Szabina Péter–Kristóf János Bodnár PROLOGUE TO NOTHING—ON BÉLA TARR'S PROLOGUE

"It passes, but it does not pass away" László Krasznahorkai: The Melancholy of Resistance

"I would like to make a film about the end of the world, and then quit making films" (Kovács 2011, 4) declared Béla Tarr in a 2008 interview about his future creative plans. This idea eventually materialized in his 2011 opus magnum, The Turin Horse, which some of his critics do indeed consider his last film (c.f. Kovács 2011 and Pólik). Although this essay is about Prologue, a rather unknown Tarr short-film, this quotation we consider as a good point of departure, since it summarizes the central role that ideas of apocalypse play in Tarr's works. In this paper, we attempt to draw out the theme of apocalypse in his oeuvre and explain why Tarr's films generally—and Prologue particularly—not only demonstrate a certain philosophical character, but are doing philosophy: film as philosophy (in the sense e.g. Goodenough and Read (2005) use the concept).

Prologue is a part of an omnibus-movie entitled Visions of Europe, released in 2004. This short black-and-white étude unfolds an overly simple and all too familiar story: homeless people queuing in front of a soup-kitchen of a charity organisation to get bread rolls and a cup of hot tea. In the first half of the film the camera slowly tracks towards the front of the unmoving queue, showing faces in medium close-up, until it reaches the window of the soup-kitchen. Then the camera halts, the window opens up, and the crowd quietly begins to move as a young girl starts serving their food, smiling down on each one of them. There is not much to see here, as the well-worn phrase suggests. But soon one might start wondering whether this simplicity and surface—precisely because it is so emphasized—might be deceptive. Passing beyond this veil of appearance—that is, as the movie gradually reveals itself—one might discover an underlying philosophical profundity, the tacit dialect of Prologue.

That Tarr chose the end of the world as the theme of his last film is no surprise to those familiar with his *oeuvre*: he had never made a film on any other theme (c.f. Pólik 2012, Kovács 2011 and Kovács 2008). But what sort of apocalypse is Tarr presenting us? And, more importantly, why is apocalypse so central to his film-thinking? For Pólik (Pólik 2012), the transfiguration of Tarr's *apocalypses* starts

with the decomposition of the social realm, continues in the moral and metaphysical decline of the individuals' world(s), and culminates in total ontological and theological erosion and catastrophe. This progression is most obviously seen in *The Turin Horse*. As Pólik points out, the diversity of meanings of apocalypse in Tarr's movies is crucial to understanding this theme (and, in our reading, to argue that his films, generally, and this one particularly indeed are *doing* philosophy):

Apocalypse can mean, and this is particularly important in the case of Tarr, contemplation (hazon) and inspiration through seeing (nebua). Since Tarr, like directors such as Tarkovsky, or Antonioni in his modernist period, uses the medium of film as the means of contemplation—he does not use it to copy or mirror things, neither does he want to represent anything with it, but to apprehend: to apprehend something that can only be apprehended in and through pictures (Pólik 2012, 97)

This we consider to be true of all important filmmakers. Indeed, some filmmakers seem driven by the urge to provide us with the "therapy" only art can give. Film as philosophy in this sense means not simply depicting or showing contemplation (which would be, in Goodenough's and Read's conceptualizing, film *illustrating* philosophy) but contemplating with, and through, moving pictures. As Pólik puts it:

Tarr argues in a similar manner to Nietzsche: if nothing else, art still can save us. Since art is a reservoir of values and ideals confronting nihilism, so is film-art. At this point we have to confront Plato and Nietzsche. For Nietzsche believes that what protects us from nihilism is not a pedagogic-like art attached to social ends—since this kind of art, given its collective character, can easily be attached to colonizing false ideological ends. Rather this art should be like one which undertakes—in its subjective way, even on behalf of philosophy—sthe task of telling the truth (Pólik 2012, 98)

Tarr's films also philosophize by creating cinematic and aesthetic approaches to contemplate seemingly highly abstract¹ issues that are revealed—on repeated viewings—to be crucially practical issues. This cinematic contemplation reveals itself, *inter alia*, in Tarr's perpetual return to questions of the possibility-conditions of cinema as such. He does this via experimentation with, for instance, editing, the length of shots, *border-violations*² between genres and the runtime of his films. We

¹ It is typical chiefly of the films made after Almanac of Fall.

² "Documentarist fiction" (cf. Kovács 2011) as such, which is a favoured genre (and narrative and dramaturgical technique) of Tarr *per se* realizes such a border-violation, at the same time, on a meta-level, scans and questions the topography of these—often blurry—genreboundaries.

decided to take *Prologue* as an expressive example of film as doing philosophy, and to speculate on the philosophic character of Tarr's film-art as a whole, for the following reasons: *Prologue* encapsulates Tarr's art and way of seeing³—it is like an ocean in a drop. Despite its seemingly mundane appearance, we try to demonstrate that *Prologue* is an apocalyptic-movie—although of a very *ordinary* sort. It presents, in its tacit, modest manner, the daily apocalypse of individuals and groups, regardless of their temporal or local position.

Besides, like Tarr's other films, *Prologue* is presenting us symptoms that demand therapy, but it does not offer or call for quick and easy fixes (that is, as in the Pólik quote, not Socratean-pedagogic ones). The answers to the questions of how, where, and when this cure—that is, to say it with Wittgenstein, what can be *said* about these question—is to be found lies *outside* Tarr's film-worlds. What is—or *could* be—*shown* (as inscribed in another meaning of the word apocalypse: the epiphany and revelation of things in the End Times) is something that is *simply* brought into light. The director only *directs* attention, refraining from judging or even indicating the *perspective*⁴ from which it should be viewed. This seems similar to Wittgenstein's favoured technique of offering new aspects and objects of comparison, while simultaneously emphasizing the impossibility of determining or grounding which one is correct (enough to think about his famous insistence of the *ineffability* of ethics). Cures are and can only be found by us, the spectators. Or, to put it in another way, whether we recognise ourselves as suffering the *sicknesses* on the screen, or as those who must discover new *cures*, depends upon us.

Moreover, like Wittgenstein's efforts to provide a *perspicuous representation*, the disclosure (or *revelation*) Tarr aims at is not brought about by a special cinematic technique which grants the viewer an otherwise inaccessible perspective. Rather he simply re-arranges the things that have been *in front of our noses* all the time—nothing is hidden. Of course, this simplicity⁵ sometimes veils itself in various ways,

³ For a detailed analysis of Prologue from this aspect see Bíró 2009

⁴ However, putting it this way might be a bit misleading. On the one hand, this apocalyptic manner *per se*—and in a sense the fact that apocalypse is not just a *manner*, but also a *subject matter* of his films—can be regarded as a form of judgement, or at least an alarm. On the other hand—as some critics mentioned, and we agree on this—*Werckmeister Harmonies* could be interpreted as a kind of exception from Tarr's above described neutral way of representation: The atmosphere and visual narration of this piece forces a feeling on the spectator that the director sympathizes with *Valuska*, the protagonist. (Cf. Kovács 2008)

⁵ To indicate a possible parallel between Tarr's and Wittgenstein's relation to simplicity, the following quote can be reve aling: "Tolstoy: the meaning (importance) of something lies in its being something everyone can understand. That is both true & false. What makes the object hard to understand - if it's significant, important - is not that you have to be instructed in abstruse matters in order to understand it, but the antithesis between understanding the object & what most people want to see. Because of this precisely what is most obvious may

such as the ornament of over-stylisation, over-written symbolism and allegories and (sometimes literally) end-less and unclosed plotlines. This is especially true of *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *The Turin Horse*. However, these techniques do have a function: they ironically "mirror" the difficulty and opacity of the world. They ironically unveil the artificiality and deceptiveness of self-propagated difficulty, and serve to mask the underlying simplicity and banality: the banality of evil, selfishness, betrayal and perpetual decay, at the same time the banality of humanity, humanism and dignity (if there is a difference between the films before *Satantango* and those that follow it, it might be captured in this latter dialectic).

This dialectical, self-questioning mode of representation is a central concern of our reading of *Prologue* as well. At the same time, self-questioning and self-reflection gather another meaning in *Prologue*. At first, one might expect something graspable—a "conclusion" or solution—from this seemingly easy-going documentary on a group of downtrodden homeless people. But as the short runtime comes to an end, one might wonder whether this story is much more about himself or herself, and his or her reception of, and relation to, what is seen on the screen as opposed to any *content* or *message* (again, as an analogy of Wittgenstein's distinction of what can be *said* or *shown* only). Another reason why we consider *Prologue* a film doing philosophy is its minimalist form: the almost total absence of a storyline or plot; its lack of monologues or dialogues, and the seeming hiatus of any dramatic accumulation. Are we presented with a story without action, or actions that do not for a coherent "story"? In a sense, all we are presented with is time, the most ordinary world—*life* itself.

To decipher how this extremely short and tellingly wordless film can indeed do—dialectic, therapeutic or otherwise—philosophy, we first turn to the title. At first glimpse it seems—just as the whole film—rather simple. *Prologue* derives from the ancient Greek $\pi\rho o\lambda o\gamma o\varsigma$, which means foreword. It is important to note that the second particle—logos—is understood and used in different senses, most commonly (but not exclusively) as word(s), speech, reason, ground, essence and truth. This analysis will also rely on some of these meanings, but its focus will mainly be on its use as word and *truth*, *essence*. Besides it is worth to consider the semantic richness of the *pro* particle in *Prologue*. We can understand it as denoting the word *before*

be what is most difficult to understand. It is not a difficulty for the intellect but one for the will that has to be overcome." (Wittgenstein CV, 25) Naturally, as hinted earlier, this simplicity can not be taken literally (tp the full extent) in films like Almanac of Fall, Werckmeister Harmonies, The Turin Horse, The Man from London, or even in Damnation. Still, especially his documentary fiction works (now Prologue is treated as such), in our reading, in a sense de, onstrates the truth of the Wittgenstein quote via their particular way of representation and storytelling.

other or more important words—like in literary or academic texts. Or in a related, yet broader sense, as words that should *anticipate* other words. And foreword can also mean: before any word *can* or *should* be articulated. As we attempt to demonstrate, all the above senses are present in this movie, and it plays an inherently functional role understood in all senses.

First, let us take a look at it in the sense of "words before other words", or as "words anticipating something (more) essential", or even "words anticipating the truth". To begin with, it is foreword in a much straightforward sense: it was the opening movie of the New York Film Festival in 2004. This date is also important from another, but possibly related perspective: 2004, its release date, was the year when Hungary became a member state of the European Union, so *its foreword-ness* can be understood as follows: Before we enter Europe, we have to talk about this first⁶. We have to talk about what should be left behind before we enter the land of freedom, equality and fraternity. In a more abstract sense, the title, in the mirror of the whole film, can be interpreted as alluding to the priority of pictures (alone) to the words, the priority of *showing* to *saying*. Showing tacitly, not purposing to create propaganda by shouting—for in a trivial, yet important sense, we only see what Tarr is talking about. (A cinematographic parallel of this is that we only see the girl in the soup kitchen saying: "Bon appetite!").

On a structural level this afore-ness is reflected in the camera-movement as well. One might at first think that when the camera halts, one can leave behind this sad mass waiting for something yet unknown. This dynamic and structure is essential and functional: the slow lateral camera movement yields a feeling of an eternal, teleological precession⁷ or even development. It might raise ones expectations of a possible and imaginable salvation, or at least solution. This horizon of expectation is counterpointed by the extreme slowness of the tracking, the initially unmotivated seeming close-up on the faces, and the hopeless, ever increasing presence of Mihály Víg's waltz-like soundtrack. But when the camera stops, what first seemed to be the fore-word now becomes the *word*—the *logos*—*itself*. *Logos*, now understood as *truth*, which is something that is, philosophically speaking, always on the move (at least since Heraclitus). It is the truth that can be appreciated (or recognized,

⁶ It can also be interpreted in a much more ironic way from this horizon of referentiality. Thus understood *Prologue* can be seen as a clip depicting a common biased fear of the opponents of the East-European "poor" countries' (like Hungary among others) demand to become a member of the European Union. According to this interpretation *Prologue* would be an allegory of the poor nations waiting for the free-meal granted by the richer member-states.

⁷ Cf.: "If we want briefly to summarize why he needed long takes and continuous cameramovement, we can say he wanted to depict a cyclical process returning to itself while having to create the illusion of moving forward." (Kovács 2008)

glimpsed, depending on our treating it either sensual or intellectual) only in its dynamicity⁸.

This shift of *fore* and *real* word is also mirrored in the dramaturgy: we are presented with a single, slow lateral movement, a tracking shot, which seems to suggest, that what we are actually watching—the endless-looking queue—is a foreword to some sort of climax, a foreword to something bigger or more dynamic. But it soon turns out that the foreword, the fore-ness in this sense, is simply a symbolic mirror of the very expectations shared by these downtrodden people hoping to get a piece of bread and a cup of tea. And there is a small, but relevant joke here: the girl starts dispensing the food *before* she is supposed to: the clock we see through the window shows that we are before twelve o'clock. This is the cardinal point: after this fore-word the *climax* (that would be the *word*) reveals and unfolds itself in its absence. Philosophically put: it turns out to be a foreword to nothing, to a nothingness—yet, to a nothingness that, means everything for those standing in line⁹.

⁸ Though the frame of this paper does not allow us even at a very basic level to give an outline of the diversity of truth-concepts present in the history of the Western philosophical tradition, yet four philosophers' related ideas we consider cardinal to mention here briefly: Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. They all considered-though in some respects indisputably in deeply divergent manners—truth (not exclusively, but often having in mind ethical and existential truths) not as something once-and-for-all fixed and given, immobile, it is not an effable and declarable, stable and static statement or graspable empiria. Much rather as something that only our life-in its perpetual flux-can reveal, can unfold in the appearance of our life-events, for it is more event-like, and not as something a static theory empirically could discover or prove. Here we particularly rely on thoughts put forward in of course, inter alia-Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy and his idea of salvation through appearance, Kant's mature ethical thought (i.e. the post-critical writings, e.g. the Theodicy or the Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone), Wittgenstein's distinction between explanation and description, chiefly with respect to the foundational claims of a life-form, and Kierkegaard's concept of the teleological suspension of truth in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript. This conception of truth (again, according to which it only shows herself in the dynamicity, on the move) can be apprehended in a meta-level as a metaphor of film-art itself, the ever-moving nature of motion-picture, and especially of fictional-feature films that despite (or exactly because of) their fictionality can indeed show, reveal—at least a certain, but never the—truth. Thus, we can risk a broad analogy between the very medium of film and Razumihin's notorious question in Crime and Punishment: can we lie our way (with motion-picture itself treated as a means of "lying", as a means of the teleological suspension of truth instead of a still and stable statement) through to the truth?

⁹ As Bíró (2009) insightfully marks in her analysis, this crowd scene has its parallel and predecessor in Tarr's *oeuvre*: the famous crowd scene in the *Werckmeister Harmonies*. In both cases we are initially unaware what these people are up to, all we are presented with is a monotonous marching towards the unknown. Yet, there is an uncanny, even demonic aura to these images. *Werckmeister* indeed ends in a scene of the total (and totally irrational and demonic) destruction of a hospital. In *Prologue* this end, the awaited "surprise", lies right in

As discussed above: what at first sight seemed to be the fore-word—the waiting for the soup kitchen to open—turns out to be the word itself, the *logos*, again apprehended as truth. It is not a pre-word. This speechless and patient waiting for something always just to come is the "real thing", the *real*—and much-awaited—*logos*. And this *logos* that shows (or masks) itself as pro-logos is, metaphorically speaking, *time itself*. It is not a pro-logos, not a fore-word in a way that there would be something better to come, not even at the level of expectations. This eternal movement the movement of the queue, the caring movements of the girl—is the only logos, the only truth *per se*. History, our histories cannot be divided into protostates and (an) end-state(s). There is no eschatology in *Prologue*. There is no messianistic, teleological direction of history in Tarr's films, and *Prologue* is not an exception. There is no *end* of history we should write a prologue to, there is no (r)evolution in a sense that there is no (positive) accumulation in the destiny of humankind. All we are left alone is *time itself*¹¹, the eternal present, the eternal present and presence of (the need of and demand for) care.

this smothering of the expected culmination. This surprise is constructed of the reversion of the movement (of both the camera and the crowd), which surprises us right because it turns out to be a settling instead of a culmination. Naturally, our horizon of expectation is still on the move until the last seconds. Is it a documentary (and thus we should expect a real life-like ending) or is it a feature film (like other films in *Visions of Europe*, to add another component of external referentiality) and if so, shall we expect something 'extraordinary' to happen?

¹⁰ Yet, this (chain of) movement(s) can be interpreted right as the *lack* of any movement, too, since the movement of the camera and the movement of the mass – given their opposing directions – cancel each other out. Accordingly, the emphasized duality of the movements can be understood as an allegorical allusion to another ancient (philosophical and religious) insight: the illusoriness of any sort of change or movement and the only reality of immutability and immobility.

¹¹ The thematization of time and its usage as structural, dramaturgical and narrative organizing element is typical to the whole of Tarr's oeuvre. Especially his films after Almanac of Fall are often treated as cinematic representations of eternal recurrence (see e.g. Kovács 2008 in this respect). His insistence on (extreme) long shots, and accordingly the real-time(-like) character of his cinematic universe are immanently functional elements of his film-language since his early, semi-documentary works. This real-time aura serves not only as a dramaturgical (e.g. raising and sustaining suspension), narratological (see e.g. the Satantango interpretations that examine Tarr's work as an endeavour to offer a literally literal adaptation of a novel to the canvas), reception aesthetic or cognitivist (investigating and trying to change the spectator's receptive attitudes) means. It also bears a self-reflective, or even a – philosophically speaking – transcendental role. Let us recall Wittgenstein's insight concerning this problem: "The limit of language manifests itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence without simply repeating the sentence." (Wittgenstein, 1980, 10e) Similarly, one might surmise that the most adequate way to show anything about (or right the 'essence' of) time - to "question" and to "probe" the possibilities and limits of its (re)presentation, investigation and thematization –

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Now let us inquire the other sense of prologue, i.e. its afore-ness now understood as "before any word can or should be spoken"—or any deed should be done. Wittgenstein quotes Goethe's *Faust* on several occasions: "In the beginning" — before the word— "there was the deed". In the beginning: before we would like to, or are *able* to, or *should* say anything. Anything about dignity, humanity, Europe, or whatsoever—there should be the deed.

The *deed* of the homeless people—waiting itself. This could be considered a real action, and not merely the absence of an action. We have here the ability (in the form of a silent and modest action) to wait until one becomes strong enough, humanenough to perform an act. The deed of the individual (the girl in the soup-kitchen and each of us, the audience): the care—Sorge—just for the sake of caring, care just for the sake of the Other. But the demand for it cannot (and should not) be said—it is showing itself. To rephrase it in a Levinasian manner: the transcendence, the imperative of care should not be searched for in heavens (or ethical and philosophical handbooks), but it can be found right on the Face of the Other(s), of each and every individual. This moderate and silent demand shown through this slow, modest, and at the same time inexorable depiction of faces—simultaneously presenting individuality and universality, unity and diversity, particularity and generality¹²—is what differentiates *Prologue* from mere propaganda, pure illustration. But Levinas' other idea—ethics is optics—is also present in Prologue; it is this thought *Prologue* is contemplating and arrives at by its own, cinematographic means and through its particular approaches. This movie speaksabout ethics, about dignity, about ourselves and the others—inasmuch as it simply¹³ shows; revealing something so well-known about ethics through the optics of filmlanguage, questioning our responsibility and ethical stances.

is to play with (cinematic) time itself. The possibilities and the reality of time is most adequately captured by real-time presentation of the "real(ity of) time".

¹² In an interview when asked why he was making films, Tarr answered as follows: "One desperately hangs on to the camera, as the only depository of the supposed truth. But what should I shoot when everything is mendacious? Because I hate stories, since stories make people believe that something has happened. However, nothing happens; we are only fleeing from one state into another. As today only states exist – all stories are outdated, have become inferior common-places, ceased to exist or are dissolved. Thus nothing is left but time. Probably that's the only true thing – real time: years, days, minutes and seconds. We die either of making films or of not making them. But we cannot get away with it. For our fate can only be corroborated by the films we make." Tarr, cit. Kovács (2008)

The above mentioned silent dialectic of *Prologue* can be detected in light of a well-known Wittgenstein quote— "Don't think, but look!" (Wittgenstein PI §66)—as follows. First, we can take it at face value: don't think (about humanity, dignity), just look (recognize it without reflection); but then we can turn the table, and reverse the imperative. Don't just look, think about it—for the superficial interpretation (in our very case: the apprehension of *Prologue* at first sight as a simple and familiar propaganda—even for such an evidently "good" cause) can be deceptive and shallow. And then, watching it over and over again, and thinking with it, one arrives back to our initial interpretation of Wittgenstein's words (and we can recall his remark on the difficulties of the will and the intellect as well): To be able to think dignity and humanity we indeed only need to keep our eyes wide open, and recognize (and not (re)conceptualize or reflect on) what always laid before our eyes and on the faces of the others.

Concerning the presentation of faces in *Prologue*: it is remarkable that they open up another layer of meaning of the interpretation of fore-ness. Because in a sense we meet the logos—the words that the faces as fore-words anticipate—*outside* the filmworld: in the end-credits section. That puts our whole field of expectation into question: at first glance we were inclined to say that what we have been watching was a kind of *documentary*. But now it is clear that what we were presented with escapes generic categories and thus transcends the *naïve* view of the spectatorship (one is tempted to think about this piece also through the previously examined concept of *documentary fiction*). It poses the question to us, whether it is a documentary or a feature film, and more importantly, whether all of this matters at all? The real therapeutic potential of the film lies right in the recognition that we must question our positions toward what we see on the screen—and what we are to see when leaving the movie-theatre, heading to the street.

The closing-credits destroys our seeing the crowd as a crowd, as nameless mass: we now realize—in yet another sense—that what we were seeing is literally not a nameless mass, but a crowd made up by individuals, each one of them *logos*, truth *per se*. This question of identity, and the problem of individuality and (its relation to the) community is a central concern of *Prologue*. Auguste Comte famously claims that the individual, individuality is always a mere abstraction—sometimes taking it quite literally—derived and abstracted from the only *positive*, actually *existing* reality, the reality of the community. Michel Houellebecq, the famous and notorious contemporary French writer (and admirer of Comte) examines this question in his novel *Atomised* published in 1999 by linking it to a pivotal concept of quantum-mechanics, the wave-particle duality. Michel, the protagonist sees this problem, while meditating on the life of his younger brother, Bruno, as follows:

Was it possible to think of Bruno as an individual? The decay of his organs was particular to him, and he would suffer his decline and death as an individual. On the other hand, his hedonistic worldview and the forces that shaped his consciousness and desires were common to an entire generation. Just as determining the apparatus for an experiment and choosing one or more observables made it possible to assign a specific behaviour to an atomic system – now particle, now wave – so could Bruno be seen as an individual or, from another point of view, as passively caught up in the sweep of history. His motives, values and desires did not distinguish him from his contemporaries in any way. (Houellebecq 2001, 148)

When we at the "opening" or first part of the clip catch sight of the crowd, we are, in a sense, perceiving them as a *mass*—as a *wave*. We are literally only passers-by. And maybe we are inclined to think about them merely on the level of political, social questions, seeing them in terms of social theory or social science. Then, when we stop, when the camera halts, we see them *individually*. Yet, again, the greatness of Tarr in this short clip lies in his ability to show this duality in the unity of (moving)images. We see the faces, the individuality even when the camera is (and we are too) on the move—thus perceiving the individuality in the community, in the mass. And we do not see the faces when we occupy a fixed viewpoint, we only see the movement of the individuality —now the mass, the community reflected in the movements of the individuals. Cinematography can capture this duality: immobility in movement (when we are presented with a tracking shot), and movement in immobility (when the camera is fixed and the crowd starts to move). And the point is that either we are moving or the world is moving before our very eyes, the epiphany of the demand for Care is always showing itself on the faces. The face of the Other is always speaking to us, addressing us. All we have to do is too see and listen (literally: care-fully). "Don't think, but look!"

Finally, we would like to quote Tarr himself, talking about this film at the opening ceremony of a documentary film festival dedicated to human rights:

Given that I am a filmmaker, I have brought you a movie instead of words. Faces. Looks that are talking about human dignity. That is what we are to show: the dignity of existence. I would kindly like to ask you to love those people who these movies are about, it is not enough to feel solidarity. We demand more, people demand more. We have only one life, it does make a difference, how it is like. We have to live it with dignity.

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