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**FROM THE REDEMPTIVE TO THE NON REDEMPTIVE
APOCALYPSE
IN 20th CENTURY GERMAN THOUGHT**

During the first decades of the last century an extraordinary number apocalyptic of thinkers and artists in Germany «sketched out a future condition of perfection, which is to be created not by God, but by the nation, or the people, by a race or class, by the human spirit, or the new art»¹. Klaus Vondung's succinct formulation captures the utopian, man-made dimension of this modern apocalyptic imagination, with its distinctly pessimistic, radical and prophetic mood, its fascination with violence and destruction, as well as its hope of aesthetic or political deliverance. There has been no shortage of explanations for this phenomenon. The modern apocalypse, so one strand of argument holds, is the ideological face of terror and violence. In the 1960s, Norman Cohn argued that the apocalyptic mood became the underpinning of modern totalitarianism, pointing to the ways in which the rhetoric of Hitler's anti-Semitism was framed in the «tones of apocalyptic fervor characteristic of the popular Christianity of the Middle Ages and the millenarian sects who believed they had a divine mission to purify the world by wiping out the "sons of Satan"»². A second strand, represented by Frank Kermode, and which could be called the compensation thesis, claims that individuals and mass movements are drawn to an "apocalyptic set" that allows them to suffer the ravages of war or terror in the anticipation of a new and more perfect age. More dramatically, the age of "glitter and doom" (the title of a recent New York exhibition of Weimar painting) can be seen as a familiar era, not at all unlike the mood of catastrophe and doom that followed 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the debacle in Iraq. Yet a third stresses the anthropological and social dimensions of the apocalypse – an apocalyptic culture – that creates self-reinforcing communities of belief and knowledge that claims deeper access to elusive truths unavailable to the benighted.

What ties all of these strands together is their extremely negative assessment of the apocalyptic mentality as an expression, compensation for, or irrational subculture of violence and destruction, distinctly alien to a liberal and rational culture and society. Recently, historians of the early modern period have put into question the overidentification of apocalyptic thought with totalitarianism, pointing to a much earlier and broader variety of apocalyptic writers and popular preachers, including moderate messianists who preached communal property but eschewed radical violence. Scholars have also questioned the assumption that the apocalyptic mind-set was restricted to marginal individuals and exotic communities, naming for example, Columbus, Kepler and Newton among others, as purveyors of the apocalypse among the elites and learned classes³. In the eighteenth century we find the same apocalyp-

1 K. Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia (Mo) 2000, p. 437.

2 N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Secker & Warburg, London 1957, pp. 102-104.

3 A. Grafton, *The Varieties of Millennial Experience*, in «The New Republic», 1999, n. 13, vol. 221, pp.

tic tone in less bloodthirsty, more democratic, disturbers of the peace like Tom Paine, or in some of the mainstream trade union movements. Today, we find descendents of this more moderate apocalypticism in the “Earth-First movement” which was founded in the 1980s and subsequently divided into those who insisted on non violence and public education and the more radical practitioners of eco-terrorism. One can also criticize the characterization of the apocalypse as totalitarian or proto-totalitarian, by pointing to the profusion of doctrines of transfiguration and regeneration among European intellectuals and artists. There was more than one single violent path to redemption. Some were political, others imaginative, utopian, absurdist, iconoclastic, still others nostalgic and traditionalistic.

Nor is it true, as is often assumed, that the apocalyptic epoch is behind us. Michael Barkun has discovered a wide variety of apocalyptic and millenarian subcultures in contemporary America, some religious, others less so, many of them wedded to conspiracy beliefs, and almost all convinced that they are in the possession of “stigmatized knowledge” that is marginalized or suppressed because it is a threat to the dominant organization of power.

Apocalyptic mind-sets come in many forms – religious, secular, and “improvisational,” – a mélange of psychology, religion, esotericism, radical politics and science fiction. Barkun calls this «an unprecedented millenarian pluralism»⁴. In his brief survey, *Apocalypses*, Eugen Weber asks: «if apocalypticism and millennialism are not exceptional and cranky, why are they so commonplace?» Is it simply that «when troubles are dominant apocalypse is in the ascendancy»⁵.

There are, of course, periods of millennial intensity and periods of millennial quiescence. In twentieth century Germany, there are at least two distinct epochs of apocalyptic thought, each with its own register. The first and most familiar is what Leo Bersani has identified as the post World War I culture of redemption, the extreme modernist contention that politics or aesthetics can become «an alternative to an inferior and depreciated world of mere appearance»⁶. The apocalypse assumes the form of an interruption the order of progressive history or, more precisely, as Walter Benjamin famously put it, as the opposite of «homogenous empty time», a «time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)»⁷. In the years after World War I, Manichean scenarios of world destruction and world redemption, images and symbols of the corrupt, unfulfilled earthly world of pain and degradation, and prophecies of fulfillment and perfection became familiar tropes in politics, radical art movements, and philosophy. Especially in Germany, writers on the left and on the right felt at home in the climate of catastrophe. As Thomas Mann put it, «after the first World War the French left it the Germans to dream of apocalypses»⁸.

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- 4 M. Barkun, *Millennialism and Violence*, Frank Cass, London Portland (OR) 1996, p. 177; M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, in “Comparative Studies in Religion and Society” n. 15, University of California Press, Berkeley-London (Calif.) 2003, p. 243.
- 5 E.J. Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, pp. 234, 235.
- 6 L. Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, p. 2.
- 7 W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p. 257.
- 8 T. Mann, *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans*, Bermann-Fischer, Amsterdam

The vision of a present that is so completely pathological, so utterly destitute that its very fallenness must be accompanied by a vehicle of ontological renewal was shared by prophets of the divine, protagonists of the trenches, and their most dedicated ideological “anti-German” opponents, by left wing revolutionaries and fascists *avant la lettre*. For example, Hugo Ball, the Dadaist and antiwar publicist shared with his friend Carl Schmitt, the Catholic legal theorist, an admiration for Bakunin because he expressed their «apocalyptic hatred of Europe»⁹.

In the 1920s, there was also an effervescence of apocalyptic thinking from different quarters including Jewish theology (Rosenzweig, Buber, Scholem), revolutionary (Bloch, Landauer, Lukács, Toller), reactionary modernist (Jünger, Freyer, Heidegger). From this perspective, the vehicle of ontological renewal was often quite arbitrary and could be quickly abandoned or resuscitated, as long as the apocalypse remained on the horizon. As Ernst Jünger once remarked, «one had to step into the train at some dismal station – as a nationalist, or as a Bolshevik, as a revolutionary, as a soldier in the service of obscure spirits or theories – the only question is, how far one is willing to travel»¹⁰. Gershom Scholem once observed that all such messianic expectations are characterized by the radical denigration of the existing order of decline, destitution, and depravity, in which life is only «lived in deferment»¹¹.

In contrast to the man-made apocalypse and the images of transfiguration and renewal that accompanied World War I, World War II elicited an entirely different response which the philosopher Günther Anders – who proved to be the exception – described as «apocalypse-blindness»¹². For Anders, the malaise of the cold war was an inability to bring in to philosophical focus the real catastrophes of the twentieth century, of exile, holocaust, mediation, the nuclear threat and the abdication of human responsibility. In the second postwar era the apocalypse is no longer a future event, not anticipated or expected, but instead a constant presence in recent memory. Moreover, redemption and transfiguration, the leitmotifs of historical apocalyptic prophecy are no longer thinkable in the aftermath of catastrophe. World War I produced a plurality of reflections and representations on death and redemption; World War II produced a profound distrust of the redemptive ideal – revolutionary, nationalist, metaphysical – and what might be called an anti-redemptive mood. Figures like Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, all to one degree or another susceptible to one or more of the vehicles of ontological renewal available before the Second World War, expressly ended their journeys. Withdrawn (Jünger) or imprisoned (Schmitt), they regarded themselves as prophets punished for their prescience. «After the earthquake», wrote Ernst Jünger, «one has recourse to the seismograph. One cannot punish the barometer

1949, p. 190.

9 N. Bolz, *Auszug aus der Entzauberten Welt: Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen*, Wilhelm Fink, München 1989, p. 80.

10 E. Jünger, *Maxima-Minima: Adnoten zum “Arbeiter”*, in “Cotta’s Bibliothek der Moderne”, n. 15, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1983, p. 6.

11 G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, Schocken Books, New York 1995, p. 35.

12 G. Anders, “Über die Bombe und die Wurzeln unserer Apokalypse-Blindheit”, in *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*: Bd. 1. *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*; Bd. 2. *Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, Beck, München 1956, pp. 235-308. Cited in D. Sonolet, *Günther Anders: Phénoménologie de la technique*, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, Pessac 2006, p. 29.

for the typhoon, unless one counts oneself among primitives»¹³. At the same time, Schmitt wrote: «Beware the diagnostician. The rage at Ernst Jünger's *The Worker* and perhaps even more my *Concept of the Political*, is the rage of the spa director at the doctor who discovers an outbreak of the plague on the premises»¹⁴. To be sure, as Hannah Arendt remarked of Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, «It seems to me that not one of the philosophers has mentioned or analyzed in philosophical terms this background in experience»¹⁵.

Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, written in the Fall of 1946 and published in France in 1947, was the first cogent and extraordinary influential statement of the philosopher's postwar thinking. It represents Heidegger's first utterances on the defeat of Germany and is Heidegger's effort to separate his statements of the rectoral era (1933/1934) from his more profound meditations on language, the "homelessness" of modern man, and the "forgetting of Being". Implicitly, Heidegger reinterprets Germany's defeat into a discourse on the apocalyptic victory of technology (which, in 1942, he had already seen as the victory of Bolshevism and Americanism). For Heidegger, writing in 1946, the «[...] devastation is not the consequence of the world wars, but the world wars are already only a consequence of the devastation that has been visited upon the earth for centuries»¹⁶. For Heidegger, to be German in the hour of defeat is to grasp the fact that devastation is merely the completion of the nihilism that first appears in the "abandonment of Being". It is this *Seinsverlassenheit* and not the collapse of the Reich, that is «the world event that encircles the earth». Germans therefore are in a position to overcome their claim to nationality and assume their proper role as an "expectant people" (*wartendes Volk*)¹⁷. In other words, the apocalypse is past but the advent is postponed and Heidegger reiterates his sentence from the penultimate page of *Being and Time* that «[...] the conflict with respect to the interpretation of being (that is, therefore, not the interpretation of beings or of the Being of man) cannot be settled *because it has not yet been kindled*»¹⁸. Like Jünger and Schmitt, Heidegger repositioned his own thank from that of an agitator and prophet of the new order of being (Nazism) to the philosophic seismograph of the destruction of the old order of being and the advent of an undetermined future which is still "undecided."

Karl Jaspers was in many respects the antipode to Jünger, Heidegger, and Schmitt, all of whom considered German guilt as a manifestation of the vengeance of the victors. But however much Jaspers experienced Heidegger's engagement with the Nazi revolution as a personal and political betrayal, his *Die Schuldfrage* [1946] has in common with Heidegger's postwar rhetoric an acknowledgment of the German catastrophe and the allied occupation as the postponement of a decision concerning Germany's future sovereignty and moral existence

13 E. Jünger, *Strahlungen*, Heliopolis-Verlag, Tübingen 1949, p. 9.

14 C. Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951*, ed. E. Medem, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1991, p. 161. Cited in D. Morat, *Von der Tat zur Gelassenheit: Konservatives Denken bei Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger und Friedrich Georg Jünger, 1920-1960*, Thesis (doctoral)-Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen 2005 (Wallstein 2007), p. 299.

15 H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. J. Kohn, 1st ed., Harcourt Brace & Co., New York 1994, pp. 444-445.

16 M. Heidegger, *Feldweg-Gespräche 1944-45*, ed. I. Schüssler, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.Main 1995, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 77, p. 211.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 223, 233.

18 M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, ed. D.F. Krell, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco (Calif.) 1993, p. 247.

(Jaspers believed it would take 20 years to establish a German state). Of course, unlike Heidegger, who regarded the outcome of the war as having decided “nothing,” Jaspers thought the allied occupation might offer a potential for democratic renewal and human rights. The Germans had now become a people deprived of their national existence and excluded from the community of nations because of the enormous suffering they had inflicted on others. Jaspers’ vision is no less apocalyptic. With their sovereignty forfeit, their state destroyed, their country under foreign rule, their leaders in flight or in custody, Germans are legally, politically, morally, and metaphysically guilty (to varying degrees) and politically responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Guilt had to be assumed freely lest it be imposed by the occupiers. In Jaspers terms, Germans had to assume the burden of pariahdom in order to achieve the moral and metaphysical reckoning that the catastrophe required. This too is a non-redemptive apocalypse. «Germany» wrote Jaspers «is the first nation, that, as a nation, has gone to ruin»¹⁹. German guilt was a wager to rescue the *Kulturnation* in the face of the collapse of the political nation. If the wager failed, Jaspers argued, Germany could suffer a permanent loss of sovereignty.

For both Heidegger and Jaspers, as it was for historian Friedrich Meinecke, the defeat of 1945 was first and foremost a German catastrophe. By contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944-1947), with its famous thesis that «myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology», gives Hegel’s phenomenology of sacrifice an anthropological twist. By outwitting nature through the sacrifice achieved by knowledge and cunning the modern individual ends up unwittingly sacrificing him/herself by self-renunciation and regression. Mastery over outer nature results in the domination of inner nature – the introversion of sacrifice. To some degree Horkheimer and Adorno’s text vaguely parallels Heidegger’s insistence that Western metaphysics realizes subjectivity and rationality, the world of subject and object, as the “occlusion of Being”. But Horkheimer and Adorno, following Freud, regard not Being or the West, and certainly not Germany, but rather European Jewry as the victims of the relentless expunging of myth from civilization. The ritual sacrifice of the Jew is the ultimate form of a generalized renunciation of mimesis and alterity; the Jews, as the carriers of the taboo on images (*Bilderverbot*) are mad to pay the ultimate price for the running of ritual sacrifice into symbolic sacrifice and eventually into abstract thought. In certain respects, the strategy of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is to turn *Kulturkritik* against itself.

They attempted a “rescue” of Enlightenment, to use Horkheimer’s apt expression, by turning to the writings of figures like Ludwig Klages and Ernst Jünger in order to harness the power of nihilism to demythologize the conservative revolution. As Adorno remarked, «One of the tasks confronting thought – and not the least of those tasks – is to bring into the service of *Aufklärung* and progress all the reactionary arguments that have been moved against Western civilization»²⁰.

19 Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, May 3, 1947, in H. Arendt / K. Jaspers / L. Köhler / H. Saner eds., *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*. 1st U.S. ed, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1992, p. 84.

20 T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, New Left Books, London 1974, p. 192.

If there was no agreement between Heidegger, Jaspers, or Horkheimer and Adorno on the nature of the catastrophe, each of these thinkers invokes the catastrophe as a caesura in modern history. That move, I am suggesting, accounts for the post-World War II permanence of the apocalypse as the postponement of redemption. The capacity to sustain the tension between enlightenment and counter-enlightenment without succumbing to the temptation to embrace catastrophe along with redemption distinguishes these postwar philosophers from their Weimar-era predecessors.

It would be shortsighted to conclude this discussion with the oft-cited argument that post-modernism is in fact modernism without apocalypse and without redemption. There is no doubt, as I have tried to show, that since the end of the war and the Holocaust redemptive programs and ideologies have been suspect. The post-apocalyptic mood of Heidegger, Jaspers, Horkheimer and Adorno appeared at a moment of shock and disorientation while postmodern or poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman have provided a quite different, perhaps “third” register of apocalyptic thinking. While they are equally non-redemptive, the apocalypse itself becomes the absolute marker of radical disenchantment. As Lyotard observed, apocalyptic thought is “future anterior” to a world that has already ended in cataclysm and terror. «The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience»²¹.

Perhaps the most notable discussion of this third register of apocalyptic thinking is Jacques Derrida’s *On the Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy* [1992]. Derrida sketched what he calls “an apocalypse without apocalypse” as the unseen, indeterminate, impossible abyss of uncertainty indeterminacy²². Philosophical antifoundationalism is *ipso-facto* apocalyptic insofar as it claims that the impossibility of grounding truth in history, science, or ethics leaves us without railings – at the brink of non-being. This assertion, which is sometimes referred to as apocalyptic “difference” absorbs the “apocalypse without its destructive, catastrophic, historical, ideological, or redemptive dimensions”. Or put it another way, it characteristically disavows the theological dimension of the apocalypse without disavowing the notion of messianicity (messianism without the expectation of the messiah or the revolutionary event). In this sense, Derrida rejects the theologically grounded apocalypse that presumes that there is something beyond life worth sacrificing life for – deconstruction instead sacrifices faith (faith without faith).

This “de-dramatization” of the apocalypse in post-structuralism is a way of preserving the modernist “breaking-out” and “breaking-through” of history without the explosions and dislocations of transformation or the demand for a new order. Though it need not be reproached with moral lassitude or cynicism, deconstruction’s project is itself historical, an opening up of the space evacuated by catastrophe and redemption without embracing its fatal dialectic of violence and the law, revolt and authority. To some degree these thinkers unquestionin-

21 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington/B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, p. 82.

22 J. Derrida, *Apocalypse*, ed. P. Engelmann, trans. M. Wetzel, Edition Passagen, Vienna 1985, pp. 88, 89.

gly collapsed the logic of modernity with the most extreme manifestations of political and ideological terror. As Derrida often noted, the rhetoric of modernism, with its attachment to explosion, ruin, collapse, and dissolution calls to mind a nostalgia for the figure of totality and history. For the last decade, this intimate connection between post-apocalyptic thinking, Auschwitz, and Trauma have all but collapsed into a single trope. The denigration of modernism as the aesthetic-political prefiguration of totalitarianism, or at least as the eradication of ambiguity and contingency seems too one-dimensional and schematic. The three registers of apocalyptic thinking during the twentieth century may belong more properly to a single yet highly fractious modernism. But that is another story.