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The End of the World

Mare Almani

2001

On September 13, 1999, at the power station at Tokaimura on the Pacific coast of Japan, the most serious nuclear accident since the time of Chernobyl took place. During a laboratory experiment, three technicians spilled sixteen kilograms of uranium into a sedimentation tank designed to hold little more than two. The error started a chain reaction that continued for many hours, contaminating the entire area surrounding the station for a radius of several kilometers. The population residing in the vicinity of the installation wasn't evacuated until several hours after the accident and another 20 hours were required before the intervention of 18 volunteers "stopped" — according to statements of the Japanese government — the radiation leak. However, word got out, the news originating from the Land of the Rising Sun left the entire world with baited breath for a few days.

We are informed of disasters everyday, but this one assumes quite specific contours. More than AIDS which lays a heavy weight upon the promises of the senses, more than railway accidents which discourage one from traveling, more than digestive disorders which revive anorexia, more than air pollution which merely renders breathing unpleasant, what happened in

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Tokaimura casts its most appropriate and sinister light on the epoch in which we live. Perhaps because the place where this most recent nuclear disaster happened is the same place where the first one occurred, namely Japan, and this gives us the idea of the vise that, having returned to the place where it started, definitively closes the panorama of our future.

However, no one deals with the lesser consequence of the event that has upset our prospects for over half a century: the atomic menace that has completely overturned our sensible horizons by casting us into a world susceptible to being annihilated at any moment. Beyond the real danger, there has never been any way to measure the extent to which the eventuality of nuclear destruction has struck out imaginations, damaging the unreality that animates it and with it our thirst for freedom. The nuclear has succeeded in seizing the *desire for the end of the world*, which, in a certain sense, embodies the fascination and terror that is felt in front of a freedom without limits and which from time immemorial has given imagination its excess, and reducing it to a mere technical possibility at the disposal of power. How can we forget that up until the middle of the last century, this very desire for the end of the world had fueled the thoughts of most radicals, forming the sensible source of an unlimited critical energy? And how can we not see that the very possibility of nuclear annihilation deprives the imagination of this infinite perspective?

Even though it may seem paradoxical, the desire for the end of the world has always been one of the great motive forces for human beings. This absolute negation has been lived as the concrete effort to snatch the possibility of determining one's own existence from divine or earthly authority. Once the fear of punishment was rejected, the end of the world became the proudest manifestation of the negativity in which human desire is rooted. Sade's crime is that he was the first to unveil the terrible secret that is hidden in the heart of the individual and to draw the due consequences from it. The anguish and

of standards" deteriorate, this only serves to verify the extent to which the human condition is currently suppressed. After the day of universal judgment, the last day of the earth must no longer inspire fear in us, because all the disasters of Tokaimura will not succeed in contaminating the meaning of an ancient battle-cry: freedom or death.

If in the first half of the 20th century, the “life beyond our days” could appear within our reach, today this thirst for the dawn has been lost in a radioactive cloud. Now that our days on this earth might not be so numerous nor particularly susceptible to change, it seems that there is nothing left to do but beg for life here. Thus it is not difficult to measure the regression that has taken place on the pathway to utopia in the course of a few decades. In a world in which, as some have rightly maintained, survival of the species has become a revolutionary demand, revolutionaries have reduced themselves to demanding nothing beyond the continuation of the species. A question of common sense, no doubt. If someone wants to transform the world it is indeed necessary that it still exist. This is how the struggle for survival has come to replace the struggle for freedom without limits.

But once we’ve started along this decline, can we be amazed at the baseness of desires that are satisfied with a house, a car or an organized cruise? Perhaps in the name of a mythical past into which we continue to place all that we notice ourselves to be lacking even though we have never experienced it in the first person? Human community, the taste food once had, wild nature, the smell of books printed with a printing press, the skill of the old crafts and all the other pleasant, nostalgic longings of anyone who would like to go to sleep at night with the certainty of finding that when she wakes up in the morning the world will be as he left it. If it were this way, the radioactive wind would have nothing to do except raise the dust we have already become.

In the face of the humanitarian bleating that increasingly deafens us as the ritual chant that accompanies each new catastrophe, I cannot keep myself from confirming my unaltered confidence in that force of negation that constitutes the only energy with which desire irradiates me. And if I cannot hide the fact that in these last few decades there has not been a single day in which I have not seen the hope for an “overturning

the exaltation bound to the restless awareness of this force of negation are easily traceable in all those who have opened fire on that which surrounds them from the dugout trench of their particular inclinations.

But since the second world war, that which the inexorable possibilities, that were opened in the face of the Creative Nothing evoked by Stirner, couple to themselves is spoiled, corroded, poisoned, contaminated *from the start*. Today we know that the blank slate that has always formed the basis for radical social transformation is no longer capable of keeping its promises. In this way it has come to assume a suspicious mien in our eyes. When everything totters on the brink of an abyss who wants to hear talk of flying away? When destruction is recruited under the nuclear banner, who would dare to consider it a creative joy? When technical power transforms language into an instruction manual, who can give body to the insubordination of words?

There is no need to look any further than this for the reason behind the increasing disinterest in the face of the great social utopias since 1945: the atomic reality — with its wastes that lose their radioactivity only after hundreds of thousands of years — has not only deprived us of the possibility of negating the existent, but has also deprived us of the possibility of creating it positively, because in either case it’s a question of imagining the end the world or on the other hand the beginning of another world. All this has had material consequences that are not neutral. Losing the capacity for absolute negation, we also lose the capacity for thinking and imagining the very notion of the totality. The concrete threat of global annihilation and a definitive night into which we could be sunk in a single moment by the hand of some idiotic engineer has made a non-universe of the universe. When we find ourselves facing a horizon with no way of escape, we are no longer facing a horizon, but a wall. And here we are before this wall, adapted to our miserable daily reality, condemned to the most indifferent

irresponsibility with regards to a world in which we no longer feel ourselves capable of doing anything.

Inasmuch as the temptation to be done with the world has passed to other side of the barricade, to the side of power and money, our force of negation has shattered, scattering itself in the order of the possible, surviving in the form of fragments. Do you want proof? The examples can be easily dug up in the things that we live through every day, in the sea of particularisms that don't seem willing to withdraw and that, rather than curbing the process of generalized indistinctness, accelerate it to the point of enclosing us in a circuit of interchangeable causes (women's rights, environmentalism, gay liberation, minimum wage: it is worthless to go on at length about the minimal importance of these particular causes). If one then passes from the ambit of social struggles to that of ideas, it becomes difficult to remain unimpressed by the way in which the exaltation of the fragmented on the part of the intellectual rabble — a contemporary phenomenon in the grip of the nuclear reality — seems to have come expressly in order to confirm the exclusion of the totality as a category of thought. It's as if our critical modernity has had the obstruction of thought as its real aim, starting from the annulment of the subject in order to come in the end to the different undertakings of deconstruction, linguistically simulating the atomic disintegration of beings and things.

Are we still able to measure the extent of the resignation that is guaranteed to us when it is claimed that we can't speak about a part without the whole? Here we are, reduced in advance to being less than what we are. Are we aware of the vital space that is torn from us when it is declared that singularity can never illuminate the totality? If singularity starts out as merely a fragment, it nonetheless has the curious ability not to remain such. The least contact with that which surrounds it is enough to set the whole landscape on fire. In order to make singularity a fragment that refers only to itself with no relationship to

that which surrounds it, it became in its time a fragment in the midst of many others. Do we finally understand the boorish irresponsibility of a world that deprives itself in advance of the possibility of meaning through this deliberate refusal to conceive of the totality?

Not that I deplore the loss of a meaningful generator of values and the confusionism that follows from this as do many prudent people today. Perhaps it would be necessary to remind oneself that there has never been a given meaning to discover or a found meaning to give, least of all by becoming entangled on the paths of ideology or of gnosis. I even admit that the vibrant calls to safeguard the world and humanity from impending disaster do not find any echo in me. In my eyes, this humanitarianism of the final moment possesses something even more repugnant than institutional humanitarianism. As though it were not enough to have symbolically and materially exploited, plundered, massacred the natural environment and human beings. When, due to the boomerang effect, it is now a question of concretely paying the consequences of this, one then thinks to get oneself out of it by using and abusing the worst humanitarian rhetoric without realizing that one only fools oneself in this game.

After all, isn't it precisely this humanitarian sort of culture and civilization the type that, in the course of a few years, generated the stalinist and nazi extermination camps as well as Hiroshima? And it's not a question of figuring out whether art is possible after Auschwitz, as many have claimed, so much as looking for what about this civilization has made Auschwitz possible. Rather, anyone who persists in thinking that it is the sleep of reason, rather than the very state of the wakefulness of reason, that has generated monsters, anyone who persists in denouncing the bad use of technics rather than the technics themselves with their pathetic claims to solve every problem and free the human being from the effort of living, only helps to further tighten the noose that binds us to the present world.