

# THE DESTROYED WORLD AND THE GUILTY SELF

A Psychoanalytic Study  
of Culture and Politics

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*and*  
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## Introduction

In this book, we continue our exploration of cultural and political trends organized around the conviction that the world we live in is a dangerous place to be, that it is dominated by hate and destruction, and that in it our primary task is to survive by carrying on a lifelong struggle against hostile forces (Bowker, 2014; Bowker & Levine, 2018; Levine, 2018). As in our earlier work, our concern is not with the reality of existential threats, but with the conviction that those threats exist, a conviction that, while validated at times by real events, transcends reality-based sources of existential anxiety while fueling and shaping our experience of them.

One form the conviction that we are beset by existential threats takes is fantasies: wish- and fear-invested narratives, images, and dialogues. These fantasies imagine a past, anticipate a future, or describe the present as a time (and place) defined by a violent contest of wills in which the best we can do is struggle to survive against hostile forces. Such fantasies offer evidence that, whether those engaged with them are or are not aware of the fact, there exists at a basic level of their psyches a conviction that the world is a place where survival is always in doubt.

Fantasies exist at two levels of experience: the inner or private world, and external, especially public, space. Public fantasies are distinguished from private by the fact that they are shared. Public fantasy makes the private fantasy seem more real because it appears in public and because it appears

there in a more finely drawn and fully conceived form. However unrealistic the public fantasy may be, when it accords with private fantasy, experience of public fantasy affirms the reality of an otherwise subjective experience.

Characters in fantasy represent or embody emotional experiences internalized as self-states. The crystallization of emotional experiences into fantasy characters means that emotions often appear in pure or extreme forms, which are the forms of primitive emotional experience and its continuing presence in adult life. Thus, for example, a fantasy rooted in early emotional experiences of rage or aggression may give rise to fantasy figures who commit acts of violence or cruelty.

That individuals are drawn to such fantasies—and the central fantasy with which we are concerned here is certainly one of extreme emotional states—does not imply that they are driven to act out their fantasy narratives in the world. We should not make the assumption so often made that those who are drawn to extreme narratives must therefore be prone to violent acts, or that mere exposure to violent fantasy causes violence. Doing so misunderstands the meaning and significance of fantasy, while eliding the distinction between fantasy and reality. At the same time, we should not reject the real, if more complex, way in which fantasy narratives do shape what we do in the world outside our fantasy. For instance, violence, whatever its form, is an enactment of fantasy; and our ability to understand violence depends on our ability to sort out the complex relationship between fantasy and reality, or, more precisely, between two kinds of reality: the reality of the inner world (psychic reality) and the reality of the world outside.

The power of public fantasy is a clear indication that something vital in our private lives is shared with others. More than anything else, more than values, more than allegiance to group, community, or nation, it is shared fantasy that binds us together and reveals the meaning of our social connection. Indeed, group affiliations are built out of fantasy and group identification is an enactment of fantasy. The specific meaning of social connection expressed in public fantasy defines the kind of society we live in or wish we lived in. This means that there is a special kind of truth embedded in fantasy so that, even if we are tempted to dismiss fantasy as an escape from reality—which, in an important sense, it is—we should also understand fantasy as an escape in the direction of a different reality, which is the reality of psychic life and of the emotions that are the essential elements there.

The method we employ here to understand social processes and cultural trends is the analysis or interpretation of fantasy. To analyze or interpret fantasy is to explicate the meaning of the activities in which fantasy characters are engaged. Doing so, however, can be problematic. Fantasies are not straightforward tales. Their meanings are rarely what they appear to be, or what the characters in the fantasy narrative tell us they are. Rather, the meaning of fantasy exists on two, often conflicting, levels: (1) what is overtly or explicitly presented in the fantasy narrative, and (2) what is hidden or embedded in it. The analysis of fantasy seeks to identify this second, embedded meaning.

### **Destruction and Its Aftermath**

In this book, we explore the fantasy of the destroyed world. By doing so, we hope to gain insight into something important that lies at the emotional core of our society: a shared state of mind that is, on one level, what being in society is all about. Our primary concern is with the way impulses associated with the destroyed world are expressed or depicted in fantasy narratives that dominate both intrapsychic experience and the public shape that such experience takes. In other words, our interest is in the hold the destroyed world has over us, individually and collectively, which is to say: our fascination with it.

We are also concerned, however, with the way destructive impulses are used to hide more deeply embedded emotional realities of desolation and loss. That is why our attempt to interpret the fantasy of the destroyed world is an effort to understand not merely our preoccupation with destruction, but, more precisely, with destruction's aftermath: a desolate world where living, if possible at all, means little more than surviving. We focus specifically on what might be called the *past tense* of destruction and what it tells us about the quality of the inner world and the nature of its relationship to both private and public realities. For instance, simply noting the emphasis, in destroyed-world fantasies, on the aftermath of destruction offers us a clue to the link between anxiety about present or future existential threats and their hidden psychic meaning: that the anticipated moment of destruction both distracts from and gives expression to the desolation of an inner world where considerable destruction has already occurred.

The destroyed world of fantasy is a world made unfit for human habitation. The things that sustain life – air, food, and water – may have



become toxic. The world may have been taken over by aliens intent on eliminating human beings altogether or erasing what is distinctively human in the world. The institutions of government and civil life may have been taken over by malevolent forces. No place is safe. The few who retain their humanity must devote all of their energies to surviving: to discovering water to drink or food they can eat, to fending off the forces bent on their destruction, or to escaping the now uninhabitable world in the hope of finding a new world more conducive to human life. In this last variant of the fantasy, survivors must abandon an Earth no longer capable of supporting human life and seek a new world—a world which, as it turns out, often appears identical to the old world before it was destroyed. In brief, the fantasy of the destroyed world is a fantasy of the radical loss of safe space, the subsequent impossibility of attending to and caring for the self or human spirit, and the desperate search for an environment capable of nurturing body, mind, and soul.

In literary fiction, film, television, and virtual reality entertainment, one readily encounters vivid expressions of destroyed-world fantasy: depictions of extinction-level events and world-ending scenarios, struggles for survival against nonhuman monsters, and, more recently, revisitations of Holocaust-, World War-, and Cold War-narratives, prominently featuring the anxious mood of those living under the threat of genocide, world domination, and/or nuclear annihilation. In popular journalism, *The Washington Post* now presents readers with its (first) official slogan, “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” printed just beneath its masthead. More blithely, the cover story of a recent issue of *Popular Mechanics* offers a list of “64 Things to Do Before the World Ends” (2018). If popular media have become engaged with fantasies of destruction, so too have academic literatures, particularly those that advance the ideal of “the death of the subject” and the dawn of the “the post-human” (see Blackman et al., 2008), that valorize self-rending or traumatic experience (e.g. Bataille, 1988; Butler, 2004; Caruth, 1995), that envision the “end of the Anthropocene” (see Jagodzinski, 2018), or that insist that we live “in the end times” (Žižek, 2011).

The prevalence of such expressions of the fantasy of the destruction of the world suggests that this fantasy has a special hold over us, that it has become a subject of shared fascination. The French psychologist Gustave Le Bon (2001, pp. 69–78) describes fascination as a “hypnotic state” in which the fascinated person or group is enveloped by fantasy,

appropriates any and all suitable aspects of reality into the fantasy, and, thereby, forfeits contact with reason, reality, “will and discernment,” such that “all feelings and thoughts are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer” (p. 18).

By speaking of the “appropriation of reality into fantasy,” we do not intend to dismiss or diminish the importance of actual destructive forces existing outside our fantasy, nor do we deny that the destruction of the world is a real possibility<sup>1</sup>. But we misunderstand the relationship between destructive fantasies and destructive realities if we treat the fantasy of the destroyed world merely as a fantasy about real acts of destruction. Instead, destructive realities are “appropriated into fantasy” when events involving real-world destruction are experienced in terms of their concordance with personal emotional catastrophes instantiated in the mind as fantasies of destruction.

When this appropriation of the reality of destruction occurs, our understanding of the nature and meaning of real-world threats is distorted, just as our ability to respond to them on a reality-connected basis is compromised. Thus, our concern in this book is not only with the loss of reality connection implied by the appropriation of reality into fantasy, but also with what is expressed when real catastrophes are appropriated and incorporated into fantasy life. In other words, our interest is in what we can learn about the meaning(s) invested in external reality by the power exerted by psychic reality.

While it may seem natural to consider the destroyed-world fantasy primarily in terms of destructive forces in the world, more important in understanding this fantasy is not what is *present* there, but what is *absent*. What is missing from the destroyed world is the good object. For this reason, the best word to describe this world is not “dangerous” but “desolate.” In it, we are banished from the presence of the good object, which has been taken away and hidden from us. It has been made inaccessible, sealed behind an impenetrable wall.

### **Badness, Responsibility, and Guilt**

In our fantasy, the good object has gone missing for a reason: namely, because we are “bad” in some essential way. We are bad because we have lost our own good self, which can only exist in the presence of the good object. Before there is badness there is absence. Absence becomes

badness when we discover, or, more accurately, create, a causal connection between the two. We discover or create this causal link because, to the extent that we are able to identify the bad self as the entity whose presence is responsible for absence, we also generate hope: the hope that we can retrieve the good object and, once again, become a good self. But this hope is only possible once we have replaced the mere absence of the good object with its destruction.

Destruction, then, becomes the active moment of absence, the moment without which absence can be nothing other than an unalterable (given) fact. In the mental work of fantasy, we transform this fact into the result of an act done by an actor and, therefore, into something that has happened for a reason. We do so because of the conviction that we can fix the things that matter by finding what went wrong, which is to say by creating a relationship in the mind between cause and effect.

At stake in the destroyed-world fantasy, in other words, is the insistence that we live in a destroyed world because someone or something destroyed it, and, therefore that to rectify our predicament requires the assignment of responsibility to destructive forces in our world. In this way, our path out of the destroyed world becomes clear: We must engage those destructive forces in a struggle over hegemony. But, of course, the forces that destroyed our world are fantasy characters we put into it with the hope that we could reverse the effects of destruction by defeating them. These characters were created by us to take responsibility for the absence in our world of an agent capable of caring for us. Preoccupation with destruction, then, becomes preoccupation with responsibility. Our special concern here is with how taking and assigning responsibility protects individuals and groups against the intolerable prospect of the loss of their world, which is also the intolerable knowledge of the fact that their world has already been lost.

The destroyed-world fantasy, then, is an account of where the badness in the world lies and what can be done about it. More specifically, it is a story about the badness of the self. The conviction that the self is bad—along with the psychological, moral, and political consequences entailed by that conviction—has, of course, been a prominent theme in religious and philosophical thought for centuries, as it has become a veritable obsession in contemporary political and ethical theory, where it typically assumes the following form: “To prevent the (bad) self from doing harm to others, the self must be disrupted, disoriented, or incapacitated.”

The widespread “revulsion” against the bounded, secure, “Western” self (Hassan, 1987, p. 5) in much late modern and postmodern thought is based on the belief that this self is to blame for the destruction of the world. Indeed, if anything unites the vastly different *oeuvres* of prominent thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Georges Bataille, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Emmanuel Levinas, it is the attack on the self-as-subject and the consequent moral imperative that the self be diminished, restricted, or destroyed.

For Georges Bataille, the “father of postmodernism” (Drury, 1994, p. 123), the self must be “lacerated” in *supplice*, a French term that typically refers to torture or torment, but that also alludes to supplication. Torment and supplication ensure that the “appropriative” and exploitative self is broken, and is, in that sense, made amenable to penetration by the Other (1988, pp. 33–61). For Bataille, “the wound that opens up in each participant of the relation permits the flow of material from one to the other” (Faulkner, 2010, p. 106). Indeed, the lacerating of the self creates the wound that “marks the place of loss, the enormity of which tears a hole that opens up being to the communication that unites beings” (Botting & Wilson, 1997, p. 7).

It is of some interest to us that Bataille specifically condemns the individual and collective process he calls rational “appropriation” (1985), a term we have used above to discuss the “appropriation of reality into fantasy.” Instead, Bataille defends the appropriation of reality into his fantasy of shared woundedness and mutual (physical and psychic) violation, while rejecting the cognitive processes associated with understanding as debasements of sacred experience, sacrileges to that which must remain overwhelming and unassimilable. Thus, in Bataille, we see the links between (1) the conviction of a bad self, (2) the ethical demand that the self must be lacerated or broken in order *not* to be bad, and (3) the mystifying effect of this laceration or brokenness, which leaves the self confused, lost, and forbidden or unable to think.

Along similar—but less extreme—lines, for Judith Butler, the self must remain “undone” by and before others (2004, p. 23), even if, following Emmanuel Levinas, this undoneness makes the self a “hostage” to the other (see Alford, 2002, p. 29). Like Bataille’s tortured, supplicating selves, Butler’s self is exhorted to ask, “Who am I?”, “What have I become?”, and “What is left of me?” (Butler, 2004, p. 30), as “I become inscrutable to myself” (p. 22). That these questions find no answers is understood by Butler as an

ethical achievement, since it is our “unknowingness” that makes possible a virtuous community (p. 46).

As in Bataille’s and Levinas’ thought, for Butler the refusal to close the “open wounds” we inflict on ourselves, as we take on more and more responsibility for harm done to others, becomes the foundation for a public ethic of shared vulnerability where “my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.” In the “disorientation of grief,” which is, again, not just grief at the harm done to others but grief over the infliction of guilt on the self and the ensuing restriction of the self’s capacity to be and to act without trepidation, Butler finds an ethical “point of departure” (2004, p. 46): By “remaining exposed to [the] unbearability [of grief],” the self becomes alienated from itself and finds, instead, “a point of identification with suffering itself” (p. 30).

The oriented, bounded, and secure self is, in Butler’s (and others’) accounts, guilty of imagining itself to be autonomous and is, therefore, flawed and dangerous. “Let’s face it,” Butler writes, “we’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.” The person who tells a “story” about himself in which his own choices, determinations, and achievements matter more than his “precariousness,” his “woundedness” (p. 23), and his self-alienation, is presumed to be lacking an essential quality that would permit him to live harmoniously with others in society. More than that, he is guilty of refusing to take responsibility for the suffering of others, responsibility that is implied in any action grounded in self-determination. By failing to take responsibility, he may force those who suffer to take responsibility for their own suffering. And it may be that, in failing to relieve them of their suffering, he imposes on them—or exposes to them—the source of his own suffering.

To take another influential example, consider Jacques Derrida’s claim that any death, even of a single individual, constitutes not just the death of *a* world, the subjective “world” of the deceased. Rather, “each time something dies, it’s the end of the world. Not the end of a world, but of the world, of the whole of the world, of the infinite opening of the world” (quoted in Naas, 2015, p. 181, 14n). If we combine Derrida’s assertion of radical “singularity” with his critique(s) of mourning, then our subjective orientation to the reality of destruction—even the death of a single individual—can be fairly described as apocalyptic.

**Note**

1. If it is felt that the term, “possibility,” distances us excessively from the havoc being wreaked by “long emergencies” and “converging catastrophes” already underway (Kunstler, 2005), we agree that, in many senses and for many persons, the destruction of the world is a reality. Certainly, the ongoing—but not as yet cataclysmic—degradation of the planet wrought by climate change represents a form of destruction that threatens the capacity of the planet to sustain human life. Similarly, democratic societies find themselves facing the possibility of “erosion,” “collapse,” or “destruction” from forces within and without, particularly from the activity of extremist groups, from the rise of information warfare, and from nativist and authoritarian movements. The long-standing realities of poverty, hunger, disease, species extinction, and resource scarcity are well known to us, as are terrorism, genocide, and international warfare.