Apocalyptic Poetry between Metaphysics and Negative Theology: Dante to Celan and Stevens

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The possibility of seeing beyond the limits of time and mortality vouched for by the Bible, with its prophetic-apocalyptic visions, was discovered early on by Christian authors to be represented also in classical pagan literature, notably in the descents to the underworld for revelations of their personal destinies by Odysseus in Book XI of the *Odyssey* and by Aeneas in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. This epic topos of the otherworldly voyage in quest of knowledge from the dead that will illumine the path of the protagonist's life is expanded by Dante into the whole of his epic journey in the afterlife as recounted in the *Divine Comedy*. Most poignantly, Dante's meeting in *Paradiso*, cantos 14–18, with his ancestor Cacciaguida, a hero and martyr of the Second Crusade, brings the modelling on ancient epic tradition to a dramatic climax. In the guise of a precious gem refulgent in an illuminated cross of light in the heaven of Mars, Cacciaguida appears to Dante as lovingly as the shade of Anchises appeared to Aeneas, his son ("*si pia l'ombra d'Anchise si porse*"—*Paradiso* XV.25). Dante combines this sort of pagan precedent for his otherworldly journey with its analogues in the Bible, particularly Paul's famous *raptus* to the "third

heaven." Indeed the inevitable comparison to Paul's *elevatio ad coelum* insinuates itself unmistakably from the outset of the *Paradiso*, with the worry, echoing 2 Corinthians 12:1–5, about disclosing things that it is not lawful for a man to utter (". . . *vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sù discende*"—I.4–7). Dante's doubt later in this passage about whether he is underway on his paradisiacal journey in the body or outside it ("*S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti / novellamente, . . . tu 'l sai*"—I.70–75) likewise echoes Paul's uncertainty in 2 Corinthians ("whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell"). Such comparisons to these antecedents are unmistakable, notwithstanding Dante's disclaimer earlier, at the beginning of the *Inferno*, protesting that he is neither Aeneas nor Paul ("*Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono*"—*Inferno* II.32).

Absorbing a host of medieval allegorical vision literature into this new synthesis distinguished by a new sense of history as the arena in which the final truth of human existence is revealed, the *Divine Comedy* marks the beginning of, or at least a new departure in, the modern development of apocalyptic outside of and well beyond the canonical and subcanonical books of the Bible in a broader stream of imaginative, creative religious literature. Dante works within the theological vision of the Bible and its patristic and medieval interpreters, including Saint Augustine. He synthesizes this background with a classical and especially Virgilian vision of a universal, imperial, providential order. Taking up the mantle of the poet-*vates*, Dante becomes the interpreter of world history and of the destiny of his civilization, and thereby he exceeds all the roles accorded to makers of rhymes ("rimatori"), that is, to modern vernacular poets. He becomes a modern prophetic poet in the mode of the ancients, both of the biblical prophets, particularly Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and of the ancient Greek and Latin epic poets in the following of Homer.

Throughout the modern period, creative, visionary poets such as John Milton and William Blake have followed Dante in uniting the office and vocation of the prophet with those of the epic poet and in imaginatively interpreting history as the revelation of a divine plan and purpose, that is, as prophecy and specifically apocalypse.

These modern poets assume the prophetic role of "speaking out"—"pro-fateor" from πρό–φήτης—for the correction of the world in the light of a revelation of its true end and destiny. In this, too, they are following Dante, who writes "*in pro del mondo che mal vive*" ("for the good of the world that lives ill"—*Purgatorio* XXXII.103). In Milton's case, this end is reflected primarily in the image of its edenic beginning, but even so the final two books of *Paradise Lost* comprise a climactic revelation by the Archangel Michael to Adam, in an explicitly apocalyptic mode, of the whole course and final end of human history.

Dante's synthesis of classical and Christian traditions in effect lays down the parameters for a new genre of writing about human existence and history seen from the standpoint of the revelation of its end. The "great flame" that Dante, with false modesty, wishes to ignite with his "little spark" ("*Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda*"—*Paradiso* I.34) can be seen in retrospect to have flared up in the form of a modern tradition of Christian prophetic poetry. There are important Christian poets, not devoid of prophetic vision, such as Sedulius and Prudentius, already in antiquity; as well as before Dante in the Middle Ages, for example, Alain de Lille and Bernardus Silvestris. But with Dante, the genre takes a decisive, specifically apocalyptic turn: the eschatological thrust of the *Divine Comedy* sees all history as a figure of eternity, the decisive acts of individuals' lifestories as prefiguring the eternal, freely chosen destinies of their souls to punishment, purgation, or beatitude, and first brings all other elements—lyric, elegiac, speculative, didactic—coherently into the overarching perspective of poetry as prophecy.

Indeed all that happens in history is seen by these poets in the perspective of its final significance in history as a whole, and consequently the vision of history they offer is in and of itself apocalyptic. In this way, apocalypse is envisaged not just as removed into an inaccessible future that can only be passively awaited but as actually realized in history, consonant with the New Testament theology of the Christ event, Jesus' historical death and resurrection, as itself eschatological, as already the beginning of the end that will be consummated with the general resurrection and the Last Judgment. By

seeing the end as occurring exemplarily and repeatedly within history itself, the apocalyptic poem attempts to realize the possibility of living in and from the revelation of the end, as well as of acting in accordance with its truth and even of contributing to bringing about this final consummation. As Thomas Altizer's readings of prophetic-apocalyptic poetic literature in its various specific historical contexts clearly show, the vision of the end does not put an end to history, but sets it free to begin realizing its ultimate human possibilities. Altizer sees the radical visions for world renewal by apocalyptic writers including Augustine, Dante, Milton, Blake, and Joyce as revolutionary: their sense is determined by the way they aim to impact and redefine their historical worlds.[1]

Thus, a genre of writing usually read more as literary than religious, more often in literature classes than in theology courses, becomes perhaps the most remarkable torchbearer of apocalyptic vision. In the wake of Dante, outstanding paladins of this genre in the modern Christian tradition are Milton, Blake, Spenser, and Tasso, and it would be easy to add Klopstock and Novalis, Hugo, and Claudel. Further broadening this mode of "prophetic poetry" beyond any and all confessional boundaries, one could include the whole semisecularized prophetic poetry of the Romantic movement and the Symbolists: Hölderlin, who expressly identifies with John's vision on Patmos, and Rimbaud, who rewrites the traditional revelatory sojourn in hell, are prophetic-apocalyptic poets. All of these

[1]Thomas Altizer, *History as Apocalypse*. Altizer's theology insists on the dialectical identity of genesis and apocalypse.

Some of the richest literary applications of apocalyptic tradition to contemporary historical realities flourished in the Middle Ages inspired, for instance, by Joachim of Fiore. Even Saint Bonaventure's biography of Saint Francis, the *Legenda Maior*, consistently envisions the Saint as an apocalyptic figure. Indeed most of the major poetic monuments of medieval literature, including Jean de Meun's portion of the *Roman de la rose*, *Piers Plowman*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and, of course, the *Divine Comedy*, have lent themselves to intensive reading as apocalyptic texts deeply engaged with the history of their times—apostate popes, and so forth. For some suggestive readings, see Emmerson and Herzman, Bloomfield, Buonaiuti, and Costa.

are concerned with vision into some radically other possibility of existence applied energetically to the interpretation of their own contemporary realities. As Rimbaud writes in *Une saison en enfer*, "*La vraie vie est une autre*" ("The true life is an other").[2]

Prophecy in this tradition, as also in the biblical tradition from which it stems, is essentially a totalizing—but at the same time an engaged and applied—interpretation of history. Prophetic poetry proposes interpretations of history from the standpoint of a revelation of eternity. And this means envisioning some end or finality beyond the bounds of history as the key to interpretation of all inner-worldly, intra-historical phenomena. Of course, the concrete, particular historical experience of the poet remains the basis for the projection of an end beyond the historical. And yet this particularity does not need to determine the confines of the vision in any reductive way, for it is itself endlessly open to interpretation. It is indeterminate except within one or another preestablished historical framework, and all such set schemas are necessarily swept away by apocalypse. Apocalyptic vision strives to open outwards from its very historical specificity by a movement of self-transcendence so as to receive a grace and thereby escape from the deadlock of its own historical predicament. This is possible only by virtue of a gift and a granting that arrives from beyond the horizon of the present. The end intended by apocalypse is necessarily nonpresent and proves itself in practice, moreover, to be ultimately unrepresentable. It can be fathomed only so long as it can be longed for and striven after as a goal without, however, yielding itself to any adequate, finite representation.

One of the most momentous results of the extension of the apocalyptic mode to poetic literature by self-consciously creative artists is the reflection on the nature of representation and, inevitably, the pushing of the possibilities of representation to their farthest limits. The prophetic poets have each in their own way felt

[2]Great works of prose fiction such as *I promessi sposi* or *Finegan's Wake*, are, of course, equally important sources of apocalyptic representation. I concentrate on poems because of their aptness in bringing out the specifically poetical character of apocalypse.

out the limits of representation and, as a consequence, make extensive use of the topos of "ineffability." The essence of their poetic vision defies expression. They unanimously testify to the paramount importance of this sense of limits for all that falls within the range of representation and consequently for all that can be remembered and preserved as "history." Indeed, apocalyptic literature, at least implicitly, reflects on representation in general, by its very nature offering fixed forms inadequate not only to the transcendent reality of eternity but to all historical reality in its inherent temporal dynamism. Such critical reflection by poetry upon itself tends to reveal all representation as in a sense apocalyptic—that is, as pretending to disclose how things really are in the end—and at the same time as inadequate to the infinitely rich and evasive realities which it would disclose.

The whole tradition of prophetic poetry reveals most insistently the extent to which apocalypse, so far as we grasp it, is an irreducibly poetic event, that is, a product of human making and imagination. Apocalypse is, of course, directed by its intentionality towards an event beyond all human power and control. It shows how the human and the creative making of humans reveals something other than and beyond themselves. In their invocations, for instance, prophetic poets typically acknowledge a transcendent presence as an inextricable lining within all human creation. As poets, they naturally privilege language as the scene of this revelation in and through aesthetic creation, at once a revealing and a reveiling. For in poetry, language is broken open to let the previously inconceivable appear. Poetic language is to this extent itself conceived of, most overtly in modern times, as apocalyptic. In it, the world is made over again new.[3] The work of destruction wrought by poetic language, by the language of "visionaries," has been a central

[3]This outlook characterizes especially recent French poetry and poetics as seen through the optics of "la nouvelle critique." The idea of poetic language, particularly that of Mallarmé, Lautréamont, and Rimbaud, as inherently new revolutionary has been pursued notably by Julia Kristeva and by Georges Poulet. Maurice Blanchot presents the view of writing as rupture with all that exists, influentially in "La littérature et le droit à la mort."

theme especially since Rimbaud (particularly in the *Illuminations*), but it can be seen retrospectively at work even in premodern poets such as Dante.[4]

The tradition of prophetic poetry in particular and poetry generally lives from the opening up of the rules of the game of language to what cannot be articulated within the grammar and vocabulary of any already given formulations of language. Language is always yet to be discovered, or rather "made," by *poiesis*. Fundamentally, apocalyptic is radical openness to what is other than all that can be represented. The unrepresentable source of making, alias *poiesis*, from which all representations poetically emerge, cannot itself be represented as such, but it can always, volcanically, manifest itself anew and reduce all representations to naught. *Poiesis* is in this sense apocalypse; and so far as our experience of it can be conceptualized and communicated, apocalypse is *poiesis*—with the proviso that *poiesis* embraces not only the positive poetic moment of giving form but equally the dissolution of form and the annihilation of all orders of representation.[5]

When apocalyptic is understood not in terms of a fixed repertoire of representations but as the radical power of poetic representation to renew and revolutionize itself and the world, to think and see and thereby to *be* otherwise, to invent—and above all the negative capability to suspend belief even in its own representations for the sake of what it cannot represent, the unrepresentable—it need not appear to be closural or stifling. For example, the Christian apocalyptic code as

[4]The radical newness of poetic language is effectively emphasized by Jacqueline Risset's reading of the *Paradiso*. She is inspired by Ossip Mandelstam.

[5]Martin Heidegger, in an ingenious inversion of the apocalyptic motif and mood that prevailed so ominously in Germany in the 1930s, developed the idea of the work of art, in its essence a work of *poiesis*, as the origin of a world through the revealing of truth in struggle against earth and its absorption of all revealed worldly orders of significance back into itself. Nietzsche's notion, in *Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), of Dionysian and Apollonian moments in tragic art also underlines the twofold creative–destructive movement of *poiesis*, in which the order of the world originates and is, conversely, destroyed.

a stable or at least recognizable semiotic system has been repeatedly evoked by prophetic-apocalyptic poetry; nevertheless, any meaning, even of symbols remaining nominally the same, has to be created anew and poetically validated by the new experience proposed in each would-be apocalyptic poem: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Blake's *Milton and Jerusalem*, Hölderlin's "Patmos," Hugo's *La légende des siècles* and *Dieu*, Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*, Klopstock's *Der Messias*, Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht* and *Geistige Lieder*, Claudel's *Le soulier de satin*, even Ginsberg's *Howl* or Merrill's *The Book of Ephraim*. Each original apocalyptic poem has to address its own epoch in unprecedented and inimitable ways in order to make its apocalyptic theology or a/theology meaningful. The meaning of the Christian apocalypse comes to light with a novel and unexpected bearing and with unsuspected significance and implications in each new, genuinely creative work of prophetic-apocalyptic poetry.

A positive and productive sense of apocalypse, I submit, is to be gathered from this poetic literature. There is much violence in these texts, as in the apocalyptic outlook itself, but there is also a power for engendering the desire for renewal and instilling hope in a new possibility of relatedness for human beings, a new order in which self is not inevitably pitted against other. The effort to ground these ultimate ethical principles in a vision of the end is not misguided, even though it is necessarily poetic and projective. The attempt at comprehensive interpretation of the human story as a whole and the striving to imagine what life looks like *sub specie aeternitatis*—though in every case this means a vision the more radically rooted in its own time and specific historical reality—are efforts that have never proved definitive but which, nevertheless, have remained open to and have stimulated further interpretation and appropriation in each successive age. Their universality in this sense makes them models for the kind of communication across epochs and cultures, or simply divergent viewpoints, that discussion of the topic of apocalypse in particular shows to be so great a challenge.

Any representation of a final end permitting a representation of history as a whole is necessarily partial and perpetually open to

completion, whether it explicitly says so or not. Apocalypse in theory consists in reading history into a totalized configuration of an end that reveals a divine purpose for all. In poetic practice, this revelation itself remains infinitely open to interpretation and opens previously inconceivable possibilities for history rather than closing them and ending it. Apocalyptic representation opens towards what can be represented only as inconceivably other than representable. It is only the indeterminacy inherent in representation as such, that is, as a process rather than a product, that can represent—or rather indirectly signify—the end intended by apocalypse. Poetic representations of apocalypse gesture towards an ultimately unrepresentable final revelation precisely by effacing themselves and negating any apparent finality of their own.

The marriage of apocalypse with poetry accentuates the imaginative dimension of this theological concept, or rather non- or supra-concept, and reveals every representation of apocalypse as essentially poetic, a supreme fiction. To say this is not to deny or cast doubt upon its "truth" but to highlight the fact that it points to a kind of disclosure that cannot be contained within any achieved order of representation. Such a truth is displaced to a level having to do not exclusively with what happens within history and the world but rather with the limits of representation of anything such as a world or history at all.[6] Paradoxically, the self-transcending, temporal character of human existence cannot but *represent* itself in images that are totalizing by their very nature and that in their static form ineluctably embody finality. The structural necessity inherent in representation has recently become acutely problematic because in postmodern times the suspicion of all totalizing structures has been elevated to a credo or a "ground belief" in its own right.

Today, accordingly, the remnant or, perhaps, dispossessed heir of prophetic-apocalyptic poetry tends to be a poetry that is purely

[6]Northrop Frye, in his interpretation of the apocalyptic mode, emphasizes that "[w]hat is symbolized as the destruction of the order of nature is the destruction of the way of seeing that order that keeps man confined to the world of time and history as we know them" ("Typology II: Phases of Revelation, Seventh Phase (Apocalypse)," *The Great Code*, 136).

evocative by constantly breaking off before what it does not and cannot say. This has seemed to be the only way to express the "truth" of our historical times. Furthermore, poets have often relinquished all confidence in language to disclose any world or truth and rather pushed language to and even beyond its limits in order to expose its incapacity to express reality (Steiner, *After Babel*). Theoretically searching poets of recent date, in their concern to express the essence of language, typically highlight its incongruity with reality and even its intrinsic nullity. And yet, even this negativity remains an orientation towards an otherness that corresponds at least formally to the unnamable, inexpressible divinity of negative theology. This movement of rejection and denial still belongs to theology more than it is able to escape it.

Poetry becomes the cultivation of an articulate silence about the inexpressible, a dwelling upon its own incapacities and yet a hinting, by negation, at what cannot be expressed because it is beyond the reach of representation. The one avenue of expression that seems capable of being sustained even in this predicament is the discourse of address, as in prayer. Paul Celan, especially considering his sense of the poem as a dialogue with an unattainable, indefinable *you*, emblematically represents this pervasive orientation or disorientation in modern poetics. That the poem indeed speaks and that it "speaks for," "tends towards," and "has need of" an Other, indeed a "wholly Other" ("*dieses 'ganz Anderen'*"), inviting it and us into "the mystery of the encounter," are key theses of Celan's reflections on poetry. Precisely the poem's inability to express and belong to reality, its "loneliness," paradoxically makes it the focus of a secret, mysterious encounter with otherness. For "the poem today," in Celan's view, "shows unmistakably a strong leaning towards becoming silent" ("*. . . das Gedicht heute—zeigt . . . , das ist unverkennbar, eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen*," Celan, "Der MMeridian"). And precisely this dumbing ("*Verstummen*") of language witnesses to the otherness that resists speech.

The implicit negative theology lurking in this linguistic impasse is expressed in formulas describing and addressing No One, who is yet unmistakably spoken of and prayed to in the manner of God, despite

the negation of all identity, in Celan's poem "Psalm," from a 1963 collection titled *Die Niemandsrose* (*The No One's Rose*), a name taken from an expression occurring in this poem:

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen
wir blühn.
Dir
entgegen.

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandsrose.

Mit
dem Griffel seelenhell,
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
der Krone rot
vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen
über, o über
dem Dorn.

(No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing, the
no one's rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.)

The relation to the unnameable No One is a fertile one, as suggested by the image of the flower growing toward and for the sake of no one. And yet it is a fertility drenched with blood and suffering. The flower's soul-bright pistil, its stamen wasted and ravaged by its connection to heaven, its corolla stained by verbal crimson, and the blood sung over the thorn in the final stanza all evoke, in accordance with the conventional symbolic value of the rose, the passion of love, a love transcending nature and even possibly the passion of Christ, with his crown of thorns. For all their anonymity, the prayer and passion here are richly redolent of theological traditions from Genesis to Apocalypse. These traditional motifs and motivations, however, are presented in the poem as being about nothing, or more exactly about no one, no one that can be named. The result is that the impulse to apotheosis articulates itself only in terms of nothing, "*das Nichts*," as again, powerfully, in the litanies of "*Mandorla*": "*In der Mandel—was steht in der Mandel? / Das Nichts. . . . Im Nichts—wer steht da? Der König*" ("In the almond—what dwells in the almond? / Nothing. . . . In Nothing—what dwells there? The King").

The obsessive concern with transcendence via negation is explicitly wedded to eschatological-apocalyptic thematics in Celan's later poetry, in particular in the sequence of "Jerusalem poems" written in connection with his trip to Jerusalem in the fall of 1969, a few

months before his death in 1970 (Reschika). One poem of this series, "Die Pole," is particularly suggestive of the negative theology, that is, the "apophatic" discourse that affirms only by means of denial, which is constantly operative in Celan's poetry. The poles of the title refer to poles within us, the limits of our existence as chartable or representable. They cannot be surmounted except in sleep, when the unconscious escapes from the logic of difference and exclusion into a place of mercy.

DIE POLE
sind in uns,
unübersteigbar
im Wachen,
wir schlafen hinüber, vors Tor
des Erbarmens . . .

(THE POLES
are inside us,
insurmountable
when we're awake,
we sleep across, up to the Gate
of Mercy . . .)

In this no man's land, where the merciless barriers and divisions of representation can be forgiven and suspended, every distinct identity is lost, most importantly that of the you. Yet it is lost into "the you."

ich verliere dich an dich, das
ist mein Schneetrost . . .

(I lose you to you, that
is my snowy comfort . . .)

This may mean that every known and identifiable you is lost into an indeterminate you—what will be snowily figured as "your whiteness." And this, at least, brings some cold consolation. A you that

has lost all identity and thus become seemingly impersonal is, perhaps, after all what is ownmost to each and all. The impossible proper name for us all is "Jerusalem," and the consolation is that this is where the you disappears to when it is lost. The you being lost, it becomes possible to say that Jerusalem is

> *sag, daß Jerusalem ist . . .*
> (say, that Jerusalem *is* . . .)

Being, the "is," the object of naming, is now miraculously given back. After the negations and annihilations in the mode of a negative theology, being is given back, but it comes now from the other, that is, the other name of us all, "Jerusalem." I and you are infinitely other to each other, and they can say Jerusalem each as the other, at least in the subjunctive mood, for the you has become the lost identity of the I and the I the lost identity or indeterminacy of the you, its "whiteness":

> *sags, als wäre ich dieses*
> *dein Weiß,*
> *als wärst du*
> *meins . . .*
> *als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein,*
>
> *ich blättre dich auf, für immer,*
> *du betest, du bettest*
> *uns frei.*
>
> (say it, as though I were this
> your whiteness.
> as though you
> were mine . . .
> as though without us we could be,
>
> I open your leaves, for ever,
> you pray, you bed
> us free.)

This is being without you and I, without us, without identity. It is you and I, but without any determination, "white." It is "your white," but that of a you lost in its own indeterminacy. In the language characteristic of apophatic discourse, it is "we without us" ("*wir ohne uns*"), and this is eternity ("*für immer*") and freedom. We are normally, in time, confined and defined by poles of identity and difference. But here "I" loses itself in the indefinable otherness of the "you," and vice versa. And this is the condition for the unqualified, infinite *is* (*ist*) called "Jerusalem."

Yet this "is" is a kind of being without being, for it must not be anything determinate; it may *only* be said.[7] This is a signifying that cannot be reduced to being but *is* only in being said.[8] But to say it, one really needs other, even improper words, in which being is undone. Without objectifying and reifying you, I open you in the scattering of your identity like leaves, as your prayer frees "us." You "bed" us free—where the mere vocalic slippage between "*betest*" ("pray") and "*bettest*" ("bed," used unusually as a verb) seems to determine the juxtaposition of prayer and intimate proximity in a more profane sense. This perhaps hints that sexual encounter may be a laying down of self-identity in deference to the other that is potentially comparable to what one does in prayer. In any case, it is just such a not-properly-utterable relation of proximity to the other that can annul all independent self-determination of the self. For this first frees the self from itself in opening it at, and even before, its own origin towards the other in order that it *be* in the sense in which Jerusalem is said to be, or better, that it transcend being altogether, be free from and "beyond being," as Emmanuel Levinas would say (Levinas).

Celan gives what may be the most penetrating, albeit also scarcely accessible, rendering of what are in essence among the most widely

[7]Paradoxically, the ineffable, since it is disabled as referencing any object, becomes identified with the absolutely verbal (see Michel de Certeau, *L'absent de l'histoire* and "L'énonciation mystique" 183–215).
[8]Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* is all an argument against reduction of the signifying trace to an antecedent order of being.

diffused motifs of contemporary, theoretically searching poetry. In the wake of Mallarmé, probably the greatest poetic influence on Celan, this necessarily objectless search is still being conducted to further extremes by many of France's distinguished recent poets. Bernard Noël characteristically fishes for the Other in the emptiness of the Open, the O, where there is neither depth nor subject but only the forgetfulness where one fishes ("*il n'y a pas de sujet / pas de profondeur / seulement de l'oubli / où l'on peche*"—"*L'été langue morte,*" Chant un). For Eugène Guillevic the core of poetry consists in its halts and pauses, blank spaces and silence ("*Ce silence parti / A sa propre recherche*"—"Un clou"). And Michel Deguy dwells upon the collapse of language's power of figuration and consequently of the sense of sense (". . . *la perte de créance en la lune figurative. C'est le sens et ca n'a aucun sens*"—*A ce qui n'en finit pas*).

Of this sort of poetry that fights to avoid yielding its own or any meaning, one can say with John Ashbery, "These accents seem their own defense" ("Some Trees"). Only the ineffable is the sub-ject of every poem, though talk about the weather, for example, often serves as nominal subject to cover the deliberate lack of thematic meaning in a poetry that is obstinately about nothing, that is an escaping from all sense and a demotion of the sign to a signal pointing nowhere. In the American context, the office of ministering over the negative theology intrinsic to language in its inherent hollowness is assumed most authoritatively by Wallace Stevens, who in the persona of "The Snow Man," for example, "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the Nothing that is."

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens approaches the Unrepresentable at the source of all that is by perceiving the inventedness of all that we see and represent. If all that we perceive is of our own invention, then any uninvented source even of this very invention must remain unperceived by us. It may be impossible for us even to conceive of something not invented by us. The idea that there should be an unrepresentable source of all world and representation, and of invention itself, Stevens calls "the inconceivable idea of the sun." This is the idea of the sun or source of all as inconceivable, as in effect the God of negative theology:

It Must Be Abstract

I

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

To see the sun clearly in the idea of it is to see that it is invented, that it is but an idea, our idea. That is to say, the sun that we perceive is an idea we have invented. But to understand this is to "perceive" that it cannot be the source and ground of all we do see, what in Western philosophical, specifically Platonic tradition (evoked by the address to "ephebe"), figures as the sun.[9] The same must be said for the source of all that we can conceive, figuratively the intellectual sun, the *idea* of which is also our invention and conception. To see this is to become ignorant again. For the insight into the inventedness of our world, of everything under the sun and even of the sun itself as we see it or conceive it, has revealed that the sun and the very gods *as we know them* are but representations and inventions, and consequently not the true source of being, which remains—and must remain—"inconceivable" to us. Therefore,

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . .

[9]The capital importance of the metaphor of the sun to the whole foundation of metaphysics is discussed by Derrida in "La mythologie blanche."

The death of one god is the death of all,
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Ignorance of the underlying ground of things is secured only by the death of the gods, that is, by the realization of the fictiveness of our representations of this ground. Artful syntax makes it even sound as if "Phoebus" is but a projection or permutation of "ephebe." This enables the realization that the source of being and intelligibility (metaphorically the sun), which is not invented, can only be nameless and unrepresentable. This inconceivable idea must not be comprehended as the invention of any mind, for that would be to ground it again in something representable.

The project of the sun is for it to be without a name. This involves projecting from the visible world and representation beyond into the unnameable and unrepresentable. When all the gods that can be named and represented are exposed, precisely, as representations, and thus "die," it becomes possible again for the Unnameable to be "perceived," and remaining nameless it is preserved in the difficulty of what it is to be—that is, without being reduced to any category or concept that would simplify and render conceivable what is not invented and therefore not commensurate with our concepts, including the category of being.

With all idolatrous representations of God stripped away, the unnameable source of all that is seen and thought, metaphorically the sun, the absolute light in which all is revealed, can once again be "perceived," though it cannot be properly named or conceptualized. When any name for it is seen as just an idea, it is "washed in the

remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images." Seen thus in the cleanliness of its idea, it is perhaps not seen as any positive presence or image but is seen to be necessary as the source for all the ideas and perceptions that bear the taint of having been invented and cannot be the source of themselves. What has been discovered and obliquely illuminated is something anterior to us and our representations, the "first idea," which is not of our own invention. It is embodied by Adam in his createdness, not excogitated by René Descartes through the inventions of self-conscious reflection:

IV

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes
. . . . . .
There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

There is an anteriority to representation and to all speech, to "us" ("The clouds preceded us"), and this is what poetry strives to evoke.

All this suggests why the poem, in general, is essentially about what it does not and cannot say. Yet even in its extremely reductive, postmodern form, the impulse of poetry as apocalypse—to point toward and perhaps to catalyze contact with a radically other power and the possibility of another world or of the world as other—cannot but be descried, even if, in the first instance, only ironically by denial. As in Noël's previously quoted poem ("L'été langue morte," chant un): "we search everywhere for the nowhere of an other earth" ("*nous cherchons partout le nulle part / d'une autre terre*") (17). The idea of an ultimate revelation is obsessively present or else is made only the more conspicuous by absence, in an enormous range of the most widely discussed contemporary poetry. Whether this revelation is of

the fulness of reality or of its emptiness changes the valence but not the structure of apocalyptic disclosure. It is the search, even in all its inherent negativity, for an otherness, in effect an apocalyptic disclosure, that keeps the poetic word from being completely still and renders silence articulate.

Whatever may lie beyond the veil of representation, what is revealed in poetic language is ultimately the re-veiling that is the very nature of representation. Behind all positive apocalyptic imagery lurks always a mystery of the divine, about which it is possible to express only what it is not. This inexpressible divine mystery has been emptied out and, to a large extent, substituted for in modern poetry by the mere form of the negative. The ambiguous negativity of language itself—its being neither simply something nor nothing, by virtue of its representing something else—and the ultimate inexpressibility of any extralinguistic being, as was pointed out first by the Greek sophists,[10] have been explored by poets with more and more intense concentration and have increasingly translated the traditional problematic of negative theology into more and more purely literary terms. In this sort of negative poetics, this version or inversion of negative theology, theological structures undergird language and every possibility of discourse in our culture—in some sense perhaps in human cultures universally, at least so far as we are able to engage them in dialogue.[11]

Prophetic poetry may have become virtually silent today, but this is the inevitable expression of the negative theology of the incomprehensible and inexpressible that must be held together with apocalytic revelation as its secret source, abiding beyond the reach of rhetoric, its other face, the dark side of its luminous truth. This is the sort of insight that can be gleaned from assiduously frequenting poets particularly of the prophetic bent. Hence, according to Harold Bloom, the only sort of authority that survives the ravages of modernity is that of

[10]Gorgias, in his encomium of Helen, maintained that language can express nothing but itself.

[11]This sort of thesis has been defended in some sweeping ways by George Steiner, *Real Presences*.

negative theology and its analogues in literature.[12] This is not apocalypse in the form of affirmations about who will be damned, but rather the revelation that the radical otherness and the negativity of unrepresentability always underlie representations at any level. This primal negative moment of apocalypse may be appropriately expressed by affirmations of disaster, although in this case the latter are but a necessary metaphor for a negativity not otherwise perceptible or expressible. Thus Maurice Blanchot emphasizes how the disaster is refractory to every discourse. Blanchot affirms "*le dés-astre*" rather as what is outside everything representable or thinkable, as "the intense, silent, and disastrous affirmation of the outside" ("*l'affirmation intense, silencieuse et désastreuse du dehors*") (14).

Given these barriers to representation, all positive apocalyptic expressions must be taken as metaphors for what they cannot adequately express. Thus metaphor, taken as the core of poetic language and perhaps of language per se, as intrinsically negative, a disclaimer of what it predicates, has itself been understood in recent theory in terms of a negative theology, according to which no language about God can say what it means except by means of analogy. This results in theories of metaphor in general as expressing the inconceivable, that which necessarily escapes concepts (Blumenberg 75–93). Such a view constitutes the reprise in literary criticism of an ancient theological tradition stemming from Parmenides and Plato and reaching maximum peaks in Plotinus, John Chrisostom, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scott Eriugena, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Nicolaus Cusanus, and Silesius Angelus, not to mention eminent representatives, such as Moses Maimonides, in non-Christian traditions and the even more conspicuously and integrally negative-theological premises of Eastern, particularly Buddhist thought. The "apophatic" thought of modern

[12]Bloom also brings out the enormous importance of Kafka and Beckett for the adaptation of negative theology to literature (*Ruin the Sacred Truths*). Indeed Kafka's major fictions hover around the constantly withheld final revelation from the castle or the tribunal. On this question of the negative essence of literature, see the contributions of Derrida and Kermode in Budick and Iser, eds. *Languages of the Unsayable*.

times, eminently that of Wittgenstein and of Heidegger, each in its way so obsessed with the limits of language and with the mysteriously calling silence beyond this threshold, that is, with the Inexpressible ("*Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches*"—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.522), continues in this broad tradition (Heidegger, "Die Sprache," *Unterwegs zur Sprache* and *Nietzsche* 2: 484; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraphs 119, 19, 109).

Envisioning an end to the game of the present in all spheres of social and political life, with its embittered alignments and its entrenched impasses, as insidiously difficult as that may be for us to "do" (as Beckett's *Endgame* so wittily insinuates), enables us to envisage and so also to begin to enact new possibilities. And yet, apocalypse, as the advent ending, is nothing that we can *do*, though we can be aware of and perhaps cooperate with its happening to us. Indeed, from a certain point of view, this is already what our tradition itself is all about. Apocalyptic, as the ultimate expression of transcendent, metaphysical vision in poetry, rather than being taken as an aberration symptomatic of a pathology of Western civilization that could be cured, should be accepted as part of the whole and as standing for the possibility of renewal inherent within a tradition from which new and different proposals unceasingly draw their inspiration. All representations and imaginings have their limits; apocalyptic poetry thematizes this inherent destiny for every order of imagination to have its end and give place to a new, thitherto unimaginable order. Every imagination of the end in apocalyptic style is the occasion for new orientations towards the open space we call the future. This future, however, is not for us to name, in the end, since it is beholden to the Other, and this may mean—and has meant, in the terms that a certain tradition, embracing Dante, Celan, and Stevens has forged—to an apocalypse, to the revelation of an "eternity" that surpasses us.

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