“The Exodus into the Utterly-New”: Between Hope and Despair

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Nur um des Hoffnungslosenwillen is uns die Hoffnung gegeben.
Hope is given to us only for the sake of the hopeless.
Walter Benjamin (1991, 201), Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften.

In my essay, I want to ponder on the psychotheology of hope: the messianic affects which attach themselves to the promise of Exodus—of yetziat, a liberating getting-out from the world imagined as a “house of bondage” or an “iron cage” without exits. In my juxtaposition of Bloch’s philosophy of Exodus with Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of Western modernity as an Exodus gone wrong, I would like to focus on the intricate relation between hope (represented at its purest by the former) and despair (represented at its purest by the latter). I would like to prove that, contrary to appearances, the one cannot be thought without the other: hope can only come to the fore at the background of the darkest despair and vice versa—the despair can only be understood as a loss of hope. By correcting Bloch’s metaphysical optimism with the Frankfurt duo’s plunge into the abyss of hopelessness (recall Lukacs’s malicious joke about Adorno as an inhabitant of the “Grand Hotel Abyss”), I wish to reclaim the idea of despair for the messianic idiom which too often feels uneasy about it, wrongly convinced that it cannot let in a sense of the loss of hope.

Exodus into Hope, or the Objective Fantasy

If there is a thinker who truly deserves to be called a “modern Judeo-Christian,” enacting all the possible antagonisms tearing apart this uneasy denotation, it is certainly Ernst Bloch whose only theme is the “apocalyptic finale”: an imaginary of hope, promise, and fulfilment, which he finds first in the messianic Judaism, then its immediate offshoot, Christianity, and finally in modernity as an epoch which allowed the idiom of hope to come fully to the fore in a semi-secularized manner. For Bloch, the essence of messianism is represented by the Hebrew God of Exodus who remains the matrix of the most vital objective and unarbitrary fantasy that supplies “metaphysical framework of an Eschaton of New Jerusalem,” the ultimate apocalyptic promise forming the center of the Exodic narrative:

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The Son of Man is the only lamp in that city; but it is a city built on the territory, in the firmament, of a “nature” that has been both annihilated to form the “Kingdom” and unveiled in all the splendor of its eschatological truth. That is the final non-alternative between cosmos and logos proposed by the new, antithetical, Exodus-revealing, Genesis images of the Apocalypse. (Bloch 2009, 212-213)

In the all-encompassing scope of *The Principle of Hope*, no stone of fantasy ever dreamt by mankind gets unturned, but in Bloch’s later book, *Atheism in Christianity*, the focus narrows to a more specific type of the most promising kind of fantasizing which Bloch associates with the Judeo-Christian religion. Just as in *The Spirit of Utopia*, here also the main educational factor in creating a disciplined and organized form of a “hopeful dreaming” is assigned to the God of Exodus. It is the Judeo-Christian religion of *yetziat mitzraim* [getting out of Egypt] which teaches mankind how to exit the seemingly hermetic world of immanence; how to procure a way out from the universe with no apparent ways-out. Against the enlightenmental prejudice, Bloch does not see fantasy as the escapist mode of irrationalism, which merely wants to avoid the reality principle. To the contrary, Bloch’s investment in fantasy follows from his full awareness of the curtailing power of realism which needs to be resisted if thinking in hopeful terms is to be possible at all. In Bloch, fantasy and hopeful thinking form one amalgam in which the former constitutes the transcendental condition of the latter. Without fantasy, which boldly goes where no one has gone before and sets the final frontier of possibilities; without this Kierkegaardian possibility of possibilities, which opens a new dimension of freedom, thinking would be condemned to remain within the Adornian “myth of what is,” timidly bowing to *Realitätsprinzip* and its “arid wisdom” of unimaginative repetition within the already given (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 12).²

We can thus read Bloch’s restitution of fantasy along the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as a parallel project of recovering the other meaning of *Aufklärung* as not just the reign of disenchanted instrumental and hyper-realistic reason, but also as the era of promise and hope, which must dream, fantasize, perhaps even hallucinate (*Tagträumen*) in order to remember what it is for: what was the very purpose of the *nova era*, promised and prophesized in the first place by Joachim da Fiore, Bloch’s favorite Christian thinker. Bloch is firmly convinced that human reason cannot stretch at all unless it stretches as far as the ultimate utopian fantasy, the *non plus ultra* or the Omega-point of fantasy beyond which there is nothing more to dream about: the absolute complicity between matter and mind, *cosmos* and *logos*, which Bloch designates as the dream of homecoming or the final rest, the cosmic Sabbath. Only such fantasy—objective and unarbitrary—can create a critical mass of hope which allows thinking to break the barrier of the reality principle and push forwards in a constant effort of Exodus, towards the “vast open land” of the Real-Possible. For Bloch, therefore, the preservation of the ultimate fantasy is the necessary transcendental condition of thinking which grows and feeds on hope: hopefulness must be daring from the start if it wants to break through the fences of the *Realitätsprinzip*. The whole of Bloch’s project relies on the assumption that the fantastical, which haunts our hopeful dreams, possesses more mobilizing and thus historically creative power than any sober realism which measures its goals merely according to rational calculation. Even if, in the end, the ultimate fantasy may turn out to be wrong (though, according to Bloch’s logic, there is no end and therefore no possibility to falsify the dream), it has an enormous ability of mobilization which offers human subjects an extra strength in opposing the resistance of physical reality. This is why, rhetorically speaking, Bloch’s narrative is built in the mode of exhortation: by fostering the boldness of the ultimate fantasy, it inspires “hope for what seems hopeless,” the Benjaminitian version of *contra spe spero*.³

Bloch’s unique praise of fantasy as a mythic energy underlying the project of enlightenment as the continuation of the Exodus makes him deviate from his two most important precursors: Hegel
and Marx. Opposing the Hegelian ideal of secularization as the sublation of religion into philosophy, Bloch insists on the return to the religious idioms of revelation, in which the category of hope emerged for the first time. According to Bloch, the Hegelian-Marxian sublation is, in fact, unwillingly regressive because it leaves us—once again—with the impersonal powers of immanence (this time called “the laws of history”) from which the revelatory religious idioms wished to free mankind in the first place, offering a hope for something utterly new that would break with the preestablished and law-abiding rhythm of being. Thus, instead of the Hegelian progress of Aufhebungen, Bloch (1995, 146) proposes a progress of successive Exoduses which build up the historical strategy of “transcending without transcendence,” a process involving a complex messianic theo-drama, in which the exodic tendency towards freedom, the utterly-new, and open possibilities constantly clashes with the opposing forces of inertia (Hindernis) until the cosmic struggle is over—and the “latent tendency” either wins, by turning the whole material universe into the Kingdom of Freedom, or loses, by giving in to the reactionary power of the status quo based on the necessitarian repetition of what already is. However, led by the inexhaustible metaphysical optimism of his revolutionary Gnosis, Bloch leaves hardly any room for the latter possibility: his messianic hope is an unshakable a priori that will never take no for an answer. Sooner or later, the objective fantasy of a universally animated and liberated matter must triumph.

**Exodus into Anxiety, or the Missing Negativity**

Despite his overt polemic against Hegel and Marx, it is precisely this stubborn a priori of undying hope that puts Bloch back in the camp of the philosophers of historical certainty: “objective fantasy” is as unrelentless in pursuing its fulfillment as the Hegelian-Marxian objective laws of history that are destined to win, no matter what. This is where Adorno and Horkheimer, the two despairing guests of the Grand Hotel Abyss, enter the stage as a corrective to Bloch’s triumphant messianism, offering a more sober account of what—after Kierkegaard—we may call a psychology, or even better—after Santner (2001)—a psychotheology of Exodus.

The gist of this psychotheological insight lies in the calculus or economy of the messianic affects: hope and its inevitable shadow, fear and despair. Exodus is a complex endeavor: the psyche is encouraged to exit the natural law and enter the desert with no preestablished model to repeat or imitate, which causes an immediate increase of anxiety. The sole compensation for this anxious surge of incertitude is a new affective quality: hope. According to Kierkegaard, it is precisely the discovery of hope that determines the eternal difference between Athens and Jerusalem. On the one hand of this great divide, Greeks cultivate the “tragic sense of life,” which condemns every individual will to break free from the fateful arrangement of being as a hubris. Hence Aristotle’s conviction that hope is one of the plagues unleashed from the Pandora box: to harbor a hope in the change of the ontological status quo of the eternal cycle of genesis kai phthora means to be delusional and pose a danger to the divine order of things. Contrary to this diagnosis, Jews (and Christians after them) challenge the natural order precisely in the name of hope which only then becomes an “ontological category”: not a subjective/delusional state of a mind led by the vice of hubris, but an objective feature of the worldly reality as open to radical change. We have already seen how this ontological objectivity of hope, attached to the essential not-yetness of the Real, forms the gist of Bloch’s messianism—and it also emerges as the main theme in Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002, 27) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, particularly in their famous definition of the myth: “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.” On the one hand, therefore, Exodus brings a promise and a hope—yet, on the other, it also involves a serious risk: the deferment of the realization of the
promise once again increases the anxiety which now attaches itself to disappointment and the
demotivating sense of hopelessness. The resulting *loss of hope* is then a far more pessimistic affect
than the preestablished *lack of hope*, which the Greek tragic wisdom assumed in its mythological
logic of the eternal cycle. Hope and fear thus go hand in hand. According to Kierkegaard’s calculus:
the more you’re hopeful, the stronger the sense of anxiety, but also *vice versa*, it is precisely the
power of faith that can alchemically transform the gray of anxiety into a shiny coin of hope. Yet, the
more one invests in hope, the greater the danger that the state of the world will eventually seem
*hopeless*: not just “deprived of hope” as in the mythological thought which bars hope in advance (“it
cannot even be said that it was lost,” Kierkegaard 1980, 89), but as the depressing opposite of
hopefulness, the ultimate failure of the “spiritual investment” in the project of Exodus and the total
collapse of the edifice of faith. For Bloch, such radical loss, meaning both: defeat and forfeiture,
constitutes something unthinkable—the denial of the metaphysically active “objective tendency”—
that should and shall never happen (for, surely, “all shall be well”). For Kierkegaard, on the other
hand, the ever-looming possibility of loss is the gist of faith as an existential gamble of credit and
investment in the ever-elusive category of hope.

Written as a testimony to the late modern loss of hope, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a deeply
depressing document, oozing with toxic air of hopeless despair. While it accuses Western modernity
as the self.professed “age of hope” of making false promises of universal emancipation, it
nonetheless defends Enlightenment, but only as it still *could* be, against the Enlightenment in its
actual *status quo*. For, although the Enlightenment, in theory, was based on Kant’s definition that
was grounded in the metaphor of Exodus (*Ausgang aus der selbstverschuldigten Unmündigkeit*), it
did not, in reality, move away from the mythic pre-history. While it challenged the power of myth, it
did not succeed in fully realizing the project of Exodus: the myth has returned. Its reappearance
manifests itself in the tenacity of the mythological logic of the cycle, which has the same effect now
as in the ancient times: it presents the world as “deprived of hope.” The disenchanted scientific
worldview might have chased away all the mythic fables, but it did not free itself from the cyclical
idea of nature, based on the eternal repetition of the same. By forcing upon us a vision of the self-
repeating world without exits, modernity betrayed the Exodic promise which made it possible in the
first place. This is the reason why today “enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply
gulfed in mythology” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 12).

Yet, the hopelessness of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s tone, implying that we hit the rock bottom
of all that could possibly go wrong in modernity, comes with a twist: a twist which the messianic
tradition calls the antinomian inversion. The late-modern intense hopelessness—the failure of the
promise given in the most hopeful inaugural moment of early modernity (associated by Bloch with
the prophesies of Joachim da Fiore)—is for them only one side of the Möbius strip: the other is a
still possible hope which they desperately try to reach, not knowing exactly how to flip the sides. In
*Minima Moralia*, Adorno (2005, 121) writes: “So, when we are hoping for rescue, a voice tells us
that hope is in vain, yet it is powerless hope alone that allows us to draw a single breath.” *Die
machtlose Hoffnung*, a powerless hope, is a twin sister of hopelessness at the peak of the Kier-
kegaardian anxiety, no longer disciplined and appeased by faith. Today, if hope is to be rekindled,
Adorno and Horkheimer imply, it is only out of the dark spirit of the loss of hope. The loss—and the
despairing horror of it—must be thought thoroughly to the end, until no fake consolation clouds our
affects, and we face the Gorgon of the hopeless Real, the Golgotha of All Hope, and the Hegelian
negative at its barest: the withered rose of hope on the cross of reality. Only when we realize that,
paraphrasing Hegel’s dictum on the death of God, “Hope itself is dead,” can we paradoxically begin
to hope for the messianic reversal. Hope can once again be born when the mythological “depriva-
tion of hope” turns into a nagging sense of hopelessness: when the tragico-stoic attitude
metamorphoses into a despair that suddenly perceives the *Kreislauf* or *der Bannkreis des Daseins* not as a sacred “cycle of life” but as a metaphysical claustrophobic horror with a “no exit” sign written all over its rounded surface. What the Frankfurt duo, therefore, paradoxically hope for is the repetition of this psychotheological moment in the conditions of late modernity. Similarly to Walter Benjamin, who in the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* attempted a radical *Umkehr* (turn) of the ultimately nihilized world into a negative sign of revelation, they also invest in the deepening of the sense of crisis that would make us crave again for the cure of Exodus. “In the midst of the *Apocalypse, Now*, this ancient narrative should once again reverberate with all its now lost urgency: *Exodus, Now*” (Bielik-Robson 2019, 297).

What Adorno and Horkheimer reveal (and what is missing in Bloch) is the intimate symbiosis of hope and hopelessness: the bi-polar oscillation of the messianic affects which can never settle in any unshakable certitude, a constant tension between the joys of hope and the horrors of its loss that can never disassociate from one another. Bloch is right when he says that the narrative of Exodus acquires particular force in the world “without exits”—but he himself always leaves a little way-out in the form of the “latent objective fantasy,” the messianic Real-Possible that slowly but surely undermines the pharaonic reign of the Real-Actual. My goal was to refute these last safety nets and rescue the notion of hopelessness and despair from the archives of the conservative-catastrophic narratives of the Fall in order to reclaim it for the messianic story. Hence the motto from Benjamin: *Nur um des Hoffnungslosenwillen is uns die Hoffnung gegeben.* Benjamin’s diagnosis, taken over by Adorno and Horkheimer, hits the bull’s eye of the antinomian logic that abandons all certainties for the sake of the messianic risk in which all can be won, but also all can be lost.

**Notes**

1. **Lukacs 1971**, 9: “A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’ […] a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity.”

2. **Adorno (2004, 249)** will repeat his famous definition of myth also in *Negative Dialectic*: “By leaving nothing left over except the merely existent, they [modern thought systems] recoil into mythos. For it is nothing less than the closed context of immanence, of what is [*Bannkreis des Daseins*].”

3. On the significance of the concept of fantasy in Bloch and its intimate link with the category of hope, see Bielik-Robson 2019.

4. “The Greeks did not have the concept of the eternal; so neither did they have the concept of the future. Therefore Greek life cannot be reproached for being lost in the moment, or more correctly, it cannot even be said that it was lost, for temporality was conceived by the Greeks just as naively as sensuousness, because they lacked the category of spirit.” (Kierkegaard 1980, 89)

5. In his *Journals and Papers* from the period of writing the book, Kierkegaard defines faith as a positive inversion of anxiety: “But this is rigorous upbringing—this going from inborn anxiety to faith. Anxiety is the most terrible kind of spiritual trial—before the point is reached where the same man is disciplined in faith, that is, *to regard everything inversely, to remain full of hope and confidence when something happens which previously almost made him faint and expire with anxiety*, to plunge fearlessly into something against which he previously knew only one means of safety, to flee, and so on’” (Kierkegaard 1980, 173; emphasis added).

6. This position has been nicely summed up by Ryan Gunderson: “Adorno’s description of social criticism as an ‘active’ form of melancholy, as an objectification of unhappiness, embodies the Frankfurt School’s nonideal theory: a union of radical critique and reflexive despair” (Gunderson 2015, 27).
7. Benjamin describes this reversal as made possible thanks to the nature of allegory which shows the worldly reality in its unbearable truth: “the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection […] Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and is held fast in heaven, in God, by ponderacion mysteriosa” (Benjamin 1998, 233, 235; emphasis added).

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