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**Preface:**  
**Bloch's Ontology**  
**of Not-Yet-Being**

In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quotes the French historian André Monglond: “The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly.”<sup>1</sup> Far from being just a neutral observation about the complex interdependence of literary texts, this notion of past texts pointing toward future texts is grounded in Benjamin’s basic notion of a revolutionary act as the retroactive redemption of the past failed attempts: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”<sup>2</sup>

The question here is: how far should we go along this way? Do we limit the logic of retroactive redemption to human history, or are we ready to take the risk of applying this logic to nature itself, which calls for humanity, human speech, to redeem it from its mute suffering? Here is Heidegger’s ambiguous formulation of this obscure point: “I often ask myself—this has for a long time been a fundamental question for me—what nature would be without man—must it not resonate through him in order to attain its own most potency?”<sup>3</sup> Note that this passage is from the time immediately after Heidegger’s lectures on *The Fundamental*

*Concepts of Metaphysics* in 1929–30, where he also formulated a Schellingian hypothesis that perhaps animals are, in a hitherto unknown way, aware of their lack, of the “poorness” of their relating to the world—perhaps there is an infinite pain pervading the entire living nature: “If deprivation in certain forms is a kind of suffering, and poverty and deprivation of world belong to the animal’s being, then a kind of pain and suffering would have to permeate the whole animal realm and the realm of life in general.”<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger here refers to an old motif of German Romanticism and Schelling taken over also by Benjamin, the motif of the “great sorrow of nature”: “It is in the hope of requiting that/sorrow/, of redemption from that suffering, that humans live and speak in nature.”<sup>5</sup> Derrida rejects this Schellingian-Benjaminian-Heideggerian motif of the sadness of nature, the idea that nature’s numbness and muteness signal an infinite pain, as teleologically logo-centric: language becomes a *telos* of nature, nature strives toward the Word to release its sadness, to reach its redemption. However, one can give to this logic of retroactive redemption also a decisively non-teleological twist: it means that reality is “unfinished,” not fully ontologically constituted, and as such open to retroactive restructuring.

And it is here that the unique figure of Ernst Bloch enters, with his ontology of not-yet-being, of reality not yet fully ontologically constituted, immanently pointing toward its future. What comes to my mind here is the countryside in extreme places like Iceland or the Land of Fire at the utmost south of Latin America: patches of grass and wild hedges are intersected by the barren raw earth or gravel with cracks from which sulphuric steam and fire gush out, as if the pre-ontological primordial Chaos is still able to penetrate the cracks of the imperfectly constituted/formed reality. In cinema, this medium of the “undead” image, this uncanny in-between dimension is clearly discernible in what is arguably the most effective scene in *Alien 4: Resurrection*. The cloned Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) enters the laboratory room in which the previous seven aborted attempts to clone her are on display. Here she encounters the ontologically failed, defective versions of herself, up to the almost successful version with her own face, but with some of her limbs distorted so that they resemble the limbs of the Alien Thing. This creature

asks Ripley to kill her, and in an outburst of violent rage, Ripley destroys the entire horror exhibition.

But why shouldn't we risk even a further step back and evoke the "open" ontology of quantum mechanics? That is to say, how are we to interpret its so-called principle of uncertainty, which prohibits us from attaining full knowledge of particles at the quantum level (to determine the velocity *and* the position of a particle)? For Einstein, this principle of uncertainty proves that quantum physics does not provide a full description of reality, that there must be some unknown features missed by its conceptual apparatus. Heisenberg, Bohr, and others, on the contrary, insisted that this incompleteness of our knowledge of quantum reality points to a strange incompleteness of quantum reality itself, a claim that leads to a weird ontology. When we want to simulate reality within an artificial (virtual, digital) medium, we do not have to go to the end; we just have to reproduce features that make the image realistic from the spectator's point of view. Say, if there is a house in the background, we do not have to construct the house's interior, since we expect that the participant will not want to enter the house, or the construction of a virtual person in this space can be limited to his exterior—no need to bother with inner organs, bones, etc. We just need to install a program that will promptly fill in this gap if the participant's activity will necessitate it (say, if he will cut with a knife deep into the virtual person's body). It is like when we scroll down a long text on a computer screen: earlier and later pages do not preexist our viewing them; in the same way, when we simulate a virtual universe, the microscopic structure of objects can be left blank, and if stars on the horizon appear hazy, we need not bother to construct the way they would appear to a closer look, since nobody will go up there to take such a look at them. The truly interesting idea here is that the quantum indeterminacy which we encounter when we inquire into the tiniest components of our universe can read in exactly the same way, as a feature of the limited resolution of our simulated world, that is, as the sign of the ontological incompleteness of (what we experience as) reality itself. That is to say, let us imagine a God who is creating the world for us, its human inhabitants, to dwell in. His task "could be made easier by furnishing it only with those parts that its inhabitants need to know about. For example, the microscopic structure of

the Earth's interior could be left blank, at least until someone decides to dig down deep enough, in which case the details could be hastily filled in as required. If the most distant stars are hazy, no one is ever going to get close enough to them to notice that something is amiss.”<sup>6</sup>

The idea is that God who created our universe was too lazy (or, rather, he underestimated our intelligence): he thought that we would not succeed in probing into the structure of nature beyond the level of atoms, so he programmed the Matrix of our universe only to the level of its atomic structure—beyond it, he simply left things fuzzy, like a house whose interior is not programmed in a PC game.<sup>7</sup> Is, however, the theologico-digital way the only way to read this paradox? We can read it as a sign that we already live in a simulated universe, but also as a signal of the ontological incompleteness of reality itself. In the first case, the ontological incompleteness is transposed into an epistemological one, that is, the incompleteness is perceived as the effect of the fact that another (secret, but fully real) agency constructed our reality as a simulated universe. The truly difficult thing is to accept the second choice, the ontological incompleteness of reality itself. That is to say, what immediately arises is a massive commonsense reproach. But how can this ontological incompleteness hold for reality itself? Is not reality *defined* by its ontological completeness? If reality “really exists out there,” it has to be complete “all the way down.” Otherwise, we are dealing with a fiction that just “hangs in the air,” like appearances that are not appearances of a substantial Something. Here, precisely, quantum physics enters, offering a model of how to think (or imagine, at least) such “open” ontology.

And the consequences of this radical shift are breathtaking—they reach up to how we conceive the interaction of politics and ideology. The wager of a dialectical approach is not to adopt toward the present the “point of view of finality,” viewing it as if it were already past, but precisely to *reintroduce the openness of future into the past*, to *grasp that-what-was in its process of becoming*, to see the contingent process that generated existing necessity. In contrast to the idea that every possibility strives to fully actualize itself, one should conceive of “progress” as a move of restoring the dimension of potentiality to mere actuality, of unearthing, in the very heart of actuality, a secret striving toward potentiality. Apropos the French Revolution, the task of a true Marxist historiography is not to describe the events the way they really were (and to explain how these

events generated the ideological illusions that accompanied them). The task is rather to unearth the hidden potentiality (the utopian emancipatory potentials) that were betrayed in the actuality of revolution and in its final outcome (the rise of utilitarian market capitalism). In his ironic comments on the French Revolution, Marx opposes the revolutionary enthusiasm to the sobering effect of the “morning after”: the actual result of the sublime revolutionary explosion, of the Event of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, is the miserable utilitarian-egotistic universe of market calculations. (And, incidentally, isn’t this gap even wider in the case of the October Revolution?) However, the point of Marx is not primarily to make fun of the wild hopes of the Jacobins’ revolutionary enthusiasm and to point out how their high emancipatory rhetoric was just a means used by the historical “cunning of reason” to establish the vulgar commercial capitalist reality. It is to explain how these betrayed radical-emancipatory potentials continue to “insist” as a kind of historical specter and to haunt the revolutionary memory, demanding their enactment, so that the later proletarian revolution should also redeem (put to rest) all these past ghosts. One should thus leave behind the rather commonsensical insight into how the vulgar reality of commerce is the “truth” of the theater of revolutionary enthusiasm, “what all the fuss really was about.” In the revolutionary explosion as an Event, another utopian dimension shines through, the dimension of universal emancipation, which is the excess betrayed by the market reality that takes over “the day after.” As such, this excess is not simply abolished, dismissed as irrelevant, but, as it were, *transposed into the virtual state*, continuing to haunt the emancipatory imaginary as a dream waiting to be realized.

In his extraordinary opus, Ernst Bloch provided a detailed and systematic account of such an open universe—opened up toward its future, sustained by the hope of redemption, joy, and justice to come. He analyzed this dimension of hope in all its scope, from “low” kitsch romances through political and economic liberation up to religious extasis. In our “postmodern” cynical constellation, he reminds us that denunciation of ideology is not enough: every ideology, even the most horrifying Nazism, exploits and relies on authentic dreams, and to combat false liberation one should learn to discern in it the authentic utopian core.

This approach reaches its climax in Bloch’s insight that “only an atheist can be a good Christian and only a Christian can be a good

atheist.” One should take this insight quite literally: in order to be a true atheist, one has to go through the Christian experience of the death of God—of God as the transcendent Master who steers and regulates the universe—and of resurrection in the Holy Spirit—in the collective of those who fight for emancipation. We may disagree with many points made by Bloch, say, with his critique of Freud, but he is one of the rare figures of whom we can say: fundamentally, with regard to what really matters, he was right, he remains our contemporary, and maybe he belongs even more to our time than to his own.

### Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 482.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254.
- 3 Letter from October 11, 1931, *Martin Heidegger—Elisabeth Blochmann: . Briefwechsel, 1918–1969* (Marbach: Deutsches Literatur-Archiv, 1990), 44.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 271.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 19.
- 6 See Nicholas Fearn, *Philosophy: The Latest Answers to the Oldest Questions* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), 77.
- 7 Fearn, *Philosophy*, 77–78.