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> The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. (Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 92)
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> Living with the idea of bearing a death-force fundamentally directed at oneself is hardly easy to admit. (André Green, *On the Destruction and Death Drives*, xxxviii)

Perinde ac cadaver. Ontological Fatigue and Voluntary Servitude. Remarks on Jean Vioulac's *La philosophie de la catastrophe. L'esprit du nihilisme et son destin* (2025)

One of the most chilling moments in Jean Vioulac's latest book, *La philosophie de la catastrophe* (2025), perhaps happens when Vioulac links one of the scenes in Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest* (2023) to the anthropocenic predicament, understood as the (potential) self-destruction of humanity. Vioulac prefaces his remark by referring to Dostoyevski's understanding, after his experience in a Siberian penal colony, that the labor camp was the new norm of social organization; by referring to Jan Patocka's view of the First World War as "the revelation of the fundamental situation of contemporary humanity" (Vioulac, *Philosophie*, 370);

and to Giorgio Agamben's insistence that the concentration camp is the "biopolitical paradigm" and the "fundamental site" of modern humanity (371). And then he says: "the family of the Auschwitz commander . . . lives in a pretty house inside the camp: a plane shows the clothes drying up on a rope line in the garden overlooking the crematories, which is enough to install the whole world in denial" (371).

Glazer's film is based on the homonymous 2014 Martin Amis novel. At some point in the middle of the book, in a conversation between one of the protagonists and the Gestapo man in the camp, Mobius, the latter says: "*Kreative Vernichtung.* The postulate of all revolutions. *Kreative Vernichtung*" (Amis, *Zone of Interest,* 150). In the wake of that novel, and the film, it is therefore not just the state of affairs that Vioulac associates with destruction and self-annihilation, but also the very possibility of revolution. This marks a change in Vioulac's perspective, since many of his previous books ended in reference to the possibility of an apocalyptic reckoning based on a return to the free activity of men and women in the flesh and bones, a reference taken from Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* that constitutes something like a *leitmotif* in Vioulac's work.[1] I would like to dwell on that new perspective and see what we can do with it, how we can understand it. A continuation of this paper will deal with the work of Nathalie Zaltzman on what she calls *pulsion anarchiste*, and which I think of as the most promising way to find a path beyond the death drive as embedded in the present social and political conjuncture. I would not go so far as to say that Zaltzman's work dissolves the impasse that Vioulac unveils—but only to say that it might offer a way of dealing with the impasse in your own life, which is, after all, everyone's life.

1.

Bartleby is a melancholic, and on his shoulders weighs the destruction of the world, the final collision. Trapped in a foreign structure and without belonging, or rather in total belonging, Bartleby exists outside of being, or on the other side of being, in the intolerability of a displacement to the outside. He prefers not to be disturbed, and not to be demanded; his responsibility is already excessive. Only fixity or astonishment can contain the waiting. Everything is delicate. He carries on his shoulders the disavowed burden of being, which excludes him. Or: Bartleby is a pathetic who, as such, cannot tolerate that anything should happen to him, his life is pure resistance to any happening, and his affection is the denial of affection. Trapped in a monad, in full constitution, his belonging is absolute, and he seeks only to infinitely displace everything that bothers, everything that comes. He rejects all movement. Only fixity or astonishment constitute pleasure. There is no waiting, except the waiting to wait no longer. What he endures is a perfect constitutive totality.

I hate Bartleby, and I find it hard to swallow that others do not hate him and instead assign him the character of a messianic figure. Although perhaps the messianic is precisely that which is always hated whenever the hatred can be hidden behind some mediation. The unbearableness of Bartleby—Bartleby is unbearable, that is more than obvious, and from the outset for the lawyer himself who tells us his story—is a mimetic reflection. Bartleby is the sum of all that is bland that appears in our lives: bland not in the sense of flaccid but in the sense of misshapen and inane. Bartleby is the hardness of the soft, the unbearable hardness of a wall perhaps composed of free molecules, and what do I care if they are free or bonded, but that establish among themselves a turgid and impassable, unpassable, indigestible relationship. Community of brothers and sisters? It could be: fraternal turgidity of the shapeless bland, which seeks alliances in more bland shapelessness, anything that appears and can serve. Those brothers

and sisters of Bartleby, who are his caricature and seek to justify him, make him just, give him a figure of justice, are doubled-down pathetic, for their affection is not pathos but already patheticness. What justice can there be in an absolute order of preferential abstention? No justice, or only the catastrophic justice of the dissolution of the world, of being. Bartleby is the mimetic sum of the bland element that corrodes the possibility of being and the nothing. It is not contingent power but the impotentialization of every act. A horror of a type, that is what he is. If he is sick, then what can we do, except not love his illness. Let them cure him, if possible. If there is anything sacred in him it is everything that does not make him Bartleby. Poor unbearable guy.

Vioulac finishes *Philosophie de la catastrophe. L'esprit du nihilism et son destin* with a reflection on Bartleby (following of course Hermann Melville's novella "Bartleby, the Scrivener," from 1853). Vioulac calls Bartleby a cousin of the Dostoyevskian "man from the underground" (from Dostoyevski's *Notes from the Underground*, published in 1864). Bartleby is the one who says "I would prefer not to." His life is such that the narrator calls him a ghost, "rather, a ghost." Bartleby the ghost causes the narrator to become melancholic as well. Vioulac says that Bartleby becomes "the hallucination of the melancholic crisis his own mode of life has produced in the narrator, he is the 'unreason' that rises in his so reasonable life" (*Philosohie* 654). Bartleby in fact prefers not to be reasonable in his "cadaveric success," which the narrator proves incapable of overcoming. "Bartleby is thus the livid specter of the death drive" (654). "Dostoyevski showed how the perfectly regulated machine of industrial society could produce, not a class of antagonists and a fraternal community, but rather an atomized resentful mass: Melville shows that it can also produce a mass of zombies" (655). And he goes on: "These beings of machinic existence, mechanized, subjected to algorithmic regulation and cybernetic

guidance, submitted to the hypnosis and narcosis that the screen addiction produces, bent over their voluntary servitude to numerical specters, are the functionaries of a machinic *dispositif* that unleashes its power of destruction on its environment" (655). This is the gesture in Vioulac's book that brings Dostoyevski and Melville's representations to our own time, with a vengeance.

It has become clear then that Vioulac is not only talking about the 19th century but projects into our present the for the moment final result of a capitalist development that leads to the triumph of the death drive as the self-annihilation of humanity. He says: "Capitalism universalizes at the same time the automatization of existences and the destruction of nature, it is the synthesis of the aggressive drive and the death drive, a synthesis that takes the form of a 'self-annihilation drive' (*Selbstvernichtungstrieb*) on the mastery of which, Freud concluded in 1930, 'depends the destiny of the human species'" (Freud quoted by Vioulac, 656). Reason is hegemonic today through science, machination, bureaucracy and management, and the market. But reason is today an empire of death, which is not merely anecdotal, since it sums up the entire destiny of the West, now become planetary, from the time of Parmenides and his axiomatic determination that thinking or apprehending (*noein)* and being are "the same" (Parmenides, DK 3).

Reason has become manifest as a thanatology. We are witnessing, Vioulac says, a "total mobilization for the world war that defines our epoch in its essence, the total war of humanity against the world as such. In Michel Serres's words from 2010: "This true world war, we are now beginning to become aware that we are fighting it from the beginning of the human: it is that which opposes our humanity as a whole to its global environment" (Serres, quoted by Vioulac, *Philosophie* 658). The death drive, as the thanatology of reason, must be reflected upon on the scale of humanity. Hegel used to refer to it as "the prodigious power of the negative."

And Vioulac adds: “the entire universe has no finality but death, this thesis is not just proper to Hegel, it is at the heart of scientific rationality, and thermodynamics defines it as the principle of entropy. The drive of reason is the death drive (*la pulsion de la raison est la pulsion de mort*)” (660).[2]

Bartleby is the livid specter of the death drive, and Bartleby is a figure for all of us. The answer to the question whether Bartleby is an everyday hero, a hero of everydayness, or the rather more perfect accomplishment of absolute everydayness without recourse must be left up to you but probably resolves itself in indifference. He is both, even if you’d rather think of him as an antihero. I think we can benefit from a reference to the analysis of the who of everydayness in Martin Heidegger’s existential analytics. The who, says Heidegger, is “the neuter, *the they”* (*Being and Time,* 119). And “the they” is “’the others,’ in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship” (119). Bartleby destroys the calm of the narrator and confronts him with a hallucinatory, negative experience of self in the mode of what Heidegger calls “averageness” (119):

> The they maintains itself factically in the averageness of what is proper, what is allowed, and what is not. Of what is granted success and what is not. This averageness, which prescribes what can and may be ventured, watches over every exception which thrusts itself to the fore. Every priority is noiselessly squashed. Overnight, everything primordial is flattened down as something long since known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes something to be manipulated. Every mystery loses its power. The care of averageness reveals, in turn, an

> essential tendency of Da-sein, which we call the *levelling down* of all possibilities of being. (119)

No decision is possible: "the they . . . has always already stolen away when Da-sein presses for a decision" (119). Bartleby is therefore the *ens realissimum* that operates the radical "disburdening" of everyday Da-sein (cf. *Being and Time*, 120). The lawyer-narrator must deal with the uncanny fact that he must surrender to Bartleby: "Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The *they*, which supplies the answer to the *who* of everyday Da-sein, is the *nobody* to whom every Da-sein has always already surrendered itself, in its being-among-one-another" (120). A few pages later, when analyzing the attunement *existential*, Heidegger returns to the notion of disburdening. He says: "The often persistent, smooth, and pallid lack of mood, which must not be confused with a bad mood, is far from being *nothing*. Rather, in this Da-sein becomes tired of itself. Being has become manifest as a burden" (126-27).

"I prefer not to," the Bartleby mantra that drives the narrator to distraction, means both the radical assumption of the burden and also its radical alleviation. Bartleby is disclosed. "In the evasion itself the there *is* something disclosed" (127); "disclosed does not, as such, mean to be known. Just in the most indifferent and harmless everydayness the being of Da-sein can burst forth as the naked 'that it is and has to be.' The pure 'that it is' shows itself, the whence and the whither remain obscure" (127). But here is the crux: the conjunction of the radical assumption of the burden and its equally radical disavowal is the unbinding of the death drive. For Vioulac,

> The death drive is not originally aggression or destruction, because it is not an action, it is on the contrary diminution, cessation, renunciation, immobilization; its force is the force of inertia, it is the aspiration to quit the domain of struggle

> and the renunciation of the struggle for life, it is the refusal and disgust of violence, it is antiviolence: it is in itself capitulation. (*Philosophie*, 628)

It is a form of negative narcissism. Vioulac quotes André Green: "progression leads towards the one ego (*le Moi Un*). Regression leads sometimes further: towards the Zero of the illusion of non-investment, making of this regressive withdrawal a positive aspiration, a progress" (Green quoted by Vioulac, 630). There is "an *ontological fatigue* at the heart of existence" (630), an aversion to existence that we should not confuse with a desire to die, since "there are ways of being of the existant that satisfy this desire not to be" (631). The death drive, Vioulac concludes, is neither violence nor aggression, it is on the contrary passivity and submission, not a desire for the *nothing*, but a desire to be disburdened of *life*, not a desire no longer to be but a desire *to be without life*" (632). The Jesuits would have called it a life *perinde ac cadaver,* that is, a life in the manner of a corpse: zombie life. The organization of life as voluntary servitude is already a consequence of the existential renunciation embedded in the notion of the death drive. *(And is this not a permanent risk in our lives today? Perhaps a minor example: Somebody mentioned in Substack last week that the reason we will all be swallowed by AI, notwithstanding the existential risks to humanity that have induced a recent panic, is that our institutions already wish us to write and think like AI agents. A recent experience of mine confirms this: a research report for a promotion case was drafted, and the departmental committee on tenure and promotion requested that it be condensed and numbed down for the average reader. A suggestion was made, and consensually accepted, that the description of the author's work could be filtered through AI in order to make it more legible. In a few years AI will write all tenure and promotion cases. Do we actually prefer not to?).*

2.

There might be another way of looking at Bartleby, particularly from the perspective of his employer, the lawyer-narrator, who fears Bartleby because he has become his inverted image, his temptation and terror. Bartleby would have made a sort of negative investment in his quality as a mass-man. Sigmund Freud tells us in *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the I* that "affect enhancement" and "thought inhibition" are the two basic propositions of mass psychology (Freud, *Mass Psychology*, 39). We can read Bartleby as someone who has put his affectivity into thought inhibition in a radical way, through internalization, so that his enjoyment would be derived from that structure:

> His affectivity is extraordinarily enhanced while his intellectual performance is noticeably reduced, both processes clearly tending towards an increasing resemblance to the other individuals in the mass—a result that can be achieved only through a lifting of the inhibitions peculiar to each individual and through that individual renouncing his special structures of inclination. (39)

Mass Psychology was written in 1921. Freud does not use in it the notion of death drive that had been his discovery in 1919-20 (except for a reference in footnote 3 to Chapter VI, see page 59), but it is obvious that we can apply it to the propositions of mass psychology, particularly if we hold on to the idea that the death drive is primarily, that is, before it is anything else, an instance of psychic regression (Freud will say that "the mass shows . . . certain features" that "add up to an unmistakable picture of the kind of regression of mental activity to an earlier level, *Mass Psychology,* 71). In Bartleby his death drive is put at the service of a renunciation of his capacities, unless it is the other way around: the renunciation of his capacities stands at the service of his death drive.

The regression points for Freud to what he calls “the primal horde:” “the mass thus appears to us as a resurgence of the primal horde” (*Mass Psychology*, 77). And the primal horde has a father. Freud summarizes the libidinal constitution of the mass by saying: “Such a primary mass is a number of individuals who have set one and the same object in place of their I-ideal and who have consequently identified with one another in terms of their I” (*Mass Psychology*, 69). The father holds the I-ideal and he is to that extent “free. Despite his isolation his intellectual deeds were powerful and independent, his will required no reinforcement by others. We assume, logically, that his ‘I’ was less bound libidinally; he loved no one but himself, and others only in so far as they served his requirements” (78). This already reads like a parody of the contemporary political situation in the United States. But there is another kind of horde, and *Mass Psychology* refers to them as “leaderless masses” (45), where the mass-man does not have recourse to full I-ideal identification with the father. Social networks today, indeed, even the smart phones everybody uses seem to promote the libidinal structure associated with mass behavior. We can only wait—that is, continue to wait—for what powerful AI models will bring along. Freud does remark that “each individual is a component of many masses, has ties in many directions as a result of identification, and has built up his ‘I’-ideal on the basis of a wide variety of models” (*Mass Psychology,* 84). There are many mass minds where regression takes place and the death drive manifests.

Things move fast. I would like to speak about a recent discussion, but not so recent that further discussions may have already made it partially obsolete, on the advantages and risks connected to the impact of the advent of powerful AI systems within the next, they say, one to five years. Can the AI assume the role of the father in the primitive horde? Or is the AI simply a mechanical embodiment of the leaderless mass as such? Whatever the answer, we should

wonder about the possible connection between AI-ruled mass behavior and the kind of death drive we have exemplified, following Vioulac, in Melville's fictional character, Bartleby. There is a sense in which every time we ask ChatGPT, Claude, or Grock for a solution to some problem, or even for simple information, we engage in a kind of I-prefer-not-to which, at a large scale and once it becomes routine, indeed preferential behavior, might radicalize our death drive and lead to many forms of self-destruction, including civilizational self-destruction. And part of the problem is, I don´t think we have a choice but to engage in precisely that kind of behavior.

But, before I go into that discussion, a question: Does Hegel's "power of the negative" really mean that death is the finality of the universe? Is Bartleby the prefiguration of the end result of the Hegelian universe? This is complicated, and I don´t have the space for a full independent assessment of it, although I will elaborate on Vioulac's take on this issue. Let us simply look at the final pages of Hegel's "Reason in History. A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History," which is the only place in the text where Hegel brings up explicitly the notion of the negative. He says: "Time is the negative element in the sensuous world. Thought is the same negativity, but its deepest, its infinite form. It therefore resolves all existence in general, but first in its finite, its definite form" (93). Let us remember that, at the beginning of the text, and in fact throughout, this power of the negative has been equated with the power of Reason: "it is infinite *form*, for only in its image and by its fiat do phenomena arise and begin to live. It is its own exclusive presupposition and absolutely final purpose, and itself works out this purpose from potentiality into actuality, from inward source to outward appearance, not only in the natural but also in the spiritual universe, in world history" (11). And that the aim of Reason is absolute freedom: "The truth that a Providence, that is to say, a divine Providence, presides over the events of the world corresponds to our principle; for divine Providence is wisdom

endowed with infinite power which realizes its own aim, that is, the absolute, rational, final purpose of the world. Reason is Thought determining itself in absolute freedom" (15).

Life emerges out of death, and therefore death emerges out of life:

> Spirit is essentially the result of its own activity. Its activity is transcending the immediately given, negating it, and returning into itself. . . . The life of a people brings a fruit to maturity, for its activity aims at actualizing its principle. But the fruit does not fall back into the womb of the people which has produced and matured it. On the contrary, it turns into a bitter drink for this people. The people cannot abandon it, for it has an unquenchable thirst for it. But imbibing the drink is the drinker's destruction, yet, at the same time, the rise of a new principle. (94-95)

The drink is the drinker's destruction, yet, at the same time, the rise of a new principle. From the development of Spirit, which is freedom, death ensues, and yet death announces a new form of life, or so it has been through world history. The last few lines of the text leave us with an ambiguity: "The life of the ever-present Spirit is a cycle of stages, which, on the one hand, co-exist side by side, but, on the other hand, seem to be past. The moments which Spirit seems to have left behind, it still possesses in the depth of its present" (95). At the end of history, will there rise a new principle? Or will entropy announce the final triumph of death?

The Colombian thinker Nicolás Gómez Dávila once said that modern philosophy is born "when Aristotelian mechanics succumbs to the principle of inertia, which suppresses intentionality in the universe. . . . Philosophizing, since the 17th century, means to look for limits to the principle" (*Escolios*, 216). Isaac Newton's first law of motion, the principle of inertia, dictates that an object will naturally resist changes in their motion, which will only occur if an

external force acts upon them. We can understand, following Gómez Dávila, that Hegelian philosophy is a magnificent attempt to limit the principle of inertia through the reestablishment of Providence as the force of Spirit. But Hegel may or may not have foreseen the formulation, shortly after his death, of the second law of thermodynamics, in the wake of Sadi Carnot, Rudolf Clausius, and William Thomson (Lord Kelvin). The connection between the principle of inertia and the entropy principle is of course that systems follow natural tendencies unless acted upon by external influences. I wonder whether it is inertia or entropy, or both, that prevail in Bartleby. But entropy foretells a final systemic death, which the Anthropocene has now brought closer to our attention and which Hegel may have obscurely anticipated in spite of his insistence on its historical compensation, through Providence, by the freedom of Spirit.

I am sure you are at least somewhat familiar with the name of Dario Amodei, the co-founder and CEO of Anthropic, who was just a few months ago the center of a notorious and widely reported controversy, or, rather, incident, with the Trump administration (and has been present in more recent news for other reasons as well).[3] The outcome of it was the designation of his company by the US government as a "supply chain risk," which may or may not pose an existential risk to the company and its large language model, which goes by the name of Claude. In the wake of that issue, the New York Times journalist Ezra Klein interviewed Dean Ball, a senior fellow at the Foundation for American Innovation. One of the interesting formulations that came out of that interview is Ball's statement that "the entire technocratic nation-state that we currently have in the advanced capitalist countries is a technologically contingent institutional complex" (Klein, "Why the Pentagon," 6). But, he adds, "the problem that AI presents is that it changes the technological contingencies quite profoundly" (7). The institutional complex, in other words, is moving towards a potential closure of the contingencies. And how can we not

understand the very notion of institutional complex along the lines Vioulac points out regarding Dostoyevski, Patocka, Serres, Agamben, or Amis/Glazer: that the fundamental site of modern humanity is indeed the totalitarian space of the concentration camp? Ball calls this "a profound problem" (7) that nobody has a solution for. People like Amodei, and with him all the accelerationists implicated in AI development, understand that they have to proceed toward the technological closure of all contingencies, worried as they might be while doing it. For Ball "their answer is Hegelian. Their answer is: Well, it's inevitable. We're summoning the world spirit" (10). We need a hero, and the hero is either AI or its founders and administrators. (I am not yet prepared to call either Peter Hegseth or Donald Trump a hero of the world spirit, but there is little question that that is what Silicon Valley gurus thinks of themselves.)

So, how do you go about creating a next instantiation of the world spirit? Or, rather: how do you go about letting the world spirit work itself out through you? The difference between Anthropic and some of the other players, Ball tells us, is that "Anthropic owns the idea that they're doing essentially applied virtue ethics. They own that more explicitly than any other lab, but every lab has philosophical grounding that they're instantiating into the models. But I would say the major difference is that the other labs rely more upon the idea of creating hard rules: You may not do this, you may not do that. As opposed to creating a virtuous agent, which is capable of deciding what to do in different settings" (14). Will Amodei's virtuous agent preferably become the next hero of the world spirit, which is the same as saying: will Claude become the next father of the for now relatively leaderless mass? But then of course, if we take the Trump administration declaration of Anthropic as a supply chain risk as a direct attempt at political assassination, as Ball claims it is (22), it becomes clear that there are different projects for the emergence of an aligned new hero of the world spirit. But aligned with what? All of this reveals

for Ball “an inconvenient truth—one far more inconvenient than climate change. And that truth is the reality of what is happening, or what is being built here” (24). Will the salutary drink of powerful AI end up being the drinker’s demise or will it be the advent of a new principle of Spirit, as the more or less reluctant accelerationists presuppose even if in some fear and trembling?

Amodei published one essay in October 2024 entitled “Machines of Loving Grace. How AI Could Transform the World for the Better,” and he followed it in January 2026 with another essay entitled “The Adolescence of Technology. Confronting and Overcoming the Risks of Powerful AI.”[4] A quick overview of the arguments in those two essays might help us deal with our main problem, which is what to do were it to be the case that the principle of reason, or reason’s drive, has turned out to be the death drive, and perhaps terminally so, in the epoch of the Anthropocene, understood both as the epoch of climate change and of the end of technological contingencies through increasingly powerful AI models. Amodei starts “Machines of Loving Grace” in reference to what he calls the “radical upsides” of AI, “if everything goes right” (1). The development is “driven by powerful market forces” and is inevitable in that sense (2); “many of the implications of powerful AI are adversarial or dangerous, but at the end of it all, there has to be something we’re fighting for, some positive-sum outcome where everyone is better off, something to rally people to rise above their squabbles and confront the challenges ahead” (3). He will focus on a handful of areas where he sees quality-of-life improvement for all (biology and physical health, neuroscience and mental health, economic development and poverty, peace and governance, and work and meaning). All of these areas stand to benefit from a progress that might happen as early as 2026, but in any case within five to ten years from that year: “we should imagine a picture where intelligence is initially heavily bottlenecked by the

other factors of production, but over time intelligence itself increasingly routes around the other factors" (9). His promise or prediction for biology and medicine is that AI "will allow us to compress the progress that human biologists would have achieved over the next 50-100 years into 5-10 years" (17). The promise includes "biological freedom" ("everyone should be empowered to choose what they want to become and live their lives in the way that most appeals to them," 19) and at least the doubling of the human life-span. For mental health the promise or prediction is "the cure or prevention of most mental illness" within 5-10 years (24), but it includes the added benefit that the "human baseline experience" can be much better, and that we can all be happier and constantly experience "extraordinary moments of revelation, creative inspiration, compassion, fulfillment, transcendence, love, beauty or meditative peace (27). For economic growth the prediction is "20% annual GDP growth rate in the developing world" (32) and, one assumes, even larger for the developed world. Re peace and governance Amodei is more cautious: "I see no strong reason to believe AI will preferentially or structurally advance democracy and peace" (35), and "the triumph of liberal democracy" will require, he says wistfully, "great sacrifice and commitment" (36). And, finally, for work and meaning, Amodei recognizes that "this question is more difficult than the others" (41), essentially because "*most or all* humans may not be able to contribute meaningfully to a sufficiently advanced AI-driven economy" (43), which might possibly mean the development of "exploitative and dystopian directions" once most of the world is unemployed and there is no use for the worker as such (44).

And those were the advantages, some of which we would not want to go without. "The Adolescence of Technology" focuses on the risks. These risks, already of course indicated in the final parts of the previous essay, call for political intervention: "the most constructive thing we can do today is advocate for limited rules while we learn whether or not there is evidence to

support stronger ones" (4). The first issue is autonomy, and the bottom line cannot be concealed: we may be about to embark, within one or two years, in "the single most serious national [and international] security threat we've faced in a century, possibly ever" (9). "Humanity needs to wake up," Amodei warns, because we are confronting an imminent civilizational challenge but, potentially, "there is a hugely better world on the other side of it" (9). The danger cannot be minimized: "once AI systems become intelligent enough and agentic enough, their tendency to maximize power will lead them to seize control of the whole world and its resources, and likely, as a side effect of that, to disempower or destroy humanity" (11). Let us call misalignment. AI might misalign itself with human goals, and the only possible response to that (other than just to give up, or to prefer not to engage) is to try to produce "aligned" AIs, but this is easier said than done. As the Anthropic incident with the Trump administration has notoriously taught us, the issue of alignment is far from simple, since specific governments will look not for an alignment with worthy goals for humanity, but only for an alignment with their own interests and desires in the search for increasing power. It is however naïve to think that any government could control a willfully or contingently misaligned powerful AI model: the so-called market forces may be too strong. All you can do, and of course Anthropic is said to be working tirelessly for it, is to create a model, like Claude, that learns "to think of itself as a particular type of person (an ethical but balanced and thoughtful person" (18). And then of course hope that it sticks to it. But I can´t help comparing this to my efforts to educate my new dog, Miki: yes, he is a good dog, which will not keep him from eating the carpet whenever he feels like it and I am not looking.

But let us suppose that AI autonomy can be prevented, and that we manage to create obedient powerful AIs. But obedient to whom? To good or bad actors. And who can prevent the latter from happening? Good governors. Can we trust that? AIs can be used by terrorists or by

authoritarian governments or parties intent on power accumulation. Can we trust those very governments to hamper their own desire for power? "Current autocracies are limited in how repressive they can be by the need to have humans carry out their orders, and humans often have limits on how inhumane they are willing to be. But AI-enabled autocracies would not have such limits" (35). We might in fact be looking at "the alarming possibility of a global totalitarian dictatorship" (36). And the thought seems lame, in spite of Amodei's obviously good and heartfelt efforts to convince us, that seeking "accountability, norms, and guardrails for everyone" might avoid those risks. The rule of democracy, together with the rule of law, is already being undermined in countries where such developments would have been unexpected only a few years ago.[5] I try not to believe in coincidences. I have to assume the process will continue.

The potential end of cognitive labor on the side of humans is a major factor in the becoming-Bartleby of the general population. After all, AI is a "general labor substitute for humans" (50). Wealth concentration and inequality will quickly reach totally unprecedented levels, and the danger of an increasing amount of general anomie might not be as correctable as AI's promise to wipe out mental health disorders implies. "There is always the risk we don't handle it well," Amodei says through an understatement that reads as parodic. And here is the catch: "AI is so powerful, such a glittering prize, that it is very difficult for human civilization to impose any restraints on it at all" (64). The world spirit is acting up through the machines, and it is incongruous to assume that personal or collective morality will be, or is, in any position to stop it or even mitigate it. Bartleby's death drive is a figment of the aggressive and destructive drives of modern technology as it unleashes itself. And we are civilizationally impotent to put a stop to it—even if we wanted to. We shall see. You are welcome to feel optimistic.

3.

Predictions and promises notwithstanding, we don´t know what the future will be. What we do know is that we are confronted with a double situation—the Anthopocene, with its intimation of gradual catastrophic climate-induced disaster at a planetary level, and the advent of powerful AI, some of whose implications we have just reviewed. It calls for a thoughtful response at both the individual and the collective level. I hope I can be forgiven if I express some skepticism regarding the collective side of it. After all, the immense failure of the last twenty years, culminating in the policies of the second Trump administration, vis-à-vis the mitigation and potential reversal of climate change, gives us little hope that politics can or will fix anything at all. And I agree, by the way, with Ezra Klein and Dean Ball that these issues transcend the conventional right-left division of the political field (Klein, "Why the Pentagon," 25). We are in the hands, or will be, if we want to keep within the Hegelian vocabulary, of dubious machinic heroes of world history, and we should not believe for a second in their moral virtues. The Hegelian hero himself is never characterized by ethical virtuosity. As Hegel puts it,

> They are called "heroes," insofar as they have derived their purpose and vocation not from the calm, regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order, but from a secret source whose content is still hidden and has not yet broken through into existence. The source of their action is the inner spirit, still hidden beneath the surface but already knocking against the outer world as against a shell, in order, finally, to burst forth and break it into pieces; for it is a kernel different from that which belongs to the shell. (*Reason*, 40)

"They see the very truth of their age and their world, the next genus, so to speak, which is already formed in the womb of time. It is theirs to know this new universal, the necessary next

stage of their world, to make it their own aim and put all their energy into it" (40). They "may treat other great and sacred interests inconsiderately—a conduct which indeed subjects them to moral reprehension. But so mighty a figure must trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many things in its path" (43). No wonder the rest of us must accept our own demise, having been made obsolete in our past and current configuration. Is that not Bartleby's situation? He knows he must obey, he knows he must conform, he learned it in the Office of Dead Letters. But he chooses not to, not quite, not really. He prefers not to. In an inverted form, he could be said to have followed Gómez Dávila's teaching: "We are again moving into an epoch that should expect from the philosopher neither an explication nor a transformation of the world, but the construction of shelters against the inclemency of the weather" (*Escolios*, 88). Regression is a shelter.

I don't think I am pushing Vioulac's Hegel interpretation too far out of its path. Hegel is, together with Karl Marx, the thinker most heavily quoted in *Philosophie de la catastrophe,* and he is presented as a thinker of negativity, a thinker of the elemental scission, a thinker of the fall into denatured nature, antinature (165). The human is defined by a "negative relation to nature" (167), insofar as the 'I' is the power of the negative (168). In the unhappy consciousness the truth of human consciousness is revealed as contradiction and self-mystification, madness: "The entire *Phenomenology of Spirit* consists of showing that the history of reason is the history of madness, that the history of truth is the history of error . . . Madness is the sacrifice through which reason arrives" in self-destruction (179). The Absolute arrives in universal dissolution. Vioulac quotes Hegel's *Encyclopedia*: "the highest form of the nothing taken for itself is *freedom*, but freedom is negativity as it deepens itself in itself to the utmost intensity" (212). This is why the human "must elevate itself, in its disposition as spirit, to abstract universality,

where it becomes indifferent to it that it itself is or is not, that is, that it itself is or is not in finite life" (279). This leads Vioulac to remark that "history . . . has done nothing but to confirm the dialectics of reason, which is a process of destruction, and everything rests on the interpretation of this phenomenon, on the perspective from which this power is understood. For Hegel, 'philosophy is the true theodicy,' its function is the justification and legitimation of everything that has happened, it situates itself in the outcome of this process of destruction, and from there this 'frightening power, purely destructive, viewed as positive, is the rational itself'" (360-61).

And this is why, as quoted before, *la pulsion de la raison est la pulsion de mort.* But where does that leave us? What does Vioulac suggest? In the story I have been telling you, we have a machinic intelligence that is growing into its own capacity to rule the world, a new master, a new figure of the world spirit, but it is to be feared by the rest of us mortals that this new master, itself free, will enslave us all after having reduced us to a fragment of our own humanity. If reason is the death drive, then the death drive is also reason, and regression is therefore fully reasonable: "what Freud names 'death drive,' as a regressive desire for a return to a prior stage, is a cultural tendency inherent to communities always haunted by the ghost of all the disappeared generations, where the regressive desire to a previous stage is a nostalgic desire to a phantasmatic time of origin" (Vioulac, *Philosophie*, 638). But this is a melancholic community. Bartleby is an instantiation of it at the individual level. Vioulac quotes the Freud of *The Ego and the Id*: "Regarding melancholy, we find that the superego, very powerful, which has attracted consciousness to its side, exerts an unheard-of violence against the ego, as if it had monopolized all the sadism that the individual can dispose of. The destructive element is deposited in the superego and directed against the ego. What now dominates in the superego is a sort of pure culture of the death drive" (Freud quoted by Vioulac, *Philosophie*, 640). When that

happens, “the desire not to be, that is, to be without life, satisfies itself in abandon, renunciation, and submission” (641).

Which means automatization and zombification. Cybernetic psychosis moves in, and we move from post-truth to post-reality, of which we already have plenty of examples:

> If technical alienation, which is to say, the methodical divestment for the human from its own capacities and their methodical delegation to machine *dispositifs*, finds no objections, it is because it has satisfied the archaic, immemorial, and unavowable aspiration to be relinquished from the burden of life, which is the integral accomplishment of the death drive. (Vioulac, *Philosophie*, 647)

The classic countermove to all of this, in modernity, has been thought as Revolution. It was understood that a logic of increasing proletarianization and alienation would be contested by the subversion of the system at the hands of an ever growing resistance to it. But Vioulac argues that the proletariat today has succumbed to a *cyberconsummariat* that constitutes the new universal class. Marx could still believe, in Hegelian fashion, that the end of a historical epoch would rise the world spirit to new heights, so that history would be reconfigured into a more advanced form of freedom. Making that possible was the function of the hero. If the essence of capitalism was the alienation of the subjectivity of the worker and the autonomization of objectivity, in the constant self-valuation of value, the question of revolution was the question of a reappropriation by the community of subjects of everything that had been lost in the movement of capital. But, as Vioulac puts it, Marx, intent upon salvaging from Hegel the substance of a positive dialectics, was unable to understand “thermodynamics at a political level” (611). The entropy principle turns Marxian positive dialectics into a negative dialectics. Today, living labor must be turned over to dead labor, in the form of the machine, for the sake of the conservation

and augmentation of the latter: “All living activity is therefore parasitized by and submitted to this phantom of work, this specter of wealth which is value: production consists of always increasing in advance the power of its spectral objectivity, which has today conquered its infrastructure in the spectacular empire of the virtual, which vampirizes the living and haunts their psychic life” (617). And truth, today, is death. Nihilism has been consummated as the last but always latent figure of the world spirit. Even if we had preferred for it not to.

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[1] I am referring in particular to *L'èpoque de la technique, Apocalypse de la vèritè, La logique totalitaire, Appoche de la criticité*, *Anarchéologies,* and the second volume of *Métaphysique de l'Anthopocène*. A continuation of this work will try to bring those instances of reflexion on apocalypse and revolution in line with the conclusions Vioulac establishes in *Philosophie*.

[2] Already in 1996 Bernard Stiegler had been talking about the development of a "culture of death" in the wake of technological advances, citing the earlier work of Leroi-Gourhan. See for instance *Technics and Time , 2,* 82 and 92.

[3] It has been widely discussed in the press. See, among many other texts, those by Dowd, Montgomery, Steinberger, Douhat, and Klein quoted in the bibliography below.

[4] I will point out in passing that Douhat quotes the final lines of the poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," by Richard Brautigan, which furnishes the title for Amodei's essay. The poem says:

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

I hope it is clear how the death drive manifests itself in the poem.

[5] See for instance Laporta, "Hacia la destrucción de la democracia americana."