
Essays

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The Culture of the End: Tarrying with the Apocalypse

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Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die
Hoffnung gegeben.

Walter Benjamin,
Goethes Wahlverwandschaften.¹

In *The Political Theology of Paul*, Jacob Taubes famously states: “I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is.”² This declaration appears in the middle of Taubes’s critical discussion of Carl Schmitt:

He is a clerk, and he understands his task to be not to establish the law but to interpret the law. Schmitt’s interest was in only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price. This is difficult for theologians and philosophers to follow, but as far as the jurist is concerned, as long as it is possible

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1 “Hope is given to us only for the sake of the hopeless.” In Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 201.

2 Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 103.

to find one juridical form, by whatever hairsplitting ingenuity, this must absolutely be done, for otherwise chaos reigns. This is what he later calls *katechon*: The retainer [*der Aufhalter*] that holds down the chaos that pushes us from below. That isn't my worldview, that isn't my experience. *I can imagine as an apocalyptic*: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is. But I understand that someone else is invested in this world and sees in the apocalypse, whatever its form, the adversary and does everything to keep it subjugated and suppressed, because from there forces can be unleashed that we are in no position to control.³

Taubes draws a contrast between his own position of the apocalyptic messianism and Schmitt's katechonic investment in this world, which accepts the world as it is, "no matter what the price."⁴ Taubes's investment in messianic justice is immediately reflected in his divestment from the world, according to the sentence: *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus*. If justice demands that chaos rise and swallow the whole world in the apocalyptic flood – so be it, "let it go down." Schmitt's standpoint is the exact opposite. His investment in the world is at the cost of his investment in justice which he wants to replace by one, solid and strongly procosmic, "juridical form" that would be able to withstand the surge of chaos with, as Walter Benjamin called it, "law-preserving violence": *fiat mundus, pereat iustitia*. To side with the world, therefore, is to abandon the messianic ideal. To take the procosmic stance means to betray the only thing truly worth of existence: justice.

Taubes utters his famous phrase originally in German mixed with English: "Ich kann mir vorstellen als Apokalyptiker: soll sie zugrunde gehn. I have

3 Ibid., 103; emphasis added.

4 The term *katechon* (in Martin Luther's translation *der Aufhalter*, "the restrainer") derives from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians (2:3–2:8): "and you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed"; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson, Bruce Manning Metzger and Roland Edmund Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). In *Nomos of the Earth*, Carl Schmitt creates a whole new political theology based on the concept of the *katechon* as the one who withholds the advent of the Antichrist representing the forces of lawlessness and disorder and as such is a true fulfillment of Christian religion; see in particular the chapter "The Christian Empire as a Restrainer of the Antichrist (*Katechon*)," in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 1999), where Schmitt says: "I do not believe that any historical concept other than *katechon* would have been possible for the original Christian faith" (ibid., 61).

no spiritual investment in the world as it is.”⁵ This is a curious combination. The most obvious reason behind the use of English would be the quote from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Act 3, Scene 3, where the three murderers conspire to slay Banquo: they sneak to the palace at the dusk – “The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day” – and when the unsuspecting Banquo says, “It will be rain to-night,” the first murderer answers: “Let it come down.” Taubes, sharing a keen interest in Shakespeare with Schmitt (see the latter’s *Hamlet or Hecuba*), could have read this scene as an allegory of the decaying and darkening Occident, losing the last “streaks of day,” but still not able to recognize the state of crisis: just as Banquo, who is about to die, the West too misdiagnoses the encroaching chaos, which will take its “breath,” for a passing storm. But the Shakespearean “let it come down,” although hovering in the background, is not said by Taubes in English: he also does not quote it in Christoph Martin Wieland’s classical translation of *Macbeth*, where *let it come down* is rendered as *Laß ihn nur fallen*, referring directly to the approaching rain. Instead, Taubes produces a peculiar mix of the Shakespearean imperative form with the Goethean constative use of the verb *zugrundegehen*, which emerges in the crucial monologue of Mephisto from the first part of *Faust*: *denn alles was entsteht/ ist wert, dass es zugrunde geht*.⁶ By combining the two, Taubes’s *soll sie [die Welt] zugrunde gehn* transposes Mephisto’s damning diagnosis of this world into a command: since this world is only worthy of being destroyed, because nothing of worth – the absolute justice – can ever exist in it, so let it come down. The German formula *soll sie* is rare: it is stronger, more normatively charged than the less committed *lassen*, which usually translates the English *let*. Should the world (*soll sie*) come down, Taubes the Apocalyptic would not mind. But is this really a commanding imperative? Although *let* is indeed commanding – as in the exhortative *let’s do it!* – the *it come down* implies a subjunctive, which usually refers to what is commonly known as wishful thinking, and *it*, the lack of specified agency, implies a passive form. Taubes, therefore, only *imagines* the world as coming down: he wishes for it to dissolve, but he will not make himself the active agent of chaos, joyfully announcing *let’s do it!* He will rather wait for the non-specified chaos to encroach and swallow the world, the left hand of God dealing the apocalyptic blow to the unjust spectacle of worldly being. Unlike Schmitt, he will not lift a finger to stop it (*aufhalten*). Let it come down

5 Jacob Taubes, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 139.

6 “For whate’er to light is brought / Deserves again to be reduced to naught; / Then better ‘twere that naught should be / Thus all the elements which ye / Destruction, Sin, or briefly, Evil, name / As my peculiar element I claim.” Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, trans. Anna Swanwick (New York: Dover, 1994), 42.

– the sooner, the better. Taubes’s apocalyptic mood, therefore, is that of the transpassive spectator of the coming doom: while reluctant to openly join the forces of destruction, he nonetheless cheers their arrival as the advent of a long-due justice that will punish the world for its inequities. And, to be specific, not just this world as it is: what he truly implies by *die Welt* is *die Verweltlichung*, the secular age of the “turn toward the worldly” which was supposed to inaugurate the epoch of enlightenment, progress, and universal freedom, but ended up in the violent explosion of wars and revolutions. Looking with scorn at the high hopes of mankind engaged in the formation of the whole Anthropocene culminating in Western modernity, Taubes cannot but withdraw his spiritual investment in this affair: let it come down, *soll sie zugrunde gehen*, for it alone deserves to be punished.

Today, almost three decades after Taubes’s (in)famous self-declaration, we are repeatedly told to live in an epoch of the end, which demands of us all an analogical readiness to definitive avowals: to be or not to be in the human world, to cheer or to retain its approaching end, to hasten the doom, by siding with the accusation of the Anthropocene is unworthy of existence, or to slow its demise, by trying to find solutions to the threat of the “eco-apocalypse.” The idea of living in the end times has today become so hegemonic and widespread that it has begun to generate a new universal “existential mood” or *Stimmung*, to borrow Martin Heidegger’s term. Living in the end times is no longer a matter of individual experience, as it still was with Taubes, who spoke just for himself “as an apocalyptic.” It determines the present cultural context as a whole, forcing today’s humanities to enter the *depeche mode* style of thinking under the sign of extreme urgency.⁷ We all live in a “culture of the end” and we must all declare how we stand toward it.

Yet, as Taubes’s reflections on the apocalypse and the *katechon* well attest, the concept of the end is not new at all: what is new is the sense of urgency, of the “time is nigh” and the final endgame that demands of us to take stand. In fact, we have always lived in the end times. The idea of the end has shaped a large part of continental philosophical tradition, stretching from the biblical motifs of apocalypse to Hegel’s idea of the End of History, where it was meant as an apex of the progress of freedom. According to Hegel, the End of History is not a violent finale of the world finally going *zugrunde*, but a *telos*: a desired goal of historical development. The last representative of Hegelian optimism, Francis Fukuyama, spurned by the 1989 fall of communism, urged us to greet “the end of history” – the global victory of liberal democracy – as the most welcome event that would stabilize world politics and let

7 See *Depeche Mode. Jacob Taubes Between Politics, Philosophy, and Religion*, ed. Hartmut von Sass and Herbert Kopp-Obersterbrink (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

it flourish, by preventing new revolutionary ideas from coming to the fore. Just as in the original apocalyptic discourse, also here, in Fukuyama's late variant of Hegelianism, all political ideas would have become fully revealed in the end and global mankind would stand "face to face" with the highest truth of democracy as its final and unsurpassable condition. But this type of metaphysical-historical optimism, so characteristic of the last decade of the second millennium, quite suddenly waned: the narrative of the desired telos gave way to that of the imminent end as a threat to the world's existence. The evocation of the apocalypse due to climate change and the fatal inevitability of war and destruction marks a stark contrast between the past-optimistic and contemporary-pessimistic narratives of the end, the most paradigmatic of which was Taubes's apocalyptic declaration, uttered in 1987. We may thus wonder: when did this change occur, and why?

From the beginning of the Western eschatological tradition, the concept of the "end" involved a radically ambiguous sense of a "loving devastation": it meant both the limit and the goal, both catastrophe and utopia, both despair and hope, both radical anxiety and freedom to a new creation or, less religiously, a future development.⁸ Contrary to this, late modernity shows a tendency of gradual disambiguation of the end-concept: we are more and more surrounded by what Ernesto de Martino calls "psychopathological apocalypse," the negative *Stimmung* of despair and anxiety which is based upon the irreversible "loss of the world," without any promise of a new beginning.⁹ The original ambiguity of the "end" is thus resolved in a unilateral sense of the irrevocable limit, rather than the desired goal which entails the promise of something new and better. Rather than the dialectics of despair and hope, of anxiety and freedom, of catastrophe and utopia, we are witnessing today a radical disjunction between negative and positive elements, with a strong advantage given to the former. The new existential mood is decidedly pessimistic and, because of its all-pervasive negativity, demobilizing, akin to Taubes's position, transpassive: the "psychopathological apocalypse" can only be awaited, either eagerly or reluctantly, because there is no hope of preventing it. This new "rising of the apocalyptic tone in philosophy" was first spotted by Jacques Derrida who, as early as 1984, wrote

8 The British Christian theologian John Webster defines the "eschatological" as the adjective of "that single, perfect reality which is the basis and end of all realities, that absolute which, as the origin of all that is, is pure, free, ungraspable, approachable only by virtue of its own prior approach to us in a kind of loving devastation." John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 53; emphasis added.

9 See Ernesto de Martino, *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

a critical essay on the “hasteners of the Apocalypse,” as if anticipating Taubes’s declaration.¹⁰ Since then, the tone has indeed only risen. In his blog-essay “Sulla fine del mondo,” posted on November 18, 2019, Giorgio Agamben too noticed the link between the language of the Jewish and Christian prophets of doom and the contemporary, only seemingly secular, discourse of the eco-apocalypse, which now merely “reoccupies” the same position towards the world, seen from the perspective of its end:

The theme of the end of the world has appeared repeatedly in the history of Christianity. Prophets emerged in all periods announcing that the end is nigh. What is singular today is that this eschatological function, long abandoned by the church, has been assumed by scientists who increasingly present themselves as prophets, describing and predicting with absolute certainty the climate catastrophes that they say will lead to the end of life on earth. It is singular but perhaps not surprising, if we consider that in modernity science has replaced faith and assumed a properly religious function. Science is, indeed, the religion of our time: it is that which men believe in. At the very least, it is that which they believe that they believe in. Like any religion, the religion of science requires an eschatology. That is to say, it needs an apparatus to keep the faithful afraid, and so strengthen their faith, while also keeping a priestly class in power. Apparitions like Greta Thunberg are symptomatic of this situation. Greta blindly believes in the prophecies, and so she awaits the end of the world in 2030, just like the millennialists in the Middle Ages who believed in the imminent return of Christ to judge the world. No less symptomatic is a figure like that of the inventor of Gaia, a scientist who, concentrating his apocalyptic diagnoses on a single factor (the percentage of CO₂ in the atmosphere) declares with astonishing naïveté that the salvation of humanity lies in nuclear energy. In both cases, the stakes are religious and utterly non-scientific in nature, and this is betrayed by the fact that salvation plays such a central role. This phenomenon is especially disturbing because science has never before counted eschatology among its tasks. [...] It ought to be clear that these reflections are not taking a position on the reality of pollution or on the harmful changes wrought by successive industrial revolutions on the material and spiritual conditions of living beings. To the contrary, by warning against the confusion of religion with scientific truth, against the confusion of the prophetic with the lucid, the point is to avoid having interested parties dictating choices and views that, in the final analysis, cannot but be political.¹¹

10 Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey Jr., *Oxford Literary Review* 6 (2) (1984).

11 See <https://d-dean.medium.com/on-the-end-of-the-world-giorgio-agamben-538cof7a1c85>, in the translation of Alan Dean, accessed on August 25, 2023.

Agamben's warning against the "confusion of the prophetic with the lucid" falls in line with De Martino's diagnosis of the "psychopathological apocalypse" as referring precisely to the crisis of modern rationalism installed by the Enlightenment, which separated science from eschatology, by not allowing the former to step in the shoes of the latter's great expectations – or, in the idiom of Hans Blumenberg, by blocking the mechanism of "reoccupation" (*Umbesetzung*) that would make of science a modern substitute of the religious mode of thinking. According to Agamben, the pact of the Enlightenment – the new era of modernity defined by a ratio explicitly avoiding eschatological grand narratives – is now broken: science does precisely what it was not supposed to do, that is, "reoccupies" the prophecy of the doom, by "describing and predicting with absolute certainty the climate catastrophes that they say will lead to the end of life on earth." This, however, although "singular" – characteristic only of Western late modernity, weakened by the waning paradigm of the Enlightenment – is not at all "surprising": "science is, indeed, the religion of our time" and the logic of replacement has been active in our culture for the last two centuries. The Taubesian apocalyptic divestment from the world appears no longer as a purely "spiritual" position; it is secretly backed by science stepping into the eschatological role which was forbidden by the rational pact of the Enlightenment, now no longer valid. The scientific disenchantment of the world, therefore, transforms into a new spiritual "enchantment": a new religion with its own Book of Revelation prophesying the imminent apocalypse of nature – and with it, the end of the whole livable world, both natural and human. Greta Thunberg and the Gaia apologist are the new prophets of doom, motivated by exactly the same intense expectations that accompanied the frenzied millenarists at the onset of modernity: a vengeful death wish for the "sinful" Anthropocene, the demise of which, bringing down the whole world, they will watch with a transpassive sense of satisfaction. As then, also now this *Schadenfreude* is mixed with an irrational hope that, as the spectators of the apocalypse, they will somehow miraculously survive the "rapture" and see the world renewed, according to St. John's formula referring to the Savior-Lamb: "Lo, I make all things new!"

As early as the 1940s, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, profoundly aware of the crisis of Western rationalism, see the first harbingers of science self-apotheosizing into a new religion that would turn disenchantment into a new bleak charm: a dark cult of the forces representing inhuman nature against everything human, known today under the collective banner of the "Anthropocene." Unlike Taubes, who clearly participates in the vengeful mood against "failed" modern civilization, they openly declare strong "spiritual investment" in the human world: they wish to defend the Enlightenment against its own detrimental aspects, that is,

defend it as a form of dialectical *ratio*, in which despair and hope are locked in one rational paradigm, against the “religion of disenchantment” which, following the scientific practice of universal *Entzauberung*, blackens the view of the world irreversibly, eventually offering nothing but “Apocalypse Now.” While disenchantment, which questions the apparent self-evident truths of the “natural attitude” and, with its expert knowledge, destroys the magical “happy life-world” of the premodern epochs, is a legitimate scientific method, it should not be treated with a new form of religious piety that would deprive us of hope on all other fronts, most of all ethical and political. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of Western modernity as sliding into a pseudo-scientific religion of cosmic pessimism focuses on the intricate relationship between hope and despair and proves that the one cannot be thought without the other: hope can only come to the fore in the background of darkest despair, and vice versa – despair can only be understood as a loss of hope, which, by its very nature, is never irreversible. By rejecting Hegelian metaphysical optimism as no longer tenable in the conditions of late modernity, the Frankfurt duo wishes to reclaim the idea of despair for the messianic idiom of progress, which too often feels uneasy about it, wrongly convinced that it cannot let in a sense of hopelessness. On the contrary, they claim, the messianic discourse, which historically had arisen as a companion, but not always an obvious ally of the apocalyptic one, from the beginning dealt with despair and built its notion of hope in close relation to it. While they witness the dramatic passage from the uniformly optimistic *telos*-oriented hope to the equally uniformly pessimistic end-awaiting desolation, Adorno and Horkheimer want to consider a dialectical possibility of a new hope arising directly out of despair without invalidating the latter: a new positive attitude/*Stimmung* which could shake the transpassive mood of universal doom and once again begin to motivate our actions.

The Psychotheology of Exodus

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a crucial reference here, because it combines in the paradigmatic manner the most promising approaches to the analysis of the culture of the end: philosophical, psychoanalytic, and post-secular. The main idea of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to replace the pervading mood of “Apocalypse Now” with a new one, which can be called accordingly: “Exodus Now.” Adorno and Horkheimer’s psychotheological insight reveals the crucial economy of the messianic affects: hope and its inevitable shadow, fear and despair. In their account, Exodus, imagined as an archetype of radical social change, is a complex endeavor: the individual is encouraged to exit the safe realm of natural law and enter the risky desert with

no preestablished model to repeat or imitate, which causes an immediate increase of anxiety. The sole compensation for this anxious surge of incertitude is a new affective quality: hope. According to Søren Kierkegaard, it is precisely the discovery of hope that determines the eternal difference between Athens and Jerusalem. On the one side of this great divide, Greeks cultivate the “tragic sense of life,” which condemns every individual will to break free from the fateful arrangement of being as *hubris*. Hence Aristotle’s conviction that hope is one of the plagues unleashed from Pandora’s Box: to harbor a hope in the change of the ontological status quo of the eternal cycle of *genesis kai phthora* (becoming and perishing) means to be delusional and pose a danger to the divine order of things.¹² Contrary to this diagnosis, Jews (and Christians after them) challenge the natural order precisely in the name of hope, which only then becomes an “ontological category”: not a subjective/delusional state of mind led by the vice of *hubris*, but an objective feature of the worldly reality as open to radical change. Horkheimer and Adorno’s definition of the archaic world of myth stresses the importance of the new category of ontological hope which was unknown in it: “for in its figures mythology captured the essence of the status quo: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope.”¹³ On the one hand, therefore, Exodus brings a promise and a hope – yet, on the other, it also involves a serious risk: the deferment of the realization of the promise once again increases the anxiety which now attaches itself to disappointment and the demotivating sense of hopelessness. The resulting loss of hope is then a far more pessimistic affect than the preestablished lack of hope, which the Greek tragic wisdom assumed in its mythological logic of the eternal cycle. Hope and fear thus go hand in hand. According to Kierkegaard’s calculus: the more you are hopeful, the stronger the sense of anxiety, but also vice versa: it is precisely the power of faith that can alchemically transform the gray of anxiety into a shiny coin of hope. Yet, the more one invests in hope, the greater the danger that the state of the world will eventually seem hopeless: not just “deprived of hope,” as in the mythological thought which bars hope in advance (“it cannot even

12 “The Greeks did not have the concept of the eternal; so neither did they have the concept of the future. Therefore Greek life cannot be reproached for being lost in the moment, or more correctly, it cannot even be said that it was lost, for temporality was conceived by the Greeks just as naively as sensuousness, because they lacked the category of spirit.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety. A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 89.

13 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 27.

be said that it was lost"¹⁴), but as the depressing opposite of hopefulness, the ultimate failure of the "spiritual investment" in the project of Exodus and the total collapse of the edifice of faith. For Hegel, such radical loss, meaning both defeat and forfeiture, constitutes something unthinkable – the denial of the metaphysically active "objective tendency" shaping the progressive evolution of history – that should and shall never happen. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the ever-looming possibility of loss is the gist of faith as an existential gamble of credit and investment in the ever elusive category of hope.

Written as a testimony to the late-modern loss of hope, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is precursory to the *Stimmung* of doom, which characterizes our culture of the end. But it is also precursory to all pursuits of the affirmative ways-out (or, precisely, "exoduses now") that could save us from the calamitous sense of an ending. While it accuses Western modernity as the self-professed "age of hope" of making false promises of universal emancipation, it nonetheless defends the Enlightenment, but only as it still could be, against the Enlightenment in its actual status quo. For although the Enlightenment, in theory, was based on Kant's definition that was grounded in the metaphor of Exodus (*der Ausgang aus der selbstverschuldigten Unmündigkeit*), in reality it did not move away from the mythic pre-history. While it challenged the power of archaic mythology, it did not succeed in fully realizing the project of Exodus: the myth has returned. Its reappearance manifests itself in the tenacity of the mythological logic of the cycle, which has the same effect now as in ancient times: it presents the world as "deprived of hope." The disenchanted scientific worldview might have chased away all the mythic fables, but it did not free itself from the cyclical idea of nature, based on the eternal repetition of the same:

But the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played o lit, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation-this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience. The identity of everything

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 89.

with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself. Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other.¹⁵

By forcing upon us a vision of the self-repeating world without exits, modernity betrayed the exodic promise which made it possible in the first place. This is the reason why today “enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology.”¹⁶

Yet the hopelessness of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s tone, implying that we had hit rock bottom of all that could possibly go wrong in modernity, comes with a twist: a twist which the messianic tradition calls the antinomian inversion. For them, the late-modern intense hopelessness is merely one side of the Möbius strip: the other is a still possible hope which they desperately try to reach, not knowing exactly how to flip the sides. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes: “so, when we are hoping for rescue, a voice tells us that hope is in vain, yet it is powerless hope alone that allows us to draw a single breath.”¹⁷ *Die machtlose Hoffnung*, a powerless hope, is a twin sister of hopelessness at the peak of the Kierkegaardian anxiety, no longer disciplined and appeased by faith, which always consoles the believer that, in the Hegelian manner, “all shall be well.” Today, if hope is to be rekindled, Adorno and Horkheimer imply, it is only out of the dark spirit of the loss of hope. The loss – and the despairing horror of it – must be thought thoroughly to the end, until no fake consolation clouds our affects, and we face the traumatic Gorgon of the hopeless Real, which only then can be properly diagnosed and worked-through. What the Frankfurt duo, therefore, are paradoxically hoping for is the repetition of the psychotheological matrix of the original Exodus in the conditions of late modernity. Similarly to Walter Benjamin, who in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* attempted a radical *Umkehr* (turn) of the ultimately nihilized world into a positive sign of revelation, they also invest in the deepening of the sense of crisis that would make us crave again for the cure of Exodus in a world seemingly “without exits.”¹⁸ In the midst of the Apocalypse Now, this ancient narrative should once again reverberate with all its original urgency: *Exodus Now!*

15 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

16 Ibid., 12.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 121.

18 For Benjamin, the secret of this reversal lies in the nature of allegory which denies the world experience its illusory richness and dries it up to the bone as its disenchanting

What Adorno and Horkheimer reveal (and what is missing in Hegel, the paradigmatic metaphysical optimist) is the intimate symbiosis of hope and hopelessness: the bi-polar oscillation of the messianic affects which can never settle in any unshakable certitude, a constant tension between the joys of hope and the horrors of its loss that can never disassociate from one another. The goal of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is thus to rescue the notion of hopelessness and despair from the archives of the conservative-catastrophic narratives of the Fall in order to reclaim it for the messianic story. It takes as its motto Walter Benjamin's famous sentence: "hope is given to us only for the sake of the hopeless." For, as Horkheimer and Adorno firmly believe, the loss of hope is never irreversible: there is always some way out of the world seemingly without exits.

Hope in the Dying Universe: The Metaphysics of Entropy

According to the Frankfurt duo, the scientific view of the world as a disenchant-ed cycle of becoming and perishing and the "eternal repetition of the same" is one of the reasons why the progressive narratives of modernity, staking on social change, lost in confrontation with modern science's "arid wisdom," surreptitiously transformed into an authoritative "new religion." But what they still fail to take into their account, which perceives the scientific worldview as a modern reemergence of the mythic cycle concerned solely with the reproduction of the worldly status quo, is the discovery of entropy, which broke with the idea of the cycle and instead introduced a vision of an irreversible decline of physical reality – or what Walter Benjamin aptly called a "permanent catastrophe."¹⁹

Indeed, it was Benjamin who was one of the first modern philosophers to react to the discovery of entropy, interpreting it as decisive for the difference between nature and history. In his 1923 letter to Christian Florian Rang, Benjamin introduces the concept of *die gerettete Nacht*, the "night preserved," in order to denote the world of nature as a closed system of immanence, which should be saved precisely as such – *verschlossen*, hermetic and isolated.²⁰

terrible truth, yet "the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection [...] Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and is held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderacion misteriosa*." Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 233; 235; emphasis added.

19 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 356.

20 Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 224.

Agamben's reading of Benjamin's "night preserved" in *The Open* brings forward the stark contrast between nature, immersed in the entropic night or "eternal fall," and history as based on the notion of Exodus out of nature:

Here nature, as the world of closedness (*Verschlossenheit*) and of the night, is opposed to history as the sphere of revelation (*Offenbarung*) [...]. The "saved night" is the name of this nature that has been given back to itself, whose character is transience.²¹

For Agamben – unlike for Horkheimer and Adorno – the choice between the closed immanence of nature and the open futurity of history should be decided for the sake of the former: human beings must give up on the "interminable errancy – history"²² as the false adventure of "messianic hope" and instead choose the immanence of nature, that is, come to terms with its essentially irreparable – entropic – tendency. No Exodus is possible out of the "night of the world," so, even if rejecting the doom prophesies of science masquerading as a "new religion," they themselves are not immune to its findings: the discovery of entropy indeed constitutes a major challenge to all narrative of progress, always ultimately based on the exodic canvas.

In this manner, Benjamin and Agamben attempt to adjust their philosophical speculations to the newly discovered law of entropy as the energetic deterioration of a closed physical system that would eventually lead to the thermal death of the universe: the silent apocalypse of nature, brought about by nature itself. The key to this new sense of doom is precisely the notion of "closedness," *Verschlossenheit*, also reverberating in Karl Barth's famous description of the world as "the completely closed circle from which we have no means of escape,"²³ as well as in Taubes's Weberian portrayal of the modern disenchanted universe as an "iron cage," thus reverting to the second-century Gnostic image of the world as the oppressive *cellula creatoris*, which originally gave rise to the apocalyptic mode: the conviction that the world as a "prison cell" cannot be redeemed, only destroyed.²⁴ From the second half of

21 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 81–82.

22 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies. Homo Sacer IV*, 2, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 272.

23 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 187.

24 See Jacob Taubes, "The Iron Cage and the Exodus from It, or the Dispute over Marcion, Then and Now": "In the cosmos atheos of the modern age, there is no point of escape

the nineteenth century onwards, Western thought stands in the shadow of this new terrifying principle, which only thickens the already long shadow thrown onto it by Arthur Schopenhauer, the first anti-Hegelian critic of historical progress: from the seed planted by Carnot, Clausius, Kelvin, and Helmholtz, there grows a dark vision prophesying a final doom to the whole material universe. If the cosmos is not infinite, but finite, then perhaps the same rule of the degenerating isolated system applies to the totality of being which, some day in the remote future, will also grow cold and dissipate, thus extinguishing all more complex energetic systems – most of all, life.²⁵

Nietzsche claimed that the “death of God” constitutes a traumatic event which will reverberate in mankind’s confused reaction to it for centuries, before it is finally worked through and fully realized. We can easily substitute for this event the discovery of entropy, in which God and all that is linked to his concept – the providential order and teleology of the universe, fostering life and consciousness – abruptly vanishes from our sight. Eduard von

‘beyond’ the world. Therefore, neither can there be any Gnostic exodus from the world in the modern age.” Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*, ed. Aleida Assmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009), 138. The connection between the Marcionite Gnostic doctrine of the Alien God and the scientific climate of late modernity, marked by Rudolf Clausius’s discovery of the law of entropy in 1865, was made by Harnack himself in the 1920 “Foreword to the First Edition” of his book on Marcion: “the new life of faith and freedom was for him something so ‘alien’ as over against the world that he based its emergence upon the same doubtful/daring hypothesis by which Helmholtz proposed to explain the emergence of organisms on the earth.” Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion. The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Jamestown, NY: Labyrinth Press, 1990), ix. In 1884, Hermann von Helmholtz proposed a cosmozoic theory according to which life did not arise spontaneously on Earth, but came from outer space in the form of micro-organisms traveling with meteorites and comets. Since matter throughout the universe is generally hostile to the anti-entropic process of life, life constitutes an absolute exception: it was born accidentally and only once on an alien distant planet and propagates itself against the cosmic odds.

- 25 Kelvin himself was not at all convinced that Carnot’s law of the increase of entropy in the isolated system can so easily be extrapolated to the whole of the universe, because the limits of this alleged whole could not be theoretically comprehended: “the result would inevitably be a state of universal rest and death, if the universe were finite and left to obey existing laws. But it is impossible to conceive a limit to the extent of matter in the universe; and therefore science points rather to an endless progress, through an endless space, of action involving the transformation of potential energy into palpable motion and hence into heat, than to a single finite mechanism, running down like a clock, and stopping for ever.” William Thomson, “On the Age of the Sun’s Heat,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 5 (1862): 288–93. It was only later, with Hermann von Helmholtz and William Rankine, that this extrapolating leap was done, thus inaugurating a new era of modern disenchantment.

Hartmann, the German philosopher associated with the deeply pessimistic line of *Lebensphilosophie* (which, more properly speaking, should rather be called *Todesphilosophie*), extrapolated the rule of entropy in all realms of existence – material and cultural – by introducing the principle of dysteleology: not just ateleology, which would merely suggest an open process, but anti-teleology, which openly replaces the “good” or life-affirming purpose of the universe with the “evil,” life-negating one. Just as dystopia is not just the lack of utopia, but its direct reverse, so is the actual aim of the whole enterprise of being the very opposite of success: failure, downfall, the tragic *untergehen* of all, the massive thwarting of any purposefulness that is inscribed in the process of life. The universe destined for death mercilessly exposes life as an instant failure, error, anomaly: a little counter-eddy in the stream rushing blindly *zum Tode*, with no power to resist it. What Horkheimer and Adorno feared about the scientific disenchantment as a powerful tool of cosmic pessimism fulfills itself in the discovery of entropy as radical dysteleology, which naturally fuels the apocalyptic mood: the whole universe is on its way towards extinction from the moment of its inception. There is no *telos* to existence; there is only the end: one universal *Sein-zum-Tode*.

In his essay “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,” written in 1873, a few years after Robert Clausius’s discovery of the law of entropy, Nietzsche gives us a taste of the loss of hope which was soon to follow the entropic vision of the universal doom:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of world history – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.²⁶

This is precisely the Nietzschean “truth that kills”: the final verdict, combining “telling the truth” (*veri-dictio*) with the irreversible “sentence,” which immediately reduces the whole time of existence to the negligible instant – “only a minute.” In order to withstand this mortifying and paralyzing truth, life must resort to a lie. Aware of being nothing but a short-lived blunder in the arrangement of the universe, life must turn itself into a “willing error,” that is a deliberate lie and falsehood and, as such, the very opposite of a truth-seeking argument: “that lies should be necessary to life is part

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair and David J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 246.

and parcel of the terrible and questionable character of life [...]. Life is no argument."²⁷

Nietzsche himself is at a crossroads, not sure how he should proceed further. For, if he goes for the lethal truth, nothing will separate him from his teacher Schopenhauer, who had incorporated the entropic vision *avant la lettre* in his philosophy of the futility of life and its nirvanic *Auslöschung* or the return to state of zero-energy – but if he goes for life, nothing will save him from being simply a liar: tragic and self-conscious, but still, a liar, falsely investing in the “purposeful” enterprise of life. Far from being resolved, the agon between Schopenhauer the truth-sayer and Nietzsche the life/lie-affirmer is the one which organizes the whole of late-modern thought. And, despite all the life-affirming rhetoric coming from the post-Nietzschean side, it is nonetheless Schopenhauer who inevitably wins with his powerful entropic vision. It is precisely due to the mesmerizing force of this new enigmatic signifier, *entropia* – which insinuates itself in the place of the universal principle, as a paradoxical anti-*arche*, or even anti-God – that the finite life has begun to see itself as an error on its path to be resolved only by death; as a mistake that can be corrected solely by self-extinction. That too is a significant factor that adds to the late-modern “rising of the apocalyptic tone”: beneath the sense of urgency addressing the imminent threat of the eco-apocalypse, there reverberates a deep *basso continuo* of despair reacting to the apocalyptic tendency of nature itself, heading “dystelelogically” towards its own undoing. The new feeling of the world as a fragile and self-deteriorating “closed system,” very different from the Greek perception of nature as an eternal cycle (still present in Horkheimer and Adorno), only intensifies the current apocalyptic anxiety which constantly floods us with the images of the “loss of the world.” If nature felt as solid as it did to the Greek physiocrats, believing in the indestructibility of *genesis kain phthora*, our eco-fears would be far less intense. It is the new entropic *Stimmung*, according to which nature is no longer seen as perfectly self-sufficient and resilient, that fuels the late-modern sense of despair.

Can any hope be wrenched from this new kind of desolation? The answer to this too comes from Benjamin, the bearer of the entropic message. In *The Messianic Reduction*, Peter Fenves claims that, similarly to Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin was also very attentive to the scientific discoveries of his time and

27 See aphorism no. 121 of *The Gay Science*, titled “Life no Argument,” where Nietzsche dismisses the liveable arrangement of the world as nothing but a necessary vital lie: “we have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 180.

reacted to them in lively fashion in his writings. Fenves emphasizes the importance of the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics, by focusing on Benjamin's notion of transience (*die Vergängnis*) as the first "metaphysics of entropy."²⁸ The term – *die Metaphysik der Entropie* – has been applied recently to a thinker who most likely influenced Benjamin's intuitions, namely Philipp Mainländer: an avid reader of Schopenhauer, he was probably the first theologian to reflect on – and eagerly embrace – Helmholtz's hypothesis of the thermal death of the universe.²⁹ According to Mainländer (whose *Wille zum Tode* is also regarded as the precursor of the Freudian concept of the death drive), the transience which runs through the whole of nature should not be resisted, but apocalyptically hastened, since it is an expression of the passage of God himself moving from the error of being to the perfection of nothingness as the "state of zero excitation." Once this passage is complete and the sacred entropy runs its course, the world and God alike will have found their redemption – *Erlösung*, also to be read as "dissolution" – in being liberated from the *lapsus* of becoming. In Mainländer's *Philosophie der Erlösung* (1876), the lesson of history is a negative knowledge-*gnosis* about the futility of all human efforts to improve the condition of being, which remains inherently beyond repair. History conceived as a hopeful progress or an Exodus from nature is nothing but an illusion: an ephemeral bubble created within the "closed system of nature" which is destined to fall and expire. Both Mainländer and Benjamin thus propose an alternative political philosophy, based not on the idea of progress, but on the recognition and acknowledgment of the constant entropic decline inherent in the very process of natural being: "to strive after such passing [...] is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism."³⁰

There is practically no thinker who has not commented, openly or implicitly, on what immediately became dubbed as *Naturdämmerung*: "the twilight of nature," revealing the benighted condition of all material being. Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) is a paradigmatic response to the anti-spirit of *entropia* in its passionate defense of the "messianic hope" and its need for a history of progress breaking with the doomed world of nature. When narrating about the Janus-faced modernity, torn between the horrors of the entropic Real and the messianic hope for an Exodus out of the

28 Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 12–3.

29 Philipp Mainländer, *Philosophie der Erlösung*, ed. Ulrich Horstmann (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1989), 20.

30 Walter Benjamin, "The Theological-Political Fragment," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 306.

iron cage of the closed physical system destined to die, Bloch insists on keeping “a different order of wisdom than the one that describes a cycle of universal cooling, a new flare-up, and another phase of cooling – a carousel of entropy and anti-entropy from which mechanical philosophy draws its final conclusion.”³¹ For Bloch, there is still hope, even if born in the midst of the entropic despair: the “different order of wisdom,” not giving in to the “arid wisdom” of the “mechanical philosophy,” still stakes on the possibility of a human history as differing from the order of nature, which speaks the “language of doom.”³² For Benjamin, however, this is a wrong answer which merely perpetuates the Nietzschean “web of lies” that life builds around itself in order to preserve the sense of its own purposefulness and thus hope. Benjamin does not want to lie against the entropic tendency of nature itself; he wants to embrace it and deprive it of the apocalyptic violence, by instead assuming “the quietest approach.”

Political Nihilism: “The Quietest Approach”

The idea of nihilism as a new world politics originates in Walter Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment,” written in response to Ernst Bloch’s 1918 first edition of *Geist der Utopie*. It is partly a praise and partly a disguised polemic with Bloch, who is first openly credited with having proved the impossibility of a utopian theocracy (a compliment not at all obvious in regard to Bloch), and then tacitly trashed for his investment in the messianic “principle of hope,” staking on the gradual raising of the world to the spiritual level. Spurned by the discovery of entropy, Benjamin elaborates on the concept of transience, which leads him to the corresponding notion of a hope in reverse. Bloch approaches his “principle of hope” – soon to become a title of his *opus magnum* – in a traditional manner of Jewish messianism, filtered through his appropriation of Hegel and Marx, according to which the world has an objective tendency to press towards the redemptive *telos* when spirit and matter will have found perfect reconciliation. Benjamin, on the contrary, sees the “messianic intensity” of thinkers like Bloch as the source of misfortune and unhappiness, merely perpetuating the lies of life. Thus, paraphrasing Kafka, if there is a hope, it is not for “us,” if we imagine ourselves as the messianic agents pressing for the redemptive goal of history, the Omega-point as the imaginary fulfillment and perfection of

31 Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 313.

32 Ibid.

our current state of existence.³³ It is rather a hope in reverse, realizing itself not in the Blochian progress of the world towards the “humanization of nature”³⁴ but in the reverse downward movement of the “eternal Fall,” in which matter resists and counteracts the messianic agency of the spirit. According to Benjamin, nihilism as the new world politics replacing the grand narrative of progress is the only logical response to the entropic phenomenon of transience:

Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away. To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.³⁵

While these two metaphysical orders of restitution – of the natural world, on the one hand, and of the divine immortal pleroma, on the other – never collide, there is nonetheless a third element that insinuates itself in between the two: history. History arises as an attempt to mediate between the transcendent immortal God and the immanent passing Nature, but does so in vain: after all, “nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic.”³⁶ In Benjamin’s reading, the error of history, which hoped to build a bridge between the eternal and the transient, is to be overcome by the politics of global nihilism, which would undo the errance of history and revert it back to the rhythm of transience as the natural form of time that is not destined to accumulate, construct, and reform, but simply to “decompose.”³⁷ Nature as the “total passing away” is not to be sublated into accumulative history and subordinated to its human *telos* set on the ideal of permanence (*Dauer*) as reflecting the transcendent order of eternity. On the contrary, history must recognize itself as an

33 Benjamin quotes Kafka’s *dictum* – “there is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope – but not for us” – in his essay on Kafka: Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 798.

34 See Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. J. T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009), 232.

35 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 305–306.

36 *Ibid.*, 305.

37 Compare Benjamin’s fragment from a similar period, “World and Time”: “in the revelation of the divine, the world – the theater of history – is subjected to a great process of decomposition.” Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 226.

error of impossible mediation and peacefully dissolve into entropic nature, so it can now serve the metaphysical purpose of the “worldly restitution” or the world recognizing its true essence not in progress, but in the downfall. Benjamin’s response to the anti-spirit of entropia (as opposed to the Blochian spirit of utopia), therefore, is a total revolution of the late-modern worldview, coupled with a new revolutionary politics the goal of which is the “nihilistic” attunement to the “rhythm of transience”: no more high hopes and great expectations in the dying universe, which offers its inhabitants nothing but a short passing material existence. According to Benjamin, however, this is not a call to despair, as it is in Bloch, Horkheimer, and Adorno, still longing for an idea of progress – Exodus. By reversing the notion of hope, now attuned to the needs of transient matter, world politics can become happily nihilistic – and thus pave way to the strictly materialistic biopolitical paradigm of taking care of the fragile life in the conditions of radical finitude.

This biopolitical attunement to the entropic transience is designed by Benjamin to disarm the apocalyptic mood that rose with the sense of doom implied by the idea of final *Naturdämmerung*: “nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away,” which means that it should be accepted that way, deeply affirmed and taken care of as transient. While the “apocalyptic tone” is catastrophic and unforgiving, throwing a negative verdict over the world doomed to die, the nihilistic politics finds a new home in the “permanent catastrophe,” precisely because it is permanent. According to Benjamin, therefore, we can live in the dying universe without hoping either for eternal progress or for the hasty demise of the miserable physical world as, in the paradigmatically apocalyptic formulation of Goethe’s Mephisto, *nur wert, dass es zugrunde geht*. Thus, in yet another piece from 1921, “The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe,” Benjamin tries to build an alternative understanding of time, not as the Rilkean force of destruction (*die Zeit, die zerstörende*), but as the force that helps and assists the *vergeben/vergehen* of the world’s entropic self-obliteration: “time helps, in ways that are wholly mysterious, to complete the process of forgiveness, though never of reconciliation.”³⁸ The key to this enigmatic assistance lies in the prefix *ver*, ringing with the old-Saxon *forth* as “away with”: *Vergängnis, Vergebung, Vernichtung*. This “doing away with” is the proper work of time: the element which enables transience and self-erasure of the world before the apocalyptic manifestation of God’s Judgment in the immediately destructive divine violence. The “crimson thread of negation,” therefore, would thus appear in two distinct yet related forms: *in the world*, as the time which delays the final blow and constitutes the essence of the “nature passing away,” on the one hand – and *out of the world*, as

³⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 287.

the apocalyptic annihilation that strikes in a timeless now, because it cannot tolerate the misery of the transient material existence, on the other. While the former immanent negation gives the world its structure (even if ultimately grounded in “passing away”) and thus perpetuates its being (even if in the “permanent catastrophe”), the latter transcendent negation strikes from the beyond as the Gnostic revenge against the scandal of material creation:

Retribution (*Vergeltung*) is fundamentally indifferent to the passage of time, since it remains in force for centuries without dilution, and even today what is actually at bottom, a heathen conception still pictures the Last Judgment along these lines.³⁹

In the first case, time as the delayed divine violence destroys the world in the manner of what would later be known as the Derridean *différance*. It “dilutes” – differs and defers – the apocalyptic force, by patiently working through the world’s inner self-erasure, and because of that is “forgiving” (*vergebend*): time annihilates the world in a “gentle” manner which does its work of “doing away with” *before* the violent intervention of the Last Judgment. Paradoxically, therefore, the self-obliteration of the world in time saves the world from the violent end – and that is, for Benjamin, the ultimate forgiveness (*Vergebung*), taking the form of “the quietest approach,” *das leiseste Nahen*, as opposed to the apocalyptic bang: “as the purifying hurricane speeds ahead of the thunder and lightning, God’s fury roars through history in the storm of forgiveness, in order to sweep away everything that would be consumed forever in the lightning bolts of divine wrath.”⁴⁰ The storm – *der Sturm der Vergebung* – is thus to save us from fire: drenched by the rivers of time, the world keeps at bay the *ekpyrosis* that can be brought on it any time and in no time by the divine violence and its sudden fiery strike. When translated into a more secular idiom of our age, Benjamin’s doubling of the concept of time would be an attempt to keep the apocalyptic discourse at bay, in this manner similar to that of Derrida. Not apocalypse, not now – the world is still worth preserving (*wert, dass sie nicht zugrunde geht*), even if passing and thus offending human longings for eternity and immortality.⁴¹ For, despite the demise of the religious faith and its “messianic intensity,” the retributive rage against finitude – the Nietzschean “revenge against time” – still

³⁹ Ibid., 286; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 287.

⁴¹ See Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics* 14 (2) (1984): 20–31.

persists in even the seemingly most secularized scientific discourses and the penchant for the “apocalyptic tone.” This is also the point made by Agamben in his blog entry: the new “religion of science” inherits not only the form of the prophetic discourse, but also its violent negation of the finite fragile being as essentially unworthy of existence. In this manner, the traditional puritan contempt for the sphere of *privatio boni* as the sinful way of all flesh wanders into the contemporary vengeful images of the materialist apocalypse, usually unaware of their theological component, which comes particularly strongly to the fore in Taubes’s scornful phrase: “I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is” – that is, “a world of chaos and turmoil, without stability, a world of death without eternal life [...] where the good things pass away and aspirations do not come to fruition.”⁴²

Benjamin’s biopolitical apology of a “happy life,” which should be forgiven its finitude – “a world of death without eternal life” – is at once a polemic against the spiritual investment in eternity, characteristic of the Abrahamic messianic religions, and the heroic thanatopolitics of the nascent fascism, which utilized the apocalyptic sense of historical urgency.⁴³ It creates a *tertium* – a praise of the ordinary finite life – where the messianic imperative of *ubaharta ba’hayim* (choose to live) does not lead to the esoteric doctrine of immortal life, but accepts life with all its limitations and as it is: finite, transient, always already dying. Going against the Jewish-messianic line of human *theosis* as the final denouement of the “messianic intensity,” which can still be detected in Bloch despite all his declared materialism, Benjamin boldly invests in its opposite: nihilism understood as the embracement of the *nihil* which inherently pervades the world as always-already and irreparably non-existent, grounded in the entropic principle of passing away. This, for him, is the true *gnosis* of the age of entropy, the final knowledge that brings redemption as *Erlösung* or “dissolution” – not the higher knowledge leading to “becoming like gods,” but the recognition of the constitutive negation running like a “crimson thread” and a gently commanding “rhythm of transience”

42 Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 29.

43 On the latter, see most of all Hans-Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele. Studie zu einer Lehre von den letzten Dingen*, vol. 1 and 2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1998), where the very concept of the Third Reich is derived from the concept of the Millennium, appearing in the Book of Revelation. This motif is also elaborated by Karl Löwith in his *Meaning of History*, where the image of the Third Millennial Kingdom travels from St. John, through Joachim da Fiore and the Millenarists, to Hegel and then the Hegelian Right, instrumental in creating the intellectual milieu of German fascism. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

through the whole natural domain. Benjamin is thus also, in a way, an apocalyptic, but his “quietest approach” to the apocalypse of nature is very different from those prophesying either a triumphant New Creation, in which all of transient nature will have become spiritualized and eternalized, or a universal doom. Paraphrasing Taubes, Benjamin has no spiritual investment in the world as it is and wants to let it go down – but with two very strong provisos that radically transform the meaning of the Taubesian phrase: he does invest in the world, but materially, not spiritually – and indeed lets it go down, yet not in a climactic bang, full of trumpets and noises, but rather in an Eliotian ending with a little whimper: in fact, a sigh of pleasure in the transic dance to the rhythm of transience, the happy trance of transience.⁴⁴ The world is not a solid construction that needs a demolition ball to bring it down; being is so pervaded by nothing that it only needs a gentle reminder about its metaphysical destiny. It already has its “nihilistic” form: the “shape of time” engaged in the “great process of decomposition.”

With Benjamin, therefore, biopolitics – the new science of those dark “transformations taking place in that great flowing stream of human physicality”⁴⁵ – acquires its own political theology. Very different from the original Schmittian theological justification of political sovereignty and its later avatar in the concept of the *katechon* as the restrainer of the apocalypse, it also goes against the grain of the messianic theopolitics of such thinkers as Bloch and Taubes. Neither an apocalypse from above, nor an apocalypse from below, Benjamin’s “quietest approach” brings a vision of an end as always already inscribed in the world’s “eternal downfall,” pervaded by the entropic “crimson thread of negation.” The goal of the new “nihilistic world politics” is thus nothing but happiness, or rather, nothing a s happiness: a blissful transic fall into the “rhythm of transience,” which gives up any hope for the messianic improvement of being, but does not end up hopeless. His story may thus be a *Verfallsgeschichte*, a “history of the Fall,” but with a spin. Contrary to the widespread metaphysical pessimism of the Weimar era, emerging out of the first reaction to the entropic vision of the dying universe, Benjamin finds a hope in reverse in the very narrative of the Fall. This is yet another answer to the dialectics of hope and despair, very much alive today, especially in the affirmative biopolitics of Giorgio Agamben, equally attuned to the “quietest approach” of the apocalyptic all-demise.

44 “This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but a whimper.” Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, in *The Waste Land, Prufrock, The Hollow Men and Other Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 2022), 51.

45 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 230.

Conclusion

The purpose of my little intervention was to demonstrate that the language of doom is not a new invention, coming from the angle of what is nowadays called “the environmental apocalypse”: the prophecy of the impending ecological catastrophe.⁴⁶ It has a whole history of the West behind it, which was predominantly a story, a narrative that begins – and ends. The grand finale was always a matter of the dialectical tension between despair and hope, from the first Jewish and Christian apocalypses to Hegel’s teleological elaboration of the End of History. This dialectic – for the last time awakened in Horkheimer and Adorno’s attempt to keep the motif of Exodus alive – broke under the impact of the discovery of entropy, which tipped the balance towards metaphysical pessimism. Due to this epochal change, the concept of the end lost its ambivalent hue: the dysteleological tendency of *Naturdämmerung* overshadowed the positive image of the *telos* as the Omega-point of fulfillment. Yet it did not put the traditional apocalyptic discourses out of operation. On the contrary, they continue to be present everywhere, albeit in a new materialist guise, merely thinly veiling their non-secular matrix. Whereas the “religion of science” raises the apocalyptic tone in the context of climate change, which violently demands of us, the benefactors of the Anthropocene, to reckon with our “sins” – the late-modern politics proceeds the way of biopolitical “nihilism” which, as my analysis of Benjamin has shown, took “the quietest approach” to the apocalyptic vision of the universal ending of all things and continues the Anthropocene, but without the vision of progress. Both eco-apocalyptic prophecies and biopolitics are concerned with the preservation of fragile finite life that cannot escape the verdict *zum Tode*. They may differ in their respective defenses of life – the non-human nature versus the human world – but they share a sense of pure despair in the face of the entropic “night of nature,” irrevocably dying and “without exits.”

No religious or philosophical “tricks” trying to rekindle hope out of despair seem to work anymore; perhaps with the sole exception of the “hope in reverse” which was devised by Benjamin in order to create a new “nihilistic” political subject, perfectly attuned to the “rhythm of transience” and not desiring anything else. But if we still wish an Exodus from the universe reduced to *cellula entropiae*, we must boldly plunge into this despair and “tarry with the apocalypse”

46 On the topic of eco-apocalypse in the post-secular approach, see *The Environmental Apocalypse. Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis*, ed. Jakub Kowalewski (London: Routledge, 2022); for a scientific approach, see Paul Halpern, *Countdown to Apocalypse. A Scientific Exploration of the End of the World* (Cambridge MA: Perseus Publishing, 1998); and for a critical political approach, see Michael Shellenberger, *Apocalypse, Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021) and Pascal Bruckner, *Le fanatisme de l'Apocalypse* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2011).

until, one day, a new language of hope arises that will restore the sense of purpose: not a grand *telos* secured by the Hegelian laws of progress, but a small sober one that we can still believe in despite the trauma of finitude.⁴⁷

Abstract

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The Culture of the End: Tarrying with the Apocalypse

Today, we apparently live in an epoch of the end. The idea of living in the end times became today so hegemonic that it began to generate a new universal "existential mood." We live in a "culture of the end", and this can be observed in all social fields, from art to politics, from science to popular humour. Yet, in the history of Western thought, the concept of the end is not new at all. To some extent, we might even say that we have always lived in the end times. In fact, the idea of the end has shaped a large part of continental philosophical tradition, stretching from Biblical motifs of apocalypse and the end time to Hegel's idea of the end of history, where it is meant as an apex of the progress of freedom. According to Hegel, the End of History is not a violent finale of the world, as well as our lives in it, but a *telos*: a desired goal of the historical development. The last representative of the Hegelian optimism was Francis Fukuyama who, spurned by the 1989 fall of communism, urged us to greet "the end of history" – the global victory of liberal democracy – as the most welcome event that would stabilize the world politics and let it flourish, by preventing alternative revolutionary ideas to come to the fore. Yet, this type of metaphysical-historical optimism, so characteristic for the last decade of the second millennium, quite suddenly waned: the narrative of the desired goal gave way to the narrative of the imminent end as a threat to the world's existence. The evocation of the apocalypse due to climate change and natural catastrophe to convictions about fatal inevitability of war and destruction of both mankind and the whole planet marks a stark contrast between the past-optimistic and contemporary-pessimistic narrations of the end. The essay attempts to elucidate the reasons why this sudden change occurred.

Keywords

Apocalypse, end of history, ecological crisis, Adorno, Benjamin, Agamben

⁴⁷ On some modest attempts to overcome the traumatic impact of the entropic radical finitude, see my *Another Finitude. Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).