Thomas Hobbes it presents itself as a subtle crack internal to order—a crack that is, however, a constituent part of order from the beginning. In Franz Kafka, there is no doubt that the norm and death coincide in an endless nightmare. We do not find, in this succession, any pattern of philosophy of history that might indicate that nihilism had increased over the course of time, perhaps following the advance of secularization (according either to a moderate thesis of the critique of culture, or to the reactionary stance of Catholic revanche). We find only evidence that, whereas the constant that is death is, of course, something we have always combated, our rationalistic modernity has done so with a tenacity that reveals itself to be absolutely nihilistic, and that has rendered all of society thoroughly unbalanced and phantasmatic.

The theme of the irruption of the void into the law, and of the consequent contamination [miasma], is at work deep in the tragic conscience. In Antigone, Sophocles gives a dazzling definition of the spectral irruption of death into life. Just as he is about to announce to Creon the disasters that will shortly annihilate him, the messenger (the authentic angel of death) defines a person who has lost every joy and reason to live not as a “living being” (and the verb is zēn) but rather as a “breathing corpse” [empsychon nekron] [1167]. And, indeed, as soon as Creon learns the chilling news of the end of Antigone, his son Haemon, and his wife Eurydice, he experiences his own annihilation and commands his servants to carry him away, now that he himself has become precisely nothing: “Take me away, quickly, out of sight. / I don’t even exist—I’m no one. Nothing” [agete m’ hoti tachist’, agete m’ekpodon, ton ouk onto mallon e mēdena] [1324–25].

This living death—far more atrocious than the simple death of the living—irrupts here in a context that is specifically political. After all, Creon’s will is indeed political when he establishes, with his own law distinguishing between friend and enemy and forbidding the enemy burial within the circle of friends, the predominance of polis over genos, the supremacy of the celestial norm over the chthonic law, and the will of the universal (love of homeland) over the particular bond of affections. Meanwhile, Antigone, with her “holy crime,” establishes herself as the exclusive spokesperson for the love of family, for the right of blood, for the tribute owed to Hades, god of the dead [87–90]. Of course, Creon has also embarked on a conflict between man and woman, but we are interested in this conflict as a clash between light and shadows: the king of Thebes is seeking the autonomy of the political, which is “enlightened” and rational, from the infernal religion of the underworld, from the grasp of the dead and death itself.

Against the infernal depths of Antigone, who worships Hades as her only god, this autonomy of the political openly plays out the “horizontal” and “spatial” logic of the friend and the enemy as its sole determinant [209–10]. By burying the woman who wor-

5 Line numbers refer to the Greek text.—Trans.
ships the gods of the underworld alive and outside the city, Creon tries to distance the city as much as possible from death and anyone who worships it, to insure that the city is not contaminated by death [784—88]. Put simply, the autonomy of politics pursues a security that does not fear its enemies; rather, it fears the presence of death and the dead, the suffocating memory of Hades. The political must reduce that presence to a private cult, constrained never to interfere with what is public. Indeed, the public instead must assert its mastery over this presence and this cult. Not all of the dead can be equally venerated, only those (as Creon affirms) whom politics establishes as “friends” [585].

And so, the result of this true and proper political-legal removal of death—or better still, this attempt to subjugate death to political legality, to the word of politics—is actually the absolute contamination of life by death. It is a monstrous paradox in which death and life exchange roles and parts. This is clear to Antigone, who understands perfectly well the baleful exchange of life and death, wedding and burial, to which she is condemned, and who sees in it the exchange between justice and injustice. It even ends up being clear to Creon, who in fact backs down from his own conviction [1228—30], but only after having been warned by Tiresias [1064—90] about the tragic inversions and contaminations his proclamations [kerygma] have produced—only when, in other words, it is already too late. The terrifying scene in the cave as the messenger informs Queen Eurydice, thus triggering her suicide [1158—209], is really a link in a chain of deaths in which everyone who dies grabs hold of someone who is alive: Antigone’s intention to bury the dead Polynices against Creon’s will causes Antigone’s suicide, which leads to the suicide of Haemon, who dies embracing his barely dead betrothed (almost as if making love on a nuptial bed). But before he dies, the son spits in the face of his father in a symbolic act of spiritual murder and then attempts to kill his father with a sword. The deaths of Antigone and Haemon lead, in turn, to the death of Eurydice. And this whole series of deaths finally produce the “living death” of Creon.

But why is the autonomy of politics, in the form in which Creon tries to practice it, so evil? The answer is that, in essence, Sophocles sees in it the mad illusion of the omnipotence of the city and of the man who, having saved the city from its enemies, has absolute power over it [1129—30]. So many times throughout the drama, Antigone, Tiresias, and the chorus counter Creon, who is acting to save the city, with the laws of the gods of heaven—and not just the gods of the underworld—that deny that it is possible to leave a body without a proper burial. Even the will and the sentiment of the city itself and its citizens—the very ones the king wants to represent—oppose him, their wishes and convictions conflicting with his on this issue. Creon’s salvation of the city from its enemies certainly carries a positive value, as does his release of political power from the exclusive domination of the genos, as well as his placing the love of country—the universal—in opposition to the particularism of Antigone. Not for nothing does the chorus deplore Antigone’s autognotos orga [850], her wrathful temperament that decides for itself and all by itself, her completely self-referential passion that is incapable of dealing with political power [kratos].

But Sophocles seems to suggest that politics, however autonomous it may be, still cannot be absolute: it cannot constitute the only value or means of judgment, nor can it substitute its own laws for those of the gods. If it does, it becomes an “unbalanced” [squilibrata] politics: particular, not universal. It is no longer the expression of the city but of the individual will, of an evil man who through his own hubris opposes himself to the equilibrium of Being, of the divine order that rules the world (which, according to Sophocles, is in no way anthropocentric). Politics and piety [eusebeia] are possible together. The city supports, even desires, the burial of the traitor Polynices; the city finds impious not Polynices’s death but his havoc. Creon, with his hyper-politicism, with his absolute politics, is therefore in the wrong—and Antigone is as well, for she is “unbalanced” to the opposite extreme when she seems to shift her own allegiance toward Hades.
alone. Creon wants to dictate law to the world and to the gods; he wants his own will to political power to cut divine mystery out of the world, to transform the world into the image and logic of the human. This is Creon’s “enlightened” sin, and it shows up even at the point where, by now a desperate “living corpse,” he proposes to accelerate his death. He receives from the chorus the warning mellonta tauta [1296], an admonition to Creon to let his death follow fate, to proceed armed with resignation rather than with a will to power.

In short, tragedy affirms the necessity of recognizing a precarious equilibrium (by no means measured in human terms) between life and death, a mysterious order of Being. The human norm becomes effective only by adjusting itself to the higher norm of this order. The separation between life and death that is too clear cut, too decisive, violates this order, and the extreme distance this separation strives to impose between life and death provokes the irreversible contamination of life by death.

And yet, even though this separation is in itself impossible, to attempt it is what is properly human. In fact, it is all too human. What is, in an extreme instance, the rule of death over life, is simply too difficult to bear. Not only from a political point of view, but also from a psychological or moral one, there is always a longing, a hope, to distinguish absolutely between Being and Void, between life and death.

Choris to t’ einaki to me nomizetai: “we assume that being and non-being are distinct from one another” [Euripides 528]. In Euripides’s Alcestis, it is Heracles—the simplest, most generous of the gods—who asserts this. Admetus is reluctant to reveal to Heracles that his wife Alcestis is about to be seized by Thanatos, who will carry her off in place of her husband, for Apollo has decreed that anyone who freely offers can die in place of Admetus. It will fall to Heracles to get Alcestis back from Thanatos.

Heracles sensibly protests against a phantasmatic contamination that depends on death’s apparent vindication of itself through Admetus’s brief defeat. Death pierces Alcestis, who, while still alive, draws near a death that is not her own. Death provides Alcestis with an infernal hallucination and ghastly nightmare [252–72]. This evil has its origin in the spouses’ claim of complete separation between life and death, their will to live beyond death. Their will is not founded on the law of politics but rather on the law of Love, in particular, the love of Alcestis, who dies for Admetus, and the love of Admetus, who, in return, acquiesces to Alcestis’s request that he not remarry after her demise [280–392]. But the law of love is not stronger than death, as Admetus is forced to recognize [935–61]. Instead, death’s triumph is so much more bitter whenever we hope to defeat it. It will be sorrow, resignation to the fate of mortal beings, that will give back to Admetus that cognizance—“Now I understand” [arti manthano] [940]—that “marriage with the dead” is unachievable. He will comprehend that the fatal equilibrium between life and death cannot be altered.

Heracles’s intervention against Thanatos to save Alcestis, which might seem like a further assault on the law of Hades, instead fundamentally remedies the original violation. Neither Alcestis’s silence nor the veil behind which she hides remains as a mark of what might seem to be her residual ghostliness. In response to Admetus’s question [1126–27], Heracles explains that he is no necromancer who can restore the dead to life: Alcestis will have to be gradually restored and reeducated into life, shedding little by little her consecration to the gods of the underworld [1145–46].

In the end, Heracles makes things simpler, not more complicated. He defeats a death that is contaminating because it seeks revenge for its own prior exclusion. By doing so, Heracles teaches us to accept the human and sorrowful rhythm of existence. The distinction between Being and Void that he realizes is hardly the absolute separation that love desires (which would be impossible and absolutely contaminating). It is the only distinction possible: a transitory and merely momentary distinction that consists of living aware of the obligation to die our own death, without also attempting to shoulder the burden of the death of our loved ones. Here, as with Creon, the limit is only realized in the experi-
ence of contamination that derives from the anxiety of limitlessness (even if for Admetus and Alcestis such knowledge does not arrive too late, as it did for Creon). In ancient tragedy, it is nihilism to deny the void, to oppose oneself to death.

The harsh, ancient equilibrium between order and void—so harsh that man’s first instinct is to refute and overthrow it—is rejected not only by Christian civilization (which promises, as one of its founding principles, absolute victory over death) but also (even more so) by modern, rationalist civilization.

We find the incunabulum and prototype of this impulse in the “realism” of Hobbes. Hobbes, in fact, describes the state of nature as a spectral mixture of life and death in which the fundamental equality of men consists in the ease with which each can kill every other, and in which “there is continuall feare, and danger of violent death,” such that “the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” [89]. Here the presence of death (or, to be more precise, war) mixes with life as a permanent possibility that is both natural and, at the same time, nihilistic. In contrast to tragic thought, in which nihilism is the negation of death, the nihilism in Hobbes consists in the all-pervasive presence of death: spectral life is not the disequilibrium of any divinely guaranteed equilibrium, but rather the full and proper outcome of the jus naturale, of that power of the desiring machine that is man. For Hobbes human passions (notwithstanding the violence implicated by the “three principall causes of quarrell,” competition, diffidence, and glory [88]) are not “sin,” but simply manifestations of the irrationality of human rationality, of the pretense that each individual can be lord and master over another’s life and death, and that one and all thereby expose themselves to death in the most devastating way. As Hobbes puts it, the “generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death” [70], an inclination that carries with it conflict and death, does not violate any natural justice. Neither Dike nor Themis has a voice any longer on this desolate Hobbesian earth in which man’s limitlessness is given free rein, in which being-there is mixed together with non-being.

As such, there is in a rigorous sense no material in Hobbes for the tragic. Imbalance is not a temptation; it is terrifying normality. It is not the effect of a hubris that, at least in principle, can be led back to reason; it is a natural fate, one that can only be overcome in some new rational and artificial balance. The duty to overcome that fate issues from utilitarian motives—that is, from the individual’s objective of saving his own life—but also, at the same time, from a theological and moral motivation, a duty at once rational and moral: the Hobbesian god is so nominalistically transcendent that it is in effect a transcendent rationale. In a history devoid of divine substance, this god can no longer function as an ontological foundation for politics (as Catholics used to claim for pontifical intercession), nor can he be reached in and through individual striving for salvation (a Protestant theme). God simply limits himself to commanding men to achieve peace by means of the rational, moral law of nature, which men must then render effectual precisely by constructing the State and its sovereignty. Against the imperfect state of nature it thus becomes possible to counterpoise the utopia of a perfect State of politics (which is less a fantasy than an effective intervention geared toward the “eradication” of the conditions of the real). This perfect State is, in turn, generated by contract (the word of the individual that creates the communal word, the law) and by alienation (on the part of each and every individual from the right to govern himself).

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6 On the critique of incarnation and anthropomorphism, see book 4 of Celsus’s Discourse Against the Christians.
The State is thus the artificial and rational universal which is desired by individuals who are convinced of its necessity on the utilitarian and moral grounds that it will save their lives by establishing a boundary to exclude from the political sphere the greatest evil: violent death. In this reduction of politics to a mere strategy guaranteeing security on moral grounds, contamination is not avoided by resorting to a natural equilibrium (for, indeed, in Hobbes there is no such thing: in nature there is only disequilibrium). Instead contamination is avoided through a rational mediation (the contract) which expels death from the city and from the law. Because contamination “inside” the State would assume an unbearable form (civil war), the confusion between life and death can only be given sense once it is repelled to the “outside,” where it then takes on the clear and distinct form of interstate war. Among its many senses, political representation thus implies the reassuring construction of a political power that is transparent in relation to the individual, and that is therefore in a position to guarantee a secure life, to distance life from death.7

Nevertheless, this all-too-modern political dream of a life of peace that we (in our culture of the “last man”8 who needs only security) inherit from Hobbes, is shot through with a new tragicity that is different from that of antiquity. The tragedy here (and, to be sure, this is not the only tragic—or, more to the point, aporetic—aspect of the Leviathan, only the most relevant) is the incompleteness of its security, which is to say, the disconnect between the life of the individual and the public action of the State.9 In Hobbes, the political will (indeed the political duty) to save naked life from the void of death, this anxiety of positive law and effectual order that exists in place of an absent justice, is in fact undermined from within by that very death the escape from which dictated the political stratagem in the first place.

This point is clearly demonstrated in Hobbes’s passages on the pain of death and on war in chapter 21 of the Leviathan. Here we learn that the possibility for the individual to consent to let the Leviathan kill him is an act undertaken by the individual out of his liberty, and not out of his obligatory obedience to a potential sovereign order. Because the sovereign is born from the contract, Hobbes writes, he has no right to be obeyed when he commands a man to kill himself or to kill another, given that natural man has no right to transfer by contract his own power of self-defense. And yet, even though individuals are not in the normal case under any obligation to kill themselves or others simply to execute an order of the sovereign—despite, in short, that politics cannot include and involve death—there is nevertheless still a logic of the pact, a logic that goes beyond the letter of the pact itself with a decidedly fatalistic logic. If in fact the refusal to obey the sovereign undercuts the very reasons for which the sovereignty was instituted in the first place, then obedience to the sovereign is obligatory. If the death of only one citizen can reaffirm the life of the State, then that citizen must die. The State may then sentence him to death, and someone must execute the sentence, even if the condemned may defend himself by every means: he is now no longer a citizen but rather abandoned to a natural condition, where he once more possesses his own natural rights. Hobbes is thus quite consistent in his defense of the rationale of the individual. But it is always in his own way, that is, from

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7 The other motive is that representative power results in an irresistible unity, in which the representation of will and the natural power of all are mutually exclusive.
8 A reference to Alexandre Kojève’s discussion of “the disappearance of Man at the end of History” [158–62].—Trans.
9 On the other aporetic aspects of the Leviathan (the distance between Heaven and Earth; the contradictory nature of the passions among themselves given that vainglory renders the fear of death null and void; the anguished disconnection of morality from action given that man in the state of nature knows that he must obey the law of nature that imposes peace but cannot, constitutively, because of his very nature; the aporia of the contract which calls into existence the very parties who then enter into that contract), see Galli, “Ordine e contingenza.”
the standpoint of utility: the politically determined death of an individual is exceptional, and it is justified by the risk that, should the individual not die, that individual might turn out to destroy the State, and thus to return all to a state of nature in which a far greater number of men could die.

The entrance of death into the interior of politics is thus only an exception. But this is sufficient to demonstrate that the very existence of the logic of normality—the rational standard of security—requires precisely the logic of the exception (which indeed overpowers it); and that, moreover, the sovereign must possess the full and inherent power to judge the exceptionality of the threat to which the State is subjected (and this, of course, is the decision on the exceptional case). The sovereign is a mortal god in the sense that he can die and yet he can put others to death. In short, the end for which sovereignty has been instituted—which is the creation of a law of peace that excludes death [Hobbes 131]—implies that the law of politics is the law of death. Death penetrates into the order that excludes it through the law’s very attempt to achieve more efficiently its own innermost aims.

To his surprise, but not without having to admit the stringent logic of the paradox, the individual thus finds himself before a State that, even though it is born of a contract between individuals, is not really decipherable on the basis of the logic of individuals. This is a State that does not really protect the individual. Or, more to the point, it is a State which, in order to protect the individual, can put him to death. The State, the system of security, must above all defend itself as a universal system: only secondarily must it protect the individuals who believed that they founded the State for their own security. Death hovers about even when we believe political discourse has excluded it. Nihilism presents itself as a risk even within the political structures that were supposed to defeat it.

This paradox also holds true in the case of war. Excluded by Hobbes as a juridical obligation for any citizen (who, only at the price of a negligible condemnation as a coward, can very well refuse if the war is waged for reasons of honor or territorial conquest), war represents itself as a compulsory legal duty only in cases where the very existence of the Leviathan depends on its outcome. The exceptional war thus makes a normal peace possible. From this standpoint, the State that preserves life reveals itself to be the master of death for the individual and for the masses: its peaceful order is determined by the enemy, whether internal or external.10

It is true that this is not exactly an irruption of the Void; it is more an infiltration through a logical crack in the ostensibly impermeable enclosure surrounding the norm. The infiltration of death into order, meanwhile, is not exactly a spectral contamination; it is more a condition for the existence and efficiency of the political system of security. But this crack is, in any case, originary: it is the non-rational origin—not logically constructed but simply decided—of modern rational order. The fact of the matter is that the political universal is not really genetically deducible from the logical principle specific to individuals. It cannot be perceived even through the artifice of the contract that maintains the ideological fiction that the individual subject is the beginning, middle, and end of politics. It is this break that enabled modern political order to disorder itself, and to render the life of the individual spectral. Most twentieth-century thought, meanwhile, has rejected Hobbes—while at the same time pushing this decisive break to the extreme. This is what was demonstrated ad abundarrantiam in totalitarianism—that result of the intersection of war, technology, and the politics that Jünger defined as “the democracy of death” [“Total Mobilization” 128]. Totalitarianism is the political system that possesses the void as beginning, middle, and end.11

10 On the originary presence of the common enemy, see Hobbes 118, 126, 150, 185.
11 See Jünger, “Total Mobilization.” On the transformation of man into a specter, see Arendt; and Agamben, Homo Sacer and Remnants of Auschwitz. On the nihilism of totalitarianism, see Galli,
Clearly, this originary crack in the logic of the modern machine, in the logic of normality and security, brings Hobbes’s sovereign into close proximity with the Baroque sovereign—the one who, according to Walter Benjamin, holds the scepter of history, who is the “emblem” of the nullity of creaturely life, and who represents not only the positive will of peace for individuals, but also the unrepresentability of death in the secularized and worldly forms of tyranny, catastrophe, mourning, and melancholy [62–158, 182–89].

To avoid any ambiguity here, we need to keep in mind that Hobbes wants to be—and indeed is—the founder of modern political rationalism. Even if he is not generally recognized as such, Hobbes is nevertheless the trailblazer of the Enlightenment, the theoretician of a politics that is imperium rationis. His Leviathan is, in this regard, not tragic but rather realistic and even moderately optimistic with reference to the one objective its author holds dear: the public protection of the life of the individual. Only after having underlined this fact can we then acknowledge that, in the light of our contemporary sensibility, even in Hobbes there exists a tragic potentiality. This potentiality is not one of classical tragedy: there is no room in Hobbes’s thought for conflicts between opposing claims to justice, given that justice is naturally absent and present only as the State’s creation, monopolized by the sovereign. It is a modern tragedy: the Leviathan is what Benjamin would call a Trauerspiel, even though its attempt to think politics as security aspires to be the prosaic and legal antithesis of a Trauerspiel. The potential modern tragicity of the Leviathan is not determined by the conflict with God but rather by its self-referential worldliness. The reason for this concerns the fact that the more powerful the law and the norm are in creating security the more these laws and norms are subject to their own contradictions, making it clear that their very essence is based on the void of the exception and of the decision.12

It is of course true that, in Hobbes’s view, the norm and the decision that together found security are a form of “action,” and not melancholic uncertainty or sorrowful paralysis. And his effort to transform nature into artifice is hardly the agonizing Calderonian discovery that “life is a dream.”13 And yet, all the same, Hobbes’s attempt to absolutely exclude death from politics renders politics not only “secure” but also potentially “mourn-

12 For Benjamin, Hamlet’s indecision also implicitly concerns the modern political form theorized by Hobbes, even above and beyond the Trauerspiel, because the more radical and nihilistic a decision, the more aporetic it is too. For Schmitt, by contrast, Hobbes’s nihilism (which is undoubtedly just what it is) gives rise to an excess of form, which is to say, to legal positivism [Leviathan in the State Theory]. To this same Hobbes Schmitt will then later ascribe a temperament characterized by an “opening to transcendence” (“Il compimento della Riforma”). For Schmitt, unlike Benjamin, the indecision thus resides in Hamlet alone [Hamlet or Hecuba]. Schmitt accordingly interprets Shakespeare’s drama not as a “statal” tragedy [Tragödie] that, like works by Racine or Corneille, is closed in on itself, but rather as a Spiel. According to Schmitt, however, the “melancholy” of this Spiel does not make it a Trauerspiel in the sense that Benjamin uses the term. Rather, Schmitt argues, the Tragik in Hamlet owes itself very concretely to England’s then still-unresolved passage from land to sea as a dimension of its political existence. This historical concreteness makes Hamlet a “barbaric drama” that is in excess of any representative game (the episode of Hecuba) and that demonstrates the imperfect connections between game, representation, and reality (which are drawn close to one another but never really mediated). For Schmitt, this imperfection is the concrete characteristic of the imperfect drama which is the originary unrepresentability of the Modern as such. It demonstrates that the modern nomos—the pretense of rational mediation that underlies the State and the system of States—is, in its very essence, incoherent and unhinged. Schmitt neglects the 1969 work of De Santillana and von Dechend and hence doesn’t know that Hamlet has always been a mythic figure of incoherence and disconnectedness.

13 See, on this point, Benjamin 81. —Trans.
ful.” Even Hobbes’s operative Enlightenment—which shines light in the shadows—has a dark and “melancholy” side for those who know how to perceive it.14

The philosopher who thinks of the law as the exclusion of death must also, after all, admit death into this same law. As such, Hobbes is an example of the great relevance of the void in modern culture. This relevance is manifold, as numerous scholars have shown.15 It ranges from the ludic forms of the Renaissance to the tragic-emblematic forms of Baroque, from libertinism to mysticism, assuming guises that run from vertigo to wonder. It is a relevance that can be regarded as paradoxically foundational (the void for libertines is the fertile womb of all the infinite possibilities of the soul and of the world, and is therefore positive in that it is the parent of all matter and the origin of All), but that can also be completely negative and anguished (for mystics the void destroys all creation; it is the absolute risk that destabilizes every identity). And the paradox is that Hobbes—who is, in historical and cultural terms, closer to libertinism16—is, in his theory, much closer to mysticism. As is the case with mysticism, Hobbes establishes the origin of the Modern not only in the sum but also in the non sum, displacing Christian salvation onto eschatology and construing time as the agonizing dimension of the finite. In the vanitas that construes history as a “time of expectation,” Hobbes is looking indeed for an intimation of the infinite, an intimation which however can only come in the compensating form of a perfect security.17

3

In the great diagnosis he offered at the end of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche ascribed Western nihilism to its claim to have discovered a “real world” of ideas and values and to have counterpoised it to the “apparent world,” conferring meaning upon the latter and saving phenomena devalued as such, revaluing them now as manifestations of ideas [50–52].18 According to Nietzsche, with the collapse of the real world—with the ever more serious aporias that undermine Christianity and modern, rational mediation—European culture would be unable to gain access even to the apparent world, and as such would suffer a total loss of its relationship with reality. Nietzsche’s diagnosis holds true for the artificial world of modern politics as well. Erected to save phenomena (individuals) from death (interpreted in light of the idea and ideal of security), this world collapsed precisely in the nineteenth century, contaminated by the very death it was designed to exclude. The devastating coincidence of death and norm—which is really only embryonic in Hobbes—truly manifests itself in the twentieth century. Franz Kafka grasps this with disquieting foresight in “In the Penal Colony,” written at the dawn of the Great War (before the final and extreme experience of the Lager).19 That war was very shortly to give the European masses definitive proof—in the form of technological massacres and the non-life of the trenches—of the intrinsic spectrality of modern existence and of

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14 See, for example, the fourth part of the Leviathan, “Of the Kingdom of Darknesse.”
15 See, for example, Ossola.
16 This is a point made by Castrucci.
17 On the sense in which history in Leviathan (especially chapters 38 and 40–43) is a time of waiting, suspended among the end of the royal presence of God on Earth, the “disenchanting” arrival of Christ, and the anticipation of the New Reign of Christ on Earth, see Galli, “Ordine e continenza”; and Angoulvent.
18 See also Kuhn.
19 There are some important insights about Kafka’s text in Müller-Seidel. The source of Kafka’s text is likely Alfred Weber’s Der Beamte (1910).
the contradictory aspects of modernity’s demand for security. In Kafka’s text we find a coincidence of death and norm that moves well beyond the still “optimistic” diagnosis of Leo Strauss, according to whom nihilism is, politically, the “moral” rejection of modern civilization [Strauss 358]. Kafka, by contrast, obliges us to consider the possibility that rationalist modernity itself may be nihilistic.

In Kafka nihilism is the true cipher of the Modern, whose machinery of security no longer realizes the free reconciliation of the particular and the universal. It sees the individual act in concert with the State and introject into his conscience the rational law, the universal that saves the law, not only because it is useful but also because it is morally just and good. In truth, Kafka teaches us, the reconciliation of particular and universal—the machinery of state security—is in reality murderous torture. The individual “saves” himself only in death, when he experiences the law as death in a way that is no longer moral, but physical. He introjects the law—in an abstract, transcendental, almost Kantian form: sei gerecht, “be just.” In Kafka’s work, when the “harrow” inscribes in complicated script the actual sentence on the body of the condemned (who has not, until that very moment, understood the sentence), the condemned decipher it in suffering. In contrast with ancient tragedy, suffering here imparts understanding less as a solution to or triumph over the tragic situation than as an integral part of it: only when the “iron spike” pierces the condemned and finishes them off does it give them that illumination that allows for the perfect, moral adherence to the universal. And the universal is precisely the death inflicted by the State. This death in Kafka both replaces the universal protection the State wanted to assure and exposes the truth about such a protection. What for Hobbes was citizenship is, in Kafka, deportation and a death sentence. Kafka in other words pushes the Leviathan’s eradicating and “utopian” impulse to its logical overturning. And, what’s more, in Kafka, death comes as a condemnation for a trifling offence, for a small transgression. In reality the sentence does not set any injustice right; it simply pays for an offense that is not really the one that has been committed, a transgression which, we know from Kafka’s work more generally, is the metaphysical offense of having claimed to live the “normal,” quiet life of a bourgeois. The truth, however, is that normality does not exist. The quotidian is actually monstrous. The norm is death.

In the death of the condemned, staged at the sixth hour and marked by a kind of crown of thorns, Kafka may very well be hinting at the death of Christ and the Christian claim of salvation from death by means of death itself. This premise can be seen as the miraculous source of “normality.” Understood in this light, in Christ would lie the origin of the supposition of modern rationalism that excludes death from life by means of political reason. It is not improbable that Kafka wanted to declare both Christian salvation and political, rationalist salvation equally useless: salvation from death through death is still just death. It is the total contamination of law by the work of death. And salvation from death creates an equivalence between law and death.

In Kafka the entire procedure of execution demonstrates less that the “method” and its norm are a nightmare than that everyday life is hell: Kafka tells us that the whole procedure is intrinsically false and inefficient even in relation to its own objectives. The rational and ultra-perfected machine—the machine of morality, of the State, of God—is precisely a meehane in the theatrical sense: a deceit. As a devoted follower of the old commandant, who dreamed up the apparatus in a delirium of punitive rigor, the officer succumbs to its foundational myth and exaggerates its structure and function. The more he elucidates the machine to the voyager, the more obvious it is that the machine is completely incomprehensible and abstruse, subject to breakdowns, falling apart, and gasping
its last breath. Its organization is in reality chaos. In a foreshadowing of totalitarianism, Leviathan is in truth Behemoth.22 When, at last, the machine does break, it is revealed to be as clumsy and grotesque as it is cruel; it is just a lot of sprung gears. Above all, the machine is not even effective in making the victim adhere to the law. This is true not only for the original, subhuman condemned man, who is reduced to the status of a brute by means of terror, but even for the officer, a voluntary victim who is acting out his own convictions. The ultimate martyr to duty lets the machine kill him, only to discover that the machine does not work properly. In that last execution the apparatus moves mysteriously all by itself, destroying itself without having accomplished its real goal: salvation through suffering. Killed by the machine, the corpse of the officer was as it had been in life; no sign of the promised deliverance could be detected; what all the others had found in the machine, the officer had not found; his lips were pressed firmly together, his eyes were open and had the expression of life, their look was calm and convinced, through his forehead went the point of the great iron spike. 

Is this the happy conclusion of Kafka? The lie, the mechane, is exposed by its own failure? Life and death, law and pain, turning back to distinguish themselves from one another (in a relative sense), coming out of their perverse contamination and thus overcoming nihilism? It might seem so. At the end we witness the defeat of the officer—of his obtuse, nasty bureaucratic mentality, of his phobic mania of precision and cleanliness, so typical of a contaminated person. We see the defeat of the authoritarian personality’s morbid obsessions and compulsions as it manifests itself in the intimate, joyful, and almost childishly enthusiastic adherence—as both Officiator and Victim—to the ritual of the fatal ceremony. This fatal ritual is at once merciless and pedagogical. Its mechanistic rhythms resemble a military parade. In the face of this defeat, the victory seems promising for the progressive humanitarianism of the voyager, the new commandant, and his salon full of ladies. In short, victory here seems to smile on the Enlightenment side of political rationalism that has its foundation in Hobbes.

Without a doubt, the reader sees in the breakdown of the machine an end of a nightmare, of that nightmare that is the contamination of the law by the work of death. And yet, at the same time, when we see that the dead man’s eyes have the expression of someone who is still alive, we confront a death that is not natural, a death that does not die but rather continues to act: a death that is horribly alive, a death-life that is in some way confirmation of the norm-death nexus that the officer’s death should have wiped out. We are not then facing the purification of the contamination but rather its aggravation: from the first springs the second.

This is the cipher of “In the Penal Colony.” We witness it in the finale of the story, in the unsettling sight of the voyager, accompanied by the soldier and the condemned man, at the tomb of the old commandant, who died without the solace of religion and who is destined, according to one prophecy, to return [135]. The one who died a bad death will return to live a bad life—the life of the living dead, of a sort of vampire, or, more to the point, of the unburied (and here too Kafka writes in anticipation of later developments, this time of the great expressionistic German cinema). The old commandant’s soul is, to be sure, the Law’s source and origin; but because we are certain that the prophecy will be fulfilled, it is also the Law’s culmination and end—indeed, its eternity.

The voyager, as we know, flees this nightmare. He is no hero—just a generic Western man with humanitarian and progressive intentions. He does not help either the soldier or
the condemned man to escape the island. And so he saves himself at the cost of his own humanity—just like those who escaped from the Lager only because they were capable of overpowering their companions in misfortune. The penal colony—which will host the supreme contamination, the living death that rises up and perpetuates itself—will be now and always not only the hellish picture of the century that has just ended, but also, and above all, the place of eternal expiation for the transgression of living.

The struggle between old and new is won by the old, by the undead corpse who communicates his contamination to the living, and in whose nihilism we find the fatal hallmark of the immunitary efforts of an entire civilization. The nightmare never ends—no matter whether we identify with the voyager and his egotistical cowardice or if we align ourselves with those who remain on the damned island, destined to be the prey of the monsters. In Kafka we encounter the form that tragedy has assumed today: “In the Penal Colony” is a drama without any possible cathartic identification, an offense without action. Neither classical equilibrium nor rationalistic mediation can help twentieth-century man, naked before the void. The void today shows itself as a victorious and active presence following tragic irruption and modern infiltration. In the devastating presence of the void lies the truth of the normative barrier that Western culture has erected to exorcize its own intrinsic nihilism.

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