

Is It Too Late?

Bara Kolenc

Is it too late—for the world, for humankind, for philosophy? Yes, it is too late. But this is only the beginning.

1. The Swelling of the End

In the middle of the 1990s, when the peaceful part of the world was discussing the post-historical era, the end of ideology, and the end of grand narratives, a certain systemic failure (a minor failure that would need to be recuperated, in Fukuyama's view¹) was taking place in the Balkans. There was a considerable piece

¹ As the remnant of the dialectical historical process developing towards the end of history, achieving its final state in overcoming all of the world's contradictions in the political system of liberal democracy—a post-historical state already accomplished by the North-Atlantic world and still struggled for in other parts of the world, which are, like the Balkans, still *in* history (cf. Fukuyama 1989, 18). Fukuyama's view (leaning on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history, promoting the idea of the "universal homogenous state") was widely criticized for being subordinated to the leading ideology of neoliberalism. However, as shown by Alenka Zupančič, the thesis about the end of history became even more vivid on the side of the critics of liberal-democratic capitalism (Deleuze, Lyotard, Badiou, Jameson, Agamben, Virno, Meillassoux, and others), which points out "both its emptiness and non-eventfulness, as well as the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a breakthrough coming out of it" (Zupančič 2019, p. 12, quote translated by B. Kolenc). What appears to Fukuyama as the end of history, reveals itself as the *impossibility of an ending* on the side of critical theory, notes Zupančič.

of history happening (and being suppressed) on the outskirts of Europe: a fratricidal war of political and religious proportions, a complete disregard of the Geneva Conventions, a genocide—accompanied, in a small irony of history, by the publication of Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* coinciding with the beginning of the Bosnian War in 1992.²

The Sarajevo Book of the Dead,³ a collection of poems written by Bosnian-Slovenian poet Josip Osti, is one of the most valuable documents of this suppression, of a disappearing reality that clung in its condemnation and its poor finality to the letters and words of a poet who turned by necessity into a witness of this reality, and whose verses could only have echoed a deep silence. A silence about the vanishing city that changes its image from one minute to the next, about teenage butchers breaking into homes, robbing, killing and massacring families, about corpses that cannot be buried because it is too dangerous outside, so they are kept in their homes, lying in beds next to the living, the dead and the living maintaining their coexistence, the living-dead together with the dead-living, about the blond blue-eyed girl who took refuge in a hall during a sniper attack and who claps merrily at the sight of people on the street jumping on one leg, exclaiming, "Mom, I would also like to play hopscotch with them," about gangs of obnoxious minors playing with hand grenades and blowing up Albanian confectioneries at night, so that baklavas, shedentiles and tulumbas rain from the sky, but children cannot pick them up because they sleep behind lowered blinds, about lovers meeting in parks that have become cemeteries with felled trees, which were cut down to be used as firewood, kissing ever more passionately in the face of snipers, about kids who turned into old men overnight, sitting motionless and pensive as sages,

² Though his notorious article "The End of History?" was published three years earlier, in 1989.

³ A bilingual publication in Bosnian and Slovenian, with the original title *Sarajevska knjiga mrtvih*. Cf. Osti 1993.

and old men who turned into kids, constantly asking questions to which children cannot give satisfactory answers. Today, this document is itself almost forgotten.⁴

One of the poems notes two men playing chess—a friendly habit, arrangement, and necessity—who take turns visiting each other every evening even after the outbreak of the war. When the constant shooting and the curfew limit their visits, they report their moves to each other by phone. They do not interrupt the game even when the telephone connections are severed, each sitting in his own apartment and responding to the presumed moves of the other. And when one day a speck of grenade shatters the head of one of them, the one living in the attic, the other man, who does not know about his comrade's death, still carries on with the game: "without knowing what happened / the other continued to move the figures / defended and attacked / already with a dead opponent / fought" (Osti 1993, pp. 98–99). And as if the man without the head never noticed what had happened either, he sits still in his armchair, leaning over the chessboard, sitting there for the following four days until found by the neighbors, who had been—unlike himself—hiding in the basement when the bombing occurred.

The game of chess continues after the death of one of the players. The one who is left alive keeps anticipating his opponent's moves. In the abidance of the game, the man who is already dead is still present: not in his physical appearance, but in the moves attributed to him. He is present through the function he acquires in what Huizinga calls "the autonomous reality of the play."⁵ In a

⁴ The translations of excerpts from *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead* into English are provisory, made by B. Kolenc.

⁵ With consensus as its founding moment, the play establishes an autonomous reality separated from everyday life: it is a space of freedom, equality, order, and the abolishment of private property with its own spatiotemporal coordinates (cf. Huizinga 1949). In his re-reading of Huizinga's disposition, Gadamer argues that "the purpose of the game is not really the solution of the task, but the ordering and shaping of the movement of the game itself" (Gadamer 1989, p. 97), for which encounter with otherness is essential.

weird way, the role itself acquires some sort of autonomy: it matters little if the other player is alive or not as long as he maintains his part (in a way, this echoes Molière's collapsing onstage while playing the part of the sick man in *The Imaginary Invalid*). From this perspective, we should perhaps reconsider the famous statement by the respected Slovenian theatre director Dušan Jovanović, who passed away recently, the statement that it is impossible to perform death on stage (the ultimate performance therefore being dying for real in front of an audience—as was almost the case with Molière and as happened recently to the stand-up comedian Ian Cognito). What truly *is* impossible, is not performing death on stage (anyone can be shot with a proper bullet or take some cyanide), but *maintaining* the role even after one's death.

The chess player who is left alive keeps playing with his dead colleague as if holding a figure would protect him against dying. The relationship between the game and everyday reality is turned upside down: it is not only true that if I die, the game will end, it is also true that if the game ends, I will die (a subversion common to superstition and to the rituals of obsessional neurosis). He carefully avoids any anticipation of the opponent's move that could end the game. Thereby, he actually plays two games at once, with two opposite goals: one is to win and the other is to not win. Meandering between the conclusion of the game and its hypothetical prolongation into infinity, he is caught in a temporal loop, in some sort of extension of the moment of ending: he pulls forward and backward at the same time. However, it is not just the lonely player who sticks to the game, it is also the game itself that clings to the player—for without him, it would have ended prematurely, before even bringing itself to an end.

In yet another poem, Osti deals with the topic of fire in the theatre, a popular motif of both poetry and theory. But the limits of conceptual curiosity are once again transcended with a sort of blow of the real: watching the Sarajevo National Theatre burning, Osti remembers how he was in this theatre for the first time as a kid with his grandma, pulling her by the hand and wanting

to leave because there was a fire performed onstage (they were playing a dramatization of the notorious Slovenian novella *The Bailiff Yerney and his Rights*, written by Ivan Cankar). He asks himself: “did I then / forty years ago / want to run from the fire in which / these days / burned down the building of the sarajevo [sic.] national theatre?” (Osti 1993, pp. 82–83).

In this book of the dead, something happens with time: the clock spring cracks and the pointers spin back in a flash while children turn into old men and old men back to children. Time is running backward and forward, exploding at moments or lingering like mist over the river Miljacka, in which people are catching fish with bare hands. The fire in the theatre traverses not only the border between fiction and reality, which young Osti is unable to discern, but also the border between the past and the present. The fire is spreading from the memory of a poet to the unsurpassable reality that surrounds him, from sparkles in the performance to the fireworks of the spectacle of war.

What is at work in these poems is not only an uncanny blurring of the boundary between life and death, which Freud explicates through Hoffmann’s *Sandman*⁶ and which is so present in Kantor’s Theatre of Death.⁷ It is not even just the tendency of the existent something to be “driven out and beyond itself,” which Hegel ascribes to simple existence. Rather, it is something much more fundamental and all-encompassing: the city is falling apart, but *something persists*. Something just does not capitulate, no matter how much it is being trampled.

It is common to poetry, art, and philosophy that they aspire to transcend the world’s finitude and the individual’s mortality with an “eternal idea.” Such an eternal idea is, for example, constituted

⁶ Cf. Freud 2013.

⁷ With his performance *The Dead Class* (1975), Tadeusz Kantor proposed—with a radical *tour de force* of theatre conventions—a vision of the Theatre of Death, which explored the persistence of memory and its interplay with time and the construction of history.

through the concept of hope (hope dies last), or through a vision of sacrifice (the revolutionary stance of dying in the name of an idea). It is, especially in ancient Greek art, stated by fate, which is either hopelessly fought against or passively surrendered to, or, in Christianity, by faith in God, supported by the promise of salvation. In this manner, poetry, art, and philosophy attempt to overcome finitude and interconnect it with infinity. Reading Osti's poems, however, we get a very clear impression that what persists is *not* some reality beyond the existent world or something that is believed to emerge after its extinction, but rather something *within the world itself*. It is not hope, nor faith, nor a revolutionary idea that keeps the characters and the poet himself going despite their desperate circumstances, but something much more earthly, even carnal, stripped of any remorse over finitude and the destiny of the existent world.

In this mousetrap-like city, it seems to be too late for everything. However, within the rapid process of destruction on the very edge of the city's existence, it seems not to be too late for too-lateness itself. Something is going on: like some sort of swelling of the end, like some ungraspable extension of the moment of extinction. As if *the end* itself was not a singular and final rupture, but rather *something that lasts*; as if something only *began with the end*, through and over it.

2. *The Sorrow of Finitude*

Existent things are finite. Their determination, states Hegel in his *Science of Logic*, does not go past their *end*. They are caught in a trap.

The existent something (*Etwas*) is determined by its quality, whereby it is also delimited.⁸ An opposition between the existence

⁸ Hegel's premises of existence (*Dasein*) are the following: "Existence is determinate being; its determinateness is existent determinateness, quality. Through

of a thing and a limit immanent to this existence constitutes the thing's *finitude*. Because of this specific constellation, for an existent thing, a denial of its finitude also means a denial of its very existence, that is, a denial of the thing itself. For this reason, a further dialectical move, a negation of finitude, a reach beyond its determination, does not protect the existent thing against its finality, it does not make it infinite or immortal, but, on the contrary, condemns it once more to its inevitable end. It is impossible to escape the vicious circle of finitude: it is not only the immanent opposition between existence and its determination but also the negation of this opposition that brings an existent something to an end.

This is the paradox of existent things: running away from their finitude is possible only under the condition of putting themselves to an end. But this would again be—and this is the trap—a confirmation of their finitude. “Finite things *are*,” claims Hegel, “but in their reference to themselves they refer to themselves *negatively*—in this very self-reference they propel themselves beyond themselves, beyond their being. They *are*, but the truth of this being is (as in Latin) their *finis*, their *end*” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). In the last instance, this means that *it is non-being that constitutes the being of the existent world*: “When we say of things that they are finite, we understand by this that they not only have a determinateness, that their quality is not only reality and existent determination, that they are not merely limited and as such still have existence outside their limit, but rather that non-being constitutes their nature, their being” (ibid.). As soon as an existent thing emerges, it is already doomed to extinction: “The finite does not just alter, as the something in general does, but *perishes* [*vergeht*], and its perishing is not just a mere possibility,

its quality, something is opposed to an other; it is alterable and finite, negatively determined not only towards an other, but absolutely within it” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). And: “Quality, in the distinct value of existent, is reality; when affected by a negating, it is negation in general, still a quality but one that counts as a lack and is further determined as limit, restriction” (Hegel 2010, p. 85).

as if it might be without perishing. Rather, the being as such of finite things is to have the germ of this transgression [*Keim des Vergehens*] in their in-itselfness: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death” (ibid.).

Things cannot catch up with their own beginnings: as soon as they come into existence, it is already too late. For Hegel, an existent thing is not just born, and afterwards it dies, but it *dies as soon as it is born*. The event of death does not only succeed the event of birth, but also directly coincides with it. This means that existence, *Dasein*, is not only *being-towards-death*, as Heidegger puts it, but is at the same time also *death-towards-being*.⁹ What is normally considered to be the event of death is not some empty nothingness that intervenes into the supposed fullness of the being of existence, destroys it, and establishes itself in place of its demolition, but it is rather something that has always already been inscribed in existence itself. From this perspective, we can perceive the coexistence of the dead and the living in the households of Sarajevo not as some sort of transcendence of the unsurpassable (and uncanny) line between life and death, but rather as a paradoxical juxtaposition of life and death in the cohabitation of *the living dead* (everyone who is alive is always already dead—she or he was not only born to die, but was born to death straightaway) and *the dead living* (even those who die still participate in the daily routine, for it matters little if you die or not since you have been dead since birth). Therefore, *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead* is not a book of condolences written by the living to the dead. It is a book of resistance written by the dead to the living.

⁹ If we transfer this supposition from the level of *Dasein* to the level of *Sein* (following Heidegger’s task of philosophy articulated in the last chapter of *Being and Time*), we can say that what is fundamental according to Hegel is not only being, which has always already been temporalized as subjected to dying and finitude, but—simultaneously—also time, which has always already been ontologized, for death itself is nothing but a rupture in the birth of being. Cf. Heidegger 1996 and footnote no. 21 in this article.

It has always already been too late for the world. It is destined to perish. This is what Hegel calls *the sorrow of finitude*.

3. In-Finitude/Un-Endlichkeit

The understanding often clings to the sorrow of finitude, to the fact that existent things are condemned to perish, and is unable to surpass it. This is, Hegel argues, because of one of the most adamant ideas of humankind (and of philosophy): the insistence on a qualitative difference between being and nothing. Being is thought to be eternal and absolute, while nothing is perceived as an absolute negation of being and its attributes. Accordingly, this also means insisting on a qualitative difference between finitude and infinity: the finite is considered to be restricted and perishable, pertaining to nothingness, while the infinite is unlimited and eternal, pertaining to being. Following this, “the official claim is that the finite is incompatible with the infinite and cannot be united with it; that the finite is absolutely opposed to the infinite” (Hegel 2010, p. 102).

“The falsification [*die Verfälschung*],” states Hegel, “that the understanding perpetrates with respect to the finite and the infinite, of holding their reciprocal reference fixed as qualitative differentiation, of maintaining that their determination is separate, indeed, absolutely separate, comes from forgetting what for the understanding itself is the concept of these moments” (ibid., p. 116). In this falsification, which comes from forgetting that nothingness is not something that stands in stark contrast to being, but is rather its inner otherness, it is now the understanding itself that gets caught in a trap. The trouble of this trap is that reflection can assert the unity of finitude and infinity only in their abstraction, for as soon as it wants to determine them by attributing to them a quality, they fall apart, forming an opposition. And the other way round: proceeding from their qualitative incompatibility

(finitude is limited and perishable, infinity is unlimited and eternal), reflection cannot make a transition between the finite and the infinite unless it brings them to the level of abstraction. The relation between finitude and infinity remains external as long as it rests upon the covert assumption that the two differ in their quality. Let us call this trap *the sorrow of thought*.

The most infamous example of such sorrow of thought, which Hegel explicitly criticizes, is the idea that *everything perishes yet it is the very perishing that is eternal*. In this view, the *eternal being of finitude* is insisted on, which is precisely its *transitoriness* [*die Vergänglichkeit*]: “Their transitoriness would only pass away in their other, in the affirmative; their finitude would then be severed from them; but this finitude is their unalterable quality, that is, their quality which does not pass over into their other, that is, not into the affirmative; *and so finitude is eternal*” (ibid., p. 102). “The understanding,” claims Hegel, “persists in this sorrow of finitude, for it makes non-being the determination of things and, at the same time, this non-being imperishable and absolute” (ibid.).

Everything perishes except the perishing itself. The perishing itself, however, does not perish, it endures because of the stubborn declaration that finitude and infinity are incompatible: “The finite remains held fast over against it as its negative; incapable of union with the infinite, it remains absolute on its own side; from the affirmative, from the infinite, it would receive affirmation and thus it would perish; but a union with the infinite is precisely what is declared impossible” (ibid.). The understanding keeps apart the *opposition* of the finite and the infinite on the one hand and their *unity* on the other. But the truth is, Hegel argues, that the unity of the finite and the infinite and their opposition are interconnected in a process of mutual determination through negation: “Thus the finite and the infinite are both this movement of each returning to itself through its negation; they are only as implicit mediation, and the affirmative of each contains the negative of each, and is the negation of the negation” (ibid., p. 117).

The question of how the infinite becomes finite preoccupied philosophy from the Presocratics to Kant. But, stresses Hegel, the key point is that it is *not* the *transition* from finitude to infinity, or the other way round, that is conceptually incomprehensible: it is the very *divide* between them. For the determination of each is implicit in the other. And “to have a simple insight into this inseparability which is theirs, means that we comprehend them conceptually” (ibid., p. 123). It is precisely this *inseparability that is their concept*. The answer to the question “How does the infinite become finite?” is therefore this: “*There is not an infinite which is infinite beforehand, and only afterwards does it find it necessary to become finite, to go forth into finitude; the infinite is rather for itself just as much finite as infinite*” (ibid., p. 123).

Following this consideration, we can see that what opens up and lingers in Osti’s poems is the striking fact that infinity is not something that comes *after* the end, after *finis* (or something that exists in some parallel eternal reality beyond the finite world), but something that is itself essentially interwoven with finitude. One cannot transcend finitude by elevating it to the level of an eternal idea. Firstly, because finitude cannot be preserved through any kind of transcendence—existent things are doomed to perish—, and secondly, because infinity cannot exist without relation to a limit. The brutal truth is that infinity is essentially interwoven with finitude, it cannot get rid of it: something will always pull its wings to the ground. And the other way round (this might well be the beautiful aspect of it): meager existence is itself perforated with eternity—it is through the very process of the world’s extinction that infinity is constituted. It is within the existent world, within the very perishing, within the swelling of the world’s end that something infinite persists: not through an alleged reconciliation of finitude and infinity (which is always a falsification), but rather through their unsurpassable contradiction. The only way one can get to infinity is through the paradox of finitude, which opens

up through the (im)possibility of ending the end,¹⁰ through the absurd task of *killing death*.

“It is an excessive tenderness for the world to keep contradiction away from it,” claims Hegel in his commentary on Kant’s first cosmological antinomy from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “to transfer it to spirit instead, to reason, and to leave it there unresolved” (Hegel 2010, p. 201). The world is fundamentally contradictory: “nowhere does the so-called world—call it the objective, real world, or, in the manner of transcendental idealism, subjective intuition and sense-content determined by the category of the understanding—nowhere, however you call it, does it escape contradiction” (ibid.). But because the world is not capable of enduring this contradiction, it is “left to the mercy of the coming and ceasing to be” (ibid.). And it is the task of the spirit, of language and of thought, not to ignore the world’s contradictions, but to take them upon itself and to aim at resolving them: “spirit is the one which is strong enough that it can endure contradiction, but it is spirit again which knows how to resolve it” (ibid.).

Let us call the interconnection of finitude and infinity, which stems from the fundamental intertwining of being and nothing, *in-finitude*, Un-Endlichkeit: it is only through enduring the condemnation of the existent world to extinction that the path for reflection towards in-finitude opens up.

¹⁰ According to Hegel, finitude is the most obstinate of the categories of the understanding, because of the specific form of negation inscribed into it: finitude is qualitative negation driven to the extreme. “In the simplicity of such a determination,” states Hegel, “there is no longer left to things an affirmative being distinct from their determination as things destined to ruin” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). Contrary to negation in general, constitution, and limit, which are compatible with their other, finitude is negation *fixed in itself* and, as such, stands in stark contrast to its affirmative: “Its refusal is rather to let itself be brought affirmatively to its affirmative, the infinite, to be associated with it; it is therefore inseparably posited with its nothing, and thereby cut off from any reconciliation with its other, the affirmative” (ibid., p. 102).

4. *The Falsification of Neo-Liberalism and the Morbidity of Capitalism*

It is not hard to see that “absolute boredom,” the suffocating feeling of vacuum and the impossibility of radical change that grew globally from the late ’80s until the 2008 financial crisis, was nothing but an expression (or representation) of the very trap thought gets caught in when proclaiming the reconciliation of finitude and infinity while silently maintaining their qualitative difference. After the end of grand narratives and the bankruptcy of eternal truths, which determined the postmodern era, reflection staked everything on the one single handle that was left: there is a certain truth in the fact that there is no truth, there is something firm in the fact that everything is transitory, there is something unchangeable in the all-encompassing change. The common attitude that prevailed in late twentieth century drew on the idea that things do perish; however, it is the very perishing that persists. Even if every single existent thing is doomed to finitude, the world is nevertheless eternal. Or, more accurately: it is precisely *the inevitable ephemerality of things that makes the world eternal*.

Taking a closer look, we can see that the general worldview of this period, taken up not only by the advocates of the post-historical idea but also by its critics, perpetually swung between two equally abstract and external propositions of a connection between finitude and infinity. The first was the idea of the *eternal return of the same*, leaning on the conception of perishing as the eternal being of finitude (things and events and people will come and go, but the carousel of existence will forever stay on track, turning and returning forevermore). The second was the vision of a limitless expansion of capital (and freedom), of an *infinite production of the new* (that is, of finitude), building upon the idea of infinite progress, which is criticized by Hegel as only

“an abstract transcending which remains incomplete because the transcending itself has not been transcended” (Hegel 2010, p. 113), and is therefore only a “repetitious monotony, the one and the same tedious alternation of this finite and infinite” (ibid.). What might seem like a “beautiful reconciliation” of the post-ideological era is actually nothing but an abstract linking of these two (obviously incompatible) propositions of an external connection between finitude and infinity, both clinging to their qualitative difference, to achieve some unity of a higher order: a unity of *the infinite progress of capital and freedom* on the one hand, and of *the preservation of the existent order* on the other. This is, as it is immediately evident, the ultimate utopia of *neo-liberal conservatism*.

On the surface, it looks like the final reconciliation of perishing and the eternal (it is exactly the production of the new — i.e., the multiplication of things with limited durability — that will last forever), like the ultimate achievement of the Enlightenment (a limitless expansion of freedom, which will bring us eternal peace), while behind-the-scenes there is a terrible stalemate taking place: the perpetual reciprocal reference of two equally abstract notions (finitude and infinity) produces an impasse as soon as the understanding tries to determine either of them. In bringing abstract ideas of finitude and infinity to the ground (by transforming them into measures of work, time, waste production, etc.), it becomes clear that in the era of neo-liberalism, the limitless production of finite things doomed to extinction (the sooner they spoil the better) is made *the eternal being of capitalism*. The idea of novelty promising progress towards the absolute wellbeing of humanity is promoted only to hide the morbid fact that it is decay and breakdown that are the drivers of capital — *capitalism cannot die precisely because it itself feeds on dying*, on finitude.

Marx was not mistaken in the fact that capitalism has its own end inscribed in its very structure (as it is widely known, he ex-

pected capitalism to destroy itself and transform into communism sooner or later), but in the *manner* in which this end is inscribed in its structure. What is crucial is that finitude drives capitalism not in the way of a “proper functioning” of Hegel’s dialectic, in which thought (and, according to Marx’s turn,¹¹ also socio-economic reality) proceeds through sublation, as Marx believed, but in the way of *falsification*, of a trap into which thought (and subsequently also the related world) gets caught, turning in a circle trying to catch its own tail, and failing time and again to surpass its regrettable situation. This failure stems from a certain oblivion (which — this is one of Freud’s essential discoveries — often points to the locus of resistance), from forgetting what for reflection itself are the concepts of being and nothing, of finitude and infinity. It is therein that lies the sorrow of neo-liberalism, the falsification that supports the morbidity of capitalism.

Capitalism cannot end *not* because the end is not inscribed in its very structure, as some critics of Marx’s utopianism would argue, it very much is, but because *the end is inscribed in its structure in such a way that finitude and infinity are held apart in a falsification* that, supported by the ideology of neo-liberal conservatism, deeply represses their fundamental intertwinement. The problem (and the prosperity) of capitalism is therefore *not in its infinity* — any criticism taking this position is itself subject to the misconception that perishing is the eternal being of finitude —, but, just the opposite, in its *finitude*. In finitude (deadlines, expiration dates, unemployment of the elderly, etc.), which is proclaimed to be eternal (as a forced flag bearer of the alleged infinite progress).

Moreover, the trouble with capitalism — why it cannot end — is not that it is too brutal (for it kills everything except capital itself),

¹¹ Articulated most clearly in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 1976, p. 8).

as one might suggest, but, on the contrary, that it is too mild, not radical enough. The true malice of capitalism is its tenderness. Capitalism is not only tender towards the consumers, triggering desire and offering different kinds of pleasures while silently putting chains around their necks, it is also too tender towards finitude itself. Its terrible gentility, its soft killing, is a consequence of its incapacity to bring finitude to the extreme, to let the perishing perish instead of crowning it with thorns. It is its inability *to bring the end itself to an end*.

This incapacity, this clinging to falsification, is due to the fact that killing the end would be capitalism's hara-kiri: for only through a radical negation of what thought and reflection and the so-called world are at a certain point can they be sublated and constituted anew. The end of capitalism and neo-liberalism would mean the end of the erroneous idea that perishing is the eternal being of finitude.¹² It would mean raising human self-awareness to a new level, which would no longer celebrate infinity while silently practicing finitude, killing, and mortality, but would celebrate finitude and practice infinity within finitude itself.¹³

¹² The ever more important question of the end of capitalism, discussed by Jameson, Fisher, Žižek, Zupančič, Boldizzoni, and others, is commonly grasped through the perspective of our imagination or a fantasy of The End, wherefrom arguments for its persistence and seeming infinity are derived. Nevertheless, if we are to change the devastating effects of capitalism, it is of crucial importance not only to re-evaluate our utopias and deal with our fantasies (which are, as Žižek shows, inscribed not only in the way we think, but above all in the way we act—this is one of Freud's most important findings discovered through the repetition compulsion), but to re-constitute, both functionally and ideologically, our relation towards finitude and infinity. It is not only a question of our fantasy of the end of capitalism, but, above all, of our fundamental relation towards the end itself.

¹³ Some traces of this new relation towards finitude and infinity can be found in the ideas and practices of sustainable development, self-sufficiency, the circular economy, and similar initiatives, as long as they proceed from the fundamental re-evaluation of the relations between time and work, between life and death, and between the individual and "the other."

5. *The Brutality of the Real: The Perishing of the Perishing*

In the course of dialectics, the condemnation of existent things to finitude is sublated: “The development of the finite will show that, expressly as this contradiction, it collapses internally, but that, in this collapse, it actually resolves the contradiction; it will show that the finite is not just perishable, and that it perishes, but that the perishing, the nothing, is rather not the last of it; that the perishing rather perishes” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). Perishing is not some sort of an eternal being of the existent world, but is itself subject to extinction. It is *perishing itself that perishes*: an unbearable idea that yawns like an abyss in the face of the understanding.

The Sarajevo Book of the Dead not only reminds us that the world is doomed to ruin, avoiding any poetic transgression of this painful truth (it does not cover it with any illusion of the eternal idea), but it also unfolds the fundamental contradiction of the existent world in opening up the rupture of the *perishing of the perishing*, the brutality and the paradox of *ending the end*. The vanishing city on the outskirts of Europe should therefore not be seen as a minor deviation from the existent order of neo-liberalism, but rather as its very symptom, which points to the wound: perhaps, the traumatic core of the North-Atlantic world, of philosophy and of the Enlightenment, which shielded itself with the illusion that perishing assures eternity, is nothing but the horrifying truth that the perishing itself might perish.

We may ask ourselves whether it is not the unforeseen confrontation with the long forgotten brutality of the idea that the perishing itself might perish that has recently shaken our perception of reality. Should we not say that it was precisely the abyss of the perishing of the perishing that opened up when the post-historical vision of the world, resting upon the false and sorrowful conception of perishing as the eternal being of the world (a conception that unreasonably put together ideas of the eternal recurrence of the same and of infinite progress on the side of the

advocates of neo-liberalism, and that triggered contra-productive moaning about the impossibility of the end of this constellation on the side of its critics), abruptly faced the probability of its near end? It might be so, for it immediately triggered a new survival strategy. The brutal truth of the perishing of the perishing was quickly covered up with a new phantasmal screen: a fantasy of the final collapse.¹⁴

The general post-historical atmosphere of the late twentieth century has, in the past decade, almost imperceptibly shifted into a very different mode. The all-encompassing feeling that we are living in some kind of a vacuum or void, stuck in an eternal loop of the multifariousness of the same, where any deviation has always already been subsumed under the minotaur of neo-liberalism and

¹⁴ Of course, we are not saying that the ecological crisis is a fantasy. It is a brutal fact. What we need to be aware of, however, is that the nest of fantasies that has been woven around this brutal fact directly affects the fact itself. It is not only the terrible factuality that makes us produce a phantasmal shield (to happily ignore the trauma or to masochistically enjoy the fever of self-victimization): *it is the very phantasmal shield that (co)produces this brutal factuality.* We should recognize that inasmuch as we cause the destruction of the planet through mass technological production, we equally cause it through the mass production of truths and hegemonic discourses. The tectonic break that marks the beginning of the digital age is perhaps exactly the fact that an idea (i.e., language) produces more effects on factuality than factuality does on the idea (a horrifying yet very Hegelian twist, which might constitute—if consciousness is able to take its consequences upon itself—the path towards a new era of the Enlightenment). This awareness is not only an ineffective cynical unmasking of the ideology traced by Sloterdijk, nor is it only digging into the depths of what Žižek calls the “ideological fantasy” in order to unravel the phantasmal traits controlling the way we act. It is equally and above all *intentionally* drawing on the negation of the prevailing discourses and producing their affirmative “other.” Producing this “other” is not denying or questioning factuality (as is the case with conceptions of post-truth or post-reality), but rather opening the “other” nest of discursive realities, which might redirect the course of the effects of ideology on factuality (not beyond, but through ideological fantasy) in such a way that might benefit the so-called world and possibly—this is the task of Hegel’s spirit—solve some of its contradictions.

where nothing new can ever happen, has been—almost all of a sudden—superseded by a completely different mood: the expectation of catastrophe. But this change is less radical than it looks. What seems to be a fundamental twist of perspective is actually only a minor shift performed not with the purpose to change the prevailing neo-liberal state of affairs and the sorrowful state of mind, but to protect and to maintain it.

The thing is that in all the more recent expectations of catastrophe we have not really been waiting for an end. What we have been waiting for (and what we fear) is rather our fantasy of The End. In the rich imaginary of the apocalypse pertaining to what Hegel calls the “contentful nothing,”¹⁵ we imagine nothingness to be something qualitatively different from being. In this way, we are still holding apart finitude and infinity and maintaining the idea of the eternal being of the perishing. We are not taking upon ourselves the possibility of a radical end, of the end of the end, of the perishing of the perishing, risking a radical transformation of all that is known and familiar, including the extinction of what is thought to be our subjectivity. Rather, we are producing an illusion of The End, which will never end, but will be happily (that is, fearfully) postponed forever.¹⁶

For reflection, only facing the brutality of the real, only enduring the rupture of the *perishing of the perishing* and the paradox of *ending the end*, opens up the path out of the sorrow of thought towards a new state of self-awareness. This, however,

¹⁵ Absolute darkness, the great void, and similar, claims Hegel, are “supposed to be not nothing in general, but the nothing rather of light, warmth, and so forth, of something determinate, of a content” (Hegel 2010, p. 78). Thus, he continues, “they are a determinate, ‘contentful nothing’ if one may so speak” (ibid.).

¹⁶ The structural function of fantasy is to collaborate with suppression in covering up the traumatic core of subjectivity and thereby maintaining its “relative normality.” The fantasy is being constantly replaced and postponed to protect the subject from facing the brutal reality or, to be more direct, *the brutality of the real*. Thereby, the fantasy is always projected into the (near) future.

means abandoning the qualitative differentiation of being and nothing, which has led to falsifications such as the idea of the eternal being of perishing or the more recent fantasy of The End. The new state of human self-awareness, which could possibly repair the devastating effects of capitalism, is only achievable through a rudimentary re-constitution of our relation towards finitude and infinity. This is what Hegel's dialectics points to. Through sublation, it turns out that the perishing, the nothing, is not the last of it: it is exactly *within* the contradictory negation of nothingness, of ending the end, or of killing death, that something new also begins.

6. *Happy New Fears! Drawing on the Idea of Expiration*¹⁷

When we speak about too-lateness today—and we speak about it all the more often—we tend to embed reality in a totality of *expiration*: we have failed to pull the brake once and for all, the world is inevitably approaching its end. We are living in a reality that will soon expire. Now, it is already too late.

The logic of postponement is what structures fantasy. The fantasy of an end is the “ultimate fantasy,” for it unravels the hidden paradox driving the very mechanism of fantasy: *it is the impossibility of further postponement that demands postponement*. What triggers fantasy is a certain tension between the finality of the object, which grants this object the aura of uniqueness (“I must see her *now*, or it will be too late once and for all, she will be gone forever, the meeting cannot be postponed”), and the infinite postponement of this finality (“If I see her now, I won't be able to desire *forever* to see her now, so I had better postpone the meeting”). The hidden paradox driving the mechanism of

¹⁷ *Merry Crisis and a Happy New Fear* is a slogan that first appeared as graffiti in Athens during the 2008 Civil Unrest in Greece.

fantasy is unwrapped when the object of desire, which is covertly supposed to be forever postponed, is not something that can last, but *an end*, which is by definition something that cannot be postponed. Because its fundamental paradox has been revealed, the fantasy of the end needs to use a trick. The trick is that what keeps being postponed in the fantasy of the end (i.e., the expectation of a catastrophe) is not the end itself, but the very moment the subject starts to approach it. What keeps being postponed is not the end, but the beginning, the spot marking the beginning of the countdown, the red line defining the entrance of the world into an inevitable state of too-lateness, wherefrom everything will start to diminish into “the great void” — a blurry, undefined, and de-temporalized vision of The End. The idea of expiration is itself nothing but an exposure of this constellation.

Thinking in a Hegelian manner, however, too-lateness has nothing to do with the idea of expiration. There is no breaking point at which one would enter the state of being too late after all the late-comings, latenesses, and belatednesses that have formed and deformed history. There is no borderline where lateness as such would suddenly outrun itself or lag behind itself and turn into an inevitable and irreversible too-lateness. There is no edge over which time and the course of events might start dripping, performing the world’s final countdown. There is no red line marking the moment in which all the *lines of flight* of the world would start shrinking towards the point of final extinction.

If we take a closer look, we can see that there is a certain *doubling* inscribed in our *recognition of too-lateness*: in the very moment we realize that it is too late, we also become aware of the fact that it is our recognition of this too-lateness that has come too late. This immediately leads us to narcissistic self-accusation (which is but a flipside of self-victimization), in the sense that it is all our fault: if we had only realized on time that it will soon be too late, we could have acted differently and prevented the inevitable too-lateness we are now confronted with. We were

too late in realizing it will soon be too late, we were blind to the red line dividing the *not-yet-too-late* state of affairs (where many possibilities of how things could evolve were still open) and the realm of the *too-late-once-and-for-all* (where there is only one single and inevitable path left). Implying that “if we had only become aware of too-lateness on time, we could have prevented the course of events rushing towards the inevitable end.” And for that, because of our ignorance, it is now finally and uncompromisingly too late.

Such reasoning, which has recently become a common moralistic stance of different hegemonic discourses (such as the Anthropocene argument, the idea of environmental neo-liberalism, etc.), conceals, as it is instantly evident, the fact that it is structurally impossible to realize on time — say, in the very last moment — that it is (or that it will soon be) too late. Or, to put it the other way round: one is always too late in finding out that it is already too late. It is impossible to get ahead of too-lateness itself: if our recognition comes on time, it is not yet too late; but once it *is* too late, any recognition of it is by necessity also too late: this — and not the practical argument in the sense that philosophy is only interpreting the world — is the idea of the owl of Minerva.

7. It Is Too Late; But This Is Only the Beginning

It has always already been too late for the world. It is destined to perish. It has also always already been too late for the subject: it misses again and again not only its elusive object but also the encounter with itself. Recognition has always already been too late in realizing it was too late. Consciousness has always already been too late in relation to the development of the spirit or world history. This too-lateness, however, is not a vicious circle of some inevitable fate, which cannot be surpassed and can only be surrendered to. On the contrary, it is the very fact that it is too

late and the awareness of this fact that allow development in the direction of a new beginning.

Therein perhaps lies the paradoxical layout of Hegel's dialectics: although it has always already been too late, we are always only at the beginning. *In the beginning, there was too-lateness.* Being and nothing are in a permanent delay with respect to themselves. Hegel writes: "The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being—'has passed over,' not passes over" (Hegel 2010, pp. 59–60). The transition of being and nothing into one another is their very unity, but at the same time it is also something separate from them, which means they are distinguished yet indistinguishable, the same but other.¹⁸ Being cannot catch up with itself; it has always already passed into nothing and *at the same time* it has never yet passed into nothing. The same goes for nothing. It is caught up in the "never yet" and the "always already" structure of the missed encounter. But as much as this encounter is missed, it is also realized: "Their truth is therefore this *movement* of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: *becoming*, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just as immediately dissolved itself" (ibid., p. 60).

The first determination of being and nothing, their unity and their otherness, in which they are the same and not the same,

¹⁸ Jure Simoniti has demonstrated that the seemingly self-evident, Heideggerian "preponderance of being over nothing" was subconsciously subverted already in its very first historical appearance, in Parmenides' poem *On Nature*. Simoniti interprets the Parmenidean "Being" as a mere secondary means to neutralize and suppress the primary causality of juxtaposing "is" and "is not," the causality which was most notably manifested in the antagonism of two opinions, one burgeoning in the public space of ancient Greece and making way for the imminent emergence of sophism: "The imperative of affirmative judgments and the prohibition of negative ones does not ensue from some substance of Being, which rather is than is not, but from the preceding antagonisms of 'is'-es and 'is-not'-s, proliferating in the exclusively inter-subjective, proto-sophist space, one which will later be named 'public'" (Simoniti 2013, p. 90).

inseparable yet separated, is *becoming*. In becoming, being and nothing are *temporal yet out of time*.¹⁹ As soon as they are set up (*gesetzt*) as the *beginning*—the absolute beginning, which is itself a doubling, a split²⁰—and thereby also as *becoming, too-lateness is established*.

In too-lateness, it is not only being that “falls” into time, but also time that “falls” into being; into being that *is/is not* nothing. Through the twisted temporality of Hegel’s dialectics, which finds a powerful companion in *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead*, too-lateness not only intrinsically interconnects finitude and infinity, it also intertwines the world and the spirit.²¹

¹⁹ Here, temporality does not refer to the empirical but to the onto-logical notion of time.

²⁰ This is one of the common interpretations of Hegel’s concept of the beginning, also the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, advocated particularly by the Ljubljana school. Cf. *Problemi 3-4/13* (titled *Being, pure being*), especially the contributions by Dolar, Moder, and Simoniti (Dolar 2013, Moder 2013, and Simoniti 2013a).

²¹ Heidegger’s notorious critique of Hegel’s notion of time in *Being and Time* exposes the problem of the primordial temporality of spirit, culminating in the ultimate question of the primordial temporality of being: “Is there a way leading from primordial *time* to the meaning of *being*? Does time itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?” (Heidegger 1996, p. 398). Hegel does not clarify what this “falling into time” means *ontologically*, states Heidegger, and also does not explain whether the essential constitution of spirit as a negation of negation is possible in any other way than on the basis of primordial temporality. Regardless of these problems concerning Hegel’s commitment to (yet radicalization of) the “vulgar notion of time,” Hegel’s “construction” is, according to Heidegger, “prompted by his arduous struggle to conceive the ‘concretion of spirit’” (ibid., p. 396). The endeavor of Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Da-sein* is therefore to begin with the “concretion” of factually thrown existence, and to reveal the temporality that would make such existence primordially possible. In the existential analytic of *Da-sein*, “‘spirit’ does not fall into time, but exists as the primordial *temporalizing* of the temporality” (ibid.). Leaving aside the vast literature on Heidegger’s critique of Hegel’s notion of time, let us juxtapose here only the reading of the Ljubljana school, which explicates Hegel’s dialectics through the idea of *Nachträglichkeit* and repetition as conceived by Freud and

What is the excessive tenderness towards the world? It is the nasty and unjust pretending that the world eludes any contradiction. It is imposing on the world the idea of a well-functioning mechanism that is perpetually improving its wellbeing. Now, we are faced with it: it is *not*. Perhaps, the captivity in paradoxes enveloping both world and spirit stems precisely from the all-encompassing too-lateness, from the repeatedly missed encounter, which prevents any violence of a harmonic vision of the world from being projected upon it.

It is the task of the spirit of the twenty-first century to walk in, to embrace and to embody this fundamental too-lateness

Lacan (cf. Zupančič 2007, Dolar 2013, Kolenc 2016 and 2018, Aumiller 2018; Aumiller, for example, finds repetition in the tetradic logic of dialectics, which she calls “twice two”: something new “emerges in the relationship between the split in the first double and the doubling of the split itself in the second double” [Aumiller 2018, pp. 260–61]). Here, it is important to understand that *Nachträglichkeit* is not just about a simple retroactive arrangement of the past, about a simple reversal of causal logic (in the sense that, for example, the trauma didn’t cause the illness, but the illness retroactively produced the trauma as its alleged cause). What retroactivity brings about is a certain slip of causal logic. The point here is that a certain *presence* (the presence of the now, e.g., a present event) *retroactively* produces its own origin, which means that this presence is at the same time the cause *and* the effect of this origin. Thereby, the presence of the now is doubled—it is *the same* (for it is one single presence) but *other* (for it bears two different causal functions). Because of this, *Nachträglichkeit* is not only directed backwards: within the very return to the past, a certain “intentionality” towards the future is established. The paradoxical moving forward through the eventual moving backward is possible because of a slip of causality at work in the constitution of the signifying chain that produces (the subject’s and the world’s) history. On the basis of this reading, we can suggest that it is precisely the slip of causality and the logic of *Nachträglichkeit* which fundamentally temporalize Hegel’s dialectics as its irreparable too-lateness. (In this sense, too-lateness, which is not Hegel’s own concept, must be delimited from Hegel’s more specific notion of belatedness [*Verspätung*].) From this perspective, Hegel seems not to be just half-way in performing Heidegger’s task of the temporalization of being (and its consequent ontologization of time), but rather on the way towards a de-ontologization of time through the temporalization of the original cut as the co-determination of being and nothing/non-being.

by surpassing the alleged reconciliation of finitude and infinity taking place both in the falsification of neo-liberalism and in the fantasy of The End. The end of the world is not something that will happen in the future—it is already here. It is the task of the spirit to take this ending upon itself and to try to resolve the conceptual-existential paradox of what it is.

The end is not the end—not because it never really ends, but exactly because it very much and most radically does, exactly because *the end itself is subjected to the process of ending*—if anywhere, it is there that something also begins. Precisely because it is too late, it is not yet too late. (Hegel was himself a passionate chess player, after all.)

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Bara Kolenc

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