

Stanimir  
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### Ask the Puppet

Towards

Thomas Ligotti,

*The Conspiracy against the Human Race,*

New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010.

If I was unborn  
I would have nothing to be grateful for  
I would have never seen love  
I would have never held cats  
I would have never buried my friends  
And prayed for their souls  
In reddening churches  
I would never have kissed  
And I would never have wept  
And I would never have seen  
Black Ships eat the sky  
And I would have been unborn  
And not have seen circuses  
Whilst watching the flowers  
Rise flags made of atoms  
Who will deliver me from myself?  
Who will deliver me from myself?

Current 93, *Black Ships Ate the Sky*

That we cannot give consideration to “nothing” is in itself not a tragedy too big to overcome. That nothing in the world is “inherently compelling” is also not a blunder too terrible to swallow. Yet the fact that we have not done yet with the massacre of life gains its significance from the non-realization of the nothingness that has to follow once

humanity becomes extinct under its “own will” to do so. And only a notion of the tragic could temporarily justify the affirmative spirit of the realization of that extinction. Of course, provided tragedy itself withers away along with all extinction. For, to preserve tragedy is to preserve a creeping life of partial extinction which does nothing to efface all the nothingness of this world - or, as Ligotti would say elsewhere, “this degenerate little town.”

The leitmotif of an affirmative “rant” such as Ligotti’s assumes its focus against the reign of unquestionable natalism from his own philosophical supposition that life is **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**. It might seem that Ligotti’s capitalization of this singular inference throughout the book insistently insults even the most attentive readers of this always already forsaken *opus post umus* of humanity. Although one needs to be a cynic in order to write horror (per Lovecraft), dare not be that cynical to the author: Ligotti is not interested in considering you emotional creatures. You are a puppet. Ask any human puppet.

Before coming to the outline of his own brand of philosophical pessimism which is based on the notion of *supernatural horror*, we should pay attention to the particular self-refuting rhetorical strategy of Ligotti who, while lambasting the posture that being (alive) is “all right,” invites us to *ask* this or that breathing impersonation of humanity about this or that saddening realization of our existence. Serving always as the rhetorical seal of a given passage, the futility of such an invitation to inquire another “authority” in non/existence only makes it more lucid to the reader that *to ask is to mean*. And what use of asking a question directed at some expert in in/humanity if life is MALIGNANTLY USELESS? What meaning can asking acquire if being alive is NOT all right? The affirmative spirit of negation is revealed just here: dare you ask, you are already there, facing the grinning face of joyless possibilities, meaningless nothingness, and malignant uselessness. Is this the same old story: that to affirm such an affirmation is the purest of negations? After all, this book provides only the “outlawed banalities” of worthless life. By asking, you only enact the worst myth ever - that of eternal return, while there is no sense in coming back. There is the repressed lurk of nothingness and its momentary natality of: and in this pure manure of being we will only be given a nanosecond of enjoying the obliteration of the One we become with the nothing only to disappear from the face of Earth. For Ligotti it goes without saying that this face will be smiling before all supernatural horror.

*The Conspiracy against the Human Race* pushes “philosophical pessimism” beyond its heroic versions (Unamuno, Camus, Sartre) and provides a methodological space and position for those not prone to buying into

compulsory suicidal rituals of self-effacement. Ligotti makes clear, once and for all, that the pessimist need not be morally burdened with suicide. That in the history of anti-natalist ideas few did not put an end to their tragic embodiments does not make them morally irresponsible. The (secular) anti-pessimistic moral infringement and its dictum require that should you happen not to like life, you better hurry up and die. But to announce the uselessness of life only means that the pessimist *has concluded* (p. 50) that the case is such. Nothing morally binding stems from the perfunctory ability to judge so. If anything, it takes an evocative and performative affirmation to announce this: against the dictum “If you cannot say something positive, or at least equivocal, keep it to yourself” (p. 172) stands the incorrigibly purposeless logic of the affirmative pessimist and his/her “yes” to death. “Without a ‘yes’ in our hearts, nothing could be done. And to be done with our existence en masse would be the most ambitious affirmation of all.” (p. 51) That affirmative spirit endorses that we should learn to live with what *should not be*. To overcome such a challenge, pessimists should positively affirm that what should *be* is the absence of life. (p. 47) It is from such heartfelt logical platitude that Ligotti evokes the screeching sounds of malignant uselessness from his signifying orchestra of “meaning.” What is more, pessimists do not choose to be forsaken since they never chose to be born in order to “apply for status in life affairs.” They are being *realists*, the everyday Buddha-advocates of non-existence. And without the Real of everyday life horror of living we cannot be done with. Thus, this sort of Buddhist anti-natalism requires that only by ceasing to procreate can one resolve the false dilemma of existence: suffering or transcendence. If “survival is for the pigs,” then may it be so for suicide. And if you are willing to even consider

that you are the joyless object of “puppet determinism” - Ligotti’s conceptual stock-in-trade, then being a pig will be much more joyful. With this the pessimist’s credo that “the non-existence never hurt anyone” gains its revelatory momentum: be no more and if you care for Nature, cease to exist. Even if Nature has a special plan for us, it is given to our consciousness to realize it: the conscious and controlled return to the primordial soup is impossible. Just as our *being-made human*. For, in Ligotti’s view, nature’s plan produced neither consciousness nor its plan to conquer it; and less so was the environment ever meant for us. Consciousness, even if we take the most vulgar and colonizing version of its anthropomorphization, was a system bug. Being conscious of this condition of ours thus invites us to kill ourselves. Ask Ligotti.

Both the title and the paradox of consciousness which produces the human tragedy of existence are deeply indebted to Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe and his essay “The Last Messiah,” (Zapffe 2004) as well as other occasional chunks of his translated into English which Ligotti disinters. The title’s “conspiracy” is more precisely one that involves silence when humans agree to not speak in their isolating themselves from meaninglessness. This is the primeval consensus of the human race against itself. Of course, that is true only if we take it for granted that falsification theory is the true grammar of living. Ligotti seems endeavored to prove how inherently wrong it is to entice yourself into the perseverance of a meaningless existing. He needs some categorical apparatus to reign over pro-lifers, and the project he should reinstate to do is roughly called anti-natalism, which seems to be the more generic term for both pessimism and nihilism (both of which went wrong

in life-affirmative directions, e.g. Camus and Nietzsche). It is only natural to conclude that this line of inhuman thinking, in the long run of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical “turns,” went in the wrong direction in its being right and stayed outside the radar of philosophical trendsetters. At least it has been spared the attention of being recognized with masters of mystical materialismsuch as Nietzsche. In his indebtedness to Zapffe’s tragic and the Last Messiah, Schopenhauer’s moribund Will-to-live (“a virtuoso of life’s devaluation”) and Lovecraft’s supernatural horror, Ligotti walks through the bestiary of pessimism: Phillip Mainländer’s Will-to-die and deicide, Carlo Michaelstaedter’s puppet and suicide, Edgar Saltus, and other specimens of non-lifers reveals the chronology of Ligotti’s intellectual heirs in anti-natalism. The far-fetched end of this book is projected into the conclusion that not being is all right and we have nothing to lose but our right to die and just like God’s suicide or deicide we need to set ourselves free from life and ourselves (and the Last Messiah as the propagator of a post-divine era, is the quotidian Deus of the uselessness of life as its highest truth). After all, “Do we not deserve to die?” (p. 228) If Creation is for the pessimists the worst news ever, (p. 45) then our only natural and single right is the right to die. (p. 22) And, as we might suspect, it takes the abolishment of the very paradoxicality of life - consciousness - to do so quietly.

In his introduction and the first chapter, Ligotti merely makes it more luminescent why anti-natalists and pessimist are jettisoned in the outskirts of philosophy. Since the human condition is not one of being human, Ligotti takes quite literally the figure of the puppet. As if suggesting that we are already on the other side of life, as if

it was not enough that we only select what to want to see from the (in)human reflection that the puppets are, (p. 17) he asks: “How to take seriously a puppet master who has *gone over to the other side*?” Dare I say we should take that seriously if we are to ever proceed towards a more or less honorable quietus?

Since consciousness is a system error of Nature and divides (our) being, deprived of naturalistic reasoning, we inherit and reproduce the an-human paradox of consciousness which gradually leads us to believe that the puppet is the human. How so? Ligotti uses two possibilities to advocate puppet determinism (which naturally includes the questioning of free will and causality) by the quadruple explanatory formulas of Zapffe (isolation, anchoring, distraction, sublimation) and Tolstoy (ignorance, Epicureanism, strength and energy, and weakness). And while the latter cared to *choose* between these, the former, whose self-styled appointee Ligotti is, only cared to *explain* humanity’s strategies of survival in the vortex of consciousness:

“isolation” is the repression of grim facts by a code of silence; “anchoring,” the stabilizing attachment to specific ends; “distraction,” the continuous stream of divertive impressions; and “sublimation,” the conversion of anguish into uplifting pursuits, like literature and art. (Tangenes 2004)

Thus neither Zapffe nor Ligotti ever meant to take sides with survival: it is not a matter of choosing to die, it is a matter of the determination to *do* it.<sup>1</sup> With the evolution of consciousness, humanity developed finer techniques to deviate itself from disillusionment and the sad realization

of being here. Zapffe’s paradox of consciousness - that we cannot live with consciousness but cannot live without it - is the tragedy (itself able to serve as sublimation, see pp. 163-5). “This is the tragedy: Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are - hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrated bones.” (p. 28) Consciousness is “existential liability” (p. 51): and we *really* stop being what we think we are (and thus, Nietzsche-style, become what we are) when we are conscious enough of the identity paradox we live in and realize there is no way out if we believe we are somebody while being nobody. (p. 201) Everybody is nobody - as well as nobody’s puppet, for there is no self, too. It might turn out that the very externalization of the puppet (or whatever other mechanistic figure different from Ligotti’s) outside consciousness is the product of consciousness which is indiscernible as a self-model precisely because it serves both as image and reality.

I am pointing at Metzinger’s paradox from *Being No One* which Ligotti reads meticulously and defines it as: “You cannot know what you really are because then you would know there is nothing to know and nothing to know it.” (p. 105) Ligotti’s puppet determinism vs. causality postulates that we are able to reason about our determination, but we cannot feel it. (p. 97) Those who somehow manage to feel it go mad, for determinism = madness. It cannot be experienced first-hand, hence the socialized sublunary iatocratic power to temporarily undo someone’s “self” and “free will” in order to restore it and choose instead of that “self” who cannot relate to the notion of (causal) responsibility. To deny free will, as Ligotti does, is to involuntarily slip into the ranks of anti-natalists (one

such particular case is Popper's "elimination of suffering," see p. 73). The unacceptable and as of yet human compromise of cognitive psychology and analytic philosophy is that despite their oft met denial of the self, they only make more complex the questioning of existence. Thus, accepting/living in Metzinger's paradox is to mechanically go insane and sink into an "epidemic of madness." It is at this moment that the nightmare of our world finally becomes visible and real, and depression and meaninglessness unite into the four no's of Ligotti: "There is nothing to do and/ there is nowhere to go/ There is nothing to be and/ there is no-one to know." (Ligotti 2000)<sup>2</sup> And as in this stage we cannot feel anything being nobody, (p. 113-14) it only takes the mechanistic course of puppet determinism as the unconscious strategy of not surviving the millennia of our own survival. But there is something ultimately relativist about this determinism which renders it irrelevant for, as Ligotti himself admits, every nihilistic/anti-natalist position is abolishable. Were it not irrelevant, it might as well become a cause. And the question which Ligotti does not address is whether the self-extinction of humanity can do just fine without *itself*?

If we admit our being puppets, then we should abolish the paradox of consciousness which will be the abolishment of paradox altogether as yet another "real-life" paradox thrusting existence. And this arrested development is not news in itself. Earlier Malthus gave it economic determination if only to preserve a higher standard of living; in the 1990s, the Boston-based Church of Euthanasia was among the pioneers of a gleeful anti-natalist gay apocalypse through their weird house music. But these are minor examples of merely choosing to liberate oneself

from liberation. What is truly vertiginous here is that Ligotti asks for our liberation from ourselves. We do not deserve to exist: even less so as self-conscious and quasi-paradoxical puppets. The tragedy of evolution of consciousness is the "parent of all horrors." (p. 15) Kill yourself after Zapffe Socratic travesty "Know yourselves - *be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye,*" and you kill the whole family: the division of being, consciousness, tragedy, paradox, liberation and survival, puppets, death itself. There is no significant difference between suicide and thanatocide on this point. The uncanny fear of not being you (p. 88-9) which is worse than death is now alleviated once and for all.

In the rant against the line-up of the heroic "freaks of salvation," Ligotti manages to ravage such iconic nihilists such as Nietzsche, whose architecture of meaninglessness' ruins serves an entirely different Dionysian end that refashions fate into *freedom*. Transhumanists provide no more of it; they are attacked as a "secular retelling of the Christian rapture" (p. 127) whose ambition that we can remake ourselves is failed because determinism would teach us that we are not even part of the process of remaking ourselves in isolating suffering in the world. Day by day, we are not getting better: we are only "getting made" better and better. And the better we are made, the worse we will cross the finish. Christianity itself gets a scarce mention: a mere "savior on stick." The "egoistic compulsion to send emissaries into the future" (p. 178) does not end even in the spiritual counterpart of anti-natalism - Buddhism, which Ligotti considers to be the *religious* mirror of pessimism whose popularity as opposed to pessimism's state of affairs is based on: (1) the fact that operates through belief rather than truth claims and (2)

the tree-like Buddhist version of the Decalogue, based on the relief from suffering (*dukkha*). That Buddhism does embrace suffering from scratch still does not make it eligible as extinction's intellectual credibility, but at least it does consider the imaginary status of the self. In doing so, Buddhism manifests the paradox of desire and the self: if one wants to get relief from suffering, one assumes that he or she is one and has a self. "There is nothing more futile than to consciously look for something to save you," concludes Ligotti. And among those who best understood that ego-death is the condition to abandon that paradox are Krishnamurti and people who have not drawn themselves into the reparation of selves after Near Death Experience (such as author Suzanne Sagal). But then again, even ego-death is a compromise with being and creation itself; we have to be able to kill death and killing itself. And if we are puppets, we are doomed to do it. And perhaps imagining that "doing" for the human puppets is the only way to quit their very quietus.

It makes little sense to wonder or further ask where does this "only way" end. If the end is the end of the end of all ends, then puppet logic would require that even anti-natalists are not ones, for they will still retain self-identity which is non-sense. If anti-natalists assume that every system (and what else than a system [error] is the human species?) contains the conditions of its self-destruction, and if for humanity this condition is consciousness, and puppetry is self-destruction, then that system cannot and should not have a way to retain any possibilities for the abolishment of self-destruction and the preservation of the living "flesh" of the paradox. If this is the case, then to hell with "The moment of consummate disaster/ When puppets turn to face the puppetmaster." (Ligotti 2000) It seems

that for Ligotti self-destruction is just that: self-destruction with no identity, for how can it have one if there is no one to be and no one to know? This is when the human puppet grasps that "the true is a moment of the false" (Debord) and we have to abolish death itself in order to transcend being, go consciously through it and terminate it: other than that, there is no serious "confrontation with mortality." (p. 161) In short, it takes no self and no identity to destroy the (notion of) self; it only takes a puppet.

The mastering of such arguments which hardly can be further pushed to their edges has a specific purpose in Ligotti. We need to observe that he is a writer who, not yet dead, himself makes an examination of the kind of examined life not worth living. What spares us the whining and whimper of non-being in Ligotti? This is his privileging of philosophical horror fiction, more precisely, supernatural horror (Lovecraft).<sup>3</sup> It is the paradox in flesh (p. 16) and, to answer the futile "how so?": a character should "collapse in horror before this ontological perversion." If we are only able to accept being and living as "not all right," as horror (that it is supernatural is to me a tautological ornamentation of that ontological perversity), we will suffocate ourselves in peace with the non-existing denizens of selfhood. Since puppet determinism and supernatural horror are related, then it seems logical that their very deterministic relation should exclude the necessitation of all determination. This is why "No one can prove that our life in this world is a supernatural horror." (p.18) If a puppet could determine anything (say, about the ontological status of horror), then why bother writing about it in the first place? To exclude all determination from the idea of supernatural horror is not to further determine the puppet to shoot itself: we merely have to *play*

as if we decide on not determining it/us doing so, for the absolute adieu to consciousness is either a bullet or non-procreation. If what unites us is the Brotherhood of suffering (Zapffe), then those who live a conscious life about suffering should let go, because they do not “go on with things.” Since we are human puppets, and puppets are only relative to other *playthings* (p. 33, emphasis mine, S. P.) supporting the illusion of being real, “A utopia in which we no longer deny the realities we presently must repress cannot be realistically hoped for.” (p. 71) Thus, if the essential question was for Ligotti “Are we real?,” (p. 83) some 100 pages later the entire project of answering this question is subjected to the definition of supernatural horror as “Horror is more real than we are.” (Lovecraft p. 182)<sup>4</sup> The realization of such invariably mechanistic rationalization is the characterless plot of the supernatural horror fiction. (Again, little do we care to ask for the status of reason and “rationalization” if this is the case.) Existence of puppets as life-dream of “life” is that ontologically bittersweet concoction of subjective mind and objective monstrosity. Hence, every form of rationality and explaining horror “is irrelevant to our being afraid or not afraid of anything.” (p. 243, n. 7) Little do monsters care about horror, if they ever care and feel. Thus, the supernatural is the “metaphysical counterpart of a mind that has been driven mad,” (p. 211) that is, of absolute determinism in a causeless universe. Once consciousness appeared, we walked out of the natural. Ever since this system bug, everything is supernatural and we only figure in the galaxy’s cesspool. Our life is just the elusion out of this impossible and ravaging news.

*The Conspiracy against the Human Race* ends like an apophatic narration on how not to speak about death as

the supernatural, (see esp. pp. 224-26) since it is “like a visitation from a foreign and enigmatic sphere.” (p. 217) If there was no consciousness, it is natural that death would not exist and with this all narration ends here. But the supernatural horror of human puppetry *cannot be avoided* because we are both consciousness-bearers and puppets and as such orchestrate the endless rapture of life. If all is nature and we are not, then, simply put, “We are not from here.” (p. 221) “We” are the supernatural horror that creep us all along. We are the outlandish. We are the we that are nobody. We are those who should not be here. We run amok outside the puppet world we inhabit, decentering the supernatural Real in the outskirts of survival but, at the end, to no avail, for “We are those puppets, those *human* puppets.” (p. 222) Consciousness gave us an “appointment with nonexistence.” How do we part with it in not procreating? With an unnatural puppet smile.<sup>5</sup> And even then, as Ligotti says, what do we care? What do we care that some puppets are being swallowed by a terminal anti-eternality or that we are aware of all that follows from that millennial farce of being-all-right? There will come the time when we will not wake up on time, outside time, when time will be swallowed by itself and no God will be there to digest the feces and carcasses of those irrelevant non-beings, of those jittery puppets. After all, facing “The death of tragedy in the arms of non-existence” (p. 228) must bring about the end of all tragic ends; it *must mean* - in a final paroxysm of the paradox - that the puppets deserve to die.

Taken as individuals, we do not quite resemble horror. But seen as a whole, humanity is a zombie. And if only to unconsciously “surprise” itself with the horror that it is, yes, it does survive for the sake of survival. What else is

procreation if not human zombification? The conspiracy against the human race is made to be for the human race, and it ends with it:

Survival is a two-way street. Once we settle ourselves off-world, we can blow up this planet from outer space. It's the only way to be sure its stench will not follow us. ... [if] it can destroy what it has made ... then may it perish along with every other living thing it has introduced to pain. (p. 80)

Will life as such linger on with no-one to fake its realization? Will it whistle the planetary melodies of existence after survival's quietus? Undoubtedly, yes. Two documentaries (David de Vries' *Life after People* and National Geographic's *Aftermath: Population Zero*, both 2008) and a book, Alan Weisman's *The World without Us* (see Weisman 2007) announce the horrific news we never cared to face: without us, life itself continues undisturbed on Earth. Good news broadcasted on no TV channel: there is no one to pronounce the shibboleths of life and "life" itself. The bad news: our own disappearance or extinction does not free the world of our consciousness' remains with a sleight-of-hand. Puppets' puppets blight the smiling face of Earth some 300 years after. Stainless steel still shines away at the edge of non-existence. Dams and atomic plants still disintegrate. Non-existence and unconsciousness thrive. For the good of the unborn, for the smiles of "those who would never be forced to exist," for an ethic of the void, for a better galactic toilet, what else can we do but build a giant stainless puppet monument and CEASE TO EXIST? Who knows? Ask anybody's puppet.

#### Notes:

1. But as puppets, we are even not doing it: we are *made to do* it.
2. See also Ligotti's project with David Tibet: Current 93, *The Unholy City*, "Nobody is Anybody," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fetSoZFyBw> (accessed October, 1 2011).
3. Throughout the years, Ligotti has raised the standard of a creeping and unimitable style of simplicity much less grandiose than that of Lovecraft's longitudinal necrostills but no less endeavored toward the description of being's hollows. I cannot think of better examples than his *Teatro Grottesco* and *In a Foreign Town, in a Foreign Land*.
4. See esp. pp. 191-2: "We know that everything we see is unreal, yet there is paradoxically heightened reality to it all. To awaken from such a dream is to lose your freedom from yourself and return to an onerous embodiment where consciousness is a tragedy and you cannot soar unscathed within an atmosphere of death. You can only die."
5. As Zapffe says, "All I have for facing death myself, is a foolish smile."

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