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Thomas J. J. Altizer, History as Apocalypse

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enabled both Scott and Thackeray to go back to this period—as Dumas went back to the ages of Richelieu and Henri IV—to find historical analogues for the upheavals of the early nineteenth century.) When, as a graduate student at Illinois, I heard Murray Krieger deliver his powerful paper, "*The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*: The 'Frail China Jar' and the Rude Hand of Chaos," I was quite convinced that he was right to find in Pope's later poetry an almost modern vision of the breakdown of civilization and a return to barbarism. Nor could I quite accept Robert W. Rogers' question to Krieger, "Don't you think that Pope was simply exaggerating the danger for rhetorical effect?" In Swift and Pope, at least, there *is* both the sense of the fragility of human civilization and the qualified faith in the possibility of human enlightenment and progress that leavens the political and social thinking of all the Romantics. But by the Age of Johnson, the demons that threatened the writers came from inside, not from without. That the political world was corrupt and inefficient was, in itself, a protection against any domestic ideological fanaticism. England's Continental rivals were divided and just as corrupt and weak as Great Britain itself, so that even a united onslaught by several of them toward the end of a long and unpopular war against the revolt in her strongest colonies could not wrest Gibraltar or any other significant overseas possession from her, except the United States themselves.

The course of Cowper's letters illustrates clearly how little fear the most timid of men had, even when the London "Gordon" rioters destroyed the home of Chief Justice Mansfield in June 1780, or when in 1783 Scottish Highland troops mutinied against their officers and were discharged to make their way home through England, or when the French and Dutch first overthrew their old regimes in the name of liberty. Even those acts that Cowper disapproved of met with the censure of a calm and superior schoolmaster—not outraged vituperation such as one finds in Southey's and Hazlitt's political prose. What Johnson, Goldsmith, and Cowper had learned to fear (and what Savage, Smart, and Burns never learned to fear in time) was the danger posed by the breakdown of the balance of power between their inner desires and their repressions.

Elsewhere I have differentiated between "Gothic" and "pastoral" imaginations—the first fearfully concerned with outer, the second with inner weather. The Gothic poet—Shelley or Yeats—fears the madness of the wind and snow of the outside world; the pastoral poet—Wordsworth or Frost—fears far more his own desert places. Cowper exhibits the pastoral imagination, but he could not believe that the Good Shepherd cared enough to protect him from his inner demons. And historical events, which can influence the individual either to accentuate or control his natural temperament, conspired to destroy the social nexus that had provided his pastoral guidance and security. The arrival of the French Revolution, with its threats to the unity and stability of English society, set Cowper's friends against one another, while he strove to maintain a decorous *via media*; his growing awareness of this change must have weakened his outward supports just at the time when the infirmities of aging required them most. Johnson and Goldsmith, also pastoral natures, maintained their faith during days that were not quite so trying. But to lack inner assurance during a time when the world outside is also collapsing can overset any mind. Cowper, like Virginia Woolf, was ultimately caught between the storm outside and the whirlwind within. I cannot see him as merely an individual, because the record of the other men and women of talent and genius who in parallel historical circumstances have gone mad, or committed suicide, or withdrawn into circumscribed and virtually useless lives (such as Wordsworth portrayed more than once as a warning to himself) gives us reason to think that the times, as well as the individual temperament, have their contribution to make to human destiny. It is, perhaps, time that we stopped thinking of William Cowper as some kind of sickly aberration, unconnected with other literary figures before and after him. The fine editions of Cowper's *Poems* and *Letters and Prose Writings* now in progress will provide us with the opportunity to carry out this study in depth.

Thomas J. J. Altizer. *History as Apocalypse.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. 263 pp. $34.50.

Reviewed by Steven Goldsmith

Having admired the passion and intensity of *History as Apocalypse*, I find myself brought back to the book's title, a title that points to a central problem of Altizer's exceptionally ambitious study of not merely the Christian epic tradition but the history of consciousness itself. If that scope already suggests the dangers of reification implicit in organizing such a vast array of particular and historical phenomena, the title reflects the principle that imposes unity upon diversity. History and apocalypse are antithetical terms; the apocalypse puts an end to history, substituting a closed and meaningful structure for the merely temporal and often terrifying progression of events that seems without origin and destination. The biblical model of such substitution is the Book of Revelation, where John of Patmos imagines the displacement of history by the transcendental order of the

New Jerusalem. As M. H. Abrams has argued, the literary tradition that leads to romanticism preserves this model by internalizing it, transforming the literal millennial kingdom at the end of time into a mental and imaginative reality accessible through visionary experience at any time. Whether imminent or immanent, the apocalypse always poses as an alternative to history; its enabling premise is that the conditions of material reality, the conditions of history, can be displaced. One might call this the first principle of an apocalyptic ideology, and Altizer reproduces that ideology at a fundamental level. Although *History as Apocalypse* suggests a unity, even an identity, between its governing terms, it too enacts an apocalyptic substitution, replacing history with a visionary structure enclosed within beginning and end, a formal whole that represents a non-contingent mental teleology. History in this book is the neatly constructed narrative of the progress of consciousness, and in that substitution of mind for material circumstance any sense of actual history is largely effaced. Altizer's book, to some extent modeled upon Hegel, is a condensed phenomenology of consciousness. In other words, despite the book's title, apocalypse appears at the expense of history.

No undertaking of this astonishing scope could be managed without the conviction that one held the key to the deep structure that unifies three thousand years of culture. Altizer believes that the evolution of Western consciousness forms an organic whole and that the epic tradition represents the fullest manifestation of the total structure. This tradition develops "from a real and actual beginning to an actual and apocalyptic ending. The organic evolution of Western epic is not only the record of the deeper history of a uniquely Western humanity; it is also a vision of an interior, cosmic, and eternal voyage of a universal humanity" (p. 16). Starting from this premise, Altizer details the progression of consciousness from its birth in Homeric epic to its internalization as self-consciousness in Christianity through the end of self-consciousness in *Finnegans Wake*. This "deeper," "interior" history charts the evolution of a universal human identity, an inner self that transcends the contingency of time and place, demonstrating the "ultimate harmony or coinherence between Athens and Jerusalem" (p. 11). The narrative progresses by a series of apocalyptic ruptures, moments in history when consciousness breaks with its past so essentially that the fissure can only be expressed by revolution in the social realm and a new epic vision in the literary realm. Each epic corresponds to an utterly changed society, and in the four chapters that form the main substance of his book, Altizer links the fully mature Christian epics of Dante, Milton, Blake, and Joyce to the Gothic, English, French, and Modernist revolutions.

The story, however, begins well before Dante, and in his early chapters Altizer considers an array of subjects from Greek drama to Hebrew scripture, from Paul to Augustine. The first chapter, "The Birth of Vision," enacts the book's recurring pattern in its description of Greek sculpture. As the fifth-century unity and wholeness of the body evolves into the fourth-century emphasis upon unique and individual faces (the advent of portraiture), an external presence becomes internal and increasingly human. The progress of Western consciousness is the steady humanization of presence, a movement inward that renders transcendence immanent. Accompanying this movement is the gradual, kenotic emptying of God that eventually leads to the death of God—a death that liberates existence as it is, freeing it from any dependence upon supernatural authority. Thus, in his treatment of Christian epic, Altizer's emphasis always lies upon the evolving interpretation of Christ and the crucifixion that secures his humanity as it drains him of divinity. In the chapter on Blake, where this thesis is especially pertinent, Altizer contends that history records "an alien and transcendent God ever struggling to become incarnate, until He comes and freely dies in Jesus. Accordingly, the Crucifixion is the culmination and fulfillment of a long and revelatory incarnate movement of God. For Jesus dies the death that has always been God's destiny . . . , but it is precisely this death that is the source of apocalypse" (p. 201). This focus engenders a multitude of insights that provide coherence across the Christian epic tradition. Dante embodies Christ as love in Beatrice; Milton insists that the Son exists independently of the transcendental Father and, even more importantly, that the Son dies an actual and human death upon the cross—both of which ideas Altizer applies to his interpretation of *Paradise Lost* by way of an illuminating discussion of *De Doctrina Christiana*; Blake universalizes Christ in his conception of self-annihilation, internalizing the deist death of God that enabled the French Revolution; Joyce provides Christ with his ultimate human identity in Leopold Bloom. "This epic evolution ever moves forward toward the finality of history and the world, finally realizing an apocalpytic finality wherein cosmos and history are the very eschatological fullness of Christ"—in other words, "the fullness and the finality of concrete and actual time and space" (pp. 225–26). Altizer's history is one where God gradually forfeits his transcendence to become "the pure actuality . . . of existence itself" (p. 250).

Vassily Rozanov, in a subversive interpretation of the Apocalypse, once argued that the inadequacy of Christianity is its failure "to organize human life—to give us an 'earthly life,' precisely one that is earthly, difficult, and sad."[1] Altizer is often at his best, it seems to me, in his persistent attention to the difficulty of this process of humanization. At the end of chapter 4, he favors the "original and radical and apocalyptic" (p. 78) Paul tormented by self-consciousness over the Paul easily assimilated by the Patristic Church—the Paul whose

Christ was only glorious, only transcendental, only a Christ of the resurrection. Resisting easy solutions, Altizer argues that the resurrection is meaningless without its negative, the crucifixion, and the entire book describes an increasing immersion in the negative that is the only route to dialectical ascension. The world of Urizen must be fully identified, fully experienced, before it is annihilated in an apocalyptic liberation. Apocalypse results from a painful passage through nihilism, and Altizer announces a fundamental premise in his preface: "nihilism is an essential ground of our epic tradition, perhaps of all epic as such, for epic can enact itself only by way of a voyage through darkness and chaos, a chaos and darkness that is cosmos and light in pure nihilism" (p. 3). The rhetoric of this mystery is not difficult to identify. Despite the book's radical humanization of Christianity and despite the difficult progress of that humanization, Altizer frequently has recourse to the familiar conventions of Christian paradox: one loses oneself to find oneself; one falls to rise; one dies to live. Altizer's Western consciousness progresses through the trials of self-division, negativity and nihilism, but on the other side of nihilism there always shines, perhaps too automatically, "cosmos and light."

History as Apocalypse, then, becomes to some extent a testimony of faith, an affirmation that attempts to address the author's fear that Western consciousness currently dwindles to its end—and not with a bang but a whimper. "No greater danger lies before us," the opening sentence of the prologue warns, "than that of the loss of our deeper or primal identity, an identity that has always been the center of mythical and ritual traditions throughout the world, just as it has been the center of our imaginative and intellectual creations" (p. 7). According to the preface, we live in the apocalyptic age of postmodern nihilism, an era in which American philosophy, theology and literary criticism have all but died. The unstated mission of *History as Apocalypse* is to help remedy our current state of "intellectual poverty" (p. 3) by restoring the forgotten life of the inner self. At a time when the human sciences generate such excitement precisely in their effort to relinquish outworn and overidealized conceptions of humanity—"to pass beyond man and humanism"[2]—Altizer declares their poverty, warns of "the ever increasing loss of our historical consciousness" (p. 7), and seeks to restore humanistic faith in our shared inner identity by retracing its universal history. Apocalyptic texts such as the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation express the conviction that the crisis of their historical moment is unprecedented, that the end must be at hand because the times approach their worst. Altizer's text, even with its postmodern bent, differs very little from its ancient models.

It is this sense of urgency, and the passion and conviction that accompany it, that provides *History as Apocalypse* with its particular strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, it fuels the commanding sweep of this study, for Altizer feels compelled to provide a complete picture, a total vision adequate to the organic wholeness he perceives in Western consciousness. Much of the book's excitement results from wondering what Altizer, with such extensive learning, will introduce next. The chapter on "Dante and Gothic Revolution" is typical; Altizer begins by discussing Charlemagne and late medieval history, moves on to interpret the innovations of Gothic painting, and before he even gets to Dante presents analyses of Aquinas, the Franciscan movement, and Meister Eckhart—in each case arguing that "the Gothic world as a historical world . . . fully conjoins and unites time and eternity" (p. 123). Along the way, one encounters the steady stream of provocative insights that result from a probing mind deeply engaged in its subject. Altizer's analysis of the visual arts is often penetrating, and here he captures what he sees as the essence of Gothic culture (the unity of the eternal and the temporal) in his homage to Giotto. Not only did the painter provide his Christ with the physical presence of a real body, but, reversing an iconographic tradition that represented Christ only in isolation, he portrayed his earthly interaction with humanity in the narrative frescoes of the Arena Chapel. As Giotto can now represent Christ among the people, so Dante can be the first to represent himself in a Christian epic narrative, for the human and the divine inevitably gravitate toward each other. The *Divine Comedy* becomes the fullest expression of the immanent and organic totality that is the Gothic revolution. At its best, *History as Apocalypse* incorporates a rich variety of subjects and approaches into its wide-arching design.

Such a comprehensive sweep, however, while it is as exhilarating as many of Altizer's minute particulars, inevitably leads to generalization, simplification, and hyperbole. Within the first ten pages of the same chapter we learn that:

"no other major ruler [in the history of the West] was so continually occupied with war as was Charlemagne" (p. 98)

"the Carolingian Empire was followed by the greatest chaos in the history of the West" (p. 99)

"Aristotle was surely the purest and most profound secular thinker who ever lived" (p. 103)

Aquinas was "the first truly and comprehensively systematic thinker since Aristotle, and the last before Hegel" (p. 103)

"Giotto is the most revolutionary artist in the history of art" (p. 108)

Everyone Altizer discusses must be the first or best or worst at something, for the book is obsessed with superlatives and origins. The prevalence of such exaggerated claims undermines the book's credibility and foregrounds its tendency to recreate history as an abstract and artificial construct inadequate to material complexity. This "deeper" history, the wholeness and unity of Western consciousness that should restore faith, is not the deep truth that Altizer implies. The book's indul-

gence in unqualified assertions like those above can only increase the reader's skepticism, causing one to question the absolute order it imposes upon history.

The gap between this apocalyptic structure and the actual complexity of the material history it displaces becomes most evident in Altizer's understanding of revolution. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels argued that German metaphysics turned the world upside down, postulating the mind's priority over historical conditions. Associating himself with Hegel, Altizer joins the idealists in allowing consciousness to determine life, not life the forms of consciousness. Revolutions in politics and art manifest a deeper revolution in the universal mind that determines them. What exactly is the Gothic revolution? In Altizer's representation it appears as a radical change in *Zeitgeist* that seems unrelated to radical change in politics. An apocalyptic upheaval of ideas suddenly reveals the glory of "a unitary and organic world" (p. 136), and Altizer can end his chapter with a moving, if nostalgic, lament: "Yet having been once, though only once, having been once on earth, can it ever be cancelled?" (p. 136). But to whom did this magnificent *Zeitgeist* belong?—the great minds of the period, Dante, Giotto, Aquinas—as Altizer interprets them, but perhaps not the vast majority of feudal workers who may or may not have perceived the immanence of eternity in time, but who might have benefited more from even a minor social reform than a metaphysical apocalypse.

A similar idealization characterizes Altizer's interpretation of Blake and revolution, leading to a particularly extravagant claim: the "true epic is the most revolutionary, and the most comprehensively revolutionary, political document or text that has arisen or been given us from its own revolutionary world. Already it is becoming apparent that the prophetic and epic poetry of Blake is more politically revolutionary than the texts of Marx, and is so precisely because of its universal horizon" (p. 13). To date there have been no Blakean revolutions in the political world, so this assertion can only mean that Blake's poetry enacts an alteration of consciousness transcending any particular, historical revolution bound to a single time and place. Mental reality once again displaces historical reality, and because Blake imagines "the final ending of all distinctions and divisions between human beings" (p. 13) his texts are more revolutionary than those that subjected class division to rigorous and particular analysis. It is in the context of such rhetoric that we most need to remember Blake's shortcomings as a revolutionary: his fear of publishing his most immediately radical material (the Bishop Watson annotations, for instance) and the extraordinary difficulty of the prophecies that, despite their egalitarian vision, severed them from all but a few sympathizers in Blake's time and all but the smallest academic circles in our own. To see the prophecies as successful radical poetry is to declare one's allegiance to a world of imagination divorced from material history, politics, and society.

Throughout *History as Apocalypse* Altizer seeks to initiate us into that world, restoring our contact with the buried and universal consciousness that expresses itself in the visions of Christian epic. If this book resembles earlier apocalpytic endeavors motivated by the belief that the end was imminent, it also shares their imposition of a visionary authority—the sense that the author is in touch with the mystery. "Nothing," Altizer declares, "is more baffling in epic language than its intrinsic authority, an authority immediately confronting its hearer or reader" (p. 209). And yet the same is true of Altizer's own text. The preface announces that in *History as Apocalypse*, "documentation is absent, both to avoid the appearance of a false authority, and to seek a postmodern style" (pp. 3–4), but the absence of any notes in such a sweeping study produces just the opposite effect: the appearance of non-contingent, unmediated truth. Style adds to this effect; even at its most effective the writing here is rhythmic, hypnotic and incantatory, disguising impressionistic and subjective interpretation as universal and absolute experience. Of a *Head of Apollo*, Altizer writes,

> This face and these eyes release a new vision, a vision which simply and purely sees, for it sees in a dawn in which a primeval darkness is ending. With the ending of that darkness, even if it is only in the moment before us, we can open our eyes without awe or dread, and see without terror or fear. Then we are awake, as if resurrected from the dead, and can see a new world of light, a light in which darkness is absent, and a light releasing a vision in which the seer is the center of its world. In this moment the eyes of Apollo are our eyes. (p. 21)

I am reminded of Poulet experiencing the presence of Tintoretto at the Scuola de San Rocco, described at the end of a famous essay, but Poulet never universalized that essentially private revelation.[3] He never obliged his readers to share it. I cannot help but resist the first person plurals by which Altizer coerces the shared presence of our deeper and common humanity. At times, *History as Apocalypse* becomes a rhetoric of mystification, its incantation verging upon the redundant, its prose approaching the mystery of tautology: "So it is that the impotent will cannot will even to be itself, for it cannot actually will so as to enact what it wills, and thus cannot fully will" (pp. 91–92). Perhaps such writing lies closest to the mystery, expressing the tortuous path to the deepest truths of our deepest and immaterial selves. If so, Altizer has given us history as apocalypse—history as the revelation of universal consciousness. If not, we might resist the temptations of mystery by seeking to understand apocalypse as history.

[1]Vassily Rozanov, "The Apocalypse of Our Times," in *Four Faces of Rozanov*, trans. and ed. Stephen E. Roberts (New York: Philosophical Library, 1978), pp. 212–13.

[2]Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 292.

[3]Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History*, 1 (Oct. 1969), 53–68.