

## Article

# Walking off the Edge of the World: Sacrifice, Chance, and Dazzling Dissolution in the Book of Job and Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

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**Abstract:** This article compares Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1974) to the book of Job. Both stories feature characters who can be read as innocent victims, but whereas the suffering in Le Guin's tale benefits many, Job is the victim of useless suffering. Exploring this difference, I draw on George Bataille's theory of sacrifice as useless expenditure, and developed his concept of the "will to chance" in my reading of how each set of characters responds to the complex moral impasses faced. In the end, I read both stories as being about the struggle to create a viable, meaningful life in a world that is unpredictable and structurally unjust.

**Keywords:** Ursula K. Le Guin; Job; sacrifice; guilt; chance; complicity; redemption

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"Suppose the truth were awful, suppose it was just a black pit, or like birds huddled in the dust in a dark cupboard? Who could face this? All philosophy has taught a facile optimism, even Plato did so. Any interpretation of the world is childish. The author of the Book of Job understood it. Job asks for sense and justice. Jehovah replies that there is none. There is only power and the marvel of power; there is only chance and the terror of chance."

—Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* [1]

## 1. Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin's evocative short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" [2], posits a city whose citizens are categorically happy, save for an unnamed child who is imprisoned in a putrid "broom closet, or disused tool room," and is covered in festering sores. In Omelas, the child's suffering magically enables the happiness of everyone else. As such, the fictional city can be viewed as a Utilitarian dream world, since the child's sacrifice maximizes the balance of pleasure over pain, everyone considered.<sup>1</sup>

Le Guin's tale can be compared to the Book of Job [14], one of the most resonant and poetic expressions of the Hebrew Bible, and a touchstone for philosophers and critics who explore the grounds of absurd, surplus suffering.<sup>2</sup> The story features a righteous man who nonetheless becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the story's preamble, Le Guin cites William James' *reduction ad finem* of Utilitarian doctrine (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out). On this point, see also [3]. The secondary literature on Le Guin's work in general is considerable and growing; see [4–9]. By comparison, less critical commentary surrounds "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." For some interesting attempts to fill this lacuna, see for instance [10–13].

<sup>2</sup> Le Guin's work in general tends to bear resonance with the themes of the Book of Job, suggesting a strong influential link. See, Le Guin's *Chandi*, a play that stages a version of Job's story in the context of the fictional tribe of the Kesh [15].

subject to divine torture, and dares to demand an accounting from God.<sup>3</sup> The child of Omelas and Job both suffer, even if neither deserve to—they can both be read as innocent victims. But, by contrast to the child of Omelas, Job's suffering bears no social utility for others.<sup>4</sup> As such, we might say that whereas the child from Omelas appears to give up everything in order to gain something of arguably greater value, Job is the victim of useless suffering. His pain represents expenditure without return.

I have questions for both stories, questions about how they each end. Toward the end of Le Guin's short story, some of the inhabitants of Omelas decide to walk away. Though Le Guin does not explain why, one might assume that those who walk away do so because they are overwhelmed by guilt owing to their complicity in the child's sacrifice. But, upon closer reading, we discover that this cannot be the case since, as Le Guin herself writes, the collective happiness determined by the child's sacrifice is in part defined by a state of absolute guiltlessness: "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the question remains: From where does the impulse to depart come from, for those who walk away, if not from a desire to feel free from culpability?

At the end of the Book of Job, the character Job is released from his absurd torment, but this comes only after he willingly surrenders, accepts that he is nothing, and becomes, as Job puts it, like "dust or ashes." This is ironic, since the story is, as Harold Bloom rightly points out, ultimately about "Job's structure of gathering self-awareness" [20]. Indeed, Job becomes more self-aware, but this self-awareness includes bringing to consciousness a total loss of self-consciousness. Though redemption arrives, Job, having forsaken his sense of self, renounces his earthly standing, and as such no longer sustains enough subjective anchoring to assume this state of redemption.<sup>6</sup> Thus, my question: Who is (*who* can be?) the subject of redemption, when redemption entails self-abandonment?

My wager is that each question is the other's answer, and that by reading George Bataille this can more clearly be seen.

My answer to the first question is about *responsibility without guilt*; that is, one might read those who walk away from Omelas as being motivated by fidelity to a principle that should be adhered to, even if these Omelians are nonetheless incapable of experiencing the guilt associated with transgressing such an imperative. The answer to the second question will be about *redemption without a subject*; that is, even if Job has been spirited away, and thus cannot actually undergo the experience of redemption, he adheres to the principle of redemption regardless of this fact.

As it turns out, these answers deeply inform each other. As with those who walk away from Omelas, who cannot experience guilt but nonetheless act as if they can, Job cannot experience redemption, but nonetheless acts as if he can. In both cases we see characters facing impasse, and in both cases, these characters respond with an *As-If*.<sup>7</sup> In the end, I read both stories as being about characters who appeal to this *As-If* in their struggle to create a viable life when they are thrown into a world that is structurally unjust. Pursuing this argument, I turn to *Theory of Religion*, among other texts, where Bataille most clearly articulates his uncanny theory of self-loss. In particular, the connection he

<sup>3</sup> For accountings of Job's daring address to God, see, e.g., [16–19].

<sup>4</sup> One might say that Job's sacrifice bears some utility for God, or for Satan, since the two have engaged in a wager. But I would argue that there is literally nothing at stake in this wager, since God and Satan bet nothing at all on Job's fate. Others might argue that his sacrifice bears social utility for Job's three friends, an argument I discredit below. Otherwise, one might argue that given the uselessness of Job's suffering it cannot be represented as a sacrifice in the same way the child of Omelas' suffering can. In the end, as shall be seen, I argue that both represent perfect sacrifices in terms of the way George Bataille deploys the phrase.

<sup>5</sup> Later in the story it becomes clear that though these Omelians cannot feel guilt, once they learn of the child's sacrifice they do sometimes feel "disgust, anger, outrage, impotence. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed" [2].

<sup>6</sup> My reading here depends on overlooking the story's bizarre Epilogue—often considered to be an addition to later editions, appended to appease orthodox readers—which finds Job restored and rewarded for proving his disinterested faith and accepting God's legitimate, albeit mysterious, purposes. I follow from Harold Bloom, who questions whether the poet of the Book of Job could possibly have written either the Prologue or the Epilogue—the latter he refers to as "an absurdity written by any pious fool whatsoever" ([15], p. 15). For readings that take the Epilogue more seriously, see for instance [18].

<sup>7</sup> For more on the concept of *As-If*, see, e.g., [21]; and for an interesting critique, see [22].

draws between sacrifice and the “will to chance” informs the politics of *As-If* that I want to explore in these remarkably complex, ambivalent parallel stories.

In the end, both Job and the Omelians who walk away represent perfect sacrifices, in the sense that Bataille defines it. For Bataille, sacrifice represents unproductive loss, or giving without getting—glorious expenditure without profit. When he surrenders, Job finally eschews his faith in divine justice and embraces the lawlessness of God’s mysterious ways. Likewise, when they “walk off the edge of the world,” the Omelians abandon the predictability of a life of assured happiness and enter a land without promise. In both cases, the characters of these stories “relinquish and give,” when what is given cannot be an object of preservation or utility. For both, this sacrifice is expressed through a will to chance. The risk represented by this will brings both sets of characters into sacred intimacy with the world. But this does not mean that Job and the Omelians locate some exchange value for their sacrifice. Rather, precisely by virtue of their will to chance, they abandon all that would make such exchange possible.

The following is split into three remaining sections. In Section 2, I contextualize both stories and flesh out more explicitly the comparison between them. This section focuses especially on how each set of characters responds to injustice by longing for, or otherwise abandoning, the law and its promise of redemption. Section 3 reviews Bataille’s theory of expenditure, subjective undoing, and risk taking. In Section 4 I read the stories through the interpretive lens offered by this theory, which helps to illuminate the argument I make about what is at stake in comparing them. I conclude by comparing the courageous efforts of Job and the Omelians who walk away to lead a good life in a bad life. In the case of the former, Job faces a “bad” world where the pious apparently suffer *because* they are pious, whereas, in the case of the latter, the ones who walk away face a “bad” world where, unfairly, their happiness hinges on an innocent person’s pain. In both cases, we see characters struggling to invent a meaningful way through in a world flush with impasse. And in both cases, Job and the Omelians who walk away act in accordance with a will to chance by negotiating their respective impasses such that a passageway for action opens precisely when the opportunity for action appears foreclosed.

## 2. Parallel Impasses

Before comparing impasses, each story must be recounted. To many, the Book of Job is familiar, even if its meaning is contested. Righteous Job, from the Land of Uz, is tormented by waves of divine suffering, brought on by Satan (“the accuser”), who suspects that Job’s piety and integrity will weaken in proportion to his diminishing prosperity. God grants Satan permission to test this hypothesis, and so he subjects Job to a series of ordeals, including the loss of his sons and daughters and the disappearance of his material wealth. In response, boldly, Job praises God and blesses the name of the Lord, at which point Satan afflicts Job’s body with boils. Though he laments having been born, and questions the legitimacy of his suffering, Job refrains from forsaking God. Though three friends visit to impress upon Job the idea that his suffering must reflect punishment for past sin, Job continues to protest his innocence up until the point that God appears in a whirlwind, demonstrating His omnipotent sovereignty: “Would you indeed annul my justice? Would you declare me guilty so that you might be right? Do you have an arm as powerful as God’s, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” [14]. In the end, Job confesses that by comparison to God’s omniscience he possesses little knowledge “of things beyond me which I do not know” [14]. Further, given God’s ability to “do all things,” Job admits that “no purpose of [His] can be thwarted.” In the end, Job states that he “despises [him]self,” withdraws in regret, and “repent[s] in dust and ashes!” [14].

Though “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is less well known, its story resonates deeply with the Book of Job. Written in the early 1970s, the short story first appeared in *New Dimensions 3*, a science fiction anthology edited by Robert Silverberg, but was later reprinted in Le Guin’s *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* in 1975. In 1974, the story won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story. Since that time, the story has been translated into five languages, and has been widely anthologized. In 2012, Le Guin included “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” in her collection *The Unreal and the Real*, vol. 2, and

introduced the story as bearing “a long and happy career of being used by teachers to upset students and make them argue fiercely about morality” [23].

The story opens with “the clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring” in bright Omelas, a city resplendent with joy: “a boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world’s summer.” Bereft of monarchy and slavery, absent violence and wretchedness, Omelas gives rise to glorious happiness, even if the definition of happiness remains relatively open: “I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines. Or they could have none of that: it doesn’t matter. As you like it” [2]. In this way, though Le Guin asks us to believe in the genuine happiness of Omelas’ inhabitants, she leaves many of the details of what this happiness consists in up to the reader to determine. Curiously, however, Le Guin insists that despite this openness, “One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt.” Despite the fact that guilt is impossible in Omelas, Le Guin introduces a twist in the story that would make such guilt expected:

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, ‘eh-haa, eh-haa,’ and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no caves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually [2].

Importantly, the Omelians all know that the child is there, and they all know that “their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on the child’s abominable misery” [2]. The story concludes when Le Guin writes that though most Omelians accept this sacrifice as necessary, others do not: “Some leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness” [2].

The impasse for the Omelians is this: If they act in accordance with an imperative that prohibits complicity in harm and free the child, this will come at the cost of everyone else’s happiness, thus marking a new complicity. As Le Guin writes, “If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed” [2]. Job’s impasse is equally difficult: To assume that the world is truly governed by the divine justice promised by Deuteronomic theology, he must accept responsibility for the harm that is done to him, even if he does not deserve it, and even when accepting this responsibility appears to undercut the viability of divine justice in the first place. In these ways, both the Omelians and Job are subject to an unassumable responsibility: Both must do something, and yet cannot, for doing so will betray another, equally valuable principle.

And yet, despite this structural similarity, their impasses appear to be fascinating inversions of one another. Job can feel guilt, but should not, because he is ultimately not to blame. The Omelians cannot feel guilt, but should, because they are the beneficiaries of suffering. In order to be faithful to the principle of divine justice, Job must act as if he is guilty, even when he is not. In order to clear themselves of complicity in sacrifice, the Omelians must act as if they can feel guilt, even when they cannot.

In the end, the Omelians who walk away are released from the guilt they should, but do not, feel when they act as if they can. Now, having walked away, they bear a capacity for guilt, since they have stepped outside Omelas' borders. But, precisely because of this stepping out, there is no longer a *raison d'être* for their guilt, since they are no longer complicit in the child's sacrifice. They are released from a burden they cannot undergo, only to escape to a condition where, though they can finally experience the burden of guilt, there is no longer any good reason for it. Ironically, their complicity is neutralized the very instant they develop a faculty for guilt, which is why this newfound guilt lacks use-value.

On the other hand, there is Job, who is released from the guilt he can, but does not, feel only when he acts as though he should. Once his suffering is suspended Job is redeemed, even if he cannot truly experience this redemption, because acting as though he should feel guilty requires submission to the sovereign authority of God, which includes abandoning his right to complain along with his subjective self-worth (call it his *right to have a right to complain*).<sup>8</sup> Ironically, he is absolved the very instant he abandons that for which such absolution would be meaningful.<sup>9</sup>

During his trial of suffering, Job witnesses the breakdown of the symbolic order, which is represented by the affliction caused to his body. As C. Fred Alford puts it, for Job, "The realm of the symbolic is impoverished, as the ego is drawn to the Siren's terrifying call of nonbeing, the self undifferentiated from the world. More precisely, body becomes an abject, cast-off piece of the world," ([27], p. 9). For the majority of his story—though this is ultimately reversed at the story's conclusion—Job's complaints are tokens of a longing to restore this symbolic order. He possesses a desire to reinstate a regime of meaning where sign, rule, and norm govern the borders, positions, and boundaries that make life bearable. He yearns, in other words, for a world where law, now suspended, is returned.

This can be contrasted with what happens at the end of Le Guin's story. The story concludes with this sentiment:

They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas ([2], p. 284).

Those who walk away depart from a condition structured by law—the law that ensures an equitable distribution of happiness discharged by the child's pain—and step into an unimaginable world where anything can happen. As Linda Simon writes of the Omelians who walk away: "The decision to stay and remain passive can be countered by a decision to leave—but even this decision is not a striking out or protesting against an unsupportable reality, but a willingness to be annihilated. Leaving Omelas means a descent into anomie and chaos" ([3], p. 7). In other words, given the total unpredictability of the unknown world they enter as they walk away, the Omelians who depart must, like Job, affirm a willingness to be annihilated.

On the one hand, in order to accept responsibility as beneficiaries of suffering, the Omelians must become like Job and become exposed to the possibility of what he finally accepts, namely self-loss. On the other hand, their decision to leave inverts Job's story. Where Job longs to restore a worldly structure of predictability and promise, guaranteed by the law, those who walk away willingly drift into a volatile condition of lawlessness. Their lives, though happy in Omelas, are nonetheless unbearable by virtue of their complicity in injustice, even if they cannot feel guilty about this complicity. When they walk away they exchange this unbearable happiness for a life without promise and without guarantees, because they forsake the law that makes life predictable. This reading is reinforced by

<sup>8</sup> For more on "absurd protest," see especially [24]. For a Neo-Marxist reading that connects this to labor politics, see [25].

<sup>9</sup> Compare my argument with Davis Hankins, who argues that "Job may recede but he never [quite] falls away" ([26], p. 193). On the other hand, Hankins also cites instances where Job "repeatedly asserts that he is not at one with himself," as well as his "profound sense of a lack of unity and self-identity" ([26], p. 194).



Jerre Collins, who writes, “To walk away into the darkness, unable to imagine where one might be going, is very much like walking off the edge of the world. Or rather, in the archetypal imagery of our culture, leaving bright Omelas and walking into the darkness is like going from life to death” [10]. In sum, Job longs for the law that makes life bearable, whereas the Omelians cannot bear the law, and so they enter a mysterious lifeworld where they are exposed to the same possibility of self-abnegation Job ultimately endures.

Despite the interesting differences, what connects Job to the Omelians who walk away is this willingness, in the face of impasse, to become subject to such radical vulnerability. Job’s redemption from suffering can be read as impossible, given that it includes losing the very subjectivity necessary for experiencing the relief from suffering it represents. Despite this, Job acts as if redemption is attainable, and this *as if* offers him an idiom for action, even when such action appears impossible. Rather than escape suffering for themselves, those who walk away from Omelas wish to relieve the suffering of an innocent child. Even if they do not feel guilty about their complicity in the child’s misery, the ones who walk away nonetheless feel responsible for that child’s well-being. But when they walk away they effectively do nothing for this child, even if their own complicity is neutralized. When they act *as if* they should feel guilty, even though they cannot, they discover a way forward, even if this means taking an extraordinary risk as they exchange a world structured by guaranteed happiness for one where anything can happen. Like Job, those who walk away from Omelas find a way to actively respond to impasse by exposing themselves to shattering self-loss.

In order to understand this connection more fully, and develop the theory underpinning the responses to impasse reflected in the actions of Job and the Omelians who walk away, we turn now to George Bataille, and in particular to his twin concepts of “useless expenditure” and the “will to chance,” both of which illuminate the sacrifices at stake in each story.

### 3. “Marvelous Abandon”

Bataille’s writings focus on experiences that destabilize the autonomous individual and induce “a being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness” ([28], p. 19). This being “beyond oneself” is analogous to what he calls “pure immanence,” “the immanence of the outside to the inside, of the inside to the outside”; a position Bataille likens to being “like water in water.” For Bataille, such experiences reveal the world as a densely interwoven field of public flesh, where everything is crossed and crossing over in a richly enfolded chiasm pulsing with immediacy. The distinctions between subject and object, which normally structure self-consciousness, are replaced with a “dazzling dissolution where nothing is posed outside the present moment” ([29], p. 375).

For Bataille, sovereignty is the ultimate expression of such pure immanence. As such, sovereignty cannot be reduced to a juridical configuration. Rather, it is a condition of experience that inheres in the undoing that takes place when the subject is disconcerted, displaced, or otherwise generatively self-dispossessed. In this sense, for Bataille, sovereignty is not an object that can be seized or wielded as power or authority over others.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it unravels the very conditions of possibility for this in the first place, as sovereignty undermines the bounded, self-propelled individual in whose name such possession would be purposeful.

In particular, for Bataille, sovereignty suggests unproductive loss, a glorious spending that bears no exchange value. Over profit and possession, Bataille favors excess and squandering. He advocates for “life beyond all utility,” and emphasizes utterly useless, senseless expenditure.<sup>11</sup> A non-reciprocal

<sup>10</sup> Compare this with Carl Schmitt, for instance, who likens sovereignty to a “state of exception,” the suspension of everyday law, and the declaration of an emergency power—“sovereign is he who decides the exception.” According to this reading, in the Book of Job, God would be seen as sovereign precisely because he wields the power to interrupt the law, as it organizes and governs social life normally, and unilaterally legislate an exception where punishment without cause becomes possible. For more, on Schmitt in this connection, see for instance [30]. For a comparison of the Leviathan in Job to that in Hobbes, *pace* Schmitt, see [31].

<sup>11</sup> For more on this point, see, e.g., [32–35].

form of giving without getting, or forfeiture without gain, “life beyond all utility” is sovereign, for Bataille, because it establishes a state of pure loss, which is also a state of pure immanence.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Bataille views sacrifice as a vehicle for spending the self without expecting any return on one’s “investment.” In his reading of Bataille, for instance, Maurice Blanchot writes that to sacrifice is to “abandon oneself and to give oneself—to give oneself without return to an abandon without limits” ([37], p. 16). Sacrifice represents a perfect gift, in this regard, insofar as it dissolves the subject without return; or, as Bataille writes, “To sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give” ([28], p. 50). Such giving-without-getting involves exposure to worldly absorption, such that one enters, through sacrificial loss, into “the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life.” In other words, being sacrificed precipitates an attunement to “sovereign being.”<sup>13</sup> Here, the emphasis is placed on an exigency “to exist in [the] instant, without expecting its plenitude to depend on anything and without undertaking anything whose result counts for more than the present moment, without any will or intention except the empty space” [28].<sup>14</sup>

Far from generating grief, the loss associated with sacrifice, where inside and outside collapse into absolute reversibility, is the “expression of a keen awareness of shared life grasped in its intimacy” ([28], p. 48). “Paradoxically,” writes Bataille, this sacred intimacy,

*is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual. If one describes the individual in the operation of sacrifice, he is defined by anguish. But if sacrifice is distressing, the reason is that the individual takes part in it.*” ([28], p. 51)<sup>15</sup>

For Bataille, in other words, the anguish experienced by the victim of useless sacrificial consumption is delivered from his pain the moment he is spent without return: “He would have no anguish if he were not the individual, and it is essentially the fact of being an individual that fuels his anguish” ([28], p. 50). With sacrifice, what is lost, what falls away, is precisely the locus of individuality, and the subjective self in whose name such individuality is waged.

For Bataille, in this way, sacrifice and communication are closely connected. True communication, writes Bataille, requires expropriation of the self, and abandoning the security or regularity of self-knowledge: “I give myself to non-knowledge, and this *is* communication.” Communication subverts self-certainty, and opens up a sacred world beyond control: “Communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked” ([41], p. 62). Communication takes place in an indeterminate field of interfolding communion, and necessitates a “miraculous reign of unknowing.” Or, rather, all communication participates in the dissolution of self-certainty that Bataille likens to “the randomness of dice as they fall,” or what he otherwise terms “the will to chance” ([41], p. 26).

Chance reflects a world of risk and uncertainty. In this sense, for Bataille, chance strips bare the “entirety of predictions in which reason encloses it [and] arises from disorder, not regularity. It demands randomness—its light sparkles in dark obscurity. We fail it when we shield it from misfortune, and its sparkle abandons it when failed” ([41]). The will to chance signals not merely an affirmation of this disorder, but also a refusal to give in to despair when all available avenues for action appear exhausted. Bataille explains:

*As a means to triumph over significant difficulties over the exasperating contradictions from which, generally speaking, we are able to disentangle ourselves mostly through*

<sup>12</sup> This is Bataille’s critique of consequentialist utilitarianism and capitalist political economy. But his theory of sovereignty and sacrifice is also a function of Bataille’s surrealism, and in particular of his commitment to the idea that aesthetic beauty must, by definition, operationalize nothing whatsoever. See this in connection to Frantz Fanon’s own surreal theory of sovereignty in [36].

<sup>13</sup> On this point, see also [35].

<sup>14</sup> For more on Bataille’s mysticism in general in this regard, see e.g., [38,39].

<sup>15</sup> For an incisive critique of this view, see especially [40].

denial, it seems to me that only certain chance movements, or the audacity that comes from taking chances, will freely prevail" ([41], p. xxvi).

Indeed, for Bataille, "Chance represents a way of going beyond when life reaches the outer limits of the possible and gives up. Only [chance] gives me the possibility of exploring the far reaches of possibility" ([41] p. 110). "Going beyond" here signifies a mode of resilience, but not one that inheres in the possessive individualism implied by pulling oneself up against all odds. Rather, the will to chance is about risking everything, and losing one's bearings as a self-possessed subject in the process.

Thus, the will to chance is an exercise in sovereign sacrifice; or rather, "the recognition of chance is the suicide of self-knowledge." Bataille admits that, given that it necessitates senseless loss and the "marvelous abandon" of unproductive expenditure, "the path of chance is hard to follow." Such self-sacrifice "demands taut power and continuing self-restraint exercised at the exact moment of pitiless descent into destruction and emptiness, whose limits retreat forever" ([41], p. 125). But this limitless abyss is also a new beginning, an opening toward new realms of possibility: "In the end only chance has the possibility of openness." This opening out, Bataille argues, is richer than other ontological alternatives: "Night is a representation richer than being. Chance arises from the night."

Taking a chance means surpassing the predictable structure of things, willfully entering into a world beyond imagination, and risking oneself in the process. This is what the Omelians do as they walk away into oblivion, and this is what Job does as he submits to self-erasure. One might be tempted to read both stories as being about futility. The futility of Job's story can be glimpsed in the impossibility of his redemption. Though Job is released from his miserable condition, being rescued includes losing his selfhood, thus it is unclear how meaningful this cathartic release can be.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Omelas, those who walk away end up having done nothing for the child. In fact, by leaving Omelas they have effectively sacrificed their own happiness without improving that of the child. So, the question becomes what good is the *As-If* each set of characters act with if neither result in much good? By looking at these stories in conversation with one another we can open up an alternative reading, one that stresses a politics of possibility, courage, and risk; or rather, perhaps, one that emphasizes the idea that there is nothing futile about futility.<sup>17</sup> As shall be seen in the concluding section, Bataille helps us to see why.

#### 4. Sacrifice, Rescued From All Utility

Bataille is germane to my discussion of the Book of Job and Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" for several reasons. His theory of subjective undoing as linked to sacrifice resonates in particular with Job's story. At the story's beginning, God gives his blessing that Job should be tormented. As a result, Job loses everything, save his selfhood, which he initially defends by complaining about the injustice of his abject victimhood up until the story's conclusion, when he finally forgoes even his right to have a right to complain and capitulates to nonbeing. Job forgets his painful past, accepts life on life's terms, and moves on, even if this moving on is also a going nowhere. His sacrifice typifies the useless expenditure Bataille describes since it enables nothing and bears no significant use-value. What is more, Job's sacrifice "destroys that which it consecrates," as Bataille writes, since his redemption from suffering takes shape as the loss of loss itself. The cessation of pain that is brought about at the story's conclusion is of no comfort to Job, given that this follows from his self-dispossession. His sacrifice is, as Bataille would have it, both "gift and relinquishment" ([28], p. 49).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For more on the absurdity of futility in connection to self-loss, see [42].

<sup>17</sup> For more on generative futility, albeit from a different angle, see especially [43].

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Bataille's approach to the sacred and sacrifice stresses the role of voluntary victims rather than scapegoated outsiders. Even if he is an unwitting victim of suffering, Job becomes a voluntary victim of sacrificial self-dispossession when he repents and capitulates to God, becoming "like dust or ashes." But the child of Omelas is not a voluntary victim. For more on voluntary victimhood and Bataille, see e.g., [44].



In the Book of Job, the three friends—Elphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite—visit to console Job during his trial of suffering by arguing that the world is absolutely structured by divine justice, which means that he must have done something to deserve his punishment, even if it appears that he has not. In this way, his friends try to make Job's suffering *meaningful*. Job refuses to accept this consolation by insisting upon the meaninglessness of his misery, even as he equally refuses to forsake God. In this way, Job occupies an impossible interval between two positions that contradict one another. If he maintains that there is no *raison d'être* for his suffering then, as a consequence, he must renounce all that which God's divine justice implicitly relies upon. But from the perspective we can glean from Bataille, Job's complaint can also be read as an insistence upon the already sacrificial nature of his affliction, when sacrifice is read as being without purpose or meaning.

This is different from Omelas, where the sacrifice of the child is already apparently *meaningful*, since it supports the happiness of the vast majority of citizens who stand to gain from it. Inverting what Job's friends attempt to do, those who walk away from Omelas convert the usefulness of the child's suffering into meaningless pain. By leaving, those who walk away no longer benefit from the sacrifice that is being made. Remarkably, we might say, this renders that sacrifice less purposeful because there are now fewer beneficiaries available to enjoy its felicitous effects. Though those who walk away want to remedy the child's suffering, in this way, they unwittingly put the child ever more in the position of Job, who suffers without purpose.

Even if the child's sacrifice leads to favorable consequences for those who stay in Omelas, and thus cannot be counted as useless, Bataille nonetheless speaks to Le Guin's story as well. In particular, this can be seen in the self-sacrifice made by those who walk away, represented by their willingness to be opened up to the possibility of annihilation as they depart from their condition of unbearable happiness to a world devoid of promise. This action demonstrates a will to chance, a "way of going beyond without getting out" [41]. By walking away into a world where anything can happen they may not become as undone as Job, but they do freely risk themselves in this way, and exchange the predictable certainty represented by the law of Omelas for what Bataille terms "non-knowledge," and the life without guarantees it indexes. Nominally, what they get in exchange for taking this chance is redemption from guilt, but this state of innocence itself lacks purpose, given that those who walk away cannot feel guilt until it is no longer necessary. Thus, their self-sacrifice turns out to be an end in itself, and this underscores Bataille's point: "In sacrifice the offering is rescued from all utility" [28].

Note also the interesting difference between the two stories in terms of forgiveness. Job repents, but not for his supposed sinfulness. Rather, he apologizes for his "arrogant words," and retracts his complaint about being unjustly punished.<sup>19</sup> Thus, he atones for his ignorance of God's mysterious ways, and not for the transgression his friends accuse him of committing. Job is finally forgiven when he reclaims a condition of prostration after the whirlwind revelation symbolizes the appearance of God. But, again, this forgiveness lacks use-value, since Job is forgiven the instant his selfhood is effaced.<sup>20</sup>

In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" there is no parallel moment of forgiveness, nor is there such a sublime encounter between perpetrator and victim.<sup>21</sup> The child in the broom closet, who possesses the power to forgive those who benefit from sacrifice, never confronts the Omelians. Rather, the child is publicly exhibited as a spectacle to behold by townspeople, who sometimes visit

<sup>19</sup> His "arrogant words" are not yet sinful because Job never quite commits an act of blasphemy, even if he refrains from expressing gratitude for his suffering after Satan begins to afflict not only his possessions but also his body (the quintessential possession, or so Satan claims). See [45].

<sup>20</sup> Note also the connection here to Derrida, who was profoundly influenced by Bataille. For Derrida, forgiveness is either redundant, in the sense that whatever can be forgiven is precisely that which needs no forgiving, or impossible, in that what must be forgiven is that which disallows all forgiveness, or both. As he puts it, "If one is prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls 'venial sin,' then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable" ([46], pp. 32–33).

<sup>21</sup> On Job and the sublime, see especially ([26], Ch. 9); ([47], Ch. 6).

to witness its excruciating condition, but never speak with the child.<sup>22</sup> Where Job is absolved, the Omelians who walk away are not. These Omelians may become like Job when they affirm a will to chance, but this is not because they are forgiven. Rather, it is precisely because forgiveness remains for them a distinct impossibility.

The will to chance galvanized by Job and the Omelians is reflected in the *As-If* both assume. Up until his confrontation with God, Job acts as if divine justice really shapes the world even when, in witnessing his own unjust suffering, he knows that this cannot be the case. The ones who walk away cannot experience guilt in Omelas, but nonetheless act as if they can when they decide to leave. In both cases, acting on behalf of an impossible principle—acting *as if* such a principle were otherwise—operationalizes the audacity that comes from taking chances.

Ultimately, I read both stories as being about the struggle to create a viable life in a world that is structurally unjust. Job and the Omelians both try to locate a way to lead a good life in a bad life; that is to say, to find a way to lead a good and virtuous life despite difficult circumstances of impasse and structural unfairness.<sup>23</sup> In light of this difficulty, Job and the Omelians who walk away sustain an openness toward the world in a way that includes the possibility of being self-shattered. Both summon tremendous courage as they subject themselves up to a world where, as Bataille writes, only chance affords “the possibility of exploring the far reaches of possibility” [41].

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<sup>22</sup> Compare the role of the witnesses here. In the book of Job, Job’s friends witness his suffering and attempt, in vain, to rescue him from his melancholic condition of stubborn attachment to loss. They do this by trying to persuade him that he is to blame for his affliction, which they hope will make his sacrifice meaningful, and therefore bearable. By contrast, in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” the witnesses of atrocity are not only bystanders; they are also beneficiaries of suffering. Far from consoling a victim of sacrifice, these latter witnesses visit but do not engage her. For more on Job’s friends see, e.g., [48].

<sup>23</sup> This phrase is Theodor Adorno’s, who argues in *Minima Moralia* that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” See also Judith Butler’s response to this sentiment in [49].

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