



Theodicy - Violence - Benjamin to Žižek

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Theodicies of Violence: From Benjamin to Žižek

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the theodicy of violence in its two different forms: the antinomian and the hypernomian. The theodicy of violence deliberately blurs the lines between the messianic idiom of Walter Benjamin's *Toward the Critique of Violence* (2021), with its stark contrast between mythic and divine violence, and the Lacanian idiom of various subjective positions toward the symbolic order. While the antinomian line turns out to be close to the discursive strategies of the Hysteric, the hypernomian line resembles those of the Pervert. My goal is to present them in purely descriptive and value-free terms. I will thus begin with the close reading of *the Critique of Violence*, which is, in fact, an apology of a certain form of political violence, and then juxtapose it with another praise of violence, originating in Slavoj Žižek's deliberately "perverse" reading of both Paul and Benjamin. The difference between them will be revealed by the Benjaminian phrase: *for the sake of the living*. I will try to prove that while violence for the

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antinomian/hysterical line can be justified only with regard to life conceived as survival, for the hypernomian/perverse line violence becomes a goal in itself.

Keywords

theodicy, violence, Benjamin, thanatopolitics, Žižek

From Mere Life to More Life: Antinomianism in Benjamin

From Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, from
Mount Zion a band of survivors.

Isaiah 37:32

The classical locus from which all reflection on late-modern theodicies of violence must begin is Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay, *Toward the Critique of Violence* (2021), a text precursory to all later attempts to justify the use of violent means for political ends by calling them "divine." In this essay, where for the first time Benjamin articulates the idea of the "net of guilt" (*Schuld-zusammenhang*), Jewish messianism positions itself against the mythic totality of self-enclosed worldly immanence, for which there is no transcendent, otherworldly, alternative. By presenting such an alternative in the form of radical transcendence, Judaism offers an anti-mythic and antinomian ideal of the otherworldly justice, the main vehicle of which is divine violence: "Just as God is opposed to myth in all spheres, so divine violence runs counter to mythic violence" (ibid.: 58).

In contrast to Abrahamic monotheisms, the Greek tradition is inherently *tragic*: the gods are part of the natural immanence that runs on the basis of the cyclical *genesis kai phthora* (generation and decay), becoming and perishing, birth and decay. In the tragic worldview, death is the instrument of justice as the right ordinance of time; it puts an end to each and every single being's hubristic desire to linger on: survive as long as possible, which, in fact, is always longer than possible, that is, permitted by fate. In Benjamin's account, this hubris is best personified by Niobe, who boasted of her vital powers proved by numerous progeniture: "Niobe's arrogance conjures up the disaster that befalls her not because it injures law but because it challenges fate—challenges fate to a combat in which fate must triumph, bringing a law to light, if need be, only in its victory" (ibid. 2021: 55). For Benjamin, the tragic end of Niobe, herself turned to stone, and of her children, murdered by the gods in a bloodbath, represents the gist of the immanent sense of justice as the rule most aptly expressed by Anaximander: whatever comes into existence can linger only

for a while and then perish—rather sooner than later, before its “inordinate” survival disturbs the predetermined order of things.

By regulating and watching over the timely “harmony of being”—which in his commentary on *Der Spruch des Anaximander* Martin Heidegger calls *der Fug*, “joint” (Heidegger, 1975: 41)—death becomes the main instrument of ontological tuning and the very matrix of natural law as operating on the basis of mythic violence. Jacques Derrida called this form of violence a generalized *peine de mort*, a “death penalty”: inscribed into the very fabric of mythic thinking, this violence hangs as a verdict over anything that lingered for too long in being and thus dared to crave more life (Derrida 2016: 242).¹ Derrida’s protest against the Heideggerian praise of Anaximander’s rule belongs to the same Jewish messianic line that challenges tragic fate and goes against the natural law of the death penalty, earlier corroborated by Benjamin (2021). By claiming that deconstruction “remains, and must remain (that is the injunction) in the disjointure of the *Un-Fug*” (Derrida, 1994: 33), Derrida continues the “fight” inaugurated by Benjamin in which fate does not necessarily have to triumph over the guilty life.

Within the mythico-tragic immanence, however, *Ananke* (the Fate) always has the last word, by issuing a death sentence on all the living who wish “to stay, to remain” (Rosenzweig 1984: 4). The ground of the mythological order, taking the form of the all-encompassing “net of guilt,” is the assumption that *all life is a priori guilty and must be punished*: “according to ancient mythical thinking, the designated bearer of inculpation [is] mere life” (Benjamin

¹ In the 1946 piece *Der Spruch des Anaximander*, Heidegger gives his own translation of the famous aphorism of Anaximander on justice [*dike*] whose aim is precisely to eliminate the “lingering”: “But that from which things arise [*genesis*] also gives rise to the passing away (*phthora*), according to what is necessary; for things render justice and pay penalty to one another for their injustice [*adikia*], according to the ordinance of time” (Heidegger, 1975: 20). It is, therefore, just for the things to pass away, so that they can give place to other things not yet in existence. If any of them lingers too long—or simply *lingers* (*verweilt*)—and resists the just ordinance of time, it becomes an agent of *adikia*: by showing all signs of hubris, manifesting itself precisely in the prolonged will-to-be, it brings on itself an even harsher form of penalty (*tisin*). The will is thus accused of an excessive “craving to persist” and “clinging to itself”: “*Lingering as persisting* . . . is an *insurrection* on behalf of sheer endurance” (ibid.: 43; emphasis added), i.e., a rebellion against the *dike* of all things, which causes human beings, those bearers of the will, to step out of the world of *phusis* and enter history as the “realm of errancy”; the time of *Un-Fug*, “out-of-jointness,” and arbitrary violence done to Being. The more *Dasein* wishes to linger in the world, the more it sins against the just ordinance of time; it is thus only when it immediately admits that it is “present only insofar as it lets itself belong to the non-present” (ibid.)—that is, if it sees itself as always already dying and in this manner repaying the debt of existence, it is in the right: “In the jointure whatever lingers awhile keeps to its while. *It does not incline toward the disjointure of sheer persistence*. The jointure belongs to whatever lingers awhile, which in turn belongs in the jointure. *The jointure is order*” (ibid.; emphasis added).

2021: 59).² The mythic violence, therefore, operates on the grounds of the universal guilt of all life: the tragic original sin of *hamartia*, which pertains to life as such and must be punished by death—preferably a bloody one that sheds blood as the liquid, unruly, and excessive element that endangers the stony order of perpetual cosmos, where all beings outside the living know their right place and time (hence the petrification of Niobe who, turned to stone, returns to her right place in the “harmony of being”). For the gods of the mythological order, the chaotic nature of blood serves as proof that life is a priori suspect and punishable: a rogue being or what Derrida, following Benjamin’s notion of the “metaphysical criminal,” calls a *voyou* (Derrida 2005: 68).³ This mythic association with blood is, for Benjamin, the original locus of the topos of *blosses Leben*, “mere life”—a life reduced to the hubristic desire of “inordinate” survival—which always threatens to disturb the quiet sterility of Greek metaphysical harmony (*Fug*):

For blood is the symbol of mere life. Now, the release [*Auslösung*] of legal violence stems from the inculcating [*Verschuldung*] of mere natural life, which delivers the living, innocent and unfortunate, into the hands of an expiation that “atones” [*sühnt*] for this inculpation [*Verschuldung*—and doubtless also de-expiates [*entsühnt*] the guilty, not of guilt, to be sure, but of law . . . Mythic violence is blood-violence over mere life *for the sake of violence itself*; divine violence is pure violence over all of life *for the sake of the living* [*um des Lebendigen willen*] (Benjamin 2021: 54; emphasis added).

While Benjamin protests against the tragic arrangement of being, which dooms life to be a priori guilty, punishable, and incorrigibly deviant (*voyou*), an object of contempt of the sublime order-keeping gods, he nonetheless refrains from an affirmation of *mere life* as such. Whereas mere life remains

² Although Benjamin creates his concept of *Schuldzusammenhang*—a “net of guilt”—in reference to Greek mythology, the real origin may in fact lie in *Pirke Avoth*, the germ-cell of the Talmud, in which Akiva paints a vision of life as based on constant collateral damage/debt that will need to be repaid on the Day of Judgment: “He (Rabbi Akiva) used to say, everything is given on collateral, and a *net is spread over all the living*. The store is open, the Storekeeper extends credit, the ledger is open, the hand writes, and whoever wants to borrow may come borrow. The collectors make their rounds constantly every day, and they collect from a person whether he realizes it or not, and they have what to rely upon. The judgment is true, and everything is prepared for the banquet (of Leviathan).” (Torah 3, 20)

³ “The *voyou* can also be one of those ‘great criminals [*grosse Verbrecher*]’ who, as Benjamin tells us in *Toward the Critique of Violence*, fascinates because he defies the state, that is, the institution that, in representing the law, secures and maintains for itself a monopoly on violence. The ‘great criminal’ *voyou* thus rises up, in an *insurrection of countersovereignty*, to the level or height of the sovereign state—which is exactly the same as the “*insurrection on behalf of sheer endurance*,” (Derrida 2005: 68) so strenuously rejected by Heidegger.

innocent of the crime of hubris implied by the mythic “net of guilt,” it is still guilty of its own unhappiness because it lets itself be passively immersed in the mythic cycle of *genesis kai phthora*. Benjamin’s attack on mythic violence against mere life, therefore, does not lead to the symmetrical endorsement of *blosses Leben* as the metaphysical underdog and the simple victim of the law. Hence his critique of the modern cult of the “sanctity of life,” characteristic of the German *Lebensphilosophie* of his times, which merely reverses the hierarchy within the immanent order of the tragic myth and, for this reason, is not antinomian enough. If life that desires “to stay, to remain” is to be truly liberated, the *whole* mythic “harmony of being” must be destroyed: “Genuine divine violence can manifest itself other than destructively only in the coming world (of fulfillment). Where, by contrast, divine violence enters into the earthly world, it breathes destruction” (ibid.: 83).

For Benjamin, therefore, the only way out is a radical Exodus from self-enclosed mythic immanence, where it is not the natural life that gains protection, not *blosses Leben*, but a “more life” of the singular living, augmented and intensified, taken out from the snares of the tragic, self-repetitive, cyclical nature. This Exodus, however, can only be achieved through a divine violent intervention, where “getting out of Egypt,” *yetsiat mitsraim*, is achieved as a consequence of *Gewalt* done to the natural realm, symbolized by the Egyptian “dark kingdom”: a divine violence which introduces an abrupt *caesura*—cut, separation, incision, *coupure*—into natural life, yet without breaking with life as such. Within the Jewish tradition, those who can escape the tragic involvement in guilt and death through its violent demise are designated as the “band of survivors” or the “messianic remnant” (*sh’erit*): the latter refers to the rest of the living that had survived the crisis, managed to “linger on” despite the collapse of the whole cosmic harmony, and can now hope for a new Zion—“the coming world (of fulfillment)”—where survivors will find a new, happier home, no longer being punished for their desire to live on. This new life, liberated in its innocent commitment to survival, no longer conceived as a sheer prolongation of “mere life,” but as a qualitatively and essentially new “more life” (or the Derridean *sur-vie*), does not have to be immortal, as in the promise laid by the Pauline messianism. It may just as well be a finite life, yet denaturalized and defatalized, finally able to leave the toxic “net of guilt” behind.

For Benjamin, the exemplary intervention of divine violence is the massacre of Korah and his aristocratic comrades who rebelled against Moses and what he stood for: the effort of Exodus as the exit from the mythological form of life. Their total obliteration symbolizes a violent disappearance of the “old man” whose ways are still rooted in the natural hierarchies of the Egyptian-mythic order—as opposed to the petrification of Niobe, which merely perpetuates the tragic *Schuldzusammenhang*. Korah impersonates the old life which must be destroyed—yet not because it is life as such, as in the mythic order, but because it is a lazy inertial life that still relies on the mythic powers of nature and the natural law:

The legend of Niobe may be contrasted by way of example with God's judgment on Korah's horde. The judgment strikes privileged ones, Levites; it strikes them unannounced, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. At the same time, however, precisely in annihilating, it is also de-expiating, and one cannot fail to recognize a profound connection between the bloodless and the de-expiating character of this violence . . . If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates them; if mythic violence inculcates [verschuldend] and expiates [sühnend] at the same time, divine violence de-expiates [entsühnend]; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal in a bloodless manner. (ibid.: 58–59)

Korah's old life must thus be absolutely overcome with one purifying strike of divine violence that leaves no trace—distinct from mythic violence, which always generates an endless chain of tragic curse/*Ate*, with its self-preserving laws of retribution and revenge. In their new translation of *Toward the Critique of Violence* (2021), Peter Fenness and Julia Ng decide to render the word *Entsühnung*, formerly translated as “exoneration,” in a semi-Heideggerian manner, which radically inverts its colloquial meaning: thanks to their translatory maneuver, the divine *de-expiation* (*Ent-sühnung*) can now stand in stark contrast to the mythic *expiation* (*Sühnung*). Benjamin calls God's purifying strike “de-expiating” in opposition to the punitive interventions of mythic violence (ibid.: 57), which simply let the guilt be atoned: divine violence “de-expiates” because there was never an original sin from which life had to be redeemed. Life had always been innocent, yet simultaneously unhappy, because it is forcedly (*gewaltig*) immersed in the tragic *Schuldzusammenhang*: if there is any guilt here then it is to be conceived in precisely the reverse sense to the original sin of hubris, as it is the timid lack of it. Thus, to gain hope for happiness—a full enjoyment of its ontological innocence—life must embolden itself and go through violent trauma, which when it “enters into the earthly world, it breathes destruction” (ibid.: 83). But if life survives the total shattering of mythic immanence, which sustained life in its curtailed “distorted form,”⁴ it can then survive anything—or rather, it can finally shed distortion and come to its own essence as a “structural survival,” destined to “linger,” “stay,” “remain” or, in Spinoza's terms, exercise its inner *conatus* as “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being.”⁵ If the actual essence of the being is nothing but the striving to linger/live on without

⁴ The motif of the distortion (*Entstellung*) that life “assumes in oblivion” emerges in Benjamin's essay on Kafka (Benjamin 1968: 133).

⁵ “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being. The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing” (Spinoza 1994: 159).

limits (*peras*) set a priori on this essential “appetite,” then to be happy is to be able to enjoy life as acting according to one’s own essence.

Set on a happy, undistorted life, Jewish messianism in Benjamin therefore forms a strict alternative to tragic immersion in the net of guilt, which a priori dooms all living beings to the unhappiness of “unfulfillment”: “the coming world (of fulfillment),” or Isaiah’s new Zion as the “band of survivors” final destination is a promised land of the living who, having survived the traumatic destruction of “the earthly world,” catch a breath on the other seashore, as if born again after the most perilous *Engführung* (to use Paul Celan’s poetic term for a “narrow escape”) (Szondi, 1983). Judaic tradition is full of such violent topoi in which life attempts to shed the distorted form of “mere life” (*survie*) and liberate itself as “more life” (*sur-vie*). While the Exodus narrative is the archetype of the life-changing divine intervention, the other, equally significant, is Yom Kippur, which repeats the critical events that happened in the desert (*bamidbar*) in the ritual of separation and—hopefully—reunion or “At-One-Ment.”

One would, therefore, be mistaken to regard The Day of At-One-Ment as simply a day of *atonement* for earthly sins (even if often presented like that in its “mythic” disguise). It is the culmination of the “violent days,” *die gewaltigen Tage* or *yamim nora'im*, which, in the crucial fragment of the ritual, performs the dramatic moment of “de-expiation”: the law is suspended, yet the guilt in front of God persists—and asks for forgiveness. This forgiveness, however, does not take the form of the mythic *Sühnen*: it is rather a merciful reverse of the divine violence itself. The whole of Israel once again gathers at the “foot of the mountain,” which the wrathful God threatens to lift and then drop on their heads, unless they accept His teaching: “If you accept the Torah, all the better; if not, it will be your grave” (Ps 76:9). In this moment of absolute crisis, all oaths and laws are revoked, including the *brit*—the Covenant—which must be either reconfirmed, if the crisis is to pass, or perish forever in the lethal fire.⁶

⁶ *Pace* this view, Peter Fenves claims that the destruction of Korah and his company is a completely unique event that has no equivalent in other manifestations of divine violence in the Hebrew Bible: “According to Numbers 26:10, Korah and his company became a ‘sign,’ yet the Bible does not specify what they signify. Benjamin fills in the lacuna by making them into figures of ‘de-expiation’—which has nothing to do with atonement, propitiation, absolution, satisfaction, conciliation, forgiveness, or the like. *The day of their destruction is no Yom Kippur*. It represents, rather, a paradigmatic countermovement to the encroachment of law over the surface of the earth” (Fenves, in Benjamin 2021: 34; emphasis added). True, but only if we think about Yom Kippur in a mythic manner as a form of atonement that perpetuates the cycle of sin and exoneration. Here, however, I am trying to put forward a non-mythic interpretation of Yom Kippur as breaking out of this very cycle.

Only Violence Can Do Against Violence: The Violent Day that Forgives

In Judaism man is always somehow a *survivor*, an inner something, whose exterior was seized by the current of the world and carried off while he himself, *what is left of him*, remains standing on the shore. Something within him is *waiting*.

Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*

Benjamin, the radical antinomian thinker writing passionately against *Torah-nomos- ius* alike,⁷ rarely gets juxtaposed with Emmanuel Levinas, the equally passionate defender of the halakhic *law*—yet, when it comes to divine violence and its revolutionary consequences for the immanent arrangement of being, they speak quite unisono. This fact did not escape Derrida’s attention: his early essay from *Writing and Difference*, “Violence and Metaphysics,” portrays Levinas as a thinker who wages a violent war against the tragicomycal “ontology of violence” (Derrida 2005). In his second Talmudic Lecture, Levinas indeed describes the Torah as the transcendent justice that, paraphrasing Benjamin, challenges the natural order of things to a fight in which the fateful rule of immanence does not have to triumph:

Being receives a challenge from the Torah, which jeopardizes its pretention of keeping itself above or beyond good and evil. In challenging the absurd “that’s the way it is” claimed by the Power of the powerful, the man of the Torah transforms being into human history. *Meaningful movement jolts the Real* . . . Only the Torah, as seemingly utopian knowledge, assures man of a place. (Levinas, 1990: 39)

The Torah is a “meaningful movement” of pure justice which violently “jolts the Real” and, as Derrida would say in reference to both Benjamin and Levinas, “throws it out of joint” (*ent-setzt*): the destruction of the natural *status quo*, symbolized by Egypt as the mythic realm of nature, emerges here as the necessary condition of the messianic dynamic which creates history proper, that is, a temporality that left the cyclical natural tide of *genesis kai*

⁷ This phrase derives from Taubes’s description of Paul’s refutation of law as deliberately non-specific, but it can also be applied to Benjamin: “Does he mean the Torah, does he mean the law of the universe, does he mean the natural law? It’s all of these in one” (Taubes 2003: 24).

phthora and the “death penalty” administering the immanent “ordinance of time.” The u-topian no-place of the just man of the Torah is the transcendent vantage point that can pass judgment over the world as it is from out of this world. As a *no-place*, it is, in Benjamin’s words, exempt from the mythic *Schuldzusammenhang* in which the singular living can never judge the whole, because it is always already and a priori judged by it—and found inescapably guilty (Benjamin 2021). It is, therefore, life—always the interest of the singular living, its living-on beyond the tragic “net of guilt”—that gives the meaningful movement its secret meaning: the Torah is most of all *torat hayim*, the teaching of a new life capable of “lingering on” after the violent caesura sundering from nature’s confines, which gives birth but also gives death in a short spin of finitude, or what Heidegger (1975) calls “awhile” (*die Weile*). In *Toward the Critique of Violence*, Benjamin insists on the divine destruction’s necessity in saving the soul of the living via a violent (though not necessarily discontinuous) passage from mere life to more life, which must involve the strike of *die göttliche Gewalt*, traumatizing life and pushing it out of its natural joints—yet not in the gesture of hostile contempt for life, which would like to kill it in a bloodbath (as is the case with the gods of the tragic order), but always and only for the sake of the living.

The bloodlessness of the divine violence clearly indicates that it does not target life as such in order to annihilate it, but rather that it wants to preserve life and simultaneously transform it. The Benjaminian bloodless destruction would thus come close to what psychoanalysis calls an “enabling trauma”: a crisis that allows the subject to survive, yet also forces him to re-find himself anew and radically reinterpret “what is left.”⁸ According to André Green, psychoanalyst of the Kleinian school, life’s fundamental opposition to death is reflected in the former’s traumatic impact on the latter’s inertial permanence: “Psychical life—like life—is merely a fruitful disorder . . . All erotism is violence, just as *life does violence to inertia*” (Green, 2001: 127). When translated back into Benjamin, Green’s insight lets us see the divine bloodless violence as representing pure life at its apex of opposing the forces of mythic repetitive and law-preserving inertia: its aim is to traumatize the immanence immersed in the tragic rule of death and break the cycle. Mythic bloody violence, on the other hand, represents the inertia of the perennial *genesis kai phthora* cycle, opposing the anarchic forces of life by law-preserving violence aimed at sheer repetition—which psychoanalytic theory since Freud associates with the death drive and the compulsion to repeat (*Wiederholungszwang*). While the bloody mythic violence manifests absolute hatred for life as the rogue force of disorder, disturbing the “boundaries” of stony “harmony of being,”

⁸ The concept, coined by Cathy Caruth, refers to a complex psychic reality: the enabling trauma is and will always remain a trauma, yet, when survived, it paves the way toward a new kind of subjective life, constantly pondering its “enigma of survival” (Caruth 1996: 58).

and compulsively repeats strikes against the living, the bloodless divine violence takes us beyond the mythico-tragic dualism of life and death into a more complex dialectics of two distinct forms of life: the mere life immersed in the immanent *kata physein* order, on the one hand—and more life transcending this order in the free pursuit of happiness, on the other.

The essential difference between these two types of violence is, again, well illustrated by Levinas, who in the same Talmudic reading interprets God’s famous warning—“If you accept the Torah, all is well, if not here will be your grave” (Ps 76:9)—not as a *death threat*, characteristic of the law-preserving mythic violence, but precisely as an enabling trauma that shatters the mythic world and enjoins the survivors to “choose life” (*u’ baharta ba’hayim*) as a “fruitful disorder” going boldly against the inertial-cyclical order of being (or “ontological violence”). In Levinas’s translation, God presents us the following alternative: if you take the Torah as *torat hayim*, you shall find another, happier life, but if you return to *mitsrayim*, “the land of the dead,” expect nothing but the short and brutish *Sein-zum-Tode*, inevitably punished by the fateful death sentence. As we also know from Benjamin’s reflection on the naked life revealed in the moment of tradition’s absolute crisis—“they stopped at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 19:17)—Franz Kafka interprets God’s warning as a violent threat: the village inhabitants’ life at the foot of the castle hill is permanently suspended because of a vague menace coming from the sovereign above. But Benjamin and Levinas see it differently: the divine violence strikes “without threat” (Benjamin 2021: 58), immediately creating the possibility of another life, achievable only via the traumatizing and violent “jolt”—a sudden somersault into more life, which necessarily implies the destruction of the former mere life. Just as “only God can do against God,” (Goethe 1998: 177) so must the mythic violence of the immanent deities be opposed by *die göttliche Gewalt*: only violence can do against violence.

This rule forms the very gist of the antinomian theodicy of violence—a doctrine that, merely outlined by Benjamin in *Toward a Critique of Violence*, acquires a full *imago* in the thought of Jacob Taubes, for whom the best executioner of the antinomian scheme was Paul. The *Theology of Paul* (Taubes 2003), a late series of lectures conducted right before Taubes’s death in 1987, portrays Jesus’s main apostle in deliberate contrast to Carl Schmitt’s famous take on Paul, which focuses mostly on the figure of the *katechon* or the restrainer of the apocalypse. In Taubes’s alternative reading, Paul emerges as a more complex antinomian thinker: not only, and not even primarily because he sublates old Jewish law into a new Christian love and grace, but because he plunges into the abyss of the “prolonged Yom Kippur” during which the old *brit* between God and the chosen people becomes null and void—yet not to be reconfirmed in its old form after the crisis, but rather replaced with a wholly new covenant, this time between a new God and a new universal people whose natural/ethnic identities would have also become erased in the annihilating process.

Just as Gershom Scholem (2016: 797–98) juxtaposed Paul with Nathan of Gaza in his account of the Sabbatian theology,⁹ Taubes too emphasizes the antinomian features of Christian revolution: only a true Messiah can be a “pearl diver” and plunge into the negative abyss—the total nullification of the existent order—to rescue a hidden treasure, buried under shards of death and destruction: the surviving remnant of the “children of God” who are neither Jew nor Greek, neither man nor woman, just point should be after the bracketed reference. The step toward something better—a new covenant, a new religion, a new social arrangement bound between free universal people of equal metaphysical standing—cannot be conceived in a natural evolutionary manner; it must involve a violent break, a caesura of crisis and negativity, which totally annuls the old hierarchical order and searches for a “band of survivors” in the depth of ruins. On Taubes’s reading, the Pauline *metanoia*, announcing the birth of a New Man, is thus a violent operation, where violence is not an accidental by-product of a change, but is its essential component.

In the next section, we shall see that the concept of the crisis involved by the Pauline *metanoia* lends itself to differing interpretations and thus different theodicies of violence. The specific feature of the line inaugurated by Benjamin and continued by Taubes is that it takes Yom Kippur as the crisis model, in which the “earthly world” is exposed directly to divine violence—as well as, equally importantly, to *forgiveness*. It is precisely forgiveness of the Day of the Great Pardon, which explains the Benjaminian distinction between mythic violence as violence for itself and divine violence as the violence *for the sake of the living*. On Yom Kippur, life itself is forgiven on the most fundamental level: simultaneously expiated from the *true guilt* in God’s eyes, which is the failure to live according to the divine *torat hayim*, and de-expiated, that is, released from the *false guilt* of the “original sin,” which is implied by the old laws of the mythic/Egyptian order. The suspension of all laws, therefore, exposes the living both to direct divine violence, unmediated by the gift of the Torah, and to equally boundless divine mercy which exonerates from guilt in the absence of law. In his lectures on Paul’s theology, addressed to the Christian audience, Taubes explains the Jewish antinomian logic lurking behind the new Pauline *brit*:

Paul, after all . . . speaks of nothing other than atonement [*Versöhnung*]. Now it is my thesis that the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, whose status in the Jewish calendar is the same as your Christmas, translates this controversy between God and Moses into ritual. *The day itself forgives.*

⁹ The analogies with Christianity, especially Christian antinomianism, abound, particularly in Scholem’s *Sabbatai Sevi*: “There was a core of potential antinomianism in the legacy which Sabbatai bequeathed to later Sabbatian doctrine as elaborated by Nathan. In the history of the Sabbatian movement, Nathan’s writings played a role similar to that of Paul’s letters in the development of Christian doctrine” (2016: 797–98).

It says in the Talmud: *ha-yom mekhaper*. Not everything, but it does forgive; it has the power of atonement. Because it says—this Talmudically is the verse—on this day I will cover up all your sins before God. Before the Lord you will be purified. So the day forgives . . . My thesis—which is not arbitrary—is that the evening of Yom Kippur is in the grip of this trembling. (Taubes 2003: 32–34)

The forgiving/de-expiating and life-affirming aspect of Yom Kippur is even more pronounced in Derrida: not as mere compensation for the “trembling” of *yamim nora'im*, (violent days), but, in the Benjaminian manner, as its very essence. On Derrida’s reading, the violent crisis is not to be solved but is to remain permanent—as “the eternal Yom Kippur” or *Yom Coupure*—and switch the paradigm within itself: from the mythic threat to messianic promise; from the tragic *abeyance* of a bare life arrested “at the foot of the mountain,” as if on the threshold between the mythic and the coming world, to the messianic possibility of survival that *cuts* life (hence *coupure*) off all the nets—the “net of guilt,” as well as the safety nets of the either Old or New Covenant. The revocation of all laws and oaths becomes thus a true life-changing opening: a chance of a radical “lucky break”¹⁰ from all the deals/covenants, here symbolized by the “white presence” of life’s regained innocence. To survive all oaths, covenants, laws, nets—and *still live*; more than that, *survive* all earthly order and find one’s essence in *sur-vie*, “the most intense life possible”—that is Derrida’s stake in his non-tragic experience of Yom Kippur as the “day that forgives”: “the day of the Great Pardon, presence of white, my immaculate tallith, the only virgin tallith in the family, like the feathers of the cocks and hens that Haim Aime wants to be white for the sacrifice before Kippur” (Derrida 1993: 245–46). The whiteness—immaculate, virginal, light as a feather—calls symbolically for an absolute forgiveness: return to the innocence, the clean sheet of a free soul, no longer burdened by a guilt suspended together with oaths and laws. Yet, despite the appeasing Derridean rhetoric of love and pardon, we can easily detect here the same antinomian scheme operative in all Jewish messianism: only divine violence, which interrupts the rule of the “earthly” order, can do against

¹⁰ According to Jonathan Lear, the Chicago philosopher and psychoanalyst, the *lucky break* arrives when a person, so far encumbered by the heavy task of giving a symbolic rationale and justification to her every motivation, affect, word, or behaviour, suddenly gains a distance to this compulsive obligation to present herself as at-oned and whole, and with deep sigh relief, exclaims—“this is crap!” (Lear 2000: 117). This moment of crisis—a rapid *coupure* of her efforts of symbolic reconciliation—instead of darkening her misery, makes her, paradoxically, happy. For happiness, opened by such a lucky break, means nothing more than the acceptance of life in its undistorted form of the remainder/remnant, i.e., as a *sur-vie* always excessive in regard to meaning—a “too much” of sheer energetic quantity, disrupting the qualitative field of sense, be it the Lacanian symbolic sphere or the Benjaminian mythic order.

law-preserving mythic violence. This violent destruction, however, occurs not because it pleases God in his apocalyptic wrath against the “earthly” sinners, but *for the sake of the living* who should pass through the crisis as the “band of survivors”: it is the living remnant that is the object of forgiveness inherent to divine violence. As Moses informs the trembling tribe when he returned from the Sinai for the second time with a new set of tablets: “The Lord was unwilling to destroy you” (Deut. 10:11).¹¹

Following his own concept of the “eternal *Yom Coupure*” as defining the position of human subjectivity, Derrida (2011: 51–52) proposes to call it a “structural survivor.” The structural survival, though traumatically affected by violent crises, breaks, and losses, preserves nonetheless a tenacious *continuity* in which the subject accepts death as the predicament of finitude, but refuses to ever “prefer” it to life:

We are structurally survivors . . . But, having said that, I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say . . . about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an *unconditional affirmation of life* . . . my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because *survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible*. (Derrida 2011: 51–52)

We shall yet see, in the next section, that this model of subjectivity—based on the uncanny continuity of survival as “that which remains” and its messianic transformation in “the most intense life possible,” happy in its fully affirmed choice of life—will be most vehemently negated by the perverse party that derives the emergence of the human subject from the opposite choice: the one of death.

¹¹ The dialectics of *sh'erit*, which lives through apocalyptic violence and is surrounded by divine forgiveness as if in the eye of the cyclone, does not escape Giorgio Agamben, who comments on the famous representation of the surviving righteous with animal heads (perhaps, with a view of symbolizing their tenacious vitality): “According to the rabbinic tradition, the righteous in question are not dead at all; they are, on the contrary, the representatives of the remnant of Israel, that is, of the righteous who are *still alive* at the moment of the Messiah’s coming. As we read in the Apocalypse of Baruch, ‘And Behemoth will appear from its land, and the Leviathan will rise from the sea: the two monsters which I formed on the fifth day of creation and which I have kept until that time shall be nourishment for *all who are left*’”: (Agamben 2004: 2 emphasis added).

The Hysterics versus the Perverts: The Hard Core of the Messianic Tradition

Night and day he must have but one thought, one aim—merciless destruction. Striving cold-bloodedly and indefatigably toward this end, he must be prepared to destroy himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that stands in the path of the revolution.

Sergey Genadievich Nechayev, *The Revolutionary Catechism*

It is precisely the enigmatic Benjaminian formula—*for the sake of the living*—that differentiates the two strains of late-modern theodicies of violence: the antinomian and the hypernomian. Prima facie, they have much in common: they both target the status quo of the law as its main enemy and justify violence in their anti-legal practices. But they also radically differ in their strategies.¹²

According to Jacques Lacan’s classification of the subjective positions toward the law of the Other, the antinomian strategy resembles the one of the Hysteric: it attacks the symbolic order (or the Benjaminian “mythic law”) as if from the outside, clutching to the remnant of life, which the Hysteric perceives as external to the system (Lacan 1992). When Benjamin says that “the domination of law over the living ceases with mere life” (2021: 59; emphasis added), he designates *blosses Leben* as precisely such a non-assimilable remnant that, with the help of divine violence and always acting for the sake of the living, can be transformed into a messianic “band of survivors.” The Hysteric, therefore, positions himself toward the symbolic order as a “structural survivor” who violently assaults the law, by taking the side of life that can never be completely dominated nor covered by the mythic “net of guilt,” as seen in Gérard Wajcman’s succinct definition: “We’ll give the name of hysteric to this object which cannot be mastered by knowledge and therefore remains outside of history, even outside its own” (1982: 11). In that sense, the whole of the Jewish messianic discourse can be summed up by the subtitle to Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*:

¹² I take this distinction from Elliot Wolfson’s polemic with Gershom Scholem who famously described the kabbalistic forms of messianism as antinomian, i.e. going against the legal prescriptions of the Jewish law and eventually aiming at its total annihilation. According to Wolfson, the kabbalistic practices are not so much antinomian as rather hypernomian: “That is, in kabbalistic doctrine, the lawful confrontation with the limits of the law occasions a hypernomianism, which must be distinguished from antinomianism. From a kabbalistic perspective there can be a persuasive argument for one to surpass the laws, but always in tension with fulfilling them, and this most evidently in their abrogation” (Wolfson 2002). In my essay, however, I want to maintain the distinction, by attempting to show that these two strategies – antinomian and hypernomian – lead to two very different theodicies of violence.

“An Essay on Exteriority” (1969). Just as the Levinasian Infinite is an irreducible remnant of alterity, which cannot be assimilated by knowledge of the whole, so is the messianic Hysteric in the position of remnant-survivor, outside of history and language, always only waiting for the “coming world (of fulfillment).”¹³

In the Lacanian system, the direct juxtaposition of the Hysteric with the Pervert runs the risk of a categorial error—the Hysteric belongs to the four types of discourse, while the Pervert represents one of the three positions toward the Other, next to psychotic and neurotic (of which the hysterical discourse is an extreme manifestation)—yet it makes sense in the present context. In contrast to the Hysteric’s assault from without, the Pervert attacks the system from within, by targeting the *lack*—the lacuna or the loophole—in the law of the Other. For Lacan, per-version is a sub-version of the symbolic order, which occurs as an in-version of the law, made possible by the weakness of the law itself. The Pervert, therefore, may be even said to improve the law, by simultaneously exploiting and correcting its deficient overt articulation, which makes him not so much anti-nomian as *hyper-nomian*: as Slavoj Žižek puts it, with his usual taste for semantic collisions, “serving the Law is the highest adventure” (2003: 56). According to Stephanie Swales’s definition of the hypernomian nature of the Pervert’s transgressions, “perversion is a strategy for increasing the power of the paternal function and thereby setting limits to jouissance. By way of disavowal, the pervert creates a substitute for the insufficient Other of the Law . . . The lawgiving Other exists, but only precariously; the pervert fervently tries to make the Other whole and to give it a stable existence” (2012: 55–56).¹⁴ A Pervert, therefore, does not simply reject the rules

¹³ It is perhaps not at all accidental that for Lacan, the Hysteric discourse is best embodied by the Shakespearean Shylock who doggedly demands his “pound of flesh”—here representing the elusive “primordial real [that] suffers from the signifier,” while it resists inclusion into the symbolic sphere and remains “the beyond-of-the-signified” (Lacan 1992: 118; 54). The fragment of the primordial real is what survives and what Lacan identifies with the “remnant”—Isaiah’s *sh’erit*—the word he even scribed in Hebrew during his seminar on anxiety: “it is something which survives the ordeal of the division of the field of the Other by the presence of the subject—something which, in a particular biblical passage, is formally metaphorised in the image of the stump, of the cut trunk from which a new trunk re-emerges, in this *living function* in the name of Isaiah’s second son Shear-Jashub, a remainder, a remnant . . . in this *Sh’erit* [resides] the function of the remainder, the irreducible function, *the one which survives every ordeal of the encounter with the pure signifier*” (Lacan 2014: 202; emphasis added).

¹⁴ On Swales’s Lacanian account, “the perverse subject has undergone alienation but disavowed castration, suffering from excessive jouissance and a core belief that the law and social norms are fraudulent at worst and weak at best” (ibid.: xii; 1; 6). Alienated, that is, drawn out of itself into the relation with the Other, but denying castration, i.e., not ready to relinquish his own jouissance, the Pervert feels empowered and identifies with the “imaginary phallus fails to become negativized” (Swales 2012: 61). In his overt transgressions against the paternal law, he manifests contempt for the insufficiency of the law-giving Other (“the future pervert is the child who comes to see the lawgiving Other as

of the symbolic order; he obeys the paternal law, yet in a different—better, more powerful—version that deviates from its official weak manifestation, thus demonstrating that in its essence, the law constitutes precisely the opposite of what it appears to be in its insufficient status quo. While the Hysteric remains outside, waiting—the Pervert enters the Kafkan gate of the law and takes the internal position: in fact, so deeply internal that locating itself at the symbolic system’s *extimate* core. They both, however, achieve a distance from the law: the former via *exteriority* which guards the original position of the outsider—and the latter via *extimacy* in which the most intimate core of the system negates its deficient outer appearance.

Žižek’s analysis of the “perverse core of Christianity” in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) faithfully follows the Lacanian description: the Christian Pervert reveals the real, extimate core of his religion, which subverts the appearance that constitutes its manifest self-expression—and, in this manner, by disclosing the inner duality of Christian faith, he simultaneously destroys its rules and obeys them, though in a radically hypernomian manner. Thus, while the open symbolic articulation of the Christian credo is emphatically theistic, assuming that the Trinitarian pattern actively forms the believer’s life—its hidden perverse core is, in fact, atheistic, assuming that God is lacking and there is no Great Other who providentially controls the creaturely realm. In Žižek’s reading of G. K. Chesterton’s apology of Christian credo, taken by Žižek as the paradigmatic case of Christian perversity, God as the Great Other is marked with a serious “inadequacy of the lawgiving function” (Swales 2012: 62). In result of such weakness, He himself constantly wavers in the faith that He had failed to establish as a strong set of rules:

In the standard form of atheism, God dies for men who stop believing in Him; in Christianity, *God dies for Himself*. In his “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?,” Christ himself commits what is, for a Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith. This “matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss” concerns what cannot but appear as the hidden perverse core of Christianity (Žižek 2003: 15; emphasis added).

This “weakness” of the God who does not believe either in himself or in what he promises—the ultimate image of the Father lacking in his paternal law-giving function—affects the whole content of the Christian credo. Thus, while Christianity overtly offers its believers life immortal—its deep message goes against it: not only God is dead but death itself, as the figure of the essential lack in the Holy Father, becomes the true *kerygma*, which both Lacan and Žižek identify with the emergence of the Holy Spirit: the lack personified. Only on the surface, therefore, Christianity appears to be a development of

nothing but a façade.” *ibid.*: 62), but also shows a hypernomian aspect: “Disavowal [of castration] is a *creative attempt to prop up the Law* and to set limits to the excess in jouissance experienced due to the child’s problematic relation to the first Other” (*ibid.*: 78).

the Jewish *torat hayim* designed for the sake of the living, taking the concept of messianic survival to the next level of personal immortality—in its real depth, it is a religion of death/lack that denounces life eternal as a false promise. The ultimate difference between the antinomian Hysteric and the hypernomian Pervert thus lies in the subjective resistance toward the dominance of the law: while the former impersonates the remnant of life (*she'rit*), capable of surviving the crisis of the law's disintegration, the latter impersonates the void, which permeates and annihilates the symbolic order from within, without, at the same time bringing it down completely.

It is this fundamental difference that divides the late-modern interpretations of Paul: Taubes's, informed by Benjamin, on the one hand—and Žižek's, more traditionally (though also “perversely”) Christian, on the other. The latter strongly relies on the Pauline model of conversion as *metanoia*, or the radical reversal of the self, which leads to the birth of the New Man. Yet, unlike in Benjamin or Taubes, this New Man is not a “structural survivor” who rises from the crisis traumatized, yet forgiven. Here *metanoia* is conceived as a far more discontinuous process of passing through the void, which allows for what Jacques Derrida, in critical reference to Lacan, calls the “break with life”: a violent self-voiding the purpose of which is to rise above the messy “clamour of being” into a sublime sphere of pure Truth (Derrida 2014: 4).

According to Žižek, at its deep core, Christian doctrine is a Lacanian psychoanalysis *avant la lettre* and, because of that, is doomed to appear in a confusing “weak” disguise: the revelation is but an archaic term for a disclosure of truth, which transforms human animal into a human subject. While “the ‘natural state’ of the human animal is to live in a lie” (Žižek 2007: 2), the anthropogenic truth faces the subject with his own constitutive death drive. The Christian promise, therefore, is a complex form of seduction that first relies on pure fantasy and only then unravels the real behind the fantastical desire to live forever. It is not an initiation into life eternal, but into the icy realm of Thanatos, the true and only essence of human subjectivity: “the psychoanalytic cure is effectively over when the subject loses the fear of non-being and freely assumes his own nonexistence” (ibid.: 80). The Pervert, therefore, does not see the anarchic ferment of life as the “fruitful disorder”: as if aligning with the Benjaminian mythic gods, he perceives it simply as a *disorder*, a primordial chaos that plunges the subject into the “morass of imbecilic Being” (Žižek 2008: 8). What the Pervert takes from the Pauline *metanoia* is a model for the true Revolutionary's rite of passage: a New Man who will be able to violently oppose the messy order of liberal biopolitics, with its law-preserving violence concerned solely with *conservatio vitae* as most of all biological life. For only then can he become a true human subject constituted as the Lacanian barred subject \$ and identified with the void: an empty space that, purified of the obsessive concern with self-preservation, is ready to serve the revolutionary Cause—*preferably*, unto death.¹⁵

¹⁵ In Seminar VII, Lacan describes the tragic ethics of faithfulness to one's desire up to the bitter end as a hidden *preference* for the “second death” where desire be-

On first glance, Žižek's apology of revolutionary violence is nothing new: Sergey Nechayev's *Catechism of the Revolutionary* (1869)—passionately hated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, admired by Georg Lukács, and deeply respected by Alexandre Kojève (via whom some of his teachings could have reached Lacan, only later to boomerang back to Žižek, himself well versed in Russian nihilism)—defines the perfect Revolutionary as the man dead-already, completely indifferent to the business of life, in the language steeped with religious overtones of radical conversion and martyrdom:

The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution. The revolutionary knows that in the very depths of his being, not only in words but also in deeds, he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities, and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them it is only in order to destroy them more speedily . . . He knows only one science: the science of destruction . . . The object is perpetually the same: the surest and quickest way of destroying the whole filthy order.¹⁶

However, Žižek adds to the typical *Nechayevshchina* a perverse twist that transcends the pathos-laden use of Christian rhetoric. He aims to rewrite Pauline messianism in such a manner that the revolutionary “readiness-to-die” goes beyond the traditional concept of martyrdom (to pay the price for fidelity to the Cause) and insinuates itself into the very center of the redemptive promise as an active “desire for death as such”: the perverse *u'baharta ba'mavet*.

It is precisely this choice that constitutes the decisive difference between the Hysteric and the Pervert. In the psychoanalytic paraphrase that Lacan and Žižek offer, the “readiness-to-die” translates into a subjective identification with the death drive as the force forming the most intimate core of the human psyche. This is where the “perverse core of Christianity” resides: while the Pauline credo, crowning the long history of Jewish messianism and its eternal imperative of *u'baharta ba'hayim*, promises *more life* on the surface, deep down this promise refers to the discovery of the death drive, which indeed may be said to fulfil the gift of immortality, because what is already dead simply cannot die. To be on par with death, therefore, to be *dèja-mort* would mean to be, as Paul indeed promised, out of reach from the sting of death: in the state of

comes “the pure and simple *desire for death as such*” (Lacan 1992: 282; emphasis added). As he then explains in the Heideggerian manner, it is only from this self-voided position that the “false metaphors of being (*l'étant*) can be distinguished from the position of Being (*l'être*) itself” (ibid.: 248), which is obviously *higher* than the one attached to the ontic multitude of “imbecilic” beings.

¹⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/nechayev/catechism.htm>.

“symbolic suicide” or “subjective destitution,” death as the actual end of our existence, can no longer touch us. Once death shifts from the external position of a threat into an inner position of the new source of empowerment,¹⁷ the Revolutionary, released from mortal anxiety, can put all his energy into the fight for a Cause and thus strive for the Good unflinchingly and mercilessly.¹⁸

The first sign of the successful initiation into the sublime pursuit of the Cause is a radical change in the subject’s attitude toward life: fearfully cherished before, it becomes now an object of contempt, exactly the same as the disdain for *blosses Leben*, characterizing the Benjaminian gods of the mythic order:

The death drive is not merely a direct nihilistic opposition to any life-asserting attachment; rather, it is the very formal structure of the reference to Nothingness that enables us to overcome the *stupid self-contended life-rhythm*, in order to become “passionately attached” to some Cause—be it love, art, knowledge or politics—for which we are ready to risk everything. (Žižek 2000: 127; emphasis added)

According to Žižek, it is precisely this creative-destructive power of the death drive liberated from the attachment to life that Christianity aims at by having coined the concept of the Holy Spirit:

In 1956, Lacan proposed a short and clear definition of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world. This is certainly what Freud brought us under the title of death drive.” What Lacan means, at this moment of his thought, is that the Holy Spirit stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of “life”—lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant’s terms, the “pathological.” *When we locate ourselves within the Holy Spirit, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one.* (Žižek 2003: 9; emphasis added).

¹⁷ See again Swales describing the early development of the perverse subject: “The child goes on thinking and acting *as if no threat had been uttered*. There is no Other who can force the child to relinquish his jouissance and undergo castration” (Swales 2012: 72; emphasis added).

¹⁸ In *Ethics*, Alain Badiou, at that time closely allied with Žižek, criticizes modern liberal politics for “the incapacity, so typical of the contemporary world, to strive for Good. We should even go further and say that the reign of ethics is one symptom of the universe ruled by a distinctive combination of resignation in the face of necessity together with a purely negative, if not destructive, will. It is this combination that should be designated as nihilism . . . By blocking, *in the name of Evil and human rights*, the way towards the positive prescription of possibilities, the way towards the Good as the superhumanity of humanity, towards the Immortal as the master of time, it accepts the lay of necessity as the objective basis for all judgments of value” (Badiou 2001: 30–31; emphasis added).

The identification with the death drive thus offers a significant gain: *power*. This *power* immediately leads us to the next distinction between the antinomian-hysterical and the hypernomian-perverse variants of the messianic tradition: while the former formulates its ultimate goal as the happy liberated life, that is, always *for the sake of the living*, understood as the “structural survivors,” essentially finite and non-divine—the latter aspires to a secret *theosis* that will claim the prerogatives of the divine violence for itself. Žižek’s vision of Christianity remains firmly entrenched within the paradigm of sovereignty, according to which freedom can only result from embracing the highest sovereign power that lies at the very source of all creation and destruction alike, and, as a result, beyond any symbolic system of meaning: the Hegelian “Death, the Absolute Master” (Hegel, 1977: 117). The perverse core of Christianity, therefore, hidden behind the apparent weakness of its official *credo*, reveals the powerful energy of Thanatos that rises above all that exists and transcends all actual order of being into the realm of pure *potentiality*—and in this manner finds an immanent materialist equivalent of the omnipotent deity, bestowed with the *potentia absoluta*, the infinite potency-potentiality ready to shatter the world and void any existing creation.¹⁹ Only seemingly, therefore, the sequence that Žižek presents in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003)—the sovereign God dying as the humbled Son to resurrect as the free community of finite spirits—would suggest getting beyond sovereign power logic. In fact, it only reinforces it, by making sovereignty “freely” accessible: in the final stage of the Hegelian era of the Spirit, sovereign power becomes a common asset of all those who dare to seize it, by “freely assuming their own nonexistence,” and thus forming a new “secret society” of the elect: the true Revolutionaries ready to reach for the power of divine violence. In the lack of the Great Other, it is the lack itself that becomes a new master. The Lacanian sentence: “God is dead, and his tomb is empty” (Lacan 1989: 26) should thus not be read as the proclamation of the absence of God as the *Autrui* (Other) controlling the system of signification, but rather as a *secret deification of the lack*. It is precisely this deified void/abyss, teaming with the creative-destructive divine violence, that leads to the new sovereignty and the new system of hierarchical empowerment: a revolutionary meta-master position boldly embracing the absence of all fathers/masters.

Having reached the source of infinite power—the death drive as the theomorphic spark of divine violence within the subject—the Pervert becomes

¹⁹ According to the classical definition of William Ockham, who states in *Quodlibeta: Deus multa potest facere quae non vult facere* (“God can create many more things than he wanted to create”): quot. in (Blumenberg, 1985: 609). The nominalist theology of the divine sovereignty is based on the dogma that God’s true omnipotence lies in his potentiality—“what he *could* create”—rather than in what he had actually created. As a result, God poses a constant violent threat of destruction to the actual being. It is precisely the same mechanism—infinite transcendent potentiality opposed to finite immanent actuality—that secures the death drive its “beyond” position toward life.

oblivious to the logic and interests of life: his way of thinking and acting becomes emphatically *not* for the sake of the living. From Kojève through Lacan to Žižek, the hostility to the idea of happiness as a false ideal linked to the “lie of life” remains a constant feature of the doctrine. Here happiness constitutes merely a natural category belonging to the sphere of human animality administered by modern biopolitics: a main enemy of the new Revolutionary, which actively prevents “human animals” from becoming proper human subjects. It is a purely biopolitical, deeply nihilistic and “pagan” accessory of mere life, which the true hypernomian Christian, led by the light of the anthropogenic revelation (*God is death*), must abandon with contempt:

Happiness is thus, to put it in Badiou’s terms, not a category of truth, but a category of mere Being, and, as such, confused, indeterminate, inconsistent . . . It is a pagan category: for pagans, the goal of life is to live a happy life (the idea of living “happily ever after” is a Christianized version of paganism), and religious experience or political activity themselves are considered a higher form of happiness (see Aristotle) . . . In short, “happiness” is a category of the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle. (Žižek 2003: 42)

By discarding happiness as the pleasure principle category, which bars passage to the sublime transcendence of the death drive, Žižek confirms the “choice of death” that was first made by Kojève.²⁰ Once it is perceived from the thanatic Beyond, all becomes clear: Christianity unveils its perverse core as indistinguishable from radical atheism. Yet, this *radical* atheism differs from the *trivial* atheism of the Nietzschean Last Men in that it transcends the banality of the pleasure principle and puts the subject in touch with the purest libidinal energy, which then can become the powerful source of the most daring revolutionary action, that is, the Lacanian *passage to Act*. Thus, in the next perverse twist, the Pauline notion of the highest life also becomes redefined as the one that can only be won through the omnipotency of the death drive:

Insofar as “death” and “life” designate for Saint Paul two existential (subjective) positions, not “objective” facts, we are fully justified in raising the old Pauline question: *who is really alive today?* What if we are “really alive” only if and when we engage ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond “mere life”? What if, when we focus on *mere survival*, even if it is qualified as “having a good time,” what we ultimately lose is life itself? What if the Palestinian suicide bomber on the point of blowing himself (and others) up is, in an emphatic sense, “more alive” than the American soldier en-

²⁰ “If Man is Action, and if Action is Negativity ‘appearing’ as Death, [then] Man is, in his human or speaking existence, only a death: [a death] more or less deferred, and conscious of itself . . . It is death that engenders Man in Nature, and it is death that makes him progress to his final destiny” (Kojève 1973: 132).

gaged in a war in front of a computer screen hundreds of miles away from the enemy, or a New York yuppie jogging along the Hudson river in order to keep his body in shape? (Žižek 2003: 94)

This whole fragment is built on a series of perverse, that is, deliberately confusing, equivocations on the concept of life that, uprooted from its biological context, becomes a matter of a fluid “subjective position.” In Žižek’s reading of Paul, the true life that makes us “really alive” has nothing to do with “mere survival,” which keeps the subject in a castrating fear of death and thus prevents him from embracing the death drive’s “excessive intensity”; to experience “more life,” the subject must go beyond the *Angst und Sorge* of life’s sheer conservation. The highest life, therefore—perversely better and more powerful—is *discontinuous* with the “mere life” of survival: it is a sublime and ephemeral animation of arriving at the place of nothingness as the *extimate* core of subjectivity—feared and avoided by the animal residue in the psyche, yet at the same time most intimately human. At the conclusion of this perverse reasoning, seemingly opposite concepts like “life” and “death” begin to oscillate in an aporetic vertigo: it becomes impossible to tell apart the two imperatives—“choose life” versus “choose death.”

The Happy and the Mighty

Lucifer: Think not The Earth, which is thine outward
cov’ring,

is Existence—it will cease—and thou wilt be—
No less than thou art now.

Cain: No less! and why no more?

Lucifer: It may be thou shalt be as we.

Cain: And ye?

Lucifer: Are everlasting.

Cain: Are ye happy?

Lucifer: We are mighty.

Lord Byron, *Cain*

Can this conclusion still be paraphrased in the Benjaminian manner as *for the sake of the living*? Perversely and hypernomically speaking—yes. If the gist of Christian revelation lies in the promise of higher immortal life, then the non-biological vivacity of the fully unleashed death drive may indeed do the *trick*: by raising above the survival and freely accepting his nonexistence, the subject reaches the state of *theosis* beyond the laws of the mythic pleasure principle, in which he can make a free use of divine violence, previously reserved only for the illusory Great Other. The perverse subject, therefore, embraces the process

of sublimation/alienation, but only to collapse it from within, that is, instead of taking the law at its face value, breaking through the surface appearances and revealing the hidden core—the divine violence lurking behind the mythic violence (or the infinite *jouissance* behind the inefficient law).

Yet, from the perspective of the antinomian Hysteric—no. While he also challenges the symbolic order laws, the Hysteric does so not in the name of the higher but rather happier life: he resists the sublimation process by sticking to his surviving remnant. He is not interested in the most sublime—mighty and theomorphic—mode of existence, oblivious and unforgiving to such “animal” categories as happiness, but in the promotion of his *conatus* beyond the crippling mythic order which he is ready to destroy for the sake of a freer way of living. There is no *metanoia* here, which would catapult the subject into the sublime void of perverse *theosis*. On the contrary, there is a hard-necked refusal to go through the sublimatory void, determined to live through all the violent crises of the mythic/symbolic order as the *sh'erit* defining the “band of survivors”—a hysterical counterpart to the revolutionary “secret society” of those empowered by the act of self-deadening. Unlike the Pervert, the Hysteric does not feel contempt for survival—on the contrary, he expects forgiveness for his desire “to stay, to remain”—but he also rebels against fitting it into the biopolitical scheme of the Hobbesian *conservatio vitae* or the dubious “sanctity” of *blosses Leben*. The Hysteric, therefore, never identifies with death, however it be conceived: either “first” or “second,” “objective” or “subjective.” As a “structural survivor” he is, in Derrida’s definition, “always on the side of the affirmation of life” (Derrida 2011: 51–52) where life forms an essential *continuum* spreading between the two poles: from “mere life” of *survie* to the “more life” of *sur-vie*. For him, survival can only be thought as a *continuous* perseverance of “that which remains,” even if it involves traumatic close shaves with death. But the *almost-dead* of the most seasoned survivors is still miles apart from the *already-dead* of the Perverts who claim to have discovered higher life after they broke with the “pathological” life of their bodies.

From the Pervert’s point of view, hysterical rebellion is futile. Based on the wrong premise of the surviving remnant (for the powerful alienating pull of the Other cannot be resisted), the Hysteric positions himself as the “stupid” peasant from the Kafkan parable: forever arrested at the gates leading to the law and thus stuck in his passive indecision of interminable *waiting*, unable to either accept or destroy the legal order. For the Pervert, the only viable way is to enter the gate and penetrate the realm of the law to its deepest recesses where it begins to waver and show a lack of foundation. Subsequently, it is this very lack that transforms into a sublime void where all the laws are suspended and “nothing but the place takes place” (Žižek 2000: 30).

Yet, from the Hysteric’s point of view, such subversion of the law from within loses its essential stake because it also loses life, never to be recovered by the perverse equivocations; if it is not life against law, as in the messianic antinomian scheme, then why bother? From this perspective, the perverse *passage al’Acte* may indeed appear devoid of purpose. Revolution as the act of

voiding means an apocalyptic emptying of all being, first merely subjectively and *in effigie*, then in real action—yet, unlike in the antinomian messianism, which truly hopes to make all things new, the perverse politics is also voided of hope: whatever emerges out of this radical reset will once again be merely an “imbecilic Being,” only worth of being destroyed in the next revolutionary throw.²¹ Everything new would thus immediately decay into the decrepit old of the ancient regime and its unworthy status quo. In Žižek’s words: “What tips the balance of choice towards revolution . . . is the insight into how the organic harmony of the *ancien regime* is itself a fake, an illusion concealing the reality of brutal violence, division, and chaos” (2012: 70). This diagnosis, however, does not refer merely to the historical moment of the French Revolution: for Žižek, it is a metaphysical truth revealing the nature of any social/paternal order, be it authoritarian or democratic, just because it exists and as such can only be full of “violence, division, and chaos,” forming the essential and unchangeable characteristics of every mythic/symbolic law.

Žižek’s “perverse core of Christianity,” therefore, speaks the language of apocalyptic Gnosticism: *Let it go down!* Let it all collapse and reveal the Void of the perfect reset, in which nothing survives, no remnant from before; a perfect stillness in which there will be just one voice clamouring that “the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being”—the triumphant battle-cry of the Lacanian *jouissance*.²² But while Taubes (2003: 104), who famously uttered this phrase, wished to negate the natural world for the sake of a supranatural counterworld of fulfilment that could be a happier seat for the “band of survivors”—Žižek wants things to go down in the act of purifying negation. His perverse strategy could thus justify only one politics: the one of the permanent “inhuman terror” as an institutionalized destruction of the mythic law and, in that sense, a pure manifestation of the divine violence (or the Benjaminian “pure means”), not only not for the sake of the living, but solely for the sake of absolute justice—autotelic and self-sufficient in its righteous vengeance against the “filthy order” of the world. While discussing Maximilien Robespierre in the context of Benjamin’s *Toward the Critique of Violence*, Žižek refers to the apocalyptic “point of non-distinction between justice and vengeance,” in which the divine violence annihilates the world according to the ruthless rule of *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*:

²¹ For Horkheimer and Adorno, closely following Benjamin’s critique of the mythic violence, the deprivation of hope is an unmistakable sign of a thought conforming to the mythological order: “For in its figures mythology captured the essence of the status quo: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and *deprived of hope*” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 27; emphasis added).

²² Lacan (1989: 316) quotes here Paul Valéry’s poem *The Sketch of a Serpent*, in which the demonic snake, personifying the force of death in the garden of paradise, speaks with the perverse voice of yet another Serpent, the Goethean Mephisto: “Then better ‘twere that naught should be/ Thus all the elements which ye/ Destruction, Sin, or briefly, Evil, name/ As my peculiar element I claim” (Goethe 1994: 42).

The revolutionary Terror of 1792–94 was not a case of what Walter Benjamin and others call state-founding violence, but a case of “divine violence.” Interpreters of Benjamin wonder what “divine violence” could effectively mean—is it yet another leftist dream of a “pure” event which never really takes place? . . . One should repeat this, *mutatis mutandi*, apropos divine violence: “Well and good, gentlemen critical theorists, do you want to know what this divine violence looks like? Look at the revolutionary Terror of 1792–94. That was Divine Violence.” (And the series can continue: the Red Terror of 1919...) That is to say, one should fearlessly identify divine violence with positively existing historical phenomena, thus avoiding all obscurantist mystification. When those outside the structured social field strike “blindly,” demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is “divine violence” . . . *Like biblical locusts, divine punishment for men’s sinful ways, it strikes from out of nowhere, a means without an end*— . . . The “dictatorship of the proletariat” is thus another name for Benjaminian “divine violence” which is outside the law, a *violence exerted as brutal revenge/justice*—but why “divine”? “Divine” points towards the dimension of the “inhuman”; one should thus posit a double equation: divine violence = inhuman terror = dictatorship of the proletariat. Benjaminian “divine violence” should be conceived as divine in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei*: . . . as the heroic assumption of the *solitude of a sovereign decision*. It is a *decision (to kill, to risk or lose one’s own life) made in absolute solitude, with no cover from the big Other*. If it is extra-moral, it is not “immoral,” it does not give the agent the license just to kill with some kind of angelic innocence. The motto of divine violence is *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*: it is through justice, *the point of non-distinction between justice and vengeance*, that the “people” (the anonymous part of no-part) imposes its terror and makes other parts pay the price—Judgment Day for the long history of oppression, exploitation, suffering. (Žižek 2008: 161–62; emphasis added).

This is an openly perverse reading of *Toward the Critique of Violence*: just as the Lacanian Pervert, identified with the non-castrated phallus, imagines himself as the one who can bypass the deficient paternal Other and offer a true *jouissance* to the (M)other—so does the Žižekian phallic Revolutionary imagine himself as the one who can challenge the corrupt law of the social order and offer a true *jouissance* to the People: an orgasmic ecstasy of Judgment Day over the ever-failing elites. Which, when translated into the genre of Žižek’s favorite filthy jokes, could be summed as follows: “while they (the Fathers) only screw you (the People), we (the Revolutionaries) will fuck you right.”

But, is the permanent inhuman terror, in which absolute justice takes joyous revenge on the “filthy world,” *truly* what Benjamin had in mind? Žižek’s form of violence fails to fulfil the criteria of the latter’s definition of *die göttliche Gewalt*: it rather resembles *die mythische Gewalt* as a sublime punitive “blood-violence over mere life [is] *for the sake of violence itself*,” which Benjamin explicitly contrasted with the “de-expiating,” bloodless and thus emphatically

non-punitive (in fact, even “forgiving”) strike of divine violence. Seen through the lenses of Benjamin’s critique, the perverse strategy, despite its declarations to the contrary, would thus remain stubbornly “pagan” in taking the side of the sublime gods of the mythic order, full of contempt for the messy business of life. Yet, with a significant twist: instead of using the death drive as the vehicle for law-preserving violence, which would guard the repetition of the ontological status quo, the Pervert desires to unleash a bloody apocalypse envisioned as “the full actualization of a Cause, including the inevitable risk of a catastrophic disaster” (ibid.: 8) in which this apparent risk becomes a true, albeit (sadly) unachievable goal: the *re-institution of the Void*. As a punishing blow of contributive justice, which in Benjamin marks the apex of mythic violence, it is not directed toward the “coming world (of fulfillment),” but at freeing the destructiveness of the death drive, which Hegel—in reference to the mythic goddess of vengeance, Furia—called the “fury of destruction” (*die Furie der Zerstörung*) (Hegel 1977). Thus, if anything survives the apocalypse, it is only because of its inevitable *failure* to bring about a total catastrophe. But, as Žižek proclaims: “better a disaster of fidelity to the Event than a non-being of indifference towards the Event. To paraphrase Beckett’s memorable phrase . . . after one fails, one can go on and fail better, while indifference drowns us deeper and deeper in the morass of imbecilic Being” (Žižek 2008: 8). For this morass, as in Mephistopheles’s famous speech to Faust, *ist nur wert dass es zugrunde geht* (is only worth of being destroyed). Just as the Goethean demon or his later avatar, the Byronian Lucifer, are the mighty agents of the primordial Void, so is Žižek—at least in his Gnostic-apocalyptic reading of Benjamin in *The Defense of Lost Causes*.²⁵ The divine violence of the Holy Spirit, aka, the death drive indeed “does violence to the inertia” of the law-preserving mythic violence—yet not for the sake of life’s “fruitful disorder,” but only for the sake of a higher, more sublime form of inertial repetition: *conservatio vacui*.

For the antynomian Hysteric, the truth is a matter of hope: doggedly stuck to his life, he opposes all symbolic systems that would denigrate it as “imbecilic,” “filthy” or “stupid” and hopes for the “coming world (of fulfillment)” in which his surviving remnant will be able to, in Žižek’s dismissive formulation, “live happily ever after.” For the hypernomian Pervert, the truth lies in destruction, exposing the essential weakness of “the morass of imbecilic Being”: “striving cold-bloodedly and indefatigably toward [t]his end, he must be prepared to destroy himself and to destroy with his own hands everything” (Nechayev 1869). They both resort to and justify violence, by calling it

²⁵ I make this proviso because Žižek’s recent views have gradually shifted toward the liberal position which he so fiercely mocked in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* and in *Defense of Lost Causes*. While still a decade ago he was praising Islamic terrorists’ “readiness to die,” today he speaks strenuously against any form of authoritarian thanatopolitics that would call for the identification with death. But this change of heart, revealed mostly in his press interviews, has not yet been backed by the parallel shift in his theoretical writings.

“divine,” that is, transcendent and exterior to the status quo of the world, but for very different reasons: the former wants to change the world “for the sake of the living”—the latter wants the annihilation of the world “for its own sake.”

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Theodicies of Violence: From Benjamin to Žižek

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