

9 Wittgenstein's Apocalyptic Subjectivity

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Abstract: This chapter moves through three clear stages. First, the initial sections highlight some of the ways that Wittgenstein has been misread by thinkers working in the tradition of continental philosophy and critical theory (including Badiou, Deleuze, and Marcuse); and, exposing some of these misreadings, it makes the case for grasping Wittgenstein not simply a modernist philosopher, but, more specifically, as an exponent of (what the chapter terms) *philosophical modernism*. Second, the chapter tarries with a number of Wittgenstein's controversial remarks on the atomic bomb and (what he calls) the "apocalyptic view of the world," and it brings these remarks into dialogue with the work of a number of other literary and philosophical figures, including Gertrude Stein, Günther Anders, and Theodor Adorno. Third, and finally, although Wittgenstein's remarks on apocalypse appear in his private, postwar notebooks, they nevertheless provide us with a crucial link to his later philosophy, specifically *Philosophical Investigations* and this is what I turn to in the last sections of the chapter. In the *Investigations*, it is not simply the language of the book that we might describe as apocalyptic, but also, and more importantly, the fundamental conception of philosophy that we find therein. This returns us to the view of philosophical modernism previously outlined.

Keywords: Apocalyptic Writing, Critical Theory, Ethics, Misreading, Modernism, Subjectivity, Gertrude Stein, Günther Anders, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou.

I.

Let us begin with a series of questions which continue to preoccupy Wittgenstein scholarship. How are we to conceive of Wittgenstein's relation to modernism? Is modernism an *internal* component of Wittgenstein's philosophical practice, or is it an *external* tradition

to which his philosophy in some way relates? What exactly is it that we mean when we speak of Wittgenstein as a modernist figure?

According to Terry Eagleton in a now famous series of remarks: "Frege is a philosopher's philosopher, Bertrand Russell every shopkeeper's image of the sage, and Sartre the media's idea of an intellectual. But Wittgenstein is the philosopher of poets, playwrights, novelists, and composers."¹ For Eagleton, the *Tractatus* belongs to the great wave of early twentieth-century European modernism; and therefore the true coordinates of the text are not Frege or Russell, but rather Joyce, Schoenberg, and Picasso – what Eagleton calls "all those self-ironizing modernists who sought in their own fashion to represent and point to their representing at a stroke."²

This view of Wittgenstein's modernism – one which conceives of the relation in essentially *aesthetic* terms – is now very much what I want to call *the standard view*. To the extent that Wittgenstein is thought of as a modernist at all, then it is, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, because his "way of tackling philosophical problems is best called *aesthetic*": aesthetic in its creative use of "exempla, apposite images, parataxis, and sudden leaps of faith."³ To adapt a remark from Stanley Cavell's 1971 study *The World Viewed*, we might thus say that what makes Wittgenstein a modernist is that his "philosophy exists in the condition of art."⁴

And of course, all of this, in one respect, is true – absolutely and vitally true. No understanding of either the *Tractatus* or the *Investigations* can proceed without taking seriously the literary and aesthetic dimensions of the works. As early as the wartime *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein describes his problem as one of finding the right form of expression for his thoughts. "My difficulty," he remarks in 1915, is only "an enormous difficulty of expression." In a later letter to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein famously writes (about his "Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung") that "the work is strictly philosophical and at the same

¹ Terry Eagleton, "Introduction to Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script / The Derek Jarman Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), 5.

² Terry Eagleton, "My Wittgenstein," in *The Eagleton Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 336.

³ Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15.

⁴ See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 14.

time literary: but there's no gassing in it."⁵ The literary dimensions of the *Tractatus* are also emphasized by Frege:

The pleasure of reading your book can ... in no way arise through the ... content, but ... only through the form, in which is revealed something of the individuality of the author. [The book] thereby becomes an artistic rather than a scientific achievement; that which is said ... takes a back seat to how it is said.⁶

Frege's comments are now well known; but it will be useful here to briefly pause and compare his insightful, though ultimately unsympathetic, remarks on the artistic elements of the *Tractatus* with those of a number of more recent European philosophers and theoreticians – figures who one might expect to be much more open and sympathetic to the literary and aesthetic dimensions of Wittgenstein's work.

II.

In a series of interviews conducted in 1989, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze is asked for his thoughts on Wittgenstein. Initially reluctant to engage the topic, Deleuze finally opens up to his interlocutor Claire Parnet:

For me [Wittgenstein] is a philosophical catastrophe. ... [His work marks] a regression of all philosophy, a massive regression. The Wittgenstein matter is very, very sad. They [the Wittgensteinians] impose a system of terror ... under the pretext of doing something new. It is poverty instituted as grandeur. ...

There isn't a word to describe this danger. It seems, especially since all Wittgensteinians are mean and destructive, if they win there could be an assassination of philosophy. They are philosophical assassins.⁷

What is perhaps most striking about Deleuze's remarks, is not simply their dismissive (even contemptuous) tone, but the fact that they come from a philosopher who is elsewhere utterly committed to the "mobile

⁵ Letter: Ludwig Wittgenstein to Ludwig von Ficker (October, 1919), cited in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus*, ed. B. F. McGuinness, T. Nyberg, and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 14, n. 2.

⁶ Letter: Gottlob Frege to Ludwig Wittgenstein (September 16, 1919), in *Loneliness* (Boston University Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, 19), ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 91.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze *From A to Z*, Dir. Pierre-André Boutang, trans. Charles J. Stivale (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents, 2012). The film comprises a series of interviews with Deleuze, in which each letter of the alphabet evokes a word: From A ("Animal") to Z ("Zigzag"). The letter W, for Deleuze, evokes "Wittgenstein."

relations" between philosophy and literature; to what he calls "the smooth space" which allows for philosophy-becoming-literature and literature- and art-becoming-philosophy.⁸ In their 1991 text *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari, refer to figures such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as "hybrid geniuses" who "use all the resources of their "athleticism" to install themselves within [a space of] difference, like acrobats torn apart in a perpetual show of strength."⁹ Wittgenstein, however, surely *the* great inheritor of Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean philosophical acrobatics in the twentieth century, is completely absent from the Deleuze–Guattari picture.

In many respects, Deleuze's interview comments reprise a view of Wittgenstein's philosophy put forward, several decades earlier, by members of the Frankfurt School. Theodor Adorno, for example, in his *Hegel: Three Studies*, cites the final proposition of the *Tractatus* – "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (7) – and takes it, reductively, as an example of "extreme positivism" which, in his words, "spills over" into a "gesture of reverent authoritarian authenticity."¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse's 1964 study *One Dimensional Man*, moves in a similar direction. According to Marcuse, Wittgenstein's later work "militates against intellectual non-conformity", "reaffirms the prevailing universe of discourse and behaviour", and, in its demand for absolute clarity, functions like the philosophical equivalent of a Stalinist politburo:

The intellectual is called on the carpet. What do you mean when you say...? Don't you conceal something? You talk a language which is suspect. You don't talk like the rest of us, like the man in the street, but rather like a foreigner who does not belong here. We have to cut you down to size, expose your tricks, purge you.¹¹

There is, of course, no mention here of Wittgenstein's own émigré ("foreigner") status and a life spent not "belonging"; no mention of the fact that his philosophy issues no decrees, but, much like Marcuse's own,

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), xvi; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Treatise on Nomadology War Machine," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 351–423.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), 67.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 101.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1991), 196.

is thoroughly committed to a liberatory battle against the bewitchment of the intellect; no mention of the fact that rather than a bureaucratic leveling of language and discourse, what Wittgenstein *actually* calls for – explicitly at one point, and elsewhere implicitly – is for philosophy to be written *only* as a kind of poetic or creative composition: “I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought to be written only as a poetic composition” (CV 1980, 24). As he puts it again, several years later: “If, rather than the more correct way of thinking, I want to teach a new movement of thought, my purpose is a ‘re-evaluation of values’ and [with this] I come to Nietzsche as well as to the opinion that the philosopher should be a poet.”¹²

It would thus seem that Wittgenstein is not entirely misguided in his pessimistic prediction that his work would not be understood. Writing in the Preface to the *Investigations*, he remarks that although his work *might* “bring light” into one brain or another, this is not very likely. “My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age,” he comments to a friend, echoing Nietzsche: “I have to swim so strongly against the tide. Perhaps in a hundred years people will really want what I am writing.”¹³

III.

The only recent continental philosopher to pay any real attention to the literary and aesthetic dimensions of Wittgenstein’s writing has been Alain Badiou. Taking his cue from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Badiou reads Wittgenstein as a prototypical “antiphilosopher”: a figure who, in the tradition of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Lacan himself, exposes the “dishonesty” of conventional modes of philosophizing, acting, in Badiou’s words, as an “awakener” of his audience.¹⁴ Badiou highlights the early Wittgenstein’s “art of writing,” his “abstract literary audacity”; and he suggests that the text to which the *Tractatus* should be

¹² Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* (23 March, 1938) item 120, 145r. This remark is translated by Wolfgang Huemer and quoted by David Schalkwyk in his essay “Wittgenstein’s ‘Imperfect Garden’: The Ladders and Labyrinths of Philosophy as Dichtung,” in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), 73, fn. 7.

¹³ M. O’C. Drury, “Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 94.

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein’s Antiphilosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2011), 49, 67.

compared is Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. According to Badiou:

The affirmative and hierarchical unfolding of propositions, the metaphorical tension combined with a mathematising rigour, the latent irony of the figures, the absolute self-sufficiency and yet the reference to an "overcoming" of the Book: all these features bring together the two projects.¹⁵

While Badiou is certainly correct to highlight what we might call the "Mallarméan side" of Wittgenstein – the side of him concerned with syntax, precision, and structure – there are nevertheless two key problems with his overall account. First, like Eagleton and Perloff, Badiou conceives of Wittgenstein's modernism primarily in aesthetic terms: his antiphilosophical *act* is, Badiou's says, "archi-aesthetic" (or "chiefly aesthetic"). In this respect, his approach to Wittgenstein's modernism is very much in line with what I'm calling the standard approach. Second, there is a problem with Badiou's notion of antiphilosophy: a concept which does not simply refer to philosophy which is divested of its theoretical pretensions, but one which, in the context of his account of Wittgenstein, crucially entails an ineffabilist dimension:

The antiphilosophical act consists in letting what there is show itself, insofar as "what there is" is precisely that which no proposition can say. If Wittgenstein's antiphilosophical act can legitimately be declared archi-aesthetic, it is because this "letting be" has the non-propositional form of pure showing. . . . It is thus a question of firmly establishing the laws of the sayable (of the thinkable), in order for the unsayable (the unthinkable, which is ultimately given only in art) to be *situated* as the "upper limit" of the sayable itself.¹⁶

The problem here is that while Badiou praises Wittgenstein's break with traditional, theory-producing modes of philosophy, the aspect of his work that he deems *most significant* is his so-called "theory of saying and showing." "Antiphilosophy," as Badiou puts it, paraphrasing *Tractatus* 4.14, "must set limits to what can be thought; and, in so doing, to what cannot be thought."¹⁷ On its own terms, then, Badiou's notion of antiphilosophy, when applied to the early Wittgenstein, would appear to be at best contradictory: it rehearses the standard, doctrinal reading of the *Tractatus*, while simultaneously claiming that the book does not advance doctrines and theories and is instead committed solely to the idea of philosophy *as an act*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷ Ibid.

IV.

Where, then, might we turn for an understanding of Wittgenstein's relation to modernism – one which avoids conceiving of the matter in exclusively aesthetic terms (the standard approach), and one which, at the same time, sidesteps the pitfalls of Badiou's notion of modernist antiphilosophy? Here I'd like to suggest that understanding Wittgenstein as a modernist figure requires us, first of all, to begin with a different understanding of modernism itself: one which treats it not (or not *chiefly*) as an aesthetic category, nor indeed as a chronological one, but rather as a *philosophical concept*.

One twentieth-century thinker who makes an explicit case for modernism as having its conceptual roots firmly planted in philosophy is the art critic Clement Greenberg. At the beginning of his 1959 essay "Modernist Painting," Greenberg makes the following claim: "Western civilization is not the first civilization to turn around and question its own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify modernism with the intensification, almost exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means of criticism itself, I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist."¹⁸ Applying this assessment to art, Greenberg continues: "The essence of modernist art lies ... in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."¹⁹ For Greenberg, the essence of modernism therefore lies in the activity of radical self-criticism and the movement toward absolute self-referential autonomy. Within the domain of art, this involves the elimination of anything extrinsic to the medium of art itself; for example, freedom from sculptural properties like tactility and literary ones like narrative. As Greenberg points out: successful modernist art draws attention to the materiality of the paint, the shape and size of the canvas, and, most importantly, the "ineluctable flatness"²⁰ of the picture's surface.

Whilst all of this sounds rather radical, it is in fact undergirded by a kind of historical gradualism and by a commitment to the past of art as *the* standard of artistic quality. Greenberg resists explicitly and

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting,' in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

repeatedly the idea that modernism operates as a site of break, rupture, or negation. Indeed, as he puts it:

Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time [i.e., modernist art] than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is – among other things – continuity, and is unthinkable without it. Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, modernist art would lack both substance and justification.²¹

One could of course say a great deal more about this idea of modernism as inheriting and continuing the past – not least because it becomes a key component in Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell's thinking about modernism. Suffice to say here, however, that it's *against* this idea of modernism (at least in part) that I wish to articulate my own view of *philosophical modernism*: a view which comprises three intimately connected strands – (i) the temporal, (ii) the methodological, and (iii) the formal. These three strands can be elucidated as follows.

(i) Temporal Strand

Philosophical modernism is characterized by an affirmation of the *new* and a *conscious awareness* of one's own philosophical enterprise *as new*. It makes its claim on the present through a rejection of the old – understood as past forms, past ideas, past ways of seeing – in the name of a commitment to a philosophically, aesthetically, ethically, or politically transformed future. This emphasis upon the new is, however, far from unproblematic: (i) it seems to preserve a secret tie to be past, being dependent upon that which it seeks to overturn; and (ii) to the extent that the new is *endlessly* announced, it cannot avoid succumbing to the logic of *the same*. Nevertheless, it is still the new upon which philosophical modernism insists.

Example i:

I myself still find my way of philosophizing new, & it keeps striking me so afresh, & that is why I have to repeat myself so often. It will have become part of the flesh & blood of a new generation. (CV 1998, 3)

(ii) Methodological Strand

Philosophical modernism finds its truth not in the production of philosophical doctrines and theses, but rather in and through the activity of *negation*. While such negation can take numerous forms it is always, in

²¹ Ibid., 93.

my view, closely connected to what Walter Benjamin calls “the destructive character.” According to Benjamin, “the destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. . . . Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined means. . . . What exists is reduced to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.”²² Here, then, negation is not to be equated with *unqualified destructiveness*; rather, destruction is always invested with a positive, transformative force.

Example ii:

Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only houses of cards, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood. (PI §118)

(iii) Formal Strand

Philosophical modernism strives to find new *forms* for the expression of philosophical thought – an activity which requires opening up a space *outside* the discursive universe of traditional philosophy. In this respect, philosophical modernism places particular emphasis not just on what is said, but on *how* it is said and the *impact* of what is said on the reader. The reader’s emotional and affective engagement with the text is thus, we might say, already anticipated by the text itself. The aim of philosophical modernism – as a specific kind of writing – is not (or not chiefly) to bring the reader to new forms of knowledge, but rather to bring them to see that, in Rilke’s phrase, they “must change their life.” In this respect, formal experimentation and ingenuity is closely tied to ethics.

Example iii:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as [nonsense], when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. (TLP 6.54)

²² Walter Benjamin, ‘The Destructive Character,’ in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 541–542.

In what follows, I want to suggest one way in which Wittgenstein can be grasped as a *philosophical modernist* in the way just outlined. Focusing specifically on the second, methodological strand – which I associate with negation and Benjamin's "destructive character" – I will argue that Wittgenstein's later work can be understood as *apocalyptic*, not simply in tone, but also, and more importantly, in terms of its *philosophical method*. This method can be viewed under a changed aspect once it is considered in light of a number of cultural and political remarks which Wittgenstein makes in his private notebooks of the 1930s and 1940s.

V.

Modernism as a philosophical project is, we might say, apocalyptic through and through. One only need consider the vast number of things that it pronounces dead and buried: God, man, meaning, metaphysics, the subject, history, nature, art, and, of course, philosophy itself. Regarding philosophy's preoccupation with its *own* end, Badiou remarks that

the great declarations concerning the death of philosophy in general, and of metaphysics in particular, are most probably a rhetorical means of introducing a new way, or a new goal, into philosophy itself. The best means of saying: I am a new philosopher, is probably to say: philosophy is finished, philosophy is dead. . . . So there is a possibility that the development of philosophy must always be in the form of resurrection. The old philosophy, like the old man, is dead, but this death is in fact the birth of the new man, the new philosopher.²³

Announcing the end of philosophy is thus a means of clearing the ground, of allowing a new mode of thought – or a new *style of thought* – to emerge (out of the ruins of the old). However, because the theme of the end *continues* to play out, it comes to figure (to use a phrase from Freud) as a kind of *repetition compulsion*. But this compulsion to repeat also turns out to be a vital source of modernist philosophy's creative drive: the theme of the end is what returns, but the variations on this theme are themselves endless. To give just three examples: Hegel's understanding of his own thought as bringing the history of philosophy to an end;²⁴ Wittgenstein's belief that the *Tractatus* had finally "solved"

²³ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), 6.

²⁴ See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E. S. Haldane and Francis H. Simon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), III, 551–552. "The strife of the finite self-consciousness with the absolute self-consciousness, which

“the problems of philosophy,” finding them to consist in a “misunderstanding of the logic of our language” (TLP 27); and Heidegger’s view that (i) philosophy is metaphysics, (ii) the end of philosophy means the completion of metaphysics, and (iii) “the development of philosophy into the independent sciences . . . is the legitimate completion of philosophy.”²⁵

Philosophical modernism is not, however, only concerned with the end(s) of philosophy, but also with *the end as such*. Thought is, we might say, both haunted and fascinated by the possibility of extinction, wipe-out and, ultimately, its own negation. But here, once again, repetition yields difference. In his late essay “The End of All Things” (1794), Kant argues that the notion of an absolute end – the end as *total discontinuity* – is both horrifying and attractive: “frighteningly sublime”, as he puts it (8:327).²⁶ While such an end cannot, strictly speaking, be thought (it implies “an end of all time,” which is something about which we are “obviously able to form no concept”), it is certainly not meaningless; indeed, it is “woven in a wondrous way into universal human reason.” The moral perfection which our rational natures must aspire to cannot be realized within time, marked as it is by a constant alteration of one’s (moral and physical) state (8:335). This leads to the idea of a *final end*, which (at the same time) is the beginning of a duration in which beings as *supersensible* no longer stand under conditions of time and in which their ultimate moral end can thus be attained (8:327/8:335). The idea of a *final end*, then, is what gives worth to the world of rational beings; without it, as Kant writes, “creation itself appears purposeless . . . like a play having no resolution and affording no cognition of any rational aim” (8:331).

Moving forward almost a century, we encounter an extinction fable placed at the very beginning of Nietzsche’s oeuvre, in his 1873 essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* [On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense]. The fable reads as follows:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which

last seemed to the other to lie outside of itself, *now comes to an end*. . . . Now, indeed, [the history of philosophy] seems to have reached its goal. . . . At this point I bring this history of Philosophy to a close.”

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The End of Thinking and the Task of Philosophy,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 432–434.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 221. All referencing in the body of the text follows the standard conventions for citing Kant’s works.

clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. – One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.²⁷

While Kant invites us to entertain an apocalyptic thought experiment in order to arrive at a moral sense of the world, here Nietzsche presents us with a much more disquieting picture of the end: from the emergence of human existence through to its final extinction "nothing will have happened." But perhaps it is possible to move beyond a purely nihilistic reading of this fable and to see it as a kind of provocation, a call to further thought. Faced with the prospect of a final end – an extinction without revelation – how should we assess our egological obsession with "knowing"? In what direction has the "knowledge-drive" taken us and with what consequences? Perhaps we can read the fable as a reminder that, given the inevitability of our species extinction, a transvaluation of our economic, ecological, and political values – the creation of new *passions for life* – is now more urgent than ever before.

VI.

Throughout his notebooks of the 1930s and 1940s, Wittgenstein makes numerous remarks which, in different ways, evoke the sense of an ending. In 1931, for example, when thinking about his work in philosophy, he says to himself: "I destroy, I destroy, I destroy" (CV 1980, 21). In the same year, he comments that "[i]f my name lives on then only as the *Terminus ad quem* of great occidental philosophy. Somewhat like the name of the one who burnt down the library of Alexandria."²⁸ In the *Big Typescript*, he comments that "*all that philosophy can do is to destroy idols ... [a]nd that means not creating a new one*"; and, moreover, that philosophy itself, at least in part, consists in destroying "certain prejudices that are based on our particular way of looking at things."²⁹

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (New York: Humanity Books, 1979), 79.

²⁸ *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 73.

²⁹ *The Big Typescript*, TS. 213 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publications, 2005), 413.

In 1946, however, Wittgenstein makes an altogether more startling claim: one that is, seemingly, less a comment on his own philosophical practice and more a piece of social, political, and cultural critique

The hysterical fear of the atom bomb the public now has, or at least expresses, is almost a sign that here for once a really salutary discovery has been made. At least the fear gives the impression of being fear in the face of a really effective bitter medicine. I cannot rid myself of the thought: if there were not something good here, the philistines would not be making an outcry. But perhaps this too is a childish idea. For all I can mean really is that the bomb creates the prospect of the end, the destruction of a ghastly evil, of disgusting soapy water science and certainly that is not an unpleasant thought; but who is to say what would come after such a destruction? The people now making speeches against the production of the bomb are undoubtedly the dregs of the intelligentsia, but even that does not prove beyond question that what they abominate is to be welcomed. (CV 1980, 48–49)

What then should we make of these remarks, written almost exactly one year after the bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – events which left between 129,000 and 226,000 people dead, many of them civilians? We might begin by placing Wittgenstein's comments alongside other modernist responses to the bomb, notably Gertrude Stein's fragment "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb," also written in 1946:

They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it.

... I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldn't any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.³⁰

If Stein is radically *uninterested* in the bomb (a striking example, perhaps, of modernist boredom, intellectual coldness, and subjective withdrawal), then Wittgenstein appears deeply *invested* in it; and for what would seem

³⁰ Gertrude Stein, "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), *Yale Poetry Review* (1947), [<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-atom-bomb.html>] (accessed April 4, 2020).]

to be two connected reasons. First, the bomb offers the prospect of an “end” and, specifically, the termination of what he calls “soapy water” scientism; and second, the bomb might be thought of as a welcome invention *precisely because* those opposing it (including the likes of Russell and Einstein) are, in Wittgenstein’s words, “philistines,” the “dregs of the intelligentsia.” While Wittgenstein is quick to acknowledge that the latter is perhaps a “childish idea” (he is simply welcoming what his intellectual opponents are against), his general remarks about the bomb need to be understood in relation to a number of other statements that he makes during the same period. The following remark from 1947 is here especially important:

The truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do not repeat themselves. It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific & technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge & that humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means clear that this is not how things are. (CV 1998, 64)

This passage, I would suggest, needs to be read dialectically. The truly apocalyptic view is one which sees humanity marching directly toward its end; but this end emerges *only* as a possibility once the belief in *total and uninterrupted scientific progress* comes to hold sway. Put another way: the apocalyptic threat arises as the direct consequence of a certain kind of *apocalyptic blindness* (“bedazzlement”), itself a product of the technological-scientific worldview. Humankind has fallen into a trap, mistaking technological progress for human progress and failing to see the reality of the apocalyptic danger that it itself has created. On this point, Wittgenstein comes strikingly close to the view put forward by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the opening pages of: “The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”³¹

Taken together Wittgenstein’s two remarks thus present a distinctly apocalyptic outlook: (i) we are faced with the prospect of an end (“the bomb”); but (ii) this end also reveals or unveils (*apo*, “away” + *kalupto*, “cover”) an important truth about reality: what appears at first blush as human “progress” (technological-scientific advancement), turns out in fact to be the very motor of world annihilation. Consequently, it might be necessary, as Wittgenstein suggests, for the end of a world – the world

³¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 3.

of frenzied technoscience – in order to prevent an even more catastrophic end – the total destruction of our existing forms of (ecological, human, and non-human) life.³²

VII.

It will be useful here to bring Wittgenstein's thoughts into dialogue with those of the German-Jewish philosopher Günther Anders. A contemporary of Marcuse, Hans Jonas, and Hannah Arendt (to whom he was married from 1929 to 1937), Anders devoted much of his work in 1950s and early 1960s to exploring the relation between technology and catastrophe, especially the threat of nuclear annihilation. Writing in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Anders argues that we have become "inverted Utopians": "while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualise, we are unable to visualise what we are actually producing."³³ This Promethean gap – our capacity to produce as opposed to our power to imagine – defines the moral situation facing us today.³⁴ Our society is, according to Anders, a society of machines and technological devices; and it through these that the great "dream of omnipotence has at long last come true."³⁵ This dream, however, turns out to be the very nightmare from which we cannot awake, precisely because "we are [now] in a position to inflict *absolute destruction* on each other."³⁶ With these new "apocalyptic powers," we enter what Anders calls "The Last Age":

On August 6, 1945, the day of Hiroshima, a New Age began: the age in which at any given moment we have the power to transform any given place on our planet, and even our planet itself, into a Hiroshima. On that day we became, at least "modo negativo," omnipotent; but since, on the other hand, we can be wiped out at any given moment, we also became totally impotent. However long this age may last, even if it should last forever, it is "The Last Age": for there is no

³² For a reading of Wittgenstein's later work in relation to ideas of utopia and alternate futures, see Ben Ware, "Right in Front of Our Eyes: Aspect Perception, Ethics and the Utopian Imagination in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*," in *Living Wrong Life Rightly: Modernism, Ethics and the Political Imagination* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 7–36.

³³ Günther Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," *The Massachusetts Review* 3 (2): 493–505 (Spring, 1962); 496.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Günther Anders, "Reflections on the H Bomb," *Dissent* 3 (2): 146–155 (Spring, 1956); 146.

³⁶ *Ibid.* (added emphasis)

possibility that it's "differentia specifica," the possibility of our self-extinction, can ever end – but by the end itself. . . .

Thus the basic moral question of former times must be radically reformulated: instead of asking "How should we live?," we now must ask "Will we live?"³⁷

Surviving the threat of extinction will entail, at least in part, expanding our capacity for fear and anxiety and cultivating a *renewed sense of the apocalyptic*. As Anders puts it: "Our imperative: 'Expand the capacity of your imagination,' means, in concreto: 'Increase your capacity of fear.' Therefore: don't fear fear, have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbour as yourself. This fear, of course, must be of a special kind: 1) a fearless fear, since it excludes fearing those who might drive us towards cowardice; 2) a stirring fear, since it should drive us into the streets instead of under cover; 3) a loving fear, not fear of the danger ahead but fear for the generations to come."³⁸ We thus need to become *enlightened doomsayers*.³⁹ Anders distills this doomsaying message into a wonderful short parable which retells the biblical story of Noah:

One day, he [Noah] clothed himself in sackcloth and covered his head with ashes. Only a man who was mourning [the death of] a beloved child or his wife was allowed to do this. Clothed in the garb of truth, bearer of sorrow, he went back to the city, resolved to turn the curiosity, spitefulness, and superstition of its inhabitants to his advantage. Soon he had gathered around him a small curious crowd, and questions began to be asked. He was asked if someone had died and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: "Tomorrow." Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew himself up to his full height and said these words: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been. And when the flood will have been, everything that is will never have existed. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. *If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time, to mourn tomorrow's dead today.* The day after tomorrow it will be too late." With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to

³⁷ Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," 493. ³⁸ Ibid., 498.

³⁹ The phrase is from Jean-Pierre Dupuy, one of Anders's most sophisticated readers. See, for example, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "The Precautionary Principle and Enlightened Domsaying: Rational Choice before the Apocalypse," *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 1 (1): 1–13 (October 5, 2009).

his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false." Later a roofer joined them, saying: "It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false."⁴⁰

For Anders's Noah, then, the catastrophe is at once both, the catastrophe is at once both *necessary*, fated to occur, and a *contingent accident*, one that need not happen. The way out of this paradox, based on a new understanding of the relation between future and past, requires us to act *as if* the catastrophe has already happened – or is fated to happen – in order to prevent it from becoming true. By acting *as if* the catastrophe has already taken place, we are able to project ourselves into the postapocalyptic situation and ask ourselves what we could and should have done otherwise.⁴¹ "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false."

There is an important distinction to be drawn here between Anders and Wittgenstein, as well as a crucial point of connection. In Anders's case, the prophecy of catastrophe is made in order to prevent it from becoming true: whilst we are living in the "Time of the End," we must "do everything in our power to make The End Time *endless*," to prevent it from becoming "The End of Time." His position is thus apocalyptic (since it believes in the possibility of The End of Time), but also *anti*-apocalyptic (in the sense that it fights against man-made apocalypse).⁴² Wittgenstein, by contrast, would seem (at least in his notebooks) to believe that (i) the catastrophe is already in train ("the scientific and technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity") and (ii) it is only "the *prospect*" of a final end that allows us to imagine a future beyond the "infinite misery" of capitalist "progress" in which "peace is the last thing that will . . . find a home" (CV 1994, 72). It is therefore the threat of extinction itself which promises to reconnect us with our basic humanity; and it is here that the key connection with Anders becomes clear. Both philosophers are conscious of themselves as writing in *a moment of danger*; and both, in different ways, encourage "an alteration in the mode of life of human beings"⁴³ – one grounded in a certain kind of ethical-imaginative leap. While their work is directed towards the realization of a more humane

⁴⁰ Cited in Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 203.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 204. See also, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), chapter 1. For a critique of Dupuy's theory of "enlightened catastrophism," see Ben Ware, Nothing but the End to Come: "Extinction Fragments," *e-flux journal* (September, 2020).

⁴² Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," 494. ⁴³ The phrase is from RFM.

world – a world that fully accords with human needs and potentials – it would nevertheless be correct to say that both are *pessimists*, albeit of a distinctly dialectical type.⁴⁴ As Anders writes: “If some, paralyzed by the gloomy likelihood of the catastrophe, have already lost courage, they still have a chance to prove their love of man by heeding the cynical maxim: ‘Let’s go on working as though we had the right to hope. Our despair is none of our business.’”⁴⁵ Wittgenstein, similarly, in a telling encounter with his friend Rush Rhees, appears to endorse *tragic hope* in the face of pseudoscientific optimism:

Walking home ... Wittgenstein remarked that when someone said he was optimistic *because* the law of historical development showed that things were bound to get better, this was nothing he could admire. On the other hand, if someone says: “By the look of them, things are getting worse, and I can find no evidence to suggest that they will improve. And yet in spite of this, I believe things will get better!” – I can admire that.⁴⁶

VIII.

Although Wittgenstein’s remarks on apocalypse appear in his private notebooks, they nevertheless provide us with a crucial link to his later philosophy. The epigraph of the *Investigations*, drawn from Nestroy, warns readers that “progress ... always looks much greater than it really is”; while the book’s Preface speaks of “the darkness of this time” – a reference, no doubt, to the catastrophic period, 1936–1945, during which the book was composed. In the body of the *Investigations*, we hear of machines “bending, breaking off [and] melting” (PI §193); exploding boilers (466); and people who see “the cross piece of a window as a swastika” (420). But it is not simply the language of the book that we might describe as apocalyptic, but also, and more importantly, the fundamental conception of philosophy that we find therein. This is expressed very clearly in the metaphilosophical remarks at §§89–133. Here Wittgenstein carries out a kind of apocalyptic-anti-apocalyptic

⁴⁴ For an exploration of the idea of dialectical pessimism, see Ben Ware, “Excremental Happiness: From Neurotic Hedonism to Dialectical Pessimism,” *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 45 (2): 198–221 (2018).

⁴⁵ Anders, “Theses for the Atomic Age,” 505.

⁴⁶ *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 201–202.

move: he strives to bring to an end not philosophy as such, but rather philosophy as a *discourse of the end*⁴⁷ – that is, philosophy which takes as its goal “crystalline purity” (107), “perfect order” (98), “complete exactness” (91); philosophy which serves to prescribe and insist that “this is how things *must* be”:

We want to say that there can’t be any vagueness in logic. The idea now absorbs us that the ideal “must” occur in reality. . . .

The ideal, as we conceive of it, is unshakable. You can’t step outside it. . . .

When we believe that we have to find that order, the ideal, in our actual language, we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called “sentences,” “words,” “signs.” The sentence and the word that logic deals with are supposed to be something pure and clear-cut. And now we rack our brains over the nature of the *real* sign. . . .

The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had discovered: it was a requirement.) (PI §§101, 103, 105, 107)

Where then does this striving after the ideal of perfect order and crystalline purity come from? It would seem to be a perfect example of an issue which Wittgenstein highlights in the *Blue Book*: “Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness” (BB 18). Being held captive by a picture of the “the ideal” is, Wittgenstein says, akin to having “a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (103). But perhaps the answer is not the *removal* of the glasses absolutely (there can, after all, be no pure and unmediated act of seeing), but rather a radical *perspectival shift*: one that allows us to see what has been there all along, right in front of our eyes. Here, once again, we encounter the end of one world (or, in this case, the end of one particularly regime of seeing) and the opening up of a new one: a world of unknown familiarity.

⁴⁷ On this point, see also Simon Glendinning, “Wittgenstein’s Apocalyptic Librarian,” in *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: A Reassessment After 50 Years*, ed. Rudolph Haller and Klaus Puhl (Vienna: OBV & HPT, 2002), 61–70. I would, however, question Glendinning’s rather too simple contention that the later work “teaches us how to bring philosophy to an end.”

This brings us to the second sense of apocalyptic in the later Wittgenstein: the revelatory and indeed *the ethical* moment signposted at §129:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck them. And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.

Here philosophy is being presented as an activity with which involves relearning how to “look” at the world. Its aim, according to Wittgenstein, is to loosen the grip of fixed ways of seeing; to destabilise routinized habits of thought and perception; and bring us to the point from which it is possible to view the everyday through a dialectical optic.

This change in how we see can have a number of far-reaching consequences. For instance, by striving to see things otherwise, we also, in the words of the critic Fredric Jameson, initiate a “reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our current system – offering itself as the end of history – necessarily represses and paralyses.” Understood in this way, seeing language, self, and the world otherwise becomes inseparable from the imaginative activity of seeing the future otherwise. In our own apocalyptic moment – a period of ecocidal acceleration, deadly plagues, and inter-imperialist war – nothing, we might argue, could now be more urgent.